

# Empowering Large Language Models: Tool Learning for Real-World Interaction

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## ABSTRACT

Since the advent of large language models (LLMs), the field of tool learning has remained very active in solving various tasks in practice, including but not limited to information retrieval. This *half-day* tutorial provides basic concepts of this field and an overview of recent advancements with several applications. In specific, we start with some foundational components and architecture of tool learning (i.e., *cognitive tool* and *physical tool*), and then we categorize existing studies in this field into *tool-augmented learning* and *tool-oriented learning*, and introduce various learning methods to empower LLMs this kind of capability. Furthermore, we provide several cases about *when*, *what*, and *how to use tools* in different applications. We end with some open challenges and several potential research directions for future studies. We believe this tutorial is suited for both researchers at different stages (introductory, intermediate, and advanced) and industry practitioners who are interested in LLMs and tool learning<sup>1</sup>.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → *Users and interactive retrieval*; • **General and reference** → **Cross-computing tools and techniques**; • **Computing methodologies** → **Natural language processing**.

## KEYWORDS

Large Language Models, Tool Learning, Language Agents

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<sup>1</sup>We promise that at least one presenter will attend in person to present the tutorial, and we will try our best to get the visa to be there.

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## 1 MOTIVATION AND OVERVIEW

Large Language Models (LLMs) [43], also known as Foundation Models, have demonstrated remarkable capabilities across various tasks [4], including dialogue systems [34, 37, 38], question answering [39], and complex reasoning like mathematical [16] and symbolic problem-solving [5, 10]. However, they still face inherent limitations such as hallucinations [42], outdated information [39], and poor mathematical calculations. To address these challenges, the concept of tool learning [27] has emerged, aiming to bridge LLMs with the external world by equipping them with versatile tools such as calculators, search engines, models, and even physical robots. This kind of integration not only overcomes these limitations (e.g., providing up-to-date information using an external search engine) but also unveils the great potential and possibility of LLMs to solve more complex and interactive tasks in the real world. The main content of this tutorial includes:

### 1.1 Foundation of Tool Learning

Tools have been crucial throughout human history, spanning thousands of years of evolution. The creation and use of tools is a unique characteristic of humans, setting them apart from other species, which extends the human capabilities to enhance productivity, efficiency, and problem-solving in practice. However, the definition and scope of tools within the context of Large Language Models (LLMs) have undergone a notable transformation, resulting in the emergence of distinct architectures for tool learning [27]. In this part, we will provide a comprehensive introduction about tool learning that spans various task formulations and application scenarios. In specific, we start with the definition and scope of tools in the era of LLMs and then present some important components and architecture of tool learning.

• **Definition and Scope of Tools.** Tools are defined as objects that can extend an individual's ability to modify features of the surrounding environment or help them accomplish a particular task in general. Since the dawn of LLMs, tools are basically categorized into two classes: *cognitive tools* [11, 36] and *physical tools* [12, 23, 27]. The former stands for a cognitive concept used to help systematic or investigative thought inside the cognitive / thinking processing of the human mind [3, 7], such as reflection [6] and different conversational strategies [36], which is more like internal abstract. Apart from internal cognitive tools, there are many physical tools externally which can be divided into:

1) physical interaction-based tools; 2) GUI-based tools; and 3) program-based tools, according to a recent survey [27]. We will delve into widely-used tools and their practical applications in real-world interactions.

- **Components and Architecture of Tool Learning.** To combine the strengths of LLMs with different specialized tools (internally or externally), there are four fundamental components: tool set, environment, controller, and perceiver [27]. Each of these components possesses distinct characteristics and functions, and they closely interact with each other. We will provide an elaborate discussion of the general procedure of tool learning [23, 27], and we also will introduce some specialized architecture of tool learning in the context of language agents, such as CoALA [32].

