Chapter 1 - Getting Started with Time Series Analysis

Time Series All Around Us

Whenever we are dealing with measurements collected throughout time at specified intervals, it becomes obvious that we are working with time series data and its specific challenges and complexities.

Time series data can take on different properties, by the nature of the data domain, thus requiring the practitioner to be familiar with the different methods and techniques available for analysis. These properties cluster time series data into different buckets or types depending on whether we are dealing with stationary, non-stationary, linear, non-linear, seasonal, non-seasonal, univariate, or multivariate time series data.

Time series data is all around us and in different domains and disciplines. Recent events have further simulated interest in learning time series analysis and prediction techniques, whether it is classic statistical methods or advanced machine learning algorithms, such as building COVID-19 prediction models, predicting presidential election results, or analyzing stock and cryptocurrency data.

Few examples of where time series data can be found:

* Business: Marketing planning, Inventory management, Product Demand Planning, Resource Planning, Churn analysis
* Finance: Stock analysis, Budget forecasting, Sales forecasting, Volatility Modeling
* Government: Election forecast, Economic forecasting, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Unemployment Rate, Population migration rate, Birth Rate
* Science: Weather forecasting, Earthquake prediction, Air Quality, Species population growth
* Medical: Infectious disease transmission, Electrocardiogram monitoring (ECG or EKG), Healthcare cost prediction, Blood glucose monitoring, Hospital capacity
* Engineering: Predictive maintenance, Signal processing, Production decline analysis, Traffic volume forecasting
* Technology: Log Data, Web Traffic, Internet of Things (IoT), Server Utilization Demand
* Prevention: Credit card anomaly and fraud detection, Non-technical power loss detection, Crime rates

When working with time series data we usually have two goals: time series analysis (descriptive), and time series forecasting (predictive). In time series analysis we strive to extract a better understanding and deeper intuition into the underlying phenomenon captured in our data using statistical methods. In time series forecasting, we aim to create a predictive model that extends from our data into the unforeseeable future and hence the term forecasting.

Time series data differs from the typical data used in machine learning in the classical sense due to the dependence on time, serial correlation, and dependence.

In this book, we cover a variety of recipes for both analysis and forecasting of time series data and pragmatic approach to handling the complex nature of time series data.

Time Series Analysis Environment Setup

As we dive into the various recipes provided in this book, it is important to create a Python virtual environment which provides as an isolated Python environment in order to install all our dependencies without impacting other Python projects.

There are two methods to creating Python virtual environment in this book. This includes the use of conda or venv. If you are already using Anaconda <https://www.anaconda.com/products/individual> then Conda would be the preferred choice since it provides package dependency and environment management for Python (and supports other languages). Venv is a Python module that provides environment management that is part of the standard library in Python 3.3 or newer and requires no additional installation.

With these tools one can create multiple virtual environments for different Python projects that may require different Python versions (e.g. 2.7 or 3.8), or different Python packages and associated versions, or if experimenting with new packages to better understand how they work. This is a best practice taken by many developers and data science practitioners as to not over clutter your primary Python installation or creating version conflicts between packages.

Conda vs venv

If you have Anaconda or Miniconda installed then using conda would be the preferred method to create a virtual environment. In this book, I will show different ways to install packages using conda install or pip install.

How to do it…

Using conda

Windows Users

On Windows OS you will need to use the Anaconda Prompt. You can access that by clicking on the Windows Icon, and start typing “Anaconda” to find matches. In the result pane, look for Anaconda Prompt, click that to open the Anaconda terminal.

1. Update conda to the current version

$ conda update conda

1. Create a new virtual environment named timeseries using Python 3.8

$ conda create -n timeseries python=3.8

Where -n is a shortcut for --name

1. Conda may identify additional packages that need to downloaded and installed. You be prompted to whether to proceed or not. Hit enter or type y then enter. You may get a different list of packages to download/install in comparison to the screen shot below.



