

Handout 2: Gradient descent

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Aim. To introduce gradient descent, its motivation, description, practical tricks, analysis in the convex scenario, and implementation.

Reading list & references:

- Bishop, C. M. (2006). Pattern recognition and machine learning. New York: Springer.
- Shalev-Shwartz, S., & Ben-David, S. (2014). Understanding machine learning: From theory to algorithms. Cambridge university press.

****Subject to adjustments**

1. MOTIVATIONS

Note 1. Consider a learning problem $(\mathcal{H}, \mathcal{Z}, \ell)$. Learning may involve the computation of the minimizer $h^* \in \mathcal{H}$, where \mathcal{H} is a class of hypotheses, of the empirical risk function (ERF) $\hat{R}(h) = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ell(h, z_i)$ given a finite sample $\{z_i; i = 1, \dots, n\}$ generated from the data generating model $g(\cdot)$ and using loss $\ell(\cdot)$; that is

$$(1.1) \quad h^* = \arg \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} (\hat{R}(h)) = \arg \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ell(h, z_i) \right)$$

If analytical minimization of (1.1) is impossible or impractical, numerical procedures can be applied; eg Gradient Descent (GD) algorithms. Such approaches introduce numerical errors in the solution.

2. DESCRIPTION

Notation 2. For the sake of notation simplicity and generalization, we will present Gradient Descent (GD) in the following minimization problem

$$(2.1) \quad w^* = \arg \min_{w \in \mathcal{H}} (f(w))$$

where here $f : \mathbb{R}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, and $w \in \mathcal{H} \subseteq \mathbb{R}^d$; $f(\cdot)$ is the function to be minimized, e.g., $f(\cdot)$ can be an empirical risk function $\hat{R}(\cdot)$.

Assumption 3. Assume (for now) that $f : \mathbb{R}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is a differentiable function.

Definition 4. The Gradient Descent (GD) algorithm with learning rate η_t for the solution of the minimization problem (2.1) is given in Algorithm 1

Algorithm 1 Gradient descent algorithm with learning rate η_t

For $t = 1, 2, 3, \dots$ iterate:

(1) compute

$$(2.2) \quad w^{(t+1)} = w^{(t)} - \eta_t \nabla f(w^{(t)})$$

(2) terminate if a termination criterion is satisfied, e.g.

If $t \geq T$ then STOP

where

$$\nabla f(w) = \left(\frac{\partial}{\partial x_1} f(x), \dots, \frac{\partial}{\partial x_d} f(x) \right)^\top \Big|_{x=w}$$

is the gradient of f at w .

Remark 5. Intuitively, GD produces a chain $\{w^{(t)}\}$ that drifts towards the minimum w^* by directed against the direction of the gradient $\nabla f(\cdot)$ and at a rate controlled by the learning rate η_t .

Remark 6. For more intuitive explanation, consider the (1st order) Taylor polynomial for the approximation of $f(w)$ in a small area around u (i.e. $\|v - u\| = \text{small}$)

$$f(u) \approx P(u) = f(w) + \langle u - w, \nabla f(w) \rangle$$

Assuming convexity for f , it is

$$(2.3) \quad f(u) \geq \underbrace{f(w) + \langle u - w, \nabla f(w) \rangle}_{=P(u)}$$

See
Handout 1

meaning that P lower bounds f . Hence we could design an updating mechanism producing $w^{(t+1)}$ which is nearby $w^{(t)}$ (small steps) and which minimize the linear approximation $P(w)$ of $f(w)$

$$(2.4) \quad P(w) = f(w^{(t)}) + \langle w - w^{(t)}, \nabla f(w^{(t)}) \rangle.$$

while hoping that this mechanism would push the produced chain $\{w^{(t)}\}$ towards the minimum because of (2.3). Hence we could recursively minimize the linear approximation (2.4) and the distance between the current state $w^{(t)}$ and the next w value to produce $w^{(t+1)}$; namely

$$\begin{aligned} w^{(t+1)} &= \arg \min_{\forall w} \left(\frac{1}{2} \|w - w^{(t)}\|^2 + \eta P(w) \right) \\ &= \arg \min_{\forall w} \left(\frac{1}{2} \|w - w^{(t)}\|^2 + \eta \left(f(w^{(t)}) + \langle w - w^{(t)}, \nabla f(w^{(t)}) \rangle \right) \right) \\ &= w^{(t)} - \eta_t \nabla f(w^{(t)}) \end{aligned}$$

where parameter $\eta > 0$ controls the trade off.

