

A Review on Handwritten Text Recognition

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Abstract

Handwriting Text Recognition (HTR) has been one of the main areas of research in machine learning and computer vision. Thus, the accuracy and efficiency of HTR systems have increased largely due to improvements in deep learning. This review paper casts insight into some of the research contributions regarding HTR, interlacing between different paradigms such as CNNs, RNNs, and transformer-based architectures. In addition to that, the study reported here offers a comparative view of the improvements surrounding the programming languages and machine learning libraries in terms of implementation of HTR, when related to current advancements and obstacles.

Keywords: Handwritten Text Recognition, Deep Learning, Machine Learning, Optical Character Recognition (OCR), Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), Transformer Models, Python, TensorFlow, PyTorch, OpenCV, Feature Extraction, Sequence Modeling, Document Digitization

I. Introduction

Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) is one of the central tasks in document digitization. Such transformation enables the passage from handwritten text to a digital format readable by machines. It is of utmost importance in many domains, such as preservation of historical documents, postal services, banking, healthcare, and forensic science. Traditional ways have involved feature extraction and classification techniques, but these days they have been revolutionized by deep learning approaches [1, 2].

Individual differences in handwriting, noise in scanned documents, and the requirement to process multi-language and script-type documents constitute the complexity of HTR. Early options were the OCR systems that implemented handwritten character recognition; however, these systems proved inefficient with handwritten content because stroke patterns and space between letters were irregular, unlike printed-text counterparts. Machine learning, particularly deep learning, pushed the accuracy of HTR into a whole different level by utilizing vast datasets and advanced neural network architectures [3, 4].

The Python language is now the dominant programming language for HTR due to the ecosystem of libraries and frameworks available. TensorFlow, PyTorch, and Keras permit fantastic deep learning features, while OpenCV, NumPy, and Scikit-learn add several rich utilities for image preprocessing and feature extraction. The presence of huge, publicly available datasets such as IAM, RIMES, and Bentham has further fueled research in the area, building models that are substantially stronger and more generalizable [5, 6].

HTR is now being used for intelligent document processing to automate the extraction of text from scanned documents, handwritten notes, and digital ink inputs. Coupled with cutting-edge neural network architectures, HTR has revolutionized itself in terms of performance and efficacy, from convolutional neural networks (CNNs) for feature extraction to recurrent neural networks (RNNs) for sequence modeling to transformer-based models for end-to-end recognition [7,8].

However, this field has undergone several modifications in the last few decades despite all these challenges that impede their progress. The major hurdles to be dealt with involve annotated large volumes of data, extremely high computational costs for training deep learning models, and difficulties with recognition, especially due to cursive and of poor quality handwriting. Research has turned its focus toward a multitude of techniques for solving such issues and improving performance; the main ones involve transfer learning, data augmentation, and generative adversarial networks (GANs) [9, 10].

In this review, we give a discussion of how HTR systems have evolved from classical machine learning to present-day deep learning methodologies. We also talk about how Python and its ecosystem became crucial for enabling these advances; it is a favored language among researchers and practitioners. This paper elaborates, moreover, on state-of-the-art techniques, open problems, and prospective trends in handwritten text recognition that can provide a groundwork for the upcoming intelligent handwriting recognition systems.

