

# Package ‘DESpace’

January 23, 2025

**Type** Package

**Title** DESpace: a framework to discover spatially variable genes

**Version** 1.7.0

**Description** Intuitive framework for identifying spatially variable genes (SVGs) via edgeR, a popular method for performing differential expression analyses. Based on pre-annotated spatial clusters as summarized spatial information, DESpace models gene expression using a negative binomial (NB), via edgeR, with spatial clusters as covariates. SVGs are then identified by testing the significance of spatial clusters. The method is flexible and robust, and is faster than the most SV methods. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, it is the only SV approach that allows:

- performing a SV test on each individual spatial cluster, hence identifying the key regions of the tissue affected by spatial variability;
- jointly fitting multiple samples, targeting genes with consistent spatial patterns across replicates.

**biocViews** Spatial, SingleCell, RNASeq, Transcriptomics, GeneExpression, Sequencing, DifferentialExpression, StatisticalMethod, Visualization

**License** GPL-3

**Depends** R (>= 4.3.0)

**Imports** edgeR, limma, dplyr, stats, Matrix, SpatialExperiment, ggplot2, ggpubr, scales, SummarizedExperiment, S4Vectors, BiocGenerics, data.table, assertthat, cowplot, ggforce, ggnewscale, patchwork, BiocParallel, methods

**Suggests** knitr, rmarkdown, testthat, BiocStyle, ExperimentHub, concaveman, spatialLIBD, purrr, scuttle, utils

**VignetteBuilder** knitr

**RoxygenNote** 7.2.3

**ByteCompile** true

**Encoding** UTF-8

**URL** <https://github.com/peicai/DESpace>

**BugReports** <https://github.com/peicai/DESpace/issues>

**git\_url** <https://git.bioconductor.org/packages/DESpace>

**git\_branch** devel

**git\_last\_commit** 2b11443

**git\_last\_commit\_date** 2024-10-29

**Repository** Bioconductor 3.21

**Date/Publication** 2025-01-22

**Author** Peiyong Cai [aut, cre] (ORCID: <<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9229-2244>>),  
Simone Tiberi [aut] (ORCID: <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3054-9964>>)

**Maintainer** Peiyong Cai <[peiyong.cai@uzh.ch](mailto:peiyong.cai@uzh.ch)>

## Contents

DESpace . . . . .	2
DESpace_test . . . . .	3
FeaturePlot . . . . .	5
individual_test . . . . .	7
LIBD_subset . . . . .	9
results_DESpace_test . . . . .	10
results_individual_test . . . . .	11
top_results . . . . .	12
<b>Index</b>	<b>14</b>

---

DESpace	<i>DESpace: A package for identifying spatially variable genes</i>
---------	--

---

## Description

An intuitive framework for identifying spatially variable genes (SVGs) via edgeR, one of the most common methods for performing differential expression analyses.

## Details

Based on pre-annotated spatial clusters as summarized spatial information, DESpace models gene expression using a negative binomial (NB), via edgeR, with spatial clusters as covariates. SVGs are then identified by testing the significance of spatial clusters.

Our approach assumes that the spatial structure can be summarized by spatial clusters, which should reproduce the key features of the tissue (e.g., white matter and layers in brain cortex). These spatial clusters are therefore taken as proxy for the actual spatial distribution; a significant test of these covariates indicates that space influences gene expression, hence identifying spatially variable genes.

Our model is flexible and robust, and is significantly faster than the most SV methods. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, it is the only SV approach that allows: - performing a SV test on each individual spatial cluster, hence identifying the key regions affected by spatial variability; - jointly fitting multiple samples, targeting genes with consistent spatial patterns across replicates.

For an overview of the functionality provided by the package, please see the vignette: `vignette("DESpace", package="DESpace")`

**Author(s)**

Peiyong Cai <peiyong.cai@uzh.ch>, Simone Tiberi <simone.tiberi@unibo.it>

**See Also**

[DESpace\\_test](#), [individual\\_test](#), [top\\_results](#), [FeaturePlot](#)

---

DESpace\_test

*DESpace\_test*

---

**Description**

'DESpace\_test' identifies spatially variable genes (SVGs) from spatially-resolved transcriptomics data, provided spatial clusters are available.

