Learning to Smooth Matplotlib Plots with SciPy

Authored by

Mohammed looti

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When visualizing data using a line chart within the powerful Matplotlib visualization library, data scientists frequently encounter outputs that display a series of jagged or angular connections. This occurs particularly when the underlying dataset consists of a limited number of discrete data points. While these plots are technically accurate representations of the raw input, they often fail to communicate the expected underlying trend smoothly, thereby diminishing the professional quality required for formal reports or publications. To achieve a visually continuous and aesthetically pleasing representation of the data's trajectory, the application of advanced curve smoothing techniques is essential.

Achieving a smooth, continuous curve is remarkably straightforward when integrating the dedicated mathematical capabilities of the SciPy library, which is built to interface perfectly with Matplotlib. This methodology relies specifically on sophisticated methods of interpolation, allowing us to mathematically generate the thousands of intermediate points necessary for visual continuity.

The core functions utilized from the `scipy.interpolate` module, which form the basis of this transformation, are listed below:

scipy.interpolate.make_interp_spline()

scipy.interpolate.BSpline()

This comprehensive tutorial will guide practitioners through the necessary steps: preparing the discrete data, constructing the mathematical spline object, and finally, rendering the enhanced, smooth visualization. By mastering these functions, you can transform sparse data points into compelling, high-resolution curves suitable for detailed analysis and superior presentation.

Understanding the Imperative for Curve Smoothing

In the realm of data visualization, the primary objective is to communicate complex information or an overarching narrative with maximum clarity and efficiency. When plotting phenomena that are inherently continuous in nature--such as biological growth rates, temperature changes over time, or complex financial market fluctuations--connecting sparse data points with straight lines can create abrupt, visually jarring changes. These sharp corners are often misleading and difficult to interpret, suggesting discontinuities that do not exist in the underlying process. Curve smoothing addresses this limitation by employing robust mathematical interpolation to generate a vastly denser set of intermediate coordinates. These new points follow a continuous and differentiable path between the original markers.

This technique is vital when working with data where the sampling rate is low but the physical or economic phenomenon being modeled is known to be smooth. The most effective method for this is Spline Interpolation. A spline is a specialized function defined piecewise by polynomial

segments. When correctly constructed, a spline ensures that the resulting curve not only passes precisely through all the original data points (a defining feature of interpolation) but also maintains continuous first and second derivatives across its entire length. This mathematical property is what eliminates the sharp corners and produces the visual smoothness required for professional applications.

The standard workflow involves defining a mathematical representation, commonly referred to as a **spline**, which behaves like a highly flexible ruler bent to fit the data points perfectly. This complex numerical task requires powerful computational support, making the collaboration between Matplotlib (which handles the graphical rendering) and SciPy (which provides the necessary numerical and interpolation algorithms) indispensable for Python-based data analysis and visualization.

Establishing the Baseline: The Standard Line Chart

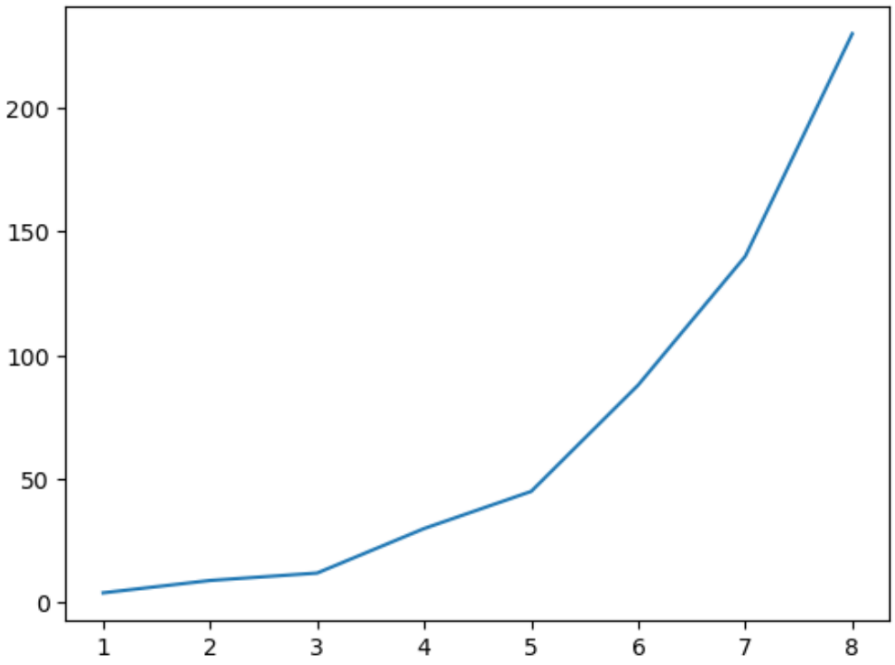
Before implementing any advanced smoothing techniques, it is crucial to establish a visual baseline. This initial visualization helps quantify the problem and clearly demonstrates why smoothing is necessary. We begin by defining our dataset using standard NumPy arrays, which provide highly efficient mechanisms for numerical data handling in Python. We then use Matplotlib's basic `plot()` function to connect these points directly. The resulting chart will clearly show the angular, straight-line segments that necessitate the use of interpolation.

