

# Optimal Placement in a Limit Order Book

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**Abstract** Algorithmic trading refers to the automatic and rapid trading of large quantities with orders specified and implemented by an algorithm. Roughly speaking, algorithmic trading is based on two different time scales: the daily or weekly scale, and a smaller (ten to hundred seconds) time scale. These two time scales essentially reflect the two steps by which the traders slice and place orders. The first step is to optimally slice big orders into smaller ones on a daily basis with the goal to minimize the price impact and/or to maximize the expected utility; the second step is to optimally place the orders within seconds. The former is the well-known optimal execution problem and the latter is the much less-studied optimal placement problem.

This paper reviews several simple models and approaches for the optimal placement problem. Several most relevant statistical issues are presented, together with a brief discussion on the key differences between the system of limit order book and the multiclass queues with reneging.

**Keywords** Limit order book, high frequency trading, optimal placement, correlated random walk, diffusion limit, queues with reneging

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## 1. Introduction

Technological innovation has completely transformed the fundamentals of the financial market. As a result, automatic and electronic order-driven trading platforms have largely replaced the traditional floor-based trading. In an electronic order-driven market, orders arrive at the exchange and wait in the *Limit Order Book (LOB)* to be executed. In US, high-frequency trading firms represent 2% of the approximately 20,000 firms operating today, but account for 73% of all equity orders volume. In most exchanges, order flow is heavy with thousands of orders in seconds and tens of thousands of price changes in a day for a liquid stock. Meanwhile, the time for the execution of a market order has dropped below one millisecond. This new era of trading is commonly referred to as the *High Frequency Trading (HFT)* or *Algorithmic Trading*.

In an order-driven market, there are two types of buy/sell orders for market participants to post: market orders and limit orders. A *limit order* is an order to trade a certain amount of security (stocks, futures, etc.) at a given specified price. The lowest price for which there is an outstanding limit sell order is called the *ask price* and the highest limit buy price is called the *bid price*. Limit orders are collected and posted in the LOB, which contains the quantities and the price at each price level for all limit buy and sell orders. A *market order* is an order to buy/sell a certain amount of the equity at the best available price in the LOB; it is then matched with the best available price and a trade occurs immediately and the LOB is updated accordingly. A limit order stays in the LOB until it is executed against a market order or until it is canceled; cancelation is allowed at any time. The closer a limit order is to the bid/ask, the faster it may be executed. Most exchanges are based on First-In-First-Out (FIFO) policy for orders on the same price level, although some derivatives on some exchanges have the pro-rate microstructure. That is, an incoming market order is dispatched on all active limit orders at the best price, with each limit order contributing to

execution in proportion to its volume. In this paper, unless otherwise specified, we always focus the discussions on the FIFO market, with extensions to the pro-rate microstructure whenever appropriate.

Order books are available with different levels of details. For example, the so called “level-1 order book” contains the best price level of the order book, while “level-2 order book” provides the prices and quantities of the best five levels on both the ask and the bid sides. The following table is a typical example showing the dynamics of the limit order book (LOB) of the top 5 levels: a market sell order of size 1200, followed by a limit ask order of size 400 at price 9.08, and then a cancel action of size 23 for limit ask order at the price 9.10.

	Price	Size		Price	Size		Price	Size		Price	Size
Ask	9.12	1,525	Ask	9.12	1,525	Ask	9.12	1,525	Ask	9.12	1,525
	9.11	3,624		9.11	3,624		9.11	3,624		9.11	3,624
	9.10	4,123		9.10	4,123		9.10	4,123		9.10	4,100
	9.09	1,235		9.09	1,235		9.09	1,235		9.09	1,235
	9.08	3,287		9.08	3,287		9.08	3,687		9.08	3,687
Bid	9.07	4,895	Bid	9.07	3,695	Bid	9.07	3,695	Bid	9.07	3,695
	9.06	3,645		9.06	3,645		9.06	3,645		9.06	3,645
	9.05	2,004		9.05	2,004		9.05	2,004		9.05	2,004
	9.04	3,230		9.04	3,230		9.04	3,230		9.04	3,230
	9.03	7,246		9.03	7,246		9.03	7,246		9.03	7,246

FIGURE 1. Orders happened in bid/ask queues.

