# gRNA design for CRISPR interference (CRISPRi)

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# Introduction

This tutorial will demonstrate how to use crisprDesign to design gRNAs for CRISPR interference (CRISPRi). Specifically, we will target the human KRAS gene and use the SpCas9 nuclease.

# Installation

See the Installation tutorial to learn how to install the packages necessary for this tutorial: crisprDesign, crisprDesignData

# Terminology

See the CRISPRko design tutorial to get familiar with the terminology used throughout this tutorial.

# CRISPRi design

For CRISPR activation (CRISPRa) and interference (CRISPRi) applications, the CRISPR nuclease is engineered to lose its endonuclease activity, and should therefore not introduce double-stranded breaks (DSBs). We will use the dead SpCas9 (dSpCas9) nuclease as an example here. Note that users don't have to distinguish between dSpCas9 and SpCas9 when specifying the nuclease in the crisprVerse as they do not differ in terms of the characteristics stored in the CrisprNuclease object.

In CRISPRi, fusing dSpCas9 with a Krüppel-associated box (KRAB) domain has been shown to be effective at repressing transcription in mammalian cells (Gilbert et al. et al. 2013). The dSpCas9-KRAB fused protein is a commonly-used construct to conduct CRISPR inhibition (CRISPRi) experiments. To achieve optimal inhibition, gRNAs are usually designed targeting the region directly downstream of the gene transcription starting site (TSS).

crisprDesign provides functionalities to be able to take into account design rules that are specific to CRISPRi applications. The queryTss function allows for specifying genomic coordinates of promoter regions. The addTssAnnotation function annotates gRNAs for known TSSs, and includes a column dist\_to\_tss that gives the distance in nucleotides between the TSS position and the PAM site of the gRNA. For CRISPRi, we recommend targeting the region 25-75bp region downstream of the TSS for optimal inhibition; see Sanson et al. (2018) for more information. Finally, the function addCrispraiScores adds CRISPRi-specific on-target activity scores based on the work of (Horlbeck et al. 2016).

#### Creating the GuideSet

We first start by loading the required packages:

library(crisprBase)
library(crisprDesign)

```
library(crisprDesignData)
library(BSgenome.Hsapiens.UCSC.hg38)
```

To demonstrate CRISPRi design, we will design gRNAs to inhibit expression of the human KRAS gene using the SpCas9 nuclease. To accomplish this, we want our gRNAs to target the region downstream of the KRAS TSS; let's consider the window containing 500bp immediately downstream of the TSS to explore candidate gRNAs.

We first need to retrieve the TSS coordinates for KRAS. These data are conveniently stored in the crisprDesignData package as the dataset tss\_human. For more information on tss\_human and how to create similar TSS annotation objects, see the Building a gene annotation object tutorial.

We load the TSS coordinates stored in the tss\_human object

```
data("tss_human", package="crisprDesignData")
```

and query for KRAS using the queryTss function from crisprDesign:

```
target_region
## GRanges object with 1 range and 9 metadata columns:
##
             seqnames
                                 ranges strand |
                                                     score peak_start peak_end
                            <IRanges> <Rle> | <numeric> <integer> <integer>
##
                <Rle>
##
                 chr12 25250429-25250928
                                             - /
                                                             25250928 25250928
                                                 5.20187
    region_1
                                                  source
                                                            promoter
##
                       tx_id
                                     gene_id
##
                  <character>
                                 <character> <character> <character>
    region 1 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
##
                                                fantom5
##
                             ID gene_symbol
##
                    <character> <character>
##
    region_1 ENSG00000133703_P1
##
    seqinfo: 25 sequences from an unspecified genome; no seqlengths
```

We load the crisprNuclease object storing information about the SpCas9 nuclease from the crisprBase package:

```
data(SpCas9, package="crisprBase")
```

