

What is undefined in algebra

The Enigma of the Undefined in Algebra: Unveiling the Secrets of Mathematical Limitations

Algebra, the language of mathematics, elegantly describes relationships and patterns. Yet, within this seemingly perfect system, certain operations and expressions remain shrouded in ambiguity, marked as "undefined." This seemingly simple concept of "undefined" holds profound implications for the structure and applicability of algebraic principles. This delves into the complexities of undefined expressions in algebra, exploring their origins, limitations, and broader significance.

Understanding the Foundation: What is an Undefined Expression?

An undefined expression in algebra is one that, within the established rules of arithmetic and algebra, cannot be assigned a meaningful numerical value. These expressions often arise when attempting to perform operations that are not mathematically permissible or when encountering situations that violate fundamental

axioms. Think of it as a grammatical error in the language of mathematics – the sentence, while syntactically correct, simply lacks a meaningful translation. *Illustrative Examples:*

- **Division by Zero:** This is arguably the most prominent example. The expression " $a/0$ ", where 'a' is any non-zero number, is undefined. Attempting to divide a quantity by nothing leads to nonsensical results and, mathematically, an instability that the system cannot handle. $a / 0 =$ undefined
- **Square Root of a Negative Number (in the Real Number System):** The square root of a negative number, like $\sqrt{(-4)}$, is undefined within the realm of real numbers. There's no real number that, when multiplied by itself, results in a negative value.
- **Logarithm of Zero or Negative Numbers (with a positive base):** Logarithms of zero or negative numbers, such as $\log_0(x)$ or $\log_2(-2)$, are undefined in the context of standard logarithmic functions.
- **Determining the Slope of a Vertical Line:** The slope of a vertical line is undefined because its change in x is zero, and division by zero is undefined. Visual Representation: $y \text{ ^ } ||| |||$
 $\text{slope}=\text{Undefined } ||| ||| ||| ||| \text{_____} x \text{ (vertical line) } >$

Why are Undefined Expressions Crucial?

Understanding the limitations of undefined expressions is vital for several reasons:

- **Preventing Errors:** Recognizing undefined expressions is crucial to prevent mathematical errors in problem-solving. Attempting to manipulate an undefined expression can lead to erroneous conclusions.
- *Defining Limits of Applicability:* Knowing when an expression is undefined clarifies the limitations of a mathematical model or function. This is particularly important in applications like calculus, where understanding limits and continuity

is crucial. • Ensuring Robustness: Understanding undefined expressions ensures that mathematical frameworks, especially in computer science and engineering, are robust and don't lead to unexpected crashes or erroneous outputs.

Avoiding Pitfalls: Related Concepts and Considerations

1. The Concept of Limits

Limits provide a way to approach undefined expressions from different directions. In calculus, limits allow us to analyze the behavior of a function as it approaches a value where the function itself is undefined.

2. The Significance of Domains

Understanding the domain of a function, the set of values for which the function is defined, is crucial. The domain explicitly excludes values that would lead to undefined expressions.

3. Complex Numbers

While $\sqrt{-4}$ is undefined in the real number system, in the complex number system, it's equivalent to $2i$ (where $i = \sqrt{-1}$). This demonstrates how extending the number system can make previously undefined expressions meaningful.

4. Extended Number Systems (e.g., Rational Numbers, Irrational Numbers, Complex Numbers)

In specific contexts, extending the number system helps to define expressions that were undefined in the real numbers. Different number systems enable different types of operations. **Case Study: Engineering Applications** In structural engineering, calculating stresses and strains often involves division by dimensions. If a dimension approaches zero (or a similar undefined condition), engineers must analyze the situation carefully and assess whether a limit or an alternative calculation method is necessary.

Advantages of Understanding Undefined Expressions (If Applicable)

- Avoiding Errors and Inaccuracies: Knowing undefined expressions helps prevent computational errors and ensures accurate results in calculations.
- **Clarifying Problem Domain**: The limitations imposed by undefined expressions highlight areas where a mathematical model or equation is not applicable.
- Developing Robust Algorithms: In programming, handling undefined situations helps build robust algorithms and prevents unexpected behavior or crashes.

