

# How to I read research papers



Aaditya Ramdas

Dept. of Statistics and Data Science  
Machine Learning Dept.  
Carnegie Mellon University

Thanks to: LeT-ALL organizers, Tim Roughgarden, Sam Hopkins

<https://cs.stanford.edu/~rishig/courses/ref/paper-reading-overview.pdf>

<https://cs.stanford.edu/~rishig/courses/ref/paper-reading-technical.pdf>

# This talk

To give you an idea **how reading papers evolved** for me (and might evolve for you) as you go from being an inexperienced researcher to a mature researcher:

To show you some **tools that I use** to keep track of papers that I have read, so that I do not forget key points.

Types of papers:

theoretically inclined papers in statistical machine learning or mathematical statistics or applied probability

# Know why you are reading a research paper

Good reasons:

- a) “Read directly from the masters” — a lot can be omitted by someone else summarizing or paraphrasing a classic paper.

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## A STOCHASTIC APPROXIMATION METHOD<sup>1</sup>

By HERBERT ROBBINS AND SUTTON MONRO

*University of North Carolina*

**1. Summary.** Let  $M(x)$  denote the expected value at level  $x$  of the response to a certain experiment.  $M(x)$  is assumed to be a monotone function of  $x$  but is unknown to the experimenter, and it is desired to find the solution  $x = \theta$  of the equation  $M(x) = \alpha$ , where  $\alpha$  is a given constant. We give a method for making successive experiments at levels  $x_1, x_2, \dots$  in such a way that  $x_n$  will tend to  $\theta$  in probability.

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- b) The authors had a new insights on an old problem**

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- b) The authors had a new insights on an old problem**

*Biometrika* (1998), **85**, 2, pp. 379–390  
Printed in Great Britain

## Asymptotic calibration

By DEAN P. FOSTER

*Department of Statistics, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania 19104, U.S.A.*

[foster@hellspark.wharton.upenn.edu](mailto:foster@hellspark.wharton.upenn.edu)

AND RAKESH V. VOHRA

*Department of Management Science, Fisher College of Business, Ohio State University,  
Columbus, Ohio 43210, U.S.A.*

[vohra.1@osu.edu](mailto:vohra.1@osu.edu)

### SUMMARY

Can we forecast the probability of an arbitrary sequence of events happening so that the stated probability of an event happening is close to its empirical probability? We can view this prediction problem as a game played against Nature, where at the beginning of the game Nature picks a data sequence and the forecaster picks a forecasting algorithm. If the forecaster is not allowed to randomise, then Nature wins; there will always be data for which the forecaster does poorly. This paper shows that, if the forecaster can randomise, the forecaster wins in the sense that the forecasted probabilities and the empirical probabilities can be made arbitrarily close to each other.

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- b) The authors had a new insights on an old problem

Bad reasons:

- a) **“I am new to the area, I wanted to read the original proof.”**

Often, the original authors’ proof was complicated and has been far simplified in later works.

If you are new to an area, the simpler proofs may be a better first read.

- b) **“I am citing this paper, so I should read it fully.”**

Sometimes, we are only interested in porting a very particular lemma or result from a paper, and one does *not* need to read it fully.

One definitely needs to verify the correctness of the claim being made about the other paper, or the correctness of the result being borrowed.

# Start of PhD

*The Annals of Statistics*  
2009, Vol. 37, No. 5A, 2178–2201  
DOI: 10.1214/08-AOS646  
© Institute of Mathematical Statistics, 2009

## HIGH-DIMENSIONAL VARIABLE SELECTION

BY LARRY WASSERMAN AND KATHRYN ROEDER<sup>1</sup>

*Carnegie Mellon University*

This paper explores the following question: what kind of statistical guarantees can be given when doing variable selection in high-dimensional models? In particular, we look at the error rates and power of some multi-stage regression methods. In the first stage we fit a set of candidate models. In the second stage we select one model by cross-validation. In the third stage we use hypothesis testing to eliminate some variables. We refer to the first two stages as “screening” and the last stage as “cleaning.” We consider three screening methods: the lasso, marginal regression, and forward stepwise regression. Our method gives consistent variable selection under certain conditions.

