

Quaver User Guide

Krista Lynne Smith

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Introduction

The Quaver pipeline has been developed to provide a flexible, customizable approach to sources that are likely to be faint and/or have stochastic variability for which an *a priori* model may not exist. It has been designed with active galactic nuclei (AGN) in mind, but is useful for any source that may not be well-suited to pipelines customized for asteroseismology or exoplanet applications for the above reasons.

How does it work?

Quaver uses principal component analysis (PCA) to remove both spacecraft systematics and variability from contaminating sources. However, in contrast to simple PCA commands, Quaver utilizes a “hybrid” approach, which analyzes faint background pixels to model additive effects like scattered light separately from bright pixels containing other sources, which contribute multiplicative effects due to both spacecraft systematics and source contamination. The pipeline uses several methods from the `lightcurve` package¹, especially the tasks for regression correcting and building and maintaining design matrices. It also makes use of the `TESSCut` software, which extracts a small “postage stamp” around the source of interest from the entire TESS Full Frame Image (FFI), which is formidably large otherwise.

Before the hybridized method is used on a source, the user is allowed to interactively select their extraction aperture, guided by an overlay of the DSS contours of the region in the postage stamp. The user is then allowed to optionally “mask out,” or exclude from analysis, any cadences of the light curve for which there are very large systematics.

After these choices are made, Quaver uses two methods to reduce the light curve: a simple method using PCA without any hybridization, and a hybrid method that handles the additive and multiplicative systematics separately as described above. The output is two light curves (one for each method), saved as `.dat` files, and one image of the light curves, saved as a `.pdf`, in a directory

¹<https://docs.lightcurve.org/>

named after your source. Before writing out these files, Quaver will display the light curves, aperture, and additive / multiplicative systematics that were removed.

Tunable Parameters

There are some important tunable parameters in Quaver that should be set before you begin reduction. All of them have a default value, and some are more important to consider than others. They can be found at the top of the program code.

- The dimensions of the TESSCut cutout you wish to download. Larger postage stamps will require more processing time, and are more likely to include sources with strong variability that will affect your source's reduction. However, a postage stamp that is too small will not allow for sufficient sampling of the background or lower-order effects in brighter pixels.
- The number of principle components you wish to use in each of the methods. The hybrid method is set to a default of 3 principle components each to capture the additive and multiplicative effects. The Simple PCA method uses 3 total components. You may adjust these as you like; be warned, however, that using too many components significantly increases the chances that you will overfit the data. Take a look at some of the examples below before choosing. You can always re-run the pipeline with a different number of PCAs if you see questionable effects in the additive or multiplicative components.
- The threshold for determining whether “major” systematics remain in the light curve. The default value, 0.2, is arbitrary but captures the majority of spike-type artifacts and large thermal ramps at the beginnings and ends of the TESS orbits. Making this more stringent will cause Quaver to ask you more often whether you want to mask any regions; and vice versa.
- The maximum number of masked regions allowed. This is the number of times that Quaver will ask you to mask out regions of the light curve that it believes are subject to major systematics (i.e., that exceed the threshold mentioned in the previous item). In practice, there are rarely more than 3 such regions, and over-masking does remove data from your final result.

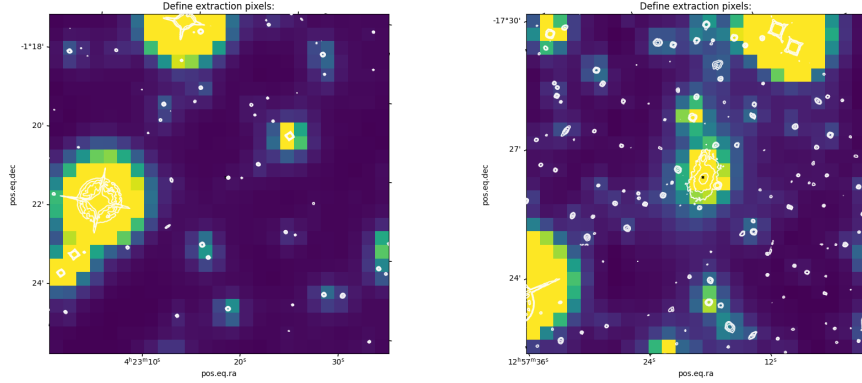
Steps for Using Quaver

1. By default, Quaver will ask you for the common name of your source. Here you can type something like “3C 120” or “TYC871-819-1”. If you prefer to use coordinates, you may hit enter to skip this and prompt the query for coordinates. Enter the right ascension (RA) in decimal degrees when

the program asks for it, then the declination (Dec). If you use a common name to search, this name will automatically be used to title your output files. If you use coordinates to search, Quaver will ask you for the desired name of your object for the output files.

