

ERASER : A Benchmark to Evaluate Rationalized NLP Models

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Abstract

State-of-the-art models in NLP are now predominantly based on deep neural networks that are opaque in terms of how they come to make predictions. This limitation has increased interest in designing more interpretable deep models for NLP that reveal the ‘reasoning’ behind model outputs. But work in this direction has been conducted on different datasets and tasks with correspondingly unique aims and metrics; this makes it difficult to track progress. We propose the **Evaluating Rationales And Simple English Reasoning (ERASER )** benchmark to advance research on interpretable models in NLP. This benchmark comprises multiple datasets and tasks for which human annotations of “rationales” (supporting evidence) have been collected. We propose several metrics that aim to capture how well the rationales provided by models align with human rationales, and also how *faithful* these rationales are (i.e., the degree to which provided rationales influenced the corresponding predictions). Our hope is that releasing this benchmark facilitates progress on designing more interpretable NLP systems. The benchmark, code, and documentation are available at <https://www.eraserbenchmark.com/>

1 Introduction

Interest has recently grown in designing NLP systems that can reveal **why** models make specific predictions. But work in this direction has been conducted on different datasets and using different metrics to quantify performance; this has made it difficult to compare methods and track progress. We aim to address this issue by releasing a standardized benchmark of datasets — repurposed and augmented from pre-existing corpora, spanning a range of NLP tasks — and associated metrics for measuring different properties of rationales. We refer to this as the **Evaluating Rationales And Simple English Reasoning (ERASER )** benchmark.

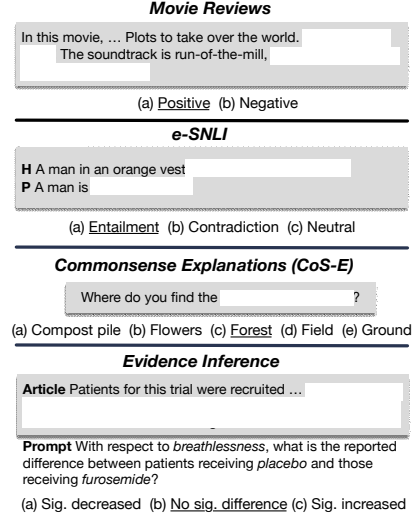


Figure 1: Examples of instances, labels, and rationales illustrative of four (out of seven) datasets included in ERASER. The ‘erased’ snippets are rationales.

In curating and releasing ERASER we take inspiration from the stickiness of the GLUE (Wang et al., 2019b) and SuperGLUE (Wang et al., 2019a) benchmarks for evaluating progress in natural language understanding tasks, which have driven rapid progress on models for general language representation learning. We believe the still somewhat nascent subfield of interpretable NLP stands to benefit similarly from an analogous collection of standardized datasets and tasks; we hope these will aid the design of standardized metrics to measure different properties of ‘interpretability’, and we propose a set of such metrics as a starting point.

Interpretability is a broad topic with many possible realizations (Doshi-Velez and Kim, 2017; Lip-ton, 2016). In ERASER we focus specifically on *rationales*, i.e., snippets that support outputs. All datasets in ERASER include such rationales, explicitly marked by human annotators. By definition, rationales should be *sufficient* to make predictions,

but they may not be *comprehensive*. Therefore, for some datasets, we have also collected comprehensive rationales (in which *all* evidence supporting an output has been marked) on test instances.

The ‘quality’ of extracted rationales will depend on their intended use. Therefore, we propose an initial set of metrics to evaluate rationales that are meant to measure different varieties of ‘interpretability’. Broadly, this includes measures of agreement with human-provided rationales, and assessments of *faithfulness*. The latter aim to capture the extent to which rationales provided by a model in fact informed its predictions. We believe these provide a reasonable start, but view the problem of designing metrics for evaluating rationales — especially for measuring faithfulness — as a topic for further research that ERASER can facilitate. And while we will provide a ‘leaderboard’, this is better viewed as a ‘results board’; we do not privilege any one metric. Instead, ERASER permits comparison between models that provide rationales with respect to different criteria of interest.

