Similarity Searches on Sequence Databases: BLAST, FASTA

Lorenza Bordoli Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics EMBnet Course, Basel, October 2003

Outline

- \bullet Importance of Similarity
- • Heuristic Sequence Alignment:
	- Principle
	- FASTA algorithm
	- BLAST algorithm
- \bullet Assessing the significance of sequence alignment
	- The Extreme Value Distribution (EVD)
	- P-value, E-Value
- • BLAST:
	- Protein Sequences
	- DNA Sequences
	- Choosing the right Parameters
- \bullet Other members of the BLAST family

similar sequences: probably have the same ancestor, share the same structure, and have a similar biological function

Rule-of-thumb: If your sequences are more than 100 amino acids long (or 100 nucleotides long) you can considered them as homologues if 25% of the aa are identical (70% of nucleotide for DNA). Below this value you enter the twilight zone.

Twilight zone $=$ protein sequence similarity between \sim 0-20% identity: is not statistically significant, i.e. could have arisen by chance.

Beware:

- E-value (*Expectation value*)
- length of the segments similar between the two sequences
- The number of insertions/deletions

Heuristic sequence alignment

Heuristic Sequence Alignment

- With the Dynamic Programming algorithm, one obtain an alignment in a time that is proportional to the product of the lengths of the two sequences being compared. Therefore when searching a whole database the computation time grows linearly with the size of the database. With current databases calculating a full Dynamic Programming alignment for each sequence of the database is too slow (unless implemented in a specialized parallel hardware).
- The number of searches that are presently performed on whole genomes creates a need for faster procedures.
- \Rightarrow Two methods that are least 50-100 times faster than dynamic programming were developed: FASTA and BLAST

Heuristic Sequence Alignment: Principle

- • Dynamic Programming: computational method that provide in mathematical sense the best alignment between two sequences, given a scoring system.
- Heuristic Methods (e.g. BLAST, FASTA) they prune the search space by using fast approximate methods to select the sequences of the database that are likely to be similar to the query and to locate the similarity region inside them
	- =>Restricting the alignment process:
		- Only to the selected sequences
		- Only to some portions of the sequences (search as small a fraction as possible of
the cells in the dynamic programming matrix)

Heuristic Sequence Alignment: Principle

- \bullet These methods are heuristic; i.e., an empirical method of computer programming in which rules of thumb are used to find solutions.
- \bullet They almost always works to find related sequences in a database search but does not have the underlying guarantee of an optimal solution like the dynamic programming algorithm.
- \bullet Advantage: This methods that are least 50-100 times faster than dynamic programming therefore better suited to search DBs.

FASTA & BLAST

FASTA & BLAST: story

1985: FASTP (D. Lipman and W. Pearson)

Global gapped alignments

1988: FASTA (W. Pearson and D. Lipman)

Local gapped alignments

1990 : BLAST1

(S. Altschul, W. Gish, W. Miller, E. Myers, and D. Lipman)

Local ungapped alignments

Gapped BLASTs:

1996: WU-BLAST2 (W. Gish)

1997: NCBI-BLAST2 (and PSI-BLAST)

(S. Altschul, T. Madden, A. Schaffer, J. Zhang, Z. Zhang,

W. Miller and D. Lipman)

FASTA

FASTA: algorithm (4 steps)

Identify all k-tuple matches

score the 10 best scoring regions using a scoring matrix

Init1 score

Each diagonal: ungapped alignment

The smaller the k, The sensitive the method but slower

Find the best combinationof the diagonals-> compute a score.

Only those sequences with a score higher than a threshold will go to the fourth step

DP applied around The best scoring diagonal.

BLAST

BLAST1: Algorithm

First step:

For each position p of the query, find the list or words of length w scoring more than T when paired with the word starting at p:

Quickly locate ungapped similarity regions between the sequences. Instead of comparing each word of the query with each word Of the DB: create a list of "similar"words.

