

# Developing a Test of Normality in the Classroom

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## Abstract

Many basic statistics textbooks assess normality with QQ plots with this advice: a quantile plot close to a straight line, indicates normality. But “how close to a straight line” is not addressed. As a review of hypothesis testing in a second semester undergrad course in statistics, we develop, in class, the test of normality due to Filliben (1975), using the correlation coefficient of the QQ plot. The development starts with the data set of MacDonald and Schwing (1973) demonstrating a variety of histogram and QQ plot shapes. First, students classify histograms and QQ plots based on their intuition of normality as requiring symmetric and bell-shaped histograms or a straight line QQ plot. Next, they examine the correlation coefficients of the QQ plots to determine how low a correlation best matches their intuition of normal or not. Then, students randomly generate samples from the standard normal distribution and calculate the QQ plot correlation to generate its sampling distribution. For these data their intuition about normality closely matches both their simulated lower percentage points and the more extensive simulations of Filliben (1975). The importance of looking at the data, an analyst’s intuition and experience in modeling, sampling distributions, hypothesis testing, power, QQ plots, and correlation are all reviewed and reinforced.

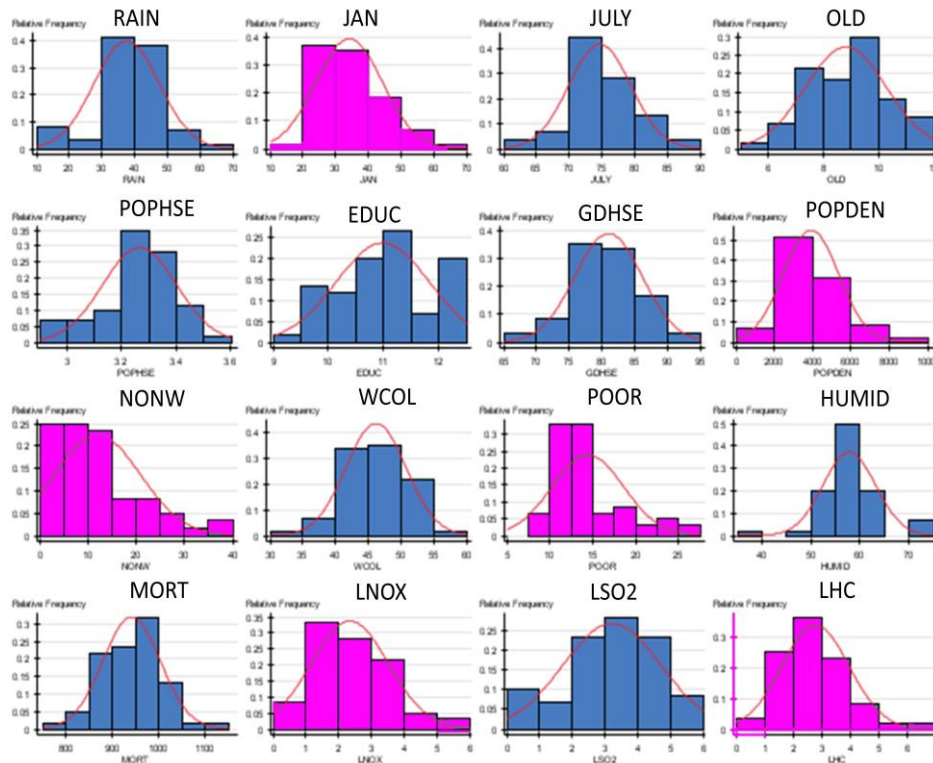
**Key Words:** QQplot, quantile plot, Simulation, Statistical Education, Modeling

## 1. Introduction and Rationale

Many basic statistics textbooks assess normality with quantile or QQ (quantile-quantile) plots with this advice: a quantile plot that is close to a straight line, indicates normality. But “how close to a straight line” is not addressed. As a review of hypothesis testing in a second undergraduate course in statistics, we develop, in a computer classroom, the test of normality due to Filliben (1975), using the correlation coefficient of the QQ plot. The development starts with the data set of MacDonald and Schwing (1973). This is a well-studied dataset that contains meteorological, demographic, pollution and mortality data on 60 cities in the US in the 1960s. The data are available in the DASL (Data and Story Library) online under the heading Environment with the dataset name SMSA and variable names can be found in a classroom handout below. The data set demonstrates a variety of histogram behaviors and QQ plot shapes as illustrated below in graphics from StatCrunch, the software we use in this course. For these projects we have taken the logarithms of the three pollution variables NOX, SO2, and HC. These are quite skewed variables and obviously non-normal. Taking their logs makes for more interesting findings for this test of normality.

