The data files train.csv and test.csv contain gray-scale images of hand-drawn digits, from zero through nine.

Each image is 28 pixels in height and 28 pixels in width, for a total of 784 pixels in total. Each pixel has a single pixel-value associated with it, indicating the lightness or darkness of that pixel, with higher numbers meaning darker. This pixel-value is an integer between 0 and 255, inclusive.

The training data set, (train.csv), has 785 columns. The first column, called "label", is the digit that was drawn by the user. The rest of the columns contain the pixel-values of the associated image.

Each pixel column in the training set has a name like pixelx, where x is an integer between 0 and 783, inclusive. To locate this pixel on the image, suppose that we have decomposed x as x = i \* 28 + j, where i and j are integers between 0 and 27, inclusive. Then pixelx is located on row i and column j of a 28 x 28 matrix, (indexing by zero).

For example, pixel31 indicates the pixel that is in the fourth column from the left, and the second row from the top, as in the ascii-diagram below.

Visually, if we omit the "pixel" prefix, the pixels make up the image like this:

000 001 002 003 ... 026 027

028 029 030 031 ... 054 055

056 057 058 059 ... 082 083

| | | | ... | |

728 729 730 731 ... 754 755

756 757 758 759 ... 782 783

The test data set, (test.csv), is the same as the training set, except that it does not contain the "label" column.

Your submission file should be in the following format: For each of the 28000 images in the test set, output a single line containing the ImageId and the digit you predict. For example, if you predict that the first image is of a 3, the second image is of a 7, and the third image is of a 8, then your submission file would look like:

ImageId,Label  
1,3  
2,7  
3,8

(27997 more lines)

The evaluation metric for this contest is the categorization accuracy, or the proportion of test images that are correctly classified. For example, a categorization accuracy of 0.97 indicates that you have correctly classified all but 3% of the images.

Introduction

MNIST ("Modified National Institute of Standards and Technology") is the de facto “Hello World” dataset of computer vision. Since its release in 1999, this classic dataset of handwritten images has served as the basis for benchmarking classification algorithms. As new machine learning techniques emerge, MNIST remains a reliable resource for researchers and learners alike.

In this competition, we aim to correctly identify digits from a dataset of tens of thousands of handwritten images. Kaggle has curated a set of tutorial-style kernels which cover everything from regression to neural networks. They hope to encourage us to experiment with different algorithms to learn first-hand what works well and how techniques compare.

Approach

For this competition, we will be using Keras (with TensorFlow as our backend) as the main package to create a simple neural network to predict, as accurately as we can, digits from handwritten images. In particular, we will be calling the Functional Model API of Keras, and creating a 4-layered and 5-layered neural network.

Also, we will be experimenting with various optimizers: the plain vanilla Stochastic Gradient Descent optimizer and the Adam optimizer. However, there are many other parameters, such as training epochs which will we will not be experimenting with.

In addition, the choice of hidden layer units are completely arbitrary and may not be optimal. This is yet another parameter which we will not attempt to tinker with. Lastly, we introduce dropout, a form of regularisation, in our neural networks to prevent overfitting.

## Result

Following our simulations on the cross validation dataset, it appears that a 4-layered neural network, using 'Adam' as the optimizer along with a learning rate of 0.01, performs best. We proceed to introduce dropout in the model, and use the model to predict for the test set.

The test predictions (submitted to Kaggle) generated by our model predicts with an accuracy score of 97.600%, which places us at the top 55 percentile of the competition.

Importing key libraries, and reading data