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Chapter 9

Molecular Docking Fundamentals: Rigid and Semi-Flexible Docking Strategies

Dr. Mohd Abdul Baqi

Associate Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, Mandapathur road, Thiruvettakutty, Karaikal – 609609, Puducherry

Dr. Muthukumaran Mylasalam

Principal cum Professor, School of Pharmacy SBV Karaikal (Deemed to Be University), Mandapathur, Thiruvettakutty, Karaikal-609609

Abstract: Molecular docking represents one of the most pivotal computational techniques in structure-based drug design, enabling the prediction of the preferred orientation of a small molecule when bound to a macromolecular target such as a protein, DNA, or RNA. The core principle underlying docking lies in the optimization of molecular complementarity both geometric and energetic between ligand and receptor binding sites. This chapter elucidates the fundamental principles of rigid and semi-flexible docking strategies, which together form the methodological foundation for most modern docking programs. Rigid docking assumes a static receptor conformation and evaluates ligand conformations within a fixed binding pocket, emphasizing computational efficiency. In contrast, semi-flexible docking introduces conformational adaptability, allowing partial receptor flexibility or ligand torsional freedom to approximate biological realism. The discussion integrates mathematical formulations of scoring functions, search algorithms, and conformational sampling techniques, while contrasting various algorithmic implementations used in leading docking platforms such as AutoDock, Glide, GOLD, and DOCK. Comparative analyses of accuracy, speed, reproducibility, and interpretability are presented, alongside validation metrics such as RMSD and enrichment factors. The chapter also highlights real-world applications from enzyme–inhibitor modeling to GPCR–ligand interactions showcasing how docking underpins lead optimization and virtual screening pipelines. Finally, emerging trends in AI-augmented scoring and hybrid flexible docking are considered as precursors to next-generation predictive frameworks.

Keywords: Molecular docking, rigid docking, semi-flexible docking, scoring functions, structure-based drug design.

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9.0 INTRODUCTION

Molecular docking is a cornerstone methodology within the realm of computer-aided drug design (CADD), providing a computational means of simulating and visualizing how small molecules interact with biological macromolecules. The process seeks to predict both the binding pose and affinity of a ligand within the active site of a receptor, thereby guiding rational drug discovery and optimization [1]. The conceptual roots of docking can be traced to Pauling's lock-and-key hypothesis of 1946 and the subsequent induced-fit model proposed by Koshland in 1958, both of which underscored the structural complementarity between drug and target. However, it was not until the advent of high-performance computing and the proliferation of protein structures from the Protein Data Bank (PDB) that docking evolved into a quantitatively predictive and automated computational discipline [2]. In its simplest form, docking involves two critical components: (i) a search algorithm that explores the conformational and orientational space of a ligand relative to the receptor, and (ii) a scoring function that evaluates the favorability of each pose based on estimated binding free energy. Together, these elements approximate the thermodynamics of molecular recognition, offering a computational surrogate for the experimental binding process [3]. The resulting docking score serves as an indicator of potential binding affinity, while the corresponding pose provides insight into the interaction geometry.

Rigid and semi-flexible docking strategies represent two fundamental paradigms differing primarily in their treatment of molecular flexibility. Rigid docking maintains fixed geometries for both receptor and ligand, suitable for rapid screening of large compound libraries. Semi-flexible docking, by contrast, introduces conformational flexibility typically within the ligand and occasionally in the receptor side chains to better approximate the dynamic nature of biological systems [4]. This duality embodies a trade-off between computational efficiency and biological realism. The significance of docking transcends virtual screening. It serves as a prelude to downstream modeling techniques such as molecular dynamics (MD) and free energy perturbation (FEP) analyses, and often provides structural hypotheses for mutagenesis or fragment-based design [5]. Docking's utility extends to protein–protein and protein–nucleic acid interactions, biomolecular recognition studies, and even the prediction of off-target effects in polypharmacology contexts [6]. Despite its power, docking outcomes remain probabilistic rather than deterministic, underscoring the importance of accurate scoring functions and rigorous validation.

