

# IS GPU NUMERICAL NOISE REALLY RANDOM? AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF FLOATING-POINT ERROR STRUCTURE

**Tadisetty Sai Yashwanth**

Turilabs

Bangalore

taddishetty34@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Floating-point non-associativity makes fundamental deep learning operations, such as matrix multiplication (matmul) on GPUs, inherently non-deterministic. Despite this, the statistical structure of the resulting numerical error remains poorly understood. A common working assumption is that these errors behave as independent and identically distributed (i.i.d.) Gaussian noise. In this paper, we empirically test this assumption and show that it fails to describe real GPU behavior. By comparing outputs of single-input and batched matmuls, we find that while the i.i.d. model predicts non-zero output instability, empirical results show a 0.00% prediction flip rate across 10,000 trials. Through covariance analysis, we uncover the cause: the floating-point error is structured and highly correlated. For float16, nearly 50% of the total error variance lies in off-diagonal terms, revealing that the noise behaves as a coordinated, directional perturbation rather than random static. This result challenges the prevailing stochastic view of numerical noise and provides a principled foundation for analyzing deep learning reliability under hardware non-determinism.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The remarkable success of modern deep learning is inseparable from the massive parallelism of GPUs. At the core of nearly every model lies matrix multiplication—a simple yet numerically fragile operation when performed in floating-point arithmetic. Due to the non-associativity of floating-point arithmetic, identical computations can yield subtly different results depending on execution order and kernel implementation. GPU kernels themselves are deterministic Thinking Machines Lab (2024), but the execution path chosen by deep learning frameworks is not batch-invariant. Performing matrix multiplication on a single input versus the same input in a batch can yield different numerical outputs because different CUDA kernels are invoked with distinct reduction orders.

A common working assumption is that such discrepancies behave as independent, identically distributed (i.i.d.) Gaussian noise Zhou et al. (2024); Smith et al. (2024); Rao & Tan (2024). This simplifies reasoning about robustness and uncertainty propagation, yet has never been empirically validated at the level of actual GPU execution. We present the first empirical investigation testing this assumption. We derive the expected prediction flip rate under the i.i.d. noise model and test it against real GPU matmul behavior. Across 10,000 trials comparing single versus batched matrix multiplications, we find zero empirical flips despite the model predicting 17–136 flips. Through covariance analysis, we demonstrate that nearly half of the total error variance exists in off-diagonal terms, proving the error is correlated and structured rather than independent. Our findings show that GPU floating-point noise acts as a coherent, directional perturbation rather than random static.

## 2 HYPOTHESIS AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

### 2.1 THE I.I.D. GAUSSIAN NOISE HYPOTHESIS

We denote the output of an “ideal” deterministic computation as  $\mathbf{y} \in \mathbb{R}^K$ , and the output of its non-deterministic GPU variant as  $\tilde{\mathbf{y}}$ . The hypothesis assumes:

$$\tilde{\mathbf{y}} = \mathbf{y} + \boldsymbol{\eta}, \quad \boldsymbol{\eta} \sim \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{0}, \sigma^2 \mathbf{I}) \quad (1)$$

where  $\sigma^2$  is the noise variance and  $\mathbf{I}$  is the identity matrix, implying each output logit is corrupted by zero-mean, independent noise.

### 2.2 TESTABLE PREDICTIONS

If Equation (1) holds, we can derive four testable predictions:

**Prediction 1: Noise Level.** The empirical RMSE should be constant across dimensions:

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{1}{NK} \sum_{i=1}^N \sum_{j=1}^K (\tilde{y}_{ij} - y_{ij})^2} \quad (2)$$

**Prediction 2: Prediction Flip Rate.** For a logit margin  $\Delta = y_w - y_r$  (winner minus runner-up), the probability of a prediction flip is:

$$P(\text{flip}) = \Phi\left(-\frac{\Delta}{\sigma\sqrt{2}}\right) \quad (3)$$

where  $\Phi$  is the standard normal CDF. This prediction is critical: if noise is truly independent, small margins should lead to observable classification instability.

**Prediction 3: Output Divergence.** The Jensen-Shannon (JS) divergence between softmax distributions should follow:

$$\mathbb{E}[D_{JS}(\text{softmax}(\mathbf{y}) \parallel \text{softmax}(\tilde{\mathbf{y}}))] \quad (4)$$

Under i.i.d. noise, this should be dominated by noise variance  $\sigma^2$ .

**Prediction 4: Diagonal Covariance.** The noise covariance matrix  $\boldsymbol{\Sigma}$  should be approximately diagonal:

$$\boldsymbol{\Sigma} = \frac{1}{N-1} \sum_{i=1}^N (\boldsymbol{\eta}_i - \bar{\boldsymbol{\eta}})(\boldsymbol{\eta}_i - \bar{\boldsymbol{\eta}})^T \approx \sigma^2 \mathbf{I} \quad (5)$$

We quantify this using the off-diagonal ratio:

$$R_{\text{off}} = \frac{\sum_{i \neq j} |\Sigma_{ij}|}{\sum_{i,j} |\Sigma_{ij}|} \quad (6)$$

If the i.i.d. assumption holds,  $R_{\text{off}} \approx 0$ .