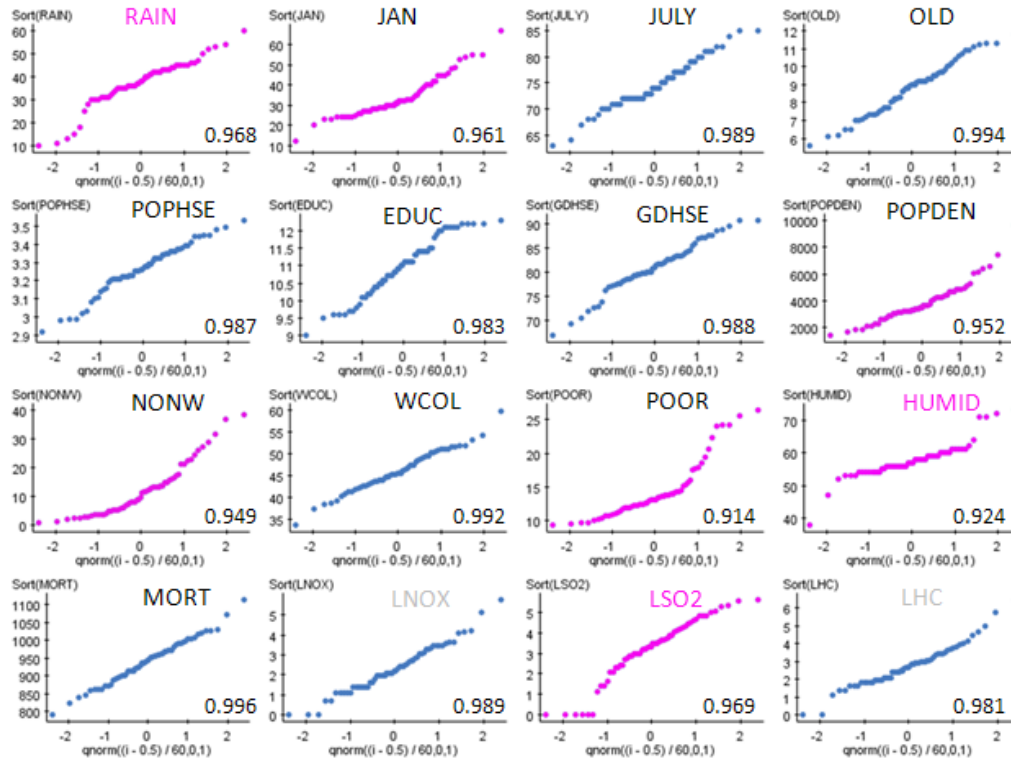
First, students classify histograms based on their understanding of what to expect from samples of size 60 from a normal distribution. They invariably look for histograms that are symmetric and bell-shaped. The histograms shaded pink below are those frequently chosen by students as being non-normal. There is a noticeable bias in their selections towards skewed histograms particularly right skewness. In contrast, variables with

symmetric histograms that display high central concentrations and heavy tails are accepted as normal.



**Figure 1.** Histograms and estimated normal distribution curves for the sixteen variables in the MacDonald and Schwing(1973) data set. The variables NOX, SO<sub>2</sub>, and HC are shown here as log transformed. Histograms shaded pink are those most often selected by students as being not normal.

Next, the students examine the QQ plots for the variables along with their understanding that a straight QQ plot indicates a normal distribution. Here are revealed some discrepancies in their findings. Often the variable LNOX, which was flagged as non-normal from its histogram, is now considered to have an acceptably straight QQ plot. Alternatively, LSO<sub>2</sub> or LHC, which often pass their visual histogram test, are flagged as non-normal.

