

Optimizing Seasonal-to-Decadal Analog Forecasts with a Learned Spatially-Weighted Mask

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Key Points:

- An interpretable neural network provides a spatially-weighted mask for selecting optimal analogs
- Analog selected with the weighted mask offer more skillful forecasts than traditional methods for selecting analogs
- The learned mask highlights precursor regions for predicting large-scale climate anomalies in a perfect model framework

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12 **Abstract**

13 Seasonal-to-decadal climate prediction is crucial for decision-making in a number of in-
14 dustries, but forecasts on these timescales have limited skill. Here, we develop a data-
15 driven method for selecting optimal analogs for seasonal-to-decadal analog forecasting.
16 Using an interpretable neural network, we learn a spatially-weighted mask that quan-
17 tifies how important each grid point is for determining whether two climate states will
18 evolve similarly. We show that analogs selected using this weighted mask provide more
19 skillful forecasts than analogs that are selected using traditional spatially-uniform meth-
20 ods. This method is tested on two prediction problems within a perfect model frame-
21 work using the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology Grand Ensemble: multi-year pre-
22 diction of North Atlantic sea surface temperatures, and seasonal prediction of El Niño
23 Southern Oscillation. This work demonstrates a methodical approach to selecting analogs
24 that may be useful for improving seasonal-to-decadal forecasts and understanding their
25 sources of skill.

26 **Plain Language Summary**

27 Understanding how the climate will look in one to ten years is useful for many in-
28 dustries, but this task is very difficult. One method for making forecasts on these timescales
29 is called analog forecasting. In analog forecasting, a researcher finds past states in ob-
30 servations, or states in a climate model simulation, that look like the current state of the
31 climate, and uses how those maps changed over time to predict how the climate will change
32 over time. Some regions are more important for determining how a climate state will change
33 over time, and we use a machine learning method called a neural network to identify these
34 important regions. We find that if we only look at these important regions when deter-
35 mining if two climate states are similar or not, we can improve our analog forecasting
36 skill.

37 **1 Background**

38 Forecasts on seasonal-to-decadal timescales are crucial for decision-makers in a num-
39 ber of industries, but forecasts on these timescales have limited skill (Kushnir et al., 2019;
40 Merryfield et al., 2020; Towler et al., 2018). Analog forecasting, predicting what will hap-
41 pen based on previous states with similar initial conditions, is an intuitive method for
42 seasonal-to-decadal prediction. It is built on the premise that similar geophysical states

43 will evolve in similar ways (Lorenz, 1969). It follows that analogs—similar looking states
44 to the initial state that is being forecast—can provide insight into how that initial state
45 will continue to evolve. The analog forecasting approach is powerful for seasonal-to-decadal
46 climate prediction (e.g., Ding et al., 2018, 2019; Menary et al., 2021; Delle Monache et
47 al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2023) and can outperform general circulation models (GCMs) ini-
48 tialized with observations, which struggle with initialization shock and climate model
49 drift (Merryfield et al., 2020; Mulholland et al., 2015).

50 A major hurdle in obtaining successful analog forecasts is that the climate system
51 is noisy and chaotic, and thus small differences between two initial states can result in
52 vast differences in their evolution (Lorenz, 1963). Thus, a successful analog forecast for
53 a particular initial climate state, which we refer to as the state of interest (SOI), requires
54 that the analogs and SOI are sufficiently similar such that their evolutions do not sig-
55 nificantly diverge during the prediction timeframe. Sufficiently similar analogs can be
56 difficult to find in the observational record since the number of independent observations
57 we have on seasonal-to-decadal scales (e.g., fewer than 100 during the satellite era) is so
58 much smaller than the number of degrees of freedom within a global geophysical field
59 (e.g., Van den Dool, 1994). While observations are in short supply, there is a wealth of
60 simulated climate data and many recent studies have used “model-analogs” (Ding et al.,
61 2018) drawn from climate model output instead (e.g., Lou et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2021;
62 Wu & Yan, 2023).

63 We refer to the library of climate model states that can be used for analog fore-
64 casting as “potential analogs.” Once a potential analog has been identified to be suffi-
65 ciently similar to the SOI we refer to it as an analog. Forecasts are made by taking the
66 mean evolution of the top-N analogs, where N is chosen by the user. There are several
67 ways to quantify the similarity between the potential analogs and the SOI. The most straight-
68 forward method is to compute the global correlation between each potential analog and
69 the SOI (e.g., Mahmood et al., 2022). Using a global correlation assumes that the sim-
70 ilarity between the maps at each grid point globally matters equally. A natural next step
71 in complexity is to compute a correlation over a region that is known to be important
72 for predictability of a given target, such as the North Pacific for predicting the Pacific
73 Decadal Oscillation (e.g., Wu & Yan, 2023). While this approach removes some regions
74 that may not be useful for determining the best analogs, it still assumes that each grid
75 point within the region is equally important and the region must be known *a priori*.