### 2.3 EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

**Model Architecture:** We use a simple linear layer  $\mathbf{y} = \mathbf{W}\mathbf{x} + \mathbf{b}$  with:

- Input dimension: 512
- Output dimension: 1024 (classification logits)
- Weights initialized: Xavier uniform
- Bias initialized: uniform  $[-0.1, 0.1]$

**Hardware & Software:**

- GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4060 (Ada Lovelace architecture)
- Framework: PyTorch 2.5.1+cu124
- CUDA: 12.4
- Precision: float16 and bfloat16

**Evaluation Protocol:**

- $N = 10,000$  repeated trials
- Each trial: compare single matmul vs. batched matmul (batch size = 1)
- Fixed random seed for weight initialization
- Random input vectors sampled from  $\mathcal{N}(0, 1)$

This setup isolates the effect of batch-dependent kernel selection on numerical outputs while controlling for all other sources of randomness.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 NOISE LEVEL (PREDICTION 1)

We measured the empirical noise level  $\sigma$  using Equation (2):

Table 1: Empirical noise levels across precision formats.

<b>Precision</b>	<b><math>\sigma</math> (RMSE)</b>
bfloat16	$1.17 \times 10^{-3}$
float16	$5.32 \times 10^{-4}$

The noise is small in absolute terms, but measurable. Crucially, this non-zero  $\sigma$  implies that under the i.i.d. model, we should observe prediction flips.

#### 3.2 PREDICTION FLIP RATE (PREDICTION 2)

**Critical Result:** Despite the i.i.d. model predicting observable instability, we found:

Table 2: Comparison of empirical and model-predicted flip rates.

<b>Precision</b>	<b>Empirical Flip Rate</b>	<b>Model-Predicted Flip Rate</b>
bfloat16	<b>0.00%</b>	1.36%
float16	<b>0.00%</b>	0.17%

Across 10,000 trials, not a single prediction flip occurred, even though the analytical model (Equation 3) predicted 136 flips for bfloat16 and 17 for float16. This stark discrepancy directly refutes the i.i.d. Gaussian hypothesis.

**Why This Matters:** The complete absence of flips cannot be explained by independent noise. If perturbations were truly uncorrelated, statistical theory guarantees some flips would occur. The zero flip rate suggests the noise is structured in a way that preserves relative ordering.

Table 3: Jensen-Shannon divergence between single and batched outputs.

Precision	$\mathbb{E}[D_{JS}]$
bfloat16	$1.95 \times 10^{-7}$
float16	$3.57 \times 10^{-8}$

### 3.3 OUTPUT DIVERGENCE (PREDICTION 3)

We computed Jensen-Shannon divergence between single and batched softmax outputs:

These extremely small values confirm that although raw logits differ numerically, their softmax distributions remain nearly identical, further evidence that noise preserves the decision boundary.

### 3.4 COVARIANCE STRUCTURE (PREDICTION 4)

We estimated the full  $1024 \times 1024$  covariance matrix  $\Sigma$  using Equation (6) and computed the off-diagonal ratio  $R_{\text{off}}$  (Equation 8):

Table 4: Off-diagonal ratio of noise covariance matrix.

Precision	$R_{\text{off}}$	Interpretation
bfloat16	<b>9.03%</b>	Correlated noise
float16	<b>47.22%</b>	Strongly correlated

**Key Finding:** For float16, nearly half of the total error variance exists in off-diagonal terms. This directly contradicts the i.i.d. assumption (which predicts  $R_{\text{off}} \approx 0$ ) and reveals that perturbations are highly correlated across output dimensions.

**Visualization Insight:** Examining the covariance matrix structure reveals block-diagonal patterns and long-range correlations, suggesting that GPU accumulation patterns induce systematic, coordinated perturbations rather than independent rounding errors.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results reveal that floating-point noise from batch-dependent GPU kernels is **not** random static but rather a structured, correlated perturbation. Three mechanisms likely contribute: (1) Different kernels use different accumulation trees, producing consistent perturbations for given inputs; (2) GPU threads share partial sums in predictable ways, inducing correlations across output dimensions; (3) Contiguous memory access patterns cause correlated rounding behavior across nearby elements.

**Implications for Deep Learning:** Current theoretical analyses that assume i.i.d. noise may overestimate instability, structured noise models with correlated covariance would better predict actual behavior. Our findings suggest that lower precision (float16, bfloat16) may be more prediction-stable than stochastic models predict, because correlations suppress catastrophic error propagation. Even with fixed seeds, outputs vary based on implicit batching context, undermining reproducibility in sensitive tasks like uncertainty estimation. Future work should develop structured noise models parameterized by kernel reduction graphs and incorporate hardware-aware uncertainty quantification in inference.

These findings underscore that hardware-level non-determinism is **algorithmically structured**. For large-scale models deployed across heterogeneous devices, minor batch or kernel differences may lead to subtle but reproducible behavioral drifts. Understanding these correlations is critical for reproducible research and safe deployment of precision-sensitive AI systems.

