Linear systems, row reduction and echelon forms: Summary

To use row reduction to solve a linear system, we follow these steps:

1. Write the augmented matrix of the system.
2. Use the row reduction algorthim to obtain an equivalent augmented matrix in reduced echelon form.
3. Determine if the system is consistent. If not, there is no solution.
4. If the system is consistent, translate the reduced echelon form into a system of equations.
5. Give a parametric description of the solution set by writing each basic variable in terms of any free variables. If there are no free variables, the system of equations from the previous step gives the unique solution to the system.

To recall the echelon forms of a matrix, consider the following excerpt from the text.

EXAMPLE 1 The following matrices are in echelon form. The leading entries ($\blacksquare$) may have any nonzero value; the starred entries ($*$) may have any value (including zero).

$$\begin{bmatrix} \blacksquare & * & * & * \\ 0 & \blacksquare & * & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \begin{bmatrix} 0 & \blacksquare & * & * & * & * & * & * & * & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & \blacksquare & * & * & * & * & * & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & \blacksquare & * & * & * & * & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & \blacksquare & * & * & * & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & \blacksquare & * \end{bmatrix}$$

The following matrices are in reduced echelon form because the leading entries are 1's, and there are 0's below *and above* each leading 1.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & * & * \\ 0 & 1 & * & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 1 & * & 0 & 0 & 0 & * & * & 0 & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 & * & * & 0 & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 & * & * & 0 & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & * & * & 0 & * \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & * \end{bmatrix}$$

Example: Solve the linear system

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 - 2x_2 + x_3 &= 0 \\ 2x_2 - 8x_3 &= 8 \\ 5x_1 - 5x_3 &= 10 \end{aligned}$$

1. The augmented matrix is $\begin{bmatrix} 1 & -2 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 2 & -8 & 8 \\ 5 & 0 & -5 & 10 \end{bmatrix}$.
2. Row reducing yields the reduced echelon form $\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & -1 \end{bmatrix}$.

3. No row has a nonzero leading entry in the rightmost column: hence, the system is consistent.
4. Translating back into a linear system yields

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 \qquad\qquad &= 1 \\ x_2 \qquad &= 0 \\ x_3 &= -1 \end{aligned}$$

5. There are no free variables: thus the system has a unique solution which is given by $x_1 = 1$, $x_2 = 0$, and $x_3 = -1$.

Here are two quick examples of applying the algorithm without noting each step:

Example: Solve the linear system

$$\begin{aligned} x_2 - 4x_3 &= 8 \\ 2x_1 - 3x_2 + 2x_3 &= 1 \\ 4x_1 - 8x_2 + 12x_3 &= 1 \end{aligned}$$

The augmented matrix is

$$\begin{bmatrix} 0 & 1 & -4 & 8 \\ 2 & -3 & 2 & 1 \\ 4 & -8 & 12 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \sim \begin{bmatrix} 2 & -3 & 2 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & -4 & 8 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 15 \end{bmatrix}.$$

The final row of the echelon form of the augmented matrix has a nonzero leading entry in the rightmost column: hence, this system is inconsistent and has no solution.

Example: Solve the linear system

$$\begin{aligned} 3x_2 - 6x_3 + 6x_4 + 4x_5 &= -5 \\ 3x_1 - 7x_2 + 8x_3 - 5x_4 + 8x_5 &= 9 \\ 3x_1 - 9x_2 + 12x_3 - 9x_4 + 6x_5 &= 15 \end{aligned}$$

Notice

$$\begin{bmatrix} 0 & 3 & -6 & 6 & 4 & -5 \\ 3 & -7 & 8 & -5 & 8 & 9 \\ 3 & -9 & 12 & -9 & 6 & 15 \end{bmatrix} \sim \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & -2 & 3 & 0 & -24 \\ 0 & 1 & -2 & 2 & 0 & -7 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 & 4 \end{bmatrix}.$$

Translating back into a linear system yields:

$$\begin{aligned} x_1 - 2x_3 + 3x_4 &= -24 \\ x_2 - 2x_3 + 2x_4 &= -7 \\ x_5 &= 15 \end{aligned}$$

The variables corresponding to pivots are x_1, x_2 and x_5: these are the basic variables. Thus x_3 and x_4 are free. Rewriting accordingly gives the following parametric description of the solution set.

$$\begin{cases} x_1 = -24 + 2x_3 - 3x_4 \\ x_2 = -7 + 2x_3 - 2x_4 \\ x_5 = 4 \end{cases}$$