Actionable Insights

- *Thoroughly Analyze the Domain*: Before applying any algebraic operation, always consider the domain of the variables involved to avoid undefined expressions.
- Use Limits and Asymptotes: If

encountering an undefined expression, exploring the behavior of the expression using limits can provide valuable insights. • *Consult Relevant Mathematical Resources:* When in doubt, don't hesitate to consult textbooks, online resources, or seek guidance from a mathematical professional.

5 Advanced FAQs

1. **Q:** How do undefined expressions affect numerical analysis methods? 2. **Q:** Can you explain the concept of an indeterminate form in calculus and how it relates to undefined expressions? 3. **Q:** What are the practical implications of undefined expressions in the field of computer graphics? 4. **Q:** In the context of complex numbers, can all undefined expressions be resolved? Explain. 5. **Q:** How do different programming languages handle undefined expressions and what are the potential consequences of not considering them? By thoroughly understanding the concept of undefined expressions in algebra, we gain a deeper appreciation for the inherent limitations and the subtle nuances of mathematical systems. This awareness ultimately fosters a more robust, reliable, and comprehensive understanding of mathematics as a whole.

What is Undefined in Algebra? A Deep Dive into the Concept

Ever stared at a math problem and encountered something that just... doesn't have an answer? Something that seems to break the

rules of arithmetic? You're likely staring at an "undefined" situation in algebra. It's a fundamental concept, yet it can be a bit of a head-scratcher for beginners. But don't worry, by the end of this comprehensive guide, you'll have a solid grasp on what "undefined" means in algebra, why it happens, and where you'll encounter it.

Think of algebra as a language, a way to describe relationships and solve for unknowns. Like any language, it has its grammar and its rules. When a mathematical expression violates these rules, it results in an undefined outcome. It's not that the problem is *wrong* or *impossible* in the sense of having no solution, but rather that it doesn't fit within the established framework of mathematical operations. It's like trying to divide by zero – the operation itself is not permitted.

The "Why" Behind Undefined: Where the Rules Get Bent

So, what makes something "undefined" in the world of algebra? It usually boils down to specific operations that are mathematically illogical or lead to contradictions. These are the forbidden zones, the mathematical equivalent of a "Do Not Enter" sign.

Division by Zero: The Cardinal Sin of Algebra

This is hands-down the most common culprit when it comes to undefined expressions. You've probably heard it before: "You can't divide by zero!" But why? Let's break it down.

Understanding Division as the Inverse of Multiplication

Division is essentially the opposite of multiplication. When we say 10 divided by 2 equals 5, it means that 2 multiplied by 5 equals 10. So, for any division problem $a / b = c$, it's true that $b * c = a$.

Now, let's try this with zero. If we have $5 / 0 = x$, then according to the rule above, $0 * x$ should equal 5. But what is zero multiplied by any number? It's always zero! $0 * x = 0$. This means there is no number (x) that we can multiply by zero to get 5. The equation $0 * x = 5$ has no solution. Because there's no answer that satisfies the definition of division, $5 / 0$ is declared undefined.

What About 0/0? A Special Kind of Undefined

This one is a bit trickier and is often referred to as an "indeterminate form." If we have $0 / 0 = y$, then $0 * y$ should equal 0. Here's the problem: *any* number multiplied by zero is zero! So, y could be 1, 10, -50, or even π . Because there are infinitely many possible answers, we can't assign a single, definitive value. Therefore, $0 / 0$ is also undefined, but for a different reason than $5 / 0$. It's not that there's no solution; it's that there are *too many* solutions to be meaningful in a standard algebraic context.

Understanding the difference between "no solution" (like $5 / 0$) and "infinite solutions" (like $0 / 0$) is crucial. In many advanced mathematical contexts, such as calculus, $0 / 0$ is given special attention as an indeterminate form, indicating that further analysis is needed to determine a limit or a specific value.

Square Roots of Negative Numbers (in Real Numbers)

In the realm of real numbers, which are the numbers we typically use in everyday life (integers, fractions, decimals), taking the square root of a negative number is also an undefined operation.

What is a Square Root?

The square root of a number is a value that, when multiplied by itself, gives the original number. For example, the square root of 9 is 3 because $3 * 3 = 9$. It's also -3, because $(-3) * (-3) = 9$. So, the square root of 9 is both 3 and -3 (though we usually refer to the principal, or positive, square root).

