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Math comes down to pattern recognition. We identify patterns in the world around us and use them to navigate its challenges. But to do all this, we need numbers -- or at least the information our numbers represent. What are numbers? As we explore more later, it's a deceptively profound question, but you already know the simple answer. A number is a word and a symbol that represents counting. Let's say you're walking in front of the house and you see two angry dogs. Even if you didn't know the word two or knew what the appropriate number looked like, your brain would understand well how meeting two dogs compares to a situation with three, one or zero dogs. We owe this innate understanding to our brain (specifically, the inferior parietal lobe), which naturally extracts numbers from the surrounding environment in the same way it identifies colors [source: Dehaene]. We call it the meaning of numbers, and our brains come fully equipped with it from birth. Studies show that while infants have no understanding of human numerical systems, they can still identify changes in quantity. Neuroimaging research has even found that infants possess the ability to engage in logarithmic counting, or counting based on integral increases in physical quantity. While the baby won't see the difference between five teddy bears and six teddy bears in the lineup, he or she will notice a difference between five and 10 [source: Miller]. Numerical sentiment plays a key role in the way animals navigate their environment -- environments where objects are numerous and often mobile. However, the numerical feeling of the animal becomes more imprecise with an increasing number. People, for example, systematically calculate $4 + 5$ out of $2 + 3$ [source: Dehaene] more slowly. At some point in our ancient past, prehistoric people began to develop a means to increase their sense. They started counting on their fingers and toes. That's why so many numerical systems depend on groups of five, 10 or 20. Base-10 or decimal systems are derived from the use of both hands, while base-20 or vigesimal systems are based on the use of fingers and toes. Thus, ancient people learned to outsource their numerical meaning and in doing so undoubtedly created humanity's most important scientific achievement: mathematics.

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