As a whiskey connoisseur with a strong preference for American whiskies, I've long been curious about the conventional attitudes towards whiskey. Longer aged whiskey is prized above younger whiskies, but is it really better? Many of the oldest whiskies are off the Scotch variety, and Scotch seems to be preferred to other varieties; could it be that age doesn't matter as much as people think, or that it only matters for Scotch? And what is really the relationship between quality and price? Many people may mistake price for quality, so perhaps high prices are a self-fulfilling prophesy. Another good question which was raised by my brother (a fellow whiskey connoisseur): what are the key aspects of the flavor profile which the raters are rewarding? Do they enjoy a diverse variety of flavors? Or are some of them only looking for sweet and smooth flavors which are easy on the palate? In order to answer these questions, I scraped 3774 expert whiskey reviews from the Whiskey Advocate website. The data set is compromised of whiskey reviews from 13 different experts on all categorized whiskies listed on the site, which are broken down into 11 categories.

Basic Assumptions: I expect to find that on average, whiskey quality and rating improves vaguely logarithmically with age, with a six-year whiskey showing a marked improvement over a four year whiskey, and a twelve year whiskey being only somewhat better than a ten year whiskey. Furthermore, I expect the slope to rise faster and level off faster with American whiskies because American oak is more porous than the French oak used elsewhere. I expect the change to be evident in the rating, as well as increased frequency of review words such as “complex,” and decreased frequency of words identifying negative flavors. I also expect to see that reviewers are biased in favor of blended and single malt Scotch over American whiskies such as rye and bourbon.

Initial results: my first check on the data was to query for average rating by category. The results look more or less as expected, and seem to confirm that Scotch is more highly-regarded, although not by a huge amount. The p-value for the Blended Scotch Whiskey and Bourbon/Tennessee Whiskey data sets (the highest rated Scotch and American whiskey categories) was 0.2, which indicates that there may indeed be a statistically significant bias, but it’s by no means certain. This comparison assumes that the overall in-category quality is the same between categories however, and that is by no means guaranteed; the blended malt scotch whiskey has a p-value of 0.036 when compared with blended scotch, and that seems more likely to be a quality issue than a bias issue.