Remark 7. After T iterations of the GD algorithm, the output of GD can be (but not exclusively),

(1) the average (after discarding the first few iterations of $w^{(t)}$ for stability reasons)

$$(2.5) \quad w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T w^{(t)}$$

(2) or the best value discovered

$$w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)} = \arg \min_{\forall w_t} \left(f \left(w^{(t)} \right) \right)$$

(3) or the last value discovered

$$w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)} = w^{(T)}$$

Note 8. GD output converges to a local minimum, $w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)} \rightarrow w_*$ (in some sense), under different sets of regularity conditions (some are weaker other stronger). Section 4 has a brief analysis.

Remark 9. The parameter η_t is called learning rate, step size, or gain. $\{\eta_t\}$ is a non-negative sequence and it is chosen by the practitioner. In principle, regularity conditions (Note 8) often imply restrictions on the decay of $\{\eta_t\}$ which guide the practitioner to parametrize it properly. Some popular choices of learning rate η_t are:

- (1) constant; $\eta_t = \eta$, for where $\eta > 0$ is a small value. The rationale is that GD chain $\{w_t\}$ performs constant small steps towards the (local) minimum w_* and then oscillate around it.
- (2) decreasing and converging to zero; $\eta_t \searrow$ with $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \eta_t = 0$ E.g. $\eta_t = \left(\frac{C}{t}\right)^\varsigma$ where $\varsigma \in (0.5, 1]$ and $C > 0$. The rationale is that GD algorithm starts by performing larger step at the beginning to explore the area for discovering possible minima. Also it reduces the size of those steps with the iterations such that eventually when the chain $\{w_t\}$ is close to a possible minimum w_* value to converge and do not overshoot.
- (3) decreasing and converging to a tiny value τ_* ; $\eta_t \searrow$ with $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \eta_t = \tau_*$ E.g. $\eta_t = \left(\frac{C}{t}\right)^\varsigma + \tau_*$ with $\varsigma \in (0.5, 1]$, $C > 0$, and $\tau_* \approx 0$. Same as previously, but the algorithm aims at oscillating around the detected local minimum.
- (4) constant until an iteration T_0 and then decreasing; eg $\eta_t = \left(\frac{C}{\max(t, T_0)}\right)^\varsigma$ with $\varsigma \in (0.5, 1]$ and $C > 0$, and $T_0 < T$. The rationale is that at the first stage of the iterations (when $t \leq T_0$) the algorithm may need a constant large steps for a significant number of iterations T_0 in order to explore the domain; and hence in order for the chain $\{w_t\}$ to reach the area around the (local) minimum w_* . In the second stage, hoping that the chain $\{w_t\}$ may be in close proximity to the (local) minimum w_* the algorithm progressively performs smaller steps to converge towards the minimum w_* . The first stage ($t \leq T_0$) is called burn-in; the values $\{w_t\}$ produced during the burn-in ($t \leq T_0$) are often discarded/ignored from the output of the GD algorithm.

- Parameters $C, \varsigma, \tau_*, T_0$ may be chosen based on pilot runs.

Remark 10. There are several practical termination criteria that can be used in step 2 in GD Algorithm 1. They are to terminate the recursion in practice. Some popular termination criteria are

- (1) terminate when the gradient is sufficiently close to zero; i.e. if $\|\nabla f(w^{(t)})\| \leq \epsilon$ for some pre-specified tiny $\epsilon > 0$ then STOP
- (2) terminate when the chain $w^{(t)}$ does not change; i.e. if $\|w^{(t+1)} - w^{(t)}\| \leq \epsilon \|w^{(t)}\|$ for some pre-specified tiny $\epsilon > 0$ then STOP
- (3) terminate when a pre-specified number of iterations T is performed; i.e. if $t \geq T$ then STOP

obviously the first two are preferable to the latter.

