

What Is a Condition Number?

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A condition number of a problem measures the sensitivity of the solution to small perturbations in the input data. The condition number depends on the problem and the input data, on the norm used to measure size, and on whether perturbations are measured in an absolute or a relative sense. The problem is defined by a function, which may be known explicitly or may be only implicitly defined (as when the problem is to solve an equation).

The most well known example of a condition number is the condition number of a nonsingular square matrix A , which is $\kappa(A) = \|A\|\|A^{-1}\|$. More correctly, this is the condition number with respect to inversion, because a relative change to A of norm ϵ can change A^{-1} by a relative amount as much as, but no more than, about $\kappa(A)\epsilon$ for small ϵ . The same quantity $\kappa(A)$ is also the condition number for a linear system $Ax = b$ (exactly if A is the data, but only approximately if both A and b are the data).

It is easy to see that $\kappa(A) \geq 1$ for any norm for which $\|I\| = 1$ (most common norms, but not the Frobenius norm, have this property) and that $\kappa(A)$ tends to infinity as A tends to singularity.

A general definition of (relative) condition number, for a function f from \mathbb{R}^n to \mathbb{R}^n , is

$$\text{cond}(f, x) = \lim_{\epsilon \rightarrow 0} \sup_{\|\Delta x\| \leq \epsilon \|x\|} \frac{\|f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)\|}{\epsilon \|f(x)\|}.$$

Taking a small, nonzero ϵ , we have

$$\frac{\|f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)\|}{\|f(x)\|} \lesssim \text{cond}(f, x) \frac{\|\Delta x\|}{\|x\|}$$

for small $\|\Delta x\|$, with approximate equality for some Δx .

An explicit expression for $\text{cond}(f, x)$ can be given in terms of the Jacobian matrix, $J(x) = (\partial f_i / \partial x_j)$:

$$\text{cond}(f, x) = \frac{\|x\| \|J(x)\|}{\|f(x)\|}.$$

We give two examples.

- If f is a scalar function then $J(x) = f'(x)$, so $\text{cond}(f, x) = |xf'(x)/f(x)|$. Hence, for example, $\text{cond}(\log, x) = 1/|\log x|$.

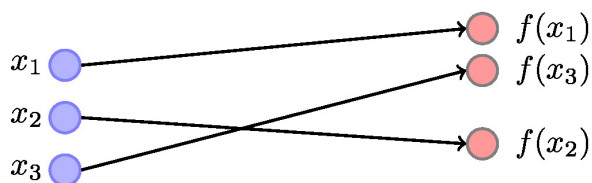
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- If z is a simple (non-repeated) root of the polynomial $p(t) = a_n t^n + \cdots + a_1 t + a_0$ then the data is the vector of coefficients $a = [a_n, \dots, a_0]^T$. It can be shown that the condition number of the root z is, for the ∞ -norm,

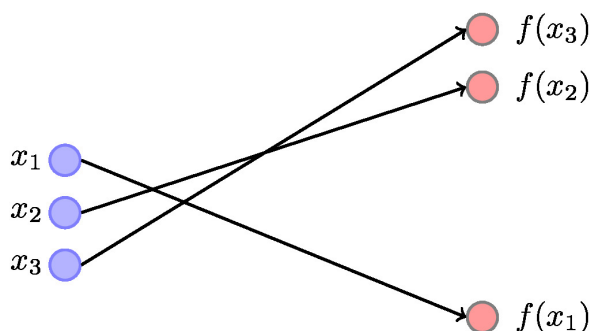
$$\text{cond}(z, a) = \frac{\max_i |a_i| \sum_{i=0}^n |z|^i}{|z p'(z)|}.$$

A general theory of condition numbers was developed by Rice (1966).

A problem is said to be *well conditioned* if the condition number is small and *ill conditioned* if the condition number is large. The meaning of “small” and “large” depends on the problem and the context. This diagram illustrates a well-conditioned function f : small changes in x produce small changes in f .



The next diagram depicts an ill-conditioned function f : small changes in x can produce large changes in f (but do not necessarily do so, as the closeness of $f(x_2)$ and $f(x_3)$ illustrates).



Here are a few key points about condition numbers.

- Even though an explicit expression may be available for it, computing $\text{cond}(f, x)$ is usually as expensive as computing $f(x)$, so a lot of research has focused on obtaining inexpensive estimates of the condition number or bounds for it.
- While $\kappa(A) \geq 1$, it is not true for all functions that $\text{cond}(f, x)$ is bounded below by 1.
- For a range of functions that includes the matrix inverse, matrix eigenvalues, and a root of a polynomial, it is known that the condition number is the reciprocal of the relative distance to the nearest singular problem (one with an infinite condition number).
- As the condition number is itself a function, one can ask: What is the condition number of the condition number? For a variety of problems, including those mentioned in the previous point, the condition number of the condition number is (approximately) the condition number!

0.1 References

This is a minimal set of references, which contain further useful references within.

- James W. Demmel, On Condition numbers and the distance to the nearest ill-posed problem, *Numer. Math.* 51, 251–289, 1987.
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0.2 Related Blog Posts

- Who Invented the Matrix Condition Number? (2019)

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