

# Proximal gradient method

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# Non-smooth problems

$\ell_1$  induces sparsity

$\ell_2$  regularization.  $\|Xw - y\|_2^2 \rightarrow \min_{\|w\|_2 \leq 1}$



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@fminxyz

# Subgradient method

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$$\min_{x \in \mathbb{R}^n} f(x)$$

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convex (non-smooth)

$$f(x_k) - f^* \sim \mathcal{O}\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{k}}\right)$$
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## Theorem

Assume that  $f$  is  $G$ -Lipschitz and convex, then  
Subgradient method converges as:

$$f(\bar{x}) - f^* \leq \frac{GR}{\sqrt{k}},$$

where

- $\alpha = \frac{R}{G\sqrt{k}}$

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- $R = \|x_0 - x^*\|$
- $\bar{x} = \frac{1}{k} \sum_{i=0}^{k-1} x_i$

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- One can use Mirror Descent (a generalization of the subgradient method to a possibly non-Euclidian distance) with the same convergence rate to better fit the geometry of the problem.
- However, we can achieve standard gradient descent rate  $\mathcal{O}\left(\frac{1}{k}\right)$  (and even accelerated version  $\mathcal{O}\left(\frac{1}{k^2}\right)$ ) if we will exploit the structure of the problem.

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$$\frac{dx}{dt} = -\nabla f(x)$$

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Thus, we have a usual gradient descent with  $\alpha \rightarrow 0$ :  $x_{k+1} = x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k)$

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## From projections to proximity

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Proximity: Replace  $\mathbb{I}_S$  by some convex function!

$$\text{prox}_r(y) = \text{prox}_{r,1}(y) := \arg \min \frac{1}{2} \|x - y\|^2 + r(x)$$

# Regularized / Composite Objectives

Many nonsmooth problems take the form

$$\min_{x \in \mathbb{R}^n} \varphi(x) = f(x) + r(x)$$

- **Lasso, L1-LS, compressed sensing**

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{2} \|Ax - b\|_2^2, r(x) = \lambda \|x\|_1$$



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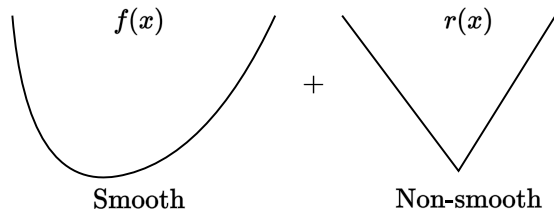
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- **Lasso, L1-LS, compressed sensing**

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{2} \|Ax - b\|_2^2, r(x) = \lambda \|x\|_1$$

- **L1-Logistic regression, sparse LR**

$$f(x) = -y \log h(x) - (1-y) \log(1-h(x)), r(x) = \lambda \|x\|_1$$



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$$x_{k+1} = \text{prox}_{r,\alpha}(x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k))$$

And this method converges at a rate of  $\mathcal{O}(\frac{1}{k})$ !

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**i** Another form of proximal operator

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## Proximal operators examples

- $r(x) = \lambda \|x\|_1, \lambda > 0$

$$[\text{prox}_r(x)]_i = [|x_i| - \lambda]_+ \cdot \text{sign}(x_i),$$

which is also known as soft-thresholding operator.

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- $r(x) = \frac{\lambda}{2} \|x\|_2^2, \lambda > 0$

$$\text{prox}_r(x) = \frac{x}{1 + \lambda}.$$

# Proximal operators examples

- $r(x) = \lambda \|x\|_1, \lambda > 0$

$$[\text{prox}_r(x)]_i = [|x_i| - \lambda]_+ \cdot \text{sign}(x_i),$$

which is also known as soft-thresholding operator.

- $r(x) = \frac{\lambda}{2} \|x\|_2^2, \lambda > 0$

$$\text{prox}_r(x) = \frac{x}{1 + \lambda}.$$

- $r(x) = \mathbb{I}_S(x).$

$$\text{prox}_r(x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k)) = \text{proj}_r(x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k))$$



# Proximal operator properties

## Theorem

Let  $r : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R} \cup \{+\infty\}$  be a convex function for which  $\text{prox}_r$  is defined. If there exists such an  $\hat{x} \in \mathbb{R}^n$  that  $r(\hat{x}) < +\infty$ . Then, the proximal operator is uniquely defined (i.e., it always returns a single unique value).