Today

# Start of PhD

Looks like  
an important  
paper. Let me read it  
from start to end

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Looks like  
an important  
paper. Let me read it  
from start to end

Today

I never  
read a paper  
from start to end on my  
first opening (or ever)

# Common (wrong) belief: papers should be read linearly

**No!** How exactly I read a paper depends on

- a. My goal (paper reviewer vs. finding related work for your own paper vs. curiosity-driven daily reading vs. trying to get into a new field)
- b. How well I know the topic (and how well I want to know it)
- c. How much time I have right now (more than 10mins, less than 2hrs)

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If so, then why are papers written linearly in a somewhat standard high-level ordering?

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If so, then why are papers written linearly in a somewhat standard high-level ordering?

To help you in your non-linear search!?  
You can jump forward to what you're looking for.

# Papers are not novels: nonlinear order is the norm

- a. Can often skip entire sections
- b. May need to read other paragraphs or subsections multiple times
- c. Sometimes the reading needs to split across days

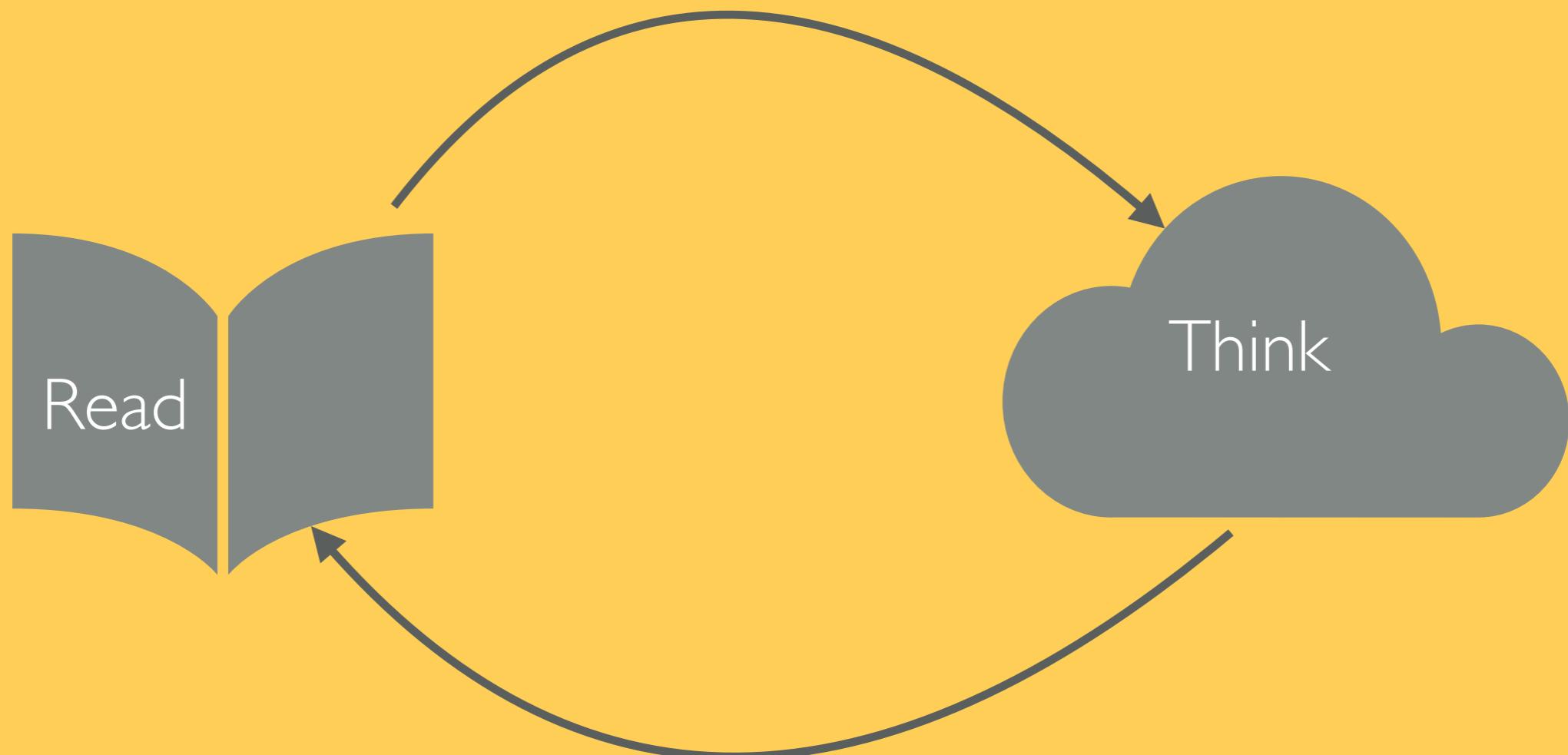
# Papers are not novels: nonlinear order is the norm

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## What are you looking for?

