GENERAL

how to expand brackets algebra

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

How to Expand Brackets Algebra: A Complete Guide

Expanding brackets is one of the most fundamental skills in algebra, yet many students still find it tricky. Whether you're tackling simple binomials or complex polynomial expressions, the process of "expanding brackets" is a powerful tool that turns compact notation into detailed, solvable equations. In this article, we'll walk you through the concepts, techniques, and common pitfalls of expanding brackets in algebra. By the end, you'll not only know how to expand brackets algebraically but also understand why each step matters.

What Are Brackets and Why Expand Them?

In algebra, brackets—commonly parentheses "( )" or square brackets "[ ]"—group terms together. They indicate the order in which operations should be performed, just like parentheses in a recipe tell you which ingredients to mix first. Expanding brackets means distributing each term inside one bracket across every term in the other bracket, thereby eliminating the grouping symbols. This process is essential for:

- Comparing expressions
- Simplifying equations
- Factoring polynomials
- Solving for variables

When you expand brackets, you expose all the individual products that make up a polynomial, which is crucial for further algebraic manipulation.

Key Algebraic Principles Behind Expansion

Understanding the underlying principles makes the expansion process feel less mechanical and more intuitive. The main rules you'll use are:

- Distributive Property: $a(b + c) = ab + ac$
- Associative Property: $(a + b) + c = a + (b + c)$
- Commutative Property: $a + b = b + a$ and $ab = ba$

These rules allow you to systematically break down expressions and combine like terms.

Distributive Property in Depth

The distributive property is the cornerstone of expanding brackets. It tells you that you can "distribute" a single factor across a sum or difference inside brackets:

1. Identify the factor outside the brackets.
2. Multiply that factor by each term inside the brackets.
3. Sum or subtract the resulting products.

Example: Expand **(3x + 4)(2x – 5)**.

1. Take the first term of the first bracket (3x) and multiply it by each term in the second bracket: $3x \cdot 2x = 6x^2$, $3x \cdot (–5) = –15x$.
2. Take the second term of the first bracket (4) and multiply it by each term in the second bracket: $4 \cdot 2x = 8x$, $4 \cdot (–$

5) = –20.

3. Combine all products: $6x^2 – 15x + 8x – 20$.
4. Combine like terms: $6x^2 – 7x – 20$.

The result, **$6x^2 – 7x – 20$**, is the expanded form.

FOIL Method for Binomials

When you're dealing with the product of two binomials, the FOIL method—First, Outer, Inner, Last—is a quick mnemonic that helps you remember the order of multiplication:

- First: Multiply the first terms in each binomial.
- Outer: Multiply the outer terms.
- Inner: Multiply the inner terms.
- Last: Multiply the last terms in each binomial.

Example: Expand **$(x + 5)(x – 3)$** using FOIL.

1. First: $x \cdot x = x^2$.
2. Outer: $x \cdot (–3) = –3x$.
3. Inner: $5 \cdot x = 5x$.
4. Last: $5 \cdot (–3) = –15$.
5. Combine: $x^2 – 3x + 5x – 15 = x^2 + 2x – 15$.

While FOIL is handy for two binomials, the distributive property works for any number of terms and is more flexible.

Expanding Trinomials and Beyond

When you encounter trinomials or higher-degree polynomials, you'll often need to apply the distributive property repeatedly. Let's walk through a few scenarios.

Expanding a Binomial with a Trinomial

Example: Expand **$(2x – 4)(x^2 + 3x + 1)$**.

1. Take the first term of the first bracket (2x) and multiply it by each term in the second bracket:

$2x \cdot x^2 = 2x^3$

2. $2x \cdot 3x = 6x^2$
3. $2x \cdot 1 = 2x$

- $(–4) \cdot x^2 = –4x^2$
- $(–4) \cdot 3x = –12x$
- $(–4) \cdot 1 = –4$

- $2x^3 + 6x^2 + 2x – 4x^2 – 12x – 4$

- $2x^3 + (6x^2 – 4x^2) + (2x – 12x) – 4 = 2x^3 + 2x^2 – 10x – 4$.