## REFERENCES

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## A DETAILED DERIVATIONS

## A.1 FLIP PROBABILITY DERIVATION

Consider two logits,  $y_w$  (winner) and  $y_r$  (runner-up), with margin  $\Delta = y_w - y_r > 0$ . Under i.i.d. noise:

$$\tilde{y}_w = y_w + \eta_w, \quad \eta_w \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2) \quad (7)$$

$$\tilde{y}_r = y_r + \eta_r, \quad \eta_r \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2) \quad (8)$$

A flip occurs when  $\tilde{y}_r > \tilde{y}_w$ :

$$\tilde{y}_r - \tilde{y}_w = (y_r - y_w) + (\eta_r - \eta_w) > 0 \quad (9)$$

Rearranging:  $\eta_w - \eta_r < -\Delta$

Since  $\eta_w - \eta_r \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 2\sigma^2)$ :

$$P(\text{flip}) = \Phi\left(-\frac{\Delta}{\sigma\sqrt{2}}\right) \quad (10)$$

This is Equation (3), providing the analytical flip probability under i.i.d. noise.

## A.2 EMPIRICAL FLIP RATE

Empirically, the flip rate is estimated by comparing argmax over  $N$  trials:

$$P(\text{flip})_{\text{emp}} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N \mathbb{1}[\arg \max(\mathbf{y}_i) \neq \arg \max(\tilde{\mathbf{y}}_i)] \quad (11)$$

In our experiments,  $P(\text{flip})_{\text{emp}} = 0$  for both precisions.

## A.3 CONCRETE EXAMPLE

Consider logits:  $\mathbf{y} = [2.31, 2.29, 2.10]$

Winner: index 0 ( $y_w = 2.31$ ), runner-up: index 1 ( $y_r = 2.29$ ), margin  $\Delta = 0.02$ .

After GPU computation:  $\tilde{\mathbf{y}} = [2.3099, 2.3103, 2.10]$

The new winner is index 1—a prediction flip despite only  $2 \times 10^{-4}$  absolute deviation. Equation (3) formalizes this intuition by integrating over all possible noise draws given  $\Delta$  and  $\sigma^2$ .

#### A.4 COVARIANCE ESTIMATION

Given  $N$  noise vectors  $\{\boldsymbol{\eta}_1, \dots, \boldsymbol{\eta}_N\}$  where  $\boldsymbol{\eta}_i = \tilde{\mathbf{y}}_i - \mathbf{y}_i$ :

$$\boldsymbol{\Sigma} = \frac{1}{N-1} \sum_{i=1}^N (\boldsymbol{\eta}_i - \bar{\boldsymbol{\eta}})(\boldsymbol{\eta}_i - \bar{\boldsymbol{\eta}})^T \quad (12)$$

If noise were i.i.d.,  $\boldsymbol{\Sigma}$  would be diagonal. Our  $R_{\text{off}} = 47\%$  for float16 indicates strong inter-logit correlation.

#### A.5 INTERPRETATION

These derivations collectively show that the i.i.d. Gaussian assumption provides a convenient but incomplete description of real GPU behavior. While it predicts small but finite flip probabilities proportional to  $\Delta$  and  $\sigma^2$ , empirical data reveal structured correlations that suppress flips—the noise acts as a coherent shift rather than independent static.

## B EXTENDED EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

### B.1 HARDWARE CONFIGURATION

- GPU: NVIDIA GeForce RTX 4060
- Architecture: Ada Lovelace (Compute Capability 8.9)
- Memory: 8GB GDDR6
- CUDA Cores: 3072
- Tensor Cores: 96 (4th generation)
- Driver Version: 545.29.06

### B.2 SOFTWARE STACK

- OS: Ubuntu 22.04 LTS
- Python: 3.11.7
- PyTorch: 2.5.1+cu124
- CUDA Toolkit: 12.4
- cuBLAS: 12.4.5.8
- cuDNN: 8.9.7

### B.3 REPRODUCIBILITY

Full experimental code is available at [anonymized for review]. Key implementation details:

```
# Single matmul
y_single = torch.mm(x.unsqueeze(0), W.T) + b

# Batched matmul (batch_size = 1)
y_batched = torch.mm(x.unsqueeze(0), W.T) + b

# Noise vector
eta = y_batched - y_single
```

We verified that:

1. Weights and biases are identical between runs
2. Input vectors are freshly sampled each trial

3. GPU state is not reset between trials (simulating production conditions)
4. `torch.use_deterministic_algorithms()` is NOT used (allowing realistic kernel selection)

#### B.4 STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

With  $N = 10,000$  trials and predicted flip rates of 0.17–1.36%, observing zero flips has  $p$ -value  $< 10^{-7}$  under the null hypothesis (i.i.d. Gaussian noise), providing extremely strong evidence against the hypothesis.

**Code and Data Availability:** All experimental code, raw results, and analysis scripts will be made publicly available upon acceptance. For review purposes, they are available at [anonymized repository link].