

DIFFERENTIAL FORMS AND THE GEOMETRY OF GENERAL RELATIVITY

TEVIAN DRAY



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PREFACE

This book contains two intertwined but distinct halves, each of which can in principle be read separately. The first half provides an introduction to general relativity, intended for advanced undergraduates or beginning graduate students in either mathematics or physics. The goal is to describe some of the surprising implications of relativity without introducing more formalism than necessary. “Necessary” is of course in the eye of the beholder, and this book takes a nonstandard path, using differential forms rather than tensor calculus, and trying to minimize the use of “index gymnastics” as much as possible.¹ This half of the book is itself divided into two parts, the first of which discusses the geometry of black holes, using little more than basic calculus. The second part, covering Einstein’s equation and cosmological models, begins with an informal crash course in the use of differential forms, and relegates several messy computations to an appendix.

The second half of the book (Part III) takes a more detailed look at the mathematics of differential forms. Yes, it provides the theory behind the mathematics used in the first half of the book, but it does so by emphasizing conceptual understanding rather than formal proofs. The goal of this half of the book is to provide a language to describe curvature, the key geometric idea in general relativity.

¹For the expert, the only rank-2 tensor objects that appear in the book are the metric tensor, the energy-momentum tensor, and the Einstein tensor, all of which are instead described as vector-valued 1-forms; the Ricci tensor is only mentioned to permit comparison with more traditional approaches.

PARTS I AND II: GENERAL RELATIVITY

As with most of my colleagues in relativity, I learned the necessary differential geometry the way mathematicians teach it, in a coordinate basis. It was not until years later, when trying to solve two challenging problems (determining when two given metrics are equivalent, and studying changes of signature) that I became convinced of the advantages of working in an orthonormal basis. This epiphany has since influenced my teaching at all levels, from vector calculus to differential geometry to relativity. The use of orthonormal bases is routine in physics, and was at one time the standard approach to the study of surfaces in three dimensions. Yet no modern text on general relativity makes fundamental use of orthonormal bases; at best, they calculate in a coordinate basis, then reinterpret the results using a more physical, orthonormal basis.

This book attempts to fill that gap.

The standard basis vectors used by mathematicians in vector analysis possess several useful properties: They point in the direction in which the (standard, rectangular) coordinates increase, they are orthonormal, and they are the same at every point. No other basis has all of these properties; whether working in curvilinear coordinates in ordinary, Euclidean geometry, or on the curved, Lorentzian manifolds of general relativity, some of these properties must be sacrificed.

The traditional approach to differential geometry, and as a consequence to general relativity, is to abandon orthonormality. In this approach, one uses a *coordinate basis*, in which, say, the basis vector in the θ direction corresponds to the differential operator that takes θ -derivatives. In other words, one defines the basis vector \vec{e}_θ by an equation of the form

$$\vec{e}_\theta \cdot \vec{\nabla} f = \frac{\partial f}{\partial \theta}.$$

Physics, however, is concerned with measurement, and the physically relevant components of vector (and tensor) quantities are those with respect to an *orthonormal basis*. The fact that angular velocity is singular along the axis of symmetry is a statement about the use of angles to measure “distance”, rather than an indication of a physical singularity. In relativity, where we don’t always have a reliable intuition to fall back on, this distinction is especially important. We therefore work almost exclusively with orthonormal bases. Physics students will find our use of normalized vector fields such as

$$\hat{\theta} = \frac{\vec{e}_\theta}{|\vec{e}_\theta|} = \frac{1}{r} \vec{e}_\theta$$

familiar; mathematics students probably won’t.

In both approaches, however, one must abandon the constancy of the basis vectors. Understanding how the basis vectors change from point to point leads to the introduction of a *connection*, and ultimately to *curvature*. These topics are summarized informally in Section 6.1, with a detailed discussion deferred until Part III.

We also follow an “examples first” approach, beginning with an analysis of the Schwarzschild geometry based on geodesics and symmetry, and only later discuss Einstein’s equation. This allows the reader an opportunity to master the geometric reasoning essential to relativity before being asked to follow the more sophisticated arguments leading to Einstein’s equation. Along the way, we discuss the standard applications of general relativity, including black holes and cosmological models.

No prior knowledge of physics is assumed in this book, although the reader will benefit from familiarity with Newtonian mechanics and with special relativity. This book does however assume a willingness to work with differential forms, which in turn requires familiarity with vector calculus and linear algebra. For the reader in a hurry, the essentials of both special relativity and differential forms are reviewed in Chapters 1 and 6, respectively.

