Introduction to Protein Structure Prediction

BMI/CS 776
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The Protein Folding Problem

- We know that the function of a protein is determined in large part by its 3D shape (*fold*, *conformation*)
- Can we predict the 3D shape of a protein given only its amino-acid sequence?

Protein Architecture

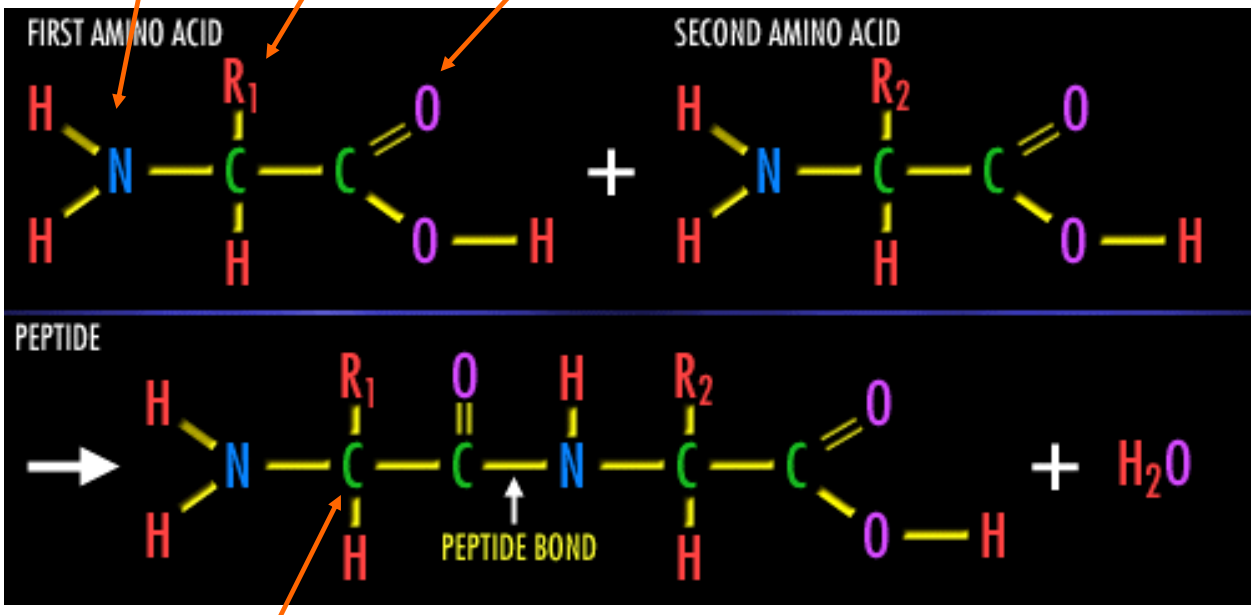
- Proteins are polymers consisting of amino acids linked by *peptide* bonds
- Each amino acid consists of
  - a central carbon atom (α-carbon)
  - an amino group, NH_2
  - a carboxyl group, COOH
  - a side chain
- Differences in side chains distinguish different amino acids