We implement baseline models and report their performance across the corpora in ERASER. We find that no single ‘off-the-shelf’ architecture is readily adaptable to datasets with very different instance lengths and associated rationale snippets (Section 3). This highlights a need for new models that can consume potentially lengthy inputs and adaptively provide rationales at a task-appropriate level of granularity. ERASER provides a resource to develop such models.

In sum, we introduce the ERASER benchmark (www.eraserbenchmark.com), a unified set of diverse NLP datasets (these are repurposed and augmented from existing corpora,¹ including sentiment analysis, Natural Language Inference, and QA tasks, among others) in a standardized format featuring human rationales for decisions, along with starter code and tools, baseline models, and standardized (initial) metrics for rationales.

2 Related Work

Interpretability in NLP is a large, fast-growing area; we do not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview here. Instead we focus on directions particularly relevant to ERASER, i.e., prior work on models that provide rationales for their predictions.

Learning to explain. In ERASER we assume that

¹We ask users of the benchmark to cite all original papers, and provide a BibTeX entry for doing so on the website.

rationales (marked by humans) are provided during training. However, such direct supervision will not always be available, motivating work on methods that can explain (or “rationalize”) model predictions using only instance-level supervision.

In the context of modern neural models for text classification, one might use variants of *attention* (Bahdanau et al., 2015) to extract rationales. Attention mechanisms learn to assign soft weights to (usually contextualized) token representations, and so one can extract highly weighted tokens as rationales. However, attention weights do not in general provide faithful explanations for predictions (Jain and Wallace, 2019; Serrano and Smith, 2019; Wiegrefe and Pinter, 2019; Zhong et al., 2019; Pruthi et al., 2020; Brunner et al., 2020; Moradi et al., 2019; Vashishth et al., 2019). This likely owes to encoders entangling inputs, complicating the interpretation of attention weights on *inputs* over *contextualized representations* of the same.²

By contrast, *hard* attention mechanisms discretely extract snippets from the input to pass to the classifier, by construction providing faithful explanations. Recent work has proposed hard attention mechanisms as a means of providing explanations. Lei et al. (2016) proposed instantiating two models with their own parameters; one to extract rationales, and one that consumes these to make a prediction. They trained these models jointly via REINFORCE (Williams, 1992) style optimization.

Recently, Jain et al. (2020) proposed a variant of this two-model setup that uses heuristic feature scores to derive pseudo-labels on tokens comprising rationales; one model can then be used to perform hard extraction in this way, while a second (independent) model can make predictions on the basis of these. Elsewhere, Chang et al. (2019) introduced the notion of classwise rationales that explains support for different output classes using a game theoretic framework. Finally, other recent work has proposed using a differentiable binary mask over inputs, which also avoids recourse to REINFORCE (Bastings et al., 2019).

Post-hoc explanation. Another strand of interpretability work considers *post-hoc* explanation methods, which seek to explain why a model made a specific prediction for a given input. Commonly

²Interestingly, Zhong et al. (2019) find that attention sometimes provides *plausible* but not *faithful* rationales. Elsewhere, Pruthi et al. (2020) show that one can easily learn to deceive via attention weights. These findings highlight that one should be mindful of the criteria one wants rationales to fulfill.

these take the form of token-level importance scores. Gradient-based explanations are a standard example (Sundararajan et al., 2017; Smilkov et al., 2017). These enjoy a clear semantics (describing how perturbing inputs locally affects outputs), but may nonetheless exhibit counterintuitive behaviors (Feng et al., 2018).

Gradients of course assume model differentiability. Other methods do not require any model properties. Examples include LIME (Ribeiro et al., 2016) and Alvarez-Melis and Jaakkola (2017); these methods approximate model behavior locally by having it repeatedly make predictions over perturbed inputs and fitting a simple, explainable model over the outputs.