## 1.2 Tool Learning based on LLMs

According to the different roles of tools and LLMs, the existing studies of tool learning can be divided into two streams: 1) *tool-augmented learning*; and 2) *tool-oriented learning*. On one hand, we witness the evolution of LLMs through techniques like retrieval-augmented generation, where execution results of specialized tools are used to enrich the quality of generations of LLMs (a.k.a., tools for LLMs) [18, 39]. On the other hand, there's a parallel journey of tool-oriented learning, where the focus lies in equipping LLMs with the ability to reason and plan complex tool executions. This approach enables LLMs to seamlessly orchestrate multiple tools [23, 29], transforming them into adept problem-solving agents (a.k.a., LLMs for tools). In this part, we will categorize the existing works into these two groups as follows, and introduce more details about how to train LLMs to use tools.

- **Tool-augmented Learning.** The role of tools in this line of work is akin to supplementary resources, bolstering LLMs' capacity to integrate domain-specific knowledge and enhance their generation capability. One typical example is retrieval-augmented generation [18], which retrieves related and useful knowledge from external knowledge sources [34, 35] and then generates more helpful and harmless responses. Besides that, we also will present augmentation from other tools, such as APIs [25, 28], Programs [9], and so on [39].
- **Tool-oriented Learning.** The objective of tool-oriented learning is to enable LLMs to make sequential decisions and effectively execute tools to address compositional tasks. However, this approach tends to rely heavily on task-specific data, resulting in poor generalization and sub-optimal performance. The most representative application of tool-oriented learning is robotic manipulation [15, 19], which treats the LLMs as the brain of the system. There are other automation for tools in practice, such as search automation, online shopping, and other complex decision-making processing to use tools.
- **"Learning" of Tool Learning.** There are two primary learning approaches for optimizing LLMs to utilize tools effectively: 1) learning from demonstrations [23, 36]; and 2) learning from interactions [24], often requiring the application of reinforcement learning. These training strategies provide a foundation for enabling LLMs to learn and effectively utilize tools in various contexts, empowering them to tackle complex tasks that require sophisticated tool interactions and decision-making capabilities.

To extend LLMs' proficiency to a wide array of tools, potential solutions have been proposed, such as curriculum learning [31] and meta-learning [13]. These methodologies aim to facilitate the generalization of LLMs' tool usage skills, ensuring their adaptability and effectiveness across a broad spectrum of tool-based tasks.

## 1.3 Application of Tool Learning

Tool learning holds significant importance in various applications by enabling systems to autonomously create, select, and utilize tools to accomplish tasks effectively and efficiently, accompanied by better user experiences. We'll first address the foundational aspects essential for tool learning in applications, focusing on the prerequisites such as tool creation and selection. Following that, we'll delve into three significant practical application scenarios where tool learning plays a crucial role.

- **Tool Creation, Selection, and Utilization.** The premise of tool learning revolves around the necessity of having tools readily available. These tools can either be created from scratch or borrowed from existing resources. Once the tools are accessible, the next step involves selecting one or more appropriate tools from the inventory to address the specific problem at hand. We will explore various commonly used tools, as well as recent advancements in the creation and selection of tools tailored to different situations [14, 27].
- **Tool Learning in Information Retrieval.** Information Retrieval, has always been an effective and efficient method to extend the knowledge boundary of language models, aiming to provide more informative, up-to-date, and personalized answers [24, 35]. There are various tools belonging to information retrieval, playing key roles in daily life such as search engines, weather and stock information services, Wikipedia, and more. We will present how LLMs interact with these tools to improve the quality and relevance of their responses over time, enhancing user satisfaction and overall performance, especially at dialogue system [35] and question answering [2].
- **Tool Learning in Embodied Environment.** In embodied environments, such as robotics or virtual reality simulations, tool learning enables agents to interact with and manipulate their surroundings effectively. We will introduce several embodied environments, such as ALFWorld [30], ScienceWorld [40] and VirtualHome [26], and then present current progress to learn via interactions [12, 20].

## 1.4 Advanced Topics and Future Directions

With the increasing power and capabilities of Large Language Models (LLMs), including multi-modal LLMs [22] and longer context windows [8], the future landscape of tool learning stands to be significantly impacted. In the last section, we will explore advanced topics and potential future directions of tool learning in light of these advancements.

- **Multi-modal and Multi-agent Tool Learning.** As LLMs evolve to incorporate multi-modal capabilities, the future of tool learning will likely involve leveraging information from various modalities such as text, images, and audio [23, 33]. Multi-modal tool learning will enable systems to understand and interact with the world

in a more holistic manner, leading to more comprehensive and contextually rich tool utilization. In addition, the communication and collaboration between multiple LLMs also play a key role in enhancing the adaptability and effectiveness of tool utilization in complex, interactive settings [36].

