# **Quasi-Exact BDD Minimization using Relaxed Best-First Search**

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#### **Abstract**

In this paper we present a new method for quasi-exact optimization of BDDs using relaxed ordered best-first search. This general method is applied to BDD minimization. In contrast to a known relaxation of  $A^*$ , the new method guarantees to expand every state exactly once if guided by a monotone heuristic function. By that, it effectively accounts for aspects of run time while still guaranteeing that the cost of the solution will not exceed the optimal cost by a factor greater than  $(1+\epsilon)^{\left\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \right\rfloor}$  where n is the maximal length of a solution path. E.g., for 25 BDD variables and using a degree of relaxation of 5%, the BDD size is guaranteed to be not greater than 1.8 times the optimal size. Within a range of reasonable choices for  $\epsilon$ , the method allows the user to trade off run time for solution quality.

Experimental results demonstrate large reductions in run time when compared to the best known exact approach. Moreover, the quality of the obtained solutions is much better than the quality guaranteed by the theory.

### 1 Introduction

Reduced ordered *Binary Decision Diagrams* (BDDs) were introduced in [2] and are well known from hardware verification and logic synthesis.

It is well known that the size of BDDs is often very sensitive to a chosen variable ordering. In [2] an example has been given where the BDD size varies from linear to exponential dependent on the ordering of the variables. Especially in applications like logic synthesis targeting multiplexor design styles, e.g. [14, 15, 20], it is important to determine a good ordering, since a reduction in the number of BDD nodes directly transfers to a smaller chip area.

In general, determining an optimal variable ordering is a difficult problem. In fact it has been shown that it is NP-complete to decide whether the number of nodes of a given BDD can be improved by variable reordering [1]. For this, in the past many heuristic approaches have been proposed that are based on structural information [10] or on dynamic reordering of BDDs [12, 17]. But all these methods cannot guarantee an optimal result and experiments have shown

that they can yield results up to orders of magnitudes larger than an optimal solution. For the applications mentioned above, this is a significant drawback.

For this reason, exact algorithms have been suggested. The fastest practical method [7, 8] makes use of ordered best-first search, i.e. the  $A^*$ -algorithm [5, 11, 16]. Due to the hardness of the problem, the computational effort of the method is still high and further reductions in run time are strongly desirable.

One way to avoid the low quality of heuristic solutions are *quasi-exact* or approximating approaches which guarantee a solution whose cost does not exceed the optimal cost by a factor greater than  $1+\epsilon$ . Quasi-exact methods aim to achieve smaller run times than their exact counterparts. However, it has been shown that the existence of a polynomial algorithm to approximate the optimal variable ordering of BDDs implies P=NP [18]. For this reason, as with exact methods, the run time of an approximate method to improve the variable ordering is expected to be much higher than that of heuristics.

Previous algorithms for quasi-exact BDD minimization can be found in [13]. Similar to the exact approach of [9], the methods operate on a truth table representation of the involved Boolean function. For this reason, while being of theoretical interest, these algorithms are not practical. Both run time and space demand are always exponential as they are proportional to the size of the truth table.

In this paper, we investigate a more practical algorithm for quasi-exact BDD minimization, called  $A^{pprox}$ . The new method is based on the fastest known exact algorithm for BDD minimization, the  $A^*$ -based approach in [8].

 $A^{st}$  finds the minimum cost path in a graph using heuristic information and can be devised to operate on state space graphs.  $A^{st}$  searches the state space by systematically expanding and generating states until a match to a goal condition is found. If certain requirements to the heuristic function guiding the search are met,  $A^{st}$  will find a minimum cost path to a goal state.

To transform this method into a faster quasi-exact algorithm, in this paper a technique of [3] is used and adapted to the new context. In [3], the *Traveling Salesman Problem* (TSP) has been tackled by an extended  $A^*$ -algorithm. This approach is called  $A^*_{\epsilon}$  and it relaxes the selection condition of  $A^*$  which triggers the choice of the next state for

expansion (i.e. for generating all its successors).

When searching in large state spaces, a potential source of performance loss is the repeated consideration of the same states. This problem arises in search algorithms of various paradigms, e.g. for the *Branch and Bound* (B&B) framework as well as for  $A^*$ . In the exact BDD minimization algorithm of [6] the simultaneous use of more than one lower bound has been suggested as a remedy. In the  $A^*$ -based approach of [8], the problem is solved by the use of a *monotone* heuristic function.