With $w=2$: $(20x20=400$ Possible words, w=3, 8000 Possible words,…)

Second step:

For each words list, identify all exact matches with DB sequences:

BLAST1: Algorithm

Third step:

For each word match («hit»), extend ungapped alignment in both directions. Stop when S decreases by more than X from the highest value reached by S.

Each match is thenextended. The extensionis stopped as soon as the score decreases more thenX when compared with the highest value obtained During the extension process

Reports all HSPs having score S above a threshold, or equivalently, having E-value below a threshold.

BLAST1: Algorithm

Each match is thenextended. The extension is stopped as soon as the score decreases more thenX when compared with the highest value obtained During the extension process

BLAST2: (NCBI)

The «two-hits» requirement

First step: as with BLAST1, generate lists of words scoring more than T with words of the query.

Second step: generation of hits: identify all word matches in DB sequences

Third step: extension of hits: requires a second hit on the same diagonal at a distance of less than A.

Additional step:

Gapped extension of the hits slower-> therefore: requirement of a second hits on the diagonal. (hits not joined by ungapped extensions could be part of the same gapped alignmnet)

This step generates ungapped HSPs

Fourth step: gapped extension of HSPs having score above a threshold S_g

- Scoring System:
	- 1. Scoring (Substitution) matrix: In proteins some mismatches are more acceptable than others. Substitution matrices give a score for each substitution of one amino-acid by another (e.g. PAM, BLOSUM)
	- 2. Gap Penalties: simulate as closely as possible the evolutionary mechanisms involved in gap occurrence. Gap opening penalty: Counted each time a gap is opened in an alignment and Gap extension penalty: Counted for each extension of ^a gap in an alignment.
- • Based on a given scoring system: you can calculate the raw score of the alignment
	- $-$ Raw score $=$ sum of the amino acid substitution scores and gap penalties $\overline{}$

Caveats:

- 1. We need a normalised score to compare different alignments, based on different scoring systems, e.g. different substitution matrices.
- 2. It is possible that a good long alignment gets a better raw score than a very good short alignment
- $=$ $>$ a method to asses the statistical significance of the alignment is needed (is an alignment biological relevant?) : E-value

• How?

 \Rightarrow Evaluate the probability that a score between random or unrelated sequences will reach the score found between two real sequences of interest:

If that probability is very low, the alignment score between the real sequences is significant.

If ${\sf SCORE} > {\sf SCORE} =>$ the alignment between the real sequences is significant

The Extreme Value Distribution (EVD)

The Extreme Value Distribution

 \bullet Karlin and Altschul observed that in the framework of local alignments without gaps: the distribution of random sequence alignment scores follow an EVD.

 $\mathsf{Y} = \lambda \, \, \mathsf{exp}[\rightarrow \hspace{-0.15cm} (\mathsf{x} \, {-} \mathfrak{\mu} \,) \! - \! \mathsf{e}^{\, - \lambda \, (\mathsf{x} \, {-} \mathfrak{\mu} \,)}]$

 $\mu,\,\lambda$: parameters depend on the length and composition of the sequences and on the scoring system

The Extreme Value Distribution

P-value = the probability of obtaining a score equal or greater than *x* by chance

In a database of size N: $P \times N = E$

• P-value:

Probability that an alignment with this score occurs by chance in a database of size N.

The closer the P-value is towards 0, the better the alignment

•E-value:

Number of matches with this score one can expec^t to find by chance in a database of size N.

The closer the E-value is towards 0, the better the alignment

- \bullet Local alignment without gaps:
	- Theoretical work: Karlin-Altschul statistics: -> Extreme Value Distribution
- \bullet Local alignments with gaps:
	- Empirical studies: -> Extreme Value Distribution

EVD: More formalisms (1)

$$
P(S \ge x) = 1 - exp[-e^{-\lambda(x-\mu)}]
$$
 (1)

 μ , λ : parameters depend on the length and composition of the sequences and on the scoring system: μ is the mode (highest point) of the distribution and λ is the decay parameter -They can me estimated by making many alignments of random or shuffled sequences. - For alignments without gaps they can be calculated from the scoring matrix and then :

$$
P(S \ge x) = 1 - exp[-Kmne^{-\lambda x}] \tag{2}
$$

K: is a constant that depend on the scoring matrix values and the frequencies of the different residues in the sequences. m,n : sequence lengths