Amino Acids and Peptide Bonds

amino group

side chain

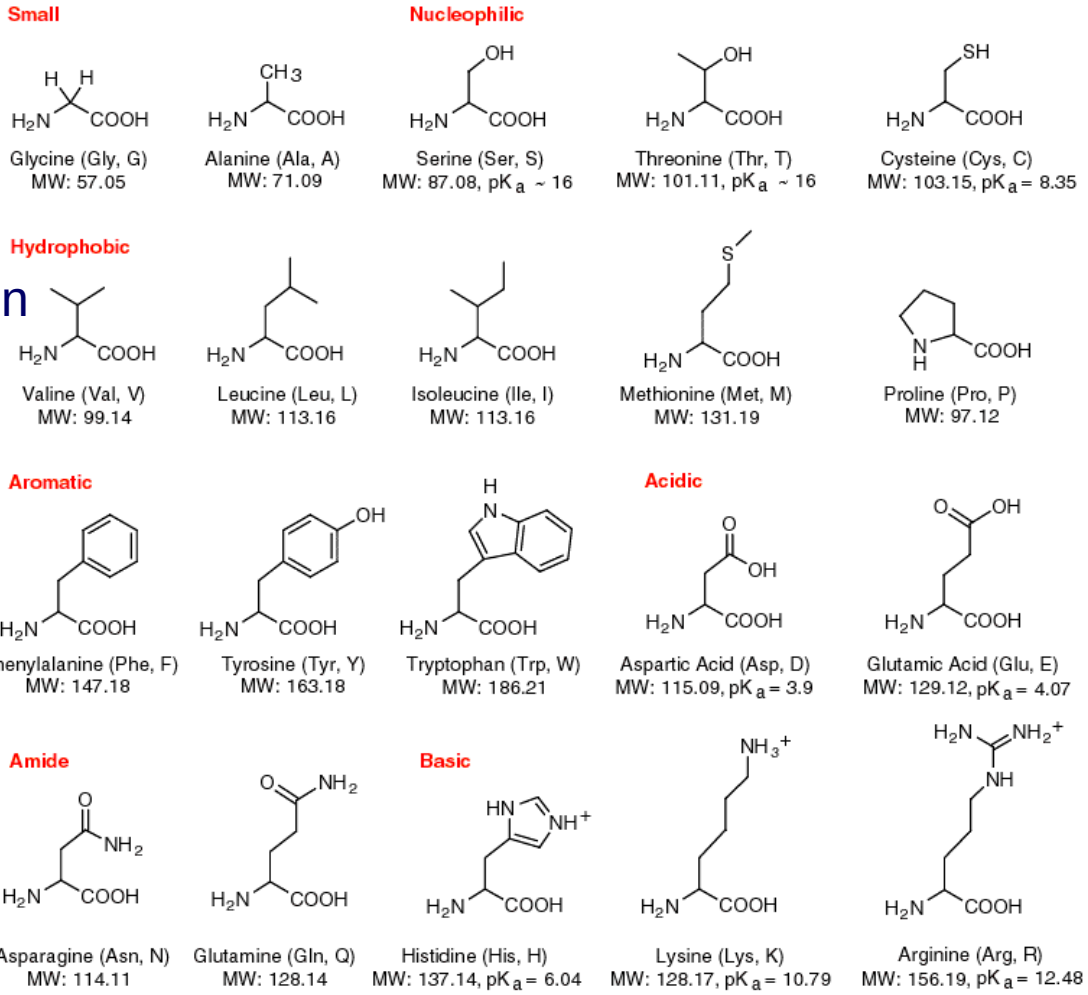
carboxyl group



α carbon (common reference point for coordinates of a structure)

Amino Acid Side Chains

Side chains vary in
- shape
- size
- charge
- polarity



What Determines Conformation?

- In general, the amino-acid sequence of a protein determines the 3D shape of a protein [Anfinsen et al., 1950s]

- But some qualifications
  - all proteins can be denatured
  - some proteins are inherently *disordered* (i.e. lack a regular structure)
  - some proteins get folding help from *chaperones*
  - there are various mechanisms through which the conformation of a protein can be changed in vivo
    - post-translational modifications such as *phosphorylation*
    - *prions*
    - etc.

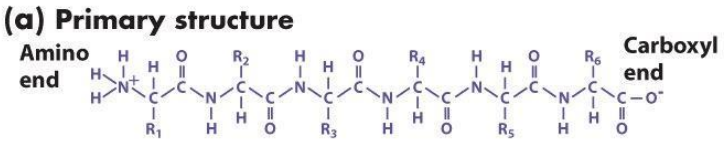
What Determines Conformation?