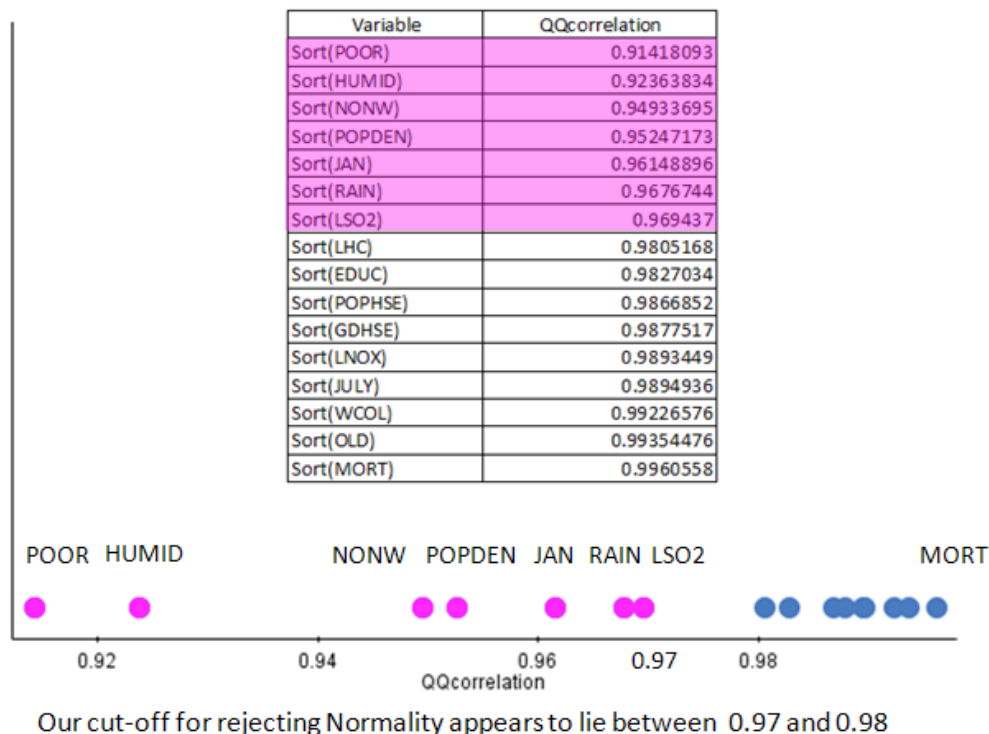


**Figure 2.** Quantile or QQ (quantile-quantile) plots for the sixteen variables in the MacDonald and Schwing(1973) data set. The variables NOX, SO2, and HC are shown here as log transformed. Quantile plots shaded pink are those most often selected by students as being not normal. Variable names in light-gray type are those that were chosen by students as non-normal from evaluating the histograms, but are not so evaluated from the quantile plots.

Next, the students compute the correlation coefficients of the QQ plots to determine how this correlation best matches their intuition of normal or not. Filliben(1975) offers very specialized advice on computing the QQ plot correlation with careful attention to the theoretical, normal quantile plotting points. We have taken a more simple approach for the classroom. First, they sort their data from smallest to largest. Call these values  $\text{sort}(y)$ . Second, they compute a sequencing variable, call it  $i$  (in StatCrunch SEQUENCE), simply as whole numbers from 1 to 60 by 1. Third, they compute percentages for their data values as:  $p = (i - 0.5) / n$ . This differs from Filliben's approach. Note we do not simply use  $i/n$ . This choice would indicate that the largest observation in our sample represented the 100<sup>th</sup> percentile. This might suggest too strongly to students that no future observation could possibly be larger. Our choice of  $p$  eliminates this and similar problems in a simple way. Fourth, they convert these percentages  $p$  into their corresponding normal percentiles, i.e.  $z$  scores (with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one). This is accomplished with the internal StatCrunch function  $qnorm(p, 0, 1)$ . Of course these values could be found in a more tedious manner with normal calculator applets or, heaven forbid tables! Finally, they compute the correlation between their sorted data,  $\text{sort}(y)$  and these  $z$ -scores,  $z$ . This is the correlation coefficient of the data plotted in the QQ plots above. This is our measure of normality.