EVD: More formalisms (2)

• To facilitate calculations, the score S may be normalized to produce a score S'. The effect of normalization is to change the score distribution with a $\mu{=}0$ and a $\lambda{=}1$. S' can be calculated from equation (2):

S' = $\lambda \mathsf{S}$ -InKmn

• And then replacing S by S' in (1) :

$$
P(S' \geq x) = 1 - exp[-e^{-x}]
$$

- • BLAST2:
	- Artificial random sequences
- \bullet FASTA:
	- Uses results from the search: real unrelated sequences

BLAST

*B*asic *L*ocal *A*lignment *S*earch *T*ool

BLASTing protein sequences

BLASTing protein sequences

blastp = Compares a protein sequence with a protein database

If you want to find something about the function of your protein, use **blastp** to compare your protein with other proteins contained in the databases

 ${\sf tblastn}={\sf Comperes}$ a protein sequence with a nucleotide database

If you want to discover new genes encoding proteins, use tblastn to compare your protein with DNA sequences translated into their six possible reading frames

BLASTing protein sequences

Two of the most popular blastp online services:

- NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information) server
- Swiss EMBnet server (European Molecular Biology network)

BLASTing protein sequences: NCBI blastp server

• URL: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/BLAST

BLASTing protein sequences: NCBI blastp server

BLASTing protein sequences: NCBI blastp server

Your request has been successfully submitted and put into the Blast Queue.

Query = sp[P09405]NUCL_MOUSE Nucleolin (Protein C23) - Mus musculus (Mouse). (706 letters)

The request ID is 1051696814-027746-29363

If you get no reply, DO NOT resubmit the same query several times in a row it will only make things worse for everybody (including you)!

BLASTing protein sequences: Swiss EMBnet blastp server

• URL: http://www.ch.embnet.org/software/bBLAST.html

The EMBnet interface gives you many more choices *:

Basic BLAST

Usage: Choose the the suitable BLAST program and database for your query sequence. Paste your sequence in one of the supported formats into the sequence field below and press the "Run BLAST" button. Don't forget your e-mail address, so that we can send you the results in case of traffic jam...

Make sure that the format button (next to the sequence field) shows the correct format.

See also our BLAST database description.

BLASTing protein sequences: Swiss EMBnet blasp server**Advanced BLAST**

Usage: Choose the the suitable BLAST program and database for your query sequence. Paste your sequence in one of the supported formats into the sequence field below and press the "Run BLAST" button. Don't forget your e-mail address, so that we can send you the results in case of traffic jam...

Make sure that the format button (next to the sequence field) shows the correct format.

See also our BLAST database description and the NCBI BLAST help

Understanding your BLAST output

1. Graphic display:

shows you where your query is similar to other sequences

2. Hit list:

the name of sequences similar to your query, ranked by similarity

3. The alignment:

every alignment between your query and the reported hits

4. The parameters:

a list of the various parameters used for the search

Understanding your BLAST output: 1. Graphic display

The display can help you see that some matches do not extend over the entire length of your sequence \Rightarrow useful tool to discover domains.

Understanding your BLAST output: 2. Hit list

- Sequence ac number and name: Hyperlink to the database entry: useful annotations
- Description: better to check the full annotation
- Bit score (normalized score) : A measure of the similarity between the two sequences: the higher the better (matches below 50 bits are very unreliable)

• E-value: The lower the E-value, the better. Sequences identical to the query have an E-value of 0. Matches above 0.001 are often close to the twilight zone. As a rule-of-thumb an E-value above 10-4 (0.0001) is not necessarily interesting. If you want to be certain of the homology, your E-value must be lower than 10-4

Understanding your BLAST output: 3. Alignment

A good alignment should not contain too many gaps and should have a few patches of high similarity, rather than isolated identical residues spread here and there