The following questions have not been discussed in an analysis of  $A_{\epsilon}^*$ : how does the method behave in the case that a *monotone* heuristic function guides the search? And: In this case, can there exist states that are *reopened* and expanded (again and again)?

This question is of particular interest since the original  $A^*$ -algorithm is known to expand every distinct state at most once in the case of a monotone heuristic function. If  $A^*_{\epsilon}$  cannot guarantee the same, performance can be degraded. In a worst-case scenario, the number of reopened states could even exceed the savings provided by the relaxation when using  $A^*_{\epsilon}$  instead of  $A^*$ .

In this paper first it is proven that  $A^*_\epsilon$  in fact can show the above (unwanted) behavior. Second, a simple modification of the algorithm resolves the problem while still guaranteeing a bounded deviation from the optimum. The resulting method  $A^{pprox}$  is shown to always find a solution whose cost may exceed the optimal cost by a factor not greater than  $(1+\epsilon)^{\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \rfloor}$  where n is the maximal length of a solution path. Experimental results show the efficiency of the approach.

This paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, some background on BDDs and on state space search as well as basic notations and definitions are given. In Section 3, previous work related to our approach is briefly reviewed. Section 4 gives an example for a severe weakness of a previous approach. This weakness then is tackled by the new approach in Section 5. Experimental results are given in Section 6. Finally, a summary in Section 7 concludes the work with the obtained results.

### 2 Background

### **2.1** BDDs

We use the standard terminology of reduced ordered Binary Decision Diagrams (BDDs) which are directed acyclic graphs where a Shannon decomposition is carried out with each node. Variables are from the set  $X_n = \{x_1, \ldots, x_n\}$  and they are encountered at most once and in the same order (the "variable ordering") on every path from the root to a terminal node. Note that reduced diagrams are considered, derived by removing redundant nodes and merging isomorphic subgraphs. An example of a shared BDD representing more than one function in one diagram is given in Fig. 1. For more details see [2].

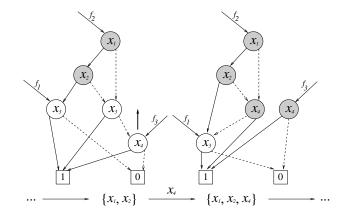


Figure 1. BDDs for a transition  $q:=\{x_1,x_2\}\xrightarrow{x_4} q\cup\{x_4\}$ .

# 2.2 State Space Search by $A^*$ -Algorithm

An important method to *guide* the search on a state space is *heuristic search*. With every state q a quantity h(q) is associated which estimates the cost of the cheapest path from q to a goal state t. This allows us to search in the direction of the goal states. The  $A^*$ -algorithm is a heuristic search algorithm designed to find a minimum cost path from the initial state s to a goal state t. It starts at s and bases the choice of the next state to expand on two criteria:

- the cost of the cheapest known path from the initial state up to state q, denoted g(q), and
- the estimate h(q).

They are combined to the so-called evaluation function  $\varphi(q) = g(q) + h(q)$ . The minimal cost of a path from s to q is denoted  $g^*(q)$ . The minimal cost of a path from q to a goal state is denoted  $h^*(q)$ .

For  $A^*$ , the estimate h(q) has to be a lower bound on the cost of an optimal path from q to a goal state, more formally:

$$h(q) \le h^*(q). \tag{1}$$

In this case, h is called *admissible*.  $A^*$  is called an *admissible algorithm*, since theory guarantees that  $A^*$  terminates and always finds a minimum cost path.

 $A^*$  maintains a prioritized queue OPEN which is ordered with respect to increasing values  $\varphi(q)$ .

In the beginning, this queue only contains s. In each step, a state q with a minimal  $\varphi$ -value is expanded, dequeued and put on a list called CLOSED. During expansion, the successor states of q are generated and inserted into the queue OPEN according to their  $\varphi$ -values. For this, the values g and h of the successor states are computed dynamically. For a transition  $q \longrightarrow q'$  let c(q, q') denote the cost of the transition. Then q' is associated with its cost g(q') = g(q) + c(q, q'), i.e. g accumulates transition costs. In this, for a state q, g(q) is computed as the sum of the cost c(r, r') of all transitions  $r \longrightarrow r'$  occurring on the cheapest

known path to q. If a path between q and q' is optimal, its cost is denoted by k(q, q').