The Problem with Negative Roots

Now, consider the square root of -9. We're looking for a number that, when multiplied by itself, equals -9. Let's test:

1. Positive number * Positive number = Positive number (e.g., $3 * 3 = 9$)
2. Negative number * Negative number = Positive number (e.g., $(-3) * (-3) = 9$)

There is no real number that, when multiplied by itself, results in a negative number. Therefore, in the context of real numbers, the square root of a negative number is undefined. This is where the concept of imaginary numbers and complex numbers comes into play, expanding the number system to accommodate these

situations. If you've encountered the imaginary unit " i ", where $i^2 = -1$, you've already stepped into this expanded mathematical universe!

Other Scenarios Leading to Undefined Expressions

While division by zero and square roots of negative numbers are the most frequent encounters with "undefined," other situations can arise, especially when dealing with functions.

Domain Restrictions in Functions

In algebra, functions are like machines that take an input (usually a variable, like x) and produce an output (usually y or $f(x)$). However, not all inputs are valid for every function. The set of all possible valid inputs for a function is called its domain.

Consider the function $f(x) = 1 / (x - 2)$. For this function to produce a real number output, the denominator cannot be zero. If $x = 2$, the denominator becomes $2 - 2 = 0$, leading to $1 / 0$, which we know is undefined. Therefore, $x = 2$ is not in the domain of the function $f(x) = 1 / (x - 2)$. If you try to evaluate $f(2)$, the result is undefined.

Similarly, for a function like $g(x) = \sqrt{x - 3}$, the expression inside the square root must be non-negative. So, $x - 3 \geq 0$, meaning $x \geq 3$. If you try to evaluate $g(1)$, you'd be calculating $\sqrt{1 - 3} = \sqrt{-2}$, which is undefined in the real number system.

The Importance of Understanding "Undefined"

Why bother with this seemingly negative concept? Because understanding what makes an expression undefined is crucial for:

1. **Solving Equations Correctly:** When solving an equation, you might perform operations that could lead to an undefined result. Recognizing these possibilities helps you avoid extraneous solutions (solutions that appear valid but don't actually work in the original equation).
2. **Graphing Functions:** Undefined points often correspond to important features on a graph, such as vertical asymptotes (where the function "blows up" to infinity) or holes (where a point is missing from the graph).
3. **Interpreting Results:** In real-world applications of algebra, an undefined result might indicate an impossible scenario or a limitation of the model being used.
4. **Building a Strong Foundation:** Grasping the nuances of undefined expressions is a stepping stone to more advanced mathematical concepts like limits and continuity.

Common Mistakes and Misconceptions

It's easy to get tripped up by "undefined." Here are a couple of common pitfalls:

1. **Confusing "Undefined" with "Zero":** An undefined expression is not the same as zero. Zero is a specific number, whereas "undefined" signifies that an operation cannot be performed or

leads to a non-sensical result. For example, $0/0$ is a valid output of a function, but $5/0$ is not.

2. **Forgetting the Context:** As we saw with square roots, "undefined" can depend on the number system you're working in. In complex numbers, $\sqrt{-1}$ is defined as i . Always be mindful of whether you are working with real numbers or a broader set.

Examples in Action: Putting it to the Test

Let's look at a few more examples to solidify your understanding:

1. **Expression:** $\frac{x+1}{x-1}$ at $x=1$.

Analysis: Substituting $x=1$ gives $\frac{1+1}{1-1} = \frac{2}{0}$. This is division by zero, so it's undefined.

2. **Expression:** $\sqrt{2x - 6}$ at $x=2$.

Analysis: Substituting $x=2$ gives $\sqrt{2(2) - 6} = \sqrt{4 - 6} = \sqrt{-2}$. In real numbers, this is undefined.

3. **Expression:** $\frac{x^2 - 4}{x - 2}$ at $x=2$.

Analysis: Substituting $x=2$ gives $\frac{2^2 - 4}{2 - 2} = \frac{4 - 4}{0} = \frac{0}{0}$. This is the indeterminate form, which is also undefined in this direct evaluation context. However, if we simplify the expression first, we get $\frac{(x-2)(x+2)}{x-2} = x+2$ for $x \neq 2$. This simplified form shows that as x approaches 2, the value approaches 4. But at exactly $x=2$, the original expression is undefined.