**Usage**

```
DESpace_test(
  spe,
  spatial_cluster,
  sample_col = NULL,
  replicates = FALSE,
  min_counts = 20,
  min_non_zero_spots = 10,
  filter_gene = TRUE,
  verbose = FALSE
)
```

**Arguments**

spe	SpatialExperiment or SingleCellExperiment.
spatial_cluster	Column name of spatial clusters in colData(spe).
sample_col	Column name of sample ids in colData(spe).
replicates	A logical, indicating whether biological replicates are provided (TRUE) or not (FALSE). If biological replicates are provided, <a href="#">DESpace_test</a> performs a joint test across all replicates, searching for SVGs with consistent spatial patterns across samples.
min_counts	Minimum number of counts per sample (across all spots) for a gene to be analyzed.
min_non_zero_spots	Minimum number of non-zero spots per sample, for a gene to be analyzed.
filter_gene	A logical. If TRUE, <a href="#">DESpace_test</a> filters genes: genes have to be expressed in at least 'min_non_zero_spots' spots, and a gene requires at least 'min counts' counts per sample (across all locations).
verbose	A logical. If TRUE, <a href="#">DESpace_test</a> returns two more results: 'DGEGLM' and 'DGELRT' objects contain full statistics from 'edgeR::glmFit' and 'edgeR::glmLRT'.

## Details

If `'sample_col'` is not specified and `'replicates == FALSE'`, `DESpace_test` assumed that data comes from an individual sample, and performs SV testing on it.

If `'sample_col'` is provided and `'replicates == FALSE'`, `DESpace_test` tests each sample individually and returns a list of results for each sample.

If `'sample_col'` is provided and `'replicates == TRUE'`, `DESpace_test` performs a joint multi-sample test.

## Value

A list of results:

- `"gene_results"`: a dataframe contains main edgeR test results;
- `"estimated_y"`: a DGEList object contains the estimated common dispersion, which can later be used to speed-up calculation when testing individual clusters.
- `"glmFit"` (only if `verbose = TRUE`): a DGEGLM object contains full statistics from `"edgeR::glmFit"`.
- `"glmLRT"` (only if `verbose = TRUE`): a DGELRT object contains full statistics from `"edgeR::glmLRT"`.

## See Also

[top\\_results](#), [individual\\_test](#), [FeaturePlot](#)

## Examples

```
# load the input data:
data("LIBD_subset", package = "DESpace")
LIBD_subset

# Fit the model via \code{\link{DESpace_test}} function.
set.seed(123)
results_DESpace <- DESpace_test(spe = LIBD_subset,
                                spatial_cluster = "layer_guess_reordered",
                                verbose = FALSE)

# DESpace_test returns of a list of 2 objects:
# "gene_results": a dataframe contains main edgeR test results;
# "estimated_y": a DGEList object contains the estimated common dispersion,
# which can later be used to speed-up calculation when testing individual clusters.

# We visualize differential results:
head(results_DESpace$gene_results, 3)
```

---

FeaturePlot

*FeaturePlot*


---

## Description

Plot spatial gene expression. This function is a modified version of the [FeaturePlot](#) function from BayesSpace R package. In comparison to the original BayesSpace function, this function allows plotting multiple genes simultaneously and drawing an outline around a specified cluster.

## Usage

```
FeaturePlot(
  spe,
  feature,
  coordinates = NULL,
  assay.type = "logcounts",
  Annotated_cluster = FALSE,
  diverging = FALSE,
  low = NULL,
  high = NULL,
  mid = NULL,
  color = NULL,
  platform = "Visium",
  spatial_cluster = NULL,
  cluster = NULL,
  legend_cluster = FALSE,
  label = FALSE,
  ncol = 3,
  title = FALSE,
  linewidth = 0.4,
  legend_exprs = FALSE,
  title_size = 10
)
```

## Arguments

spe	SpatialExperiment or SingleCellExperiment. If feature is specified and is a string, it must exist as a row in the specified assay of spe.
feature	Feature vector used to color each spot. May be the name of a gene/row in an assay of spe, or a vector of continuous values.
coordinates	Column names of spatial coordinates of spots stored in colData(spe).
assay.type	String indicating which assay in spe the expression vector should be taken from.
Annotated_cluster	A logical. TRUE or FALSE, indicating whether to plot the annotated spatial clusters next to expression plots.

