

Lecture 11 – Probability

DSC 10, Spring 2026

Agenda


We'll cover the basics of probability theory. This is a math lesson; take written notes 📝.

Probability resources

Probability is a tricky subject. If it doesn't click during lecture or on the assignments, take a look at the following resources:

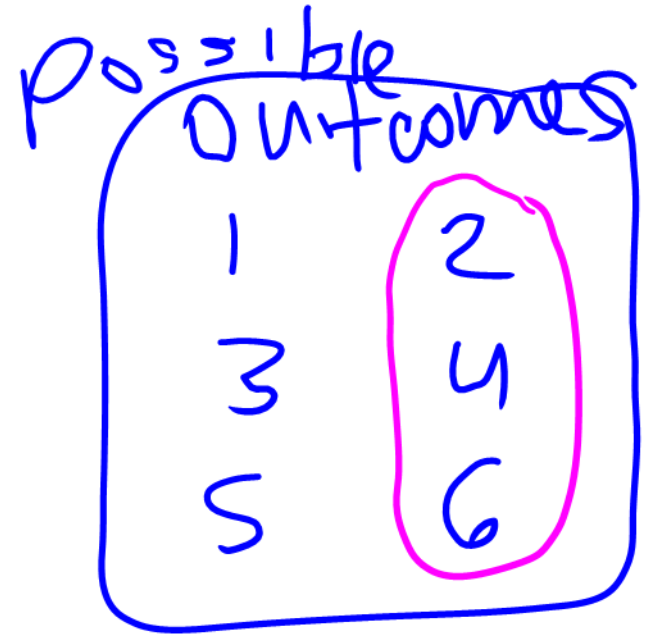
- **Computational and Inferential Thinking, Chapter 9.5.**
- **Theory Meets Data, Chapters 1 and 2.**
- **Khan Academy's unit on Probability.**

Probability theory

- Some things in life *seem* random.
 - e.g., flipping a coin or rolling a die .
- The **probability** of seeing "heads" when flipping a fair coin is $\frac{1}{2}$.
- One interpretation of probability says that if we flipped a coin infinitely many times, then $\frac{1}{2}$ of the outcomes would be heads.

Terminology

- **Experiment:** A process or action whose result is random.
 - e.g., rolling a die.
 - e.g., flipping a coin twice.
- **Outcome:** The result of an experiment.
 - e.g., the possible outcomes of rolling a six-sided die are 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.
 - e.g., the possible outcomes of flipping a coin twice are HH, HT, TH, and TT.
- **Event:** A set of outcomes.
 - e.g., the event that the die lands on an even number is the set of outcomes {2, 4, 6}. $\frac{3}{6}$
 - e.g., the event that the die lands on a 5 is the set of outcomes {5}.
 - e.g., the event that there is at least 1 head in 2 flips is the set of outcomes {HH, HT, TH}.



Terminology

- **Probability:** A number between 0 and 1 (equivalently, between 0% and 100%) that describes the likelihood of an event.
 - 0: The event never happens.
 - 1: The event always happens.
- Notation: If A is an event, $P(A)$ is the probability of that event.

Equally-likely outcomes

roll die
 $P(\text{even}) = \frac{3}{6}$

= good / total

- If all of the possible outcomes are equally likely, then the probability of A is

$$P(A) = \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } A}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}}$$

- **Example 1:** Suppose we flip a fair coin 3 times. What is the probability we see exactly 2 heads?

possible outcomes

HHH	THT
HHT	TTH
HTH	TTT
HTT	TTT

$$\frac{3}{8}$$

$$P(A) \times P(B \text{ given } A)$$

Concept Check – Answer at cc.nsc10.com

I have three cards: red, blue, and green. What is the chance that I choose a card at random and it is green, then – **without putting it back** – I choose another card at random and it is red?

- A) $\frac{1}{9}$
- B) $\frac{1}{6}$
- C) $\frac{1}{3}$
- D) $\frac{2}{3}$
- E) None of the above.

$$\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{1}{2}$$

↑
?