Conclusion: Embracing the "Undefined"

The concept of "undefined" in algebra isn't a roadblock; it's a signpost. It tells us when our mathematical tools are being pushed beyond their limits or when we're entering territory that requires more advanced concepts. By understanding why expressions become undefined – primarily due to division by zero and the limitations of real number operations – you gain a deeper appreciation for the structure and logic of mathematics.

So, the next time you encounter an "undefined" situation, don't get flustered. See it as an opportunity to learn about the boundaries of mathematical operations and to appreciate the elegance of how algebra handles these special cases. It's a key part of mastering the language of mathematics!

Defined in Algebra: Clarifying the Concept and Its Foundational Role

Algebra, as a branch of mathematics, thrives on structure—on symbols, variables, and precise relationships between them. At its core lies a fundamental idea: the concept of what is defined within the system. But what exactly does “undefined” mean in algebra? Far from being a void, the undefined serves as the bedrock upon which algebraic reasoning is built. It represents the basic elements that are not explicitly defined in a given system but are implicitly understood through context and convention. These undefined terms—often

simple symbols like variables or basic operations—act as placeholders that gain meaning only through the rules and operations assigned to them. Without such undefined entities, algebra would lack the necessary foundation to construct equations, functions, and complex expressions. In essence, the undefined provides the raw material from which all algebraic meaning emerges.

The Nature of Undefined Elements in Algebraic Systems

In algebraic structures such as groups, rings, or fields, certain core entities are left undefined to allow flexibility and generality. For instance, the number zero and the operation of addition are typically chosen as undefined or primitive in many systems, not because they lack meaning, but because treating them as defined would unnecessarily constrain the framework. Similarly, variables like x , y , or z are not defined as specific values but as placeholders capable of standing for any element within a set. This intentional ambiguity enables algebra to operate uniformly across different domains and contexts. The role of these undefined elements is not to remain mysterious, but to serve as flexible anchors—concepts that gain definition through the rules and operations imposed by the algebraic system itself. This design allows mathematicians to explore abstract patterns without being limited by concrete interpretations.

Applications and Practical Significance of the Undefined

The inclusion of undefined terms in algebra has profound practical implications. In solving equations, for example, variables remain undefined until assigned a value through substitution or inference, yet their symbolic presence allows for general solutions and transformations. In programming and computer science, algebraic logic underpins algorithms that manipulate undefined variables within defined rules, enabling robust computational modeling. In physical sciences, algebra models real-world phenomena where certain quantities remain variable—exactly the kind of flexibility that undefined elements provide. Moreover, the concept supports the axiomatic method, where systems are built logically from unstated assumptions, fostering clarity and consistency. This makes undefined terms not just theoretical placeholders, but essential tools that drive innovation across disciplines.

Benefits of Understanding Undefined Concepts in Algebra

Recognizing the importance of the undefined offers deep benefits to learners and practitioners alike. It cultivates a mindset that values abstraction and logical consistency, enabling students to move beyond mere computation toward conceptual mastery. When students grasp that undefined symbols are not arbitrary but carefully chosen to enable coherent systems, they develop stronger problem-solving skills and a more intuitive understanding of mathematical

structures. In applied settings, this awareness supports more flexible modeling and error-checking, as one can trace meaning back to foundational assumptions. Furthermore, understanding undefined elements strengthens the ability to engage with advanced mathematics, where abstraction becomes the norm. Ultimately, this perspective transforms algebra from a set of rules into a powerful language of relationships and transformations.

The Future of Undefined Concepts in Algebraic Development

As mathematics evolves, the role of the undefined continues to shape new frontiers. In emerging fields like quantum algebra and non-commutative geometry, undefined terms are being reimagined to accommodate novel structures and symmetries. Researchers explore how relaxing or redefining traditional undefined elements can lead to breakthroughs in theoretical models and computational systems. Education is also adapting, with increasing emphasis on teaching the foundational philosophy behind undefined symbols—not as empty placeholders, but as intentional components that enable abstraction and generalization. Looking ahead, the undefined will remain central to algebra's growth, bridging classical principles with cutting-edge discoveries and ensuring the discipline stays dynamic, relevant, and deeply insightful.

Unraveling the Mystery: What is Undefined in Algebra?