76 In the following work, we train an interpretable neural network on a proxy task that
 77 is similar to the analog problem (Section 3). The network learns a weighted mask which
 78 is used for determining analogs. The forecasting skill of the analogs selected using the
 79 learned weighted mask is tested through a perfect model approach where climate model
 80 data substitutes observations and is used to predict future climate model data. We show
 81 in two examples, forecasting 5-year sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies in the North
 82 Atlantic (Section 4) and wintertime SST anomalies in the tropical Pacific (i.e. El Niño
 83 Southern Oscillation; Section 5), that analogs identified using the weighted mask pro-
 84 vide more skillful forecasts than analogs that are identified in a way that is globally or
 85 regionally uniform. In addition, we show that these masks, once generated by a neural
 86 network, can be modified *post hoc* to further investigate the importance of each region
 87 for seasonal-to-decadal prediction (Section 5).

88 2 Data and Metrics

89 2.1 Climate Model Data

90 We use monthly SST from the historical run of the Max Planck Institute (MPI)
 91 for Meteorology Grand Ensemble (GE; Maher et al., 2019) at 2° latitude by 2° lon-
 92 gitude resolution. This dataset contains 100 members and each simulates 156 years (1850-
 93 2005) of the Earth’s climate with historical forcing. The MPI-GE uses the MPI Earth
 94 System Model version 1.1 (ESM1.1; Giorgetta et al., 2013). Each member is initialized
 95 using a different year of the preindustrial control simulation such that the differences be-
 96 tween ensemble members are a product of internal variability.

97 2.2 Standardization and Selection

98 Subsets of the MPI-GE ensemble members are used for different purposes. Our li-
 99 brary of potential analogs is made up of members 1-35. Members 36-50 are the SOIs for
 100 training the neural network, members 51-55 are the SOIs for the early stopping valida-
 101 tion set (which is used to prevent overfitting to the training data), and members 56-60
 102 are the SOIs for the tuning validation set (which is used to identify optimal hyperpa-
 103 rameters for the neural network). Finally, members 96-100, which are withheld until the
 104 very end, are the test set for making and evaluating the analog forecasts. Details on the

105 process of tuning and training the neural network, including selecting the hyperparam-
 106 eters, can be found in Section S1.

107 Each sample i or j , from the SOIs or the library of potential analogs, is composed
 108 of an input field ($I_{SOI,i}$ or $I_{analog,j}$) and a target ($T_{SOI,i}$ or $T_{analog,j}$). The input fields
 109 are one or more maps of global SST leading the targets over some earlier period (the "in-
 110 put period"). The targets are time- and area-mean SST anomalies over a certain region
 111 and forecast window.

112 We removed the forced signal from the climate model data by subtracting the en-
 113 semble mean of the library of potential analogs at each location and year from each set
 114 of data. After the forced signal was removed, the data was standardized by dividing by
 115 the standard deviation at each grid point across the library of potential analogs. By us-
 116 ing the library of potential analogs to calculate the forced signal and internal variance
 117 we treat the SOIs as if they are truly unseen data as we would when forecasting.

118 2.3 Metrics

119 We measure forecasting skill with a mean absolute error (MAE) skill score. This
 120 skill score is calculated by comparing the MAE of the analog prediction for the SOIs in
 121 the test set with the MAE of climatology, as:

$$\text{Skill Score} = 1 - \frac{MAE_{pred}}{MAE_{climo}}$$

122 such that a perfect prediction has a score of one, and a climatology prediction has a score
 123 of zero. Climatology is the prediction by the mean state, which is zero for this standard-
 124 ized data. Analog forecasts made using the weighted mask are compared with the fol-
 125 lowing additional baselines: a global analog forecast, a target region analog forecast, a
 126 mean target evolution forecast, and a random forecast. In the global analog forecast (tar-
 127 get region analog forecast), the analogs are selected if the unweighted MSE over the en-
 128 tire globe (target region) is the smallest. The mean target evolution forecast is based on
 129 how the targets in the input period evolve on average and is detailed in Section S2. The
 130 random forecast is made by randomly selecting targets from the library of potential analogs
 131 and using them as the prediction.

132 **3 Optimized Analog Forecasting Approach**

133 Our goal is to find optimal analogs for forecasting a specific target. To do this, we
 134 train a neural network to identify a spatially-weighted mask. This weighted mask is then
 135 multiplied by the SOI and potential analogs and the mean-squared error (MSE) between
 136 the weighted maps is used to determine how similar they are (Figure 1). This weighted
 137 mask should contain large values where similarity between the analogs and the SOI is
 138 most important for predicting the target and near-zero values where similarity between
 139 the maps is not important. With this architecture, the MSE will be low if the maps agree
 140 where the mask weights are high, regardless of the differences between the maps where
 141 the mask weights are low. For the plots in this paper, the mask is normalized by divid-
 142 ing by the sum of the weights times the size of the input, such that the mean weight is
 143 one.