Cancellation is a major and distinct feature of algorithm trading. It is a critical strategic tool used by high frequency traders to test the market. On average, more than eighty percent of the orders are canceled within a second after they are submitted. An exemplary case was reported in October 2012 by CNBC news:

“A single mysterious computer program that placed orders—and then subsequently canceled them—made up 4 percent of all quote traffic in the U.S. stock market for the week (of October 5th, 2012)... The program placed orders in 25-millisecond bursts involving about 500 stocks and the algorithm never executed a single trade.”

## 2. Optimal placement with LOB

### 2.1. Optimal placement vs. optimal execution

Roughly speaking, algorithmic trading is based on two different time scales: the daily or weekly scale and a smaller (ten to hundred seconds) time scale. These two time scales reflect two different types of traders: the slow scale for the ordinary investors and the fast scale for the others. They are referred to as fundamental traders and high frequency traders (HFT) respectively in a recent empirical work of Kirilenko et al. (2011). They show that these two different types of traders displayed statistically different behavior and played different roles during the flash crash of May 2010. In general, the former try to minimize the price impact of their trades and the latter tend to predict and act faster to price changes. The two time scales essentially correspond to the two steps by which the traders slice and place orders.

The first step is to optimally slice big orders into smaller ones on a daily basis and the second step is to optimally place the orders within seconds. The former is the well-known *optimal execution problem* and the latter is much less studied and we call it the *optimal placement problem*.

**Optimal execution.** The key issue in the optimal execution problem is the *price impact*. The major modeling hypothesis behind the optimal execution problem is that any trading strategy — especially that involves large amount of buying and selling within a short period of time — will have an impact on the stock price: too large order may depress the price and reduce the potential profit and too many small transactions may be costly and may take too long to complete. These price impact models, unlike those in classical hedging and pricing, focus on controlling the speed/quantity of trading so as to minimize the price impact and/or to maximize expected utility functions. The study of the optimal execution problem was pioneered by Bertsimas and Lo (1998), who analyze a discrete random walk model and by Almgren and Chriss (1999, 2001) and Almgren (2003) who consider continuous-time Bachelier-type Brownian motion models. The trading impact is assumed additive and their analysis yields a volume-average type static/deterministic trading strategy. Based on different model approaches, the price impact is then evolved into three different types: permanent, temporary, and transient. Later on, the notion of price manipulation is developed as analog of no-arbitrage for derivative pricing. Standard references for these models with additive and possible nonlinear price impact include Huberman and Stanzl (00), Obizhaeva and Wang (05), Schied and Schöneborn (07,08), Almgren and Lorenz(07), Alfonsi et al. (2010, 2012), Gatheral (2010), Predoiu et al. (2010), Schied et al. (2010), and Weiss (2011); works involving the geometric Brownian motion and/or multiplicative price impact include Gatheral and Schied (2011), Forsyth et al. (2011), and Guo and Zervos (2012).

**Optimal placement.** Optimal placement problem studies how to optimally place the small-sized orders in the LOB. Specifically, when using limit orders, traders do not need to pay the spread and most of the time even get a rebate. This rebate structure varies from exchange to exchange and leads to different optimization problems. For instance, in Hong Kong stock exchange, successful executions of limit orders get a discount, i.e., a fixed percentage, of the execution price whereas in other places such as the London stock exchange, the discount may be a fixed amount. This rebate, however, comes with a risk as there is no guarantee of execution for limit orders. On the other hand, when using market orders, one has to pay both the spread between the limit and the market orders and the fee in exchange for a guaranteed immediate execution. Thus, traders have to decide: given a number of shares to buy or sell, should one use market orders, or limit orders, or both? How many orders should be placed at different price levels? What is the optimal sequence of order placement in a give time frame with multi-trades? In essence, traders have to balance the tradeoff between paying the spread and fees vs. execution/inventory risk when placing market orders and limit orders.