<code>diverging</code>	A logical. If true, use a diverging color gradient in <code>FeaturePlot</code> (e.g. when plotting a fold change) instead of a sequential gradient (e.g. when plotting expression).
<code>low, mid, high</code>	Optional hex codes for low, mid, and high values of the color gradient used for continuous spot values.
<code>color</code>	Optional hex code to set color of borders around spots. Set to NA to remove borders.
<code>platform</code>	Spatial sequencing platform. If "Visium", the hex spot layout will be used, otherwise square spots will be plotted. NOTE: specifying this argument is only necessary if <code>spe</code> was not created by <code>BayesSpace::patialCluster()</code> or <code>BayesSpace::spatialEnhance()</code> .
<code>spatial_cluster</code>	Column name of spatial clusters in <code>colData(spe)</code> .
<code>cluster</code>	Names of the spatial clusters used for drawing a boundary around a group of points that belong to the specify cluster. It can be NULL, "all"/"ALL", or a vector of cluster names.
<code>legend_cluster</code>	A logical. TRUE or FALSE, indicating whether to plot the legend for the shaped clusters (TRUE), or not (FALSE). Only used when 'spatial_cluster' and 'cluster' are specified.
<code>label</code>	A logical. TRUE or FALSE. Adding a label and an arrow pointing to a group.
<code>ncol</code>	The dimensions of the grid to create. By default, 1, if the length of feature equals to 1, and 3, otherwise.
<code>title</code>	A logical. TRUE or FALSE. If true, the title name of each (subplot) is the gene name.
<code>linewidth</code>	The width of the boundary line around the cluster. The default ('0.4') size of the boundary line is one.
<code>legend_exprs</code>	A logical. TRUE or FALSE, indicating whether to plot the legend for the expression level (TRUE), or not (FALSE).
<code>title_size</code>	Text size.

**Value**

Returns a ggplot object.

**See Also**

[DESpace\\_test](#), [individual\\_test](#), [top\\_results](#)

**Examples**

```
# load the input data:
data("LIBD_subset", package = "DESpace")

# load pre-computed results (obtained via `DESpace_test`)
data("results_DESpace_test", package = "DESpace")
```

```
# Visualize the gene expression of the top three genes
feature = results_DESpace_test$gene_results$gene_id[seq_len(3)]
FeaturePlot(LIBD_subset, feature, coordinates = c("array_row", "array_col"),
            ncol = 3, title = TRUE)
```

---

individual_test	<i>individual_test</i>
-----------------	------------------------

---

## Description

DESpace can also be used to reveal the specific areas of the tissue affected by SVGs; i.e., spatial clusters that are particularly over/under abundant compared to the average signal. This function can be used to identify SVGs for each individual cluster.

## Usage

```
individual_test(
  spe,
  spatial_cluster,
  sample_col = "sample_id",
  edgeR_y = NULL,
  min_counts = 20,
  min_non_zero_spots = 10,
  filter_gene = TRUE,
  replicates = FALSE,
  BPPARAM = NULL
)
```

## Arguments

<code>spe</code>	SpatialExperiment or SingleCellExperiment.
<code>spatial_cluster</code>	Column name of spatial clusters in <code>colData(spe)</code> .
<code>sample_col</code>	Column name of sample ids in <code>colData(spe)</code> .
<code>edgeR_y</code>	Pre-estimated dispersion; if it's null, compute dispersion.
<code>min_counts</code>	Minimum number of counts per sample (across all spots) for a gene to be analyzed.
<code>min_non_zero_spots</code>	Minimum number of non-zero spots per sample, for a gene to be analyzed.
<code>filter_gene</code>	A logical. If TRUE, <code>DESpace_test</code> filters genes: genes have to be expressed in at least <code>'min_non_zero_spots'</code> spots, and a gene requires at least <code>'min counts'</code> counts per sample (across all locations).
<code>replicates</code>	Single sample or multi-sample test.

