Application of General Adversarial Networks in Smoothing Handwriting

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Abstract. Dysgraphia is a mental disorder that affects fine motor skills such as writing. In this paper, we present how to leverage recent development in neural network deep learning methods, to help smooth and style one’s handwriting. Our work focuses on Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN).

Keywords: Dysgraphia, Generative Adversarial Networks, GAN, Handwriting, Smooth Poor Handwriting, Style Transfer

1. Introduction

Developmental deficits in the acquisition of writing skills (developmental dysgraphia) are common and have significant consequences for those who suffer from them, yet these deficits have received relatively little attention from researchers.

* 1. What is dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia is a disability that affects fine motor skills like writing, buttoning a shirt, or tying a shoelace [30]. It’s a neurological disorder that can affect children or adults. People with dysgraphia tend to find it difficult to express their ideas on paper. In addition to difficulty in expressing their ideas, academic progress for children with dysgraphia can be vastly affected [25].

Below is an example of handwriting from a child with dysgraphia.



Figure 1. Dysgraphia Handwriting Example

Most children with dysgraphia are bright (and are often skilled readers and speakers) [31] therefore, it is a dilemma of our society that in most of the cases when parents find their child confronting written impairment, they consider it as if he or she is reluctant towards studying and learning. This means that a child with dysgraphia could easily reach adulthood without receiving any diagnosis, constantly trying to self-correct, feeling frustrated, and having low self-esteem.

Since so many adults with dysgraphia remain undiagnosed, it’s difficult to estimate just how many are living with the condition. In children, the rate is often estimated between 4 to 20 percent. Since dysgraphia can’t be outgrown, just as many adults are living with this learning disability [29].

* 1. Importance of Legible Handwriting

Comprehensible handwriting is important when it comes to academics. Writing plays a pivotal role in the development of any child [30]. It makes a student capable of transferring the attained knowledge, honing cognitive skills, augmenting the confidence level, and, above all, legible handwriting skills that anticipate success in the future.

If writing has been a lifelong challenge, a patient is likely to have devised strategies to compensate or to avoid writing altogether. With that in mind, symptoms of dysgraphia in adults will manifest as more than just indecipherable handwriting; they’ll also appear in the purposeful avoidance of writing and in weak fine motor skills. Symptoms of dysgraphia at home might look like [32]:

* Highly illegible handwriting, often to the point that even the patient can’t read what they wrote
* Difficulty drawing, tracing, or painting
* Avoids writing whenever possible; prefers a digital grocery list to a written one, for instance
* Makes spelling errors in simple notes
* Inappropriate sizing and spacing of letters
* Unusual body or hand position when writing
* Tight hold on pen or pencil resulting in hand cramps
* Omitting letters and words from sentences

As more jobs depend on computers, writing may not factor into someone’s day-to-day work. That being said, dysgraphia can still cause challenges by making other fine motor tasks difficult. Symptoms of dysgraphia in the work environment may include [33]:

* Trouble filling in routine forms by hand, particularly if they require fitting words into set boxes
* Illegible handwriting: for instance, not being able to read one’s own meeting notes or coworkers complain that memos are indecipherable
* Mixes lowercase and uppercase letters, or print and cursive letters, seemingly randomly
* Often leaves out individual letters or the ends of words, particularly when writing quickly
* Has trouble telling when words are misspelled
* Often uses grammatically incorrect sentences in emails or reports
* May be overly reliant on simple sentence structures
* Prefers to give or get directions orally instead of in writing
* Has trouble “getting to the point” in written communication; emails may be rambling, or reports may repeat the same ideas several times
* Able to explain self clearly when speaking but not when writing

People with dysgraphia often struggle to multitask when writing. Their difficulty in physically writing down each word can lead to missed parts of what is said during meetings or lectures.

Students with dysgraphia may also be accused of being careless because their handwriting isn’t legible. This can affect self-esteem and lead to anxiety, a lack of confidence, and negative attitudes toward school.

* 1. What causes dysgraphia?

In childhood, dysgraphia is usually the result of a problem with orthographic coding [29]. Orthographic coding is an aspect of working memory that allows you to permanently remember written words and the way your hands or fingers must move to write those words.

Researchers are still learning the reasons why some children have learning disabilities, such as dysgraphia. Learning disabilities can be hereditary or can be related to abnormal prenatal development [31].

* 1. Does keyboarding solve all the problems?

