

13.4 Gravitational potential

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Total: 16 marks

KEY WORDS gravitational potential 引力势 • gravitational potential energy 重力势能
 • mass 质量 • point mass 质点 • test mass 检验质量

Objective

Build the skills to answer exam questions on **gravitational potential** — $\phi = -GM/r$ and gravitational potential energy.

You must be able to:

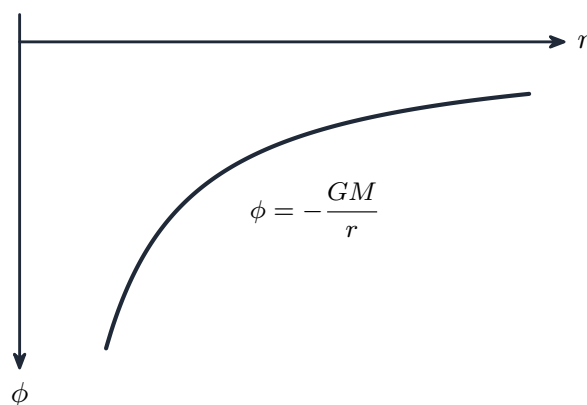
- define **gravitational potential** and use $\phi = -\frac{GM}{r}$
- use $E_P = -\frac{GMm}{r}$ for two point masses
- explain why potential and E_P are negative

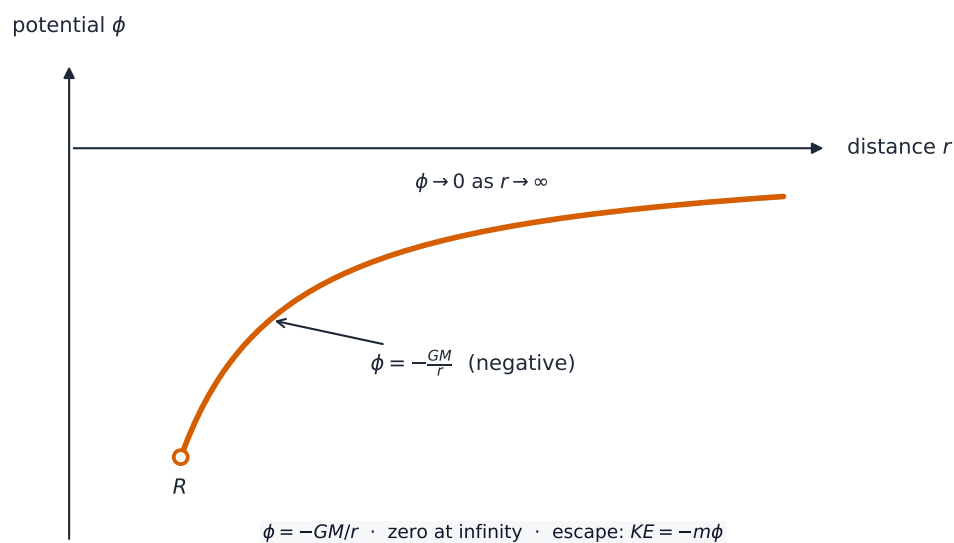
1 Worked examples

Study these first. Each one shows the method for a question type used later — follow the steps and you can do the Practice and Exam-style questions yourself.

■ Gravitational potential

Gravitational potential ϕ at a point is the **work done per unit mass** to bring a small test mass **from infinity** to that point. Potential is **zero at infinity** and **negative** everywhere else:





The gravitational potential well

$$\phi = -\frac{GM}{r} \quad (\text{J kg}^{-1}), \quad E_P = m\phi = -\frac{GMm}{r}.$$

For two radii, $\Delta E_P = GMm \left(\frac{1}{r_1} - \frac{1}{r_2} \right)$.

2 Practice

Now apply the methods above.

2.1 Define gravitational potential.

[1]

2.2 State why gravitational potential is negative.

[1]

2.3 State the unit of gravitational potential.

[1]

2.4 Write the equation for the gravitational potential energy of two point masses.[1]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 The gravitational potential at **infinity** is:

[1]

A	B
C	D

A a maximum positive value

B zero

C a large negative value

D infinite

3.2 Calculate the gravitational potential at the Earth's surface. ($M = 6.0 \times 10^{24}$ kg, $R = 6.4 \times 10^6$ m, $G = 6.67 \times 10^{-11}$.)

[3]

3.3 Calculate the gravitational potential energy of a 1200 kg satellite at $r = 7.0 \times 10^6$ m from the Earth's centre.

[2]

3.4 Explain why **two closer** masses have **more negative** gravitational potential energy.

[2]

3.5 A 1000 kg satellite orbiting a planet is moved from an orbit of radius 7.0×10^6 m to one of radius 1.4×10^7 m. Its gravitational potential energy **increases** by 2.86×10^{10} J. Calculate the **mass of the planet**, and give a **unit**. ($G = 6.67 \times 10^{-11}$.)

[4]