3. GD FOR NON-DIFFERENTIABLE FUNCTIONS (USING SUB-GRADIENTS)

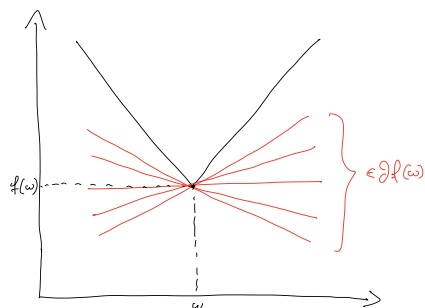
In several learning problems the function to be minimized is not differentiable. GD can be extended to address such problems with the use of subgradients.

Definition 11. Vector v is called subgradient of a function $f : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ at $w \in S$ if

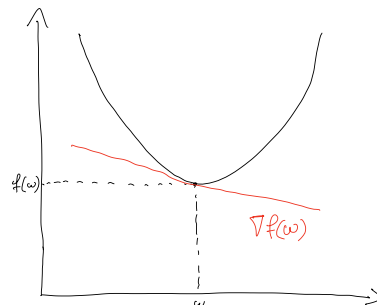
$$(3.1) \quad \forall u \in S, \quad f(u) \geq f(w) + \langle u - w, v \rangle$$

Notation 12. The set of subgradients of function $f : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ at $w \in S$ is denoted by $\partial f(w)$.

Note 13. Essentially there may be more than one subgradients of the function at a specific point. As seen by (3.1), subgradients are the slopes of all the lines passing through the point $(w, f(w))$ and been under the function $f(\cdot)$.



(A) subgradients satisfying (3.1) in the non-differentiable case



(B) gradient satisfying the equality in (3.1) in the differentiable case

Theorem 14. If function $f : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is differentiable at w then the only subgradient of f at w is the gradient $\nabla f(w)$, and (3.1) is equality; i.e. $\partial f(w) = \{\nabla f(w)\}$.

3.1. Construction of subgradient.

Note 15. The following example denotes how to design the set of subgradients.

Example 16. Consider the function $f : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ with $f(w) = |w|$. Find the set of subgradients $\partial f(w)$ for each $w \in \mathbb{R}$.

Solution. Using Theorem 14, it is $\partial f(w) = 1$ for $w > 0$ and $\partial f(w) = -1$ for $w < 0$ as f is differentiable for $x \neq 0$. At $x = 0$, f is not differentiable and condition (3.1), i.e.

$$\forall u \in \mathbb{R}, \quad |u| \geq |0| + (u - 0)v$$

is satisfied for $v \in [-1, 1]$. Hence,

$$\partial f(w) = \begin{cases} \{-1\} & , w < 0 \\ [-1, 1] & , w = 0 \\ \{1\} & , w > 0 \end{cases}$$

Definition 17. The Gradient Descent algorithm using subgradients in non-differentiable cases, results by replacing the gradient $\nabla f(w^{(t)})$ in (2.2) with any of subgradient v_t from the set of subgradients $\partial f(w^{(t)})$ at $w^{(t)}$; namely

$$(3.2) \quad w^{(t+1)} = w^{(t)} - \eta_t v_t; \text{ where } v_t \in \partial f(w^{(t)})$$

4. ANALYSIS OF GRADIENT DESCENT

Assumption 18. For the sake of the analysis of the GD, let us consider:

- (1) constant learning rate $\eta_t = \eta$,
- (2) convex and Lipschitz function $f(\cdot)$,
- (3) GD output $w_{GD}^{(T)} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T w^{(t)}$

Notation 19. w^* is the minimizer in (2.1).

Note 20. We consider Lemma 21 as given.