**Proof:**

# Proximal operator properties

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The proximal operator returns the minimum of some optimization problem.

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It is strongly convex, meaning it has exactly one unique minimum (the existence of  $\hat{x}$  is necessary for  $r(\hat{x}) + \frac{1}{2}\|x - \hat{x}\|_2^2$  to take a finite value somewhere).

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1. Let's establish the equivalence between the first and second conditions. The first condition can be rewritten as

$$y = \arg \min_{\tilde{x} \in \mathbb{R}^d} \left( r(\tilde{x}) + \frac{1}{2} \|x - \tilde{x}\|^2 \right).$$

From the optimality condition for the convex function  $r$ , this is equivalent to:

$$0 \in \partial \left( r(\tilde{x}) + \frac{1}{2} \|x - \tilde{x}\|^2 \right) \Big|_{\tilde{x}=y} = \partial r(y) + y - x.$$



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## Proof

1. Let's establish the equivalence between the first and second conditions. The first condition can be rewritten as
2. From the definition of the subdifferential, for any subgradient  $g \in \partial f(y)$  and for any  $z \in \mathbb{R}^d$ :

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From the optimality condition for the convex function  $r$ , this is equivalent to:

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$$\langle g, z - y \rangle \leq r(z) - r(y).$$

In particular, this holds true for  $g = x - y$ .

Conversely, it is also clear: for  $g = x - y$ , the above relationship holds, which means  $g \in \partial r(y)$ .

# Proximal operator properties

## Theorem

The operator  $\text{prox}_r(x)$  is firmly nonexpansive (FNE)

$$\|\text{prox}_r(x) - \text{prox}_r(y)\|_2^2 \leq \langle \text{prox}_r(x) - \text{prox}_r(y), x - y \rangle$$

and nonexpansive:

$$\|\text{prox}_r(x) - \text{prox}_r(y)\|_2 \leq \|x - y\|_2$$

## Proof

1. Let  $u = \text{prox}_r(x)$ , and  $v = \text{prox}_r(y)$ . Then, from the previous property:

$$\langle x - u, z_1 - u \rangle \leq r(z_1) - r(u)$$

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2. Substitute  $z_1 = v$  and  $z_2 = u$ . Summing up, we get:

$$\langle x - u, v - u \rangle + \langle y - v, u - v \rangle \leq 0,$$

$$\langle x - y, v - u \rangle + \|v - u\|_2^2 \leq 0.$$

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3. Which is exactly what we need to prove after substitution of  $u, v$ .

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$$\|u - v\|_2^2 \leq \langle x - y, u - v \rangle$$

4. The last point comes from simple Cauchy-Bunyakovsky-Schwarz for the last inequality.

# Proximal operator properties

## Theorem

Let  $f : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R} \cup \{+\infty\}$  and  $r : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R} \cup \{+\infty\}$  be convex functions. Additionally, assume that  $f$  is continuously differentiable and  $L$ -smooth, and for  $r$ ,  $\text{prox}_r$  is defined. Then,  $x^*$  is a solution to the composite optimization problem if and only if, for any  $\alpha > 0$ , it satisfies:

$$x^* = \text{prox}_{r,\alpha}(x^* - \alpha \nabla f(x^*))$$

## Proof

1. Optimality conditions:

# Proximal operator properties

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### 1. Optimality conditions:

$$\begin{aligned} 0 &\in \nabla f(x^*) + \partial r(x^*) \\ -\alpha \nabla f(x^*) &\in \alpha \partial r(x^*) \end{aligned}$$



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### 2. Recall from the previous lemma:

$$\text{prox}_r(x) = y \Leftrightarrow x - y \in \partial r(y)$$

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2. Recall from the previous lemma:

$$\text{prox}_r(x) = y \Leftrightarrow x - y \in \partial r(y)$$

3. Finally,

$$x^* = \text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x^* - \alpha \nabla f(x^*)) = \text{prox}_{r,\alpha}(x^* - \alpha \nabla f(x^*))$$