← also works

possible outcomes

GR	BR	RB
GB	BG	RG

→ direct

$$\frac{1}{6}$$

Conditional probabilities

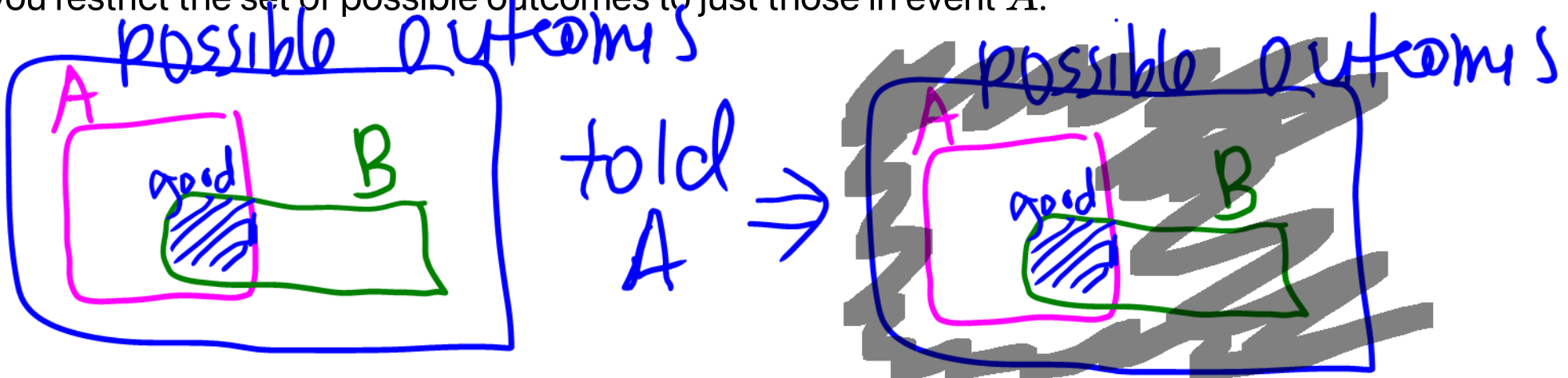
- Two events A and B can both happen. Suppose that we know A has happened, but we don't know if B has.
- If all outcomes are equally likely, then the conditional probability of B given A is:

$$P(B \text{ given } A) = \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying both } A \text{ and } B}{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } A}$$

- Intuitively, this is similar to the definition of the regular probability of B :

$$P(B) = \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } B}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}}$$

if you restrict the set of possible outcomes to just those in event A .



NU3U

Concept Check – Answer at cc.dsc10.com

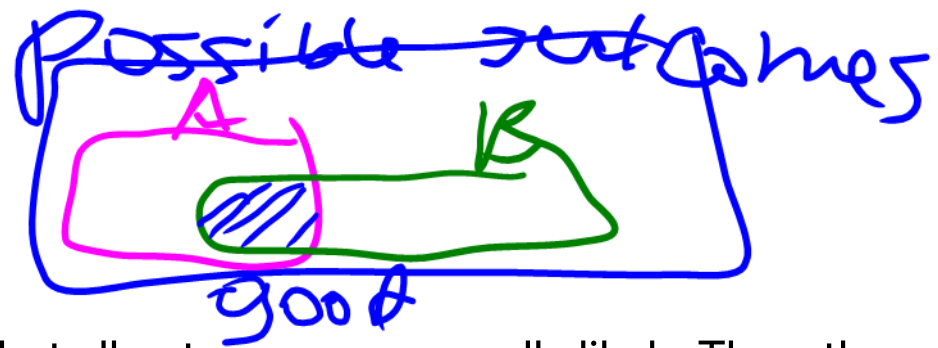
$$P(B \text{ given } A) = \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying both } A \text{ and } B}{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } A}$$

I roll a six-sided die and don't tell you what the result is, but I tell you that it is 3 or less. What is the probability that the result is even?

- A) $\frac{1}{2}$
- B) $\frac{1}{3}$
- C) $\frac{1}{4}$
- D) None of the above.