A successor state q' might be generated a second time if q' has more than one predecessor state. If a cheaper path from s to q' is found in this case, g(q') is updated. If q was on the list CLOSED, q is reopened, i.e. it is put on OPEN again. By that, states get a second chance during the search for the minimum cost path when new information about them is available. These updates of the "g-part" of  $\varphi$  to the costs of a newly found cheaper path to q continuously compensate for the fact that the character of the "h-part" is only estimative. The cheapest known path to q' is denoted p(q') and is also updated respectively. The algorithm terminates if the next state to expand is a goal state t. The estimate  $h(t) = h^*(t)$  must be zero. In this case, the path found up to t, i.e. p(t), is of minimal cost  $C^*$  which is also expressed with  $\varphi^*(t) = g(t) = g^*(t) = C^*$ . This minimum cost path  $p(t) = p^*(t)$  is reported as solution.

# 3 Previous Work

In this section previous work related to our approach is briefly reviewed.

# 3.1 Finding a Best Ordering by Path Cost Minimization

In [8] an  $A^*$ -based approach to exact BDD minimization has been presented: the problem of finding an optimal variable ordering is expressed as the problem of finding a minimum cost path from the initial state  $\emptyset$  to the goal state  $X_n$  in the state space  $2^{X_n}$ .

To achieve this, an appropriate cost function is chosen. The key idea of [8] is to define the cost function such that the number of nodes in the first k levels of a BDD is taken as the cost of this path. An example of a state transition and the corresponding BDDs is given in Fig. 1.

The heuristic function used in [8] has the property of *monotonicity*.

**Definition 3.1** Consider an  $A^*$ -algorithm with heuristic function h and with the cost of optimal paths between states k. Heuristic function h is said to be *monotone* (or consistent), if

$$h(q) \le k(q, q') + h(q') \tag{2}$$

if q' is any descendant of q.

In [11] it is shown that, in the case of a monotone heuristic function h,  $A^{\ast}$  finds optimal paths to all expanded nodes, more formally:

**Theorem 3.1** Consider an  $A^*$ -algorithm with a monotone heuristic function h. Then, if a state q is expanded, a cheapest path to q has already been found, i.e. we have  $g(q) = g^*(q)$  and therefore  $p(q) = p^*(q)$ .

With that, performance degradation by reopenings of states (as described in Section 1) cannot occur as every state is expanded exactly once.

### 3.2 Relaxing Ordered Best-First Search

Experiments have shown the following: during execution of an  $A^*$ -algorithm, a large amount of time is spent discriminating among many paths whose cost do not vary significantly from each other. To assure optimality of the final solution,  $A^*$  spends a disproportionately long time to select the best of roughly equal candidate states as next state to expand. This behavior raises the idea of equipping  $A^*$  with the capability of terminating earlier with a suboptimal but otherwise perfectly acceptable solution path.

In [3] an extension of  $A^*$  called  $A^*_{\epsilon}$  has been proposed, that addresses the above problem by adding a second queue FOCAL which maintains a subset of the states on OPEN. This subset is the set of those states whose cost does not deviate from the minimal cost of a state on OPEN by a factor greater than  $1 + \epsilon$ . Formally,

$$\text{Focal} = \{ q \mid \varphi(q) \leq (1 + \epsilon) \cdot \min_{r \in \text{OPEN}} \varphi(r) \}. \tag{3}$$

The operation of  $A_{\epsilon}^*$  is identical to that of  $A^*$  except that  $A_{\epsilon}^*$  selects a state q from FOCAL with minimal value  $h_F(q)$ . The function  $h_F$  is a second heuristic estimating the computational effort required to complete the search. By this the nature of  $h_F$  differs significantly from that of h since h estimates the solution cost of the remaining path whereas  $h_F$  estimates the remaining time needed to find this solution.

It can be shown that  $A_{\epsilon}^*$  is  $\epsilon$ -admissible, i.e. it always finds a solution whose cost does not exceed the optimal cost by more than a factor of  $1 + \epsilon$ .

# 4 Monotonicity

In Section 1 the following question has been raised: provided that  $A^*_{\epsilon}$  is guided by a monotone heuristic h, can states be *reopened*?

Next we give an example which shows that such states may exist.

