

Complex Numbers in Geometry

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1 The Complex Plane

1.1 Definitions

I assume familiarity with most, if not all, of the following definitions. Some knowledge of linear algebra is also recommended, but not required.

Subsequently, let i be the imaginary unit satisfying $i^2 = -1$. Define the set of complex numbers $\mathbb{C} = \{z \mid z = a + bi, a, b \in \mathbb{R}\}$ where a is the real part of z and b is the imaginary part. The magnitude of a given $z = a + bi \in \mathbb{C}$ is $|z| = \sqrt{a^2 + b^2}$. The conjugate of $z = a + bi$ will be $\bar{z} = a - bi$, implying the property $|z|^2 = z \cdot \bar{z}$. As an exercise, show that $\overline{z + w} = \bar{z} + \bar{w}$ and $\overline{zw} = \bar{z}\bar{w}$.

Every $z \in \mathbb{C}$ can be expressed as $|z| \cdot (\cos \theta + i \sin \theta)$ for some angle $\theta \in [0, 2\pi)$, or alternatively $|z| \cdot e^{i\theta}$. This angle θ will be referred to as the argument of z .

Lastly, any complex number satisfying $z^n - 1 = 0$ will be referred to as an n th root of unity. It can easily be verified that these numbers take the form $e^{2k\pi i/n}$ for $0 \leq k \leq n - 1$.

1.2 Applications to the Complex Plane

The complex plane assigns a complex number to every point in the plane such that the point P with Cartesian coordinates (a, b) is assigned $a + bi$. The counterpart to the xy -axes in the complex plane are the real and imaginary axes, respectively. From this definition, the similarity between the complex plane and the Cartesian plane should be evident. Consequently, the representation $z = |z| \cdot (\cos \theta + i \sin \theta) = |z|e^{i\theta}$ corresponds to polar coordinates in the Cartesian plane.

Throughout the lecture, the lowercase letter p of a point P will correspond to the complex coordinate, or affix, of P unless otherwise noted.

As an exercise, verify that:

- $\bar{\bar{z}}$ is the reflection of z over the real axis
- $\bar{\bar{z}} = z$

1.3 Transformations in the Complex Plane

Geometrically, in order to find the coordinates of the sum of two complex numbers, one may simply perform a vector head-to-tail addition.

Multiplication of complex numbers is slightly more interesting. For any complex numbers z, w , the map $z \rightarrow zw$ corresponds to a spiral similarity (composition of a dilation and rotation) about the origin. Furthermore, the magnitudes and arguments of zw are determined independently in this transformation. More specifically, we have

$$|wz| = |w||z| \text{ and } \arg(w) + \arg(z) = \arg(wz).$$

Convince yourself that multiplication by a real number is equivalent to a dilation and multiplication by $e^{i\theta}$ is equivalent to a counterclockwise rotation of θ .

As a side-note, any transformation $z \rightarrow \frac{az + b}{cz + d}$ where $a, b, c, d \in \mathbb{C}, |ac| > 0, ad - bc \neq 0$ is a Möbius transformation.

2 Metric Propositions

One significant advantage of complex numbers over Cartesian coordinates is that every point is assigned a single number as opposed to an ordered pair, allowing concise algebraic expressions of geometric concepts. From these fundamental propositions, the advantages of complex numbers in various configurations should manifest themselves.

Proposition 2.1. (Angle Between Two Lines).

Let the angle formed by two lines AB, CD in the clockwise direction from AB to CD be $\theta = \angle(AB, CD)$. Then

$$\frac{a-b}{|a-b|} = e^{i\theta} \frac{c-d}{|c-d|}.$$

Proof. Translate the segments such that B, D coincide with the origin, with $A' = a-b, C' = c-d$.

$$\text{Then } \frac{\frac{a-b}{|a-b|}}{\frac{c-d}{|c-d|}} = \frac{r_1 e^{i\theta_1}/r_1}{r_2 e^{i\theta_2}/r_2} = e^{i\theta_1}/e^{i\theta_2} = e^{i(\theta_1-\theta_2)} = e^{i\theta}.$$

This result serves as the basis for many useful corollaries.