$$\frac{1}{3}$$

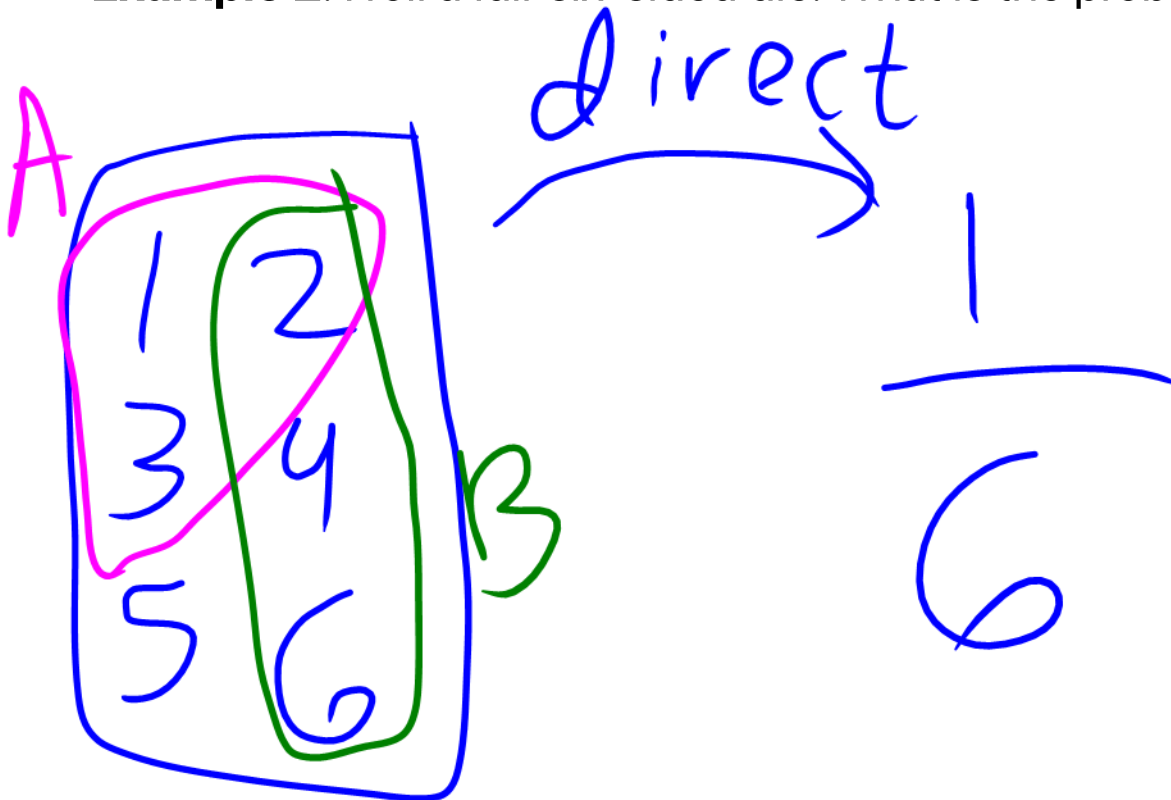


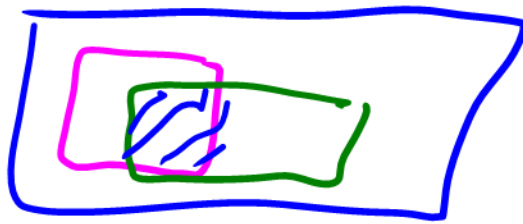
Probability that two events both happen

- Suppose again that A and B are two events, and that all outcomes are equally likely. Then, the probability that both A and B occur is

$$P(A \text{ and } B) = \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying both } A \text{ and } B}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}}$$

- **Example 2:** I roll a fair six-sided die. What is the probability that the roll is 3 or less **and** even?





The multiplication rule

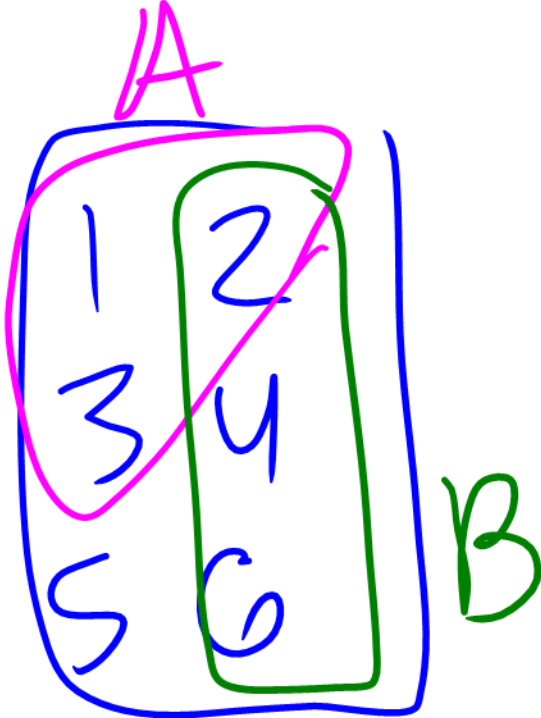
- The multiplication rule specifies how to compute the probability of both A and B happening, even if all outcomes are not equally likely.