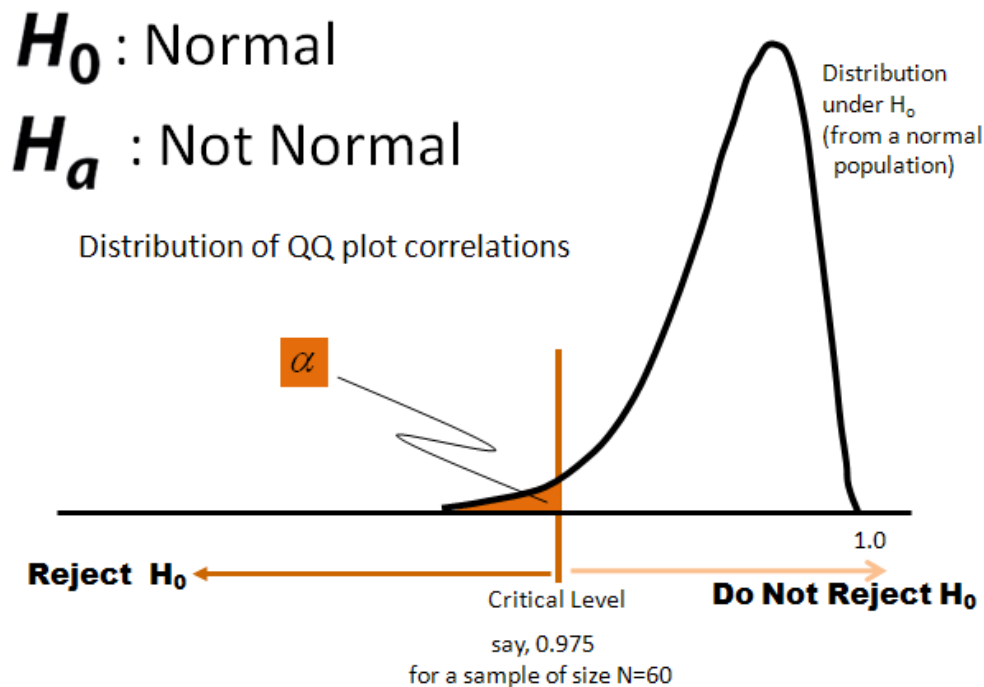
All QQ plots are increasing, so that all QQ plot correlations will be positive and quite large. But a QQ plot that may deviate from a straight line in dramatic ways would produce relatively smaller QQ plot correlations. Alternatively, QQ plots that appear almost arrow-straight would, of course, have QQ plot correlations very close to one.

When students identify the QQ plot correlations with the variables they have chosen as normal or not, often the pattern in Figure 3 results. The variables often chosen as non-normal from a visual inspection of the QQ plots are shaded pink. Their corresponding QQ plot correlations are listed alongside. Clearly, in this dataset, students intuition about normality is quite consistent with the behavior of the QQ plot correlation as an indicator of normality. The lowest QQ plot correlations correspond to the students' choices of the most non-normal QQ plots. This pattern is so strong that we can imagine a test of normality for samples of this size (60). It appears that for a QQ plot correlation less than about 0.975, our intuition suggests rejecting normality.



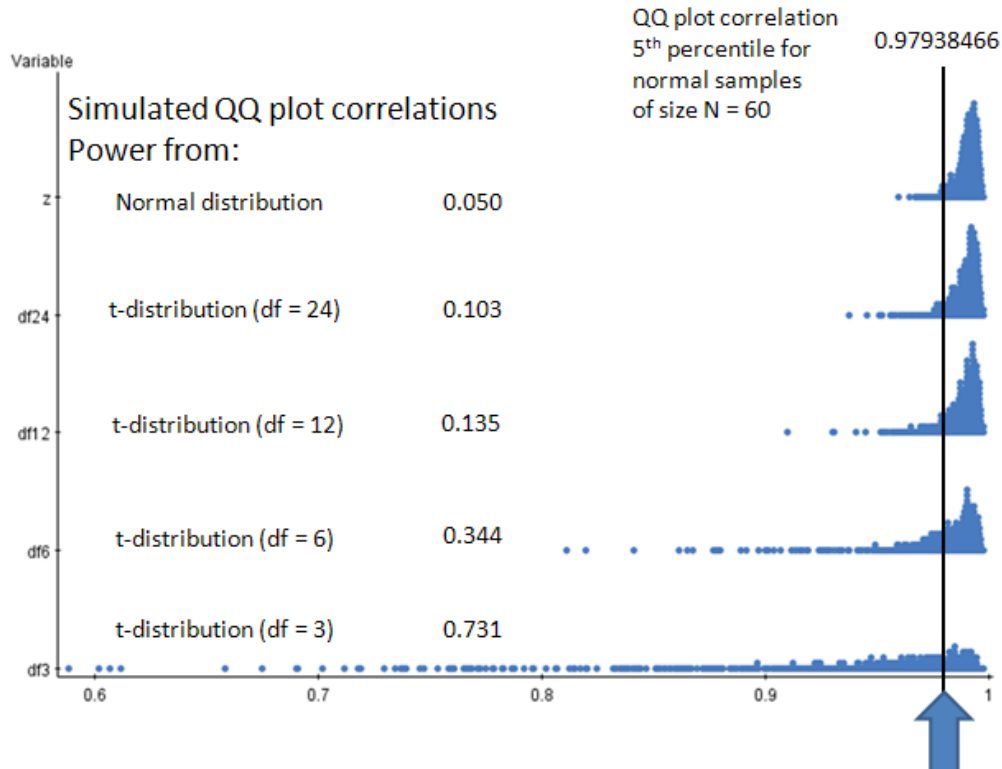
**Figure 3.** QQ plot correlations of all the variables with those flagged as non-normal from visual inspection of the QQ plots shaded in pink. Note that a test of normality is suggested by a procedure that would reject normality if the QQ plot correlation was less than about 0.975 for these samples of size  $n = 60$ .