- a. Do you just want to know the problem being solved?
- b. Maybe you want to understand the main claim(s) being made?
- c. What was the major past hurdle and how was it overcome?
- d. Is there a nifty, cute proof technique I can borrow?

# The principle of iterative refinement



## First pass: jigsaw puzzle theme (5-30mins)

For papers with interesting titles or abstracts, 75% end at first pass.  
(one per day?)

# First pass: jigsaw puzzle theme (5-30mins)

a. What is the problem being solved?

[problem context]

b. Why is it interesting and nontrivial?

[be critical about assumptions, but not too much]

c. What is the main claim being made?

[at least in English, preferably in Math]

**Sources:** abstract/intro, problem definition, main theorem, discussion.

For papers with interesting titles or abstracts, 75% end at first pass.  
(one per day?)

## Second pass: scuba diving (30mins-2hrs)

For papers with interesting titles or abstracts, 20% end at second pass.  
(one per week?)

## Second pass: scuba diving (30mins-2hrs)

- a. What was the main technical hurdle faced by past work?  
How does this paper overcome it?
- b. What is the simplest nontrivial baseline? According to what metric is the new method better?
- c. What's still open and why does their insight not apply there?
- d. Does their insight apply to other unconsidered problems?
- e. What are the caveats and takeaways?

**Sources:** examples, special cases, key lemmas/propositions, proof outlines

For papers with interesting titles or abstracts, 20% end at second pass.  
(one per week?)

## Third pass: the swamp (multiple days/weeks)

For papers with interesting titles or abstracts, 5% reach a third pass.  
(one per month?)

## Third pass: the swamp (multiple days/weeks)

- a. How did they prove their lemmas, propositions, theorems?
- b. Can I reprove (in spirit) their result from scratch?  
[High bar! Read for concepts, even if they are technical, skip algebra or symbolic manipulation.]
- c. If I cannot, what piece of intuition am I missing? Does an additional assumption make it easier?
- d. Can I simplify their proof using the tools I know, or prove their main result in a very different way, once I get their intuition?  
[often easier than reproducing their proof, can help you avoid reading a tedious proof :)]

**Sources:** appendices, proof details, corollaries, remarks, related work

For papers with interesting titles or abstracts, 5% reach a third pass.  
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# How I organize my reading

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- Deep Learning for the Benes Filter. (arXiv:2203.05561v1 [stat.ML]) The Benes filter is a well-known continuous-time stochastic filtering model in one dimension. 2h
- Koopman Methods for Estimation of Animal Motions over Unknown, Regularly Embedded Submanifolds. (arXiv:2203.05723v1 [stat.ML]) 2h
- Bayesian inference via sparse Hamiltonian flows. (arXiv:2203.05723v1 [stat.ML]) A Bayesian coresnet is a small, weighted subset of data that replaces the full dataset. 2h
- Classification from Positive and Biased Negative Data with Skewed Labeled Posterior Probability. (arXiv:2203.05749v1 [stat.ME]) The binary classification problem is considered. 2h
- Near-optimal Offline Reinforcement Learning with Linear Representation: Leveraging Variance Information with Pessimism. (arXiv:2203.05804v1 [cs.LG]) 2h
- Averaging Spatio-temporal Signals using Optimal Transport and Soft Alignments. (arXiv:2203.05813v1 [stat.ML]) Several fields in science, from genomics to climate science, generate spatio-temporal signals. 2h
- Flexible Amortized Variational Inference in qBOLD MRI. (arXiv:2203.05845v1 [eess.IV]) Streamlined qBOLD acquisitions enable experimentally straight-forward inference. 2h
- FedSyn: Synthetic Data Generation using Federated Learning. (arXiv:2203.05931v1 [stat.ML]) As Deep Learning algorithms continue to evolve and be deployed in real-world applications, 2h

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## Universal Regression with Adversarial Responses. (arXiv:2203.05067v1 [cs.LG])

stat.ML updates on arXiv.org by Moïse Blanchard, Patrick Jaillet / 2d // keep unread // hide

...

