



Getting Help

Computing for Data Analysis

Roger Peng, Associate Professor
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Asking Questions

- Asking questions via email is different from asking questions in person
- People on the other side do not have the background information you have
 - they also don't know you personally (usually)
- Other people are busy; their time is limited
- The instructor (me) is here to help in all circumstances but may not be able to answer all questions!

Finding Answers

- Try to find an answer by searching the archives of the forum you plan to post to.
- Try to find an answer by searching the Web.
- Try to find an answer by reading the manual.
- Try to find an answer by reading a FAQ.
- Try to find an answer by inspection or experimentation.
- Try to find an answer by asking a skilled friend.
- If you're a programmer, try to find an answer by reading the source code.



Asking Questions


- It's important to let other people know that you've done all of the previous things already
- If the answer is in the documentation, the answer will be "Read the documentation"
 - one email round wasted

Example: Error Messages

```
> library(datasets)
> data(airquality)
> cor(airquality)
Error in cor(airquality) : missing observations in cov/cor
```

Google is your friend

About 508,000 results (0.28 seconds)
 

[\[R\] Error in cor.default\(x1, x2\) : missing observations in cov/cor](#)
<https://stat.ethz.ch/pipermail/r-help/2008.../155523.html> - Block stat.ethz.ch
 Mar 1, 2008 – [R] Error in cor.default(x1, x2) : **missing observations in cov/cor**. Daniel Malter daniel at umd.edu. Thu Feb 28 01:40:58 CET 2008. Previous message: [R] Error in ...
[\[R\] Null values in R](#) - Dec 3, 2008
[\[R\] cor\(data.frame\) infelicities](#) - Dec 3, 2007
[\[BioC\] maanova: missing observations in cov/cor](#) - Aug 25, 2006
[\[R-sig-Geo\] Some comments on calculations with 'asc' \(and 'kasc ...](#) - Mar 27, 2005
[More results from stat.ethz.ch »](#)

[EMBnet 2007 Course - Introduction to Statistics for Biologists](#)
www.ch.embnet.org/CoursEMBnet/Basel07/tp2b.html - Block ch.embnet.org
 you will get an error: Error in cor(thuesen) : **missing observations in cov/cor** . [You will have seen a similar message above with sd .] This is because of the ...

[R help - Error in cor.default\(x1, x2\) : missing observations in cov/cor](#)
r.789695.n4.nabble.com/Error-in-cor-default-x1-x2-missing-... - Block
r.789695.n4.nabble.com
 13 posts - 5 authors - Feb 27, 2008
 Error in cor.default(x1, x2) : **missing observations in cov/cor**. Hello, I'm trying to do cor(x1,x2) and I get the following error: Error in cor.default(x1, ...

Asking Questions

- What steps will reproduce the problem?
- What is the expected output?
- What do you see instead?
- What version of the product (e.g. R, packages, etc.) are you using?
- What operating system?
- Additional information

Subject Headers

- Stupid: "Help! Can't fit linear model!"
- Smart: "R 2.15.0 lm() function produces seg fault with large data frame, Mac OS X 10.6.3"
- Smarter: R 2.15.0 lm() function on Mac OS X 10.6.3 -- seg fault on large data frame

Do

- Describe the goal, not the step
- Be explicit about your question
- Do provide the minimum amount of information necessary (volume is not precision)
- Be courteous (it never hurts)
- Follow up with the solution (if found)

Don't

- Claim that you've found a bug
- Grovel as a substitute for doing your homework
- Post homework questions on mailing lists (we've seen them all)
- Email multiple mailing lists at once
- Ask others to debug your broken code without giving a hint as to what sort of problem they should be searching for

Case Study: A Recent Post to the R-devel Mailing List

Subject: large dataset – confused

Message:

I'm trying to load a dataset into R, but I'm completely lost. This is probably due mostly to the fact that I'm a complete R newbie, but it's got me stuck in a research project.!

Response

Yes, you are lost. The R posting guide is at <http://www.r-project.org/posting-guide.html> and will point you to the right list and also the manuals (at e.g. <http://cran.r-project.org/manuals.html>, and one of them seems exactly what you need).!

Analysis: What Went Wrong?

- Question was sent to the wrong mailing list (R-devel instead of R-help)
- Email subject was very vague
- Question was very vague
- Problem was not reproducible
- No evidence of any effort made to solve the problem
- RESULT: Recipe for disaster!

Places to Turn

- Class discussion board; your fellow students
- r-help@r-project.org
- Other project-specific mailing lists (This talk inspired by Eric Raymond's "How to ask questions the smart way")