Keyboarding does help children to express their ideas at the level of their intellect, and it should be encouraged; however, handwriting should not be ignored completely for several reasons [33]:

* There are times when handwriting is needed, e.g. for certain school subjects (such as math and science) and in other everyday circumstances.
* There is some evidence that the physical act of handwriting helps the flow of ideas for written composition in ways which keyboarding doesn’t.
* Handwriting is very personal. It is an expression of a person’s identity. In adolescence it is common to find young people adopting a style of handwriting to suit their personal image.
  1. Treatment for Dysgraphia

There is no cure for dysgraphia. Occupational therapy may be helpful in improving handwriting skills. Therapeutic activities may include:

* Holding a pencil or pen in a new way to make writing easier
* Working with modeling clay
* Tracing letters in shaving cream on a desk
* Drawing lines within mazes
* Doing connect-the-dots puzzles

There are not many studies about dysgraphia, so the prevalence of this writing disability is not known; however, it is estimated that between 5-20% of the population has a varied degree of dysgraphia. Since people with dysgraphia are intelligent and high functioning, many misunderstand their disorder as a quirk rather than a problem. Dysgraphia is real and can have a significant negative impact.

However, recent developments in machine learning may present a solution. In this paper, we explore using new algorithms, such as Generative Adversarial Networks, that may be able to take unreadable handwriting and present it in a realistic handwritten text. First, sample handwriting is used to train the models of interest. Then, we analyze the results of that training on new samples. The results section describes our models and methods in greater detail. Ethical considerations of changing handwriting are then discussed, followed by conclusions and recommendations for follow-up work.

1. Literature Review

2.1 History of Deep Learning and Neuron Networks

While not commonly known today, deep learning has been around since the 1940s [34].

A broader look at the history of Deep Learning reveals 3 major waves of advancements:

* Cybernetics — During 1940–1960
* Connectionism — During 1980–1990
* Deep Learning — Since 2006

Cybernetics was kicked off by the development of the McCulloch-Pitts Neuron. It was an attempt to mimic the biological neuron. It was based on a linear model that would take various inputs [X1, X2 …. Xn], for each input the model had some weights [W1, W2 … Wn] and the output f(x,w) = X1W1 + X2W2 + …. + XnWn. This model could only output True/False based on the inputs and weights.

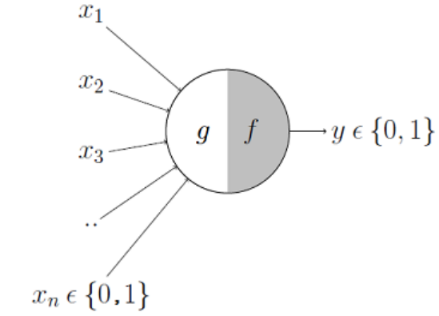


Figure-2 McCulloch-Pitts Model

The weights in McCulloch’s model need to be set manually. Later, in the 1950s, the Perceptron was developed by Frank Rosenblatt, an American psychologist, that would learn the weights automatically. Another model was developed by Bernard Widrow around the same time and could also adapt to the weights based on the weighted sum of the inputs during the learning phase.

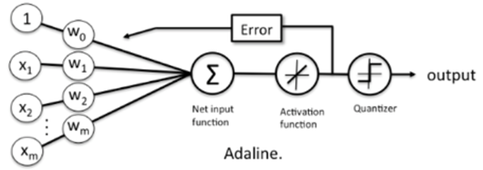


Figure-3 Adaline Model

The learning function from the Adaline model is like Stochastic Gradient Descent (SGD), which is used in Linear Regression (LR) today [34].

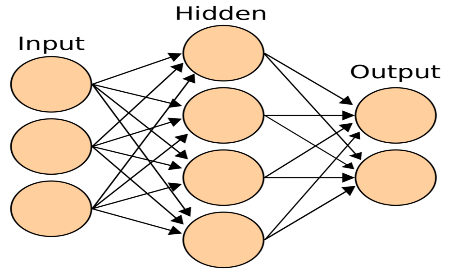


Figure-4 Artificial Neural Networks

Connectionism, also known as Parallel Distributed Processing, become popular in the 1980s, and this approach was inspired by cognitive sciences. The concept of Artificial Neural Network (ANNs) was introduced during this wave. The main idea behind ANNs was to develop a network of individual units that can be programmed to achieve intelligent behavior. This was the first time the concept of hidden layers was introduced [34].

This approach is very similar to how the human nervous system works. During the wave of Connectionism, many models like LSTM, Distributed Representation and Processing, and Back Propagation to train deep neural nets were developed and continue to remain key components of various advanced applications of Deep Learning to this date.

But during the 90s, hype about artificial intelligence was unrealistic. This, combined with a lack of computational resources for sophisticated models, caused investors to pull back, and this led to a second period of deep learning dip.