We then find all candidate protospacer sequences in our target region with findSpacers:

```
gs
## GuideSet object with 160 ranges and 5 metadata columns:
##
              seqnames ranges strand | protospacer
                                                                     pam
                 <Rle> <IRanges> <Rle> |
##
                                         <DNAStringSet> <DNAStringSet>
                 chr12 25250434
                                 - | GCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTCTG
##
      spacer_1
##
                                    - | AGCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTCT
                                                                     GGG
      spacer_2
               chr12 25250435
                                   - | GAGCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTC
                                                                     TGG
##
      spacer 3
                 chr12 25250436
                 chr12 25250443
                                   - | TCCCCGAGAGCCGCGGCTGG
##
      spacer 4
                                                                     AGG
      spacer_5 chr12 25250446 - | TCCTCCCCGAGAGCCGCGGC
##
                                                                      TGG
```

```
##
##
                                          - | ATTTTCCTAGGCGGCGGCCG
     spacer_156
                    chr12
                           25250915
                                                                                CGG
     spacer 157
                           25250916
                                          + | CGCTGCTGCCTCCGCCGCCG
##
                    chr12
                                                                                CGG
                    chr12 25250921
##
     spacer 158
                                          - | AGCTCGATTTTCCTAGGCGG
                                                                                CGG
##
     spacer 159
                    chr12
                           25250924
                                          - | CGGAGCTCGATTTTCCTAGG
                                                                                CGG
##
     spacer_160
                    chr12
                           25250928
                                          + | CGCCGCCGCGCCGCCT
                                                                                AGG
##
                 pam_site cut_site
                                           region
##
                 <numeric> <numeric> <character>
##
                 25250434
                            25250437
                                         region 1
       spacer 1
##
       spacer_2
                 25250435
                            25250438
                                         region_1
##
       spacer_3
                 25250436
                            25250439
                                         region_1
##
       spacer_4
                 25250443
                            25250446
                                         region_1
                 25250446
                            25250449
##
       spacer_5
                                         region_1
##
            . . .
                       . . .
                                  . . .
                                              . . .
##
     spacer_156
                 25250915
                            25250918
                                         region_1
##
     spacer_157
                 25250916
                            25250913
                                         region 1
##
     spacer_158
                 25250921
                            25250924
                                         region_1
     spacer 159
                 25250924
                                         region_1
##
                            25250927
##
     spacer_160
                 25250928
                            25250925
                                         region_1
##
##
     seqinfo: 640 sequences (1 circular) from hg38 genome
     crisprNuclease: SpCas9
```

#### Annotating the GuideSet

Next, we annotate our candidate gRNAs to assess quality. There are several functions in crisprDesign that provide annotation for features that are not specific to CRISPRi, for which we refer the reader to the CRISPRko design with Cas9 tutorial for more information. The sections below will cover annotation functions that are of particular interest to CRISPRi applications.

## Adding TSS annotation

As the name implies, the addTssAnnotation function annotates gRNAs with TSS context such as the distance between the gRNA and the TSS, as well as which TSS is targeted (many genes contain different TSSs corresponding to different isoforms).

The function requires a tssObject object, and the tss\_window values that we used earlier to define the target region. We can then retrieve the appended annotation with the accessor function tssAnnotation:

```
gs <- addTssAnnotation(gs,
                        tssObject=tss_human,
                        tss_window=target_window)
tssAnnotation(gs)
## DataFrame with 160 rows and 15 columns
##
                   chr anchor site
                                      strand
                                                  score peak_start
                                                                    peak_end
                          <integer> <factor> <numeric>
##
              <factor>
                                                        <integer> <integer>
## spacer_1
                 chr12
                           25250437
                                               5.20187
                                                          25250928 25250928
                           25250438
                                               5.20187
## spacer_2
                                                          25250928 25250928
                 chr12
## spacer_3
                 chr12
                           25250439
                                               5.20187
                                                          25250928
                                                                    25250928
## spacer_4
                           25250446
                                               5.20187
                                                          25250928
                 chr12
                                                                    25250928
## spacer_5
                           25250449
                                               5.20187
                                                          25250928
                 chr12
                                                                    25250928
## ...
## spacer 156
                           25250918
                                               5.20187
                                                          25250928
                 chr12
                                                                    25250928
## spacer_157
                                               5.20187
                                                          25250928 25250928
                 chr12
                           25250913
```

```
## spacer_158
                 chr12
                           25250924
                                                5.20187
                                                          25250928
                                                                     25250928
## spacer_159
                 chr12
                           25250927
                                                5.20187
                                                           25250928
                                                                     25250928
                                                           25250928
## spacer 160
                 chr12
                           25250925
                                                5.20187
                                                                     25250928
##
                         tx id
                                       gene id
                                                     source
                                                               promoter
##
                   <character>
                                   <character> <character> <character>
## spacer 1
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
## spacer_2
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
## spacer_3
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                                      P1
## spacer 4
                                                    fantom5
## spacer_5
              ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
##
                                                        . . .
                                                                     . . .
## spacer_156 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                                      P1
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
## spacer_157 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
## spacer_158 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
                                                                      P1
## spacer_159 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
## spacer_160 ENST00000256078 ENSG00000133703
                                                    fantom5
                                                                      P1
##
                                                              tss_pos dist_to_tss
                           tss_id gene_symbol tss_strand
##
                      <character> <character> <character> <integer>
              ENSG00000133703_P1
## spacer_1
                                          KRAS
                                                            25250928
                                                                               491
                                          KRAS
## spacer_2
              ENSG00000133703_P1
                                                             25250928
                                                                               490
                                                             25250928
## spacer 3
              ENSG00000133703 P1
                                          KRAS
                                                                               489
## spacer 4
              ENSG00000133703 P1
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
                                                                               482
              ENSG00000133703 P1
## spacer_5
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
                                                                               479
                                           . . .
                                                                               . . .
## spacer_156 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
                                                                               10
## spacer 157 ENSG00000133703 P1
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
                                                                               15
## spacer_158 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
                                                                                4
## spacer_159 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
                                                                                 1
## spacer_160 ENSG00000133703_P1
                                          KRAS
                                                             25250928
```