To investigate how good the students' intuition really is at spotting non-normality from QQ plots we then turn to simulation. Students randomly generate samples from the standard normal distribution and calculate the QQ plot correlation to generate its sampling distribution. The goal is to illustrate a sampling distribution and test corresponding to Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Graphic to illustrate the hypothesis test and behavior of the sampling distribution of the QQ plot correlation when sampling from a standard normal distribution.

For these data, their intuition about normality closely matches both their simulated lower percentage 5% point and the more extensive simulations of Filliben (1975). Figure 5, at the top, displays the sampling distribution of the QQ plot correlation from 1000 samples of size  $n = 60$  from a standard normal distribution. The 5<sup>th</sup> percentile of this sampling distribution is our critical value and represented by the line at 0.97938466. Samples with QQ plot correlations below this value are labeled non-normal and samples with QQ plot correlations above this value are labeled as normal. Included here are also previously computed sampling distributions from various  $t$  distributions with degrees of freedom equal to 3, 6, 12, and 24. As the degrees of freedom decrease the sampling distributions of the QQ plot correlations exhibit much more variability and left skewness. The proportion of these sampling distributions that extend to the left of our critical value vertical line gives us a simulated power of this test of normality against increasingly heavier tailed symmetric parent distributions as the degrees of freedom decrease. Similar plots could demonstrate the effect of increasing amounts of skewness in the parent population.



**Figure 5.** Simulated sampling distributions of the QQ plot correlation from the standard normal distribution and various t distributions with 24, 12, 6, and 3 degrees of freedom. Also shown are the proportions of these simulated sampling distributions that fall less than the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile of the sampling distribution of the QQ plot correlation when sampling from a normal distribution. These proportions simulate the power of this test of normality against various heavier tailed alternatives.

We have developed with test with a diverse and useful array of variables, but only for one sample size. Applying this test to other data and sample sizes would require determination of the appropriate percentage points for Filliben's test. Filliben(1975) simulated an array of percentage points for samples up to size 100. Beyond that, Vogel (1986) has extended these simulations with various sample sizes up to 10000. Of course, with these procedures students now have the knowledge and skills to produce their own tables of percentage points for any sample size.

We have attached below the handouts that were used in a computer classroom to guide the students through these exercises in data analysis, intuition, modeling, testing, and simulation.

## 2. Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths of this approach do have much in common with its weakness. For strengths, this test is constructive: students use their data analytic skills to examine, intuit, develop, build, and evaluate a test of normality. Further this development emphasizes and reinforces the logic of hypothesis testing that goes beyond the usual t-tests or z-tests. This logic is reinforced with the simplicity of dichotomous null and alternative hypotheses.

This dichotomy makes the development and discussion of power easier to present and investigate while considering a parameter that models deviations from normality. This approach also has the benefit of showing that normality is more than just symmetry and bell-shaped histogram. Heavy tails can produce nice looking histograms with drastically un-straight QQ plots.