Acquiring rationales. Aside from interpretability considerations, collecting rationales from annotators may afford greater efficiency in terms of model performance realized given a fixed amount of annotator effort (Zaidan and Eisner, 2008). In particular, recent work by McDonnell et al. (2017, 2016) has observed that at least for some tasks, asking annotators to provide rationales justifying their categorizations does not impose much additional effort. Combining rationale annotation with *active learning* (Settles, 2012) is another promising direction (Wallace et al., 2010; Sharma et al., 2015).

Learning from rationales. Work on learning from rationales marked by annotators for text classification dates back over a decade (Zaidan et al., 2007). Earlier efforts proposed extending standard discriminative models like Support Vector Machines (SVMs) with regularization terms that penalized parameter estimates which disagreed with provided rationales (Zaidan et al., 2007; Small et al., 2011). Other efforts have attempted to specify *generative* models of rationales (Zaidan and Eisner, 2008).

More recent work has aimed to exploit rationales in training neural text classifiers. Zhang et al. (2016) proposed a *rationale-augmented* Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) for text classification, explicitly trained to identify sentences supporting categorizations. Strout et al. (2019) showed that providing this model with rationales during training yields predicted rationales that are preferred by humans (compared to rationales produced without explicit supervision). Other work has proposed ‘pipeline’ approaches in which independent models are trained to perform rationale extraction and classification on the basis of these, respectively (Lehman et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019), assuming

Name	Size (train/dev/test)	Tokens	Comp?
Evidence Inference	7958 / 972 / 959	4761	◇
BoolQ	6363 / 1491 / 2817	3583	◇
Movie Reviews	1600 / 200 / 200	774	◆
FEVER	97957 / 6122 / 6111	327	✓
MultiRC	24029 / 3214 / 4848	303	✓
CoS-E	8733 / 1092 / 1092	28	✓
e-SNLI	911938 / 16449 / 16429	16	✓

Table 1: Overview of datasets in the ERASER benchmark. *Tokens* is the average number of tokens in each document. Comprehensive rationales mean that all supporting evidence is marked; ✓ denotes cases where this is (more or less) true by default; ◇, ◆ are datasets for which we have collected comprehensive rationales for either a subset or all of the test datasets, respectively. Additional information can be found in Appendix A.

explicit training data is available for the former.

Rajani et al. (2019) fine-tuned a Transformer-based language model (Radford et al., 2018) on free-text rationales provided by humans, with an objective of generating open-ended explanations to improve performance on downstream tasks.

Evaluating rationales. Work on evaluating rationales has often compared these to human judgments (Strout et al., 2019; Doshi-Velez and Kim, 2017), or elicited other human evaluations of explanations (Ribeiro et al., 2016; Lundberg and Lee, 2017; Nguyen, 2018). There has also been work on visual evaluations of saliency maps (Li et al., 2016; Ding et al., 2017; Sundararajan et al., 2017).

Measuring agreement between extracted and human rationales (or collecting subjective assessments of them) assesses the plausibility of rationales, but such approaches do not establish whether the model actually relied on these particular rationales to make a prediction. We refer to rationales that correspond to the inputs most relied upon to come to a disposition as *faithful*.

Most automatic evaluations of faithfulness measure the impact of perturbing or erasing words or tokens identified as important on model output (Arras et al., 2017; Montavon et al., 2017; Serrano and Smith, 2019; Samek et al., 2016; Jain and Wallace, 2019). We build upon these methods in Section 4. Finally, we note that a recent article urges the community to evaluate faithfulness on a continuous scale of acceptability, rather than viewing this as a binary proposition (Jacovi and Goldberg, 2020).

3 Datasets in ERASER

For all datasets in ERASER we distribute both reference labels and rationales marked by humans as supporting these in a standardized format. We

delineate train, validation, and test splits for all corpora (see Appendix A for processing details). We ensure that these splits comprise disjoint sets of source documents to avoid contamination.³ We have made the decision to distribute the test sets publicly,⁴ in part because we do not view the ‘correct’ metrics to use as settled. We plan to acquire additional human annotations on held-out portions of some of the included corpora so as to offer hidden test set evaluation opportunities in the future.