$$P(A \text{ and } B) = P(A) P(B \text{ given } A)$$

make
 A
happen

know A
happened,
so then
make B
happen
(given A)

- Example 2, again:** I roll a fair six-sided die. What is the probability that the roll is 3 or less and even?



$$P(A) \times P(B \text{ given } A)$$

$$\frac{3}{6} \times \frac{1}{3} = \frac{1}{6}$$

What if A isn't affected by B ? 🤔

- The multiplication rule states that, for any two events A and B ,

$$P(A \text{ and } B) = P(A) \cdot P(B \text{ given } A)$$

- What if knowing that A happens doesn't tell you anything about the likelihood of B happening?

- Suppose we flip a fair coin three times.

- The probability that the second flip is heads doesn't depend on the result of the first flip.

- Then, what is $P(A \text{ and } B)$?

dependent | independent

$$P(\text{even given } \leq 3) = \left(\frac{1}{3}\right)$$



$$\neq P(\text{even}) = \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)$$

$$P(\text{even given } \leq 4) = \left(\frac{2}{4}\right)$$



$$P(\text{even}) = \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)$$

Independent events

- Two events A and B are independent if $P(B \text{ given } A) = P(B)$, or equivalently if

$$\rightarrow P(A \text{ and } B) = P(A) \cdot P(B)$$

- Example 3:** Suppose we have a coin that is **biased**, and flips heads with probability 0.7. Each flip is independent of all other flips. We flip it 5 times. What's the probability we see 5 heads in a row?