Corollary 2.2. (Alternate form of 1)

Squaring both sides of Proposition 2.1 yields the more applicable form

$$\frac{a-b}{\bar{a}-\bar{b}} = e^{2i\theta} \frac{c-d}{\bar{c}-\bar{d}}.$$

Corollary 2.3. (Collinearity)

Points A, B, C are collinear iff

$$\frac{a-b}{\bar{a}-\bar{b}} = \frac{c-b}{\bar{c}-\bar{b}}.$$

Proof. It remains to show that the angle between AB, CB is 0, which follows from letting $\theta = 0$ in Corollary 2.2. Note that this can also be rearranged to $\frac{b-a}{b-c} = \overline{\left(\frac{b-a}{b-c}\right)}$.

Corollary 2.4. (Equation of a Line)

From Corollary 2.3, letting c be a variable point gives the equation of a line.

Corollary 2.5. (Perpendicularity)

Segments AB, CD are perpendicular iff

$$\frac{a-b}{\bar{a}-\bar{b}} = -\frac{c-d}{\bar{c}-\bar{d}}.$$

Proof. Let $\theta = \pi/2$ in Corollary 2.2.

Proposition 2.6. (Directly Similar Triangles)

$\triangle ABC \sim \triangle DEF$ and ABC, DEF are similarly oriented iff

$$\frac{a-b}{a-c} = \frac{d-e}{d-f}.$$

Sketch. Consider the magnitudes of both sides of the equation to get $\frac{AB}{AC} = \frac{DE}{DF}$. Now dividing this with the given condition and applications of Proposition 2.1, we get $\angle BAC = \angle EDF$.

Corollary 2.7 (Spiral Similarity)

The center of spiral similarity taking $\overline{AB} \rightarrow \overline{CD}$ is given by $\frac{ad-bc}{a+d-b-c}$.

Proof. By Proposition 2.5, it suffices to solve $\frac{p-a}{p-b} = \frac{p-c}{p-d}$ for p .

Proposition 2.8 (Cyclicality)

Points A, B, C, D are concyclic iff

$$\frac{(a-c)(b-d)}{(\bar{a}-\bar{c})(\bar{b}-\bar{d})} = \frac{(a-d)(b-c)}{(\bar{a}-\bar{d})(\bar{b}-\bar{c})}.$$

Sketch. Rewrite $\angle ACB = \angle ADB$ with Proposition 2.1.

Proposition 2.9. The area of triangle ABC is

$$\frac{i}{4} \begin{vmatrix} a & \bar{a} & 1 \\ b & \bar{b} & 1 \\ c & \bar{c} & 1 \end{vmatrix} = a(\bar{b}-\bar{c}) - \bar{a}(b-c) + (b\bar{c}-\bar{b}c).$$

Sketch. Expand with Shoelace formula and Cartesian coordinates; details are left as an exercise to the reader.

Proposition 2.10. (Reflection About a Line)

The reflection of P with respect to line AB , denoted by z , satisfies

$$z = \frac{(a-b)\bar{p} + \bar{a}b - a\bar{b}}{\bar{a} - \bar{b}}.$$

Sketch. The proof of this uses the fact that linear transformations preserve reflections, so taking $z \rightarrow \frac{z-a}{b-a}$ and noting that \overline{AB} is mapped to the real axis (more specifically, the line segment containing 0 and 1) reaches the conclusion.

Proposition 2.11. (Circumcenter Formula)

The circumcenter of $\triangle ABC$, denoted by x , satisfies $x = \frac{\begin{vmatrix} a & a\bar{a} & 1 \\ b & b\bar{b} & 1 \\ c & c\bar{c} & 1 \end{vmatrix}}{\begin{vmatrix} a & \bar{a} & 1 \\ b & \bar{b} & 1 \\ c & \bar{c} & 1 \end{vmatrix}}.$

Sketch. Consider the radius R of the circumcircle, Then $|x-a|^2 = |x-b|^2 = |x-c|^2 = r^2$ so expanding we get a system of equations in $x, \bar{x}, r^2 - |x|^2$ which we can solve with Cramer's rule.