# Convergence tools

## Theorem

Let  $f : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  be an  $L$ -smooth convex function. Then, for any  $x, y \in \mathbb{R}^n$ , the following inequality holds:

$$f(x) + \langle \nabla f(x), y - x \rangle + \frac{1}{2L} \|\nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y)\|_2^2 \leq f(y) \text{ or, equivalently,}$$
$$\|\nabla f(y) - \nabla f(x)\|_2^2 = \|\nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y)\|_2^2 \leq 2L (f(x) - f(y) - \langle \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle)$$

## Proof

1. To prove this, we'll consider another function  $\varphi(y) = f(y) - \langle \nabla f(x), y \rangle$ . It is obviously a convex function (as a sum of convex functions). And it is easy to verify, that it is an  $L$ -smooth function by definition, since  $\nabla \varphi(y) = \nabla f(y) - \nabla f(x)$  and  $\|\nabla \varphi(y_1) - \nabla \varphi(y_2)\| = \|\nabla f(y_1) - \nabla f(y_2)\| \leq L\|y_1 - y_2\|$ .

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$$x:=y, y:=y - \frac{1}{L} \nabla \varphi(y) \quad \varphi\left(y - \frac{1}{L} \nabla \varphi(y)\right) \leq \varphi(y) + \left\langle \nabla \varphi(y), -\frac{1}{L} \nabla \varphi(y) \right\rangle + \frac{1}{2L} \|\nabla \varphi(y)\|_2^2$$

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## Convergence tools

3. From the first order optimality conditions for the convex function  $\nabla\varphi(y) = \nabla f(y) - \nabla f(x) = 0$ . We can conclude, that for any  $x$ , the minimum of the function  $\varphi(y)$  is at the point  $y = x$ . Therefore:

$$\varphi(x) \leq \varphi\left(y - \frac{1}{L}\nabla\varphi(y)\right) \leq \varphi(y) - \frac{1}{2L}\|\nabla\varphi(y)\|_2^2$$

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$$\begin{aligned} f(x) - \langle \nabla f(x), x \rangle &\leq f(y) - \langle \nabla f(x), y \rangle - \frac{1}{2L}\|\nabla f(y) - \nabla f(x)\|_2^2 \\ f(x) + \langle \nabla f(x), y - x \rangle + \frac{1}{2L}\|\nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y)\|_2^2 &\leq f(y) \end{aligned}$$

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The lemma has been proved. From the first view it does not make a lot of geometrical sense, but we will use it as a convenient tool to bound the difference between gradients.



# Convergence tools

## Theorem

Let  $f : \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  be continuously differentiable on  $\mathbb{R}^n$ . Then, the function  $f$  is  $\mu$ -strongly convex if and only if for any  $x, y \in \mathbb{R}^d$  the following holds:

$$\text{Strongly convex case } \mu > 0 \quad \langle \nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle \geq \mu \|x - y\|^2$$

$$\text{Convex case } \mu = 0 \quad \langle \nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle \geq 0$$

## Proof

1. We will only give the proof for the strongly convex case, the convex one follows from it with setting  $\mu = 0$ . We start from necessity. For the strongly convex function

$$f(y) \geq f(x) + \langle \nabla f(x), y - x \rangle + \frac{\mu}{2} \|x - y\|_2^2$$

$$f(x) \geq f(y) + \langle \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle + \frac{\mu}{2} \|x - y\|_2^2$$

$$\text{sum} \quad \langle \nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle \geq \mu \|x - y\|^2$$

## Convergence tools

2. For the sufficiency we assume, that  $\langle \nabla f(x) - \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle \geq \mu \|x - y\|^2$ . Using Newton-Leibniz theorem  $f(x) = f(y) + \int_0^1 \langle \nabla f(y + t(x - y)), x - y \rangle dt$ :

