



Why

We often want to predict one of several outcomes.

Definition

A *classifier* is a predictor whose codomain is a finite set. In this case, we call the codomain the *label set* and we call its elements *classes* (or *labels*, *categories*). We call the prediction of a classifier on an input a *classification*.

If the set of labels has two elements, then we call the classifier a *binary classifier* (or *two-way classifier*, *two-class classifier*, *boolean classifier*). In the case that there are k labels, we call the classifier a *k-way classifier* (or *k-class classifier*, *multi-class classifier*). The second term is meant to indicate, not that the classifier assigns to each point several classes, but that the classification decision is made *between* several classes.

Basic examples

Let A be a set of inputs and let B be a set of labels. Define $B = \{0, 1\}$ (or $\{-1, 1\}$, FALSE, TRUE, NEGATIVE, POSITIVE). Then B is finite with two elements and $f : A \rightarrow B$ is a binary classifier with labels 0 and 1.

If the case $B = \text{NO, MAYBE, YES}$, we call $f : A \rightarrow B$ a three-way classifier. Other examples for B include a list of languages, the set of English words in some dictionary, or the set of $m!$ possible orders of m horses in a race. Often convenient to take $B = \{1, \dots, k\}$ for $k \in \mathbf{N}$.

Other terminology

Following our terminology, but speaking of processes, some authors refer to the application of inductors for these special cases as *binary classification* and *multi-class classification*. Or they speak of *classification* and *classification problems*. Roughly speaking, a classifier *classifies* all inputs into categories.

Alternatively, some authors (especially in the statistics literature) refer to a classifier as a *discriminator* and reference *discrimination problems*.