In the vast and intricate landscape of algebra, where symbols dance and equations tell stories, there's a concept that often sparks confusion and even a touch of dread: the "undefined." While it might sound like a void or an error, understanding what it means for an expression or operation to be undefined is crucial for building a solid foundation in mathematics. It's not simply a lack of an answer, but rather a specific mathematical situation where a valid numerical result cannot be produced. This article will delve deep into the concept of undefined in algebra, exploring its origins, common scenarios, and its significance in problem-solving.

The Fundamental Principle: Division by Zero

The most ubiquitous and fundamental reason for an expression to be undefined in algebra is **division by zero**. At its core, division is the inverse operation of multiplication. When we say 10 divided by 2 equals 5, it's because 5 multiplied by 2 equals 10. Now, let's try to apply this logic to division by zero. If we consider an expression like $a / 0$, where a is any non-zero number, we're asking: "What number, when multiplied by 0, gives us a ?" The answer is, no such number exists. Any number multiplied by zero always results in zero. Therefore, $a / 0$ (for $a \neq 0$) has no solution, making it undefined.

Consider the case of $0 / 0$. This scenario is even more problematic. If we were to say $0 / 0 = x$, then by the inverse

operation, $x * 0 = 0$. This equation is true for *any* value of x . Since there isn't a single, unique answer, $0 / 0$ is also considered an **indeterminate form**, which falls under the umbrella of being undefined in many algebraic contexts. It's not just an abstract rule; this principle underpins many algebraic manipulations and the behavior of functions.

When Expressions Become Undefined: Common Scenarios

Beyond simple division by zero, several other algebraic situations can lead to an undefined result. Recognizing these patterns is key to navigating complex equations and functions.

1. Square Roots of Negative Numbers (in Real Number System)

In the realm of **real numbers**, taking the square root of a negative number is impossible. For example, $\sqrt{-9}$ is undefined because there's no real number that, when multiplied by itself, yields -9. Squaring any real number (positive or negative) always results in a non-negative number. This is why the introduction of **imaginary numbers** and the broader **complex number system** was a significant development in mathematics, allowing us to define $\sqrt{-1}$ as the imaginary unit, i . However, within the context of basic algebra focusing on real numbers, $\sqrt{-x}$ where $x > 0$ is indeed undefined.

2. Logarithms of Non-Positive Numbers

Logarithms are the inverse of exponentiation. The expression $\log_b(x)$ asks, "To what power must we raise the base b to get x ?" For any valid base b (where $b > 0$ and $b \neq 1$), the result of b^y (where y is any real number) will always be a positive number. Consequently, you cannot find a real exponent y such that b^y equals zero or a negative number. Therefore, **logarithms of zero or negative numbers** are undefined in the real number system. For instance, $\log_{10}(0)$ and $\log_2(-8)$ are undefined.

3. Expressions in Denominators of Fractions

As we've established, the denominator of a fraction cannot be zero. This principle extends to expressions within the denominator. If an algebraic expression, when evaluated, results in zero for any specific value of a variable, then the entire fraction becomes undefined at that value. For example, consider the expression $1 / (x - 3)$. This expression is undefined when $x - 3 = 0$, which occurs when $x = 3$. It's crucial to identify these **domain restrictions** when working with algebraic fractions.

4. Tangent Function at Specific Angles

In trigonometry, the tangent function is defined as the ratio of the sine to the cosine of an angle: $\tan(\theta) = \sin(\theta) / \cos(\theta)$. The cosine function, $\cos(\theta)$, is zero at specific angles, namely $\pi/2$ (90 degrees), $3\pi/2$ (270 degrees), and any angle that can be expressed as $(2n + 1)\pi/2$, where n is an

integer. At these angles, the denominator of the tangent function becomes zero, making $\tan(\theta)$ undefined. This concept is vital when analyzing trigonometric graphs and solving trigonometric equations.

The Importance of Identifying Undefined Expressions

Recognizing when an algebraic expression is undefined is not just an academic exercise; it has profound practical implications:

1. Solving Equations and Inequalities

When solving equations or inequalities, it's essential to be aware of values that would render any part of the equation undefined. For instance, when solving an equation involving fractions, any solution that makes a denominator zero must be excluded. These are known as **extraneous solutions**. Failing to identify and discard them can lead to incorrect answers.

