

# An introduction to probability

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# Who am I?

- Statistician working mainly in epidemiology.
- Claim to probability fame: born in the same town where Thomas Bayes lived (Tunbridge Wells, UK).



# Course outline

- 9am-10.30am: follow along lecture and problems
- 10.30am-10.45am: refreshments break
- 10.45am-midday: follow along lecture and problems

- Introduction to probability, Blitzstein and Hwang. Open source book available here:  
<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/stat110/home>
- Seeing theory, Kunin et al. A beautiful online resource that has lots of creative ways to think about probability.  
<https://seeing-theory.brown.edu/>

# Outline

- 1 What is probability and why do we need it?
- 2 Probability and counting
- 3 Probability distributions
- 4 Joint distributions
- 5 Conditional probability
- 6 Bayes' rule
- 7 Continuous probability distributions

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# What is probability?

Mathematics is the logic of  
certainty; probability [theory] is  
the [mathematical] logic of  
uncertainty

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Bitzstein and Hwang, 2019

# Why do we need probability theory?

Life and science are full of unknown things. We say these things are *uncertain*.

Faced with these, we can give up; *Probability theory* gives us a way to make assumptions about uncertain phenomena which allows us to make progress with understanding without having to know everything.

There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.

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Donald Rumsfeld, 2002



# Who uses probability?

It is used in:

- Statistics: probability is the foundational language of it
- Biology: e.g. inheritance of genes
- Meteorology: e.g. weather forecasts are generated using probabilities
- Epidemiology: e.g. analysing randomised clinical trials and fitting models to epidemiological data
- Physics: our current best explanation of the universe at small scales (quantum theory) is based on probability

# The difficulties of probability

If we rely on our intuitions, it is easy to go awry with probability.

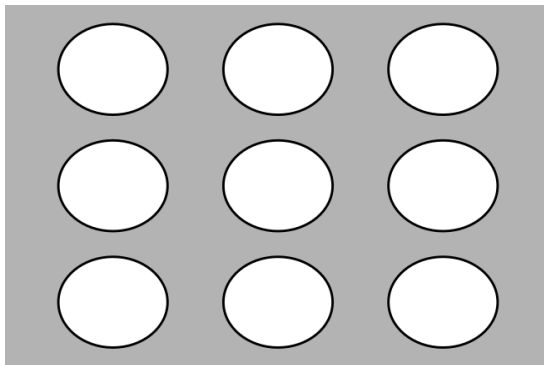
So, we need careful mathematical analysis.

Fortunately, *simulation* using R / Python / etc. can also really help us to understand.

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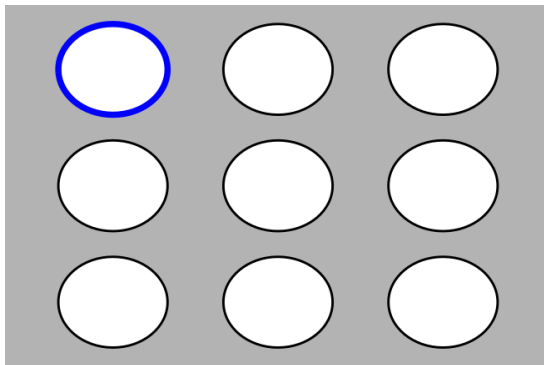
# Blitzstein and Hwang's Pebble World

As an example, consider reaching into a bag to pull out one of nine pebbles: we call this *pebble world*.



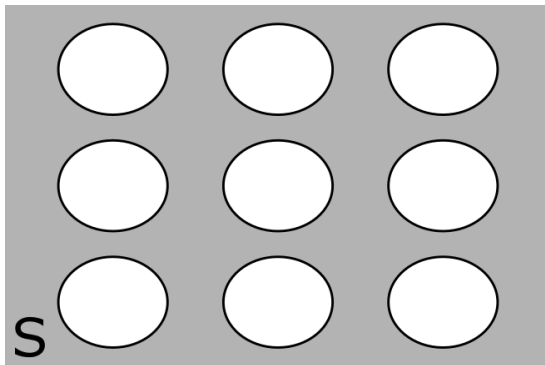
# Outcomes

An *outcome* is a possible result of some activity. Here pulling one particular pebble out of the bag would be an outcome.



