Online vs. Offline Learning, Variance Reduction, and SVRG
Recall from Lecture 2

• Gradient descent
  • Computationally slow to run
  • Statistically converges at a linear rate

\[ E \left[ \| x_t - x^* \|^2 \right] = O(\gamma^t) \]

• Stochastic gradient descent (SGD)
  • Computationally fast iterations, no dependence on dataset size
  • Statistically converges at a slower rate — or to a noise ball

\[ E \left[ \| x_t - x^* \|^2 \right] = O(1/t) \]
Can We Do Better?

• Is there an algorithm that has the **computational structure** of SGD, but still gets the **fast linear rates of gradient descent**?

• Intermediate question: can we find problems for which vanilla SGD already converges at a linear rate, rather than converging to a noise ball?
  • If we find such a problem, we can **understand why it happens**.
Rank-1 Matrix Completion

• Suppose you have some rank-1 matrix $A = xx^T$

• Carelessly, you lost most of the entries of $A$
  • You only have access to a sparse, randomly-chosen subset of the entries

• Goal: recover the original matrix $A$ from the sparse samples.
  • Applications include recommender systems, principle component analysis, etc.
Matrix Completion as Optimization

• Simplest thing: minimize squared error between model and samples.

\[
\text{minimize}_{x} \sum_{(i,j) \in \text{samples}} \left( e_i^T xx^T e_j - e_i^T A e_j \right)^2
\]

• Is this convex?

• We can try to solve this with SGD: randomly choose \((i, j)\) and run

\[
x_{t+1} = x_t - 2\alpha \left( e_i^T xx^T e_j - e_i^T A e_j \right) (e_i e_j^T x + e_j e_i^T x)
\]
Aside: What is the cost of SGD here?

• Update rule is

\[ x_{t+1} = x_t - 2\alpha (e_i^T xx^T e_j - e_i^T Ae_j) (e_i e_j^T x + e_j e_i^T x) \]

• Suppose we have \( \mathbf{K} \) samples and \( x \in \mathbb{R}^n \).

• What is the \textbf{time complexity} of computing an iteration of SGD?

• It’s really fast: \( O(1) \) — this makes SGD very attractive here
Demo
A Linear Rate for SGD? Why?

• Variance of the gradient estimator goes to zero over time.

• What is the variance at a particular point $x$?

$$\mathbb{E} \left[ \left\| \hat{\nabla} f(x) \right\|^2 \right] = \frac{4}{K} \sum_{(i,j) \in \text{samples}} \left\| (e_i^T xx^T e_j - e_i^T Ae_j)(e_i e_j^T x + e_j e_i^T x) \right\|^2$$

$$= \frac{4}{K} \sum_{(i,j) \in \text{samples}} (e_i^T xx^T e_j - e_i^T Ae_j)^2 ((e_j^T x)^2 + (e_i^T x)^2)$$

• At an optimal point, $xx^T = A$, the variance is zero!
The Role of Variance

• Hypothesis: if the variance becomes small when we get close to the optimum, we converge at a linear rate.

• In fact, we can prove that we get a linear rate if for some $C$

\[
\text{Var} \left( \nabla \tilde{f}(x) \right) \leq C \| x - x^* \|^2
\]

• Or more generally

\[
\mathbb{E} \left[ \left\| \nabla \tilde{f}(x) \right\|^2 \right] \leq C \left\| \mathbb{E} \left[ \nabla \tilde{f}(x) \right] \right\|^2 = C \left\| \nabla f(x) \right\|^2
\]
Can we make this happen for any objective?

• One way to do it:

\[ \nabla \tilde{g}(x) = \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(x^*) \]

• In expectation, this is the same since

\[ \mathbb{E} [\nabla \tilde{g}(x)] = \nabla f(x) - \nabla f(x^*) = \nabla f(x) - 0 \]

• And if the samples are Lipschitz continuous with parameter L,

\[ \| \nabla \tilde{g}(x) \|^2 = \| \nabla f(x) - \nabla f(x^*) \|^2 \leq L^2 \| x - x^* \|^2 \]
Does this mean we can always get a linear rate?

• **Yes!** ...for any strongly convex problem where we know the solution.