- Which physical properties of the protein determine its fold?
  - rigidity of the protein backbone
  - interactions among amino acids, including
    - electrostatic interactions
    - van der Waals forces
    - volume constraints
    - hydrogen, disulfide bonds
  - interactions of amino acids with water
    - hydrophobic and hydrophilic residues

Levels of Description

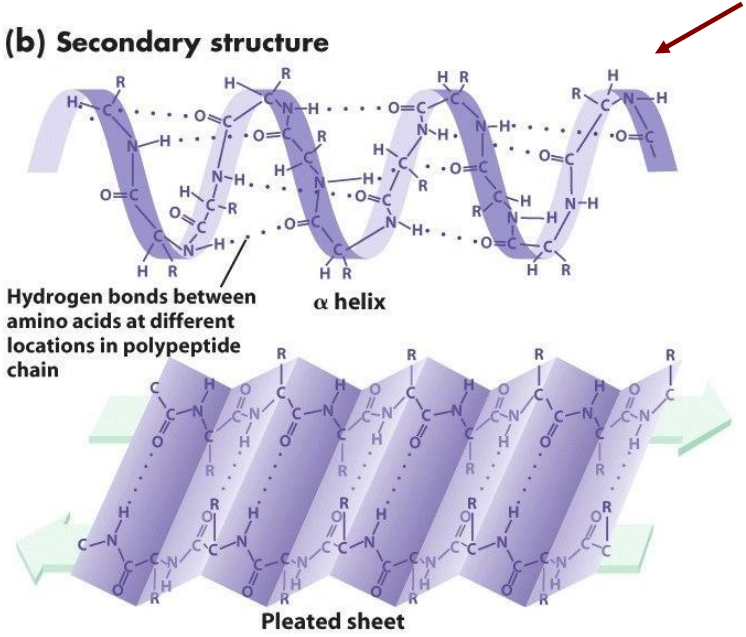
- Protein structure is often described at four different scales
  - primary structure
  - secondary structure
  - tertiary structure
  - quaternary structure

Levels of Description

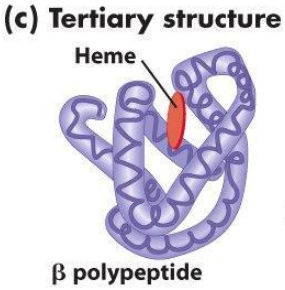


the amino acid sequence itself

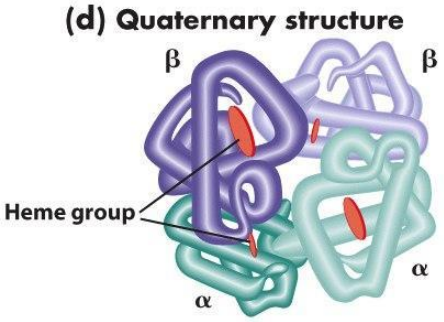
"local" description of structure: describes it in terms of certain common repeating elements