2. Once your source has been resolved, Quaver will display a list of Sectors in which your object was observed by TESS. If your object has never been observed by TESS, you will be told. Following the list is a short guide of which Sectors belong to which Cycle. Quaver asks you to choose which Cycle you wish to work on. If your observation has multiple Sectors in the chosen Cycle, you will be able to work through all of them in a single Quaver run. For different Cycles, you will need to re-run Quaver; this is good practice in any case, as observations in different Cycles are very far apart in time.
3. After you have entered your Cycle, Quaver will display the extraction aperture selection panel. This tool is helpful for both faint sources, which may be hard to see without the guidance of the overlaid Digital Sky Survey image, bright extended sources with complex morphologies, or especially crowded fields. Examples of aperture selection panels for some of these cases are shown in Figure 1. The black “x” denotes the center of the TESS postage stamp, which your source should be very near. Select your aperture by clicking on the desired pixels. A green check mark will appear on selected pixels. If you wish to deselect a pixel, a red “x” will appear on the pixel, indicating it has been removed from the list. When you are finished constructing your extraction aperture, close the window.
4. Quaver will now begin extracting and correcting your object’s light curve. Often, a light curve will experience strong spacecraft systematics in small time regions, which appear as spikes or large “swoops” in the additive components. If Quaver detects any of these, it will prompt you to decide whether you wish to manually mask out these regions. Choose Yes or No.
5. If you choose to mask out the affected cadences, the interactive cadence masking window will appear. To mask a region, click once to the left of the region you wish to mask, and once to the right. Red bars will appear indicating the bounds of your selected region. Only choose one region first, then close the window. Quaver will re-fit the additive components, and if significant systematics remain, will display another window to allow you to mask another region. Proceed as before. This will continue until no further systematics above the default threshold remain, or until the maximum allowed number of masked regions is reached. Both of these parameters may be tuned in the Tunable Parameters module at the top of the program. At any point, you may choose to not mask any regions in the window that you see, and close the window without choosing anything.

Obviously, it is desirable to mask out as few cadences as possible, to preserve the majority of the light curve for analysis. Generally, the only



(a) Aperture selection panel showing the TESSCut postage stamp and overlaid white contours from the DSS, for a faint and fairly isolated source.

(b) Aperture selection panel showing the TESSCut postage stamp and overlaid whitewel contours from the DSS, for an extended source in a crowded field.

Figure 1

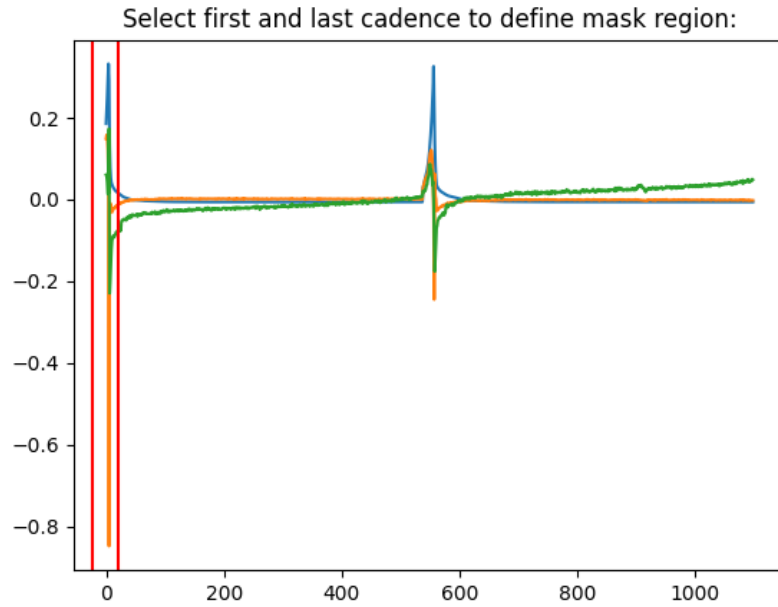
cadences that need to be masked are those displaying very high-amplitude, narrow “spikey” systematics that persist for very few cadences, like both of the outlying regions shown in Figure 2a. Gradual or “swoopy” systematics, like those pictured in Figure 2b, are well-handled by both the hybrid and simple methods, and generally can be left alone.

