

Instructor Amites Sarkar

Syllabus

I'll cover a selection of topics from the origins of counting to the invention of calculus.

Overview

It has been said that the insights of one generation become the instincts of the next. Subjects such as differential calculus were once a secret art understood only by a coterie of specialists – today they are taught to millions of people worldwide every year. The famous mathematician Louis Mordell once wrote:

Mathematical study and research are very suggestive of mountaineering. Whymper made several efforts before he climbed the Matterhorn in the 1860's and even then it cost the life of four of his party. Now, however, any tourist can be hauled up for a small cost, and perhaps does not appreciate the difficulty of the original ascent. So in mathematics, it may be found hard to realise the great initial difficulty of making a little step which now seems so natural and obvious, and it may not be suprising if such a step has been found and lost again.

This is precisely what makes the study of the history of mathematics both interesting and difficult. We have to try to get inside the minds of people who thought in a very different way and who did not have access to intellectual tools that we take for granted. A good example of such an intellectual tool is the number 0.

Class activities

Expect lectures, discussions and problem solving.
Occasionally, we will watch a video.

Grading

There will be no exams, but you are responsible for attending and participating actively in each class, and for the writing assignments, which I'll discuss in more detail in class. This is a Writing Proficiency course, so the majority of your grade will be based on the quality of your writing and the clarity of your ideas and arguments. Specifically, your grade will be based on the following:

Short paper	25%
Term paper	50%
Homework and participation	25%

Course objectives

The successful student will demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of:

- The development of mathematics as a creative human activity
- The evolution of mathematical ideas over time
- The structure and rigor of mathematics as viewed from a historical perspective
- The relationships between different parts of mathematics
- The importance of primary sources

Office hours

My office hours are 2–2:50 on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, in 216 Bond Hall. My phone number is 650 7569 and my e-mail is amites.sarkar@wwu.edu