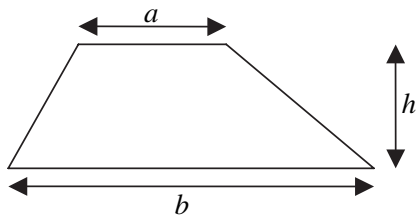


TRAPEZIUM ARTIST: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FORMULA FOR THE AREA OF A TRAPEZIUM

by Colin Foster

$$\text{Area} = \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h$$



What I thought would be a routine lesson on area with my year 8 class developed in an interesting way. I had given the class a sheet of reasonably random triangles and quadrilaterals and asked them to find the areas by any means they liked. We then discussed their different methods, summarized possible formulas and thought about how to prove them.

The formula for the trapezium stood out as being the only one that wasn't immediately 'see-able'. With thought, those for the triangle, rectangle, parallelogram and kite could all be seen to be correct at a glance. That got us thinking about different ways of proving the formula. We were seeking something not only believable but striking enough as an image to stick in our minds.

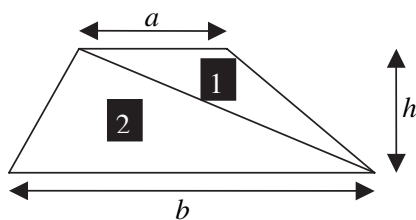
All our methods involved converting to simpler shapes.

1. A diagonal line splits the trapezium into two triangles with the same height but different bases.

$$\text{Area 1} = \frac{1}{2}ah$$

$$\text{Area 2} = \frac{1}{2}bh$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Area} &= \frac{1}{2}ah + \frac{1}{2}bh \\ &= \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h \end{aligned}$$

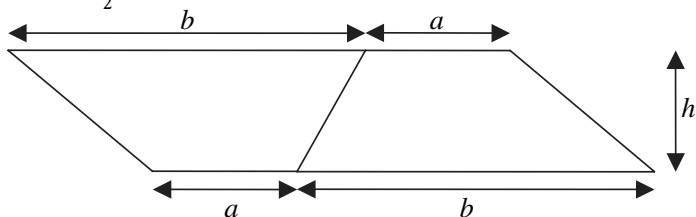


This was my preferred proof before the lesson, but the $(a+b)$ element is not visually obvious.

2. Two copies of the trapezium (one upside down) make a parallelogram.

$$\text{Area of parallelogram} = (a+b)h$$

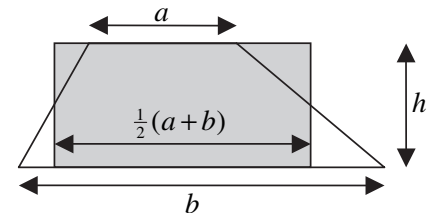
$$\text{Area} = \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h$$



Here the $(a+b)$ is clear, but some pupils weren't happy in their minds that the a -side and the b -side would join to make a straight line.

3. A rectangle with the same area and the same height will have a base of $\frac{1}{2}(a+b)$ (the mean of the two horizontal sides).

$$\text{Area} = \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h$$



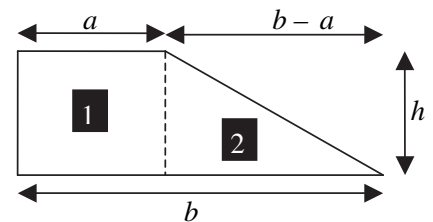
This image seemed to fit the formula best, but we felt vague about the locations of the vertices of the rectangle.

4. We were ready to accept that a horizontal shear would not affect the area. (We had pushed over a stack of file paper and looked at the end when thinking about why all parallelograms with the same base and the same height have the same area.) So any trapezium can be transformed into one with two right angles and the same values of a , b , h and Area.

$$\text{Area 1} = ah$$

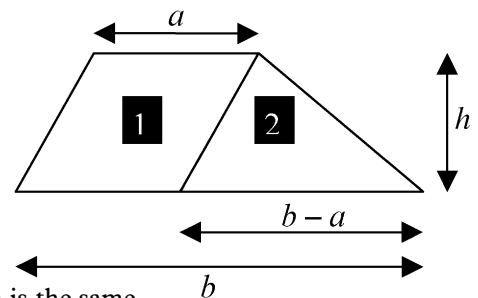
$$\text{Area 2} = \frac{1}{2}(b-a)h$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Area} &= ah + \frac{1}{2}(b-a)h \\ &= ah + \frac{1}{2}bh - \frac{1}{2}ah \\ &= \frac{1}{2}ah + \frac{1}{2}bh \\ &= \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h \end{aligned}$$



This was a new one for me, and rather neat, but hopeless for visualizing the formula.