**BPPARAM** An optional parameter passed internally to `bplapply`. We suggest using as many cores as the number of spatial clusters. If unspecified, the script does not run in parallel. Note that parallel coding performs better only when dispersion estimations are not provided beforehand. Moreover, parallelizing the script will increase the memory requirement; if memory is an issue, leave 'BPPARAM' unspecified and, hence, avoid parallelization.

### Details

For every spatial cluster we test, `edgeR` would normally re-compute the dispersion estimates based on the specific design of the test. However, this calculation represents the majority of the overall computing time. Therefore, to speed-up calculations, we propose to use the dispersion estimates which were previously computed for the gene-level tests. This introduces a minor approximation which, in our benchmarks, does not lead to decreased accuracy. If you want to use pre-computed gene-level dispersion estimates, set `edgeR_y` to 'estimated\_y'. Alternatively, if you want to re-compute dispersion estimates (significantly slower, but marginally more accurate option), leave `edgeR_y` empty.

### Value

A list of results, with one result per spatial cluster in each element. Specifically, each item in the list is a "gene\_results" dataframe which contains main `edgeR` test results.

### See Also

[top\\_results](#), [DESpace\\_test](#), [FeaturePlot](#)

### Examples

```
# load the input data:
data("LIBD_subset", package = "DESpace")
LIBD_subset

# load pre-computed results (obtained via `DESpace_test`)
data("results_DESpace_test", package = "DESpace")

# DESpace_test returns of a list of 2 objects:
# "gene_results": a dataframe contains main edgeR test results;
# "estimated_y": a DGEList object contains the estimated common dispersion,
# which can later be used to speed-up calculation when testing individual clusters.

# We visualize differential results:
head(results_DESpace_test$gene_results, 3)

# Individual cluster test: identify SVGs for each individual cluster
# set parallel computing; we suggest using as many cores as the number of spatial clusters.
# Note that parallelizing the script will increase the memory requirement;
# if memory is an issue, leave 'BPPARAM' unspecified and, hence, avoid parallelization.
set.seed(123)
results_individual_test <- individual_test(LIBD_subset,
                                           edgeR_y = results_DESpace_test$estimated_y,
```



```

                                spatial_cluster = "layer_guess_reordered")

# We visualize results for the cluster 'WM'
results_WM <- results_individual_test[[7]]
head(results_WM,3)

```

---

LIBD_subset	<i>Subset from the human DLPFC 10x Genomics Visium dataset of the spatialLIBD package</i>
-------------	---

---

## Description

Subset from the human DLPFC 10x Genomics Visium dataset of the spatialLIBD package

## Arguments

LIBD\_subset contains a [SpatialExperiment](#) object, representing a subset of the sample 151673 from the full real data of the spatialLIBD package. Below the code used to subset the original dataset.

## Author(s)

Peiyong Cai <peiyong.cai@uzh.ch>, Simone Tiberi <simone.tiberi@unibo.it>

## See Also

[DESpace\\_test](#), [individual\\_test](#)

## Examples

```

# Connect to ExperimentHub
# ehub <- ExperimentHub::ExperimentHub()
# Download the example spe data
# spe_all <- spatialLIBD::fetch_data(type = "spe", eh = ehub)
# Select one sample only:
# LIBD_subset <- spe_all[, colData(spe_all)$sample_id == '151673']
# Select small set of random genes for faster runtime
# set.seed(123)
# sel_genes <- sample(dim(LIBD_subset)[1],500)
# LIBD_subset <- LIBD_subset[sel_genes,]
# keep_col <- c("array_row","array_col","layer_guess_reordered")
# library(SingleCellExperiment)
# LIBD_subset <- SpatialExperiment(assay = list(counts = assay(LIBD_subset),
#                                           logcounts = logcounts(LIBD_subset)),
#                                colData = colData(LIBD_subset)[keep_col])
# save(LIBD_subset, file = "./DESpace/data/LIBD_subset.RData")

```

---

results\_DESpace\_test *Results from DESpace\_test function*

---

## Description

Results from [DESpace\\_test](#) function

## Arguments

results\_DESpace\_test

contains a [list](#) object, with the results obtained applying [DESpace\\_test](#) function to an external dataset from the [spatialLIBD](#) package. Below the code used to obtain 'results\_DESpace\_test'.