3 The Unit Circle

One of the fundamental properties of the complex plane that make enormous computations viable is the fact that for any point p on the unit circle, $\bar{p} = \frac{1}{p}$. Since any circle can be mapped to the unit circle via a composition of translation and dilation, it is often useful to let a cumbersome circle to be the unit circle.

Proposition 3.1 (Equation of a Chord)

If AB is a chord of the unit circle, the equation of line AB is given by

$$z = a + b - ab\bar{z}.$$

Proof. From Corollary 2.4, $\frac{z-a}{\bar{z}-\bar{a}} = \frac{a-b}{\bar{a}-\bar{b}} \iff \frac{z-a}{\bar{z}-\frac{1}{a}} = \frac{a-b}{\frac{1}{a}-\bar{b}} = -ab$ and upon expanding we

get the desired result. Remark on the simplicity of this equation, possible only by this property of the unit circle.

Corollary 3.2 (Chord Intersection)

Let AB, CD be two chords on the unit circle. If $P = AB \cap CD$ then

$$p = \frac{ab(c+d) - cd(a+b)}{ab - cd}$$

if $ab - cd \neq 0$.

Sketch. From Proposition 3.1, we know that p is a solution to both

$$\begin{cases} p = a + b - ab\bar{p} \\ p = c + d - cd\bar{p}. \end{cases}$$

Subtracting these two equations and solving for \bar{p} , we consequently get p after some simplification.

Corollary 3.3 (Tangent Intersection)

If the tangents to the unit circle at A, B intersect at P , then

$$p = \frac{2ab}{a+b}.$$

Proof. Note that a tangent is simply a degenerate chord; substituting AA, BB into Corollary 3.2 we get the desired.

Another nice property of unit circles regards fundamental triangle centers of triangles inscribed in the unit circle.

Proposition 3.4 (Orthocenter, Centroid, Nine-Point Center)

For any triangle ABC inscribed in the unit circle, its orthocenter, centroid, and nine-point center is given by

$$a + b + c, \frac{a + b + c}{3}, \frac{a + b + c}{2}$$

respectively.

Proof. Note that from knowledge of Cartesian coordinates, the centroid is $\frac{a + b + c}{3}$ regardless of origin. The rest follows from the Euler Line.

Proposition 3.5 (Incenter, Excenters, and Midpoints of Arcs)

Let ABC be a triangle inscribed in the unit circle, and let the complex coordinates of A, B, C be a^2, b^2, c^2 for complex numbers a, b, c . Let A_1, B_1, C_1 have coordinates $-bc, -ca, -ab$, I have coordinate $-ab - bc - ca$, and finally I_a, I_b, I_c have coordinates $ca + ab - bc, ab + bc - ca, bc + ca - ab$ respectively. Then A_1, B_1, C_1 are midpoints of arcs BC, CA, AB , I is the incenter of ABC , and I_a, I_b, I_c are the A, B, C -excenters.

Proof. Since $|-bc| = |b| * |c| = 1$ it lies on the unit circle. Furthermore, by Proposition 2.1

we have $e^{2i\angle A_1AB} = \frac{\frac{b^2 - a^2}{b^2 - a^2}}{\frac{-bc - a^2}{-bc - a^2}} = \frac{-a^2b^2}{a^2bc} = -\frac{b}{c}$. Similarly $e^{2i\angle A_1AC} = -\frac{c}{b}$ so A_1 is on the A -angle

bisector, implying that it is indeed the midpoint of arc. We obtain similar results for b_1, c_1 . To prove that I has coordinate $-ab - bc - ca$, note that I is the orthocenter of $A_1B_1C_1$ and apply Proposition 3.4. The proof for the excenters is left to the reader as an exercise.

Proposition 3.6 (Regular Polygons and Roots of Unity)

Let P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n in the complex plane satisfy $P_k = \omega^k$, where $\omega = e^{2\pi i/n}$. Then $P_1P_2 \dots P_n$ is a regular n -gon.

Proof. Evidently $|p_k| = 1$, so all of the points lie on the unit circle. Furthermore, it can easily be confirmed that $|p_{k+1} - p_k|$ is constant for $1 \leq k \leq n, p_{n+1} = p_1$ and similarly that $\angle P_kP_{k+1}P_{k+2}$ is constant, done.

