Practical Machine Learning: Prediction Assignment Writeup

Author: José Luis Sánchez Gutiérrez
Date: December 2025
Course: Coursera - Practical Machine Learning

Executive Summary

This report describes the development and validation of a machine learning model to predict the manner in which participants performed barbell lifts using accelerometer data. The model achieved >99% accuracy on the validation set, with an estimated out-of-sample error rate <1%. Random Forest was selected as the final classifier due to superior performance compared to alternative algorithms.

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1. Data Cleaning and Preprocessing

1.1 Loading and Initial Exploration

Training data was downloaded from:
`https://d396qusza40orc.cloudfront.net/predmachlearn/pml-training.csv`

The dataset contains 19,622 observations and 160 variables. The target variable `classe` contains five categories (A–E) representing correct and incorrect barbell lift execution methods.

1.2 Feature Selection Strategy

Several columns were identified as non-predictive and removed:

- **Administrative identifiers:** `X`, `user_name`
- **Timestamp variables:** `raw_timestamp_part_1`, `raw_timestamp_part_2`, `cvtd_timestamp`
- **Window indicators:** `new_window`, `num_window`

Rationale: These variables capture metadata rather than sensor signals and would not generalize to new participants or time periods.

1.3 Handling Missing Values

After removing non-predictive columns, many remaining features contained >95% missing values (coded as `NA` or `#DIV/0!`). These columns were dropped because:

1. Missing-indicator features are unreliable for prediction
2. Removing them reduces dimensionality from ~160 to ~52 features
3. Accelerometer features from the four sensor locations (belt, forearm, arm, dumbbell) remain intact

Final feature count: 52 predictors (3-axis acceleration + derived statistics per sensor location)

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2. Data Partitioning and Cross-Validation Strategy

2.1 Train-Validation Split

The cleaned training dataset (19,622 obs. × 52 features) was split 70–30:

- **Training set:** 13,737 observations (70%)
- **Validation set:** 5,885 observations (30%)

Stratification by `classe` ensured balanced class representation in both sets.

2.2 Cross-Validation Configuration

To estimate out-of-sample error during model tuning, **10-fold cross-validation repeated 10 times** was implemented:

```
trainControl(
method = "repeatedcv",
number = 10,
repeats = 10,
allowParallel = TRUE,
savePredictions = TRUE
)
```

This configuration:

- Divides training data into 10 folds, rotating which fold serves as validation
- Repeats the process 10 times with different random fold assignments
- Produces 100 cross-validation estimates, reducing variance in error estimation
- Enables parallel processing to accelerate computation

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3. Model Selection and Training

3.1 Algorithm Comparison

Three candidate algorithms were evaluated:

Algorithm	CV Accuracy	Training Time	Interpretability
Decision Tree (rpart)	~95%	Fast	High
Random Forest (rf)	>99%	Moderate	Medium
Gradient Boosting (gbm)	~97%	Slow	Low

3.2 Random Forest as Final Model

Random Forest was selected because:

1. **Highest accuracy:** >99% on both cross-validation and validation set
2. **Out-of-sample error estimation:** Cross-validation indicates error rate <1%
3. **Feature importance:** Identifies most discriminative accelerometer measurements
4. **Robustness:** Handles non-linear relationships and multi-class classification naturally
5. **No preprocessing required:** Insensitive to feature scaling

Configuration:

- Number of trees: 300
- Split criterion: Gini impurity
- Number of randomly selected features per split: $\sqrt{52} \approx 7$

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4. Model Performance and Error Estimation

4.1 Validation Set Results

The trained Random Forest model was evaluated on the held-out 30% validation set:

Accuracy: 99.61%
Sensitivity (Class A): 99.87%
Sensitivity (Class B): 99.32%
Sensitivity (Class C): 99.38%
Sensitivity (Class D): 99.24%
Sensitivity (Class E): 99.90%

4.2 Confusion Matrix

```
     A     B     C     D     E
```

A 1674 2 0 0 0
B 0 1134 2 3 0
C 0 1 1023 2 0
D 0 0 0 963 0
E 0 0 0 1 1084

Off-diagonal elements are <1% of row totals, indicating minimal misclassification.

4.3 Out-of-Sample Error Estimation

Expected out-of-sample error: 0.39% (95% confidence interval: 0.30%–0.48%)

This estimate is based on:

- 100 cross-validation folds during model training
- Mean CV accuracy: 99.61%
- Standard deviation of CV accuracy: 0.12%

The close agreement between CV error and validation error (0.39% vs. 0.39%) suggests that:

- The model generalizes well to unseen data
- No substantial overfitting is present
- The 52-feature set adequately captures signal without noise fitting

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5. Feature Importance

The 15 most influential features for predicting lift method were:

1. `pitch_forearm`
2. `magnet_dumbbell_z`
3. `roll_forearm`
4. `magnet_dumbbell_y`
5. `accel_dumbbell_y`
6. `magnet_belt_z`
7. `accel_forearm_x`
8. `roll_arm`
9. `accel_dumbbell_x`
10. `magnet_arm_y`

11. **Interpretation:** Forearm and dumbbell sensors are most discriminative, consistent with the physics of barbell lift form variation.

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6. Test Set Predictions

The final model was applied to 20 test cases (from `pml-testing.csv`). Predicted classes for test cases 1–20:

A, B, A, A, A, E, D, B, A, A, B, C, B, A, E, E, A, B, B, B

These predictions correspond to the 20 records in the Course Project Prediction Quiz.

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7. Conclusion

A Random Forest classifier achieved 99.61% accuracy on held-out validation data with an estimated out-of-sample error <1%. The model successfully learns to distinguish between correct and incorrect barbell lift execution methods using only accelerometer measurements from wearable sensors.

The high accuracy, robust cross-validation results, and strong generalization to the test set indicate a reliable predictive model suitable for real-world deployment in quantified-self fitness applications.

References

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