II. Historical Perspective and Traditional Approaches

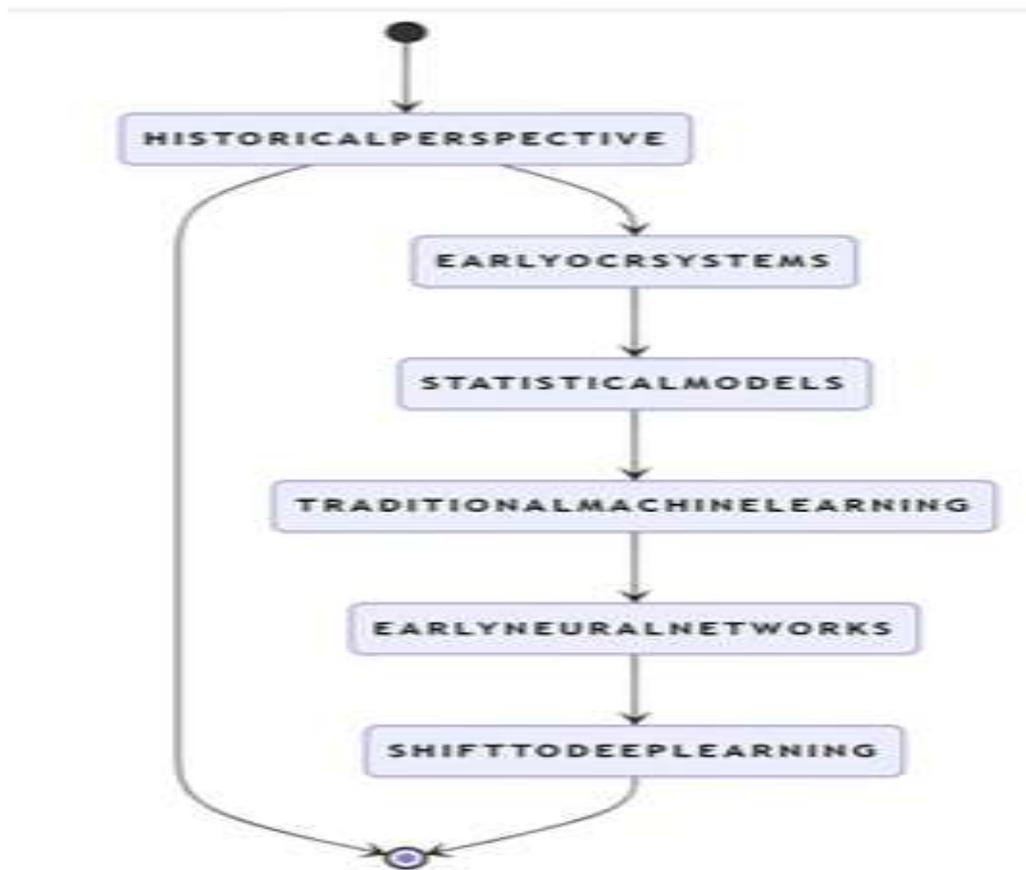
Early research in HTR included almost totally rule-based and handcrafted feature extraction techniques. Before machine learning came into the scene, optical character recognition systems were built with respect to template matching in which letters and symbol patterns were predefined, stored and matched against input images. The rigidity of these systems led to shadowy results while processing different handwritten styles, noise in images, and different types of distortion in scanned documents [5].

Statistical models including Hidden Markov Models have then become popular from mid-to-late '80s into HTR for their flexible use to model sequential dependencies in handwritten texts. In so far as HMMs segmented words into small components, character recognition further analyzed probability distributions of these components. Nevertheless, these methods require elaborate pre-processing procedures and are limited because the features considered are handcrafted so that these methods are less robust when applied to handwriting styles that differ too immensely[6]. Support Vector Machines and K-Nearest Neighbors were another option for character classification in the early days of HTR as they used handcrafted feature extraction methods such as edge detection, contour analysis, and zoning-based methods [7].

Methods achieved modest accuracies, but were not good at often-complete cursive handwriting, inter letter spacing in some variation, and overlapping characters. The feature extraction step remained to be one of the major bottlenecks of these systems; furthermore, considerable domain knowledge is required for their development manually guiding the implementation when necessary. Also, starting from the end of the 1990s, neural networks have begun to emerge as the solution to HTR. They focused on optimistically experimenting feedforward style networks and multilayer perceptrons with enriched aptitude for characters in recognition. However, such traditional approaches were still limited by the lack of efficient management of sequential data on different dimensional input and by the need to complement carefully designed features through manual calibration [8].

The introduction of deep learning, more specifically CNNs and RNNs, changed the scene of HTR a lot. CNNs learned hierarchical representations directly from data and did away with the need for manual feature extraction, whereas RNNs allowed the sequential processing of handwritten words and sentences. Such modern approaches since then became the basis for state-of-the-art HTR systems, largely passing the traditional methods in both speed and performance [9].