3D conformation of a polypeptide



3D conformation of a complex of polypeptides



Secondary Structure

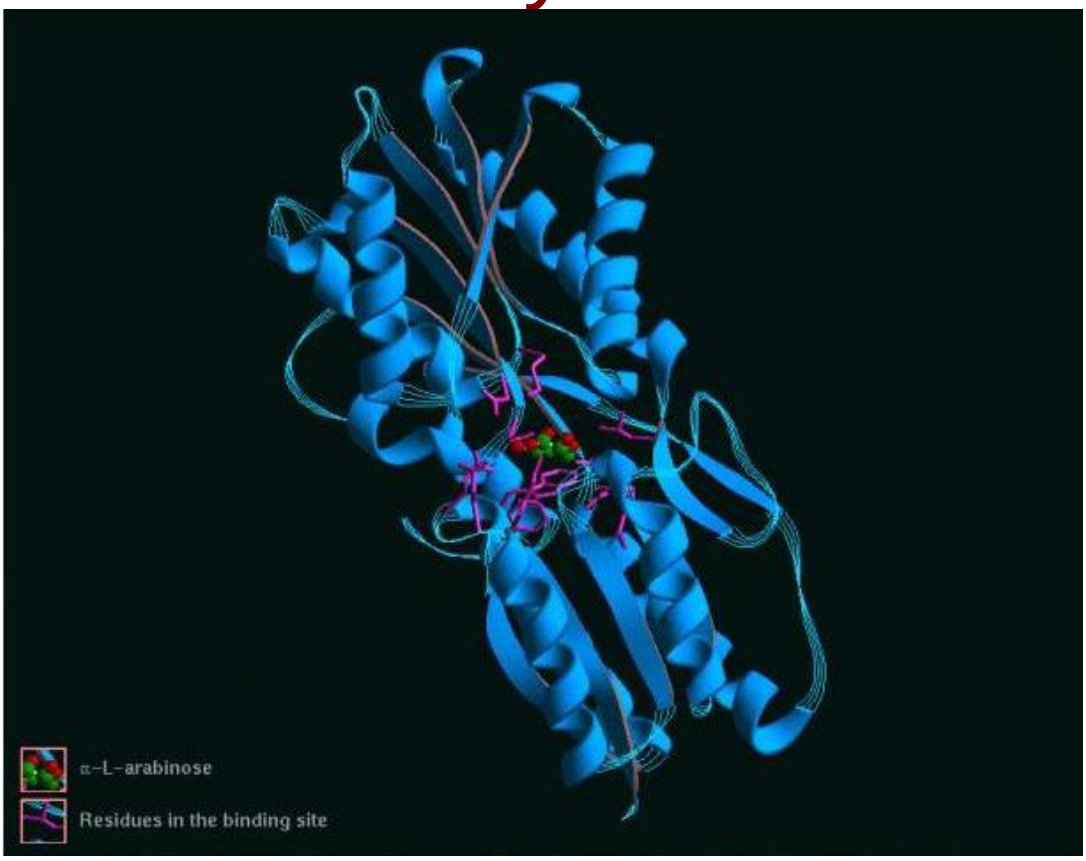
- Secondary structure refers to certain common repeating structures
- It is a "local" description of structure
- Two common secondary structure
  - α helices
  - β strands/sheets (pleated sheet on previous slide)
- A third category, called *coil* or *loop*, refers to everything else

Secondary Structure

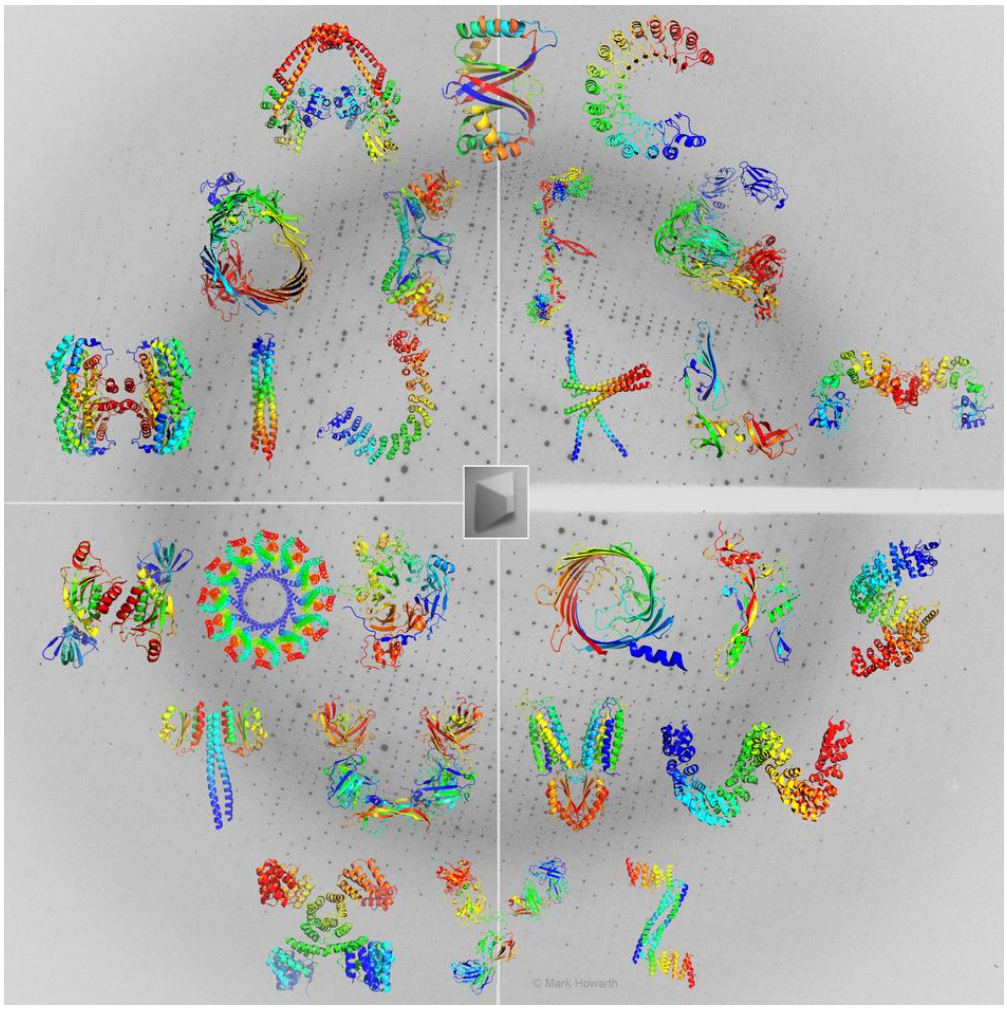
"Is the neural network an essential tool for the most accurate secondary structure prediction?"

