

Weak maximum principle for the heat equation

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In this note, we consider the standard heat equation

$$u_t - \Delta u = 0 \quad \text{in } \Omega_T$$

in which $\Omega_T = (0, T) \times \Omega$ where $\Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n$ is a *bounded* region, $T > 0$, and

$$u \in C(\overline{\Omega_T}) \cap C^2(\Omega_T).$$

We think of Ω_T as an open *cylinder* with base Ω and height T . Its closure is a closed cylinder: $\overline{\Omega_T} = [0, T] \times \overline{\Omega}$.

Definition. The *parabolic boundary* of Ω_T is the set

$$\Gamma = (\{0\} \times \overline{\Omega}) \cup ([0, t] \times \partial\Omega).$$

Clearly, Γ is contained in the normal boundary $\partial\Omega_T$; the difference is

$$\partial\Omega_T \setminus \Gamma = \{T\} \times \Omega.$$

We call $\{T\} \times \Omega$ the *final boundary* of Ω_T (nonstandard nomenclature).

Observation. If a C^2 function v has a maximum at some point in Ω_T , then $v_t = 0$ and $\Delta v \leq 0$ at that point, so we get $v_t - \Delta v \geq 0$ there. Moreover, this holds at the final boundary as well, the only difference being that there, we can only conclude $v_t \geq 0$ and $\Delta v \leq 0$. In other words,

$$v_t - \Delta v \geq 0 \quad \text{at any maximum in } \overline{\Omega_T} \setminus \Gamma.$$

We must face a minor technical glitch: The above statement requires that v is C^2 up to and including the final boundary of Ω_T . This complicates the proof of the following theorem, but only a little.

Theorem 1 (The weak maximum principle). *Assume that $u \in C(\overline{\Omega_T}) \cap C^2(\Omega_T)$ satisfies*

$$u_t - \Delta u \leq 0.$$

Then $u(t, \mathbf{x}) \leq \max_{\Gamma} u$ for all $(t, \mathbf{x}) \in \overline{\Omega_T}$. In other words, u achieves its maximum on the parabolic boundary.

Proof. First, to deal with the “minor technical glitch” mentioned above, we shall strengthen the assumptions somewhat, and assume that $u \in C^2((0, T] \times \Omega)$. We will remove this extra assumption at the end.

Now let $\epsilon > 0$, and put $v(t, \mathbf{x}) = u(t, \mathbf{x}) - \epsilon t$. Then $v_t - \Delta v \leq -\epsilon < 0$, and so it follows *immediately* from the Observation above that v cannot achieve its maximum anywhere outside Γ . On the other hand, since v is continuous and $\overline{\Omega_T}$ is compact, v does have a maximum in $\overline{\Omega_T}$, and so we must conclude that $v(t, \mathbf{x}) \leq \max_{\Gamma} v$ for any $(t, \mathbf{x}) \in \overline{\Omega_T}$. But then $u(t, \mathbf{x}) = v(t, \mathbf{x}) + \epsilon t \leq \max_{\Gamma} v + \epsilon T \leq \max_{\Gamma} u + \epsilon T$. Since this holds for any $\epsilon > 0$, it finally follows that $u(t, \mathbf{x}) \leq \max_{\Gamma} u$, and the proof is complete, with the strengthened assumptions.

We now drop the requirement that $u \in C^2((0, T] \times \Omega)$. However, it is *still* true that $u \in C^2((0, T'] \times \Omega)$, for any $T' < T$, so the first part shows that $u(t, \mathbf{x}) \leq \max_{\Gamma_{T'}} u$ for all $(t, \mathbf{x}) \in \overline{\Omega_{T'}}$. Here $\Gamma_{T'}$ is the parabolic boundary of $\Omega_{T'}$. But $\Gamma_{T'} \subset \Gamma$, so we also have $u(t, \mathbf{x}) \leq \max_{\Gamma} u$. For any $t < T$, we can pick T' with $t < T' < T$, so the inequality holds. Finally, it also holds for $t = T$, since u is continuous on $\overline{\Omega_T}$. This, at last, completes the proof. ■

It should come as no surprise that there is also a *minimum* principle. It is proved by replacing u by $-u$ in Theorem 1.

Corollary 2 (The weak minimum principle). *Assume that $u \in C(\overline{\Omega_T}) \cap C^2(\Omega_T)$ satisfies*

$$u_t - \Delta u \geq 0.$$

Then $u(t, \mathbf{x}) \geq \min_{\Gamma} u$ for all $(t, \mathbf{x}) \in \overline{\Omega_T}$. In other words, u achieves its minimum on the parabolic boundary.

We will mostly be concerned with solutions of the heat equation $u_t - \Delta u = 0$, and for these, both the maximum principle and the minimum principle can be used. But we may also wish to study inhomogeneous equations $u_t - \Delta u = f$, and if f has a definite sign, one or the other principle will apply.

Corollary 3 (Uniqueness for the heat equation). *There exists at most one solution $u \in C(\overline{\Omega_T}) \cap C^2(\Omega_T)$ to the problem*

$$\begin{aligned} u_t - \Delta u &= f & \text{in } \Omega_T, \\ u &= g & \text{on } \Gamma. \end{aligned}$$

Here, f and g are given functions on Ω_T and Γ , respectively. (Thus g combines initial values and boundary values in one function.)

Proof. Let u be the difference between two solutions to this problem: Then u solves the same problem, but with $f = 0$ and $g = 0$. Thus u achieves both its minimum and maximum on Γ , but $u = 0$ there, so $u = 0$ everywhere. ■

The following corollary is proved in essentially the same way, by applying the minimum and maximum principles to $u_1 - u_2$. Note that it immediately implies the preceding corollary by taking $g_1 = g_2$.

Corollary 4 (Continuous dependence on data). *Let u_1 and u_2 satisfy*

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} u_{it} - \Delta u_i = f_i \quad \text{in } \Omega_T, \\ u_i = g_i \quad \text{on } \Gamma, \end{array} \right\} \text{ for } i = 1, 2.$$

Then $|u_1 - u_2| \leq \max_{\Gamma} |g_1 - g_2|$.

Exercise (Continuous dependence on data, improved). Assume that u_1 and u_2 satisfy

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} u_{it} - \Delta u_i = f_i \quad \text{in } \Omega_T, \\ u_i = g_i \quad \text{on } \Gamma, \end{array} \right\} \text{ for } i = 1, 2.$$

Let $\phi = \sup_{\Omega_T} |f_1 - f_2|$ and $\gamma = \max_{\Gamma} |g_1 - g_2|$, and show that $|u_1 - u_2| \leq \gamma + \phi T$.

Note that for any t , we can pick $T = t$, so we really get $|u_1 - u_2| \leq \gamma + \phi t$.

Hint: Apply the maximum principle to $u_1 - u_2 - \phi t$ and $u_2 - u_1 - \phi t$.