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$$f(x) - f(y) - \langle \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle = \int_0^1 \langle \nabla f(y + t(x - y)), x - y \rangle dt - \langle \nabla f(y), x - y \rangle$$

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# Convergence

## Theorem

Consider the proximal gradient method

$$x_{k+1} = \text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k))$$

For the criterion  $\varphi(x) = f(x) + r(x)$ , we assume:

- $f$  is convex, differentiable,  $\text{dom}(f) = \mathbb{R}^n$ , and  $\nabla f$  is Lipschitz continuous with constant  $L > 0$ .
- $r$  is convex, and  $\text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x_k) = \arg \min_{x \in \mathbb{R}^n} [\alpha r(x) + \frac{1}{2} \|x - x_k\|_2^2]$  can be evaluated.

Proximal gradient descent with fixed step size  $\alpha = 1/L$  satisfies

$$\varphi(x_k) - \varphi^* \leq \frac{L \|x_0 - x^*\|^2}{2k},$$

Proximal gradient descent has a convergence rate of  $O(1/k)$  or  $O(1/\varepsilon)$ . This matches the gradient descent rate!  
(But remember the proximal operation cost)

# Convergence

## Proof

1. Let's introduce the **gradient mapping**, denoted as  $G_\alpha(x)$ , acts as a “gradient-like object”:

$$x_{k+1} = \text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k))$$

$$x_{k+1} = x_k - \alpha G_\alpha(x_k).$$

where  $G_\alpha(x)$  is:

$$G_\alpha(x) = \frac{1}{\alpha} (x - \text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x - \alpha \nabla f(x)))$$

Observe that  $G_\alpha(x) = 0$  if and only if  $x$  is optimal. Therefore,  $G_\alpha$  is analogous to  $\nabla f$ . If  $x$  is locally optimal, then  $G_\alpha(x) = 0$  even for nonconvex  $f$ . This demonstrates that the proximal gradient method effectively combines gradient descent on  $f$  with the proximal operator of  $r$ , allowing it to handle non-differentiable components effectively.

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$$\text{Since } x_{k+1} - x_k = -\alpha G_\alpha(x_k) \quad \Rightarrow \quad \alpha G_\alpha(x_k) - \alpha \nabla f(x_k) \in \partial \alpha r(x_{k+1})$$

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7. Now it is easy to verify, that when  $x = x_k$  we have monotonic decrease for the proximal gradient algorithm:

$$\varphi(x_{k+1}) \leq \varphi(x_k) - \frac{\alpha}{2} \|G_\alpha(x_k)\|_2^2$$

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## Convergence

9. Now we write the bound above for all iterations  $i \in 0, k-1$  and sum them:

Which is a standard  $\frac{L\|x_0 - x^*\|_2^2}{2k}$  with  $\alpha = \frac{1}{L}$ , or,  $\mathcal{O}\left(\frac{1}{k}\right)$  rate for smooth convex problems with Gradient Descent!

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9. Now we write the bound above for all iterations  $i \in 0, k-1$  and sum them:

$$\begin{aligned}\sum_{i=0}^{k-1} [\varphi(x_{i+1}) - \varphi(x^*)] &\leq \frac{1}{2\alpha} [\|x_0 - x^*\|_2^2 - \|x_k - x^*\|_2^2] \\ &\leq \frac{1}{2\alpha} \|x_0 - x^*\|_2^2\end{aligned}$$

10. Since  $\varphi(x_k)$  is a decreasing sequence, it follows that:

$$\begin{aligned}\sum_{i=0}^{k-1} \varphi(x_k) &= k\varphi(x_k) \leq \sum_{i=0}^{k-1} \varphi(x_{i+1}) \\ \varphi(x_k) &\leq \frac{1}{k} \sum_{i=0}^{k-1} \varphi(x_{i+1}) \\ \varphi(x_k) - \varphi(x^*) &\leq \frac{1}{k} \sum_{i=0}^{k-1} [\varphi(x_{i+1}) - \varphi(x^*)] \leq \frac{\|x_0 - x^*\|_2^2}{2\alpha k}\end{aligned}$$

Which is a standard  $\frac{L\|x_0 - x^*\|_2^2}{2k}$  with  $\alpha = \frac{1}{L}$ , or,  $\mathcal{O}\left(\frac{1}{k}\right)$  rate for smooth convex problems with Gradient Descent!