144 We generate the weighted mask by training a neural network on a proxy task that
 145 is tangential to our main goal. While our goal is to identify a weighted mask that is op-
 146 timized for making an analog forecast, our proxy task is to predict the difference in $T_{SOI,i}$
 147 and $T_{analog,j}$ given $I_{SOI,i}$ and $I_{analog,j}$. En route to making this prediction, the neural
 148 network must learn the weighted mask, multiply it by the two input maps, compute the
 149 MSE between these weighted maps, and finally convert the MSE into a predicted dif-
 150 ference in the targets. This process is depicted in the red box of Figure 1.

151 Once the weighted mask has been learned, a neural network is no longer needed
 152 to make analog predictions. The weighted mask is multiplied by the SOI and each po-
 153 tential analog, the MSE is computed between the weighted SOI and the weighted po-
 154 tential analogs, and the potential analogs with the lowest MSE are used to make the ana-
 155 log forecast. While the proxy task is not identical to the analog problem, it provides a
 156 weighted mask that improves analog forecasting skill, as we will show in Sections 4 and
 157 5.

158 **4 Multi-year Prediction of North Atlantic Sea Surface Temperature**

159 We first test our analog forecasting approach on a multi-year prediction of SSTs
 160 over the North Atlantic. North Atlantic SSTs exhibit clear variability on multi-annual
 161 timescales (Jackson et al., 2022) and exhibit potential for skillful decadal forecasts (Hawkins
 162 et al., 2011; Sutton & Allen, 1997). SST variability in the North Atlantic has been as-

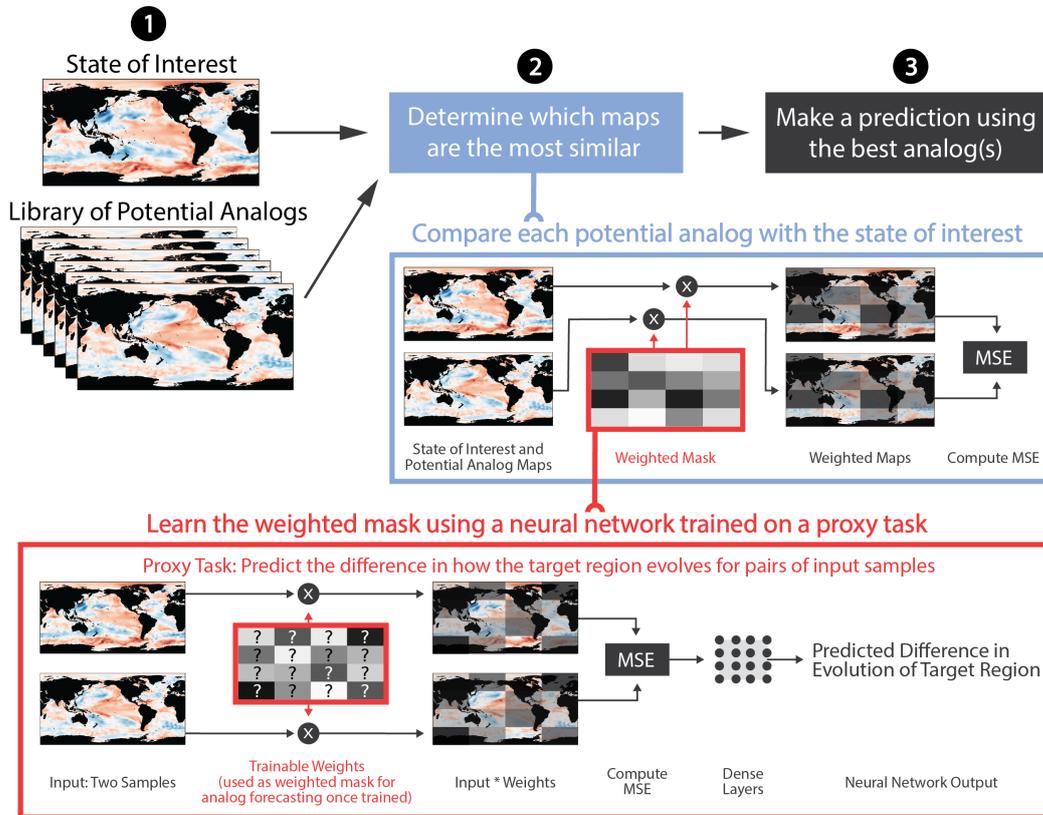


Figure 1. Optimized analog forecasting method and interpretable neural network architecture. The analog forecasting method can be described in three steps: 1) identify a state of interest and a library of potential analogs. 2) Determine which maps are the most similar. 3) Make a prediction using the best analog(s). In the blue box, we show our weighted-mask approach for determining the similarity of two maps. The weighted mask is multiplied by the state of interest and a potential analog before computing the mean squared error (MSE). In the red box, the interpretable neural network architecture is shown. Two input samples are multiplied by a matrix of trainable weights and the MSE is computed. This MSE is then converted to a predicted difference in the sample targets using a group of fully-connected dense layers. Note that the weighted mask has the same dimensions as the input field(s), despite the coarser resolution in this figure.