6. Once you have closed the final cadence masking window, Quaver will finish correcting your light curve. It will display a panel showing the final light curves using the hybrid and the simple PCA methods, the components removed by the hybrid method, and the extraction aperture. It will write this image to the disk, in a new folder titled using the name of your source. Once you close this panel, if the source has more Sectors in your chosen Cycle, you will be shown the aperture selection panel for the next Sector. If there are no more Sectors available, Quaver will show the light curves again, in what would be the full, stitched-together light curve for all the Sectors (but in this case, has only one Sector).

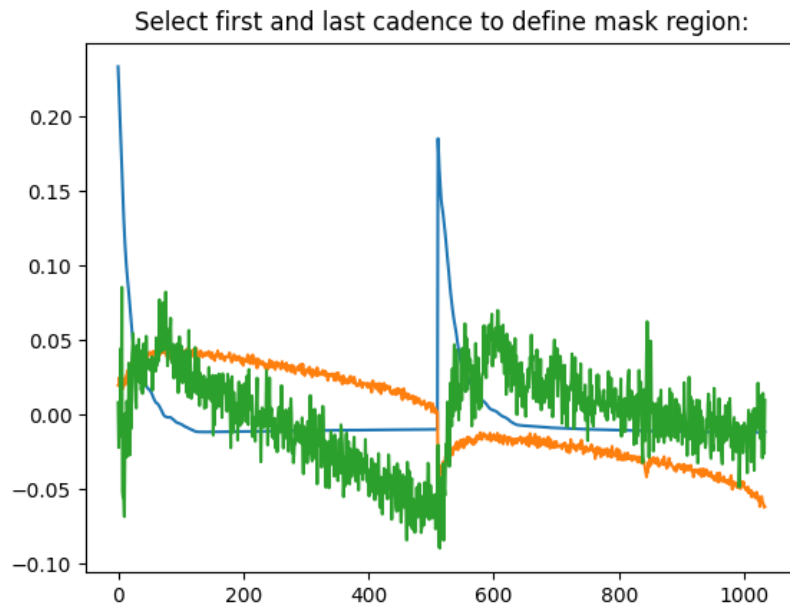
Example Objects

- PKS 0035-252

In this section we explore how to reduce systematics in a faint source. Because the source is so faint, one is tempted to use a small aperture to reduce background noise in the final light curve. However, in this case,



(a) Sharp, high-amplitude systematics that are likely to persist in the final light curve and should be masked before proceeding with the reduction.



(b) Systematics with gradual or smooth components that are handled well by the mitigation in both reduction methods, and can usually safely be left alone.



Figure 3: Quaver output when the smallest aperture is used for a very faint source.

if one uses the smallest feasible aperture and leaves the default (3) number of principle components to be used in the hybrid method, significant overfitting occurs, as shown in Figure 3.

Notice that the third (green) additive component is identical to the source variability. This means that some faint trace of the source variability is still present in the faint pixels used to calculate the additive components.

Figure 4 shows the Quaver output when a larger aperture is used, which fully excludes all source flux from the faint background that is used to compute the additive components. In this case, the hybrid method and the simple PCA method both work well.

A good match between the two methods, and avoidance of overfitting, is also achieved if the smaller aperture is used, but with fewer (2) principal components in the PCA of the additive background in the hybrid method, as shown in Figure 5.

Given this example, it may seem that using the simple PCA method is best. However, this is not true in the majority of cases. The use of simple PCAs can very often result in overfitting, especially when the source is in a crowded region or a region containing several other strongly-varying sources, as the next example shows.