Lemma 21. Let $\{v_t; t = 1, \dots, T\}$ be a sequence of vectors. Any algorithm with $w^{(1)} = 0$ and $w^{(t+1)} = w^{(t)} - \eta v_t$ for $t = 1, \dots, T$ satisfies

$$(4.1) \quad \sum_{t=1}^T \langle w^{(t)} - w^*, v_t \rangle \leq \frac{\|w^*\|^2}{2\eta} + \frac{\eta}{2} \sum_{t=1}^T \|v_t\|^2$$

Proof. See Exercise , from the Exercise sheet. □

Note 22. To find an upper bound of the GD error, we try to bound the error $f(w_{GD}^{(T)}) - f(w^*)$ wrt Lemma 21.

Proposition 23. Consider the minimization problem (2.1). Given Assumptions 18, the error can be bounded as

$$(4.2) \quad f(w_{GD}^{(T)}) - f(w^*) \leq \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T \langle w^{(t)} - w^*, v_t \rangle$$

where $v_t \in \partial f(w^{(t)})$. If $f(\cdot)$ is differentiable then $v_t = \nabla f(w^{(t)})$

Proof. It is¹

$$\begin{aligned}
f(w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)}) - f(w^*) &= f\left(\frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T w_t\right) - f(w^*) \\
&\leq \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T (f(w_t) - f(w^*)) && \text{(by Jensen's inequality)} \\
&\leq \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T \langle w^{(t)} - w^*, \nabla f(w^{(t)}) \rangle && \text{(by convexity of } f(\cdot) \text{)}
\end{aligned}$$

□

Note 24. The following provides conditions under which the gradient (or sub-gradient) is bounded. This is necessary in order to bound (4.2) with (4.1) in a meaningful manner.

Proposition 25. $f : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is ρ -Lipschitz over an open convex set S if and only if for all $w \in S$ and $v \in \partial f(w)$ it is $\|v\| \leq \rho$.

Proof. \implies Let $f : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ be ρ -Lipschitz over convex set S , $w \in S$ and $v \in \partial f(w)$.

- Since S is open we get that there exist $\epsilon > 0$ such as $u := w + \epsilon \frac{v}{\|v\|}$ where $u \in C$.
- From the subgradient definition we get

$$f(u) - f(w) \geq \langle u - w, v \rangle = \epsilon \|v\|$$

- From the Lipschitzness of $f(\cdot)$ we get

$$f(u) - f(w) \geq \rho \|u - w\| = \rho \epsilon$$

Therefore $\|v\| \leq \rho$.

For \Leftarrow see Exercise in the exercise sheet.

□

Note 26. The following summarizes Lemma 21, and Propositions 23, 25 with respect to the GD algorithm.

Proposition 27. Let $f(\cdot)$ be a convex and Lipschitz function. If we run GD algorithm of f with learning rate $\eta > 0$ for T steps the output $w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T w^{(t)}$ satisfies

$$f(w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)}) - f(w^*) \leq \frac{\|w^*\|^2}{2\eta} + \frac{\eta}{2} \sum_{t=1}^T \|\nabla f(w^{(t)})\|^2$$

Solution. Straightforward from Lemma 21, and Propositions 23, 25.

Note 28. The following shows that a given learning rate depending on the iteration t , we can reduce the upper bound of the error as well as find the number of required iterations to achieve convergence.

¹Jensen's inequality for convex $f(\cdot)$ is $\mathbb{E}(f(x)) \leq f(\mathbb{E}(x))$

²If this was a Homework there would be a Hint:

- If S is open there exist $\epsilon > 0$ such as $u = w + \epsilon \frac{v}{\|v\|}$ such as $u \in S$

Proposition 29. Let $f(\cdot)$ be a convex and Lipschitz function, and let $\mathcal{H} = \{w \in \mathbb{R} : \|w^*\| \leq B\}$. Assume we run GD algorithm of $f(\cdot)$ with learning rate $\eta_t = \sqrt{\frac{B^2}{\rho^2 T}}$ for T steps, and output $w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)} = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^T w^{(t)}$. Then

(1) upper bound on the sub-optimality is

$$(4.3) \quad f(w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)}) - f(w^*) \leq \frac{B\rho}{\sqrt{T}}$$

(2) a given level off accuracy ε such that $f(w_{\text{GD}}^{(T)}) - f(w^*) \leq \varepsilon$ can be achieved after T iterations

$$T \geq \frac{B^2 \rho^2}{\varepsilon^2}.$$

Solution. Part 1 is a simple substitution from Proposition 27, and part 2 is implied from part 1.