163 sociated with weather and climate anomalies globally, including Atlantic hurricane fre-
164 quency and intensity (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Balaguru et al., 2018), northern hemisphere
165 precipitation (Enfield et al., 2001; Si et al., 2023), and the strength of the Asian sum-
166 mer monsoon (Shekhar et al., 2022). In this prediction problem, we use global maps of
167 SST, averaged over the previous five years, to predict the mean SST anomaly in the North
168 Atlantic (40° - 60° N, 10° - 70° W) over the following five years.

169 The weighted mask learned by the neural network is shown in Figure 2a. The Green-
170 land Sea and the gulf stream region in the western North Atlantic emerge as the most
171 important regions for identifying analogs in the MPI-GE. Over the western North At-
172 lantic, there is an area of zero weight between two areas of high weight. These may be
173 where the boundaries of persistent SST anomalies vary, and the neural network has learned
174 that the specific locations of these boundaries are not important for the prediction prob-
175 lem. Previous studies that have used an analog approach to assess North Atlantic decadal
176 predictability selected the best analogs by taking a correlation over the whole globe (Mahmood
177 et al., 2022) or the entire North Atlantic basin (Menary et al., 2021). As shown in Fig-
178 ure 2b-d, when using the weighted mask, the best analogs only have to look like the SOI
179 in the highest weight regions. An example SOI is shown in Figure 2b and its best ana-
180 log in Figure 2c. These two maps look similar in the North Atlantic, but are starkly dif-
181 ferent in the North Pacific and Indian Ocean, among other regions. Once the weighted
182 mask has been applied to the SOI (Figure 2d) and its best analog (Figure 2e), the maps
183 look nearly identical.

184 These results suggest that using uniform weights across the entire North Atlantic
185 basin, or the whole globe, may lead to a selection of analogs that are not optimized for
186 forecasting multi-year variability in the North Atlantic. Indeed, we see that this is true
187 in the skill scores shown in Figure 3a. For $1 \leq N \leq 50$, where the top-N analogs are av-
188 eraged, our weighted mask analog forecast outperforms the global and target region ana-
189 log forecasts, as well as the climatology, mean target evolution, and random baselines.
190 The skill score is lowest when only the single best analog is used for forecasting, and sub-
191 sequently improves for larger N. Given that the skill score maximizes around $N = 10$,
192 and the spread of the targets associated with the analogs (i.e. the uncertainty of the fore-
193 cast) increases with N (Figure S1), we elect to focus on results for $N = 10$ analogs. The
194 prediction by the top-10 analogs, and the spread of the targets, are shown in Figure 3b
195 for 200 years of SOIs. The analog predictions do a good job of capturing the variabil-

196 ity of North Atlantic sea surface temperatures, though they do struggle to forecast the
197 most extreme anomalies.

198 **5 Seasonal Prediction of El Niño Southern Oscillation**

199 In addition to improving multi-year forecasts of SST in the North Atlantic, the learned
200 weighted mask improves forecasts of ENSO on seasonal timescales. ENSO is the lead-
201 ing mode of global annual SST variability (Hsiung & Newell, 1983) and has an exten-
202 sive influence on global weather and climate (reviewed in Yeh et al., 2018). Analog fore-
203 casting has been applied to seasonal prediction of ENSO in several studies due to its po-
204 tential to outperform initialized GCM forecasts (e.g., Ding et al., 2018, 2019). In the fol-
205 lowing example, we use wintertime (November-March) global SST anomalies to forecast
206 SST anomalies in the Niño3.4 region (5°S-5°N, 120-170°W; Barnston et al., 1997; Han-
207 ley et al., 2003) the following winter.

208 The weighted mask for forecasting ENSO looks markedly different from that for
209 forecasting North Atlantic multi-year variability (Figure 4a). While a few regions are as-
210 signed higher weights, the weights in Figure 4a are much more uniform across the globe
211 than in Figure 2a. The four main regions that stand out in this weighted mask have also
212 been identified as important precursors in previous literature: the western North Pacific
213 (e.g., S.-Y. Wang et al., 2012), the Pacific Meridional Mode (e.g., Amaya, 2019), the Cen-
214 tral Atlantic (e.g., Martín-Rey et al., 2015), and the tropical Pacific itself (e.g., Capot-
215 tondi & Sardeshmukh, 2015). The skill score of the global analog forecast (Figure 4b)
216 is similar to that of our weighted mask analog forecast (but always lower, see Figure S3),
217 which is not surprising since the values of the weighted mask are near one for most ar-
218 eas of the globe.