$P(H_{1st} \text{ and } H_{2nd} \text{ and } H_{3rd} \dots)$

$$P(H_{1st}) * P(H_{2nd}) * \dots$$

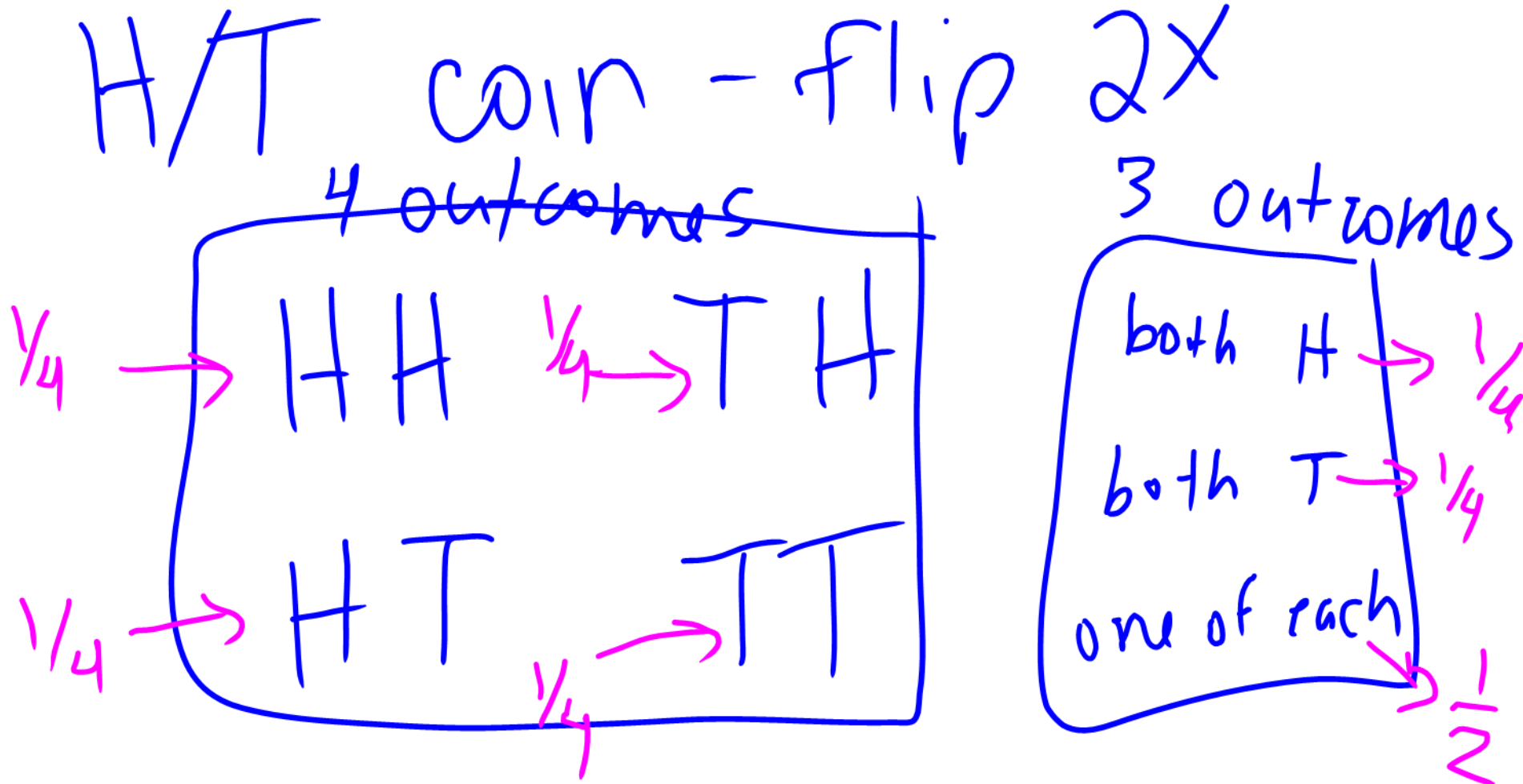
$$0.7 * 0.7 * \dots$$

$$= \boxed{0.7^5}$$

extra knowledge
↑ of A doesn't
change
chance of
 B happening

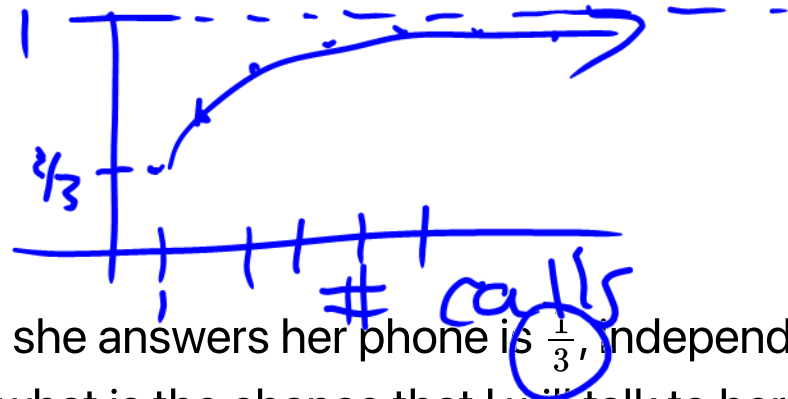
Probability that an event doesn't happen

- The probability that A **doesn't** happen is $1 - P(A)$.
- For example, if the probability it is sunny tomorrow is 0.85, then the probability it is not sunny tomorrow is 0.15.



Concept Check – Answer at cc.dsc10.com

prob
reach
gma



Every time I call my grandma 🧓, the probability that she answers her phone is $\frac{1}{3}$, independently for each call. If I call my grandma three times today, what is the chance that I will talk to her at least once?

8 possible outcomes

- A) $\frac{1}{3}$
- B) $\frac{2}{3}$
- C) $\frac{1}{2}$
- D) 1
- E) None of the above.

8 possible outcomes

YNN	NNN
YNY	NNY
YYN	NYN
YYY	NYY

$$\begin{aligned} P(\text{includes } x) &= 1 - P(\text{no } x) \\ &= 1 - P(\text{NNN}) \\ &= 1 - \left(\frac{2}{3}\right)^3 = \frac{19}{27} \end{aligned}$$