Note 30. The result on Proposition 29 heavily relies on setting suitable values for B and ρ which is rather a difficult task to be done in very complicated learning problems (e.g., learning a neural network).

Remark 31. The above results from the analysis of the GD also hold for the GD with subgradients; just replace $\nabla f(\cdot)$ with any $v_t \in \partial f(\cdot)$.

5. EXAMPLES³

Example 32. Consider the simple Normal linear regression problem where the dataset $\{z_i = (y_i, x_i)\}_{i=1}^n \in \mathcal{D}$ is generated from a Normal data generating model

$$\begin{pmatrix} y_i \\ x_i \end{pmatrix} \stackrel{\text{iid}}{\sim} \text{N} \left(\begin{pmatrix} \mu_y \\ \mu_x \end{pmatrix}, \begin{bmatrix} \sigma_y^2 & \rho \sqrt{\sigma_y^2 \sigma_x^2} \\ \rho \sqrt{\sigma_y^2 \sigma_x^2} & \sigma_x^2 \end{bmatrix} \right)$$

for $i = 1, \dots, n$. Consider a hypothesis space \mathcal{H} of linear functions $h : \mathbb{R}^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ with $h(w) = w_1 + w_2 x$. The exact solution (which we pretend we do not know) is given as

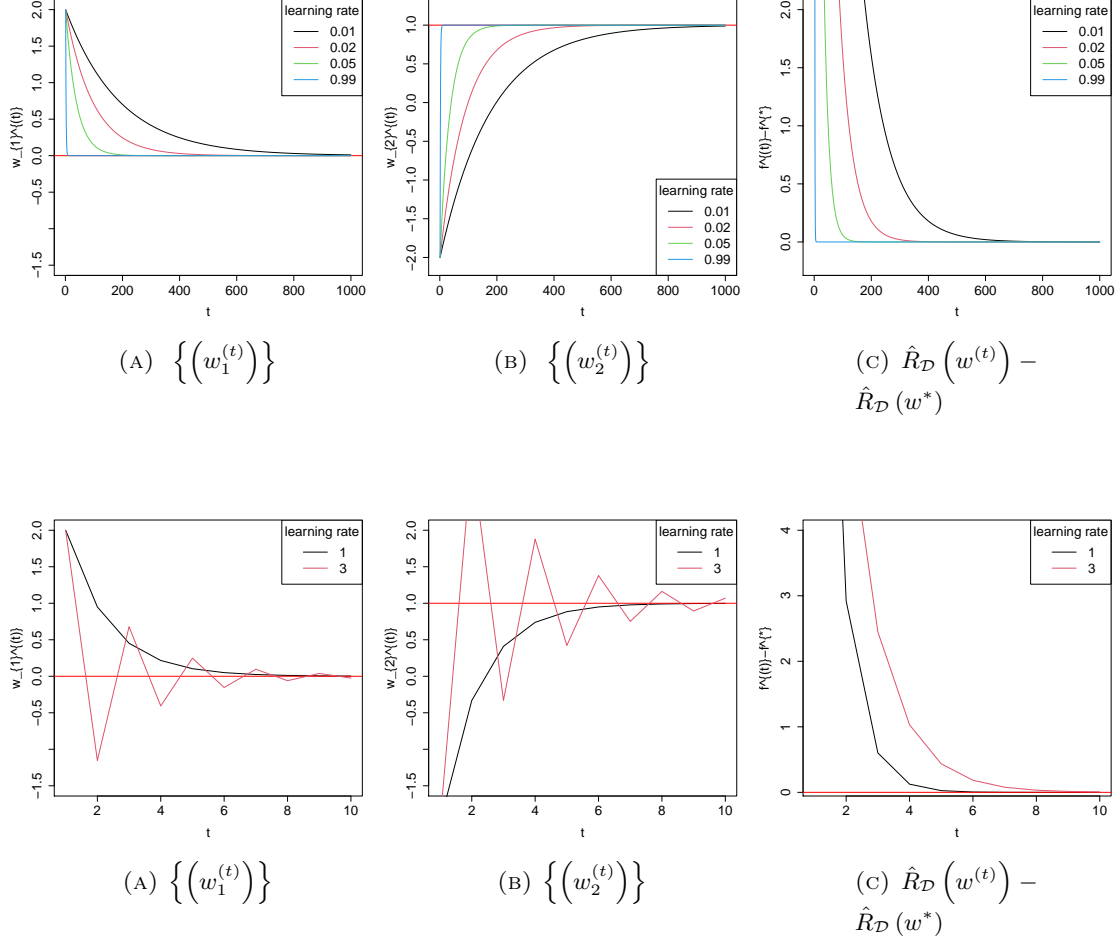
$$\begin{pmatrix} w_1^* \\ w_2^* \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} \mu_y - \rho \frac{\sigma_x}{\sigma_y} \mu_x \\ \rho \frac{\sigma_x}{\sigma_y} \end{pmatrix}.$$