219 Since the weighted mask can be manually updated *post hoc*, we use this to explore
220 the sensitivity of the forecast skill to which regions are included in the weighted mask.
221 Figure 5a shows the weighted mask for ENSO prediction (Figure 4a) but where the small-
222 est 95 percent of the weights have been set to zero. Forecasts made with this “constrained”
223 weighted mask have similar skill to the original weighted mask (as shown in Figure S4).
224 From the constrained weighted mask, we identify four main precursor regions for ENSO:
225 the West Pacific (ocean grid points bounded by 0°-40°N, 100°-170°E), the Tropical Pa-

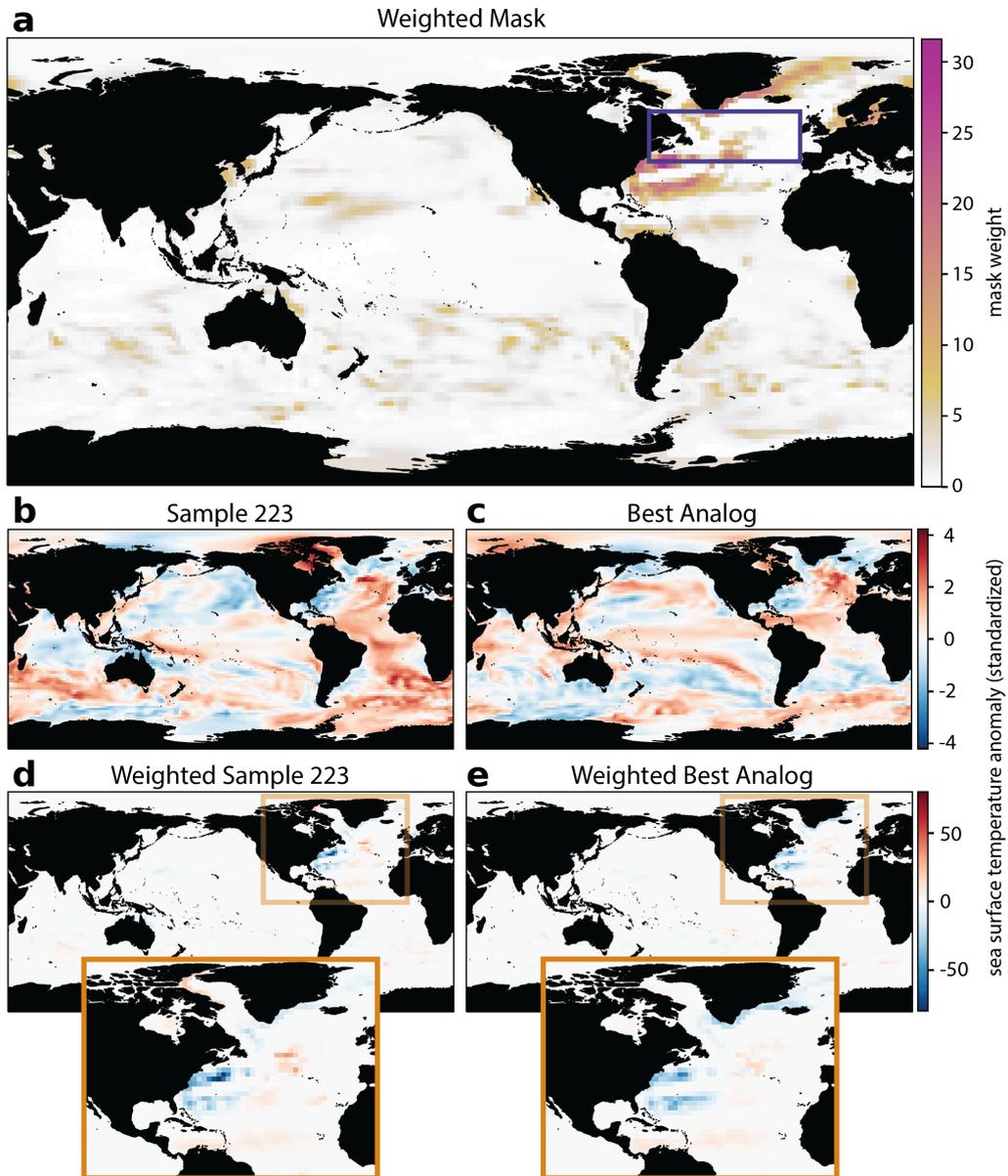


Figure 2. Weighted mask and example for multi-year predictions of North Atlantic SST. (a) Weighted mask, as learned by the interpretable neural network. (b) Standardized SST anomalies for a sample state of interest (SOI). (c) Standardized SST anomalies for the best analog associated with the SOI. (d) Weighted SOI. (e) Weighted best analog.