- Burkhard Rost, 1998

Ribbon Diagram Showing Secondary Structures



Diversity of Protein Structures



Howarth *Nature Structural & Molecular Biology* 2015

Determining Protein Structures

- Protein structures can be determined experimentally (in most cases) by
  - x-ray crystallography
  - nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR)
  - cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM)
- But this is very expensive and time-consuming
- There is a large sequence-structure gap
  - ≈ 550K protein sequences in SwissProt database
  - ≈ 100K protein structures in PDB database

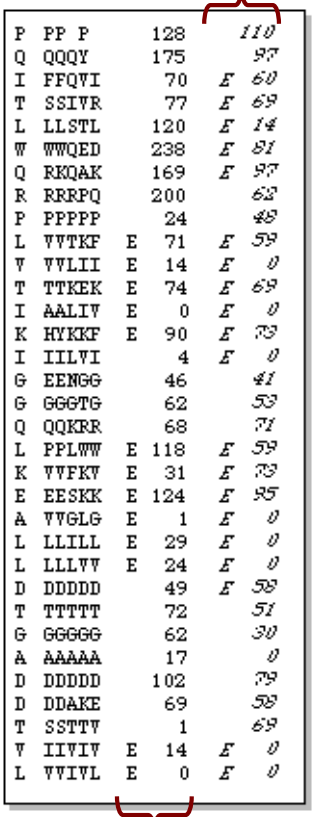
- Key question: can we predict structures by computational means instead?