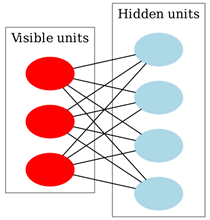


Figure-5 Deep Belief Network

In 2006, a breakthrough was made by Geoffrey Hinton’s Greedy Layer-wise Training to train Deep Belief Networks. In the simplest of forms the DBN’s are a composition of multiple hidden layers with each layer containing various latent variables. Connections exist between layers but not between the variables inside each layer [34].

The advancements by Geoffrey Hinton were used by other researchers to train different types of Deep Networks. This enabled researchers around the world to train deeper and deeper neural networks and led to the popularization of the term Deep Learning.

Significant advancement in computer chipsets has also fueled the recent artificial intelligence development. Some algorithms developed in the past started to give better results when trained on larger and larger datasets. The better results attracted more researchers to look for better and more efficient models.

2.2 Convolutional Neural Network

A CNN uses a system much like a multilayer perceptron that has been designed for reduced processing requirements. The layers of a CNN consist of an input layer, an output layer and hidden layer that includes multiple convolutional layers, pooling layers, fully connected layers, and normalization layers. The layers of neurons are arranged in such a way as to cover the entire visual field, thus avoiding the piecemeal image processing problem of traditional neural networks [15].

Images typically have multiple channels (for example, Red-Green-Blue channels). It is possible to modify the traditional CNN architecture to work with multiple channel inputs. This removes limitations and increases the efficiency for image processing, resulting in a system that is far more effective and simpler to train for image and natural language processing.

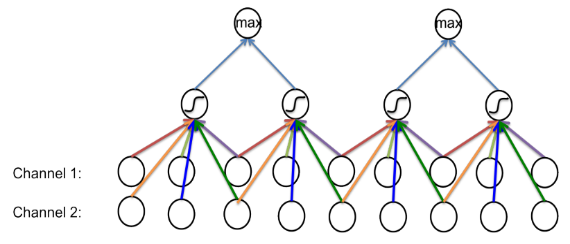


Figure-6 Image with Two Channels CNN

2.3 Recurrent Neural Network

Recurrent neural networks (RNN) are a class of neural networks that allow previous outputs to be used as inputs while having hidden states. RNNs are a rich class of dynamic models that have been used to generate sequences in domains as diverse as music, text, and motion capture data. RNNs can be trained for sequence generation by processing real data sequences one step at a time and predicting what comes next [14].

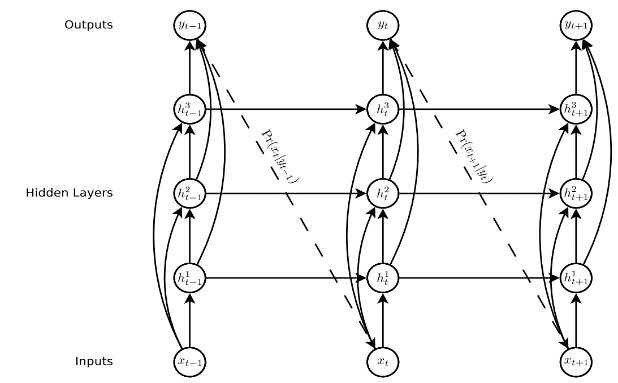


Figure-7 Deep Recurrent Neural Network [14]

2.3 Neural Style Transfer

This is an optimization technique used to copy the style from the style image and apply it to the content image [26]. “Style” is an indication of the patterns, the brushstrokes, and so on of handwriting. Neural style transfer takes three images: a content image, a style reference image, and an input image to be styled and then blended together such that the input image is transformed to look like the content image but “painted” in the style of the style image.

The principle of neural style transfer is to define two distance functions, one that describes how different the content of two images are and one that describes the difference between the two images in terms of their style. Then, given three images, a desired style image, a desired content image, and the input image (initialized with the content image), the input image is transformed to minimize the content distance with the content image and its style distance with the style image.

A 2016 paper by Johnson et al [35] was the first to train an independent neural network to stylize images in a single, feed-forward pass. Large VGG16 models pre-trained on ImageNet are used for feature extractors, and a relatively small encoder-decoder network serves as the transfer network. In this approach, a single transfer network is trained for each desired style.

In 2017, a year after the original fast style transfer technique was published, researchers at Google extended the technique to allow a single transfer network to produce images in multiple styles and even blend more than one style together [36]. Their main contribution was the inclusion of “conditional instance normalization” layers within the network so that the stylized image produced could be conditioned on an additional model input.