Is this article about Deep Learning?

We provide algorithms for regression with adversarial responses under large classes of non-i.i.d. instance sequences, on general separable metric spaces, with provably minimal assumptions. We also give characterizations of learnability in this regression context. We consider universal consistency which asks for strong consistency of a learner without restrictions on the value responses. Our analysis shows that such objective is achievable for a significantly larger class of instance sequences than stationary processes, and unveils a fundamental dichotomy between value spaces: whether finite-horizon mean-estimation is achievable or not. We further provide optimistically universal learning rules, i.e., such that if

Convergence

# papers

3 files

Tuesday, February 1st

In Assumption 1, “ $\Rightarrow$ ” denotes convergence in distribution, and the conditional “ $\Rightarrow$ ”-convergence in probability means  $P(\sqrt{n}(\hat{\psi}_n - \hat{\psi}_n) \leq x | \hat{P}_n) \xrightarrow{P} P(N(0, \sigma^2) \leq x)$  for any  $x \in \mathbb{R}$ , where  $\xrightarrow{P}$  denotes convergence in probability. Assumption 1 is a standard condition to justify bootstrap validity, and is ensured when  $\psi(\cdot)$  is Hadamard differentiable (see Proposition 2 in the sequel which follows from Van der Vaart (2000) §23). This assumption implies that, conditional on the data, the asymptotic distributions of the centered resample estimate  $\sqrt{n}(\hat{\psi}_n^* - \hat{\psi}_n)$  and the centered original estimate  $\sqrt{n}(\hat{\psi}_n - \psi)$  are the same. Thus, one can use the former distribution, which is computable via Monte Carlo, to approximate the latter unknown distribution. Simply put, we can use a “plug-in”

**arXiv.org**

**A Cheap Bootstrap Method for Fast Inference**

The bootstrap is a versatile inference method that has proven powerful in many statistical problems. However, when applied to modern large-scale models, it could face substantial computation...

Message #papers

+ |  |  |  |  |  | 

C M S SA +

Convergence

Add external people

Martingale

- Channels
  - advisees
  - auditing
  - bestarm
  - calibration
  - cvar
  - e-bh-and-friends
  - forecasting
- # general
- # good-news
- interactive-selective-inf
- # internal-paper-review
- open-problems
- # opportunities
- # papers
- # philosophy
- # random
- regret-power
- # talks
- # workshops-conferences
- + Add channels