Once you type y or hit enter, conda will proceed with the setup

Text

Description automatically generated

1. To activate the new virtual environment type

$ conda activate timeseries

1. To further validate the setup, you can run the following

$ conda info –envs

This will list all the conda environments that have been created and available.

1. To deactivate from the environment

$ conda deactivate

1. To completely delete the environment all the libraries installed

$ conda env remove -n timeseries

Where -n is a shortcut for --name

Using venv

1. Decide where to place the new virtual environment and specify the path, in this example I already navigated to Desktop and ran the command as shown here

$ python3 -m venv timeseries

In the code above we created a timeseries directory, which did not exist before, and all the supporting subdirectories, standard libraries, and other supporting files all included.

Notice the use of python3 to indicate that we are creating a Python 3 virtual environment. The same would have been achieved with this code

$ python3.8 -m venv timeseries

If we navigate to Desktop\timeseries we can confirm the additional files and subfolders inside timeseries

Graphical user interface

Description automatically generated with low confidence

1. We can then activate our new environment

On Mac/Unix

$ source timeseries/bin/activate

We can confirm that the right Python env is activate

$ which python

And you should get a response that reflects the path to the Python interpreter

/Users/tarekatwan/Desktop/timeseries/bin/python

On Windows

$ timeseries/Scripts/activate.bat

1. To deactivate

$ deactivate

How it works…

Once we activate the virtual environment, we can check on the location of the Python interpreter to confirm that we are using the right one.

$ which python

This will show the path of our Python environment which contains all the necessary files including the Python interpreter.

The output of the statement above will show different outputs depending if it was a conda environment or venv environment

# when using conda

/Users/tarekatwan/opt/anaconda3/envs/timeseries/bin/python

# when using venv

/Users/tarekatwan/Desktop/timeseries/bin/python

If we compare the folder structures of both venv and conda we can see similarities

Table

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Conda timeseries environment

Graphical user interface, application

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venv timeseries environment

Notice, that when using conda, all environments will default to the /envs/ location inside the anaconda3/ directory. When using venv, we actually had to specify where we plan to create the directory or project.

The advantage of conda on the other hand, is that with conda we get two features: a package and dependency manager and a virtual environment manager. This means we can use the same conda command to create additional environments using conda create, and also install packages using conda install <package name> which we will see later on.

When using venv, keep in mind that venv is only a virtual environment manager, we will still need to rely on pip as our package manager to install any new packages e.g. pip install <package name>

One of the added benefits of using conda is that we can create environments of other languages not just Python. This includes Julia, R, Lua, Scala, Java, and more.

Pip vs Conda

Both Pip and Conda are very popular methods for managing packages that it is very common to see these two options listed under the installation instructions of many common libraries.

A picture containing graphical user interface

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There’s more…

Aside from directly installing Anaconda on your local machine, there is another option to completely isolate the whole Python installation or Python distribution such as Anaconda by using Docker. You can further, create additional virtual environments inside the container.

There are three options here:

* Using the official Docker Anaconda image

$ docker pull continuumio/anaconda3

* Using the official Python image

$ docker pull python

* Using one of the official Jupyter Docker Stacks. To read more about the available stacks please refer to their official documentation here <https://jupyter-docker-stacks.readthedocs.io/en/latest/using/selecting.html>

$ docker pull jupyter/datascience-notebook

See also

If you are using a machine that does not allow you to install any software or using an older machine with limited capacity or performance do not worry. There are still other options to get you moving and following through the recipes in this book.

Alternative options:

* Replit offers a free, in-browser IDE that supports more than 50+ languages including Python. All you need is to create an account and create your new replit space.
  + <https://replit.com/>
* Google Colab are hosted Python notebooks that already has some of the most popular Data Science packages already installed, including Tensorflow. Colab allows you to install additional packages as well. A great feature with Colab, is that you get the option to configure your notebook to use a CPU, GPU, or a TPU all for free.
  + https://colab.research.google.com/

Installing Python Time Series Libraries