

MATHEMATICAL CONSTANTS II

Famous mathematical constants include the ratio of circular circumference to diameter, $\pi = 3.14\dots$, and the natural logarithm base, $e = 2.718\dots$. Students and professionals can often name a few others, but there are many more buried in the literature awaiting discovery.

How do such constants arise, and why are they important? Here the author renews the search he began in his book *Mathematical Constants*, adding another 133 essays that broaden the landscape. Topics include the minimality of soap film surfaces, prime numbers, elliptic curves and modular forms, Poisson–Voronoi tessellations, random triangles, Brownian motion, uncertainty inequalities, Prandtl–Blasius flow (from fluid dynamics), Lyapunov exponents, knots and tangles, continued fractions, Galton–Watson trees, electrical capacitance (from potential theory), Zermelo’s navigation problem, and the optimal control of a pendulum. Unsolved problems appear virtually everywhere as well. This volume continues an outstanding scholarly attempt to bring together all significant mathematical constants in one place.

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Mathematical Constants II

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47059-9 — Mathematical Constants II
Steven R. Finch
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108470599
DOI: 10.1017/9781316997741

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall
A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-47059-9 Hardback

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Preface

One reviewer for the first volume of *Mathematical Constants* described the book as “excellent bedtime reading” [1]. My aim here is similar to before: to gather far-flung ideas in one place, focusing on highly concrete, eminently computable results. These essays recount stories that are both successful (with depth of understanding) and tangible (in terms of numerical precision). Much mathematical research these days is necessarily abstract and qualitative, due to the enormous difficulty of the issues under consideration. Here I direct the spotlight to those rare cases when quantitative exactness still appears to be pertinent. My words from fifteen years ago (concerning purpose and scope) apply as well now as then.

A sample problem serves to illustrate my endeavor. While discussing the mass M_n of all nonisomorphic Type I inner product modules of rank n , Milnor & Husemoller [2] gave a plot of M_n on a logarithmic scale for $1 \leq n \leq 30$. They remarked that M_n is asymptotic to $C \cdot F(n)$ as $n \rightarrow \infty$, describing the function $F(n)$ exactly, but reporting only that “the constant C is approximately 0.705”. Unraveling this enigma – what is the precise nature of C ? – is captivating to me. Understandably this question was incidental to the purposes of [2]; it is, however, central here to me [3]. The answer involves a quantity [4] discovered in 1860, as well as something else.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Philippe Flajolet, a fearless leader and inspiring mentor. It is also a tribute to my parents, Charles Richard Finch and Shirley Peery Finch, and to my siblings, Valerie Jean Bridge, Gregory Charles Finch and William Robert Finch, with love and gratitude. I acknowledge a Book Fellowship from the Clay Mathematics Institute in 2004–2005, long before the magnitude of my present task became clear.

“Open the book at random”, the aforementioned reviewer wrote, evoking a few constants from many across the canvas, seedlings drawn from a vast forest. Read, learn, wander, reflect, ... “and so on into the night”.

- [1] Philip J. Davis, Constants in the universe: their validation, their compilation, and their mystique, *SIAM News*, v. 37 (April 2004) n. 3.
- [2] J. Milnor and D. Husemoller, *Symmetric Bilinear Forms*, Springer-Verlag, 1973, p. 50; MR0506372 (58 #22129).
- [3] S. R. Finch, Minkowski-Siegel mass constants, *this volume*, §5.6.
- [4] S. R. Finch, Glaisher-Kinkelin constant, *first volume*, pp. 135–145.

Notation

$\lfloor x \rfloor$	<i>floor function</i> : largest integer $\leq x$
$\lceil x \rceil$	<i>ceiling function</i> : smallest integer $\geq x$
$\{x\}$	<i>fractional part</i> : $x - \lfloor x \rfloor$
$\ln x$	<i>natural logarithm</i> : $\log_e x$
$\binom{n}{k}$	<i>binomial coefficient</i> : $\frac{n!}{k!(n-k)!}$
$b_0 + \frac{a_1}{ b_1 } + \frac{a_2}{ b_2 } + \frac{a_3}{ b_3 } + \dots$	<i>continued fraction</i> : $b_0 + \frac{a_1}{b_1 + \frac{a_2}{b_2 + \frac{a_3}{b_3 + \dots}}}$
$f(x) = O(g(x))$	<i>big O</i> : $ f(x)/g(x) $ is bounded from above as $x \rightarrow x_0$
$f(x) = o(g(x))$	<i>little o</i> : $f(x)/g(x) \rightarrow 0$ as $x \rightarrow x_0$
$f(x) \sim g(x)$	<i>asymptotic equivalence</i> : $f(x)/g(x) \rightarrow 1$ as $x \rightarrow x_0$
\sum_p	summation over all prime numbers $p = 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, \dots$ (only when the letter p is used)
\prod_p	same as \sum_p , with addition replaced by multiplication
$f(x)^n$	<i>power</i> : $(f(x))^n$, where n is an integer
$f^n(x)$	<i>iterate</i> : $\underbrace{f(f(\dots f(x) \dots))}_{n \text{ times}}$, where $n \geq 0$ is an integer
$\operatorname{erf}(x) = \frac{2}{\sqrt{\pi}} \int_0^x \exp(-t^2) dt$	<i>error function</i> : same as $1 - \operatorname{erfc}(x)$

xii

Notation

$$\Phi(x) = \frac{1}{2} \operatorname{erf}\left(\frac{x}{\sqrt{2}}\right) + \frac{1}{2} \quad \text{standard normal distribution function}$$

${}_pF_q(\cdot; \cdot; z)$ *generalized hypergeometric function:*

$${}_pF_q(a_1, a_2, \dots, a_p; b_1, b_2, \dots, b_q; z) \\
= \frac{\Gamma(b_1)\Gamma(b_2)\cdots\Gamma(b_q)}{\Gamma(a_1)\Gamma(a_2)\cdots\Gamma(a_p)} \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \frac{\Gamma(a_1+k)\Gamma(a_2+k)\cdots\Gamma(a_p+k)}{\Gamma(b_1+k)\Gamma(b_2+k)\cdots\Gamma(b_q+k)} \frac{z^k}{k!}$$