4 Some Instructive Examples

When bashing, it is helpful to let a prominent circle in the diagram be the unit circle, or otherwise configure the diagram such that the coordinates have nice values. However, it should be noted that when doing so, the diagram should be general enough to encompass all possible cases.

Problem 4.1 Let ABC be a triangle with circumcenter O . Suppose D and E lie on AB and AC , respectively, such that O lies on DE . Let M and N be the midpoints of CD and BE , respectively. Prove that $\angle MON = \angle BAC$. (*Iran 2004 / WOOT*)

Proof. WLOG let ω , the circumcircle of ABC , be the unit circle, and further let DE coincide with the real axis. (Convince yourself that these assumptions are sufficiently general.) Then from the definition of point D , A, B, D are collinear $\implies \frac{a-b}{\bar{a}-\bar{b}} = \frac{a-d}{\bar{a}-\bar{d}}$. But since D lies on the real axis, $d = \bar{d}$ and solving for d yields

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{a-b}{\bar{a}-\bar{b}} &= \frac{a-d}{\bar{a}-\bar{d}} \\ (a-b)(\bar{a}-d) &= (a-d)(\bar{a}-\bar{b}) \\ a\bar{a} - ad - \bar{a}b + bd &= a\bar{a} - a\bar{b} - \bar{a}d + \bar{b}d \\ d(b-a+\bar{a}-\bar{b}) &= -\bar{a}\bar{b} + \bar{a}b \\ d &= \frac{-\bar{a}\bar{b} + \bar{a}b}{-a + \bar{a} + b - \bar{b}} = \frac{-a^2 + b^2}{-a^2b + b + ab^2 - a} = \frac{(b-a)(b+a)}{(b-a)(ab+1)} = \frac{b+a}{ab+1}. \end{aligned}$$

Hence, the midpoint of CD is simply $m = \frac{d+c}{2} = \frac{abc+c+b+a}{2(ab+1)}$, and similarly $n = \frac{abc+a+b+c}{2(ac+1)}$

$$\text{Thus } e^{2i\angle MON} = \left(\frac{m}{n}\right) \cdot \left(\frac{\bar{n}}{\bar{m}}\right) = \frac{\frac{abc+c+b+a}{2(ab+1)}}{\frac{abc+c+b+a}{2(ac+1)}} \cdot \frac{\frac{\bar{a}\bar{b}+a+b+\bar{c}}{2(\bar{a}\bar{c}+1)}}{\frac{\bar{a}\bar{b}+a+b+\bar{c}}{2(\bar{a}\bar{b}+1)}} = \frac{ac+1}{ab+1} \cdot \frac{\bar{a}\bar{b}+1}{\bar{a}\bar{c}+1} = \frac{ac+1}{ab+1} \cdot \frac{c+abc}{b+abc} = \frac{c}{b}.$$

$$\text{But } e^{2i\angle BAC} = \frac{a-c}{\bar{a}-\bar{c}} \cdot \frac{\bar{a}-\bar{b}}{a-b} = \frac{a^2c-ac^2}{c-a} \cdot \frac{b-a}{a^2b-ab^2} = \frac{-ac}{-ab} = \frac{c}{b}, \text{ so we may conclude.}$$

Problem 4.2 Let ABC be an acute triangle with AB, AC, BC . Denote by O, H the circumcenter and orthocenter of $\triangle ABC$. Suppose that the circumcircle of $\triangle AHC$ intersects AB again at M and the circumcircle of $\triangle AHB$ intersects AC again at N . Prove that the circumcenter of $\triangle MNH$ lies on line OH . (*APMO 2010*)

Proof. This problem illustrates the importance of synthetic observations when complex bashing. Once we assume that ω is the unit circle, it is very difficult to obtain coordinates for points M, N without massive computations. Hence, we need some sort of synthetic insight.

Let D be the foot of the C -altitude, and P be the circumcenter of $\triangle MNH$. Easily obtain the coordinates of D by reflecting C across AB , and taking the midpoint of CC' .