**Example 4.1** In Fig. 2, the left datum annotated at a node is the g-value, the right one is the h-value. Edges depict state transitions and the cost of the transition is annotated at each edge. The heuristic function h is monotone since (2) is respected along every path in the state space graph. For the following, let  $\epsilon = \frac{1}{2}$ .

First,  $A_{\epsilon}^*$  expands the initial state s with successor states q' and  $q_0$ . All nodes are minimal nodes on OPEN with  $\varphi(s) = \varphi(q') = \varphi(q_0) = 2$ . Since  $q_0$  has the highest g-value, the cost of this state appears to be less estimative, i.e. the state can be expected to be the closest to a terminal state. Thus  $q_0$  is expanded next while the minimum on OPEN stays  $\varphi(q') = 2$ . The successor state of  $q_0$ , state q, appears on FOCAL since  $\varphi(q) = 3 \leq (1 + \frac{1}{2}) \cdot 2 = 3$ . Moreover, it is the state with the highest g-value g, and hence it is chosen as the most promising state in terms of run time. The successor state is g'' which does g-value on FOCAL since g'(q'') = 1 and g-value on FOCAL since g'(q'') = 1 is expanded next, g-value on FOCAL since g'(q'') = 1 is expanded next, g-value only node left on FOCAL, g' is expanded next, g-value successor g-calculates g-value on FOCAL, g'-value on FOCAL,

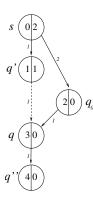


Figure 2. An example for a suboptimal path to an expanded state.

the time of expansion of q, the best path to q via q' had not been explored yet. Hence it is  $g(q)=3>2=g^*(q)$  and thus g(q) now is updated to the value 2.

To further analyze the operation of  $A_{\epsilon}^*$ , the following new result states an upper bound for the deviation of g from  $g^*$  for an expanded state.

**Lemma 4.1** Let  $\epsilon > 0$ . The paths to expanded states found by an  $A_{\epsilon}^*$ -algorithm that is guided by a monotone heuristic may be suboptimal. However, this deviation is *bounded*, in detail:

$$\forall q \in \text{CLOSED} : g(q) \le (1 + \epsilon) \cdot g^*(q) + \epsilon \cdot h(q)$$
 (4)

We omit a proof due to space limitation. During experiments conducted with  $A_{\epsilon}^*$ , using the monotone heuristic from [7, 8], this phenomenon in fact has been observed, causing high increases in run time (due to space limitation these earlier experiments are not included in Section 6). In other words: due to the relaxation,  $A_{\epsilon}^*$  has lost much of the capability of  $A^*$  to gain from the monotonicity of h.

### **5** Preventing to Reopen States

In this section a simple modification of  $A^*_\epsilon$  yields the final method  $A^{pprox}$  used in our experiments.

Consider the following change of operation for  $A_{\epsilon}^*$ : instead of maintaining closed states on a list CLOSED, states are simply marked as closed after expansion and removal from OPEN. If the method finds a better path for a state q marked as closed, this better path is ignored, i.e. g(q) is not updated.

Otherwise, method  $A^{pprox}$  follows the usual operation of  $A^*$ .

Although  $\epsilon$ -admissibility can not be guaranteed for  $A^{pprox}$ , we still can show the following result:

**Theorem 5.1** Let n be the maximal length of a solution path. When driven by a monotone heuristic, algorithm  $A^{pprox}$  always finds a solution not exceeding the optimal cost by a factor greater than  $(1+\epsilon)^{\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \rfloor}$ .

The (rather tedious, nevertheless straightforward) proof is omitted due to space limitation.

# 6 Experimental Results

All experimental results have been carried out on a machine with an Athlon processor running at 2.2 GHz, with a main memory of 512 MByte and a run time limit of 20,000 CPU seconds. The new algorithm for exact BDD minimization is called  $A^{pprox}$  and its operation at different degrees of relaxation is compared to the fastest known method based on  $A^*$  [7,8]. The maximal solution path during operation equals the number of variables of the BDD, in our case no more than 25 variables. Consequently, the lowest relaxation degree used (5%) guarantees a solution not greater than 1.8 times the optimal size (10%: 3.1 times, 15%: 5.4 times) whereas at the highest degree (40%) a solution is guaranteed not greater than 57 times the optimal size. Although this last bound may not appear perfectly tight, attention was turned also to higher relaxation degrees: experiments with simulation-based techniques have revealed that heuristics may yield results from 100 up to 1000 times the optimum.