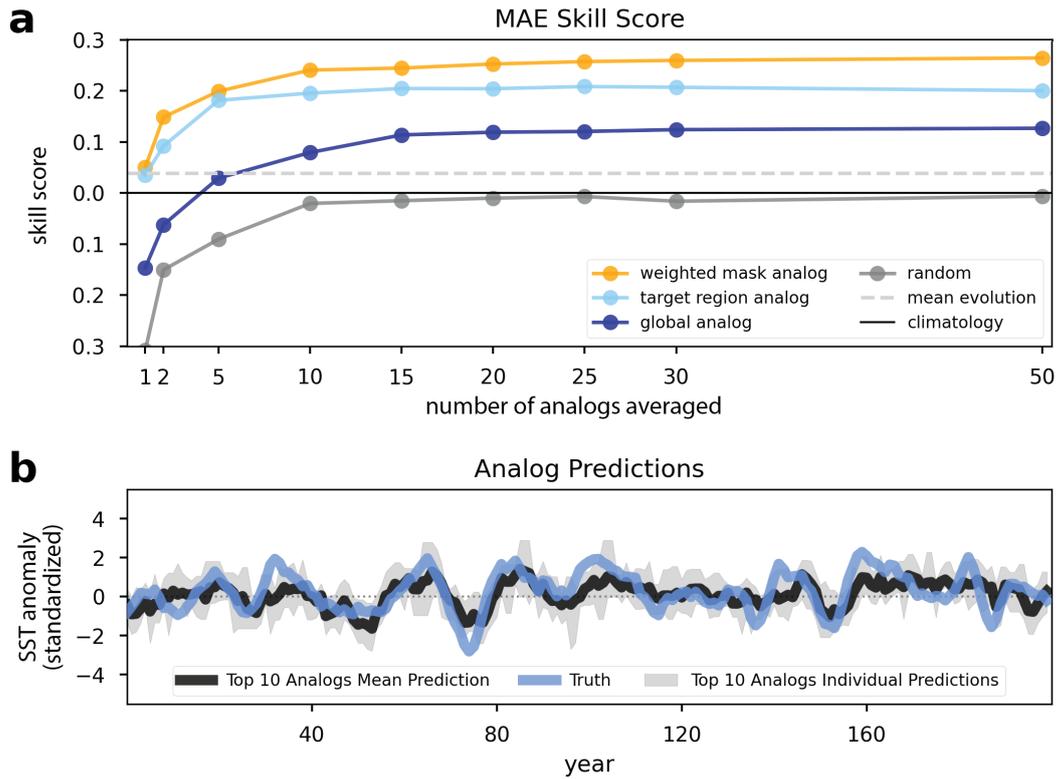


Figure 3. Analog forecasts of North Atlantic sea surface temperature. (a) Skill scores for our weighted mask analog forecast and other baselines. (b) Weighted mask analog forecasts for 200 years of MPI-GE simulations, including the mean prediction from the top-10 analogs, the spread of these predictions, and the truth values.