## Author(s)

Peiyong Cai <peiyong.cai@uzh.ch>, Simone Tiberi <simone.tiberi@unibo.it>

## See Also

[DESpace\\_test](#)

## Examples

```
# load the input data:
# data("LIBD_subset", package = "DESpace")
# LIBD_subset
#
# Fit the model via `DESpace_test` function.
# Parameter `spe` specifies the input `SpatialExperiment` or `SingleCellExperiment` object,
# while `spatial_cluster` defines the column names of `colData(spe)` containing spatial clusters.
# To obtain all statistics, set `verbose` to `TRUE`.
# DESpace_test returns of a list of 4 objects:
# "gene_results": a dataframe contains main edgeR test results;
# "estimated_y": a DGEList object contains the estimated common dispersion,
# which can later be used to speed-up calculation when testing individual clusters.
# "glmFit": a DGEGLM object contains full statistics from "edgeR::glmFit"
# "glmLRT" a DGELRT object contains full statistics from "edgeR::glmLRT"
#
# set.seed(123)
# results_DESpace_test <- DESpace_test(spe = LIBD_subset,
#                                     spatial_cluster = "layer_guess_reordered",
#                                     verbose = FALSE)
#
# save(results_DESpace_test, file = "./DESpace/data/results_DESpace_test.RData")
```

---

results\_individual\_test

*Results from [individual\\_test](#) function*

---

### Description

Results from [individual\\_test](#) function

### Arguments

results\_individual\_test

contains a [list](#) object, with the results obtained applying [individual\\_test](#) function to an external dataset from the [spatialLIBD](#) package. Below the code used to obtain 'results\_individual\_test'.

### Author(s)

Peiyong Cai <[peiyong.cai@uzh.ch](mailto:peiyong.cai@uzh.ch)>, Simone Tiberi <[simone.tiberi@unibo.it](mailto:simone.tiberi@unibo.it)>

### See Also

[DESpace\\_test](#), [individual\\_test](#)

### Examples

```
# load the input data:
# data("LIBD_subset", package = "DESpace")
# LIBD_subset
# load pre-computed results (obtained via `DESpace_test`)
# data("results_DESpace_test", package = "DESpace")
# results_DESpace_test

# Function `individual_test()` can be used to identify SVGs for each individual cluster.
# Parameter `spatial_cluster` indicates the column names of `colData(spe)`
# containing spatial clusters.
# set.seed(123)
# results_individual_test <- individual_test(LIBD_subset,
#                                           edgeR_y = results_DESpace_test$estimated_y,
#                                           spatial_cluster = "layer_guess_reordered")
# save(results_individual_test, file = "./DESpace/data/results_individual_test.RData")
```

---

top_results	<i>top_results</i>
-------------	--------------------

---

### Description

Filter significant results. `top_results` returns the significant results obtained via `DESpace_test` and `individual_test`. It can also be used to merge gene- and cluster-level results into a single object.

### Usage

```
top_results(
  gene_results = NULL,
  cluster_results,
  cluster = NULL,
  select = "both",
  high_low = NULL
)
```

### Arguments

<code>gene_results</code>	Results returned from <code>DESpace_test</code> .
<code>cluster_results</code>	Results returned from <code>individual_test</code> .
<code>cluster</code>	A character indicating the cluster(s) whose results have to be returned. Results from all clusters are returned by default ("NULL").
<code>select</code>	A character indicating what results should be returned ("FDR", "logFC", or "both"). Only used if "cluster_results" are provided. By default ("both"), both FDR and logFC are returned.
<code>high_low</code>	A character indicating whether to filter results or not. Only used if "cluster_results" are provided, and one cluster is specified in "cluster" parameter. By default (NULL), all results are returned in a single data.frame. If "high" or "HIGH", we only return SVGs with average abundance in "cluster" higher than in the rest of the tissue (i.e., logFC > 0). If "low" or "LOW", we only return SVGs with average abundance in "cluster" lower than in the rest of the tissue (i.e., logFC < 0). If "both" or "BOTH", then both "high" and "low" results are returned, but in two separate data.frames.