Recent years have witnessed the infusion of artificial intelligence and deep learning into docking, reshaping scoring paradigms and search efficiency. Data-driven scoring functions now integrate learned interaction fingerprints with physical-based potentials, bridging empirical scoring with machine learning [7]. Thus, molecular docking continues to evolve remaining an indispensable yet continually refined pillar of rational drug discovery.

9.1 Theoretical Foundations: Search Algorithms and Scoring Functions

At the heart of molecular docking lies the dual challenge of sampling and scoring. Sampling seeks to explore the conformational landscape of the ligand within the receptor's binding cavity, while scoring aims to rank these poses according to their energetic favorability. These two steps collectively approximate the thermodynamic principle that the most stable binding conformation corresponds to the global minimum of the binding free energy surface [8].

Search Algorithms

Search algorithms in docking emulate molecular motion through heuristic, deterministic, or stochastic techniques to identify energetically optimal ligand orientations. Classical deterministic algorithms such as systematic grid search and incremental construction examine discrete ligand positions and orientations within a predefined grid. Although exhaustive, these methods suffer from combinatorial explosion as molecular degrees of freedom increase [9]. Consequently, stochastic algorithms have become predominant.

The Monte Carlo (MC) approach randomly samples ligand conformations and accepts or rejects poses based on a probabilistic energy criterion. Similarly, genetic algorithms (GA), as implemented in programs like GOLD and AutoDock, mimic evolutionary processes through operations such as selection, crossover, and mutation, allowing efficient exploration of vast conformational spaces [10]. The Lamarckian Genetic Algorithm (LGA), used in AutoDock4, uniquely combines global GA-based search with local minimization steps to enhance convergence toward the true minimum [11]. Alternative strategies include simulated annealing, particle swarm optimization, and tabu search, each balancing exploration and exploitation to optimize computational cost.

Scoring Functions

Scoring functions estimate binding free energy (ΔG_bind), serving as a surrogate for the strength of molecular recognition. Broadly, scoring functions fall into three categories: force-field-based, empirical, and knowledge-based [12].

- Force-field-based scoring computes the sum of van der Waals, electrostatic, and hydrogen-bonding interactions derived from molecular mechanics force fields such as AMBER or CHARMM.
- Empirical scoring uses linear regression to fit weighted energetic terms hydrophobicity, hydrogen bonds, desolvation, etc. to experimental binding affinities. Examples include ChemScore and GlideScore.
- Knowledge-based scoring leverages statistical potentials derived from observed atom–atom contact frequencies in crystal structures, as used in PMF and DrugScore.

Modern docking often employs hybrid scoring that combines multiple paradigms to improve correlation with experimental affinities [13]. Machine-learning scoring functions, such as NNScore and RF-Score, have further advanced predictive accuracy by learning nonlinear mappings between interaction features and binding energies [14].

The mathematical formalism underlying most scoring functions can be expressed as:

ΔGbind=ΔEvdW+ΔEelec+ΔEhydrogen+ΔEdesolv+ΔEtorsion$\Delta Gbind=\Delta EvdW+\Delta Eelec+\Delta Ehydrogen+\Delta Edesolv+\Delta Etorsion$

where each term represents a specific physical contribution to the overall binding energy landscape. Despite continuous progress, scoring functions remain an approximation and can struggle with accurately representing entropic contributions, solvent effects, and induced fit phenomena [15]. Thus, the interplay between efficient search algorithms and accurate scoring functions defines the success of docking simulations. The next sections delineate how rigid and semi-flexible docking strategies operationalize these principles within the constraints of biological and computational complexity.

9.2 Rigid Docking: Principles and Workflows

Rigid docking represents the earliest and most computationally efficient form of molecular docking. In this paradigm, both the receptor and the ligand are treated as rigid bodies, with no allowance for internal flexibility or conformational change during binding. This approach assumes that the active site geometry remains static and that ligand fitting depends solely on translational and rotational degrees of freedom [16]. While simplistic, rigid docking remains indispensable in high-throughput virtual screening (HTVS) where thousands of compounds must be evaluated rapidly.