Evidence inference (Lehman et al., 2019). A dataset of full-text articles describing randomized controlled trials (RCTs). The task is to infer whether a given *intervention* is reported to either *significantly increase*, *significantly decrease*, or have *no significant effect* on a specified *outcome*, as compared to a *comparator* of interest. Rationales have been marked as supporting these inferences. As the original annotations are not necessarily exhaustive, we collected exhaustive rationale annotations on a subset of the validation and test data.⁵

BoolQ (Clark et al., 2019). This corpus consists of passages selected from Wikipedia, and yes/no questions generated from these passages. As the original Wikipedia article versions used were not maintained, we have made a best-effort attempt to recover these, and then find within them the passages answering the corresponding questions. For public release, we acquired comprehensive annotations on a subset of documents in our test set.⁵

Movie Reviews (Zaidan and Eisner, 2008). Includes positive/negative sentiment labels on movie reviews. Original rationale annotations were not necessarily comprehensive; we thus collected comprehensive rationales on the final two folds of the original dataset (Pang and Lee, 2004).⁵ In contrast to most other datasets, the rationale annotations here are *span level* as opposed to sentence level.

FEVER (Thorne et al., 2018). Short for Fact Extraction and VERification; entails verifying claims from textual sources. Specifically, each claim is to be classified as *supported*, *refuted* or *not enough information* with reference to a collection of source

texts. We take a subset of this dataset, including only *supported* and *refuted* claims.

MultiRC (Khashabi et al., 2018). A reading comprehension dataset composed of questions with multiple correct answers that by construction depend on information from multiple sentences. Here each rationale is associated with a question, while answers are independent of one another. We convert each rationale/question/answer triplet into an instance within our dataset. Each answer candidate then has a label of *True* or *False*.

Commonsense Explanations (CoS-E) (Rajani et al., 2019). This corpus comprises multiple-choice questions and answers from (Talmor et al., 2019) along with supporting rationales. The rationales in this case come in the form both of highlighted (extracted) supporting snippets and free-text, open-ended descriptions of reasoning. Given our focus on extractive rationales, ERASER includes only the former for now. Following Talmor et al. (2019), we repartition the training and validation sets to provide a canonical test split.

e-SNLI (Camburu et al., 2018). This dataset augments the SNLI corpus (Bowman et al., 2015) with rationales marked in the premise and/or hypothesis (and natural language explanations, which we do not use). For entailment pairs, annotators were required to highlight at least one word in the premise. For contradiction pairs, annotators had to highlight at least one word in both the premise and the hypothesis; for neutral pairs, they were only allowed to highlight words in the hypothesis.

Human Agreement We report human agreement over extracted rationales for multiple annotators and documents in Table 2. All datasets have a high Cohen κ (Cohen, 1960); with substantial or better agreement.

4 Metrics

In ERASER models are evaluated both for their predictive performance and with respect to the rationales that they extract. For the former, we rely on the established metrics for the respective tasks. Here we describe the metrics we propose to evaluate the quality of extracted rationales. We do not claim that these are necessarily the best metrics for evaluating rationales, however. Indeed, we hope the release of ERASER will spur additional research into how best to measure the quality of model explanations in the context of NLP.

³Except for BoolQ, wherein source documents in the original train and validation set were not disjoint and we preserve this structure in our dataset. *Questions*, of course, are disjoint.

⁴Consequently, for datasets that have been part of previous benchmarks with other aims (namely, GLUE/superGLUE) but which we have re-purposed for work on rationales in ERASER, e.g., BoolQ (Clark et al., 2019), we have carved out for release test sets from the original validation sets.

⁵Annotation details are in Appendix B.