Many of these strengths are also weaknesses. For weakness, first we must again acknowledge that the test is constructive. Not all students are ready, willing, or able to develop and apply their intuition and skills in this way. Many students are quite at home with t-tests and z-tests and statistical procedures that have alternative testing methods can be daunting for them. This use of a correlation coefficient can confuse matters with the more common use of the standard correlation coefficient for quantifying association in a scatterplot. A null hypothesis of no correlation is common in such problems where we are examining the data for some evidence of non-zero correlation. The use of a QQ plot correlation, especially a correlation that we expect to be close to one, can be confusing. Tables are likely needed for the routine application of this test. As is evident, not all students in a second course in statistics may be ready for such a constructive, non-standard type of hypothesis test.

Overall, the importance of looking at the data, the use of an analyst's intuition and experience in modeling, simulating sampling distributions, developing hypothesis test procedures, evaluating power, are all reviewed and reinforced with this approach.

### 3. Classroom Handouts

#### 3.1 Measuring Normality 1

A classic dataset in the study of multiple regression lists data on 60 U.S. cities collected in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. For each city data were collected on a range of variables including: meteorological data (such as rainfall and average January temperature), demographic data (such as population density and the percentage of people below the poverty line), and pollutant data (such as the log of the concentrations of hydrocarbons or sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere). Also collected was a mortality variable (death rate) in each city. The full list of variables and their full definitions is shown below. The data *Mort.xls* can be found on Blackboard.

RAIN	Mean annual precipitation in inches.
JAN	Mean January temperature in degrees Fahrenheit.
JULY	Mean July temperature in degrees Fahrenheit.
OLD	Percentage of 1960 SMSA population which is 65 years of age or over.
POP/HSE	Population per household, 1960 SMSA.
EDUC	Median school years completed for those over 25 in 1960 SMSA.
GDHSE	Percentage of housing units that are sound with all facilities.
POPDEN	Population per square mile in urbanized area of SMSA in 1960.
NONW	Percentage of 1960 urbanized area population that is nonwhite.
WCOL	Percent employment in white-collar occupations in 1960 urbanized area.
POOR	Percentage of families with incomes under \$3000 in 1960 urbanized area.
HC	Relative pollution potential of hydrocarbons, HC.
NOX	Relative pollution potential of oxides of nitrogen, NO <sub>x</sub> .
S02	Relative pollution potential of sulfur dioxide, SO <sub>2</sub> .
HUMID	Percent relative humidity, annual average at 1 p.m.
MORT	Total age-adjusted mortality rate, (deaths per 100 000 population).

1. Use StatCrunch and find histograms for these variables by selecting them all. Look carefully at each histogram. Classify these samples from each variable according to whether you think the sample could have come from a normal distribution. (Normal or Not).
2. Use the StatCrunch Graphics -> QQplot to form QQplots for each variable. Compare the histograms and the QQplots side by side. Check your classifications from before.
3. Which variables appear the most non-normal? How do you think we could improve any analysis that might include them? Modify these variables accordingly. Check your classifications for these modified variables.



### 3.2 Measuring Normality 2

We have seen that QQ plots give us an indication of whether or not our data come from a normal distribution. The closer a normal QQ plot is to a straight line the more a normal distribution is suggested. One way to quantify this is with a simple correlation coefficient. Recall the correlation coefficient measures the strength of a linear association. Here that association is between the percentiles (quantiles) of our data and the corresponding percentiles (quantiles) of a normal distribution.

**To compute a QQ plot correlation for a sample  $y$  of  $n$  observations:**

First, sort your data from smallest to largest. Call these values  $\text{sort}(y)$ .

Second, compute a SEQUENCE of observations from 1 to  $n$  by 1. Call these values  $i$ .

Third, compute percentile positions for your data values as:  $p = (i - 0.5) / n$

Fourth, convert these percentile positions  $p$  into their corresponding normal  $z$  scores (with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one) as:  $qnorm(p,0,1)$ . Call these values  $z$ .

Finally, compute the correlation between  $\text{sort}(y)$  and  $z$ . This is the correlation coefficient of the data plotted in the QQ plot. This is a measure of normality.

1. Compute this measure for each of the variables in the mortality data set.
2. Form a dotplot for these correlations.
3. Recall your groupings from the earlier exercise where your grouped variables into those you thought were normal and those you thought were not normal. Highlight on the dotplot correlations for the variables that you selected as being normal.
4. What is common about the correlation coefficients for these variables that you selected?
5. What value of a correlation coefficient might distinguish between those that you selected as normal and those that you selected as non-normal?
6. How could we use this value to test for normality?