#### Adding spacer alignments with TSS annotation

As with all CRISPR applications, potential off-targets effects are an important concern in assessing gRNA quality. While this concern is somewhat moderated for CRISPRi, since the dead CRISPR nuclease does not make DSBs, we should be aware of off-targetsoccuring in the promoter regions of other genes. This can be handled by passing our tss0bject to the addSpacerAlignments function. We will search for up to 2 mismatches and increase the size of our tss\_window (which defines the promoter region when searching for off-targets) to err on the safe side.

Similar to the CRISPRko design tutorial, we need to specify a Bowtie index of the human referenge genome; see the Building genome indices for short read aligners tutorial to learn how to create such an index.

Here, we specify the index that was available to us when generating this tutorial:

```
# Users need to specify the path of their bowtie index
index_path <- "/Users/fortinj2/crisprIndices/bowtie/hg38/hg38"</pre>
```

We are ready to add on- and off-target alignments:

```
gs
## GuideSet object with 160 ranges and 13 metadata columns:
      segnames ranges strand | protospacer
                                                                  pam
##
                <Rle> <IRanges> <Rle> |
                                          <DNAStringSet> <DNAStringSet>
##
                chr12 25250434
                                - | GCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTCTG
      spacer_1
                                 - | AGCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTCT
##
                chr12 25250435
                                                                  GGG
      spacer_2
##
              chr12 25250436
                                 - | GAGCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTC
                                                                  TGG
      spacer_3
##
      spacer_4
                chr12 25250443
                                 - | TCCCCGAGAGCCGCGGCTGG
                                                                  AGG
                                 - | TCCTCCCCGAGAGCCGCGGC
##
      spacer_5
                chr12 25250446
                                                                  TGG
##
      . . .
                . . .
                       . . .
                                . . . .
                                                                  . . .
                               - | ATTTTCCTAGGCGGCGGCCG
    spacer_156
##
              chr12 25250915
                                                                  CGG
                                 + | CGCTGCTGCCTCCGCCGCCG
##
              chr12 25250916
    spacer_157
                                                                  CGG
##
    spacer_158
                chr12 25250921
                                 - | AGCTCGATTTTCCTAGGCGG
                                                                  CGG
                                - | CGGAGCTCGATTTTCCTAGG
##
    spacer_159
                chr12 25250924
                                                                  CGG
                                 + | CGCCGCCGCGCCGCCT
##
    spacer_160
                chr12 25250928
                                                                 AGG
##
              pam site cut site
                                  region tssAnnotation
##
             <numeric> <numeric> <character> <SplitDataFrameList> <numeric>
      spacer_1 25250434 25250437 region_1 chr12:25250437:-:...
##
##
     spacer_2 25250435 25250438 region_1 chr12:25250438:-:...
##
      spacer_3 25250436 25250439 region_1 chr12:25250439:-:...
      spacer_4 25250443 25250446 region_1 chr12:25250446:-:...
##
     spacer_5 25250446 25250449 region_1 chr12:25250449:-:...
##
##
##
    spacer_156 25250915 25250918 region_1 chr12:25250918:-:...
                                                                  1
##
    ##
##
    spacer_159 25250924 25250927 region_1 chr12:25250927:-:...
##
    spacer_160 25250928 25250925
                                 region_1 chr12:25250925:+:...
                       n2 n0_p n1_p n2_p
##
                   n1
##
              <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric>
##
                0 1 1 0
      spacer_1
##
                    0
                                      1
                                              0
     spacer_2
                            1
                    0
                                              0
                                                       0
##
      spacer 3
                            1
                                      1
                    0
##
     spacer_4
                             0
                                      1
                                              0
                                                       0
##
      spacer_5
                   0
                            0
##
                   . . .
                           . . .
##
    spacer_156
                   0
                           0
                                     1
                                              0
                                                       0
                    0
##
                            27
                                              0
                                                      18
    spacer_157
                                     1
##
    spacer_158
                   0
                           0
                                     1
                                              0
                                                       0
##
    spacer_159
                   0
                           0
                                     1
                                              0
                                                       0
##
    spacer_160
                  18
                          160
                                              17
                                                     121
##
                                                   alignments
##
                                                <GRangesList>
##
      spacer_1
                               chr12:25250434:-,chr7:155971918:-
##
      spacer 2
                               chr12:25250435:-,chr3:184602035:+
##
     spacer 3
                               chr12:25250436:-,chr3:184602034:+
##
      spacer_4
                                              chr12:25250443:-
##
                                              chr12:25250446:-
      spacer_5
##
         . . .
##
    spacer 156
                                              chr12:25250915:-
##
    spacer_157 chr12:25250916:+,chr2:55050346:+,chr20:21397165:+,...
##
    spacer 158
                                              chr12:25250921:-
                                              chr12:25250924:-
    spacer_159
```

```
## spacer_160 chr12:25250928:+,chr17:49361951:+,chr1:3069055:-,...
## -----
## seqinfo: 640 sequences (1 circular) from hg38 genome
## crisprNuclease: SpCas9
```