Dataset	Cohen κ	F1	P	R	#Annotators/doc	#Documents
Evidence Inference	-	-	-	-	-	-
BoolQ	0.618 ± 0.194	0.617 ± 0.227	0.647 ± 0.260	0.726 ± 0.217	3	199
Movie Reviews	0.712 ± 0.135	0.799 ± 0.138	0.693 ± 0.153	0.989 ± 0.102	2	96
FEVER	0.854 ± 0.196	0.871 ± 0.197	0.931 ± 0.205	0.855 ± 0.198	2	24
MultiRC	0.728 ± 0.268	0.749 ± 0.265	0.695 ± 0.284	0.910 ± 0.259	2	99
CoS-E	0.619 ± 0.308	0.654 ± 0.317	0.626 ± 0.319	0.792 ± 0.371	2	100
e-SNLI	0.743 ± 0.162	0.799 ± 0.130	0.812 ± 0.154	0.853 ± 0.124	3	9807

Table 2: Human agreement with respect to rationales. For Movie Reviews and BoolQ we calculate the mean agreement of individual annotators with the majority vote per token, over the two-three annotators we hired via Upwork and Amazon Turk, respectively. The e-SNLI dataset already comprised three annotators; for this we calculate mean agreement between individuals and the majority. For CoS-E, MultiRC, and FEVER, members of our team annotated a subset to use a comparison to the (majority of, where appropriate) existing rationales. We collected comprehensive rationales for Evidence Inference from Medical Doctors; as they have a high amount of expertise, we would expect agreement to be high, but have not collected redundant comprehensive annotations.

4.1 Agreement with human rationales

The simplest means of evaluating extracted rationales is to measure how well they agree with those marked by humans. We consider two classes of metrics, appropriate for models that perform discrete and ‘soft’ selection, respectively.

For the discrete case, measuring exact matches between predicted and reference rationales is likely too harsh.⁶ We thus consider more relaxed measures. These include Intersection-Over-Union (IOU), borrowed from computer vision (Everingham et al., 2010), which permits credit assignment for partial matches. We define IOU on a token level: for two spans, it is the size of the overlap of the tokens they cover divided by the size of their union. We count a prediction as a match if it overlaps with any of the ground truth rationales by more than some threshold (here, 0.5). We use these partial matches to calculate an F1 score. We also measure *token-level* precision and recall, and use these to derive token-level F1 scores.

Metrics for continuous or soft token scoring models consider token rankings, rewarding models for assigning higher scores to marked tokens. In particular, we take the Area Under the Precision-Recall curve (AUPRC) constructed by sweeping a threshold over token scores. We define additional metrics for soft scoring models below.

In general, the rationales we have for tasks are *sufficient* to make judgments, but not necessarily *comprehensive*. However, for some datasets we have explicitly collected comprehensive rationales for at least a subset of the test set. Therefore, on these datasets *recall* evaluates comprehensiveness directly (it does so only noisily on other datasets).

⁶Consider that an extra token destroys the match but not usually the meaning

We highlight which corpora contain comprehensive rationales in the test set in Table 3.

4.2 Measuring faithfulness

As discussed above, a model may provide rationales that are plausible (agreeable to humans) but that it did not rely on for its output. In many settings one may want rationales that actually *explain* model predictions, i.e., rationales extracted for an instance in this case ought to have meaningfully influenced its prediction for the same. We call these faithful rationales. How best to measure rationale faithfulness is an open question. In this first version of ERASER we propose simple metrics motivated by prior work (Zaidan et al., 2007; Yu et al., 2019). In particular, following Yu et al. (2019) we define metrics intended to measure the *comprehensiveness* (were all features needed to make a prediction selected?) and *sufficiency* (do the extracted rationales contain enough signal to come to a disposition?) of rationales, respectively.

Comprehensiveness. To calculate rationale comprehensiveness we create *contrast* examples (Zaidan et al., 2007): We construct a contrast example for x_i , $\tilde{x}_i$, which is x_i with the predicted rationales r_i removed. Assuming a classification setting, let $m(x_i)_j$ be the original prediction provided by a model m for the predicted class j . Then we consider the predicted probability from the model for the same class once the supporting rationales are stripped. Intuitively, the model ought to be less confident in its prediction once rationales are removed from x_i . We can measure this as:

$$\text{comprehensiveness} = m(x_i)_j - m(x_i \setminus r_i)_j \quad (1)$$

A high score here implies that the rationales were indeed influential in the prediction, while a low score suggests that they were not. A negative value