There is also the price impact issue in the optimal placement problem. For instance, the price impact of a market order is generally believed to be larger than that of a limit order, and the empirical study by Cont, Kukanov, and Stoikov (2011) suggests that the price impact is more or less linear at the trade level.

Though optimal execution and optimal placement are two different problems, the former is sometimes studied with the incorporation of certain aspects of the latter, especially when the LOB is taken into consideration. (See Alfonsi et al. (2008) and Predoiu et al. (2010).) The latter, on the other hand, could be viewed as the former when the execution risk is removed, as shown by Guo, et al. (2013).

## 2.2. Optimal placement

The optimal placement problem can be summarized as follows:

- One needs to buy  $N$  orders before time  $T > 0$  ( $T \approx 1/5$  minutes);
- One can split the  $N$  orders into  $(N_{0,t}, N_{1,t}, \dots)$  where  $N_{0,t}$  is the number of orders at the market price,  $N_{1,t}$  the number of orders at the best bid,  $N_{2,t}$  the number of orders at the second best bid,  $\dots$ , for  $t = 0, 1, \dots, T$ ;
- No intermediate selling is allowed before time  $T$ ;
- If the limit orders are not executed by time  $T$ , then one has to buy the non-executed orders at the market price at time  $T$ ;
- When one share of limit order is executed, the market gives a rebate of  $r > 0$ ; and
- When the trader submits a share of market order, there is a fee of  $f > 0$ .

Given  $N$ , the objective is to find the optimal strategy  $(N_{0,t}, N_{1,t}, \dots, N_{k,t})_t$  to minimize the overall total expected cost.

### 2.3. Discrete models

**Markov chain model for the full LOB with  $N = 1$ .** Hult and Kiessling (2010) build a high-dimensional Markov chain model for the state and evolution of the entire LOB. Specifically, they assume that there are  $d$  price levels in the order book, say  $\pi^1 < \dots < \pi^d$ , and that the Markov chain  $X_t = (X_t^1, \dots, X_t^d)$  represents the volume at time  $t$  of buy orders with negative values and of sell orders with positive values at each price level. The generator matrix of  $X$  is  $Q = (Q_{xy})$  where  $Q_{xy}$  denotes the transition matrix from state  $x = (x^1, \dots, x^d)$  to  $y = (y^1, \dots, y^d)$ . For example, a limit sell order of size  $k$  at level  $j$  corresponds to a transition from state  $x$  to state  $x + ke^j$ . For the convenience of analysis, they also assume that the highest bid level is always lower than the lowest ask level and that there is always someone to sell at the highest possible price and buy at the lowest possible price. There is no specific constraint on the spread between the best bid and ask levels. Within this framework, they consider a special version of the optimal placement problem with  $N = 1$ . That is, an agent has to buy one unit, and has to decide between place a market order at the best ask level or place the limit buy at a lower level. The key is then to compute the probability that a limit buy order is executed before the price moves up as well as the expected buy price resulting from a limit buy order. Using the potential theory for Markov chains, they derive conditions for the existence of an optimal strategy and provide a value-iteration algorithm to numerically find the optimal strategy. They also provide a calibration method for the Markov chain model using real data from a foreign exchange market.

**Correlated random walk model.** Guo et al. (2013) propose a correlated random walk model for the optimal placement problem. Their starting point is the characteristics of the LOB rather than the whole LOB and they focus on modeling the ask price. Fix a finite time horizon  $[0, T]$ , they assume that the spread between the bid price and the ask price is constant, the number of price changes is the same as the time steps, and the ask price follows a correlated random walk with increment  $+1$  or  $-1$ . That is,  $A_n = \sum_{i=1}^n X_i$  with  $X_i$  taking two values  $\pm 1$  with transition probabilities:

$$\begin{array}{c|cc} & +1 & -1 \\ \hline +1 & p_1 & q_1 \\ -1 & q_2 & p_2 \end{array}$$

where  $p_1 + q_1 = 1 = p_2 + q_2$ . The initial condition is  $P_r(X_1 = 1) = p = 1 - P_r(X = -1)$ . Note that in this model,  $p_1 - p_2$  and  $p$  measure the “drift” of the correlated walk. For simplicity, they further assume that  $p_1 = p_2 = p_c$ . In this particular parameter choices, if  $p_c = \frac{1}{2}$ , then the price is a time-changed random walk and if  $p_c < \frac{1}{2}$ , the price “mean-reverts”.

