

CSCI3160 Design and Analysis of Algorithms (2025 Fall)

Approximation Algorithms 2: Traveling Salesman

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¹These slides are primarily based on materials prepared by [Prof. Yufei Tao](#) (please refer to [Prof. Tao's version from 2024 Fall](#) for the original content). Some modifications have been made to better align with this year's teaching progress, incorporating student feedback, in-class interactions, and my own teaching style and research perspective.

Definition

Setup for the Traveling Salesman Problem (TSP):

- $G = (V, E)$ is a complete² undirected graph.
- Each edge $e \in E$ carries a non-negative **weight** $w(e)$.
- A **Hamiltonian cycle** of G is a cycle passing every vertex of V once.

The traveling salesman problem: Find a Hamiltonian cycle with the shortest length.

²This is without loss of generality: If there is no “real” direct path between two cities, we can assign a very large cost (or use a placeholder like ∞) to discourage that route—but the edge still “exists” in the graph.

An Example of TSP

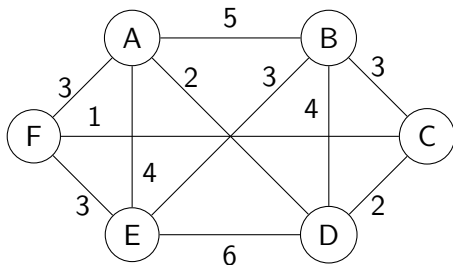


Figure: An Exemplary Graph (missing edges have weight ∞)

The shortest Hamiltonian cycle for the above graph is:

$$A \rightarrow D \rightarrow C \rightarrow B \rightarrow E \rightarrow F \rightarrow A$$

The cost is: $2 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 3 = 16$

Application: Logistics and Transportation

Courier and Delivery Services

- Companies like UPS, FedEx, and food delivery services use TSP-like optimizations to minimize travel distance and fuel costs.

Ride-Sharing Services

- Apps like Uber and DiDi solve routing subproblems similar to TSP to efficiently match passengers with drivers.

Waste Collection and Street Sweeping

- Cities optimize routes for municipal services to reduce time and operational costs.

Application: Manufacturing and Robotics

Robotic Path Planning

- Robots performing inspections or assembly tasks use TSP to find efficient routes through multiple checkpoints.

3D Printing

- Optimizing the nozzle path to reduce print time and material waste.

Application: Biology and Data Analysis

DNA Sequencing

- In DNA sequencing, there is a famous problem called the Shortest Common Superstring (SCS) Problem. This problem can be modeled as a special version of TSP.

Astronomy and Telescope Scheduling

- Scheduling observations of multiple celestial bodies in the most efficient order.

Clustering and Visualization

- TSP can help in ordering data points for better visualization, such as in heatmaps.

The problem is NP-hard.

- No one has found an algorithm solving the problem in time polynomial in $|V|$.
- Such algorithms cannot exist if $\mathcal{P} \neq \mathcal{NP}$.

So, let's focus on approximate solutions as usual.

Approximation Algorithm for TSP?

\mathcal{A} = an algorithm that, given any legal input (G, w) , returns a Hamiltonian cycle of G .

Denote by $OPT_{G,w}$ the shortest length of all Hamiltonian cycles of G under the weight function w .

\mathcal{A} is a **ρ -approximate algorithm** for the traveling salesman problem if, for any legal input (G, w) , \mathcal{A} can return a Hamiltonian cycle with length at most $\rho \cdot OPT_{G,w}$.

The value ρ is the **approximation ratio**.

Bad news (the proof of it is out of the scope of this course):

- In fact, **TSP is NP-hard to approximate within any constant factor**. That is, achieving a constant ρ is no easier than solving the exact TSP!

TSP with triangle inequality

We will instead focus on graphs with nicer structure.

We additionally assume that the graph G satisfies **triangle inequality**:

- For any $x, y, z \in V$, it holds that $w(x, z) \leq w(x, y) + w(y, z)$.

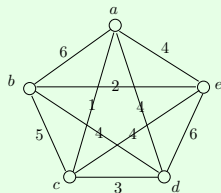
Motivation:

- Ensures that taking a *detour* is never shorter than going directly.
- Reflects realistic distance metrics (e.g., Euclidean distances, road networks).

Our goal now is to find an approximation algorithms \mathcal{A} for TSP on such graphs satisfying triangle inequality.

- We will show such an algorithm for $\rho = 2$.

Exemplary Graph satisfying Triangle Inequality



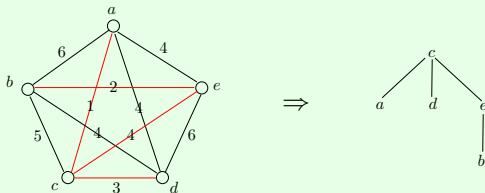
An optimal solution: $acdbea$ with length 14.

Algorithm

Next, we will describe a 2-approximate algorithm. The algorithm consists of 3 steps.

Step 1: Obtain an MST (minimum spanning tree) T of G .

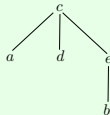
Example:



Algorithm

Step 2: Obtain a **closed walk** π where every edge of T appears on π exactly **twice**.

Example:



A possible closed walk: $\pi = \text{cacdcebec}$

π can be obtained in $O(|V|)$ time (regular exercise).

Algorithm

Step 3: Construct a sequence σ of vertices as follows. First, add the first vertex of π to σ . Then, go through π ; when crossing an edge (u, v) :

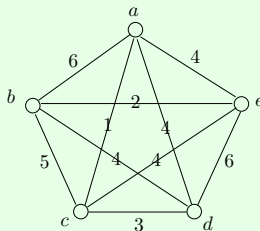
- If v has not been seen before, append v to σ .
- Otherwise, do nothing.

Finally, add the last vertex of π to σ .

The sequence σ now gives a Hamiltonian cycle.

Return this cycle.

Example:



$\pi = cacdcebec$

$\sigma = cadebc$

Weight of the Hamiltonian cycle: 18

Theorem 1: Our algorithm returns a Hamiltonian cycle with length at most $2 \cdot OPT_{G,w}$.

Next, we will prove the theorem.

Let $w(T)$ be the **weight** of (the MST) T :

$$w(T) = \sum_{\text{edge } e \text{ in } T} w(e)$$

Lemma 1: $OPT_{G,w} \geq w(T)$.

Proof: Given any Hamiltonian cycle, we can remove an (arbitrary) edge to obtain a spanning tree of G . The lemma follows from the fact that T is an MST. \square

Next, we will show that our Hamiltonian cycle σ has length at most $2 \cdot w(T)$, which will complete the proof of Theorem 1.

Lemma 2: The walk π has length $2 \cdot w(T)$.

Proof: Every edge of T appears twice in π . □

Lemma 3: The length of our Hamiltonian cycle σ is at most the length of π .

Proof: Let the vertex sequence in π be $u_1 u_2 \dots u_t$ for some $t \geq 1$.

Let σ be the vertex sequence $u_{i_1} u_{i_2} \dots u_{i_{|V|+1}}$ where

$$i_1 = 1 < i_2 < \dots < i_{|V|} < i_{|V|+1} = t.$$

By triangle inequality, we have for each $j \in [1, |V|]$:

$$w(u_{i_j}, u_{i_{j+1}}) \leq \sum_{k=i_j}^{i_{j+1}-1} w(u_k, u_{k+1})$$

Hence:

$$\text{length of } \sigma = \sum_{j=1}^{|V|} w(u_{i_j}, u_{i_{j+1}}) \leq \sum_{k=1}^{t-1} w(u_k, u_{k+1}) = \text{length of } \pi.$$

□