2.2 Generative Adversarial Networks

This is a Neural Network used for unsupervised machine learning. Developed by Ian Goodfellow in 2014, GANs can be simplified into two parts, the generator and the discriminator. The main idea is that the generator creates fake data, and the discriminator validates to see if its real or fake. The goal for the generator is to fool the discriminator [3]. Since GANs are typically used in processing many images, it can be applied to improving bad handwriting.

In a paper published by Shengyu Zhao etc. [2], Differentiable Augmentation (DiffAugment) is proposed to further enhance traditional GAN, a simple method that improves the data efficiency of GANs by imposing various types of differentiable augmentations on both real and fake samples. DiffAugment enables model to adopt the differentiable augmentation for the generated samples, effectively stabilizes training, and leads to better convergence. Experiments demonstrate consistent gains over a variety of GAN architectures and loss functions for both unconditional and class-conditional generation.

GAN is a relatively new deep learning methodology, and multiple adversarial loss functions for training either generative or discriminative models exist. Yet it remains unclear what certain types of functions are valid adversarial losses and how these loss functions perform against one another. A paper by Yi-Hsuan Yang etc. in May 2020 [8] proposes a deeper understanding of adversarial losses by decoupling the effects of their component functions and regularization terms. A simple comparative framework, dubbed DANTest, is used to systematically compare different adversarial losses.

2.3 Discriminative Adversarial Networks (DANs).

This project seeks to produce a handwriting smoother that can be used by two audiences. The first type of audience would be normal (non-data scientist) people, who would simply scan a sample of their handwriting into an application and have smoothed results returned. The second audience would be the machine learning community, who would have access to the project code (open source with an MIT license) and to a full software package that can be imported and used in code.

To meet these goals, the smoother will need to be a trained machine learning model, so the next step is to evaluate possible candidates through the literature research and expert guidance. Five potential machine learning options emerge: Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN), Neural Style Transfer (ST), Auto-encoders, Singular Value Decomposition (SVD), and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs). Of these, Generative Adversarial Networks and Style Transfer seem to show the most promise, so the project begins its focus on those two.

Deﬁning and extracting handwriting styles alone is a challenging problem since there are no formal deﬁnitions for these styles. Smoothing dysgraphia handwriting and extracting a style is a new area of research.

1. Methods
   1. Data Sources

In the interest of proper scale for a project of this size, the scope has a few limitations. First, only black and white training images are used. Second, only printed characters are supported. Finally, the character set is limited to upper and lower case English letters and numeric digits.

A total of 8 sources for the data were considered.

1. *UCI Letter Recognition Data Set* [17] – This repository is maintained by the University of California at Irvine and includes about 20000 capital letters in 20 different fonts.
2. *The Chars74K dataset* [18] – This collection of data includes about 74000 letters and numbers, but only 3410 of them are handwritten.
3. *EMNIST Dataset* [19] – These handwritten characters have been converted to the same 28x28 structure as the famous MNIST dataset. It includes 145,600 letters and 280,000 digits.
4. *MNIST DATABASE of handwritten digits* [20] – This famous dataset includes 70,000 handwritten numeric digits in 28x28 format.
5. *CVL-DATABASE* [21] – 310 writers wrote 7 texts out by hand in cursive script in this dataset.
6. *IAM Handwriting Top50* [22] – This collection of handwritten passages is broken out by sentences, lines of text, and individual words. It is mostly written in cursive.
7. *Yu Qiao* – This site is a collection of links to various handwriting samples and resources.
8. *Novel dataset creation* – In the event that no existing datasets contain the quality, type, or number of samples needed, a new dataset can be commissioned using a service such as Mechanical Turk.

The most promising datasets are *EMNIST*, *MNIST*, and *UCI* since they meet the requirements of individual printed numbers and letters in black and white. These are the data sources used in the construction of the training models.

* 1. Tools and Utilities

Python will be used for this project. It is widely regarded as a suitable and standard programming language for machine learning and data science. Python is preferred because it supports object-oriented, and it has a wide variety of packages for cleaning data and machine learning. In addition, PyTorch has similar syntax to NumPy. The only difference is an option to use Graphic Processing Units (GPUs) [28]. The use of GPUs in PyTorch speeds the training of deep learning models.

Images by their very nature often have a lot of features since the individual pixels are typically used, so even a 28x28 image would have at least 784 features. Because of this, algorithm performance becomes a concern. To address this, we need to implement a distributed Python computing platform using Spark [27]. This platform automatically splits data and computation amongst a potentially unlimited number of computing nodes known as clusters. Thus, additional computers can be added to the cluster at any time to increase the speed of processing.