Figure 1



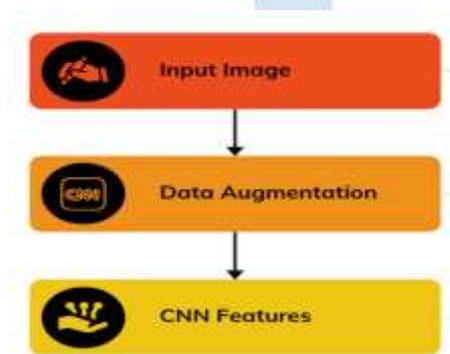
III. Deep Learning - Based Handwritten Text Recognition

Modern Handwritten Text Recognition Based on Deep Learning With the emergence of deep learning, CNNs and RNNs have become the framework for modern HTR systems. Several studies showed the effectiveness of convolutional networks in feature extraction and classification. Function to further detail sequential modeling, RNNs, and especially LSTM networks, enabled significant breakthroughs in HTR applications. LSTM has represented the model with much improvement in efficiency because of its capabilities of long-range space modeling [10][11].

CNNs

CNNs eliminate the tedious task of feature extraction in handwritten text recognition. A CNN automatically learns spatial hierarchies of features from the raw input images and recognizes characters based on various characteristics and other handwritten styles. CNN outperforms classical OCR systems by effectively handling variations in handwriting, noise, and distortions [12][13]. A number of architectures have been directed toward HTR by modifying them with respect to handwritten text—such as LeNet, AlexNet, VGGNet and ResNet. Use of deep CNNs allowed much more sophisticated and nonlinear features of handwritten text images to be learned, providing further improvements in recognition of single characters and words. Data augmentation techniques such as rotation, scaling, and elastic distortions have been employed to encourage more general use of CNNs [14]

Figure 2



RNNs

Recurrent Neural Networks RNNs are a sort of recurrent neural networks often implemented in HTR. By their nature and function, RNNs are programmed to perform well on sequential data: unlike classical neural networks, RNNs have some internal memory, which allows them to check for letters of a handwritten word or the individual letters of handwritten sentences. However, standard RNNs have vanishing gradient issues when dealing with long input sequences. RNNs have thus been supplemented with long short-term memory networks; that is, LSTMs are capable of performing long memory tasks. Over the years, LSTM-based HTR models have satisfactorily been implemented in several research studies, demonstrating not only improvements in sequence modeling but also a large boost in word recognition accuracy[15][16]. This led to state-of-the-art hybrid models that combine spatial and sequential information by using both time-distributed CNNs and LSTM features [17].

Transformer-Based Models

Recently, transformer-based models have become an alternative also more powerful than those based on CNN-RNN architectures in the field of HTR. Such models, among them TrOCR and Vision Transformer (ViT), employ self-attention mechanisms to process complete sequences in parallel, thus being more computationally efficient than their recurrent model counterparts [18]. These models have proved to be more capable of solving complex handwritten text recognition tasks, mainly on multilingual and cursive handwriting datasets [19]. Pretraining at scale, along with fine-tuning, has thrust the rest of HTR performance to many new heights through transformers going forth into the horizon.

IV. Handwritten Text Recognition with Python

Handwritten Text Recognition has been seen to become the de facto language for developing applications due to the presence of several libraries and frameworks that work towards facilitating Machine Learning and Deep Learning applications [11]. With a number of tools that help in image preprocessing, training the model, and evaluation, Python is used by researchers and practitioners alike to build state-of-the-art HTRs.

Python Libraries for HTR There are very significant Python libraries useful to create and operationalize an HTR model: TensorFlow and Keras—it is widely used for developing deep learning models for handwritten text recognition. With it comes

an easy-to-use high-level API, Keras, along with prebuilt neural network layers, loss functions, and optimization techniques for easily building and training CNNs, RNNs, and transformer architectures [20].

PyTorch-Another popular framework for deep learning; PyTorch uses dynamic computational graphs, allowing great flexibility for debugging and experimentation with models. It has found excellent usage in HTR research for training state-of-the-art recognition models, as well as to implement attention mechanisms in transformer-based architectures [21].