BLASTing DNA sequences

BLASTing DNA sequences

- BLASTing DNA requires operations similar to BLASTing proteins BUT does not always work so well.
- It is faster and more accurate to BLAST proteins (blastp) rather than nucleotides. If you know the reading frame in your sequence, you' re better off translating the sequence and BLASTing with a protein sequence.
- Otherwise:

 $T=$ translated

BLASTing DNA sequences: choosing the right BLAST

• Pick the right database: choose the database that's compatible with the BLAST program you want to use

• Restrict your search: Database searches on DNA are slower. When possible, restrict your search to the subset of the database that you're interested in (e.g. only the Drosophila genome)

- Shop around: Find the BLAST server containing the database that you're interested in
- Use filtering: Genomic sequences are full of repetitions: use some filtering

Choosing the Right Parameters

Choosing the right Parameters

• The default parameters that BLAST uses are quite optimal and well tested. However for the following reasons you might want to change them:

Choosing the right Parameters: sequence masking

- When BLAST searches databases, it makes the assumption that the average composition of any sequence is the same as the average composition of the whole database.
- However this assumption doesn't hold all the time, some sequences have biased compositions, e.g. many proteins contain patches known as low-complexity regions: such as segments that contain many prolines or glutamic acid residues.
- If BLAST aligns two proline-rich domains, this alignment gets a very good E-value because of the high number of identical amino acids it contains. BUT there is a good chance that these two proline-rich domains are not related at all.
- In order to avoid this problem, sequence masking can be applied.

Choosing the right Parameters: DNA masking

• DNA sequences are full of sequences repeated many times: most of genomes contain many such repeats, especially the human genome (60% are repeats).

• If you want to avoid the interference of that many repeats, select the Human Repeats check box that appears in the blastn page of NCBI.

Similarity Searches on Sequence Databases, EMBnet Course, October 2003

NEW.

Changing the BLAST alignment parameters

- Among the parameters that you can change on the NCBI BLAST server two important ones have to do with the way BLAST makes the alignments: the gap penalites (gap costs) and the substitution matrix (matrix).
- The best reason to play with them is to check the robustness of a hit that's borderline. If this match does not go away when you change the substitution matrix or the gap penalties, then it has better chances of being biologically meaningful

Changing the BLAST alignment parameters

• Guidelines from BLAST tutorial at NCBI

Step 3. Choose the appropriate search parameters or use default settings.

Choosing Parameters for Protein-Based BLAST Searches.

Changing the BLAST alignment parameters

• Guidelines from BLAST tutorial at the swiss EMBnet server

BLAST2.0 Parameters limitations Valid combinations of gap opening and extension penalties ex: for Blosum62, gap open=9 and gap exten=2 is allowed, but not gap open=10 With a non-valid combination, BLAST always returns " ***** No hits found ****** " !

Controlling the BLAST output

• If your query belongs to a large protein family, the BLAST output may give you troubles because the databases contain too many sequences nearly identical to yours => preventing you from seeing a homologous sequence less closely related but associated with experimental information; so how to proceed?

1) Choosing the right database If BLAST reports too many hits, search for Swiss-Prot (100 times smaller) rather than NR; or search only one genome

2) Limit by Entrez query (NCBI)

For instance, if you want BLAST to report proteases only and to ignore proteases from the HIV virus, type "protease NOT hiv1[Organism]"

3) Expect

Change the cutoff for reporting hits, to force BLAST to report only good hits with a low cutoff

BLAST Family

• Faster algorithm for genomic search: MEGABLAST (NCBI) and SSAHA (Ensembl): This program is optimized for aligning sequences that differ slightly as a result of sequencing or other similar "errors". (larger word size is used as default)

• PSI-BLAST and PHI-BLAST-> tomorrow

Acknowledgments

Frédérique Galisson, for the pictures about the FASTA and BLAST algorithms.

References

- \bullet David W. Mount, Bioinformatics, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press
- \bullet Jean-Michel Claverie & Cedric Notredame, Bioinformatics for Dummies, Wiley Publishing