To learn the optimal $w^* = (w_1^*, w_2^*)$, we consider a loss $\ell(w) = (y_i - [w_1 + w_2 x_i])^2$, which leads to the minimization problem

$$w^* = \arg \min_{\forall w} \left(\hat{R}_{\mathcal{D}}(w) \right) = \arg \min_{\forall w} \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - w_1 - w_2 x_i)^2 \right)$$

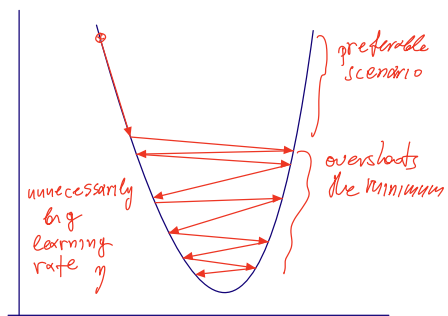
Consider data size $n = 100$, and parameters $\rho = 0.2$, $\sigma_y^2 = 1$ and $\sigma_x^2 = 1$. Consider a GD seed $w_0 = (2, -2)$.

³Code is available in https://github.com/georgios-stats/Machine_Learning_and_Neural_Networks_III_Epiphany_2023/tree/main/Lecture_handouts/code/02.Gradient_descent/example_1.R

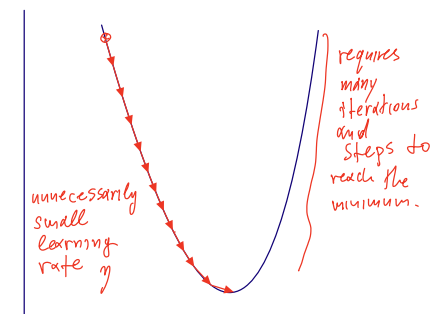


Figures 5.1a, 5.1b, and 5.1c present trace plots of the chain $\{(w^{(t)})\}$ and error $\hat{R}_{\mathcal{D}}(w^{(t)}) - \hat{R}_{\mathcal{D}}(w^*)$ produced by running GD for $T = 1000$ total iterations and for different (each time) constant learning rates $\eta \in \{0.01, 0.02, 0.05, 0.99\}$. We observe that the larger learning rates under consideration were able to converge faster to the minimum w^* . This is because they perform larger steps and can learn faster -this is not a panacea.

Figures 5.1a, 5.1b, and 5.1c present trace plots of the chain $\{(w^{(t)})\}$, and of the error $\hat{R}_{\mathcal{D}}(w^{(t)}) - \hat{R}_{\mathcal{D}}(w^*)$ produced by running GD for $T = 1000$ total iterations and for learning rate $\eta = 1.0$ (previously considered) and a very big learning rate $\eta = 3.0$. We observe that the very big learning rate $\eta = 3.0$ presents slower convergence to the minimum w^* . This is because it creates unreasonably big steps in (2.2) that the produced chain overshoots the global minimum. See the cartoon in Figures 5.1a and 5.1b.



(A) Unnecessarily large learning rate



(B) Unnecessarily small learning rate