- **Safe, Trustworthy, and Personalized Tool Learning.** Ensuring the safety and trustworthiness of automated tool learning is essential [1], particularly in critical domains such as health-care and finance. Similarly, adaptively calling tools according to the user’s preference is also an important issue for personalized tool learning [17, 34]. There are many tools with overlap functions, but the user may have different preferences over them, for example, different users tend to use different online shopping platforms and have different preferences for the brand of the products.
- **Emerging Trends and Future Opportunities.** In addition to the advancements above, several emerging trends and future opportunities are poised to shape the trajectory of tool learning. One such trend is the exploration of knowledge conflicts [41], where conflicting information or objectives arise during tool learning processes. Addressing knowledge conflicts will require developing robust mechanisms for resolving discrepancies and synthesizing diverse perspectives, thereby improving the robustness and adaptability of learned tools. Furthermore, integrating different tool learning techniques (e.g., when, what, and how to use) will enable systems to learn more efficiently, leading to faster adaptation to new tasks and environments.

## 2 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this tutorial are threefold:

- We present a comprehensive and systematic overview of the recent progress of tool learning for LLMs, covering various task formulations and application scenarios. We hope it will provide a convenient entry point for the community to get a grip on the recent progress of tool learning.
- We provide an in-depth analysis of existing works of tool learning, categorizing them into tool-augmented learning and tool-oriented learning, discussing different training strategies, and exploring various applications in practice.
- We discuss some advanced topics and emerging trends to solve more complex problems, aiming to shed some light on the future directions of tool learning.

## 3 FORMAT AND DETAILED SCHEDULE

The following summarizes the detailed schedule of the tutorial:

- (1) Introduction [10 mins]
- (2) Foundations of Tool Learning [20 mins]
  - (a) Definition and Scope of Tools
  - (b) Components and Architecture of Tool Learning
- (3) Tool Learning based on LLMs [60 mins]
  - (a) Tool-oriented Learning
  - (b) Tool-augmented Learning
  - (c) “Learning” of Tool Learning
- (4) Application of Tool Learning [40 mins]
  - (a) Tool Creation, Selection and Utilization
  - (b) Tool Learning in Information Retrieval

- (c) Tool Learning in Embodied Environment
- (5) Advanced Topics and Future Directions [40 mins]
    - (a) Multi-modal and Multi-agent Tool Learning
    - (b) Safe, Trustworthy, and Personalized Tool Learning
    - (c) Emerging Trends and Future Opportunities
  - (6) Summary and Overlook [10 mins]

## 4 RELEVANCE TO COMMUNITY

The area of tool learning has grown significantly in a very short time [23, 27]. To the best of our knowledge, there is **no** related tutorial on this topic. We believe that ours can fill the gap and provide a comprehensive overview of this topic, serving as a great opportunity for both the newer and advanced researchers in this field.

Specifically, we start with the scope and architectures of tool learning and then review existing works to provide a systematic analysis of current progress and limitations of tool learning based on LLMs. For example, we utilize retrieval-augmented generation as one typical case to illustrate tool-augmented learning. Furthermore, we discuss the practical applications of tool learning, especially in information retrieval and embodied environments. There are many different ways to utilize external various retrievers to solve different tasks such as dialogue system [35] or question answering [39]. In addition, there are some IR works that build automatic retrieval frameworks in embodied environments such as WebGLM [21]. Finally, we conclude with a detailed discussion about some advanced topics, including knowledge conflicts from the whole processing which is also related to similar areas in the IR community.

In summary, we contend that tutorials are closely related to the fundamental areas of SIGIR. This association arises not just from the multitude of tools employed within the field, but also from the potential for fruitful collaboration and interrelations between information retrieval (IR) and other fields.

## 5 SUPPORTING MATERIALS

- (1) **Slides** will be publicly available;
- (2) **Github repository** to survey all related papers about this topic;
- (3) **Survey** paper is accompanied with this tutorial [27];
- (4) **Website** to provide all above materials to the attendees.

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