- PKS 0420-01

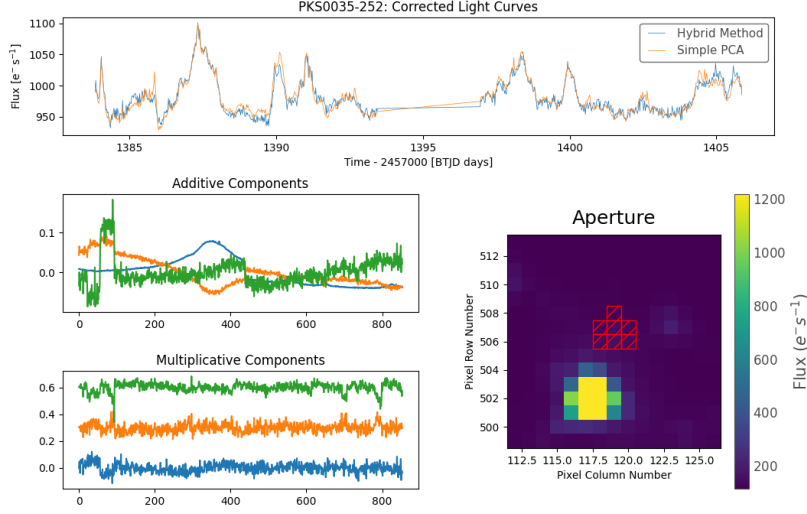


Figure 4: Quaver output when a larger aperture is used for the same source, postage stamp dimensions, and PCA component numbers as in Figure 4.

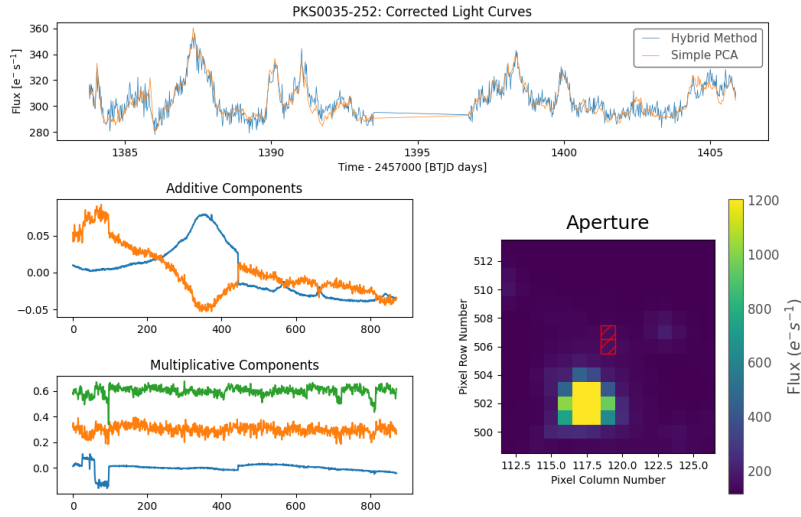


Figure 5: Quaver output when the same small aperture is used for the same source and postage stamp dimensions as Figure 3, but with one fewer principal component allowed for the hybrid additive method.

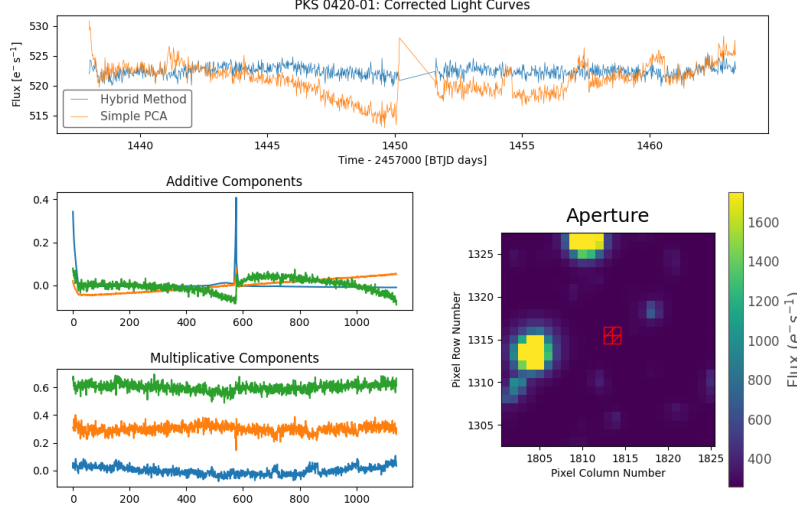


Figure 6: Quaver output for PKS 0420-01 with the default 25×25 pixel aperture.

