Earmark graph approach to *de novo* genome assembly

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The presentation of this work was made possible by a Travel Fellowship awarded by ISCB with grant funds obtained from the Department of Energy Office of Science, the National Science Foundation Bio-Directorate, and the NIH National Institute of General Medical Sciences.

Abstract

A common approach to assembling a genome from short reads is constructing the de Bruijn graph on all k-mers from the given set of reads and finding a traversal of edges in this graph. We propose a new approach that allows to decrease the graph size without losing the essential information from the input data. Instead of using all the k-mers from a read we take only a few of them (and call them earmarked). Besides an obvious advantage of requiring less memory and time for constructing, the resulting earmark graph has several other advantages over the de Bruijn graph.

Typical genome assembly setting

Input: a set of substrings (called reads) $\mathcal{R} \subseteq \{\mathtt{A},\mathtt{C},\mathtt{G},\mathtt{T}\}^r$ of an unknown circular string $S \in \{\mathtt{A},\mathtt{C},\mathtt{G},\mathtt{T}\}^*$ (called genome).
Output: the genome S.
Complications: reads may contain errors.

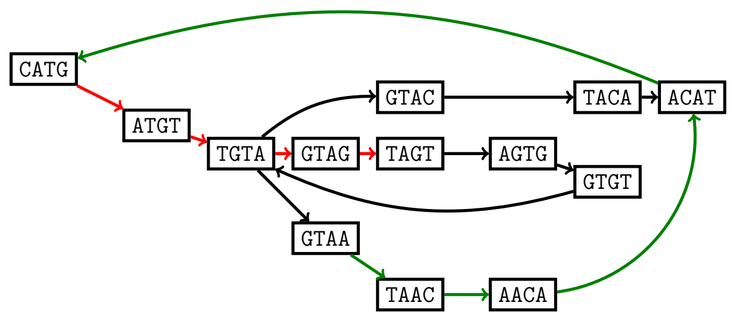
Standard and new approaches: an example

In this example:
$r = 8$
$k = 4$

set $\mathcal{R}$ of reads of length r
R_1: CATGTAGT
R_2: GTAACATG
R_3: AGTGTACA
R_4: TGTAGTGT
R_5: CATGTAAC
R_6: TAACATGT

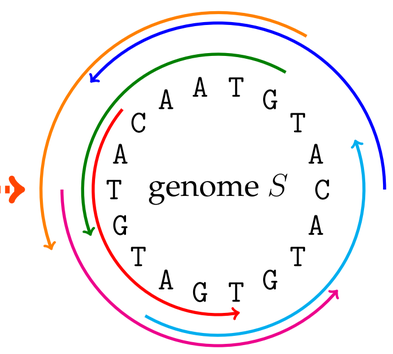
1. represent each read as a path on its $r-k+1$ consecutive k-mers

(standard) de Bruijn graph approach



2. simplify the graph (compress simple paths, clip tips, remove erroneous connections and bulges) and find a cycle containing all the edges

***de novo* genome assembly problem**



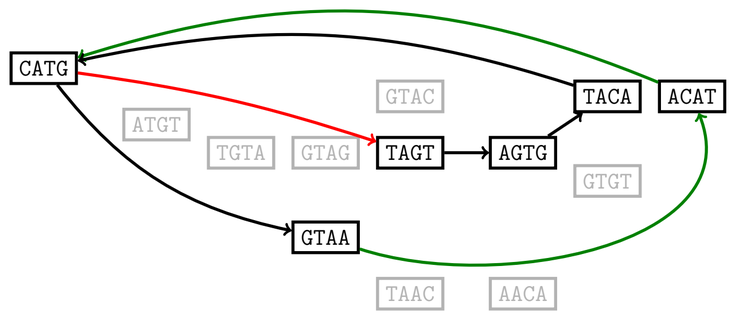
1. construct a set $\mathcal{E} \subseteq \{A,C,G,T\}^k$ of earmarked k-mers such that each read contains at least two earmarked k-mers

earmarks
CATG TACA
GTAA ACAT
AGTG TAGT

2. find the earmarks in the reads

R_1 : CATGTAGT
R_2 : GTAACATG
...

3. represent each read as a path on its consecutive earmarks



4. simplify the graph (compress simple paths, clip tips, remove erroneous connections and bulges) and find a cycle containing all the edges

(new) earmark graph approach

Advantages of earmark graph over de Bruijn graph

Smaller size. The earmark graph requires less time and memory for construction. Note also that one can control the size of the earmark graph by varying the size of the set of earmarks. Also, it is easy to see that in an extreme case when $\mathcal{E}$ is just the set of all the k-mers of the input reads, the earmark graph coincides with the de Bruijn graph.

Simpler structure. In the example above, the de Bruijn graph contains two vertices v with indegree$(v) \times$ outdegree$(v) \geq 2$, while the earmark graph contains only one such vertex. This corresponds to a simpler representation of repeats in the genome and simplifies the problem of finding a cycle in the graph.

Using trusted k-mers. By restricting earmarks to k-mers present in many reads ("trusted" k-mers) one can reduce the number of erroneous edges resulting from sequencing errors in the reads.

Practical results

		de Bruijn	earmarked
E.coli genome	# vertices	appr. 8097300	694592
	# edges	appr. 8103540	698170
+ compression	# vertices	appr. 50200	7862
	# edges	appr. 56440	11440
+ tips clipping	# vertices	appr. 13100	4142
	# edges	appr. 19340	7720
+ bulge removal	# vertices	appr. 9640	3030
	# edges	appr. 14100	5862
+ erroneous connection removal	# vertices	appr. 3980	1350
	# edges	appr. 5700	2514
+ tips clipping	# vertices	appr. 3600	1304
	# edges	appr. 5320	2468
+ bulge removal	# vertices	appr. 2420	1090
	# edges	appr. 3540	2080

E. coli K-12 MG1655,
reads of length 100,
filtered with Quake,
$k = 25$.