• **Doesn’t seem very useful.**

• What if we can **approximate the solution**? For \( \hat{x} \approx x^* \)

\[
\nabla \tilde{g}(x) = \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x})
\]

• But now our **gradients are biased** — SGD converges to \( \hat{x} \) not \( x^* \)
Unbiased gradients with approximate solutions

• We can force the gradient to be unbiased by letting

\[ \nabla \hat{g}(x) = \nabla \hat{f}(x) - \nabla \hat{f}(\hat{x}) + E \left[ \nabla \hat{f}(\hat{x}) \right] \]

• Using a **full gradient as an anchor** to lower the variance

• But what is the **computational cost** of doing this?
  • Is it feasible to compute the full gradient in every setting?
  • Is it worth it to get a linear rate?
Online and Offline Learning
Two Types of Settings for ML Problems

• **Online learning**
  • The training examples arrive one-at-a-time as we are learning
  • We don’t have access to all the training examples
  • Not even necessarily a finite training set — new training examples may be generated in real time in response to e.g. changes in the environment

• **Offline learning**
  • We have access to all the training examples upfront
  • The objective is a finite sum over the given training set
Online Learning

• Have some **distribution of training examples**, and goal is to
  \[ \text{minimize}_w \mathbb{E}_{\tilde{x} \sim \text{distribution}} [\text{loss}(w; \tilde{x})] \]

• But we **don’t actually have an expression** for the distribution

• All we can do is **draw samples from it**
  \[ \tilde{x}_1, \tilde{x}_2, \tilde{x}_3, \ldots \]
Advantages of Online Learning

• Online learning *generally doesn’t overfit as much*
  • Why? The training distribution is the same as the test distribution.

• Online learning *easily handles new data* from the environment

• Systems benefit: we don’t need to materialize the entire training set
  • Great for *scaling up* to problems that don’t fit in memory
Disadvantages of Online Learning

• Can’t compute exact/full objectives and gradients
  • Because we don’t even know distribution

• Difficult to evaluate convergence

• Generally don’t reuse training examples multiple times
  • So don’t make efficient use of the cache for the training set

• Neural networks sometimes catastrophically forget older examples.
Limitations on Online Learning

• 1-D least squares regression: for some distribution \( \mu \) over \( \mathbb{R} \),

\[
\text{minimize} \int x \mathbb{E}_{u \sim \mu} \left[ \frac{1}{2} (x - u)^2 \right]
\]

• Optimal solution is just the \textbf{mean}, regardless of what \( \mu \) is

\[
x^* = \mathbb{E}_{u \sim \mu} [u]
\]
Limitations on Online Learning (continued)

- Suppose there were an online learning algorithm that converged at a linear rate for this 1-D least squares problem. Using $t$ samples:

$$E\left[(x_t - x^*)^2\right] = O(\gamma^t)$$

- But we know (from statistics) the lowest-variance estimator for the mean of a distribution, given $t$ samples, is just the sample mean

$$\bar{u} = \frac{1}{t} \sum_{i=1}^{t} u_t \Rightarrow \text{Var}(\bar{u}) = \frac{1}{t} \text{Var}(u_t)$$

- **Contradiction.** No online algorithm can be this good!
Limitations on Online Learning (continued)

• Conclusion: there’s no online learning algorithm that converges at a linear rate for general convex problems.

• This doesn’t mean that online SGD never converges at a linear rate
  • We saw that the matrix completion example did

• But it does suggest that if we want to make SGD converge at a linear rate, we need more information than what we have in the online setting.
Aside: Online Learning in Research

• Online learning is an active area of research.

• Just from a search of the titles, there were 17 papers mentioning online learning in this year’s ICML and 35 papers in this year’s NeurIPS.
  • And a few more if we look at the abstracts.

• Particularly interesting to us because of the computational benefits of being able to run online.
Offline Learning

• **Offline or batch learning** is the more traditional setting of minimizing a finite sum of training losses

\[
\text{minimize}_w \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n} l(w; x_i, y_i)
\]

• Offline learning is often just defined as “not online learning”

• We have access to everything:
  • The loss function \( l \)
  • The training examples \( x \)
  • The training labels \( y \)
Benefits of Offline Learning

• **Can compute exact/full objectives and gradients**

• Consequence: it’s trivially possible to *converge at a linear rate*
  • Just use gradient descent

• **Can we leverage this to make an SGD-like algorithm fast?**
Stochastic Variance-Reduced Gradient (SVRG)
Recall: Unbiased low-variance samples

• From a few slides ago, we were looking at using samples of the form

$$\nabla \tilde{g}(x) = \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}) + \mathbb{E} \left[ \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}) \right]$$

• These samples have **reduced variance** when $\hat{x}$ is close to $x^*$

• We asked when we could do this, and now we have an answer:
  • Only in the offline setting!

• Question: how do we use this in an algorithm?
How much did we reduce the variance?

• If the gradient samples are $L$-Lipschitz continuous
  • And we abuse notation to define $\text{Var}(u) = \mathbb{E} \left[ \| u - \mathbb{E}[u] \|^2 \right]$

$$\text{Var} \left( \nabla \tilde{g}(x) \right) = \text{Var} \left( \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}) + \mathbb{E} \left[ \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}) \right] \right)$$

$$= \text{Var} \left( \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}) \right)$$

$$\leq \mathbb{E} \left[ \| \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}) \|^2 \right]$$

$$\leq L^2 \| x - \hat{x} \|^2.$$
Is this enough for a linear rate for SGD?