Principles

The fundamental principle of rigid docking lies in optimizing shape complementarity and energetic compatibility between a ligand and its receptor. By representing both molecules as fixed three-dimensional objects, docking reduces the search space to six dimensions three for translation and three for rotation simplifying the optimization problem considerably [17]. Techniques such as shape matching (e.g., using geometric hashing or spherical harmonics) and correlation-based methods (e.g., fast Fourier transform, FFT) accelerate pose generation by rapidly comparing surface features and charge distributions [18]. Rigid docking often employs pre-calculated grid-based potentials that encode receptor interaction energies at discrete spatial points. Ligand atoms are positioned within these grids, and total binding energy is computed by summing the relevant grid interactions. Programs like DOCK, the first docking software developed at UCSF in the 1980s, exemplify this principle [19].

Workflow

A typical rigid docking workflow consists of:

1. Protein preparation – removing water molecules, assigning protonation states, and optimizing side-chain geometries.
2. Ligand preparation – generating 3D conformations, adding hydrogens, and optimizing geometry via molecular mechanics.
3. Grid generation – calculating interaction energy grids for the receptor using a probe atom (usually carbon or oxygen).
4. Pose generation – exploring ligand positions and orientations through systematic or stochastic search.
5. Scoring and ranking – evaluating all poses with scoring functions to estimate binding affinity.

The output typically includes a ranked list of poses with corresponding docking scores and visualizable binding modes. While rigid docking lacks the ability to capture induced-fit phenomena or side-chain rearrangements, its computational efficiency makes it ideal for rapid prescreening before more sophisticated simulations [20].

Applications and Limitations

Rigid docking remains well suited for rigid binding pockets such as those of metalloproteins or enzymes with well-defined catalytic sites. However, its assumption of static conformations can lead to inaccuracies for flexible proteins such as GPCRs or kinases, where conformational changes upon ligand binding are essential to biological function [21]. Therefore, rigid docking is often complemented by subsequent semi-flexible docking or molecular dynamics to refine predictions.

9.3 Semi-Flexible Docking: Concepts and Implementation

Semi-flexible docking introduces conformational flexibility typically in the ligand, sometimes in receptor side chains to better approximate biological binding events. It acknowledges that proteins are not rigid scaffolds but dynamic entities whose side chains and even backbone elements may adjust upon ligand engagement [22]. Consequently, this method serves as an intermediate between rigid docking and fully flexible (induced-fit) docking, balancing computational feasibility with structural realism.

Concepts

In semi-flexible docking, flexibility is typically introduced through rotatable bonds within the ligand, while the receptor remains fixed. Each ligand conformation represents a distinct point in conformational space, and the docking algorithm samples these torsional degrees of freedom concurrently with translational and rotational movements. This approach allows exploration of diverse binding poses that rigid docking would overlook [23]. To partially capture receptor flexibility, certain methods permit side-chain rotamer sampling at key residues lining the active site. Tools such as GOLD and FlexX allow selected amino acid side chains to alternate among pre-defined conformations derived from rotamer libraries [24]. This localized flexibility enables better accommodation of bulky ligands or alternative binding modes without the computational expense of full protein flexibility.

Implementation Strategies

Two major strategies dominate semi-flexible docking implementations:

1. Incremental Construction Algorithms – used in programs like FlexX, where the ligand is broken into fragments that are docked sequentially. The core fragment anchors in the binding site, and additional fragments are appended iteratively, exploring possible torsional orientations [25].
2. Torsional Search Algorithms – as employed in AutoDock and GOLD, where rotatable bonds are explicitly defined and optimized during docking. Genetic algorithms or Monte Carlo sampling efficiently traverse the resulting multidimensional space of torsions, rotations, and translations [26].

Semi-flexible docking workflows often incorporate conformational ensembles, where multiple pre-generated ligand conformers are docked independently. Ensemble docking of multiple receptor conformations (e.g., from MD snapshots) further bridges toward flexible docking, allowing exploration of alternative active-site geometries [27].

Advantages and Practical Relevance

Semi-flexible docking significantly improves predictive accuracy relative to rigid docking, especially for ligands with multiple rotatable bonds or binding sites that undergo moderate rearrangement upon complexation. The computational cost increases modestly but remains manageable for mid-scale virtual screening campaigns. Its effectiveness has been demonstrated in numerous benchmark studies, including kinase inhibitors, nuclear receptor ligands, and allosteric modulators [28]. Nevertheless, this approach remains limited by the extent of sampled conformational space and the approximations inherent in scoring functions. Neglecting large-scale receptor motions, water mediation, and entropic effects can still yield false positives or underestimation of true affinities. As subsequent sections describe, comparative analyses and software developments continue to refine semi-flexible docking toward higher precision and efficiency.