They first consider the case without any price impact so that the optimal placement problem for  $N$  is reduced to finding the order level with the lowest expected cost to buy one share. In a single-period model they show that the optimal strategy is to use either the market order or the best bid. The threshold strategy is explicitly given in terms of the

model parameters, and is shown to be monotonic with respect to time and the fees. That is, with more time remaining, and/or with higher payoff from using limit orders, one is more likely to use limit orders.

They continue the analysis to a multi-period model and then add a linear price impact. In these extended models they focus on the best bid and ask prices and add a (constant) probability  $q$  of execution of each limit order. In the multi-period model without the price impact, they again derive a threshold type optimal strategy among the choices of market order, limit order, and neither. In the price impact model, they draw analogy to the work on the optimal execution problem by Bertsimas and Lo [9] by replacing the correlated random walk model with a continuous-time, piecewise linear martingale process and consider the following simplified problem: for a given pair of  $N, T$ , the number of shares and the time frame, how many to put in the market order and how many in the limit order in each time step between 0 and  $T$ ? They prove that the optimal strategy at each step is to use either the market order or the limit order but not both, and they present a numerical algorithm for finding the optimal sequence for the number of market order and limit order at each step. In the particular case when there is no execution risk, i.e.,  $q = 0$ , their solution reduces to that of Bertsimas and Lo (1998).

#### 2.4. Continuous-time model with reduced form

In general, the probability of a particular limit order being executed depends on the queue length, its position in the LOB, the frequency of price changes, the arrival rate of market orders and the cancellation of orders, as Figure 2 shows. To capture the essence of the optimal placement problem, it is important to understand  $Z(t)$ , the dynamics of an order position at time  $t$  after it is placed on the LOB, as  $Z(t)$  contains crucial information of the balance and relation between the execution risk and the microstructure of the LOB.

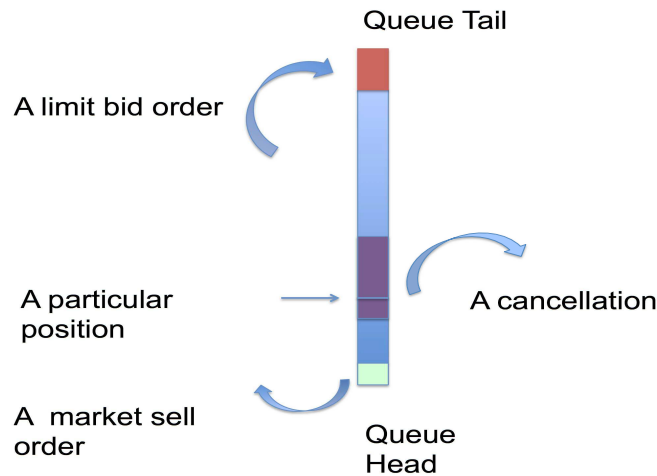


FIGURE 2. Orders happened in the best bid queue.