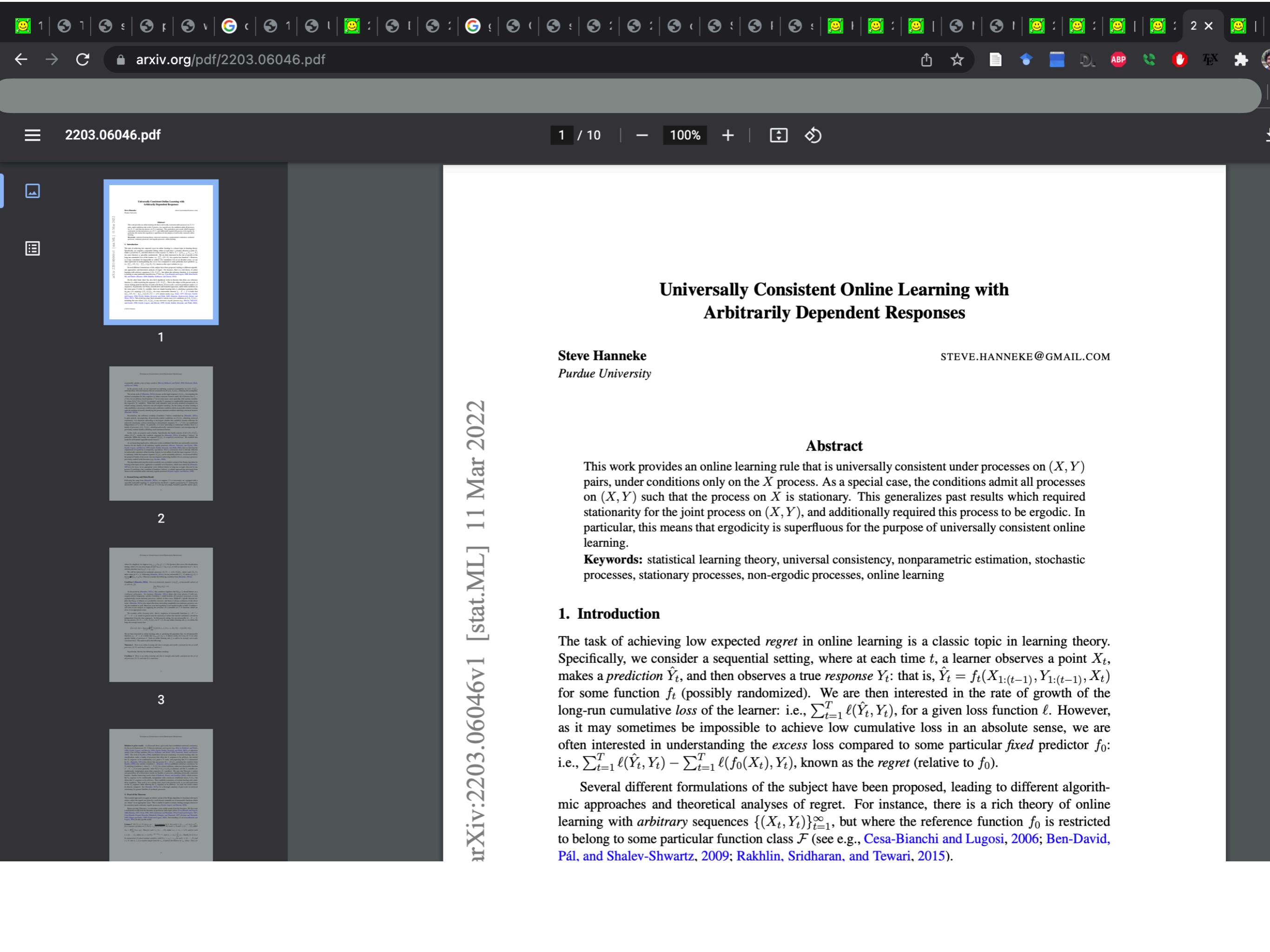
Direct messages 1

papers

On the other hand, the multichart CUSUM will give a reasonably good approximation to the best possible performance at the intermediate points  $\theta \neq \theta_i$ , and, therefore, may be considered as a reasonable candidate for practical applications. The same asymptotic performance can be obtained by using a multichart S–R detection test.

Yet another possible (and asymptotically efficient) solution can be constructed based on the maximal invariant sequence  $Y_n = X_n - X_1$ ,  $n \geq 2$ . Specifically, we conjecture that building likelihood ratios for  $Y_n$  and applying the corresponding invariant S–R test  $N_A$  will allow one to obtain an asymptotically optimal solution (as  $\alpha \rightarrow 0$ ) with respect to the average detection delay  $\mathbb{E}_k(T - k | T \geq k)$  uniformly for every  $k \geq 2$  in the class of invariant detection procedures  $\Delta_\alpha = \{T : \sup_k \mathbb{P}_\infty(T < k + m | T \geq k) \leq \alpha\}$  that confines the supremum local PFA. In fact, because the invariant S–R statistic  $R_n$  is a non-negative submartingale with mean  $\mathbb{E}_\infty R_n = n$ , it follows that  $\mathbb{P}_\infty(N_A < k + m | N_A \geq k) \leq m/A$ . Choose  $m_\alpha = O(|\log \alpha|)$  and  $A = A_\alpha$  as a solution of the equation  $m_\alpha/A_\alpha = \alpha$ . Generalizing an argument in Tartakovsky (2005) may lead to the desired asymptotic optimality result. This problem will be addressed elsewhere. Note also that the global ARL2FA metric may not be a good choice for the FAR, because the sequence  $\{Y_n\}_{n \geq 2}$  is not i.i.d.