In addition, Spark supports the use of graphical processing units (GPUs), which are highly optimized for the sorts of linear algebra operations that most machine learning algorithms employ, thus adding both a greater quantity and a more performant set of computation resources to the execution of these machine learning algorithms.

Having dysgraphia does not affect someone's mental capabilities; they just need extra help in handwriting skills. Consequently, the solution to challenges with having dysgraphia can be solved by Generative Adversarial Networks. GANs will be able to take bad handwriting from a document and present it in a better realistic handwritten text. Solving this problem will help people with dysgraphia focus more on expressing their ideas rather than how to write.

* Methods utilized for analysis
  + Interviews with Dr John Santerre and David Josephs
  + Decomposition of final desired product
* Initial methods we may use based on preliminary analysis
  + Generative Adversarial Network (GAN)
    - Two neural networks compete
    - Could merge samples
  + Style transfer
    - Famous example of applying artist style to photos
    - Would be used to merge samples
  + Auto encoder
    - Similar to principal components analysis (PCA)
    - More aggressive dimensional reduction
  + Singular value decomposition (SVD)
    - Linear algebra method
    - Sometimes helpful with image manipulation
  + Recurrent neural network (RNN)
    - Known applications in handwriting recognition
    - More difficult than GAN; will explore only as a backup option
  + Distributed computing
    - Used to minimize processing time
    - Explore Spark and Dask
    - Choose one to use
* Data sources that were used. Currently investigating:
  + MNIST – collection of handwritten digits in image format
  + UCI Machine Learning Repository - Letter Recognition Data Set
  + Chars74K dataset - Character Recognition in Natural Images
  + Data Augmentation – technique to expand existing datasets if needed
  1. Model Training
  2. Application

The final product is a command line application written in Python. The application is meant for two audiences. For the layman who wants to smooth their handwriting, the program will take a sample of their handwriting as an input along with the preferred model to use from amongst the supported models. Smoothed handwriting will be output.

The second audience of technical professionals can specify training data and one or more models to be trained. The application will train the model(s) and output the computed error of the training.

The application is written in such a way that it can be executed as a Python script from the command line, as a standalone module, or as an imported Python module used as part of another program.

The main part of the program processes the command line arguments and controls the trainers. Each trainer implements a programming interface that lets them be executed polymorphically by the controller. This allows for a common reporting of test results and training of the models.

4 Results

* Demonstrate effectiveness of handwriting smoothing
* Identify performant models
* Produce a Python package other developers can use
* Release a command line utility any one can use to smooth handwriting
* Scope restricted to:
  + Printed handwriting
  + Numbers, upper, and lower case letters
  + Black and white samples
  + Texture of a standard ball-point ink pen
* Additional scope if time permits:
  + Punctuation
  + International characters from other languages
  + Color samples
  + Textures such as pencil, marker, paint, or crayon

5 Discussion

As explained in the introduction, dysgraphia is a learning disability which strictly affects the ability to write properly. This project seeks to provide a better way to help people with this condition to communicate when writing. In this project, an application will take an image input of a handwriting sample, and the application will replace the writing with smoother writing that is similar to the original input’s handwriting style.  
 Two different approaches are promising. The first is Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), which is a generative deep learning neural network model that generates realistic new samples of the input. The second is the use of autoencoders, which are also generative deep learning models that would, instead of generating new samples, just reconstruct the input. GAN will be explored more because its unique functionality seems well-tailored to a smoothing problem. would make a better prediction model than the autoencoders. A GAN model has 2 main components: the generator and the discriminator. A discriminator is a classifier that tries to classify if a data is a real data or if the data was created by the generator. The generator learns to create a fake data and gets feedback from the discriminator.

Unfortunately, there no objective/loss functions used in training a GAN model. This means that there are no ways of checking the progress or efficiency of the model using a traditional loss function. Therefore, models will be evaluated by manually inspecting the generated image or using quantitative measures like inception score and boundary distortion. The evaluation process is replicated in other evaluated models in order to validate results evenly. Other options may be available to evaluate GANs, and this project explores the best options for both smoothing and for evaluation.

At the conclusion of this Capstone project, the application will be released as open source so that anyone that needs it would be able to have access to it. Finally, since the core goal of the project is to assist with a disability, there does not seem to be any negative impact to ethics.

6 Conclusion

Due to the impacts of dysgraphia on children and adults, this application is meant to help people who suffer from this condition to communicate better. The application would create handwriting that is more consistent and easier to read from an original image of a person’s handwriting. The application will not only help people with dysgraphia but also hopefully promote additional research into this area with the planned Python package to drive improvement in the years ahead.

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Appendix

Leave here if needed for additional information.