To study  $Z(t)$ , Guo and Ruan (2013) focus on the queues of the best bid and the best ask. This “reduced form” approach was first proposed by Cont and de Larrard (2013) where they draw connections between the LOB and multi-class priority queues. One of their key ideas to simplify the problem is the random initialization of the queues once a queue is depleted. With this assumption and by viewing the arrival of market, limit, and cancellation orders as point processes, they establish a functional central limit theorem after some technical assumptions including the stationary uniformly mixing condition on the sequence of order

sizes (market, limit, and cancellation). They show that the limit dynamics of the LOB may be approximated by a Markov process  $Q = (Q_t^a, Q_t^b)$  in the positive quadrant  $R_+^2$ , which behaves like a planar Brownian motion in the interior of the quadrant but with a boundary condition of an integral type, known also as the Wentzel condition. More precisely,  $Q$  is a Markov process with an infinitesimal generator of the form

$$Ah(x, y) = A \frac{\partial h}{\partial y} + B \frac{\partial h}{\partial x} + C \frac{\partial^2 h}{\partial y^2} + D \frac{\partial^2 h}{\partial x^2} + E \frac{\partial^2 h}{\partial y \partial x},$$

defined on a smooth function  $h$  with the boundary conditions

$$\int_{R_+^2} h(u, v) - h(0, y) F(du, dv) = 0,$$

$$\int_{R_+^2} h(u, v) - h(x, 0) F(du, dv) = 0,$$

with  $A, B, C, D, E$  are constants associated with the means, variances, and correlations of various quantities from the LOB, and  $F$  is a bivariate distribution function.

Built on the results of Cont and de Larrard (2013) for  $(Q_t^a, Q_t^b)$ , Guo and Ruan (2013) provide several fluid and diffusion limits for  $Z(t)$  under various cancellation assumptions. The fluid limit is relatively straightforward once the convergence of the limit established. The key to establish the diffusion limits comes from a nice result of Kurtz and Protter (1991), which is a generalization of Wong and Zakai's (1969) earlier work, concerning passing the convergence relation between the càdlàg processes  $(X_n, Y_n)$  to  $(X, Y)$  in the Skorohod topology to the convergence relation between  $\int X_n dY_n$  to  $\int X dY$ . With the fluid and diffusion limit for  $Z(t)$ , it is possible to calculate various quantities of interest for the LOB, including (i) the probability that an order is filled before the price increases, (ii) the expected price to pay if the order is not executed, (iii) the expected cost to place  $N_0$  orders at the bid and  $N - N_0$  at the ask, and (iv) the optimal strategy for placing orders.

**Connection between LOB and classical queues.** To get a better sense of  $Z(t)$ , it helps to understand the fundamental differences between the classical queuing theory and this reduced-form stochastic models of LOB. First, unlike the regulated Brownian motion in the classical heavy-traffic-limit queuing models (see for example Harrison (1990) and Whitt (2002)), the underlying multi-dimensional diffusion process for the LOB involves a non-local Wentzel type condition and is much less understood. Itô and Itô (1965) explicitly prescribe how to construct a Brownian motion with such Wentzel type condition. However, characterization of such diffusions remains open and it is analogous to the characterization of one-dimensional diffusion problem; the latter is now completely solved and characterized by Feller semi-groups. There are some recent studies using the Partial Differential Equations (PDEs) approach to analyze the associated differential operator (Galakhov and Skubachevskii (1998, 2001)). Secondly,  $Z(t)$  is not the same as the “workload process” in the classical queuing theory. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, this quantity has never been studied in the classical queuing which seems to be more interested in the stability and analysis of the whole system rather than the dynamics of each individual in the system. Finally, despite some similarity between the limit order with order cancellation and the renege queues (Ward and Glynn (2003, 2005)), the motivation and characteristics of cancellations in the limit order are very complex especially when there are non-displayable orders. This is an important issue as different cancellation assumptions lead to different fluid and diffusion limits, and the corresponding optimal trading strategies could be qualitatively distinct.

### 3. Beyond optimal placement

**Related statistical issues.** There have been many studies on the statistical properties of LOB, including autocorrelation of trade sizes (buy or sell), the average shape of LOB, the volume of orders, and the duration between orders. (See for instance Bouchaud et al. (2002) and He and Mamaysky (2005).) There are also studies linking the characteristics of LOB with the trading behavior. For instance, Biais, Hillion, and Spatt (1995) find that traders are more likely to submit limit orders when the LOB contains relatively few orders, or when the bid-ask spread widens. Hollifield, Miller, and Sandas (2004) use empirical analysis to test whether the optimal order submission strategy is a monotonic function of a trader's valuation for the asset. There is a rich literature on market microstructure (O'Hara (1995), Foucault et al. (2005), and Hasbrouck (2007)), but most of it is for specialist-based markets and not for order-driven markets. Interested readers are referred to Cont (2011) for more discussion on the statistical aspects of the LOB.