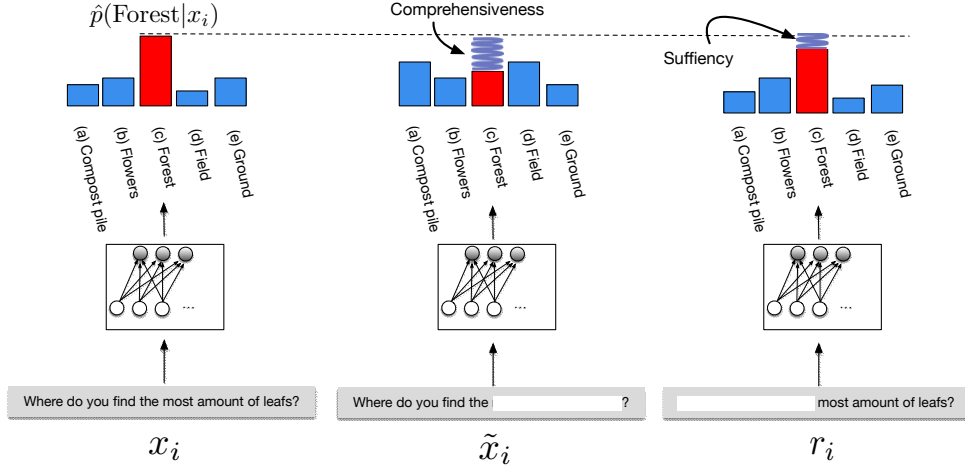


Figure 2: Illustration of faithfulness scoring metrics, *comprehensiveness* and *sufficiency*, on the Commonsense Explanations (CoS-E) dataset. For the former, erasing the tokens comprising the provided rationale ($\tilde{x}_i$) ought to decrease model confidence in the output ‘Forest’. For the latter, the model should be able to come to a similar disposition regarding ‘Forest’ using *only* the rationales r_i .

here means that the model became *more* confident in its prediction after the rationales were removed; this would seem counter-intuitive if the rationales were indeed the reason for its prediction.

Sufficiency. This captures the degree to which the snippets within the extracted rationales are adequate for a model to make a prediction.

$$\text{sufficiency} = m(x_i)_j - m(r_i)_j \quad (2)$$

These metrics are illustrated in Figure 2.

As defined, the above measures have assumed discrete rationales r_i . We would also like to evaluate the faithfulness of continuous importance scores assigned to tokens by models. Here we adopt a simple approach for this. We convert soft scores over features s_i provided by a model into discrete rationales r_i by taking the top- k_d values, where k_d is a threshold for dataset d . We set k_d to the average rationale length provided by humans for dataset d (see Table 4). Intuitively, this says: How much does the model prediction change if we remove a number of tokens equal to what humans use (on average for this dataset) in order of the importance scores assigned to these by the model. Once we have discretized the soft scores into rationales in this way, we compute the faithfulness scores as per Equations 1 and 2.

This approach is conceptually simple. It is also computationally cheap to evaluate, in contrast to measures that require per-token measurements, e.g., importance score correlations with ‘leave-one-out’ scores (Jain and Wallace, 2019), or counting how many ‘important’ tokens need to be erased before

a prediction flips (Serrano and Smith, 2019). However, the necessity of discretizing continuous scores forces us to pick a particular threshold k .

We can also consider the behavior of these measures as a function of k , inspired by the measurements proposed in Samek et al. (2016) in the context of evaluating saliency maps for image classification. They suggested ranking pixel regions by importance and then measuring the change in output as they are removed in rank order. Our datasets comprise documents and rationales with quite different lengths; to make this measure comparable across datasets, we construct bins designating the number of tokens to be deleted. Denoting the tokens up to and including bin k for instance i by r_{ik} , we define an aggregate comprehensiveness measure:

$$\frac{1}{|\mathcal{B}| + 1} \left(\sum_{k=0}^{|\mathcal{B}|} m(x_i)_j - m(x_i \setminus r_{ik})_j \right) \quad (3)$$

This is defined for sufficiency analogously. Here we group tokens into $k = 5$ bins by grouping them into the top 1%, 5%, 10%, 20% and 50% of tokens, with respect to the corresponding importance score. We refer to these metrics as “Area Over the Perturbation Curve” (AOPC).⁷

These AOPC sufficiency and comprehensiveness measures score a particular token ordering under a model. As a point of reference, we also report these when *random* scores are assigned to tokens.

