Absolute Value

The **absolute value** of a number x, denoted by $|x|$, is defined by the formula

$$|x| = \begin{cases} x, & x \geq 0 \\ -x, & x < 0. \end{cases}$$

EXAMPLE 2 Finding Absolute Values

$$|3| = 3, \quad |0| = 0, \quad |-5| = -(-5) = 5, \quad |-|a|| = |a|$$ ■

Geometrically, the absolute value of x is the distance from x to 0 on the real number line. Since distances are always positive or 0, we see that $|x| \geq 0$ for every real number x, and $|x| = 0$ if and only if $x = 0$. Also,

$$|x - y| = \text{the distance between } x \text{ and } y$$

on the real line (Figure 1.2).

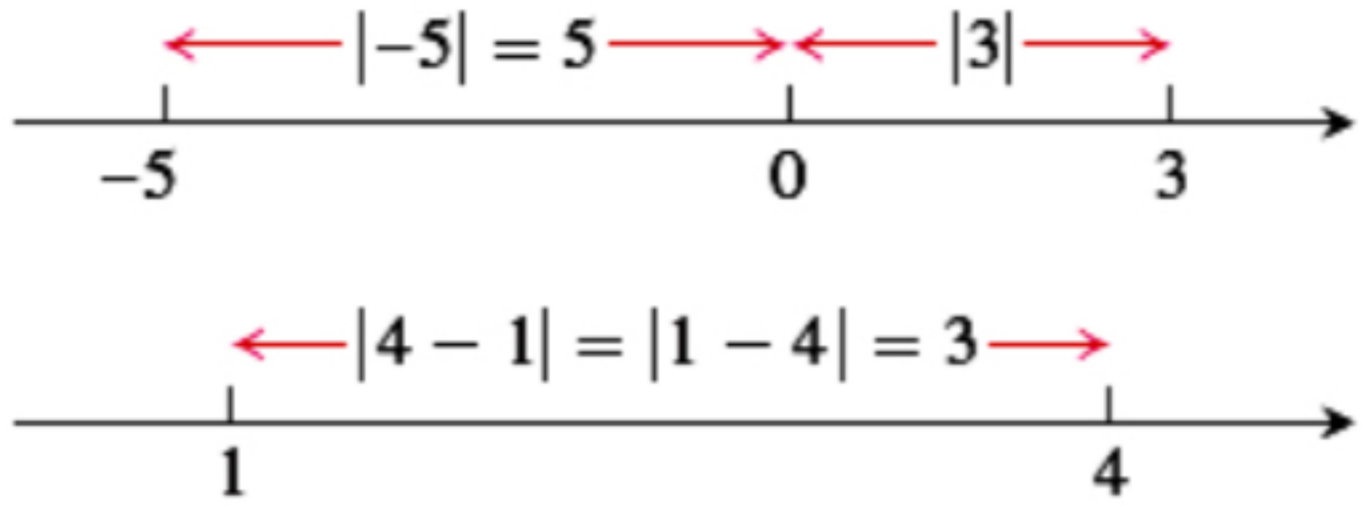

FIGURE 1.2 Absolute values give distances between points on the number line.

Since the symbol $\sqrt{a}$ always denotes the *nonnegative* square root of a, an alternate definition of $|x|$ is

$$|x| = \sqrt{x^2}.$$

It is important to remember that $\sqrt{a^2} = |a|$. Do not write $\sqrt{a^2} = a$ unless you already know that $a \geq 0$.

The absolute value has the following properties. (You are asked to prove these properties in the exercises.)

Absolute Value Properties

1. $|-a| = |a|$ — A number and its additive inverse or negative have the same absolute value.
2. $|ab| = |a||b|$ — The absolute value of a product is the product of the absolute values.
3. $\left|\dfrac{a}{b}\right| = \dfrac{|a|}{|b|}$ — The absolute value of a quotient is the quotient of the absolute values.
4. $|a + b| \leq |a| + |b|$ — The **triangle inequality**. The absolute value of the sum of two numbers is less than or equal to the sum of their absolute values.

Note that $|-a| \neq -|a|$. For example, $|-3| = 3$, whereas $-|3| = -3$. If a and b differ in sign, then $|a + b|$ is less than $|a| + |b|$. In all other cases, $|a + b|$ equals $|a| + |b|$. Absolute value bars in expressions like $|-3 + 5|$ work like parentheses: We do the arithmetic inside *before* taking the absolute value.

