Choice of axes can simplify effort needed

The components of a given vector will be different for different choices of coordinate axes. The choice of coordinate axes is always arbitrary. You can often reduce the work involved in adding vectors by a good choice of axes—for example, by choosing one of the axes to be in the same direction as one of the vectors. Then that vector will have only one nonzero component.

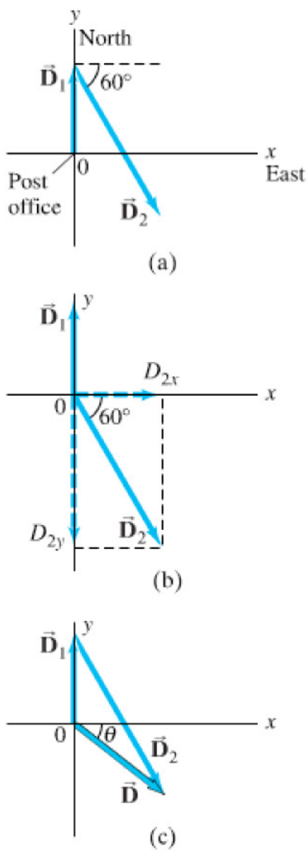

FIGURE 3–15 Example 3–2. (a) The two displacement vectors, $\vec{\mathbf{D}}_1$ and $\vec{\mathbf{D}}_2$. (b) $\vec{\mathbf{D}}_2$ is resolved into its components. (c) $\vec{\mathbf{D}}_1$ and $\vec{\mathbf{D}}_2$ are added graphically to obtain the resultant $\vec{\mathbf{D}}$. The component method of adding the vectors is explained in the Example.

EXAMPLE 3–2 **Mail carrier's displacement.** A rural mail carrier leaves the post office and drives 22.0 km in a northerly direction. She then drives in a direction 60.0° south of east for 47.0 km (Fig. 3–15a). What is her displacement from the post office?

APPROACH We resolve each vector into its x and y components. We add the x components together, and then the y components together, giving us the x and y components of the resultant. We choose the positive x axis to be east and the positive y axis to be north, since those are the compass directions used on most maps.

SOLUTION Resolve each displacement vector into its components, as shown in Fig. 3–15b. Since $\vec{\mathbf{D}}_1$ has magnitude 22.0 km and points north, it has only a y component:

$$D_{1x} = 0, \qquad D_{1y} = 22.0\text{ km}.$$

$\vec{\mathbf{D}}_2$ has both x and y components:

$$D_{2x} = +(47.0\text{ km})(\cos 60^\circ) = +(47.0\text{ km})(0.500) = +23.5\text{ km}$$
$$D_{2y} = -(47.0\text{ km})(\sin 60^\circ) = -(47.0\text{ km})(0.866) = -40.7\text{ km}.$$

Notice that D_{2y} is negative because this vector component points along the negative y axis. The resultant vector, $\vec{\mathbf{D}}$, has components:

$$D_x = D_{1x} + D_{2x} = 0\text{ km} + 23.5\text{ km} = +23.5\text{ km}$$
$$D_y = D_{1y} + D_{2y} = 22.0\text{ km} + (-40.7\text{ km}) = -18.7\text{ km}.$$

This specifies the resultant vector completely:

$$D_x = 23.5\text{ km}, \qquad D_y = -18.7\text{ km}.$$

We can also specify the resultant vector by giving its magnitude and angle using Eqs. 3–4:

$$D = \sqrt{D_x^2 + D_y^2} = \sqrt{(23.5\text{ km})^2 + (-18.7\text{ km})^2} = 30.0\text{ km}$$
$$\tan\theta = \frac{D_y}{D_x} = \frac{-18.7\text{ km}}{23.5\text{ km}} = -0.796.$$

A calculator with an INV TAN, an ARC TAN, or a TAN^{-1} key gives $\theta = \tan^{-1}(-0.796) = -38.5^\circ$. The negative sign means $\theta = 38.5^\circ$ below the x axis, Fig. 3–15c. So, the resultant displacement is 30.0 km directed at 38.5° in a southeasterly direction.

NOTE Always be attentive about the quadrant in which the resultant vector lies. An electronic calculator does not fully give this information, but a good diagram does.

PROBLEM SOLVING
Identify the correct quadrant by drawing a careful diagram

The signs of trigonometric functions depend on which "quadrant" the angle falls in: for example, the tangent is positive in the first and third quadrants (from 0° to 90°, and 180° to 270°), but negative in the second and fourth quadrants; see Appendix A–7. The best way to keep track of angles, and to check any vector result, is always to draw a vector diagram. A vector diagram gives you something tangible to look at when analyzing a problem, and provides a check on the results.

The following Problem Solving Box should not be considered a prescription. Rather it is a summary of things to do to get you thinking and involved in the problem at hand.