• **No**, variance at the optimum is reduced, but still not zero!

\[
\text{Var} (\nabla \tilde{g}(x^*)) \leq L^2 \| x^* - \hat{x} \|^2.
\]

• Idea: what if we used a sequence of \( \hat{x} \) that **approaches the optimum**?

• Then **the variance would go to zero over time**!
  • Intuition: if the variance goes to zero at a linear rate, then SGD should also converge at a linear rate.
Is this enough? (continued)

- If we have a sequence of $\hat{x}$ that converges to the optimum at a linear rate, then we can use it to reduce the variance of SGD so that it converges to the optimum at a linear rate.

- This also doesn’t seem useful.

- Critical insight: use the iterates of SGD as $\hat{x}$
  - So, if SGD converges at a linear rate, then SGD will converge at a linear rate
  - Seems circular — but we can make it rigorous
How often to use full gradient samples?

• Can we use every iteration of SGD as an anchor point \( \hat{x} \)?

• We could...but this would just be gradient descent.

\[
\nabla \tilde{g}(x) = \nabla \tilde{f}(x) - \nabla \tilde{f}(x) + \mathbb{E} \left[ \nabla \tilde{f}(x) \right] = \nabla f(x).
\]

• Instead, use a full gradient sample every \( K \) iterations of SGD.
  • Called an epoch.
Stochastic Variance-Reduced Gradient (SVRG)

• Initialize $\mathbf{x}_{0,T}$ arbitrarily

• Outer loop: for $k = 1$ to $K$

  \[
  \hat{x}_k \leftarrow x_{k-1,T} \\
  \hat{g}_k \leftarrow \nabla f(\hat{x}_k) = \mathbf{E} \left[ \nabla \tilde{f}(\hat{x}_k) \right] \\
  x_{k,0} \leftarrow \hat{x}_k
  \]

• Inner loop: for $t = 1$ to $T$

  • Sample $f_{k,t}$ at random from training set losses

  \[
  x_{k,t} \leftarrow x_{k,t-1} - \alpha \left( \nabla \tilde{f}_{k,t}(x_{k,t-1}) - \nabla \tilde{f}_{k,t}(\hat{x}_k) + \hat{g}_k \right)
  \]
Computational Cost of SVRG

• Each inner loop runs for $T$ iterations
  • Has a computational cost of $O(T)$

• If we have $n$ examples, the outer loop gradient computation has a computational cost of $O(n)$

• Over $K$ total outer loop iterations, total time is $O(Kn + KT)$
Memory Burden of SVRG

- In addition to the copy of the model that needs to be stored for vanilla SGD, we also need to store:
  - An additional copy of the model vector for the anchor point $\hat{x}$
  - An additional vector to store its exact/full gradient

- If the model is of size $d$, we will need to store a total of $3d$ numbers:
  - Plus the training set, which is usually much larger

- Takeaway: no significant memory cost to run SVRG
Linear Rates for SVRG
Very Simple Proof that SVRG Converges

• Strategy: run the inner loop of SVRG long enough that for some $\gamma < 1$

$$
\mathbb{E} \left[ \| x_{k,T} - x^* \|^2 \right| x_{k,0} \leq \gamma \| x_{k,0} - x^* \|^2.
$$

• Show that a fixed $T$ suffices for every epoch $k$
  • This is enough to show convergence at a linear rate. Why?

• You’ll see a tighter version of this proof in this week’s paper.
Analysis of an Inner Iterate of SVRG

• Starting with the iterate:

\[ x_{k,t} = x_{k,t-1} - \alpha \left( \nabla \tilde{f}_{k,t}(x_{k,t-1}) - \nabla \tilde{f}_{k,t}(\hat{x}_k) + \hat{g}_k \right) \]

• Let’s simplify it a little by abusing notation to drop the \( k \) subscripts

\[ x_t = x_{t-1} - \alpha \left( \nabla \tilde{f}_t(x_{t-1}) - \nabla \tilde{f}_t(\hat{x}) + \nabla f(\hat{x}) \right) \]
Analysis (continued)

• Expected distance to the optimum:

\[ E \left[ \| x_t - x^* \|^2 \right| x_{t-1} \] = \[ E \left[ \| x_{t-1} - x^* - \alpha (\nabla \tilde{f}_t(x_{t-1}) - \nabla \tilde{f}_t(\hat{x}) + \nabla f(\hat{x})) \|^2 \right| x_{t-1} \]  

• To proceed, need to bound the second order/variance term
Analysis (continued)