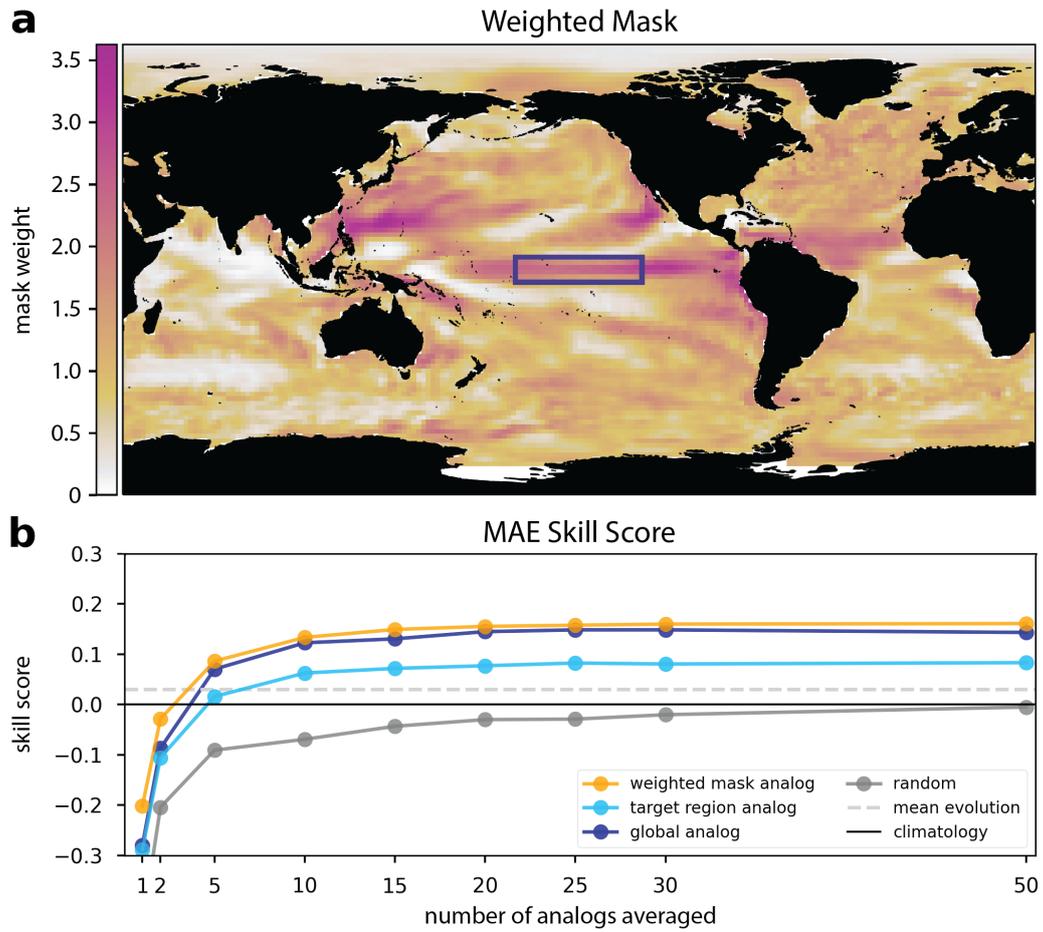


Figure 4. Weighted mask and skill scores for seasonal predictions of El Niño Southern Oscillation. (a) Weighted mask. (b) Skill scores for our weighted mask analog and other baselines.

226 cific (25°S-10°N, 170°E-65°W), the Baja Coast (10°N-40°N, 110°-140°W), and the Trop-
227 ical Atlantic (0°-20°N, 20°-80°W).

228 We assess how important each precursor region is in two ways. In the first approach,
229 we test the skill score of analog forecasting when each region is occluded from the con-
230 strained weighted mask (weights in that region are set to zero). When all four regions
231 are included, the skill score is 0.146. Removing any of the four regions from the weighted
232 mask results in a skill score decrease. Interestingly, removing the Tropical Atlantic re-
233 sults in the most drastic decrease in prediction skill. While the Tropical Atlantic has been
234 connected to ENSO predictability (e.g., Martín-Rey et al., 2015), it is not considered a
235 primary driver (C. Wang, 2018). In the second approach, we isolate each of the four re-
236 gions (weights outside that region are set to zero). There is no improvement over clima-
237 tology when just the Baja Coast or Tropical Atlantic is used to select analogs, and more
238 skill when just the West Pacific or Tropical Pacific is used. However, no region alone pro-
239 vides anywhere near the skill that all four regions do together.

240 6 Discussion and Conclusions

241 We have shown how an interpretable neural network can be used to identify a weighted
242 mask that improves the selection of analogs for seasonal-to-decadal forecasting. The pre-
243 cursors identified in the weighted masks are not necessarily causal, but they do provide
244 the optimal predictors for the given input. In this work we have constrained the neu-
245 ral network to learn one mask that represents all pathways of predictability, however al-
246 lowing the network to learn different masks for different SOIs could lead to better ana-
247 log forecasts.

248 While we only used a single input map of SST to predict a future target SST in
249 this work, this neural network architecture can be used for many other forecasting ap-
250 proaches. For example, a combination of multiple variables can be used as the predic-
251 tors (such as SST and sea surface height, as in Ding et al., 2018) or other geophysical
252 variables may be selected as the target (e.g., predicting precipitation over land). In ad-
253 dition, one may also include variables at multiple lead times to capture the time tendency
254 of the climate system. We show results that include SST tendency as an input for the
255 North Atlantic multi-year prediction example in Figure S5.