The following script demonstrates the setup required to create a simple, un-smoothed line chart for a predefined, small dataset. Note that we rely on the fundamental capabilities of NumPy for array definition and Matplotlib's `pyplot` module for the visualization engine. Observe the eight discrete points connected directly, highlighting the inherent angularity of the raw plot.

```
import numpy as np
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

#create data
x = np.array()
y = np.array()

#create line chart
plt.plot(x,y)
plt.show()
```



As the visual output above confirms, the basic connection of these discrete points results in a fragmented and angular plot. This outcome confirms that the visualization, while numerically correct, does not convey a naturally smooth trajectory. To correct this visual dissonance and reveal the assumed continuous trend, we must introduce the methodology of Spline Interpolation to generate the necessary intermediate points.

The Core Technique: Applying SciPy Spline Interpolation

The fundamental mechanism for generating a truly smooth curve involves two critical conceptual steps. First, we must define a significantly denser set of new points along the X-axis, ensuring that the resulting plot has enough data to render continuously. Second, we must use SciPy's spline functionality to calculate the corresponding Y-values for this new, denser set of X-coordinates, basing these calculations on the structure defined by the original, sparse data.

The `make_interp_spline` function is the workhorse of this process. It accepts the original X and Y data arrays and constructs a mathematical object--the spline--that perfectly interpolates these coordinates. Once constructed, this spline object can be efficiently evaluated at any new X-coordinate. For defining our dense domain, we use NumPy's essential `linspace` function. In our example, we create 200 evenly spaced values spanning the minimum and maximum range of our original X-data. These 200 points serve as the input for our newly defined spline, resulting in the high-density output required for a visually smooth result.

The following expanded code block demonstrates the integration of `make_interp_spline` and the

subsequent plotting of the smooth curve. Pay particular attention to the argument `k=3`, which defines the degree of the polynomial used for the spline. Setting `k=3` specifies a **cubic spline**, which is the widely accepted default choice for achieving optimal smoothness and fidelity in most interpolation tasks.

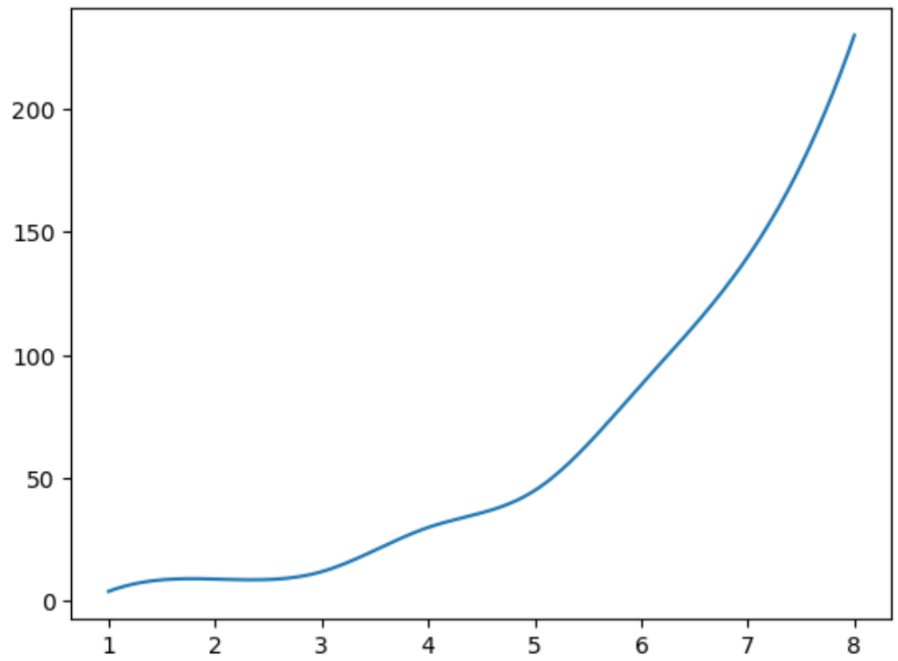
from scipy.interpolate import make_interp_spline, BSpline

#create data
x = np.array()
y = np.array()

#define x as 200 equally spaced values between the min and max of original x
xnew = np.linspace(x.min(), x.max(), 200)

#define spline
spl = make_interp_spline(x, y, k=3)
y_smooth = spl(xnew)

#create smooth line chart
plt.plot(xnew, y_smooth)
plt.show()



The resulting visualization represents a significant improvement over the baseline. By interpolating 200 intermediate points, the curve now appears continuous and smooth, accurately reflecting the

overall upward trend of the data without the distracting angular connections. This successful application validates the power of leveraging dedicated numerical libraries like SciPy in tight collaboration with Matplotlib for generating high-quality, continuous data presentations.

Advanced Tuning: Exploring the Spline Degree (k)

A crucial parameter in defining an interpolation spline is the degree, specified by the argument `k`. This value dictates the order of the polynomial segments used to construct the overall curve. Understanding its effect is paramount for achieving the desired balance between smoothness and strict adherence to the local data patterns. For instance, a degree of `k=1` results in simple linear interpolation (identical to the standard jagged plot), while increasing the degree introduces greater flexibility and curvature into the polynomial segments.