### 3.3 Measuring Normality 3

Samples vary. So no sample can be expected to match exactly the population distribution that produced it. We don't expect a QQ plot from a random normal sample to be exactly straight. Likewise, we don't expect the normal QQ plot correlation coefficient to be equal to one. But we still expect it to be very close to one. How much variability is there in this QQ plot correlation coefficient if the data really do come from a normal distribution? We will simulate the behavior of this QQ plot correlation coefficient with the mortality dataset in mind.

1. In StatCrunch use Data -> Simulate Data -> Normal to generate 60 rows and 20 columns of data from a standard normal distribution (mean of zero and standard deviation of one). Use the dynamic seed option (this generates different samples each time).
2. To construct QQ plots for these columns, first sort them all from smallest to largest.
3. Construct the sequence variable from 1 to 60 by 1. Convert it to normal quantiles with the qnorm function as shown earlier.
4. Use multiplot to plot them all together. The x-axis is your sequence of normal quantiles. The y-axis is the sorted column of simulated normal data. Plot these with points for all the columns. Notice the range of behaviors for the QQ plots: variability in the intercept and variability in the slope (most notable by the flared out regions for small or large observations).
5. Find the QQ plot correlations for the 20 columns. Use OPTIONS then COPY, to enter these back into the data table: Data, Load Data, from Paste. Then Paste the data into the window. Delete the first title row. Unclick the box to use first row as labels and unclick the box to load in a new table. This will add the correlations into the current table. The first column of numbers added will be your QQ plot correlations. Rename the column: QQr.
6. Construct a dotplot for your QQ plot correlations.
7. To see how much variability there is in QQ plot correlations you have computed it ten times for simulated normal data. Now open a new StatCrunch window and from Blackboard load the dataset: QQcorrelations361224z.xlsx. The column headed z shows the QQ plot correlations for 1000 normal samples of size 60. Construct a dotplot for these QQ plot correlations.
8. Find the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile of these QQ plot correlations. We will reject an assumption of normality if we see a sample of size 60 with a QQ plot correlation less than this 5<sup>th</sup> percentile.
9. This is based on a test of normality due to Filliben (1975). Attached are the percentage points of this distribution for other tail probabilities and other sample sizes. Suppose you had a sample of size 60 and your observed QQ plot correlation was 0.97. At a 5% level of significance, would you reject an assumption of normality? What would be the p-value for this test?

### 3.4 Measuring Normality 4

So how good is this test of normality? How well does it recognize samples from distributions that are not normal? If the data do not come from a normal distribution, what is the probability that our test will reject the null hypothesis of normality?

To answer these questions we need to examine some alternative to normality. Unfortunately, there are many. We will examine another distribution, the t-distribution that is closely related to the normal. Perhaps you remember t-tests from basic statistics; they always had a parameter called the degrees of freedom associated with the test. These degrees of freedom index the behavior of the t-distribution.

1. How do samples from t-distributions behave? Simulate a sample with 60 rows and 20 columns from a t-distribution with 3 degrees of freedom. Find a dotplot and a histogram for this sample.
2. Use StatCrunch's QQplot menu option to produce a normal QQplots to see how closely your samples match a normal distribution.
3. As we have seen before, produce quantiles from a normal distribution from a sequence from 1 to 60 by 1. Sort your t-samples and find the correlations between the normal quantiles and your sorted columns. How many fall below our lower 5% rejection point for testing the sample is normal?
4. The QQcorrelations361224z.xlsx data set on Blackboard. Shows the behavior of the QQplot correlations for samples of size 60 from t-distributions with degrees of freedom of 3,6,12, and 24. Produce dotplots of all of these QQplot correlation samples along with the one for z, the normal QQplot correlation.
5. Calculate the percentage of each of these t-distributions the percentage of the QQplot correlations that fall below our lower 5% rejection point for testing normality.
6. What do these plots tell you about the test of normality?
7. What do these plots tell you about how the t-distribution is related to the normal distribution?

## References

Filliben, J. J. (February 1975). “The Probability Plot Correlation Coefficient Test for Normality”. *Technometrics* **17** (1): 111–117

Vogel, R. M. (1986), “The Probability Plot Correlation Coefficient Test for the Normal, Lognormal, and Gumbel Distributional Hypotheses,” *Water Resources Research*, **22**(4): 587-590.