# Sample spaces

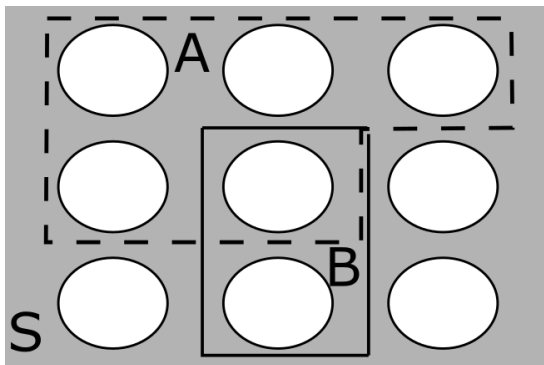
The *sample space*,  $S$ , is the *set* of all possible outcomes of an experiment. Here, it is the set of all pebbles.



# Events

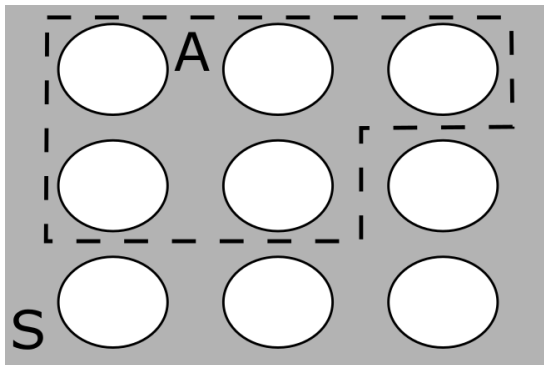
An *event* is a *set* of possible outcomes. For example, below event  $A$  corresponds to selecting one of five pebbles; event  $B$  to selecting one of two.

As we can see, two or more events can happen at once.



# Probabilities of events

What do we mean by the probability of  $A$  occurring? We write this as:  $\mathbb{P}(A)$ .

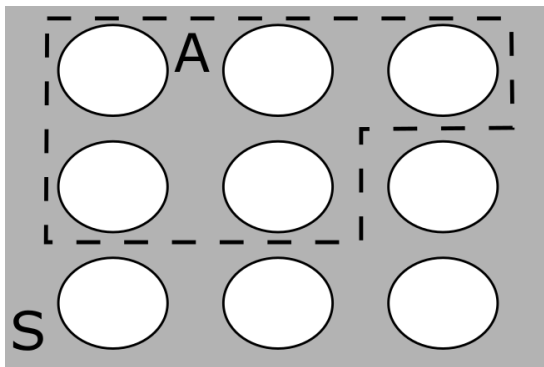




# Probabilities from counting

If all pebbles equally likely to be drawn:

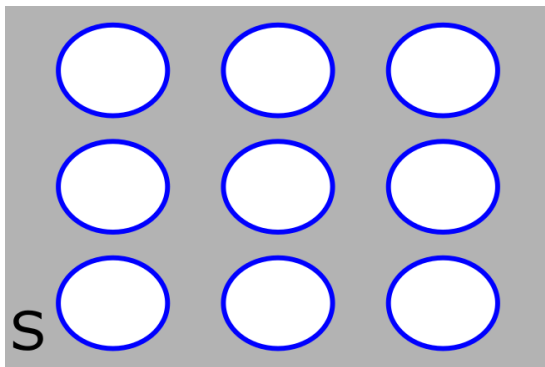
$$\mathbb{P}(A) = \frac{\text{number of pebbles in } A}{\text{number of pebbles in } S} = \frac{5}{9} \quad (1)$$