The implementation of the new algorithm  $A^{pprox}$  is based on the implementation of the  $A^*$ -based approach. For a comparison of plain concepts, we did not combine the methods with B&B. To put up a testing environment, both algorithms have been integrated into the CUDD package [19]. By this it is guaranteed that they run in the same system environment.

In a series of experiments  $A^{pprox}$  and  $A^*$  have been applied to benchmark circuits of LGSynth93 [4]. The results are given in Table 1. In the first column the name of the function is given. Column in (out) denotes the number of inputs (outputs) of a function. Column time  $A^*$  shows the run time for computation of the minimum BDD size with  $A^*$ . Column opt shows the number of BDD nodes needed for the minimal representation. The following five double-columns 5%, 10%, 20%, 30%, and 40% show run time and the sizes of the resulting BDDs when setting  $\epsilon$  to the corresponding values 0.05, 0.1, 0.2, 0.3, and 0.4.

When comparing to  $A^*$ , large reductions in run time can already be observed for  $A^{pprox}$  operating with  $\epsilon=0.05$ , i.e. at a degree of relaxation of only 5%. The reduction is up to 62.6% (e.g., see *lal*). On average, the reduction is 41.8%. As the degree of relaxation is increasing in the range of 5 up to 30%, further reductions in run time are obtained. For a degree of relaxation of 30%, the reduction is up to 92.0% (e.g., see *lal*), i.e. a speed-up factor of more than 12. On average, the obtained gain is 61.4%. However, beyond a level of 30%, higher degrees of relaxation can change the picture. Fig. 3 depicts several points on the space spanned by the two dimensions total run time (in CPU seconds) and solution quality (i.e. the number of BDD nodes). Note that an additional measuring point for  $\epsilon = 0.25$  has been added which is not included in Table 1 due to space limitation. Within the range of 0 up to 30%, the resulting plot forms a monotonically decreasing hyperbola. For a degree of 40% the total run time increases again.

Similar results have been observed in [3] where the TSP has been used as a test vehicle for  $A_{\epsilon}^*$ : there, and also in our application, the number of states expanded is not always a monotonically decreasing function. The reason for this phenomenon lies with the modified condition for the selection of the next, most promising state. This directly influences the necessary condition for state expansion. While  $A^*$  guarantees that no state q with  $\varphi(q) > C^*$  would be expanded,  $A_{\epsilon}^*$  (and with that, also  $A^{pprox}$ ) only guarantees, that states satisfying  $\varphi(q) > (1+\epsilon) \cdot C^*$  will be excluded from expansion. Consequently, it is possible that some states q satisfying the condition  $(1+\epsilon) \cdot C^* > \varphi(q) > C^*$  would be expanded by the relaxed extensions of  $A^*$ , but not by  $A^*$ .

The same observation can be made when looking at the run times of individual benchmarks, e.g., see comp. Note that for comp a run time of only 184 CPU seconds has been observed at a relaxation level of 50%, i.e. a speed-up factor of more than 19 (not included in Table 1 due to space limitation; the number of nodes obtained in this case was 101, i.e. the solution is only 6.3% larger than the optimal BDD size). This shows that sometimes, despite the general tendency illustrated in Fig. 3, also higher degrees of relaxation can be advantageous.

As the results show, the outlined speed-ups are obtained with only minor degradation of solution quality. In fact this degradation is usually very much less than the worst-case degradation by a factor of  $(1+\epsilon)^{\lfloor\frac{n}{2}\rfloor}$  which is guaranteed by the theory. Operating at 5% of relaxation, the observed maximal degradation in solution quality is 4.0% (see tcon). On average, the results are only 0.5% larger than the optimum BDD size. When using a relaxation of 30%, the maximal degradation is 28.0% (see tcon). On average, the resulting BDDs are still only 4.9% larger than the minimum size.

