








A Unified Paradigm: SFT, RFT, DPO, Online RFT, PPO, GRPO

Main Reference: DeepSeekMath: Pushing the Limits of Mathematical Reasoning in Open Language Models

Key Concepts:

- Supervised Fine-tuning (SFT)
- Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (RFT)
- Direct Preference Optimization (DPO)
- Online Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (Online RFT)
- Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)
- Group Relative Policy Optimization (GRPO)

Table of Contents:

-  A Unified Paradigm: SFT, RFT, DPO, Online RFT, PPO, GRPO
-  Supervised Fine-tuning (SFT)
-  Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (RFT)
-  Online Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (Online RFT)
-  Direct Preference Optimization (DPO)
-  Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)
-  Group Relative Policy Optimization (GRPO)

A Unified Paradigm: SFT, RFT, DPO, Online RFT, PPO, GRPO

- Supervised Fine-tuning (SFT):** Fine-tunes a pretrained model on human-curated SFT data.
- Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (RFT):** Further fine-tunes the SFT model on filtered outputs sampled from it, keeping only answers deemed correct.
- Direct Preference Optimization (DPO):** Refines the SFT model using augmented outputs sampled from it, optimized with pairwise DPO loss.
- Online Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (Online RFT):** Similar to RFT, but samples outputs from the real-time policy model (initialized from the SFT model).
- PPO / GRPO:** Initialize the policy model from the SFT model and reinforce it with outputs sampled from the real-time policy model.

General Gradient Formulation

In general, the gradient of a training method \mathcal{A} with respect to the parameter θ can be written as:

$$\nabla_{\theta} J_{\mathcal{A}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}[\underbrace{(q, o) \sim \mathcal{D}}_{\text{Data Source}} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} \underbrace{GC_{\mathcal{A}}(q, o, t, \pi_{rf})}_{\text{Gradient Coefficient}} \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right]]$$

Key components:

- Data Source \mathcal{D} :** defines the training data.
- Reward Function π_{rf} :** provides the reward signal during training.
- Algorithm \mathcal{A} :** processes data and reward to compute the gradient coefficient GC , which determines the strength of reinforcement or penalty.

Table 1 | Data Source and Gradient Coefficient of Different Methods

Methods	Data Source	Objective	Reward Function	Gradient Coefficient
SFT	$q, o \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q, O)$	Eq. (1)	–	1
RFT	$q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\text{sft}}(O q)$	Eq. (3)	Rule	Eq. (5)
DPO	$q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o^+, o^- \sim \pi_{\text{sft}}(O q)$	Eq. (6)	Rule	Eq. (5)
Online RFT	$q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}(O q)$	Eq. (8)	Rule	Eq. (10)
PPO	$q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}(O q)$	Eq. (11)	Model	Eq. (14)
GRPO	$q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), \{o_i\}_{i=1}^G \sim \pi_{\theta}(O q)$	Eq. (15)	Model	Eq. (17)

 Notes:

- P_{sft} := supervised fine-tuning dataset distribution.
- π_{sft} := supervised fine-tuned model.
- π_{θ} := real-time policy model during online training.
- o := a sampled output sequence (e.g., a generated answer).
- o^+ := the preferred (or higher-quality) output in human-labeled preference pairs.
- o^- := the less-preferred (or lower-quality) output in preference pairs.

Supervised Fine-tuning (SFT)

Objective: The goal is to maximize

$$J_{\text{SFT}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{(q,o) \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q,O)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (1)$$

Gradient:

$$\nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{SFT}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{(q,o) \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q,O)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (2)$$

- **Data Source:** SFT dataset
- **Reward Function:** Human selection
- **Gradient Coefficient:** Always 1

Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (RFT)

Objective: Multiple outputs are first sampled from the SFT model for each question. The model is then trained on the sampled outputs that correspond to the correct answers:

$$J_{\text{RFT}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\text{sft}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} I(o) \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (3)$$

Gradient:

$$\nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{RFT}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\text{sft}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} I(o) \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (4)$$

- **Data Source:** Questions from the SFT dataset with outputs sampled from the SFT model
- **Reward Function:** Rule-based (answer correctness)
- **Gradient Coefficient:**

$$GC_{\text{RFT}}(q, o, t) = I(o) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if answer of } o \text{ is correct} \\ 0, & \text{if answer of } o \text{ is incorrect} \end{cases} \quad (5)$$

Online Rejection Sampling Fine-tuning (Online RFT)

The only difference from RFT is that outputs are sampled from the **real-time policy model** π_{θ} , instead of the SFT model π_{sft} :

$$J_{\text{OnRFT}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} I(o) \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (6)$$

Gradient:

$$\nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{OnRFT}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} I(o) \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t \mid q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (7)$$

Direct Preference Optimization (DPO)

Objective:

$$J_{\text{DPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o^+, o^- \sim \pi_{\text{sft}}(O|q)} \left[\log \sigma \left(\beta \frac{1}{|o^+|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o^+|} \log \frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t^+ \mid q, o_{<t}^+)}{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_t^+ \mid q, o_{<t}^+)} - \beta \frac{1}{|o^-|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o^-|} \log \frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t^- \mid q, o_{<t}^-)}{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_t^- \mid q, o_{<t}^-)} \right) \right] \quad (8)$$

Gradient:

$$\begin{aligned} \nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{DPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o^+, o^- \sim \pi_{\text{sft}}(O|q)} & \left[\frac{1}{|o^+|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o^+|} GC_{\text{DPO}}(q, o, t) \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t^+ \mid q, o_{<t}^+) \right. \\ & \left. - \frac{1}{|o^-|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o^-|} GC_{\text{DPO}}(q, o, t) \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t^- \mid q, o_{<t}^-) \right] \end{aligned} \quad (9)$$

