

TO STUDENTS: HOW TO LEARN FROM THIS BOOK

- This book may be different from other math textbooks that you have used, so it may be helpful to know about some of the differences in advance. At every stage, this book emphasizes the *meaning* (in practical, graphical or numerical terms) of the symbols you are using. There is much less emphasis on “plug-and-chug” and using formulas, and much more emphasis on the interpretation of these formulas than you may expect. You will often be asked to explain your ideas in words or to explain an answer using graphs.
- The book contains the main ideas of precalculus in plain English. Success in using this book will depend on reading, questioning, and thinking hard about the ideas presented. It will be helpful to read the text in detail, not just the worked examples.
- There are few examples in the text that are exactly like the homework problems, so homework problems can't be done by searching for similar-looking “worked out” examples. Success with the homework will come by grappling with the ideas of precalculus.
- Many of the problems in the book are open-ended. This means that there is more than one correct approach and more than one correct solution. Sometimes, solving a problem relies on common-sense ideas that are not stated in the problem explicitly but which you know from everyday life.
- This book assumes that you have access to a calculator or computer that can graph functions and find (approximate) roots of equations. There are many situations where you may not be able to find an exact solution to a problem, but can use a calculator or computer to get a reasonable approximation. An answer obtained this way can be as useful as an exact one. However, the problem does not always state that a calculator is required, so use your own judgment.
- This book attempts to give equal weight to four methods for describing functions: graphical (a picture), numerical (a table of values), algebraic (a formula) and verbal (words). Sometimes it's easier to translate a problem given in one form into another. For example, you might replace the graph of a parabola with its equation, or plot a table of values to see its behavior. It is important to be flexible about your approach: if one way of looking at a problem doesn't work, try another.
- Students using this book have found discussing these problems in small groups helpful. There are a great many problems that are not cut-and-dried; it can help to attack them with the other perspectives your colleagues can provide. If group work is not feasible, see if your instructor can organize a discussion session in which additional problems can be worked on.
- You are probably wondering what you'll get from the book. The answer is, if you put in a solid effort, you will get a real understanding of functions as well as a real sense of how mathematics is used in the age of technology.