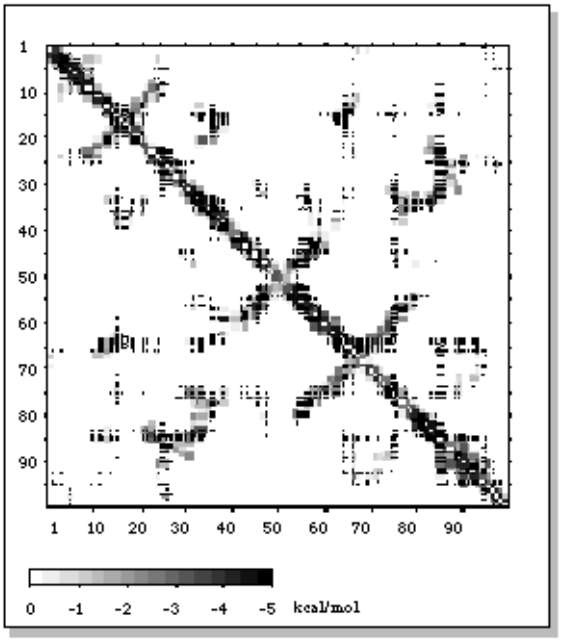
Types of Protein Structure Predictions

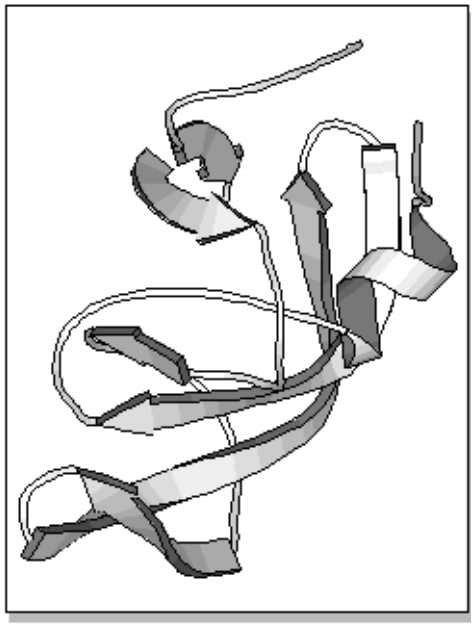
- Prediction in 1D
  - secondary structure
  - solvent accessibility (which residues are exposed to water, which are buried)
  - transmembrane helices (which residues span membranes)
- Prediction in 2D
  - inter-residue/strand contacts
- Prediction in 3D
  - homology modeling
  - fold recognition (e.g. via threading)
  - *ab initio* prediction (e.g. via molecular dynamics)