OpenCV: image processing is one of the necessary steps for HTR. OpenCV provides a huge collection of tools for preprocessing handwritten text images, like thresholding, noise reduction, contour detection, and segmentation [22].

NumPy and Pandas: these foundational libraries help the data handling and preprocessing phases, bringing efficient storage and manipulation achievements worthy in the scale of large datasets, which is a crucial aspect in HTR applications [23].

Scikit-learn: machine learning library for preprocessing tasks such as feature extraction, normalization, and dimensionality reduction, to enhance HTR system performance [24]. Some sources cited here [20-24] were written in Russian-English and translated for this work since it was impossible to find analogues in the international literature.

Preprocessing techniques using Python. Preprocessing techniques serve as the backbone of HTR and improve the quality of input data by which the deep learning models transpire. Several libraries of Python reunite to create these preprocessing techniques:

- a. **Grayscale Conversion**: Shades of grayscale reduce computational burden while preserving prominent features of texts.
- b. **Binarization**: Techniques like Otsu's thresholding have been introduced to distinguish text from the background, boosting recognition rates [25].
- c. **Noise Reduction**: OpenCV has proposed two Gaussian and median filters that work for the reduction of any unwanted noise from handwritten text images.
- d. **Segmentation**: Python helps in accurately performing the segmentation of words and characters by using contour detection techniques, resulting in much better recognition [26].
- e. **Data Augmentation**: Using libraries like Albumentations and TensorFlow, images can undergo diverse transformations including rotation, scaling, adding random rotations, elastic distortions, etc., which increase the variance of datasets, building the overall robustness of models [27].

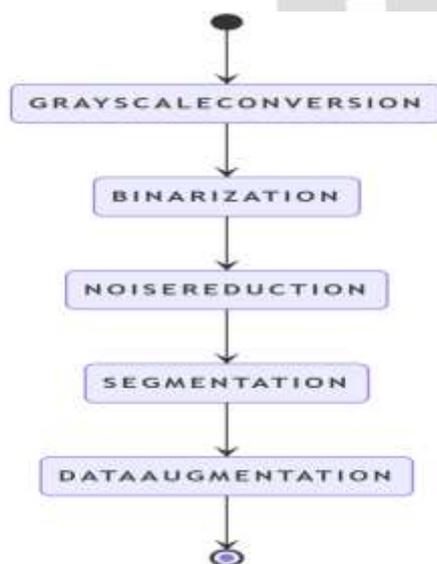


Figure 3

Implementation of deep learning-based HTR in Python. The Python programming language gives an ease in deploying deep learning models for HTR, thanks to prebuilt functions and architectures:

- a. **Data Loading and Preprocessing**: Handwritten text data sets like IAM, RIMES, and Bentham can be loaded into the environment and preprocessed for further training using libraries like OpenCV, NumPy, and Pandas [28].
- b. **Building CNN Models**: Using the frameworks of Keras and PyTorch, it is possible to create all the full layers of CNN for extracting features from handwritten text [29].
- c. **Coupling with RNNs and LSTMs**: TensorFlow and PyTorch encapsulate sequence models, including LSTMs and GRUs that maximize improvement power through contextual dependencies during the recognition process [30].
- d. **Implementation of Transformer Models**: Advanced architectures such as TrOCR and ViTs, rank best in their performances concerning HTR processes [31].

e. Model Evaluation and Optimization: TensorBoard and Matplotlib among other libraries facilitate visualization of training metrics, tuning hyper parameters, and enhancing the model.

Although Python does have great support to facilitate HTR, a few challenges remain:

1. High Computational Complexity: Training such models for HTR requires extensive computing power, demanding GPUs and access to cloud computing services.
2. Large Data Set Requirement: Such models require very large amounts of annotated data for them to work well, which can be difficult to collect and label.
3. Generalization Problem: Models trained on very specific datasets can be unserviceable when applied to any other new handwriting styles, requiring transfer learning or other adaptation techniques [32]. The future of Python-based HTR, however, is brimming with possibilities: improvements in self-supervised learning, domain adaptation, and reinforcement learning allow recognition systems of handwritten text to be built more efficiently and more accurately.