PART III: DIFFERENTIAL FORMS

I took my first course in differential geometry as a graduate student. I got an A, but I didn’t learn much. Many of my colleagues, including several non-mathematicians with a desire to learn the subject, have reported similar experiences.

Why should this be the case? I believe there are two reasons. First, differential geometry—like calculus—tends to be taught as a branch of analysis, not geometry. Everything is a map between suitable spaces: Curves and surfaces are parametrized; manifolds are covered with coordinate charts; tensors act on vectors; and so on. This approach may be good mathematics, but it is not very enlightening for beginners. Second, too much attention is given to setting up a general formalism, the tensor calculus. Differential geometry has been jokingly described as the study of those objects which are invariant under changes in notation, but this description is a shockingly accurate summary of the frustrations numerous students experience when trying to master the material.

This part of the book represents my attempt to do something different. The goal is to learn just enough differential geometry to be able to learn

the basics of general relativity. Furthermore, the book is aimed not only at graduate students, but also at advanced undergraduates, not only in mathematics, but also in physics.

These goals lead to several key choices. We work with differential forms, not tensors, which are mentioned only in passing. We work almost exclusively in an orthonormal basis, both because it simplifies computations and because it avoids mistaking coordinate singularities for physical ones. And we are quite casual about concepts such as coordinate charts, topological constraints, and differentiability. Instead, we simply assume that our various objects are sufficiently well-behaved to permit the desired operations. The details can, and in my opinion should, come later.

This framework nonetheless allows us to recover many standard, beautiful results in \mathbb{R}^3 . We derive formulas for the Laplacian in orthogonal coordinates. We discuss—but do not prove—Stokes' Theorem. We derive both Gauss's *Theorema Egregium* about intrinsic curvature and the Gauss-Bonnet Theorem relating geometry to topology. But we also go well beyond \mathbb{R}^3 . We discuss the Cartan structure equations and the existence of a unique Levi-Civita connection. And we are especially careful *not* to restrict ourselves to Euclidean signature, using Minkowski space as a key example.

Yes, there is still much formalism to master. Furthermore, this classical approach is no longer standard—and certainly not as an introduction to relativity. I hope to have presented a coherent path to relativity for the interested reader, with some interesting stops along the way.

WEBSITE

A companion website for the book is available at

<http://physics.oregonstate.edu/coursewikis/DFGGR/bookinfo>



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank my wife and colleague, Corinne Manogue, for discussions and encouragement over many years. Her struggles with the traditional language of differential geometry, combined with her insight into how undergraduate physics majors learn—or don't learn—vector calculus have had a major influence on my increased use of differential forms and orthonormal bases in the classroom.

The use of differential forms, and especially of orthonormal bases, as presented in this book, represents a radical change in my own thinking. The relativity community consists primarily of physicists, yet they mostly learned differential geometry as I did, from mathematicians, in a coordinate basis. This gap is reminiscent of the one between the vector calculus taught by mathematicians, exclusively in rectangular coordinates, and the vector calculus used by physicists, mostly in curvilinear coordinates, and most definitely using orthonormal bases.

I have had the pleasure of working with Corinne for more than a decade to try to bridge this latter gap between mathematics and physics. Our joint efforts to make $d\vec{r}$ the key concept in vector calculus also led to my redesigning my differential geometry and relativity courses around the same idea.

My debt to Corinne is beyond words. She opened my eyes to the narrowness of my own vision of vector calculus, and, as a result, of differential geometry. Like any convert, I have perhaps become an extremist, for which only I am to blame. But the original push came from Corinne, to whom I am forever grateful.

I thank my department for encouraging the development of an undergraduate mathematics course in general relativity, then supporting this course over many years. I am grateful for the support and interest of numerous students, and for their patience as I experimented with several textbooks, including my own.

I am also grateful for the extensive support provided by the National Science Foundation for our work in vector calculus. Although this book is not directly related to those projects, there is no question that it was greatly influenced by my NSF-supported work. The interested reader is encouraged to browse the project websites for the Paradigms in Physics Project (<http://physics.oregonstate.edu/portfolioswiki>) and the Vector Calculus Bridge Project (<http://www.math.oregonstate.edu/bridge>), as well as our online vector calculus text [1].



HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

There are several paths through this book, with different levels of mathematical sophistication. The two halves, on general relativity (Parts I and II) and differential forms (Part III), can be read independently, and in either order. I regularly teach a 10-week course on differential forms using Part III, followed by a 10-week course on general relativity, using Parts I and II but skipping most of Appendix A (and all of Appendix B). However, there are always a few students who take only the second course, and who make do with the crash course in Section 6.1.

BASIC

The geometry of the spacetimes discussed in this book can be understood as geometric models without knowing anything about Einstein's field equation. This path requires only elementary manipulations starting from the line element, together with a single symmetry principle, but does not require any further knowledge of differential forms.

With these basic tools, a detailed study of the Schwarzschild geometry is possible, including its black hole properties, as is the study of simple cosmological models. However, the fact that these solutions solve Einstein's equation must be taken on faith, and the relationship between curvature, gravity, and tidal forces omitted.

Read:

- Chapters 1–5;
- Section 6.3;
- Chapters 9 and 10.

STANDARD

This path represents the primary route through the first half of the book, covering all of the content, but leaving out some of the details. Familiarity with differential forms is assumed, up to the level of being able to compute connection and curvature forms, at least in principle. However, familiarity with (other) tensors is not necessary, provided the reader is willing to treat the metric and Killing's equation informally, as simple products of infinitesimals.

Some further advanced mathematical topics can be safely skipped on this path, such as the discussion of the divergence of the metric and Einstein tensors in Appendix A. The reader who chooses this path may also choose to omit some computational details, such as the calculations of curvature given in Appendix A; such computations can also easily be done using computer algebra systems.

Read:

- Chapters 1–10.

EXPERT

Advanced readers will want to work through most of the computations in Appendix A.

Read:

- Chapters 1–10;
- Appendix A.

A TASTE OF DIFFERENTIAL FORMS

This path represents a quick introduction to differential forms, without many details.

Read one or both, in either order:

- Chapters 11 and 12;
- Sections 6.1 and 6.2.

A COURSE IN DIFFERENTIAL FORMS

This path represents a reasonable if nonstandard option for an undergraduate course in differential geometry. Reasonable, because it includes both Gauss's *Theorema Egregium* about intrinsic curvature and the Gauss–Bonnet Theorem relating geometry to topology. Nonstandard, because it does not spend as much time on curves and surfaces in \mathbb{R}^3 as is typical. Advantages to this path are a close relationship to the language of vector calculus, and an introduction to geometry in higher dimensions and with non-Euclidean signature.

Read:

- Chapters 11–20.



CONTENTS

List of Figures and Tables	xiii
Preface	xvii
Acknowledgments	xxi
How to Read This Book	xxiii
1 Spacetime Geometry	1
1 Spacetime	3
1.1 Line Elements	3
1.2 Circle Trigonometry	6
1.3 Hyperbola Trigonometry	7
1.4 The Geometry of Special Relativity	8
2 Symmetries	11
2.1 Position and Velocity	11
2.2 Geodesics	13
2.3 Symmetries	14
2.4 Example: Polar Coordinates	15
2.5 Example: The Sphere	16

3	Schwarzschild Geometry	19
3.1	The Schwarzschild Metric	19
3.2	Properties of the Schwarzschild Geometry	20
3.3	Schwarzschild Geodesics	21
3.4	Newtonian Motion	23
3.5	Orbits	25
3.6	Circular Orbits	29
3.7	Null Orbits	31
3.8	Radial Geodesics	34
3.9	Rain Coordinates	35
3.10	Schwarzschild Observers	39
4	Rindler Geometry	41
4.1	The Rindler Metric	41
4.2	Properties of Rindler Geometry	41
4.3	Rindler Geodesics	43
4.4	Extending Rindler Geometry	45
5	Black Holes	49
5.1	Extending Schwarzschild Geometry	49
5.2	Kruskal Geometry	51
5.3	Penrose Diagrams	55
5.4	Charged Black Holes	58
5.5	Rotating Black Holes	59
5.6	Problems	61
II	General Relativity	65
6	Warmup	67
6.1	Differential Forms in a Nutshell	67
6.2	Tensors	72
6.3	The Physics of General Relativity	73
6.4	Problems	75
7	Geodesic Deviation	79
7.1	Rain Coordinates II	79
7.2	Tidal Forces	80
7.3	Geodesic Deviation	83
7.4	Schwarzschild Connection	84
7.5	Tidal Forces Revisited	85