## 5. DETECTION OF A CHANGE OCCURRING AT A FAR HORIZON



# Getting into a new area (BFS)

Zotero  
Google Scholar  
Author homepages  
PhD theses  
Survey articles  
Blogs  
Course notes  
Recorded lectures

My Library

Ambiguity, Uncertainty, Risk

Betting

Auditing, Without Replacement

Financial auditing

Binomial Concentration

Conformal+Calibration

Differential Privacy

FDR

Bootstrap

Financial Risk

Ideas

Important proof techniques

Modern ML

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Negative Association

Normalizing Flows

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Class Notes

Title

A trajectory interpretation of Doob's martingale inequalities

Demimartingales

Generalizing Doob's inequalities to other Orlicz functions

Martingale inequalities and deterministic counterparts

On pathwise counterparts of Doob's maximal inequalities

Optimal Stopping in the L log L-Inequality of Hardy and Littlewood

OPTIMAL STOPPING OF THE MAXIMUM PROCESS: THE MAXIMALITY PRINCIPLE

Pathwise versions of the Burkholder–Davis–Gundy inequality

rakhlin17a.pdf

The Best Bound in the L log L Inequality of Hardy and Littlewood and its Martingale Counterpart

Creator

Acciaio et al.

Gushchin

Graversen and Peškir

Beiglböck and Siorpae

All Fields & Tags

# Deep dive into who cited a specific paper

[PDF] History of the efficient market hypothesis

[PDF] psu.edu

[M Sewell](#) - Rn, 2011 - Citeseer

A market is said to be efficient with respect to an information set if the price 'fully reflects' that information set, ie if the price would be unaffected by revealing the information set to all ...

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Competitive on-line statistics

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[M Reid, R Williamson](#) - 2011 - jmlr.org

We unify f-divergences, Bregman divergences, surrogate regret bounds, proper scoring rules, cost curves, ROC-curves and statistical information. We do this by systematically ...

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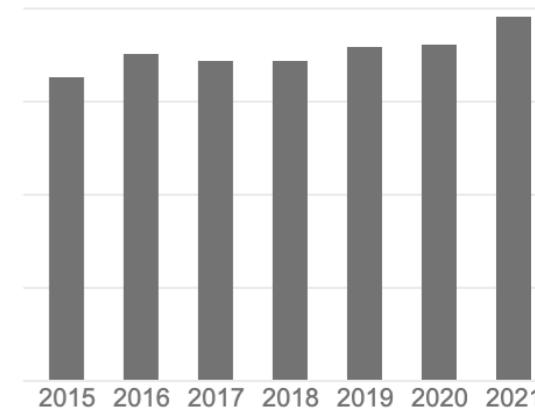
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Cited by

All

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TITLE	CITED BY	YEAR
<a href="#">Universal sequential search problems</a> LA Levin Problemy Peredachi Informatsii 9 (3), 115-116	1788 *	1973
<a href="#">A pseudorandom generator from any one-way function</a> J Håstad, R Impagliazzo, LA Levin, M Luby SIAM J. Comput. 28 (4), 1364-1396	1757 *	1999
<a href="#">A hard-core predicate for all one-way functions</a> O Goldreich, LA Levin Proceedings of the twenty-first annual ACM symposium on Theory of computing ...	1436	1989
<a href="#">The complexity of finite objects and the development of the concepts of information and randomness by means of the theory of algorithms</a> AK Zvonkin, LA Levin Russian Mathematical Surveys 25, 83	1003 *	1970
<a href="#">Pseudo-random generation from one-way functions</a> R Impagliazzo, LA Levin, M Luby Proceedings of the twenty-first annual ACM symposium on Theory of computing ...	951	1989
<a href="#">Checking computations in polylogarithmic time</a> L Babai, L Fortnow, LA Levin, M Szegedy Proceedings of the twenty-third annual ACM symposium on Theory of computing ...	749	1991



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## Parting thoughts

- a. All papers have typos/mistakes. They're usually fixable (>95%), not fundamental errors (<5%).
- b. Deep understanding can take weeks or months, even for experts. I still re-read fundamental papers in my area, and learn new things from them.
- c. There is always a pyramid of understanding for important papers: lots of people understand things at a high level, and very few people outside the authors may understand the intricacies. Thus understanding a technical paper = an almost unique superpower!

## Takeaway messages

1. What and how you read depends on goals and time constraints.
2. Ask the right questions for the goals.
3. Refine your understanding iteratively.
4. Reading proofs is often about knowing what to gloss over.
5. Use Feedly/Scholar/Slack/Zotero to organize reading.