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Rearranging Formulas

IGCSE Mathematics

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Contents

1	Introduction to Rearranging Formulas	2
2	What is the Subject of a Formula?	2
3	The Core Principle: Inverse Operations	3
4	Rearranging with Addition and Subtraction	4
5	Rearranging with Multiplication and Division	5
6	Multi-Step Rearrangements	7
7	Formulas Involving Powers and Roots	9
8	Formulas Involving Fractions	12
9	When the Subject Appears More Than Once	14
10	Harder Rearrangements	17
11	Choosing the Right Approach	19
12	Summary	20
13	Additional Resources	21
13.1	Tips for Success in IGCSE Exams	21
13.2	Common Exam Questions	21

1 Introduction to Rearranging Formulas

Note

Rearranging formulas (also called “changing the subject”) is the process of rewriting a formula so that a different variable is isolated on one side. For example, if you know $v = u + at$ and want to find t , you need to rearrange the formula to make t the subject. This is one of the most widely tested algebraic skills at IGCSE level.

In this chapter, we will explore:

- What it means to change the subject of a formula
- The core principle: using inverse operations
- Rearranging formulas involving addition and subtraction
- Rearranging formulas involving multiplication and division
- Multi-step rearrangements
- Formulas involving powers and roots
- Formulas involving fractions
- Formulas where the new subject appears more than once
- Real-world applications of rearranging formulas

2 What is the Subject of a Formula?

Definition

The **subject** of a formula is the variable that appears **by itself** on one side of the equals sign (usually the left).

For example, in the formula $A = \ell \times w$:

- A is the subject
- ℓ and w are not the subject, because they do not stand alone on one side

Rearranging a formula (or **changing the subject**) means rewriting it so that a different variable becomes the subject.

Note

Familiar formulas and their subjects:

Formula	Subject	Context
$A = \ell w$	A	Area of a rectangle
$P = 2\ell + 2w$	P	Perimeter of a rectangle
$v = u + at$	v	Equations of motion
$C = 2\pi r$	C	Circumference of a circle
$A = \pi r^2$	A	Area of a circle
$V = \frac{1}{3}\pi r^2 h$	V	Volume of a cone

3 The Core Principle: Inverse Operations

The Balance Principle

A formula is like a balanced set of scales. Whatever you do to one side, you must do to the other side to keep the equation balanced.

To isolate a variable, we “undo” the operations acting on it by applying the **inverse (opposite) operation** to both sides.

Definition

Inverse operations are pairs of operations that undo each other:

Operation	Inverse Operation
Addition (+)	Subtraction (−)
Subtraction (−)	Addition (+)
Multiplication (×)	Division (÷)
Division (÷)	Multiplication (×)
Squaring (x^2)	Square root ($\sqrt{}$)
Square root ($\sqrt{}$)	Squaring (x^2)
Cubing (x^3)	Cube root ($\sqrt[3]{}$)
Cube root ($\sqrt[3]{}$)	Cubing (x^3)

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