2. Graphing Functions

The concept of undefined is directly related to the **domain of a function**. The domain of a function is the set of all possible input values (usually x -values) for which the function is defined. When a function's expression becomes undefined for certain input values, these values are excluded from the domain. On a graph, these exclusions often manifest as **vertical asymptotes** (where the function's value approaches infinity) or **holes** (removable discontinuities). Understanding where a function is undefined helps

us accurately sketch its graph and interpret its behavior.

3. Simplifying Algebraic Expressions

When simplifying algebraic expressions, especially those involving fractions, we often cancel out common factors. However, we must be mindful that canceling a factor that could be zero can change the domain of the expression. For example, the expression $\frac{(x^2 - 4)}{(x - 2)}$ can be simplified to $\frac{(x - 2)(x + 2)}{(x - 2)} = x + 2$. However, the original expression is undefined at $x = 2$, while the simplified expression $x + 2$ is defined at $x = 2$. Therefore, when simplifying, it's important to state the restrictions, such as " $x \neq 2$ ".

4. Understanding Mathematical Limits

The concept of "undefined" is particularly important in calculus when studying **limits**. While a function might be undefined at a specific point, its limit as it approaches that point can still exist. This is a cornerstone of calculus and allows us to analyze the behavior of functions near problematic points.

Beyond the Basics: Indeterminate Forms

While division by zero is the most common cause of an undefined expression, sometimes we encounter **indeterminate forms**. These are not strictly "undefined" in the sense of having no answer, but rather they have an ambiguous form where the value cannot be determined without further analysis. Common indeterminate forms include:

1. $0/0$
2. ∞/∞
3. $0 \times \infty$
4. $\infty - \infty$
5. 1^∞
6. 0^0
7. ∞^0

These forms typically arise in the context of limits. While they don't have a definitive value in isolation, they signal that more advanced techniques, such as L'Hôpital's Rule or algebraic manipulation, are needed to determine the actual limit.

Conclusion: Embracing the "Undefined"

The concept of "undefined" in algebra is not a roadblock but a signpost. It guides us towards a deeper understanding of mathematical operations, their limitations, and the properties of functions and equations. By mastering the conditions under which expressions become undefined – primarily division by zero, but also including square roots of negative numbers, logarithms of non-positive numbers, and certain trigonometric functions – we equip ourselves with essential tools for accurate problem-solving, insightful graphing, and a more robust appreciation of the elegance and structure of mathematics. The next time you encounter an "undefined" situation, don't shy away from it; embrace it as an opportunity to learn and refine your algebraic skills.

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Questions & Answers About what is undefined in algebra

N o	Question	Answer
1	What's the big deal with 'undefined' in algebra? It sounds like a mistake!	It's not exactly a mistake, but 'undefined' means a mathematical expression doesn't have a clear, single, numerical value according to the rules of algebra. Think of it as an unresolvable situation.

2	When does 'undefined' pop up most often in algebra? Give me an example!	The most common culprit is division by zero. For instance, 5 divided by 0 ($5/0$) is undefined because there's no number you can multiply by 0 to get 5.
3	Is 'undefined' the same as 'zero' in algebra?	No, they're very different! Zero is a specific number with properties. 'Undefined' means there's no number assigned to it at all. For example, $0/5$ is 0, but $5/0$ is undefined.
4	What about square roots of negative numbers? Are they 'undefined' too?	In standard real number algebra, yes. Taking the square root of a negative number, like $\sqrt{-4}$, is undefined because no real number squared results in a negative value. This leads to the concept of imaginary numbers.
5	How does 'undefined' relate to functions in algebra?	Functions can be undefined for certain input values. For example, the function $f(x) = 1/x$ is undefined when $x = 0$ because it would involve dividing by zero.
6	If an equation has an 'undefined' result, does that mean there's no solution?	Often, yes. If solving an equation leads to an undefined operation, it usually signifies that there's no valid solution that satisfies the equation under the given rules.
7	Can 'undefined' be used in limits in calculus, even though it's about algebra?	Yes! While calculus builds on algebra, limits can approach an 'undefined' form (like $0/0$). This 'indeterminate form' often indicates that further analysis is needed to find the limit's actual value.

8	Are there other common situations where 'undefined' arises in algebra?	Besides division by zero and square roots of negatives, you might encounter it with things like the logarithm of zero or a negative number in real number algebra. These are all cases where the operation breaks down.
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