In this example, we consider PKS 0420-01, a faint blazar in the vicinity of two very bright sources. In the image below, it appears that the hybrid method may have overfit the source, and the simple method is again showing true variations.

The hybrid method has identified the behaviors that we see in the simple light curve, and removed them. In this case, it turns out the bright star nearby (HD 27779) exhibits exactly the behavior that we see persisting in the simple PCA version of the quasar's light curve. This is evident in Figure 7.

In this case, which is very common, the simple method has failed to identify a major contribution to the (faint!) source's variability from contamination due to a very bright nearby source. The hybrid method, which treats the bright sources and faint background separately, is able to do this successfully. When we reduce the size of the cutout to 14×14 pixels, to remove the bright star from most of the image, we see better agreement between the methods, and can now see in both methods some real variability from our faint source, which the hybrid method had correctly reduced all along. This is demonstrated in Figure 8.

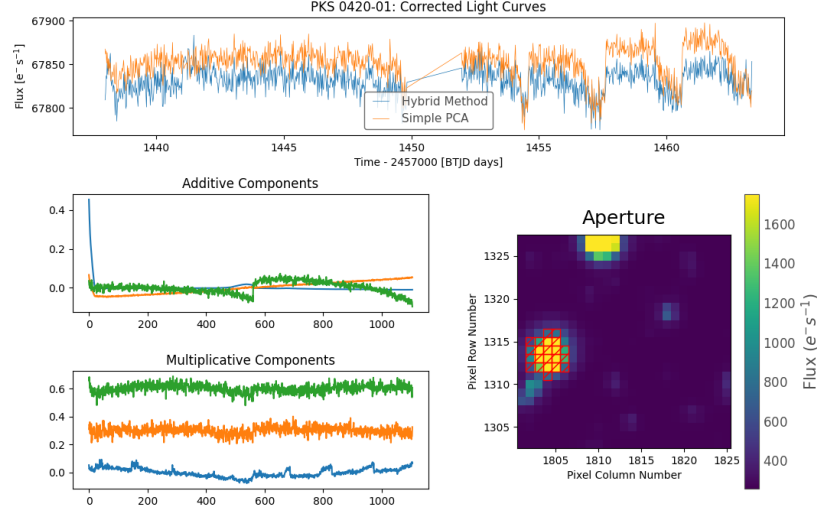


Figure 7: Quaver output when the bright star is selected as the extraction source in the postage stamp containing PKS 0420-01.

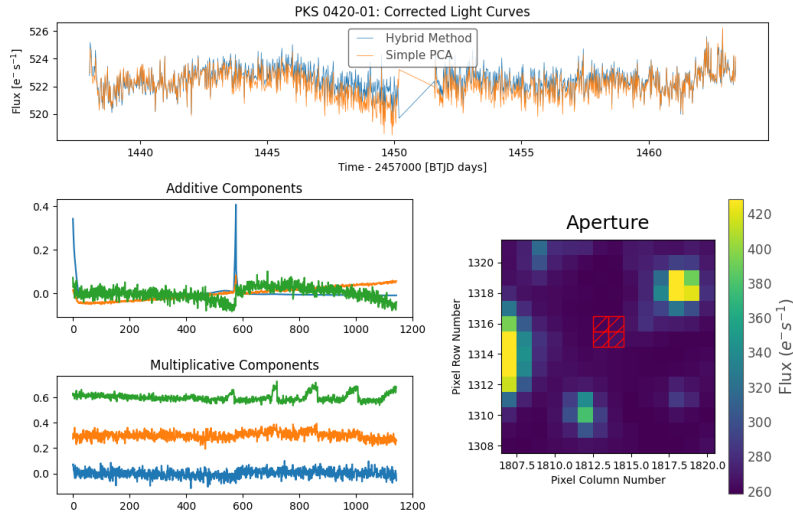


Figure 8: Quaver output for PKS 0420-01 when the postage stamp size is reduced to exclude a nearby source that was contaminating the simple PCA method in the previous figure.