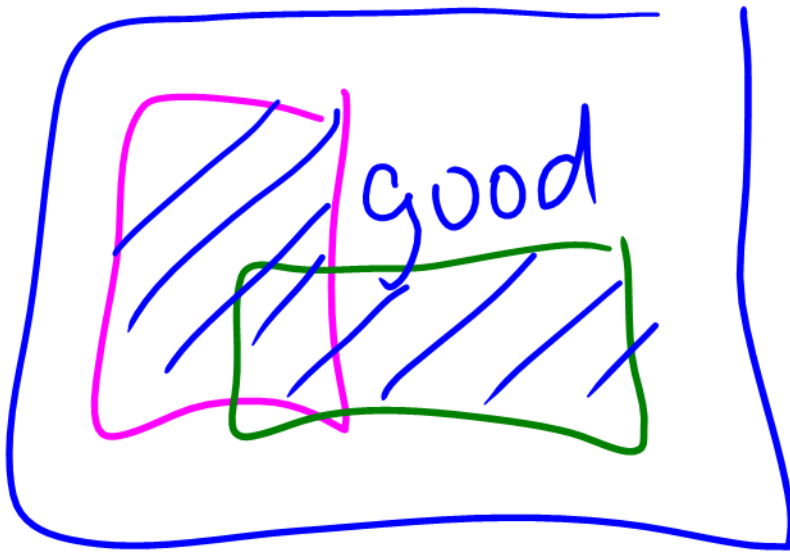
~~wrong!~~ even $\frac{3}{6} + \frac{2}{6} = \frac{5}{6}$

Probability of either of two events happening

- Suppose again that A and B are two events, and that all outcomes are equally likely. Then, the probability that either A or B occur is

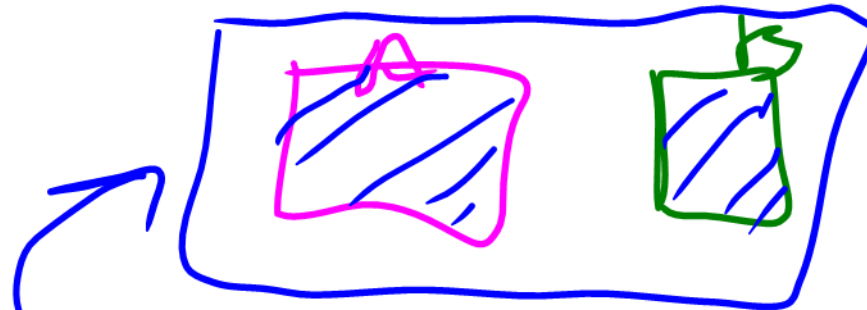
$$P(A \text{ or } B) = \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying either } A \text{ or } B}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}}$$

- **Example 4:** I roll a fair six-sided die. What is the probability that the roll is even or at least 5?



$$\frac{4}{6}$$

The addition rule



- Suppose that if A happens, then B doesn't, and if B happens, then A doesn't.
 - Such events are called **mutually exclusive** – they have **no overlap**.
- If A and B are any two mutually exclusive events, then

$$P(A \text{ or } B) = P(A) + P(B)$$

- **Example 5:** Suppose I have two biased coins, a red coin and a blue coin. The red coin flips heads with probability 0.6, and the blue coin flips heads with probability 0.3. I flip both coins once. What's the probability I see two different faces?

$$P \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{H} \\ \text{on} \\ \text{red} \end{array} \text{ and } \begin{array}{c} \text{T} \\ \text{on} \\ \text{blue} \end{array} \right) \text{ OR } \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{T} \\ \text{on} \\ \text{red} \end{array} \text{ and } \begin{array}{c} \text{H} \\ \text{on} \\ \text{blue} \end{array} \right)$$
$$0.6 \times 0.7 + 0.4 \times 0.3$$

Aside: Proof of the addition rule for equally-likely events

You are not required to know how to "prove" anything in this course; you may just find this interesting.

If A and B are events consisting of equally likely outcomes, and furthermore A and B are mutually exclusive (meaning they have no overlap), then

$$\begin{aligned} P(A \text{ or } B) &= \frac{\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying either } A \text{ or } B}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}} \\ &= \frac{(\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } A) + (\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } B)}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}} \\ &= \frac{(\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } A)}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}} + \frac{(\# \text{ of outcomes satisfying } B)}{\text{total } \# \text{ of outcomes}} \\ &= P(A) + P(B) \end{aligned}$$

Summary, next time

- Probability describes the likelihood of an event occurring.
- There are several rules for computing probabilities. We looked at many special cases that involved equally-likely events.
- There are two general rules to be aware of:
 - The **multiplication rule**, which states that for any two events,
$$P(A \text{ and } B) = P(B \text{ given } A) \cdot P(A) .$$
 - The **addition rule**, which states that for any two **mutually exclusive** events,
$$P(A \text{ or } B) = P(A) + P(B).$$
- **Next time:** Simulations.