Prediction in 1D, 2D and 3D

predicted secondary structure and solvent accessibility



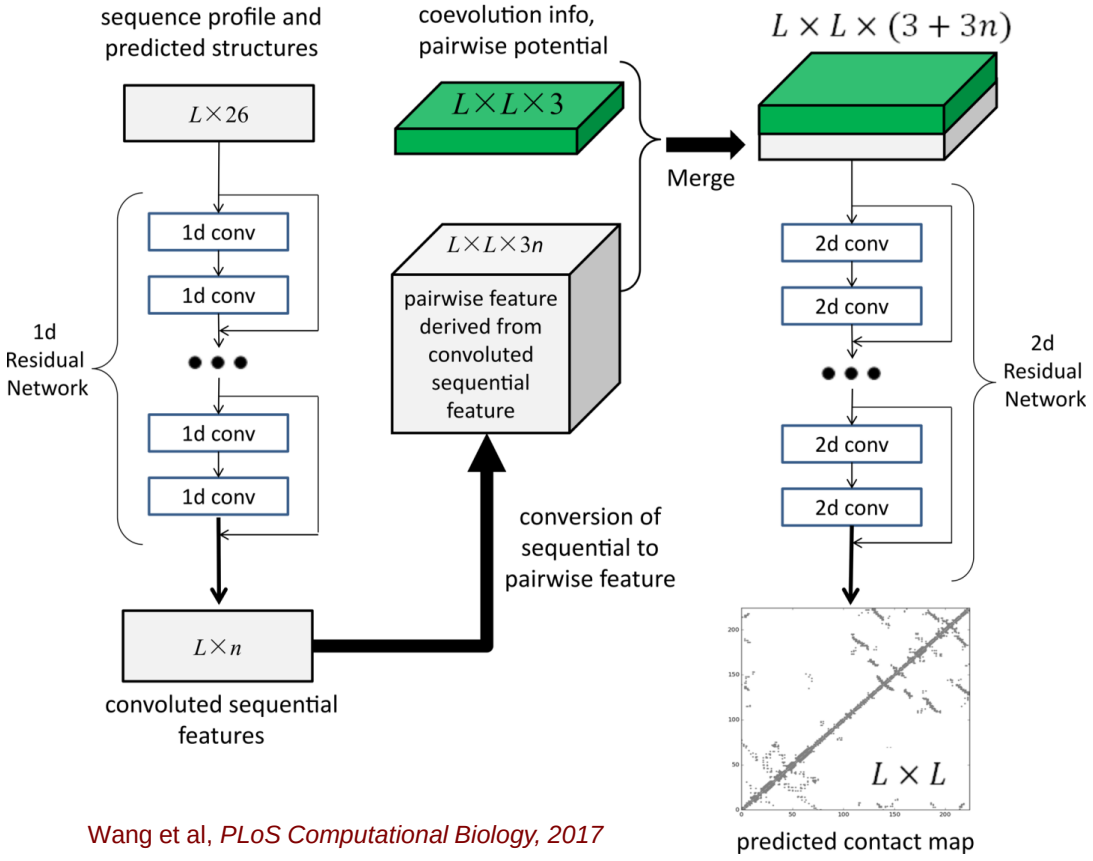




known secondary structure (E = beta strand) and solvent accessibility

Figure from B. Rost, "Protein Structure in 1D, 2D, and 3D", *The Encyclopaedia of Computational Chemistry,* 1998

State-of-the-art in Contact Map Prediction



Wang et al, *PLoS Computational Biology, 2017*

Prediction in 3D

- ***Homology modeling***
  given: a query sequence *Q*, a database of protein structures
  do:
  - find protein *P* such that
    - structure of *P* is known
    - *P* has high sequence similarity to *Q*
  - return P's structure as an approximation to *Q*'s structure

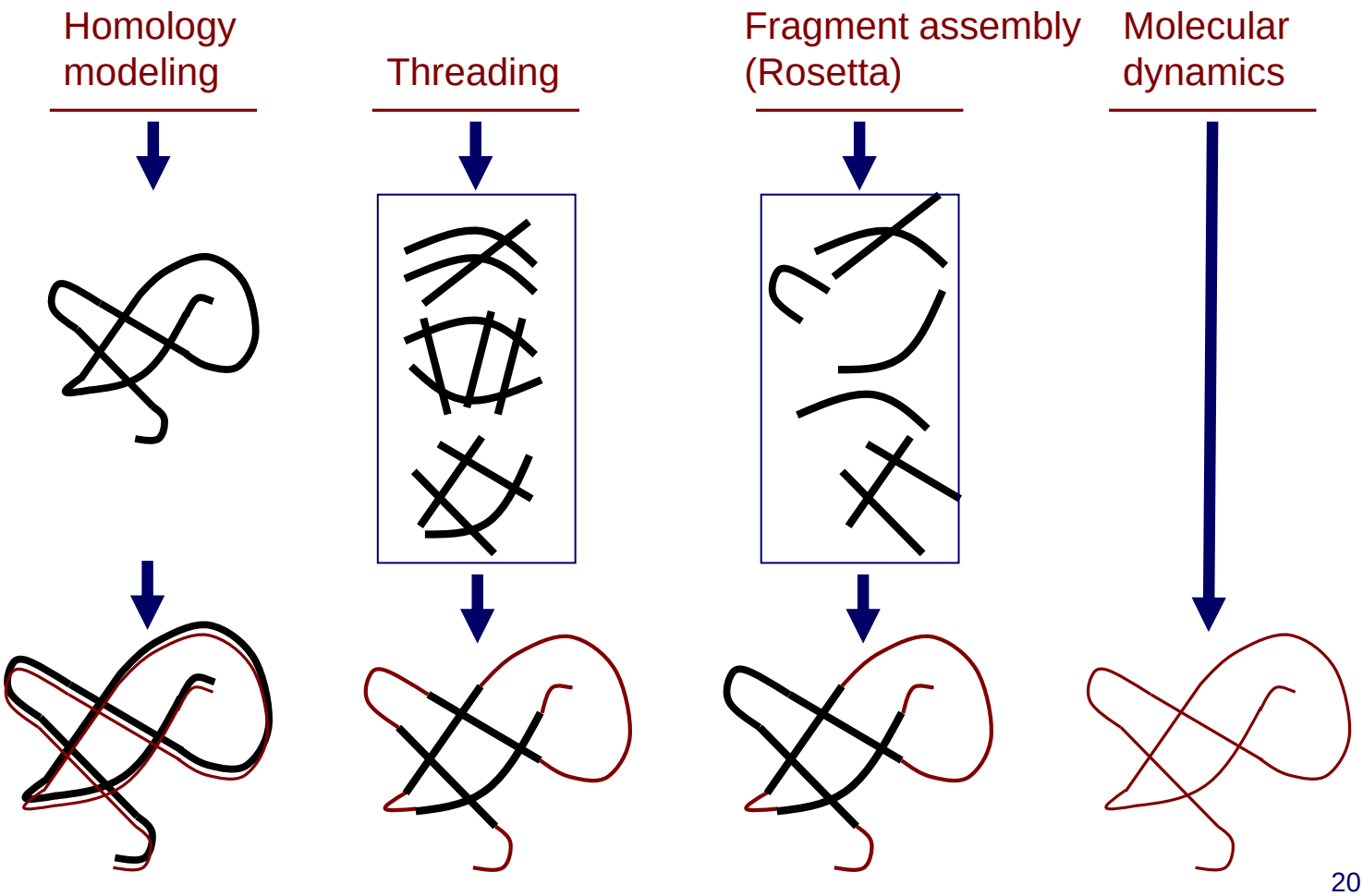
- ***Fold recognition*** (threading)
  given: a query sequence *Q*, a database of known folds
  do:
  - find fold *F* such that *Q* can be aligned with *F* in a highly compatible manner
  - return *F* as an approximation to *Q*'s structure