⁷Our AOPC metrics are similar in concept to ROAR (Hooker et al., 2019) except that we re-use an existing model as opposed to retraining for each fraction.

5 Baseline Models

Our focus in this work is primarily on the ERASER benchmark itself, rather than on any particular model(s). But to establish a starting point for future work, we evaluate several baseline models across the corpora in ERASER.⁸ We broadly classify these into models that assign ‘soft’ (continuous) scores to tokens, and those that perform a ‘hard’ (discrete) selection over inputs. We additionally consider models specifically designed to select individual tokens (and very short sequences) as rationales, as compared to longer snippets. All of our implementations are in PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2019) and are available in the ERASER repository.⁹

All datasets in ERASER comprise inputs, rationales, and labels. But they differ considerably in document and rationale lengths (Table A). This motivated use of different models for datasets, appropriate to their sizes and rationale granularities. We hope that this benchmark motivates design of models that provide rationales that can flexibly adapt to varying input lengths and expected rationale granularities. Indeed, only with such models can we perform comparisons across all datasets.

5.1 Hard selection

Models that perform *hard* selection may be viewed as comprising two independent modules: an *encoder* which is responsible for extracting snippets of inputs, and a *decoder* that makes a prediction based only on the text provided by the encoder. We consider two variants of such models.

Lei et al. (2016). In this model, an encoder induces a binary mask over inputs x , z . The decoder accepts the tokens in x unmasked by z to make a prediction $\hat{y}$. These modules are trained jointly via REINFORCE (Williams, 1992) style estimation, minimizing the loss over expected binary vectors z yielded from the encoder. One of the advantages of this approach is that it need not have access to marked rationales; it can learn to rationalize on the basis of instance labels alone. However, given that we do have rationales in the training data, we experiment with a variant in which we train the encoder explicitly using rationale-level annotations.

In our implementation of Lei et al. (2016), we drop in two independent BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) or GloVe (Pennington et al., 2014) base modules

with bidirectional LSTMs (Hochreiter and Schmidhuber, 1997) on top to induce contextualized representations of tokens for the encoder and decoder, respectively. The encoder generates a scalar (denoting the probability of selecting that token) for each LSTM hidden state using a feedforward layer and sigmoid. In the variant using human rationales during training, we minimize cross entropy loss over rationale predictions. The final loss is then a composite of classification loss, regularizers on rationales (Lei et al., 2016), and loss over rationale predictions, when available.

Pipeline models. These are simple models in which we first train the encoder to extract rationales, and then train the decoder to perform prediction using only rationales. No parameters are shared between the two models.

Here we first consider a simple pipeline that first segments inputs into sentences. It passes these, one at a time, through a Gated Recurrent Unit (GRU) (Cho et al., 2014), to yield hidden representations that we compose via an attentive decoding layer (Bahdanau et al., 2015). This aggregate representation is then passed to a classification module which predicts whether the corresponding sentence is a rationale (or not). A second model, using effectively the same architecture but parameterized independently, consumes the outputs (rationales) from the first to make predictions. This simple model is described at length in prior work (Lehman et al., 2019). We further consider a ‘BERT-to-BERT’ pipeline, where we replace each stage with a BERT module for prediction (Devlin et al., 2019).

In pipeline models, we train each stage independently. The rationale identification stage is trained using approximate sentence boundaries from our source annotations, with randomly sampled negative examples at each epoch. The classification stage uses the same positive rationales as the identification stage, a type of *teacher forcing* (Williams and Zipser, 1989) (details in Appendix C).