It is actually possible to do this without the shear by slicing off a parallelogram from one end of the trapezium (see below).



The algebra is the same.

5. A trapezium can be thought of as a triangle with one of its vertices sliced off by a line parallel to the opposite side.

The first step is to find the height x of the small triangle. Since the small triangle is similar to the large one,

$$\frac{x}{a} = \frac{x+h}{b}$$

$$bx = ax + ah$$

$$x = \frac{ah}{b-a}$$

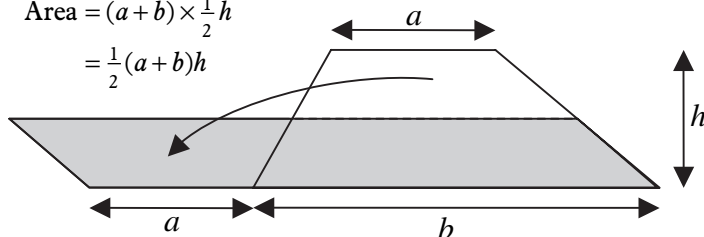
Then,

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Area} &= \frac{1}{2}b(x+h) - \frac{1}{2}ax \\ &= \frac{1}{2}b\left(\frac{ah}{b-a} + h\right) - \frac{1}{2}a\left(\frac{ah}{b-a}\right) \\ &= \frac{abh + bh(b-a) - a^2h}{2(b-a)} \\ &= \frac{(b^2 - a^2)h}{2(b-a)} = \frac{(b-a)(b+a)h}{2(b-a)} \\ &= \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h \end{aligned}$$

I worked on this after the lesson. The algebra was beyond the class. It didn't give me any insight.

6. A final possibility is to slice the trapezium half way up parallel to the base. Rotating the top piece half a turn, it makes a parallelogram with the bottom piece.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Area} &= (a+b) \times \frac{1}{2}h \\ &= \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h \end{aligned}$$



This has the advantage over Method 2 that only one copy of the shape is needed.

No doubt one could continue finding other ways. I have ended up quite keen on Method 6.

A Footnote

Later in the lesson, one pupil was staring into space. I asked him what he was doing. He said, "A parallelogram is just a special sort of trapezium, isn't it?" I agreed. "Then the formula for the trapezium ought to work for a parallelogram too." He had tried putting $a = b$ into the formula for a trapezium.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Area} &= \frac{1}{2}(a+b)h \\ &= \frac{1}{2}(b+b)h \\ &= \frac{2bh}{2} \\ &= bh \end{aligned}$$

(He had made a mistake with his algebra and thought it didn't work – and I was pleased that he was disturbed about that.) We imagined stretching the a -side until it was as long as b , and we could see how the two triangles in Method 1 (our preferred proof) became congruent. We also saw together that putting $a = 0$ gave the formula $\frac{1}{2}bh$ for a triangle and imagined how that would alter our proof (triangle 1 disappearing).

I wish I had thought of all that! ☒

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Author

Colin Foster, King Henry VIII School, Warwick Road, Coventry CV3 6AQ.
e-mail: colin@foster77.co.uk

New Resource for Handling Data: Stats4Schools

The Office for National Statistics is launching a new website to support the delivery of data handling within all areas of the National Curriculum. The free resources for teachers and pupils can be found at **www.stats4schools.gov.uk**.

Maths teacher Claire Turner designed the content. She was seconded to the Office for National Statistics and also works on the highly successful project CensusAtSchool, **www.censusatschool.ntu.ac.uk**.

Says Claire: "My aim was to develop a free resource that uses real data and provides opportunities to integrate ICT into pupil's work. Working with real data highlights the true nature of statistics, and allows pupils to draw useful and meaningful conclusions. The Office for National Statistics has a wealth of data that can be used to provide an interesting context for pupils to investigate their own hypotheses. For example, 'Do boys or girls read more?' or 'Is it true that the older you get the longer it takes you to travel to school?'"

The site includes lesson plans and resources on a number of different themes, which cover a number of curriculum areas. There are large datasets on topics like smoking. These were produced to enable pupils to manipulate large amounts of data, in practice for GCSE Handling Data coursework. There is a 'links' section in which teachers can directly link to other useful sites and resources, relevant to teaching, census and statistics.

Take a look this term on: **www.stats4schools.gov.uk**

Contacts: Claire Turner:
e-mail: **claire.turner@ntu.ac.uk**
tel. 01606 352 965

Jane Kemp – Office for National Statistics:
e-mail: **jane.kemp@ons.gov.uk**
tel. 0207 533 6235