# Convergence

## Theorem

Consider the proximal gradient method

$$x_{k+1} = \text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k))$$

For the criterion  $\varphi(x) = f(x) + r(x)$ , we assume:

- $f$  is  $\mu$ -strongly convex, differentiable,  $\text{dom}(f) = \mathbb{R}^n$ , and  $\nabla f$  is Lipschitz continuous with constant  $L > 0$ .
- $r$  is convex, and  $\text{prox}_{\alpha r}(x_k) = \arg \min_{x \in \mathbb{R}^n} [\alpha r(x) + \frac{1}{2} \|x - x_k\|_2^2]$  can be evaluated.

Proximal gradient descent with fixed step size  $\alpha \leq 1/L$  satisfies

$$\|x_{k+1} - x^*\|_2^2 \leq (1 - \alpha\mu)^k \|x_0 - x^*\|_2^2$$

This is exactly gradient descent convergence rate. Note, that the original problem is even non-smooth!

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$$\text{nonexpansiveness} \leq \|x_k - \alpha \nabla f(x_k) - x^* + \alpha \nabla f(x^*)\|_2^2$$

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2. Now we use smoothness from the convergence tools and strong convexity:

$$\text{smoothness} \quad \|\nabla f(x_k) - \nabla f(x^*)\|_2^2 \leq 2L (f(x_k) - f(x^*) - \langle \nabla f(x^*), x_k - x^* \rangle)$$

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4. Due to convexity of  $f$ :  $f(x_k) - f(x^*) - \langle \nabla f(x^*), x_k - x^* \rangle \geq 0$ . Therefore, if we use  $\alpha \leq \frac{1}{L}$ :

$$\|x_{k+1} - x^*\|_2^2 \leq (1 - \alpha\mu) \|x_k - x^*\|^2,$$

which is exactly linear convergence of the method with up to  $1 - \frac{\mu}{L}$  convergence rate.

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- Convergence rate theoretically optimal

## Example: ISTA

### Iterative Shrinkage-Thresholding Algorithm (ISTA)

ISTA is a popular method for solving optimization problems involving L1 regularization, such as Lasso. It combines gradient descent with a shrinkage operator to handle the non-smooth L1 penalty effectively.

- **Algorithm:**

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- **Application:**

- Efficient for sparse signal recovery, image processing, and compressed sensing.

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- **Application:**

- Especially useful for large-scale problems in machine learning and signal processing where the L1 penalty induces sparsity.

# Example: Matrix Completion

## Solving the Matrix Completion Problem

Matrix completion problems seek to fill in the missing entries of a partially observed matrix under certain assumptions, typically low-rank. This can be formulated as a minimization problem involving the nuclear norm (sum of singular values), which promotes low-rank solutions.

- **Problem Formulation:**

$$\min_X \frac{1}{2} \|P_\Omega(X) - P_\Omega(M)\|_F^2 + \lambda \|X\|_*,$$

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- Widely used in recommender systems, image recovery, and other domains where data is naturally matrix-formed but partially observed.

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- Proximal gradient method for a composite problem with an  $L$ -smooth convex function  $f$  and a convex proximal friendly function  $r$  has the same convergence as the gradient descent method for the function  $f$ . The smoothness/non-smoothness properties of  $r$  do not affect convergence.
- It seems that by putting  $f = 0$ , any nonsmooth problem can be solved using such a method. Question: is this true?

If we allow the proximal operator to be inexact (numerically), then it is true that we can solve any nonsmooth optimization problem. But this is not better from the point of view of theory than solving the problem by subgradient descent, because some auxiliary method (for example, the same subgradient descent) is used to solve the proximal subproblem.

- Proximal method is a general modern framework for many numerical methods. Further development includes accelerated, stochastic, primal-dual modifications and etc.

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- Further reading: Proximal operator splitting, Douglas-Rachford splitting, Best approximation problem, Three operator splitting.