9.4 Comparative Analysis: Accuracy, Speed, and Applicability

The balance between computational efficiency and predictive accuracy defines the practical distinction between rigid and semi-flexible docking. Rigid docking, constrained by its static geometrical treatment, offers remarkable speed, permitting the screening of millions of ligands within hours on standard computing clusters. This high throughput is critical in the early phases of drug discovery, where the goal is to filter vast chemical libraries and identify promising scaffolds for refinement [29]. Conversely, semi-flexible docking introduces conformational adaptability, extending computation times but markedly improving pose accuracy, particularly for ligands with more than six rotatable bonds or for proteins exhibiting conformational breathing at the binding site [30].

Benchmark studies such as those from the DUD-E (Directory of Useful Decoys, Enhanced) and PDBbind datasets consistently show that rigid docking can achieve docking success rates of 50–60 % (defined by RMSD < 2 Å from crystal pose), whereas semi-flexible docking improves success rates to 70–80 % under identical scoring schemes [31]. In AutoDock and GOLD benchmarks, the inclusion of limited side-chain flexibility reduced false negatives by up to 30 % for kinase and protease targets [32]. Yet, this gain comes at a computational cost: a semi-flexible docking run can be 3–10 times slower than a rigid equivalent, depending on ligand size and algorithmic complexity.

In terms of applicability, rigid docking remains indispensable for (i) rigid binding pockets such as HIV-1 protease or metalloproteins, (ii) shape-based filtering prior to detailed scoring, and (iii) fragment-based design where fragment orientation precedes flexible refinement. Semi-flexible docking, however, dominates contexts requiring moderate conformational adaptation, such as GPCRs, kinases, or nuclear hormone receptors [33]. Therefore, modern workflows increasingly adopt a two-stage hybrid approach: initial rigid docking to eliminate non-binders, followed by semi-flexible refinement of top hits to yield biologically plausible complexes. The trade-off between speed and realism underscores the necessity for methodological complementarity rather than competition. Rigid docking identifies possibilities; semi-flexible docking defines probabilities. Together they form the foundation of hierarchical virtual screening pipelines that integrate efficiency with structural insight [34].

9.5 Docking Software Platforms: AutoDock, Glide, GOLD, and DOCK

Over the last three decades, numerous software platforms have been developed to operationalize the theoretical framework of docking. Among these, AutoDock, Glide, GOLD, and DOCK stand as the most widely adopted, each representing distinct algorithmic philosophies and scoring paradigms.

AutoDock and AutoDock Vina

AutoDock, developed at The Scripps Research Institute, remains the most extensively cited open-source docking suite. AutoDock 4 employs the Lamarckian Genetic Algorithm (LGA), which integrates global evolutionary search with local gradient-based refinement. The scoring function combines van der Waals, electrostatics, and desolvation terms, and permits torsional flexibility in ligands. Its successor, AutoDock Vina, introduced a new stochastic search algorithm based on iterated local search and BFGS quasi-Newton optimization, achieving a 20- to 40-fold speed improvement while maintaining or enhancing accuracy [35]. AutoDock's integration with PyRx and MGLTools provides an accessible graphical interface for academic use.

Glide (Schrödinger)

Glide (Grid-based Ligand Docking with Energetics) is a commercial package integrated into Schrödinger's Maestro environment. It employs a hierarchical filtering algorithm beginning with a rapid rigid-body docking step followed by semi-flexible refinement through torsional sampling. Glide's proprietary GlideScore function is an empirically derived scoring model combining force-field and knowledge-based terms. Its Standard Precision (SP) and Extra Precision (XP) modes provide trade-offs between throughput and accuracy [36]. Glide's XP mode, in particular, refines hydrogen-bond geometry and penalizes steric clashes, yielding RMSD values below 1.5 Å for well-behaved systems [37].