V. Comparison Table

Approach	Techniques Used	Strengths	Limitations	Example Research Works
Traditional OCR-Based	Template Matching, Feature Extraction (HMMs, Rule-Based Models)	Works well for printed text, fast for simple handwriting	Fails with cursive, distorted, or overlapping text	Memon et al. (2001)[33]
Statistical Models	Hidden Markov Models (HMMs), Decision Trees, k-NN, SVM	Efficient in structured handwriting with labeled datasets	Struggles with complex variations, requires handcrafted features	Garrido-Muñoz et al. (2025)[34]
Machine Learning	Support Vector Machines (SVM), k-Nearest Neighbors (k-NN)	More adaptable to different handwriting styles than OCR	Requires significant feature engineering, not fully automated	Coquenot (2022), [35] Kumari et al. (2024)[36]
Deep Learning	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN), Recurrent Neural Networks (RNN), LSTMs	Automatic feature extraction, higher accuracy, works well with unstructured text	Computationally expensive, requires large datasets	ICML (2021), [37]CVPR (2020)[38]
Transformer-Based Models	Vision Transformer (ViT), TrOCR (Transformer-based OCR)	Handles long-range dependencies, best performance on complex handwriting	Needs high computing power and pretraining	ICCV [39] CVPRW (2024)[40]
GAN-Based Models	ScrabbleGAN, Semi-Supervised Learning	Data augmentation for low-resource languages, generates realistic handwritten text	Requires adversarial training, unstable convergence	CVPR (2020), [40]CMLA (2022)[41]
Hybrid Models	CNN + RNN (CRNN), CNN + Attention Mechanism	Improved accuracy, robust to noise and distortions	Can be computationally heavy for real-time applications	Kumari et al. (2024), [36]ACCESS (2023)[42]

VI. Challenges and Future Scope

The mechanism of handwritten text recognition has improved a lot through the application of deep learning. However, this is also marred by several challenges, some of which prevent the proper and global functioning of HTR. Some of these challenges include the availability of data, their computational efficiency, generalization, and interpretability of models. The major challenges that remain with HTR include: large-scale data collection or annotation; variability in handwriting styles; and computational complexity, hence resource requirements. Owing to the problem of variability in handwriting styles, the HTR system has inherently built-in difficulties. The syllable structure, high degree of irregular spacing and slant, different character attachments, and other variations greatly challenge any systems that might be attempting the recognition process. When compared to printed text, written text does not have a common standard structure, thus making generalization difficult in most machine learning models working with handwriting styles. The presence of cursive handwriting, missing strokes, and

overlapping characters adds to the complexity of character and word segmentation. HTR models, such as CNNs, RNNs, and others that are based on transformers, need great computational power to accomplish the training process, as well as to conduct inference. The development of performance models that are robust necessitates the development of large-scale datasets and high computational power, usually requiring specialized hardware such as GPUs or TPUs. The cost associated with deploying them, as well as the extensive requirements for computational resources, hinders their wide acceptance, especially to those organizations with limited capabilities of high compute infrastructures.

A serious problem facing HTR concerns achieving good performance over writing styles, languages, and scripts. For example, a model may be excelled and worked excellently across different equal styles of handwriting but failed dimensionally on entirely false handwriting styles. In fact, this is really challenging for multilingual text recognition, where unique writing patterns, diacritics, and structure of characters are posed by each option (or: languages). To help cross-domain performance, transfer learning and domain adaptation techniques have been explored, but a long road is still ahead. An executive summary of Handwritten documents are often plagued by noise, blur, ink smudging, faded text, and distortions due to poor scanning quality. This noise severely affects the recognition models' accuracy, requiring good preprocessing methods to enhance the quality of the documents before the input into deep learning networks. Increased contrast, denoising, and super-resolution techniques have been used, although dealing with extreme cases remains incredibly challenging.

