Vectors: Understanding Direction and Adding Them

KS4 MATHEMATICS KS3 PHYSICS Ages 11-15 ⏰ 3 min read

What Is a Vector?

In maths and science, we need two types of information to describe many things properly. A **vector** is a quantity that has both **size** (called **magnitude**) and **direction**. This is different from a **scalar**, which only has size.

For example, saying "the wind is blowing at **20 miles per hour**" is a scalar—it tells us the speed but not where the wind is going. But saying "the wind is blowing **20 miles per hour north**" is a vector—now we know both the strength and the direction.

Think of it like giving someone directions to your house. If you just say "it's 2 kilometres away," that's not very helpful (a scalar). But if you say "it's 2 kilometres north," they now know exactly which way to go (a vector).

Vectors in Real Life

Vectors are everywhere. When scientists describe how fast something is moving and in which direction, they use vectors. When engineers design bridges or buildings, they calculate forces as vectors—a force pushing down and a force pushing sideways work very differently. Even video game designers use vectors to make characters move smoothly across screens.

How to Add Vectors Together

Adding vectors is trickier than adding regular numbers because **direction matters**. You can't just add the sizes together.

The easiest way to add vectors is to draw them. Imagine you're at **point A**. The first vector points you **5 metres east**. You draw an arrow showing this. Now, from where that arrow ends, you draw the second vector: **3 metres north**. The **resultant vector** (the answer) is the straight line from where you started to where you ended up.

Think of it like treasure hunting with two clues. The first clue says "walk 5 steps east." The second says "then walk 3 steps north." The resultant vector is the shortest path

directly from your starting point to the treasure.

This method is called the **triangle rule** or **head-to-tail** method. You place vectors head-to-tail, one after another, and the overall direction and distance is your answer.

Why Does This Matter?

Understanding vectors helps explain how things move and interact. In **physics**, forces, velocity, and acceleration are all vectors. In **navigation**, we use vectors to plot routes. In **sports**, coaches think about vector forces when they teach athletes about momentum and direction. Mastering vectors now opens doors to understanding much of advanced maths and science.