8	Einstein's Equation	87
8.1	Matter	87
8.2	Dust	89
8.3	First Guess at Einstein's Equation	91
8.4	Conservation Laws	93
8.5	The Einstein Tensor	95
8.6	Einstein's Equation	97
8.7	The Cosmological Constant	98
8.8	Problems	99
9	Cosmological Models	101
9.1	Cosmology	101
9.2	The Cosmological Principle	101
9.3	Constant Curvature	103
9.4	Robertson–Walker Metrics	105
9.5	The Big Bang	107
9.6	Friedmann Models	108
9.7	Friedmann Vacuum Cosmologies	109
9.8	Missing Matter	110
9.9	The Standard Models	111
9.10	Cosmological Redshift	113
9.11	Problems	115
10	Solar System Applications	119
10.1	Bending of Light	119
10.2	Perihelion Shift of Mercury	122
10.3	Global Positioning	125
III	Differential Forms	127
II	Calculus Revisited	129
11.1	Differentials	129
11.2	Integrands	130
11.3	Change of Variables	131
11.4	Multiplying Differentials	132
12	Vector Calculus Revisited	135
12.1	A Review of Vector Calculus	135
12.2	Differential Forms in Three Dimensions	138
12.3	Multiplication of Differential Forms	139

12.4	Relationships between Differential Forms	140
12.5	Differentiation of Differential Forms	141
13	The Algebra of Differential Forms	143
13.1	Differential Forms	143
13.2	Higher-Rank Forms	144
13.3	Polar Coordinates	145
13.4	Linear Maps and Determinants	146
13.5	The Cross Product	147
13.6	The Dot Product	149
13.7	Products of Differential Forms	149
13.8	Pictures of Differential Forms	150
13.9	Tensors	154
13.10	Inner Products	155
13.11	Polar Coordinates II	156
14	Hodge Duality	157
14.1	Bases for Differential Forms	157
14.2	The Metric Tensor	157
14.3	Signature	159
14.4	Inner Products of Higher-Rank Forms	159
14.5	The Schwarz Inequality	161
14.6	Orientation	162
14.7	The Hodge Dual	162
14.8	Hodge Dual in Minkowski 2-space	164
14.9	Hodge Dual in Euclidean 2-space	164
14.10	Hodge Dual in Polar Coordinates	165
14.11	Dot and Cross Product Revisited	166
14.12	Pseudovectors and Pseudoscalars	167
14.13	The General Case	167
14.14	Technical Note on the Hodge Dual	168
14.15	Application: Decomposable Forms	170
14.16	Problems	171
15	Differentiation of Differential Forms	175
15.1	Gradient	175
15.2	Exterior Differentiation	175
15.3	Divergence and Curl	176
15.4	Laplacian in Polar Coordinates	177
15.5	Properties of Exterior Differentiation	178

15.6	Product Rules	180
15.7	Maxwell's Equations I	181
15.8	Maxwell's Equations II	181
15.9	Maxwell's Equations III	182
15.10	Orthogonal Coordinates	184
15.11	Div, Grad, Curl in Orthogonal Coordinates	185
15.12	Uniqueness of Exterior Differentiation	187
15.13	Problems	188
16	Integration of Differential Forms	191
16.1	Vectors and Differential Forms	191
16.2	Line and Surface Integrals	192
16.3	Integrands Revisited	194
16.4	Stokes' Theorem	194
16.5	Calculus Theorems	196
16.6	Integration by Parts	198
16.7	Corollaries of Stokes' Theorem	199
16.8	Problems	200
17	Connections	203
17.1	Polar Coordinates II	203
17.2	Differential Forms That Are Also Vector Fields	205
17.3	Exterior Derivatives of Vector Fields	205
17.4	Properties of Differentiation	206
17.5	Connections	206
17.6	The Levi-Civita Connection	207
17.7	Polar Coordinates III	208
17.8	Uniqueness of the Levi-Civita Connection	209
17.9	Tensor Algebra	210
17.10	Commutators	211
17.11	Problems	212
18	Curvature	215
18.1	Curves	215
18.2	Surfaces	216
18.3	Examples in Three Dimensions	217
18.4	Curvature	219
18.5	Curvature in Three Dimensions	221
18.6	Components	222
18.7	Bianchi Identities	223