- **Data Source:** Questions in the SFT dataset with outputs sampled from the SFT model
- **Reward Function:** Human preference (or rule-based for math tasks)
- **Gradient Coefficient:**

$$GC_{\text{DPO}}(q, o, t) = \sigma \left(\beta \log \frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t^- \mid q, o_{<t}^-)}{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_t^- \mid q, o_{<t}^-)} - \beta \log \frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t^+ \mid q, o_{<t}^+)}{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_t^+ \mid q, o_{<t}^+)} \right) \quad (10)$$

Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)

Objective:

$$J_{\text{PPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} \min \left(\frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t | q, o_{<t})}{\pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(o_t | q, o_{<t})} A_t, \text{clip} \left(\frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t | q, o_{<t})}{\pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(o_t | q, o_{<t})}, 1 - \epsilon, 1 + \epsilon \right) A_t \right) \right] \quad (11)$$

Simplification: If we assume a single update step such that $\pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}} = \pi_{\theta}$, the objective reduces to:

$$J_{\text{PPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} \frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_t | q, o_{<t})}{\pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(o_t | q, o_{<t})} A_t \right] \quad (12)$$

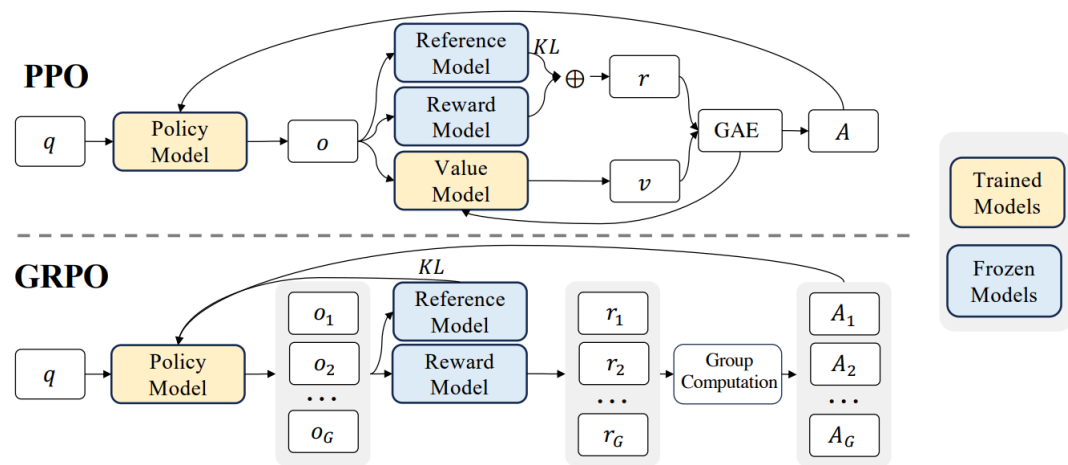
Gradient:

$$\nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{PPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), o \sim \pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{|o|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o|} A_t \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_t | q, o_{<t}) \right] \quad (13)$$

- **Data Source:** Questions in the SFT dataset with outputs sampled from the policy model
- **Reward Function:** Reward model
- **Gradient Coefficient:**

$$GC_{\text{PPO}}(q, o, t, \pi_{\theta}^{\text{rm}}) = A_t, \quad (14)$$

where A_t denotes the *advantage function*, computed using **Generalized Advantage Estimation (GAE)** based on rewards $r_{\geq t}$ and a learned value function V_{ψ} . See the below figure for a reference:



Group Relative Policy Optimization (GRPO)

Objective (also assume $\pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}} = \pi_{\theta}$ for simplified analysis):

$$J_{\text{GRPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), \{o_i\}_{i=1}^G \sim \pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{G} \sum_{i=1}^G \frac{1}{|o_i|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o_i|} \left(\frac{\pi_{\theta}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t})}{\pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t})} \hat{A}_{i,t} - \beta \left(\frac{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t})}{\pi_{\theta}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t})} - \log \frac{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t})}{\pi_{\theta}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t})} - 1 \right) \right) \right] \quad (15)$$

Gradient:

$$\nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{GRPO}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{q \sim P_{\text{sft}}(Q), \{o_i\}_{i=1}^G \sim \pi_{\theta}^{\text{old}}(O|q)} \left[\frac{1}{G} \sum_{i=1}^G \frac{1}{|o_i|} \sum_{t=1}^{|o_i|} \left(\hat{A}_{i,t} + \beta \left(\frac{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_{i,t} | o_{i,<t})}{\pi_{\theta}(o_{i,t} | o_{i,<t})} - 1 \right) \right) \nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\theta}(o_{i,t} | q, o_{i,<t}) \right] \quad (16)$$

- **Data Source:** Questions in the SFT dataset with outputs sampled from the policy model
- **Reward Function:** Reward model
- **Gradient Coefficient:**

$$GC_{\text{GRPO}}(q, o, t, \pi_{\theta}^{\text{rm}}) = \hat{A}_{i,t} + \beta \left(\frac{\pi_{\text{ref}}(o_{i,t} | o_{i,<t})}{\pi_{\theta}(o_{i,t} | o_{i,<t})} - 1 \right), \quad (17)$$

where $\hat{A}_{i,t}$ is the advantage term computed from **group reward scores**.