As previously noted, the standard choice of `k=3`, defining a **cubic spline**, is generally preferred because it offers the optimal compromise. A cubic spline guarantees that the curve is smooth up to the second derivative, providing a visually organic and trustworthy flow. However, increasing the degree of the spline (e.g., setting `k=5` or `k=7`) grants the curve much more freedom, allowing it to become highly "wiggly" or oscillatory. While this flexibility might enable the curve to fit complex local variations more closely, it concurrently increases the serious risk of numerical instability, specifically the manifestation of Runge's phenomenon. This effect involves severe, spurious oscillations appearing between the original data points, especially near the boundaries of the plot.

It is vital to recognize that the higher the degree specified for the `k` argument, the more pronounced the potential for oscillations in the resulting curve will be. Analysts must manage this effect judiciously, as an excessively high degree can lead to a plot that inaccurately represents the fundamental data trend, instead highlighting noise or calculation artifacts. To illustrate this point, consider the following example where we intentionally increase the degree to `k=7` to showcase the resulting exaggerated curvature and oscillations:

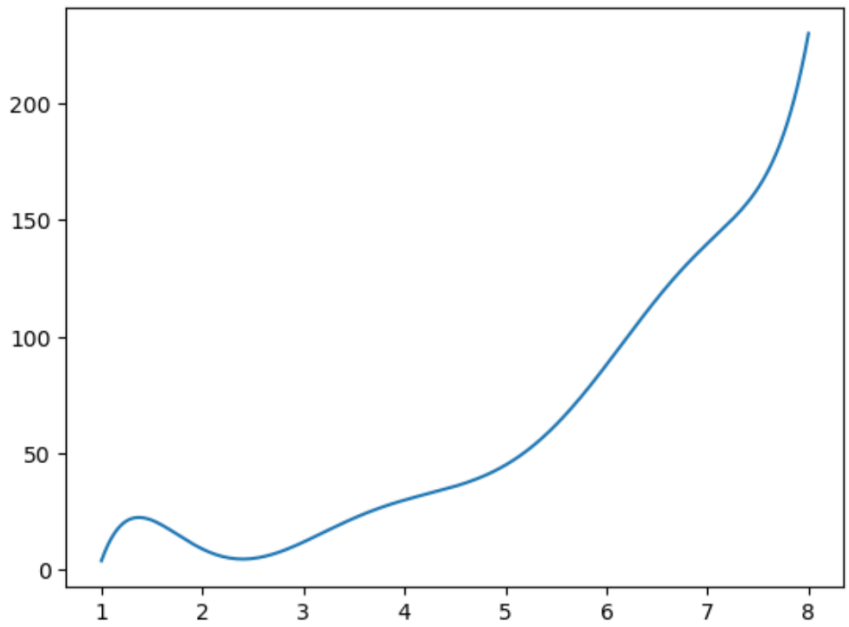
from scipy.interpolate import make_interp_spline, BSpline

#create data
x = np.array()
y = np.array()

#define x as 200 equally spaced values between the min and max of original x
xnew = np.linspace(x.min(), x.max(), 200)

#define spline with degree k=7
spl = make_interp_spline(x, y, k=7)
y_smooth = spl(xnew)

```
#create smooth line chart
plt.plot(xnew, y_smooth)
plt.show()
```



When comparing this result to the previous plot (where `k=3`), the impact of the increased degree is immediately apparent through the greater number of inflection points and the enhanced "wiggliness" of the curve. Choosing the optimal value for `k` demands a careful balance between visual aesthetic and the integrity of the data being represented. For most general-purpose visualizations, the cubic spline (`k=3`) provides the most robust and trustworthy interpolation without introducing unnecessary numerical artifacts. While the value for `k` can be modified depending on the specific curvature expectations, it should rarely exceed 5 unless the data requires fitting highly complex local patterns based on strong theoretical justification.

Conclusion and Further Resources

Successfully achieving a professional, smooth curve in Matplotlib is a straightforward yet highly impactful process when integrating the powerful numerical capabilities offered by SciPy. By mastering the `make_interp_spline` function and understanding the critical influence of the degree parameter `k`, developers and analysts can effectively transition discrete data points into continuous, high-quality visualizations. This technique is fundamental for presenting data where underlying continuity is assumed, significantly enhancing both the clarity and the aesthetic appeal of statistical graphs.

To recap, the core methodological steps are: first, generating a dense set of new X-coordinates

using NumPy's `linspace`; second, constructing the appropriate spline object using SciPy; and finally, evaluating that spline across the new, denser domain before utilizing Matplotlib to plot the final result. This disciplined approach ensures that your smooth curve maintains rigorous fidelity to the original dataset while providing optimal visual flow and continuity.

For those interested in further customizing their Matplotlib visualizations beyond simple curve smoothing, the following resources provide guidance on essential plotting features and enhancements:

Additional Resources

How to Show Gridlines on Matplotlib Plots
How to Remove Ticks from Matplotlib Plots
How to Create Matplotlib Plots with Log Scales