• Important property: for constant $c$, $\text{Var}(X + c) = \text{Var}(X)$

• We can use this to simplify the second order term:

$$\text{Var} \left( \nabla \tilde{f}_t(x_{t-1}) - \nabla \tilde{f}_t(\hat{x}) + \nabla f(\hat{x}) \bigg| x_{t-1} \right)$$
Analysis (continued)

• Substituting this back, we get

\[
E \left[ \|x_t - x^*\|^2 \bigg| x_{t-1} \right] \leq \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2 - 2\alpha (x_{t-1} - x^*)^T \nabla f(x_{t-1}) + \alpha^2 \|\nabla f(x_{t-1})\|^2
\]

\[
+ \alpha^2 \left( 2L^2 \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2 + 2L^2 \|\hat{x} - x^*\|^2 \right)
\]

• Now we can reduce the first part using strong convexity/Lipschitz

\[
E \left[ \|x_t - x^*\|^2 \bigg| x_{t-1} \right] \leq \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2 - 2\alpha \mu \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2 + \alpha^2 L^2 \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2
\]

\[
+ \alpha^2 \left( 2L^2 \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2 + 2L^2 \|\hat{x} - x^*\|^2 \right)
\]
Analysis (continued)

• We can now take the full expectation, given the anchor point

\[
E \left[ \|x_t - x^*\|^2 \middle| \hat{x} \right] \leq (1 - 2\alpha \mu + 3\alpha^2 L^2) E \left[ \|x_{t-1} - x^*\|^2 \middle| \hat{x} \right] + 2\alpha^2 L^2 \|\hat{x} - x^*\|^2
\]

• Next, for simplicity, let \( \rho_t = E \left[ \|x_t - x^*\|^2 \middle| \hat{x} \right] \)

\[
\rho_t \leq (1 - 2\alpha \mu + 3\alpha^2 L^2) \rho_{t-1} + 2\alpha^2 L^2 \rho_0
\]

• Suppose we want to contract by a factor of \( e \). As long as \( e p_{t-1} > p_0 \):

\[
\rho_t \leq (1 - 2\alpha \mu + 3\alpha^2 L^2) \rho_{t-1} + 2\alpha^2 L^2 e \rho_{t-1}
\]
Analysis (continued)

• Now we have

\[ \rho_t \leq (1 - 2\alpha\mu + 3\alpha^2 L^2)\rho_{t-1} + 2\alpha^2 L^2 e\rho_{t-1} \]

• Setting the step size such that \( \alpha\mu = 5\alpha^2 L^2 e \)

\[ \rho_t \leq \left( 1 - \frac{\mu^2}{5L^2 e} \right) \rho_{t-1} \]
Analysis (continued)

• Now, this was all contingent upon $e^{p_{t-1}} > p_0$. 
Analysis of Inner Loop Is Done!

- We’ve shown that if we run for \( t \geq \frac{5L^2e}{\mu^2} \) iterations,

\[
\mathbb{E} \left[ \| x_t - x^* \|^2 \mid \hat{x} \right] \leq \frac{1}{e} \| \hat{x} - x^* \|^2
\]
Outer Loop Analysis

• Applying this recursively,

\[ E \left[ \| \hat{x}_k - x^* \|^2 \right] \leq e^{-k} \| \hat{x}_0 - x^* \|^2 \]

• So, to get down to error \( \varepsilon \) we need \( k \) iterations, where

\[ k \geq \log \left( \frac{\| \hat{x}_0 - x^* \|^2}{\varepsilon} \right) \]
Bringing it Together

- Total number of stochastic gradient iterations needed is

\[
tk \geq \frac{5L^2e}{\mu^2} \log \left( \frac{||\hat{x}_0 - x^*||^2}{\epsilon} \right) = O \left( \log \left( \frac{1}{\epsilon} \right) \right)
\]

- This is a linear rate!
  - Although there’s a much tighter proof in the paper this week with better dependence on the condition number.
Issues with Variance Reduction

• Computational cost

• Overfitting

• Interaction with other techniques

• Choosing parameters
  • Metaparameter optimization
Other Methods for Variance Reduction
SAG

• Stochastic average gradient

• At each step, randomly update a single example’s gradient estimate using the current iterate, like SGD

• But, use the sum of all gradient estimates to perform an update
Systems Comparison: SAG vs SVRG

• SAG requires us to store a gradient sample for each training example for each training example

• What is the memory cost of doing this, if we have n training examples and our model has dimension d?

• Answer: it’s $O(nd)$

• Compare to SVRG which required $O(3d)$
Many other variance reduction methods

- SAG
- SAGA
- SVRG
- SDCA – stochastic dual coordinate ascent
- Several methods in the distributed setting
- Etc.
Questions?

• Upcoming things
  • Paper Presentation #4 on Wednesday — read paper before class
  • Paper Review #3 due Today.