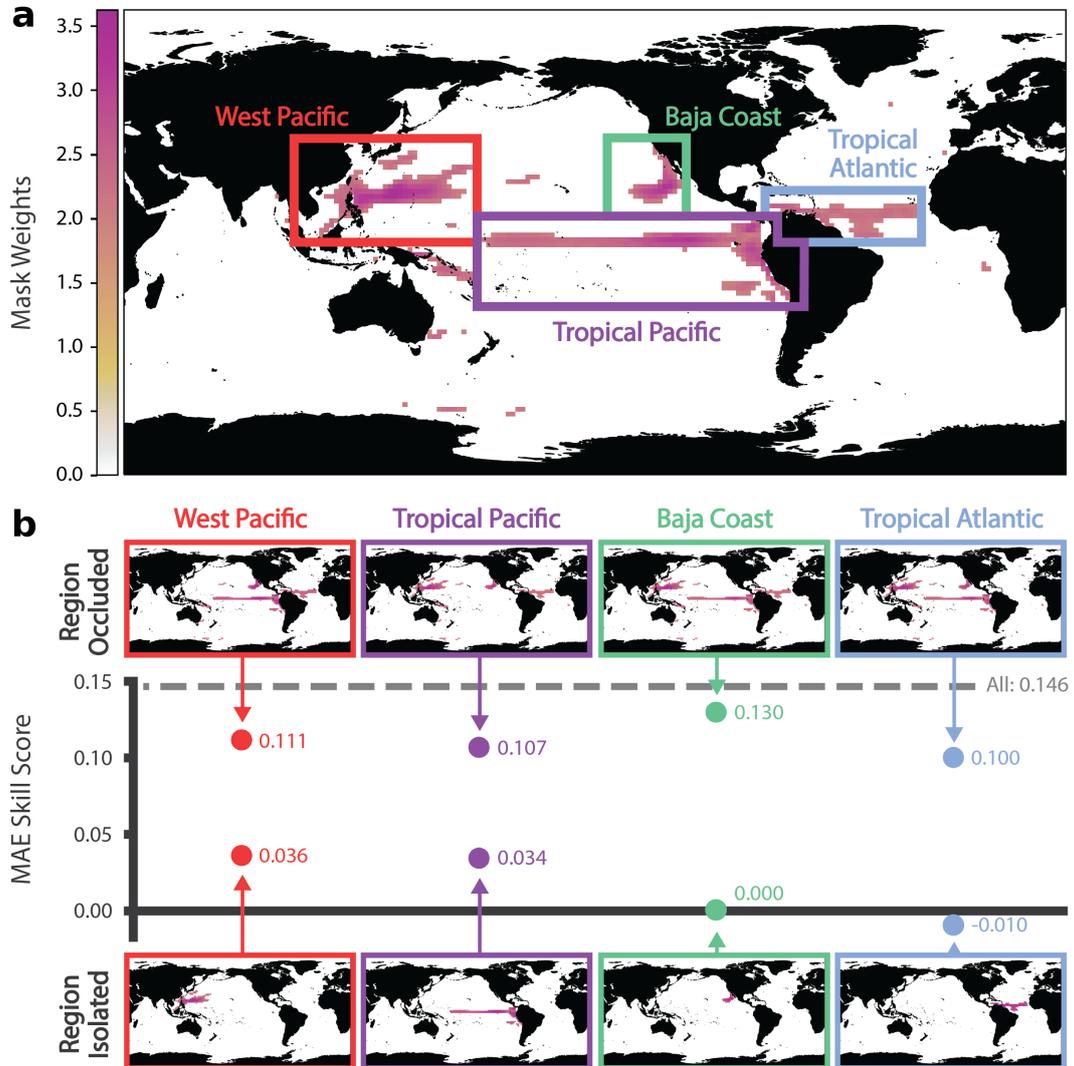


Figure 5. Analog forecasting skill of El Niño Southern Oscillation when various regions are occluded or isolated. (a) As in Figure 4a, but the lowest 95 percent of weights are set to zero. Four regions of focus are highlighted by the colored boxes. (b) Skill scores for analog forecasts when each region is occluded from the mask (top) and when the region is isolated to make a forecast (bottom).

256 We have explored this method through a perfect model setup. As such, the iden-
257 tified precursors are intrinsic to MPI-ESM1.1 and may not reflect patterns of predictabil-
258 ity in the observed Earth system. Training the weighted mask on a multi-model ensem-
259 ble may provide patterns that are more consistent with observations (e.g. Kirtman et
260 al., 2014; Rader et al., 2022) and allow for enhanced analog predictions on real data. Ad-
261 ditionally, we could train on models and observations at the same time to identify a weighted
262 mask that is more representative of the true Earth System. We believe that this weighted
263 mask approach will be influential to analog forecasting moving forward.

264 Open Research Section

265 The data used in this study, simulations from the Max Planck Institute for Mete-
266 orology Grand Ensemble, are publicly available at [https://esgf-data.dkrz.de/projects/mpi-](https://esgf-data.dkrz.de/projects/mpi-ge/)
267 [ge/](https://esgf-data.dkrz.de/projects/mpi-ge/). The weighted masks, and all python code used to generate the data and figures in
268 this paper, can be found at XXX REVIEWERS, THIS CAN CURRENTLY BE FOUND
269 AT <https://github.com/jaminrader/WeightedMaskAnalogForecasting> AND WILL BE
270 UPLOADED TO ZENODO WHEN FINISHED XXX.

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