EXAMPLE 3 Illustrating the Triangle Inequality

$$|-3 + 5| = |2| = 2 < |-3| + |5| = 8$$
$$|3 + 5| = |8| = |3| + |5|$$
$$|-3 - 5| = |-8| = 8 = |-3| + |-5|$$

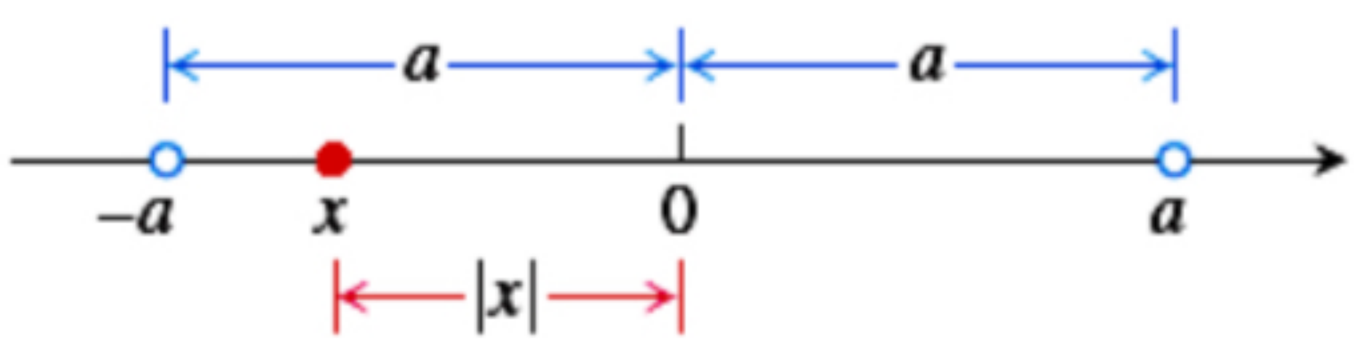

FIGURE 1.3 $|x| < a$ means x lies between $-a$ and a.

The inequality $|x| < a$ says that the distance from x to 0 is less than the positive number a. This means that x must lie between $-a$ and a, as we can see from Figure 1.3.

The following statements are all consequences of the definition of absolute value and are often helpful when solving equations or inequalities involving absolute values.

Absolute Values and Intervals

If a is any positive number, then

5. $|x| = a$ if and only if $x = \pm a$
6. $|x| < a$ if and only if $-a < x < a$
7. $|x| > a$ if and only if $x > a$ or $x < -a$
8. $|x| \leq a$ if and only if $-a \leq x \leq a$
9. $|x| \geq a$ if and only if $x \geq a$ or $x \leq -a$

The symbol $\Leftrightarrow$ is often used by mathematicians to denote the "if and only if" logical relationship.

EXAMPLE 4 Solving an Equation with Absolute Values

Solve the equation $|2x - 3| = 7$.

Solution By Property 5, $2x - 3 = \pm 7$, so there are two possibilities:

$$2x - 3 = 7 \qquad 2x - 3 = -7 \qquad \text{Equivalent equations without absolute values}$$

$$2x = 10 \qquad 2x = -4 \qquad \text{Solve as usual.}$$

$$x = 5 \qquad x = -2$$

The solutions of $|2x - 3| = 7$ are $x = 5$ and $x = -2$. ■

EXAMPLE 5 Solving an Inequality Involving Absolute Values

Solve the inequality $\left|5 - \frac{2}{x}\right| < 1$.

Solution We have

$$\left|5 - \frac{2}{x}\right| < 1 \Leftrightarrow -1 < 5 - \frac{2}{x} < 1 \qquad \text{Property 6}$$

$$\Leftrightarrow -6 < -\frac{2}{x} < -4 \qquad \text{Subtract 5.}$$

$$\Leftrightarrow 3 > \frac{1}{x} > 2 \qquad \text{Multiply by } -\frac{1}{2}.$$

$$\Leftrightarrow \frac{1}{3} < x < \frac{1}{2}. \qquad \text{Take reciprocals.}$$

Notice how the various rules for inequalities were used here. Multiplying by a negative number reverses the inequality. So does taking reciprocals in an inequality in which both sides are positive. The original inequality holds if and only if $(1/3) < x < (1/2)$. The solution set is the open interval $(1/3, 1/2)$. ■