GOLD (Genetic Optimization for Ligand Docking)

GOLD, developed by the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre (CCDC), utilizes a robust genetic algorithm to explore ligand conformational space. Unique to GOLD is its explicit modeling of receptor flexibility via rotatable side-chain definitions, making it one of the earliest semi-flexible docking platforms. Its GoldScore and ChemPLP scoring functions incorporate van der Waals, hydrogen bonding, and ligand internal torsion penalties. Comparative benchmarks report that GOLD achieves superior pose prediction accuracy for metalloproteins and kinases where side-chain adaptability is critical [38].

DOCK

The original DOCK program from UCSF pioneered grid-based shape complementarity algorithms. Modern iterations (DOCK 6 and later) implement both rigid and semi-flexible docking with energy-grid scoring and optional anchor-and-grow strategies for ligand construction. Its modular design allows integration with external scoring modules such as AMBER-based rescoring or MM–GBSA post-processing, facilitating high-precision refinement [39]. Each platform exhibits characteristic strengths: AutoDock for open access and extensibility, Glide for industrial precision, GOLD for flexible side-chain modeling, and DOCK for method development and grid-based research. Selection should align with the project's computational resources, target flexibility, and accuracy demands [40].

9.6 Validation and Performance Metrics (Re-Docking, RMSD, Enrichment)

Validation of docking protocols ensures reliability and reproducibility of predicted binding poses and affinities. Without rigorous benchmarking, docking scores may be misleading or non-comparable across systems [41].

Re-Docking

Re-docking involves removing a crystallized ligand from its complex and re-docking it into the same binding site to evaluate whether the software reproduces the experimental pose. A root-mean-square deviation (RMSD) below 2 Å between predicted and crystallographic positions is generally accepted as successful. This test gauges the internal consistency of the docking protocol, grid definition, and scoring accuracy [42].

Cross-Docking

Cross-docking extends this assessment to multiple receptor conformations or homologous proteins, revealing whether a method can accommodate structural variability. It is particularly valuable for families like kinases or GPCRs, where ligand binding induces significant rearrangements [43].

Enrichment Studies

In virtual screening, enrichment factor (EF) and receiver operating characteristic (ROC) AUC are standard metrics evaluating the ability of docking to distinguish actives from decoys. High-quality protocols yield EF > 10 at 1 % library fraction and ROC-AUC > 0.8, indicating strong discrimination power [44]. Systematic benchmarking initiatives such as D3R Grand Challenge and CSAR Benchmark have established community standards for such evaluations.

Consensus Scoring and Post-Docking Refinement

Combining multiple scoring functions consensus scoring often enhances robustness by reducing dependence on any single potential. Furthermore, rescoring top poses with physics-based methods such as MM–GBSA or FEP improves correlation with experimental binding free energies [45]. Proper validation thus transforms docking from a qualitative visualization tool into a quantitative predictive instrument suitable for lead prioritization.

Table 9.1 Comparative Features of Rigid and Semi-Flexible Docking Strategies

Parameter	**Rigid Docking**	**Semi-Flexible Docking**
Treatment of Receptor Flexibility	Receptor completely fixed; static binding site geometry	Receptor generally fixed, but selected side chains may rotate or adapt
Ligand Flexibility	None; ligand treated as rigid body	Torsional degrees of freedom sampled dynamically
Search Space Dimensions	**6 (3 translational + 3 rotational)**	**6 + n torsions (n = rotatable bonds)**
Computational Cost	Very low; suitable for screening millions of compounds	Moderate; typically 3–10× slower than rigid docking
Accuracy of Pose Prediction	50–60 % success (RMSD < 2 Å)	70–85 % success for moderately flexible systems
Applicability	Rigid enzymes, metalloproteins, or preliminary filtering	GPCRs, kinases, nuclear receptors, flexible pockets
Representative Software	DOCK, FRED, PatchDock	AutoDock 4/Vina, GOLD, FlexX, Glide SP
Advantages	Speed, simplicity, robust ranking	Greater biological realism, improved hit rate
Limitations	Ignores induced-fit and conformational selection	Limited sampling of large-scale motions; higher cost