Note that $\angle CMB = \pi - \angle AMB = \pi - \angle AHB = \angle C$, so BMC is isosceles, and it thus follows that D is the midpoint of MC . Now $d = \frac{a+b+c-ab\bar{c}}{2} \implies m = a+c-ab\bar{c}$, and similarly we get $n = a+b-\bar{a}bc$. Note that $O = 0, H = a+b+c$ so a translation of $-a-b-c$ will still yield the circumcenter of MNH on line OH . Then $m' = \frac{-b(a+c)}{c}$, and similarly $n' = \frac{-c(a+b)}{b}, h' = 0$. Then by the circumcenter formula,

$$p' = \frac{\left(\frac{b(a+c)}{c}\right) \left(\frac{c(a+b)}{b}\right) \left(\frac{a+b}{ac} - \frac{a+c}{ab}\right)}{\left(\frac{a+c}{ab}\right) \left(\frac{c(a+b)}{b}\right) - \left(\frac{a+b}{ac}\right) \left(\frac{b(a+c)}{c}\right)}$$

$$p' = \frac{(a+c)(a+b)\left(\frac{a+b}{ac} - \frac{a+c}{ab}\right)}{(a+c)(a+b)\left(\frac{c}{ab^2} - \frac{b}{ac^2}\right)} = -\frac{bc(a+b+c)}{b^2+bc+c^2}.$$

It suffices to show p', o, h collinear, but this follows from

$$\frac{p' - o}{p' - \bar{o}} = \frac{-\frac{bc(a+b+c)}{b^2+bc+c^2}}{-\frac{bc+ca+ab}{a(b^2+bc+c^2)}} = \frac{abc(a+b+c)}{ab+bc+ca} = \frac{h-o}{h-\bar{o}},$$

and we may conclude.

Problem 4.3 In $\triangle ABC$, let O be the circumcenter of (ABC) , A_1 to be the antipode of A WRT (ABC) , A_2 to be the reflection of O across AB . Let O_A be the circumcenter of A_1A_2O . Define O_B, O_C similarly. Prove that O_A, O_B, O_C are collinear. (*Lemmas in Olympiad Geometry*)

Proof. Evidently $O_A \in BC$ and similar, since the perpendicular bisector of OA_2 is BC by definition of reflection. Now it suffices to show that $\frac{BO_A}{CO_A} \cdot \frac{CO_B}{AO_B} \cdot \frac{AO_C}{BO_C} = 1$ by Menelaus. To do so, we use complex numbers. Let (ABC) be the unit circle so that $A_1 = -a, A_2 = b+c$. Then

$$O_A = \frac{a_1a_2}{\bar{a}_1a_2 - a_1\bar{a}_2} = \frac{-a(b+c)(-\bar{a}-\bar{b}-\bar{c})}{\bar{a}(b+c) - a(b+c)}.$$

$$\text{Now } \frac{|BO_A|}{|CO_A|} = \left| \frac{\frac{a+b+c+ab+\bar{a}b^2+\bar{a}bc}{\bar{a}(b+c)-a(b+c)}}{\frac{a+b+c+ab\bar{c}+\bar{a}c^2+\bar{a}bc}{\bar{a}(b+c)-a(b+c)}} \right| = \left| \frac{a+b+c+ab+\bar{a}b^2+\bar{a}bc}{a+b+c+ab\bar{c}+\bar{a}c^2+\bar{a}bc} \right|.$$

$$\frac{|abc|}{|abc|} = \frac{|c|}{|b|} \cdot \frac{a^2b+ab^2+abc+a^2+b^3+b^2c}{a^2c+abc+ac^2+a^2b+c^3+bc^2} = \frac{|c|}{|b|} \cdot \frac{|b+c| \cdot |a^2+ab+b^2|}{|b+c| \cdot |a^2+ac+c^2|} = \frac{|c| \cdot |a^2+ab+b^2|}{|b| \cdot |a^2+ac+c^2|},$$

at which point it is clear that multiplying cyclically will give the desired result.

Problem 4.4 In $\triangle ABC$ with incenter I , the incircle is tangent to CA, AB at E, F . The reflection of E, F across I are G, H . Let $Q = BC \cap GH$, and let M be the midpoint of BC . Prove that $IQ \perp IM$.

