What is a prime number?



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Why isn't 1 a prime?

Well, because we say so. But why do we say so?

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Well, because we say so. But why do we say so? One answer is: in actual practice we find that we would keep having to say "suppose p is a prime different from 1", so we avoid that by saying it just once.

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If I have a whole number n then I can find a lot of prime numbers and multiply them all together so as to get n. I don't have any choice about which prime numbers I use (only what order I write them in).

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The sieve of Eratosthenes

How do you find out which numbers are prime?

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How do you find out which numbers are prime? Let's make a list of all the numbers up to as far as we want to go, starting from 2. Cross out all the even numbers except 2;

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Let's make a list of all the numbers up to as far as we want to go, starting from 2.

Cross out all the even numbers except 2; then cross out all the multiples of 3 (except 3);

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Cross out all the even numbers except 2; then cross out all the multiples of 3 (except 3); then all the multiples of 5 (except 5);

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But there are infinitely many primes!



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But there are infinitely many primes! How do we know? How could you know a thing like that?

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Suppose that the only primes are $p_1 = 2$, $p_2 = 3$ and so on up to $p_{7794929}$. Let's multiply all those numbers together. This gives a huge number which I'll call K. Then I add 1.

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Think of a number, N: without working it out, roughly how many prime numbers less than N are there?

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Is the formula right?

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There is a famous guess, called the Riemann hypothesis, which is too complicated to explain now but would mean that prime numbers occur fairly regularly. We know it is true for small numbers because we can ask a computer, but whether it is always true is one of the great unsolved problems of mathematics. You need another break...

Let's have a look at those problems.

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Let's have a look at those problems. A.

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A. Yes, you can do that with 23 and 41; but not with $39 = 3 \times 13$.

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5 is prime;

5 is prime; so is 5+6=11



5 is prime; so is 5+6=11 and 5+6+6=17

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5 is prime; so is 5+6=11 and 5+6+6=17 and 5+6+6+6=23

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5 is prime; so is 5+6=11 and 5+6+6=17 and 5+6+6+6=23 and 5+6+6+6=29,

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5 is prime; so is 5+6=11 and 5+6+6=17 and 5+6+6+6=23 and 5+6+6+6=29, but then it stops because $5+6+6+6+6=35=5\times7$.

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Actually you can: you can go on as long as you like if you make the right choices. And we've known that since 2004, when it was proved by Ben Green and Terry Tao.

What we don't know

We don't know whether there are infinitely many pairs like 17 and 19, where p and p + 2 are both prime.

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We don't know whether there are infinitely many pairs like 11 and 23, where p is prime (it's called a Sophie Germain prime after the mathematician who thought of this one) and 2p + 1 is also prime.

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But we do know that we can get p and p + k both prime infinitely often for some k no bigger than seventy million (April 2013) no, 4680 (May 2013) no, 600 (November 2013) no, 236 (now) or perhaps 12 (soon) or even 6 but not 2 yet.

We don't know whether there are infinitely many pairs like 11 and 23, where p is prime (it's called a Sophie Germain prime after the mathematician who thought of this one) and 2p + 1 is also prime. And we don't know lots of other things...