Including a tssObject parameter in the addSpacerAlignments function appends columns to the GuideSet that tallies the alignments restricted to the defined (via tss\_window) promoter regions: nO\_p, n1\_p, and n2\_p (the \_p suffix denotes "promoter").

### Adding CRISPRai scores

The CRISPRai algorithm was developed by the Weissman lab to score SpCas9 gRNAs for CRISPRa and CRISPRi applications for the human genome (Horlbeck et al. et al. 2016). The function addCrispraiScores implements this algorithm to add scores to the GuideSet. Compared to other on-target scoring algorithms, it requires several additional inputs:

- The gr argument is the GRanges object derived from the queryTss function and used to create the GuideSet object. In our example, this is the object named target\_region.
- The tssObject argument is a GRanges object that contains TSS coordinates and annotation. It must also contain the following columns: ID, promoter, tx\_id, and gene\_symbol. Our tssObject in this instance is tss\_human.
- geneCol indicates which column of tssObject should be used as the unique gene identifier.
- modality is the modality of the CRISPR application, in our case, CRISPRi.
- fastaFile is the path of a FASTA file containing the sequence of the human reference genome in hg38 coordinates. This file is available here.
- chromatinFiles is a vector of length 3 specifying the path of files containing the chromatin accessibility data needed for the algorithm in hg38 coordinates. The chromatin files can be downloaded from Zenodo here.

We first prepare all needed inputs for addCrispraiScores. We start by specifying the location of the FASTA file on our local machine:

```
fastaPath <- "/Users/fortinj2/crisprIndices/genomes/hg38/hg38.fa"</pre>
```

This corresponds to the path where the downloaded file from here is stored. Next, we specify the location of the chromatin files:

This should correspond to the files that were downloaded from here.

We are now ready to add the scores:

Let's look at the results:

```
results
## GuideSet object with 160 ranges and 14 metadata columns:
            seqnames ranges strand | protospacer
##
               spacer_1 chr12 25250434 - | GCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTCTG
##
     spacer_2 chr12 25250435
                              - | AGCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTCT
##
                                                            GGG
     spacer_3 chr12 25250436
##
                              - | GAGCCGCGGCTGGAGGCTTC
                                                            TGG
                              - | TCCCCGAGAGCCGCGGCTGG
##
     spacer_4 chr12 25250443
                                                            AGG
     spacer_5 chr12 25250446
##
                              - | TCCTCCCGAGAGCCGCGGC
                                                            TGG
##
                     . . .
                            ....
      . . .
               . . .
                                                            . . .
                            - | ATTTTCCTAGGCGGCGGCCG
    spacer_156
##
             chr12 25250915
                                                            CGG
##
    spacer_157 chr12 25250916
                              + | CGCTGCTGCCTCCGCCGCCG
                                                            CGG
##
    spacer_158 chr12 25250921
                              - | AGCTCGATTTTCCTAGGCGG
                                                            CGG

        spacer_150
        chr12
        25250924
        - | CGGAGCTCGATTTTCCTAGG

        spacer_160
        chr12
        25250928
        + | CGCCGCCGCGCCGCCT

                                                            CGG
##
##
                                                            AGG
##
            pam_site cut_site
                               region tssAnnotation
##
            <numeric> <numeric> <character> <SplitDataFrameList> <numeric>
##
     spacer_1 25250434 25250437 region_1 chr12:25250437:-:... 1
     spacer_2 25250435 25250438 region_1 chr12:25250438:-:...
##
     spacer_3 25250436 25250439 region_1 chr12:25250439:-:...
     spacer_4 25250443 25250446 region_1 chr12:25250446:-:...
##
     spacer_5 25250446 25250449 region_1 chr12:25250449:-:...
##
##
       ...
    ##
    ##
    ##
##
    spacer_159 25250924 25250927 region_1 chr12:25250927:-:...
    ##
                 n1 n2 n0_p n1_p n2_p
##
##
            <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric> <numeric>
     spacer_1 0 1 1 0 0
##
                 0
##
     spacer_2
                          1
                                  1
                                          0
                 0
0
0
##
                         1
                                  1
                                          0
                                                   0
     spacer_3
##
     spacer_4
                         0
                                  1
                                          0
                                                   0
##
                         0
                                 1
                                          0
     spacer_5
##
                 . . .
                         . . .
                                         . . .
                0
##
                         0
    spacer_156
                                 1
                                          0
                                                  0
                                 1
                 0
                         27
##
    spacer 157
                                          0
                                                  18
                 0
                         0
                                 1
                                          0
    spacer_158
                         0
                                 1
    spacer 159
                 0
                                                  0
##
                                          0
               18 160
##
    spacer_160
                                  1
                                          17
                                                 121
##
                                               alignments
##
                                             <GRangesList>
##
                            chr12:25250434:-,chr7:155971918:-
     spacer_1
##
                            chr12:25250435:-,chr3:184602035:+
     spacer_2
##
     spacer_3
                            chr12:25250436:-,chr3:184602034:+
##
                                          chr12:25250443:-
     spacer_4
##
     spacer_5
                                          chr12:25250446:-
##
##
    spacer_156
                                          chr12:25250915:-
##
    spacer_157 chr12:25250916:+,chr2:55050346:+,chr20:21397165:+,...
##
    spacer 158
                                          chr12:25250921:-
                                          chr12:25250924:-
##
    spacer_159
```

```
##
     spacer_160 chr12:25250928:+,chr17:49361951:+,chr1:3069055:-,...
##
                score_crispri
##
                    <numeric>
##
                     0.372821
       spacer 1
##
       spacer 2
                     0.356982
##
       spacer_3
                     0.390816
##
       spacer_4
                     0.421704
##
       spacer_5
                     0.408481
##
            . . .
     spacer_156
##
                     0.599555
##
     spacer_157
                     0.666575
##
     spacer_158
                     0.599259
##
     spacer_159
                     0.565775
##
     spacer_160
                     0.636552
##
##
     seqinfo: 640 sequences (1 circular) from hg38 genome
##
     crisprNuclease: SpCas9
```

You can see that the column score\_crispri was added to the GuideSet. Note that this function works identically for CRISPRa applications, with the modality argument replaced by CRISPRa.

#### Session Info

```
sessionInfo()
## R version 4.2.1 (2022-06-23)
## Platform: x86_64-apple-darwin17.0 (64-bit)
## Running under: macOS Catalina 10.15.7
##
## Matrix products: default
           /Library/Frameworks/R.framework/Versions/4.2/Resources/lib/libRblas.0.dylib
## LAPACK: /Library/Frameworks/R.framework/Versions/4.2/Resources/lib/libRlapack.dylib
##
## locale:
## [1] en_US.UTF-8/en_US.UTF-8/en_US.UTF-8/C/en_US.UTF-8/en_US.UTF-8
## attached base packages:
## [1] stats4
                 stats
                           graphics grDevices utils
                                                         datasets methods
## [8] base
##
## other attached packages:
## [1] BSgenome.Hsapiens.UCSC.hg38_1.4.4 BSgenome_1.65.2
## [3] rtracklayer_1.57.0
                                          Biostrings_2.65.2
## [5] XVector_0.37.0
                                          GenomicRanges_1.49.1
## [7] GenomeInfoDb_1.33.5
                                          IRanges_2.31.2
## [9] S4Vectors_0.35.1
                                          crisprDesignData_0.99.17
## [11] crisprDesign_0.99.133
                                          crisprScore_1.1.14
## [13] crisprScoreData 1.1.3
                                          ExperimentHub 2.5.0
## [15] AnnotationHub_3.5.0
                                          BiocFileCache_2.5.0
## [17] dbplyr_2.2.1
                                          BiocGenerics_0.43.1
## [19] crisprBowtie_1.1.1
                                          crisprBase_1.1.5
## [21] crisprVerse_0.99.8
                                          rmarkdown_2.15.2
##
```

```
## loaded via a namespace (and not attached):
## [1] rjson_0.2.21
                                       ellipsis_0.3.2
## [3] Rbowtie_1.37.0
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