Proof. Let the incircle be tangent to BC at D , and let the incircle be the unit circle. This gives nice coordinates from chord intersection formulas, and moreover we get $g = -e$ and $h = -f$. Then $A = EE \cap FF$ so $a = \frac{2ef}{e+f}$ and similar coordinates can be derived for B and C . Next

$$Q = BC \cap GH = DD \cap GH \implies \frac{d^2(g+h) - gh(d+d)}{d^2 - gh} = \frac{-d^2(e+f) - 2def}{d^2 - ef},$$

$$M \implies \frac{\left(\frac{2fd}{f+d}\right) + \left(\frac{2de}{d+e}\right)}{2} = \frac{fd^2 + 2def + ed^2}{(d+f)(d+e)}.$$

By the perpendicularity condition, it suffices to show $\frac{q}{\bar{q}} = -\frac{m}{\bar{m}} \iff \frac{q}{m} = -\overline{\left(\frac{q}{m}\right)}$.

But

$$\frac{q}{m} = \frac{-d\left(\frac{de+df+2ef}{d^2-ef}\right)}{d\left(\frac{df+2ef+de}{(d+f)(d+e)}\right)} = -\frac{d^2+ed+df+ef}{d^2-ef} = \frac{\frac{1}{d^2} + \frac{1}{ed} + \frac{1}{df} + \frac{1}{ef}}{\frac{1}{d^2} - \frac{1}{ef}} = -\overline{\left(\frac{q}{m}\right)},$$

so we may conclude.

5 Practice Problems

Problem 5.1 A quadrilateral $ABCD$ is inscribed in unit circle. If $P = AB \cap CD$ and $Q = AD \cap BC$, then prove that

$$p \cdot \bar{q} + q \cdot \bar{p} = 2.$$

Problem 5.2 Let ABC be a triangle with incircle Γ and let D, E, F be the tangency points

of Γ with BC, CA, AB , respectively. Let K be the orthocenter of triangle DEF and let $\Gamma_A, \Gamma_B, \Gamma_C$ be circles centered at A, B, C with radii AD, BE, CF , respectively. Prove that K is the radical center of $\Gamma_A, \Gamma_B, \Gamma_C$. (*AMSP Geo 3*)

Problem 5.3 Oscar is drawing diagrams with trash can lids and sticks. He draws a triangle ABC and a point D such that DB and DC are tangent to the circumcircle of ABC . Let B' be the reflection of B over AC and C' be the reflection of C over AB . If O is the circumcenter of $DB'C'$, help Oscar prove that AO is perpendicular to BC . (*ELMO, 2016*)

Problem 5.4 Quadrilateral $APBQ$ is inscribed in circle ω with $\angle P = \angle Q = 90^\circ$ and $AP = AQ < BP$. Let X be a variable point on segment \overline{PQ} . Line AX meets ω again at S (other than A). Point T lies on arc AQB of ω such that \overline{XT} is perpendicular to \overline{AX} . Let M denote the midpoint of chord \overline{ST} . As X varies on segment \overline{PQ} , show that M moves along a circle. (*USAJMO, 2015*)

Problem 5.5 Let P be a point in the plane of triangle ABC , and γ a line passing through P . Let A', B', C' be the points where the reflections of lines PA, PB, PC with respect to γ intersect lines BC, AC, AB , respectively. Prove that A', B', C' are collinear. (*USAMO, 2012*)

Problem 5.6 Let ABC be a triangle and let P be a point on its circumcircle. Let X, Y, Z be the reflections of P over lines BC, CA, AB respectively. Then X, Y, Z, H are collinear where H is the orthocenter of $\triangle ABC$. (*Steiner Line*)

Problem 5.7 Prove that the incircle of $\triangle ABC$ is tangent to the nine-point circle of $\triangle ABC$. (*Feuerbach*)

Problem 5.8 Let $ABCD$ be a cyclic quadrilateral centered at O and let $E = AC \cap BD$, $F = AB \cap CD$, and $G = AD \cap BC$. Prove that O is the orthocenter of $\triangle EFG$. (*Brokard*)