Prediction in 3D

- ***"Fragment assembly"*** (Rosetta)
  given: a query sequence *Q*, a database of structure fragments
  do:
  - find a set of fragments that *Q* can be aligned with in a highly compatible manner
  - return fragment assembly as an approximation to *Q*'s structure

- ***Molecular dynamics***
  given: a query sequence *Q*
  do: use laws of physics to simulate folding of *Q*

Prediction in 3D



“Citizen science”

- Folding@home

http://folding.stanford.edu

Molecular dynamics simulations

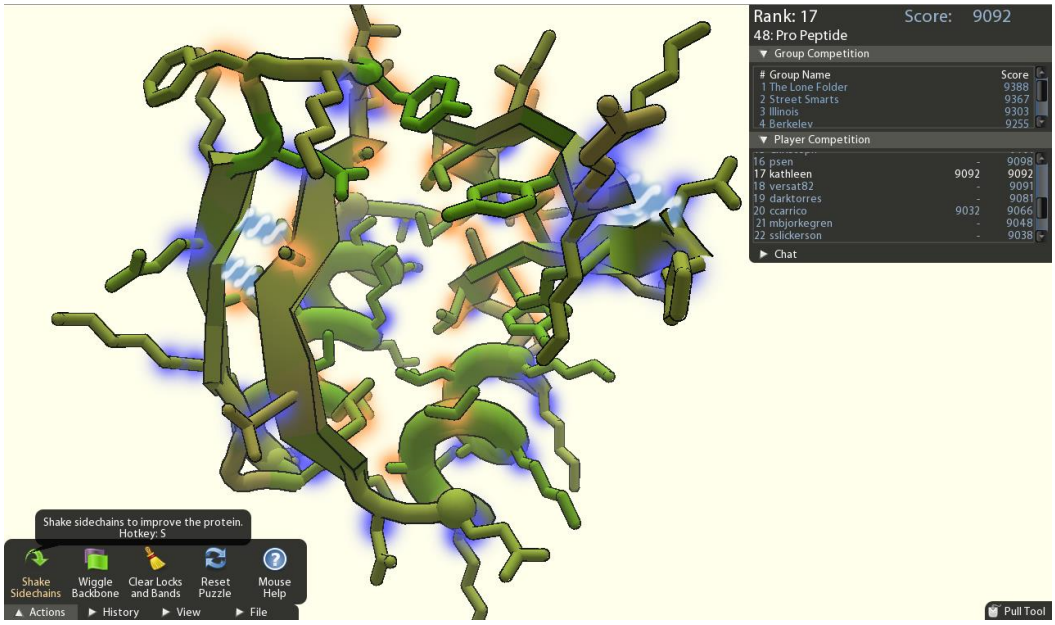
- Rosetta@home

http://boinc.bakerlab.org

Structure prediction

Volunteer/distributed computing

Foldit



http://fold.it/