The expanded form is **$2x^3 + 2x^2 – 10x – 4$**.

Multiplying Three Binomials

When you have three or more binomials, you can expand step by step:

1. First, expand two of them.
2. Then multiply the resulting polynomial by the remaining binomial.

Example: Expand **(x + 1)(x + 2)(x + 3)**.

1. Expand the first two: (x + 1)(x + 2) = x^2 + 3x + 2.
2. Now multiply by the third binomial: (x^2 + 3x + 2)(x + 3).
3. Distribute each term of the first polynomial across the second binomial:

$x^2 \cdot x = x^3$
4. $x^2 \cdot 3 = 3x^2$
5. $3x \cdot x = 3x^2$
6. $3x \cdot 3 = 9x$
7. $2 \cdot x = 2x$
8. $2 \cdot 3 = 6$

- $x^3 + (3x^2 + 3x^2) + (9x + 2x) + 6 = x^3 + 6x^2 + 11x + 6$.

The fully expanded expression is **$x^3 + 6x^2 + 11x + 6$**.

Special Cases: Distributive Property with Exponents

When brackets involve exponents, you still apply the distributive property, but you must respect the rules of exponents. Here are two common scenarios:

Distributing a Factor with an Exponent

Example: Expand **$(x + 2)^3$** using the binomial theorem or repeated expansion.

Using the binomial theorem: $(x + 2)^3 = x^3 + 3 \cdot x^2 \cdot 2 + 3 \cdot x \cdot 2^2 + 2^3 = x^3 + 6x^2 + 12x + 8$.

Alternatively, expand step by step:

1. $(x + 2)^2 = x^2 + 4x + 4$.
2. Multiply by (x + 2): (x^2 + 4x + 4)(x + 2).
3. Distribute: $x^2 \cdot x = x^3$, $x^2 \cdot 2 = 2x^2$, $4x \cdot x = 4x^2$, $4x \cdot 2 = 8x$, $4 \cdot x = 4x$, $4 \cdot 2 = 8$.
4. Combine: $x^3 + (2x^2 + 4x^2) + (8x + 4x) + 8 = x^3 + 6x^2 + 12x + 8$.

Expanding with Negative Exponents

When you see something like **(x – 3)(x {¹ + 4)**, treat x {¹ as 1/x. Expand normally:

1. x·x {¹ = 1.
2. x·4 = 4x.
3. (–3)·x {¹ = –3/x.
4. (–3)·4 = –12.
5. Combine: 1 + 4x – 3/x – 12.

It’s often helpful to keep the negative exponent term separate until you’re ready to combine like terms.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Even seasoned algebraists can slip up when expanding brackets. Here are some pitfalls and how to stay clear:

- Forgetting to Distribute All Terms: Always multiply every term in one bracket by every term in the other.
- Sign Errors: Pay close attention to minus signs, especially when distributing across a difference.
- Skipping Like-Term Combination: After expansion, combine like terms to simplify the expression.
- Misapplying the Distributive Property: Remember it applies only to sums or differences inside brackets.

- Incorrect Exponent Rules: When multiplying exponents, add the exponents; when dividing, subtract.

Practice Problems for Mastery

Practice is the best way to internalize expansion techniques. Try these problems and check your solutions afterward.

1. Expand $(2y + 3)(y – 4)$.
2. Expand $(x – 5)(x^2 + 2x + 1)$.
3. Expand $(a + 2b)(2a – 3b) + (a – b)(3a + b)$.
4. Expand $(x + 1)^2(x – 2)$.
5. Expand $(3x – 2)(x + 4)(x – 1)$.

Solutions (for quick reference):

- $2y^2 – 8y + 3y – 12 = 2y^2 – 5y – 12$.
- $2x^3 – 8x^2 + 3x^2 – 12x + 2x – 4 = 2x^3 – 5x^2 – 10x – 4$.
- First part: $2a^2 – 3ab + 4ab – 6b^2 = 2a^2 + ab – 6b^2$. Second part: $3a^2 + a\,b – 3ab – b^2 = 3a^2 – 2ab – b^2$. Sum: $5a^2 – ab – 7b^2$.

Tags: #expand #brackets #algebra