### Value

A `data.frame` object or a list of `data.frame` with results.

A `data.frame` object or a list of `data.frame` with results.

- When only "cluster\_results" is provided, results are reported as a `data.frame` with columns for gene names (`gene_id`), spatial clusters affected by SV (`Cluster`), cluster-specific likelihood ratio test statistics (`LR`), cluster-specific average (across spots) log-2 counts per million (`logCPM`),

cluster-specific log<sub>2</sub>-fold changes (logFC), cluster-specific raw p-values (PValue), and Benjamini-Hochberg adjusted p-values (FDR) for each spatial cluster.

- When “gene\_results” and “cluster\_results” are given, results are reported as a `data.frame` that merges gene- and cluster-level results.

- If “cluster” is specified, the function returns a subset `data.frame` for the given cluster, which contains cluster name, gene name, LR, logCPM, logFC, PValue and FDR, ordered by FDR for the specified cluster.

- If “high\_low” is set, the function returns a list of `data.frame` that contains subsets of results for genes with higher and/or lower expression in the given cluster compared to the rest of the tissue.

### See Also

[DESpace\\_test](#), [individual\\_test](#), [FeaturePlot](#)

### Examples

```
# load pre-computed results (obtained via `DESpace_test`)
data("results_DESpace_test", package = "DESpace")

# DESpace_test returns of a list of 2 objects:
# "gene_results": a dataframe contains main edgeR test results;
# "estimated_y": a DGEList object contains the estimated common dispersion,
# which can later be used to speed-up calculation when testing individual clusters.

# We visualize differential results:
head(results_DESpace_test$gene_results, 3)

# load pre-computed results (obtained via `individual_test`)
data("results_individual_test", package = "DESpace")
# Function `individual_test()` can be used to identify SVGs for each individual cluster.
# `individual_test()` returns a list containing the results of individual clusters.
# For each cluster, results are reported as a data.frame,
# where columns for each cluster, results are reported as a data.frame,
# where columns contain gene names (`genes`), likelihood ratio (`LR`),
# log2-fold changes (`logFC`) and adjusted p-value (`FDR`).
#
# Combine gene- and cluster-level results
merge_res = top_results(results_DESpace_test$gene_results,
                        results_individual_test)

head(merge_res,3)
# 'select = "FDR"' can be used to visualize adjusted p-values for each spatial cluster.
merge_res = top_results(results_DESpace_test$gene_results,
                        results_individual_test, select = "FDR")

head(merge_res,3)
# Specify the cluster of interest and check top genes detected by DESpace_test.
results_WM_both = top_results(cluster_results = results_individual_test,
                              cluster = "WM", high_low = "both")

head(results_WM_both$high_genes, 3)
head(results_WM_both$low_genes, 3)
```

# Index

\* **internal**

DESpace, [2](#)

\* **spatial plotting functions**

FeaturePlot, [5](#)

data.frame, [12](#), [13](#)

DESpace, [2](#)

DESpace\_test, [3](#), [3](#), [4](#), [6–13](#)

FeaturePlot, [3–5](#), [5](#), [6](#), [8](#), [13](#)

individual\_test, [3](#), [4](#), [6](#), [7](#), [9](#), [11–13](#)

LIBD\_subset, [9](#)

list, [10](#), [11](#)

results\_DESpace\_test, [10](#)

results\_individual\_test, [11](#)

SpatialExperiment, [9](#)

top\_results, [3](#), [4](#), [6](#), [8](#), [12](#), [12](#)