For the purpose of analyzing the optimal placement problem, several most relevant characteristic of LOBs are: order cancellation, price mean-reversion, and the order flow imbalance.

- **Order cancellation.** Because cancellation is frequently and strategically exploited by high frequency traders to test the market, and because different assumptions on order cancellations may lead to different trading strategies, it is important to analyze the distribution of canceled orders vs. total orders, and the distribution of canceled orders in terms of their positions in a LOB. When the data of LOB contains higher level information such as the trader's IDs, one can get a better picture for the motivation of order cancellation, by tracking for example the appearance or disappearance of certain IDs and the volume changes in the corresponding positions of the LOB.
- **Price mean-reversion.** Mean-reversion in prices has been observed by many practitioners in HFT, and some may even build trading strategies on betting the mean-reversion. If one focuses on the six types of events, i.e., market buy and sell, limit buy and sell, and cancellation of buy and sell, then it is natural to model the arrival intensities of events by multivariate Hawkes process (Hawkes (1971)) as it captures some of the clustering effect found in the LOB. The standard method for parameters estimation of Hawkes processes seems to be the Maximum Likelihood Estimator (MLE) method (Ogata (1978), Ozaki (1979), and Muni Toke and Pomponio (2011)). MLE has a definite advantage of achieving the smallest possible asymptotic variance, at least in the univariate case. Studies on the consistency and asymptotic behavior of MLE can be found in Chen and Hall (2012) for the multi-variate case and in Ogata (1978) for the univariate case.
- **Order flow imbalance.** Order flow imbalance could be a strong indication of the market momentum. Recently, Cont, Kukanov, and Stoikov (2012) examine the role of order flow imbalance, trade imbalance and the depth of LOB in affecting the price, and found that order flow imbalance is a more general metric than the other two in limit order executions. Volume Synchronized Probability of INformed Trading (VPIN) is one of the well-known indicators developed by Easley et al. (2012) for modeling order flow imbalance. (See also a recent report for testing its effectiveness by Bethel et al. (2012).) Zheng, Moulines, and Abergel (2012) use the Lasso method to predict price jump, and show that in the French stock market, trade sign and market order size as well as the liquidity on the best bid (best ask) are consistently informative for predicting the incoming price jump. Also, Lai and Xing (2007) describe Exponential Autoregressive Conditional Duration (EACD) and Weibull Autoregressive Conditional Duration (WACD) models to estimate limit order duration, and they also provide two statistical models (ordered probit model and Rydberg–Shephard model) to predict price changes.

**Market making and others.** There are many optimization problems in the LOB beyond the particular one presented in the paper. For example, closely related to the optimal placement problem is the market making problem, where trading strategies involve simultaneously

placing limit orders to buy and sell. The idea is to maximize the profit by playing with the spread between the bid and ask prices, while controlling the inventory risk and the execution risk. The profit is a reward for the market maker for his/her service to provide the liquidity to the market. For instance, Avelaneda and Stoikov (2008), Bayraktar and Ludkovski (2011), Cartea and Jaimungal (2013), Cartea, Jaimungal, and Ricci (2011), Veraarta (2010), Guilbaud and Pham (2011), and Guéant, Tapia, and Lehalla (2012) study minimizing the inventory risk and balancing the execution risk with consideration of microstructure of LOB. There are also order scheduling problems especially when orders can be placed in different exchanges with different fee structures. Cont and Kukanov (2012) use the stochastic programming approach for the optimal placement problems across different LOB markets.

#### 4. Summary

This paper presents the optimal placement problem and several models and approaches. Related optimal execution problem and statistical issues are discussed.

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