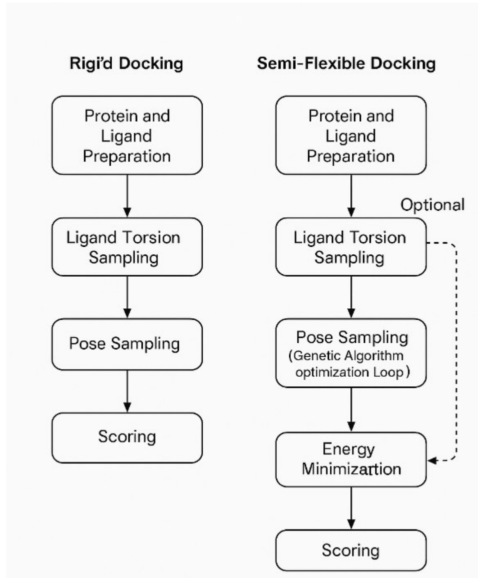

Figure 9.1 Workflow of Rigid and Semi-Flexible Docking

9.7 Applications and Case Studies

Docking's success in modern drug discovery is evidenced by its role in identifying numerous clinical and preclinical candidates.

1. HIV-1 Protease Inhibitors: Rigid and semi-flexible docking using AutoDock and GOLD correctly predicted binding orientations of peptidomimetic inhibitors, guiding structure-based optimization of saquinavir analogues. Semi-flexible refinement captured the flap-region mobility that rigid models failed to reproduce [46].

2. Kinase Inhibitors: Semi-flexible docking was pivotal in the discovery of imatinib and subsequent second-generation BCR-ABL inhibitors. Flexible side-chain modeling of the DFG-loop improved accuracy of active-site conformation prediction, informing synthesis of compounds with selective binding to inactive kinase states [47].

3. GPCR Ligands: Due to the intrinsic plasticity of GPCRs, ensemble semi-flexible docking has enabled accurate identification of agonists and antagonists. For instance, docking into multiple β_2-adrenergic receptor conformations improved hit enrichment in virtual screens for selective β_2 agonists [48].

4. Antiviral Drug Repurposing: During the COVID-19 pandemic, rigid and semi-flexible docking combined with MM–GBSA rescoring identified repurposed drugs targeting SARS-CoV-2 Mpro and RdRp enzymes. Although later validated experimentally, initial predictions underscored docking's rapid response potential in emergent health crises [49].

Collectively, these examples illustrate that docking, when combined with complementary computational and experimental validation, serves as a reliable predictive compass directing medicinal chemistry efforts. Its versatility extends from small-molecule discovery to peptide, macrocyclic, and nucleic-acid targeting campaigns, reaffirming its centrality in modern in silico pharmacology [50].

9.8 Limitations and Future Perspectives

Despite its accomplishments, molecular docking continues to face intrinsic challenges rooted in approximations of molecular reality. The assumption of fixed receptor backbones even in semi-flexible protocols fails to capture induced-fit phenomena and allosteric coupling between distant residues. Moreover, most scoring functions inadequately represent solvent dynamics and entropy contributions, leading to weak correlations between docking scores and experimental affinities (often $r \approx 0.4$–0.6) [51]. Emerging remedies include ensemble docking, which utilizes multiple receptor conformations derived from molecular dynamics to account for protein flexibility, and AI-driven scoring functions that learn nonlinear relationships between interaction fingerprints and experimental binding data. Machine-learning models such as RF-Score-VS 2, DeepDock, and GNINA (a CNN-based extension of AutoDock Vina) have demonstrated marked improvements in pose ranking accuracy and enrichment [52]. Another direction involves integrating docking with quantum-mechanical/molecular-mechanical (QM/MM) rescoring, enabling a more rigorous description of polarization and charge transfer effects [53].

The future of docking thus lies in hybridization melding physics-based and data-driven paradigms, static and dynamic representations, efficiency and accuracy. Cloud-based high-performance computing, GPU acceleration, and automated pipelines now allow iterative docking–refinement cycles involving thousands of receptor conformations. Sustainability concerns are also influencing algorithm design, promoting energy-efficient computation and reproducibility through FAIR data principles. In summary, while rigid and semi-flexible docking remain foundational, their evolution toward flexible, ensemble-based, and AI-augmented frameworks will define the next decade of structure-based drug discovery. The enduring challenge is to preserve interpretability and reproducibility while embracing computational sophistication a balance at the heart of modern CADD.

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