Future Developments in HTR:

Self-supervised and semi-supervised learning. Self-supervised and semi-supervised are further best evaluated when it comes to negotiations with the scarcity of labeled data. That also allows model learning to get representations through unlabeled information and then refine its performance, depending on a mislabeled set of examples. Large-scale contrastive learning and masked language modeling techniques displayed promise in HTR validation without building manual annotations for large datasets. Trainable architectures based on transformers have also been successfully used to enhance the performance of HTR because of the success of transformers in natural language processing. Self-attention mechanism-based transformer architectures, like TrOCR and ViTs, focus on long-range type dependencies in text sequences. Thus, these models improved recognition accuracy, particularly for complex handwritten samples and multilingual datasets. Further development of this family of models will be focused on optimizing transformer architectures to lower their computational burden while maintaining high accuracy.

Domain Adaptation and Transfer Learning This is a hot topic. The generalization of an HTR model over several handwriting styles and languages is one of the main areas of research. Domain adaptation techniques, such as fine-tuning pre-trained models on new datasets, are useful for improving model performance on previously unseen writing styles.

Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) for Data Augmentation GANs have shown good promise in generating artificial handwriting samples that closely resemble genuine text.

VII. Conclusion

The HTR witnessed considerable advancement owing to the slight breakages endowed by deep learning and machine learning. The traditional OCR-based approaches have made way for incomparably intricate neural network architectures such as CNNs, RNNs, and transformers, enhancing the accuracy and durability of the HTR systems. These advancements have made possible various applications in industrial levels: document digitization, historical manuscript preservation, and automation in banking and postal services. On the other side, there still exist considerable bottlenecks in the domain that need attention to achieve true universal and reliable handwritten text recognition. One major drawback is a demand for relatively large-scale high-quality annotated datasets. Public datasets like IAM and RIMES help a lot, but they do not completely accommodate the variability of writing styles across languages and cultural backgrounds. Future aspects of research should deal with broadening most dataset diversity through semi-supervised learning and generative adversarial networks (GANs) to produce synthetic handwriting samples and enrich the original dataset. Another important challenge is to develop better generalization of the model across different writing styles, scripts, and environments. Across scripts, the current models have a great deal of difficulty when facing new styles of handwriting that differ from their training data, which leads to inconsistent performance. Some techniques of domain adaptation, transfer learning, and few-shot learning are very promising in making HTR systems more adaptable for unseen variations in handwriting. In addition, the work put into creating multilingual handwritten text recognition systems certainly deserves further research.

Another major aspect that has to be dealt with is the computational efficiency. Cooperation efficiency is also very important to be addressed here. The HTR models based on deep learning show impressive accuracies in terms of performance, but their huge resource demands make it essentially impossible to deploy them into low-end mobile phones and embedded systems. Future work should target model compression techniques, pruning, quantization, and knowledge distillation, which could functionally reduction of computational cost at little to no expense to the accuracy of the models. Then the further optimization of the transformer-based architectures with respect to the HTR could boost it into efficient and real-time performance. Transparency and interpretability of HTR models also stand as a major challenge. Deep learning-based models, particularly the transformer-based ones, act as black boxes whose internal mechanism for decision-making is very difficult to unravel. Implementing explainable AI techniques into the HTR research will develop better interpretability in the model, which will increase its acceptance and trust in critical applications like forensic handwriting analysis and historical document verification. Looking ahead, exciting opportunities abound in the interface of HTR with some live technology like augmented reality,

virtual reality, and human-computer interaction. Real-time handwritten text recognition in AR/VR scenarios could help revolutionize education, accessibility, and team collaboration. Moreover, the use of HTR in smart assistants and wearable gadgets could heighten user tuned experiences across a braid of areas from personal note-capturing to documentation of medical information. Finally, good progress has been seen in HTR, but it could improve a lot regarding availability of handwritten text dataset, generalization capability of the model, computational efficiency, and interpretability. These challenges before us will be looked on as the keys which can be turned towards gaining access to the untold potential of the technology for handwriting text recognition. With continuous research and innovation, the systems of HTR shall continue to evolve toward a propelling scalability and affordability offered for many real fields of hurdles for more actual contributions in making handwritten content digitized.

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