# Probability of an event in $S$

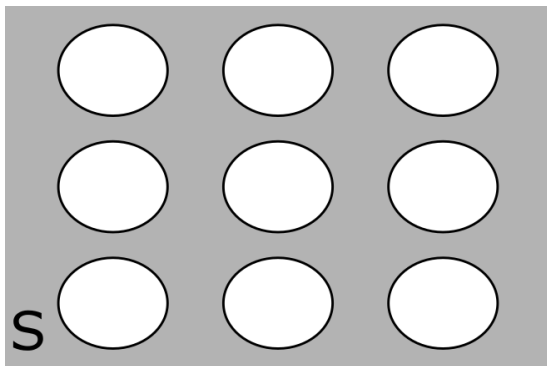
Consider the probability that some event in  $S$  occurs:

$$\mathbb{P}(S) = \frac{\text{number of pebbles in } S}{\text{number of pebbles in } S} = \frac{9}{9} = 1 \quad (2)$$



What about the probability that no event in  $S$  occurs?

$$\mathbb{P}(\text{not } S) = \frac{0}{9} = 0 \quad (3)$$



# Defining a probability

A probability of an event must be bounded between 0 and 1<sup>1</sup>.

impossible

certain



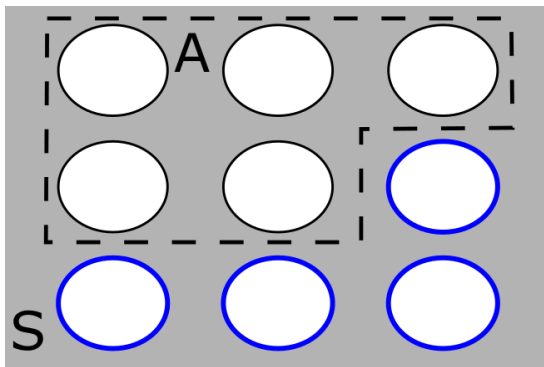
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<sup>1</sup>Note: “impossible” isn’t 100% accurate here but you can start out by thinking of probabilities this way.

# An event not occurring

We can also determine the probability that  $A$  does not occur:

$$\mathbb{P}(\text{not } A) = \frac{\text{number of pebbles not in } A}{\text{number of pebbles in } S} = \frac{4}{9} \quad (4)$$



Can anyone think of an alternative way of determining the probability that  $A$  does not occur?

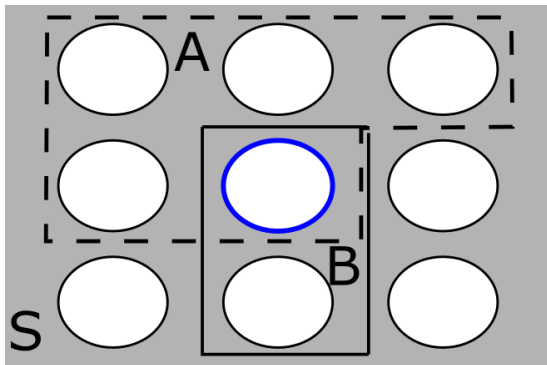
# An event not occurring: reprised

Since

# Combinations of events: intersection

We can determine the probability of  $A$  and  $B$  occurring by determining the overlap between these two events:

$$\mathbb{P}(A \cap B) = \mathbb{P}(A, B) = \frac{\text{number of pebbles in both } A \text{ and } B}{\text{number of pebbles in } S} = \frac{1}{9} \quad (5)$$

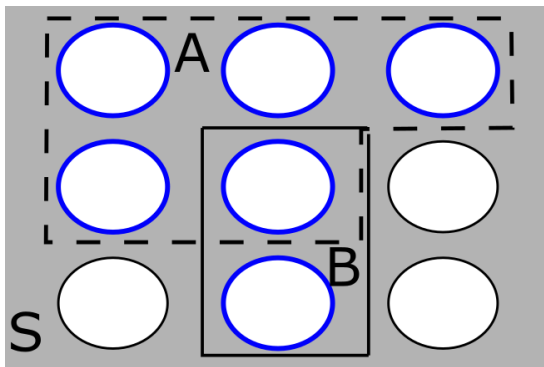




# Combinations of events: union

We can determine the probability of  $A$  and/or  $B$  occurring by:

$$\mathbb{P}(A \cup B) = \frac{\text{number of pebbles in either } A \text{ or } B \text{ or both}}{\text{number of pebbles in } S} = \frac{6}{9} \quad (6)$$



Questions?

# Problems

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Use breast cancer example.

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