# 7 Conclusion

An algorithm for the computation of a quasi-optimal variable ordering of BDDs has been presented. It is based on an extension of the  $A^*$ -algorithm designed to tolerate worst-case increases in solution cost. This happens in favour of smaller search efforts required to complete the algorithm. In contrast to previous extensions of  $A^*$ , the new method expands every state exactly once if provided with a monotone heuristic function. This result can be transferred to other applications of relaxed best-first search. In this, the new method effectively accounts for aspects of run time while still guaranteeing that the cost of the solution will not exceed the optimal cost by a factor greater than  $(1+\epsilon)^{\lfloor \frac{n}{2}\rfloor}$  where n is the maximal length of a solution path. Within a practical range of a few percents up to 30% degree of relaxation, the user can trade off run time for quality of the solution

Experimental results are reported that clearly demonstrate the efficiency of the presented approach. A comparison to the best known exact BDD minimization algorithm (which is based on  $A^*$ ) shows reductions in run time by up to one order of magnitude. This is obtained while the

degradation of solution quality stays below a few percents on average.

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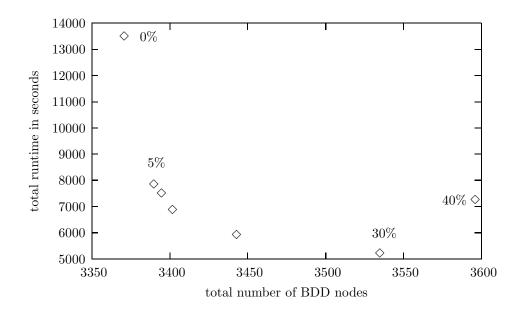


Figure 3. Trading off run time for solution quality with  $A^{\it pprox}$ .

Table 1. Results of  $A^{\it pprox}$  for different degrees of relaxations

name	in	out	time $A^*$	opt	degree of the relaxation applied in $A^{pprox}$ in percent									
					5		10		20		30		40	
					time	size	time	size	time	size	time	size	time	size
сс	21	20	46s	46	47s	46	45s	46	32s	47	27s	47	37s	48
cm150a	21	1	109s	33	110s	34	101s	36	91s	34	29s	35	27s	37
cm163a	16	5	0.5s	26	0.6s	27	0.4s	26	0.5s	26	0.5s	26	0.5s	26
cmb	16	4	0.2s	28	0.2s	28	0.2s	28	0.2s	28	0.2s	28	0.2s	28
comp	32	3	3519s	95	2017s	95	1280s	95	2168s	98	1839s	101	2690s	104
cordic	23	2	1.4s	42	1.3s	42	0.9s	42	1.2s	43	1s	44	2s	49
cps	24	102	1132s	971	1390s	980	1568s	977	1224s	980	375s	996	531s	1133
i1	25	16	17s	36	17s	36	17s	36	8.7s	36	13.7s	36	37s	37
lal	26	19	661s	67	247s	67	249s	67	228s	67	53s	67	86s	67
mux	21	1	110s	33	109s	34	101s	36	91s	34	29s	35	26s	37
pcle	19	9	4s	42	4s	42	3.9s	43	3.8s	43	2s	43	2.6s	43
pm1	16	13	0.4s	40	0.4s	40	0.4s	40	0.4s	40	0.3s	41	0.3s	40
s208.1	18	9	3.9s	41	3.9s	41	3s	41	4.3s	42	1.7s	44	2.4s	45
s298	17	20	4.7s	74	4.5s	74	4.7s	74	4.7s	74	4.9s	74	2.7s	80
s344	24	26	1136s	104	516s	104	565s	104	418s	106	543s	104	680s	110
s349	24	26	1137s	104	515s	104	564s	104	417s	106	543s	104	683s	110
s382	24	27	477s	119	327s	119	329s	119	124s	119	192s	120	299s	119
s400	24	27	479s	119	326s	119	329s	119	123s	119	192s	120	300s	119
s444	24	27	442s	119	294s	119	287s	119	112s	119	159s	120	259s	119
s526	24	27	1370s	113	286s	113	352s	114	339s	115	130s	113	231s	113
s820	23	24	767s	220	645s	222	667s	222	702s	225	469s	259	601s	224
s832	23	24	736s	220	644s	222	665s	222	699s	225	465s	259	545s	225
sct	19	15	5.2s	48	4.8s	48	5.4s	48	4.3s	48	4.9s	48	4.3s	48
t481	16	1	0.2s	21	0.3s	21	0.2s	21	0.3s	21	0.2s	21	0.2	21
tcon	17	16	0.5s	25	1.0s	26	1.1s	27	1.8s	29	0.4s	32	1s	26
ttt2	24	21	1320s	107	323s	107	346s	108	335s	108	118s	114	192s	107
vda	17	39	20s	478	21s	480	21s	481	20s	484	14.5s	504	19.6s	481