

Learning Objectives

By the end of this worksheet, you will:

- Prove statements about sets using induction.

So far, we have only used induction to prove statements about numbers. In CSC236, you'll see many more applications of the principle of induction beyond just numbers, but in this tutorial you'll get a taste of what's to come by learning how to use induction on another familiar entity: sets.

1. **A first example** Consider the following statement: “Every finite set S has exactly $\frac{|S|(|S| - 1)}{2}$ subsets of size 2.”¹ This is a universally-quantified statement, but given an arbitrary set S , it isn't obvious how to make an argument for its number of subsets. But it isn't obvious how to use induction, either! After all, we only know (right now) how to apply induction to prove statements about the natural numbers.

Here's the big insight into how to apply induction to (finite) sets: every set has a natural corresponding natural number, its *size*. We can rewrite the initial statement to emphasize the size of the sets, as

For every $n \in \mathbb{N}$, every set of size n has $\frac{n(n - 1)}{2}$ subsets of size 2.

If we define the predicate $P(n)$: “every set S of size n has $\frac{n(n - 1)}{2}$ subsets of size 2,” then this statement is exactly the kind of statement we can prove using induction!

- (a) Check your understanding: write down, in English, what $P(0)$ means. (This is the base case of the induction proof.)

- (b) Prove $P(0)$. We have started the proof for you.

Proof. **Base case:** let $n = 0$. Let S be a set, and assume S has size 0.

□

¹ For example, a set containing 4 elements has $\frac{4 \cdot 3}{2} = 6$ subsets of size 2.

(c) Now we'll prove the induction step, in a series of part. Please read through and complete the following proof.

Proof. Induction step. Let $k \in \mathbb{N}$, and assume $P(k)$. That is, assume that:

[Write down, in English, the induction hypothesis (what $P(k)$ means).]

We want to prove $P(k+1)$, that is,

[Write down, in English, what you want to prove (what $P(k+1)$ means).]

Let S be a size of $k+1$, and let the elements in the set be $\{s_1, s_2, \dots, s_k, s_{k+1}\}$.

The **key idea** of most proofs by induction on sets is that you can take a set of size $k+1$, and split it up into a single element and another set of size k .² Let $S' = \{s_1, s_2, \dots, s_k\}$, so that $S = S' \cup \{s_{k+1}\}$. Note that S' has size k . Now, we'll treat s_{k+1} as “special,” and use it to divide up the possible subsets of S in a really nice way!

Part 1: counting subsets of size 2 that contain s_{k+1} .

² This is the exact same idea as taking a summation with range 1 to $(k+1)$, and splitting it up into a summation with range 1 to k , plus the $(k+1)$ -th term.

Part 2: counting subsets of size 2 that don't contain s_{k+1} .

[Use the induction hypothesis to determine the number of subsets of S of size 2 that don't contain s_{k+1} .]³

Part 3: putting the counts together.

[Finish off this proof by adding up your results from Parts 1 and 2.]

□

2. **Extending your work.** Use the same technique from the previous question to prove the following statement: “Every finite set S has exactly $\frac{|S|(|S| - 1)(|S| - 2)}{6}$ subsets of size 3.” You can (and should) use the statement you used in the previous question as an external fact in your proof.

³ Note that the induction hypothesis only applies to sets of size k ; do you have a set of size k in this proof to work with?