5.2 Soft selection

We consider a model that passes tokens through BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) to induce contextualized representations that are then passed to a bidirectional LSTM (Hochreiter and Schmidhuber, 1997). The hidden representations from the LSTM are collapsed into a single vector using additive attention (Bahdanau et al., 2015). The LSTM layer allows us to bypass the 512 word limit imposed by

⁸This is not intended to be comprehensive.

⁹<https://github.com/jayded/eraserbenchmark>

	Perf.	IOU F1	Token F1
Evidence Inference			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.461	0.000	0.000
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.461	0.000	0.000
Lehman et al. (2019)	0.471	0.119	0.123
Bert-To-Bert	0.708	0.455	0.468
BoolQ			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.381	0.000	0.000
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.380	0.000	0.000
Lehman et al. (2019)	0.411	0.050	0.127
Bert-To-Bert	0.544	0.052	0.134
Movie Reviews			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.914	0.124	0.285
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.920	0.012	0.322
Lehman et al. (2019)	0.750	0.063	0.139
Bert-To-Bert	0.860	0.075	0.145
FEVER			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.719	0.218	0.234
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.718	0.000	0.000
Lehman et al. (2019)	0.691	0.540	0.523
Bert-To-Bert	0.877	0.835	0.812
MultiRC			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.655	0.271	0.456
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.648	0.000 [†]	0.000 [†]
Lehman et al. (2019)	0.614	0.136	0.140
Bert-To-Bert	0.633	0.416	0.412
CoS-E			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.477	0.255	0.331
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.476	0.000 [†]	0.000 [†]
Bert-To-Bert	0.344	0.389	0.519
e-SNLI			
Lei et al. (2016)	0.917	0.693	0.692
Lei et al. (2016) (u)	0.903	0.261	0.379
Bert-To-Bert	0.733	0.704	0.701

Table 3: Performance of models that perform hard rationale selection. All models are supervised at the rationale level except for those marked with (u), which learn only from instance-level supervision; [†] denotes cases in which rationale training degenerated due to the REINFORCE style training. Perf. is accuracy (CoS-E) or macro-averaged F1 (others). Bert-To-Bert for CoS-E and e-SNLI uses a token classification objective. Bert-To-Bert CoS-E uses the highest scoring answer.

BERT; when we exceed this, we effectively start encoding a ‘new’ sequence (setting the positional index to 0) via BERT. The hope is that the LSTM learns to compensate for this. Evidence Inference and BoolQ comprise very long (>1000 token) inputs; we were unable to run BERT over these. We instead resorted to swapping GloVe 300d embeddings (Pennington et al., 2014) in place of BERT representations for tokens. spans.

To soft score features we consider: Simple gradients, attention induced over contextualized representations, and LIME (Ribeiro et al., 2016).

	Perf.	AUPRC	Comp. $\uparrow$	Suff. $\downarrow$
Evidence Inference				
GloVe + LSTM - Attention	0.429	0.506	-0.002	-0.023
GloVe + LSTM - Gradient	0.429	0.016	0.046	-0.138
GloVe + LSTM - Lime	0.429	0.014	0.006	-0.128
GloVe + LSTM - Random	0.429	0.014	-0.001	-0.026
BoolQ				
GloVe + LSTM - Attention	0.471	0.525	0.010	0.022
GloVe + LSTM - Gradient	0.471	0.072	0.024	0.031
GloVe + LSTM - Lime	0.471	0.073	0.028	-0.154
GloVe + LSTM - Random	0.471	0.074	0.000	0.005
Movies				
BERT+LSTM - Attention	0.970	0.417	0.129	0.097
BERT+LSTM - Gradient	0.970	0.385	0.142	0.112
BERT+LSTM - Lime	0.970	0.280	0.187	0.093
BERT+LSTM - Random	0.970	0.259	0.058	0.330
FEVER				
BERT+LSTM - Attention	0.870	0.235	0.037	0.122
BERT+LSTM - Gradient	0.870	0.232	0.059	0.136
BERT+LSTM - Lime	0.870	0.291	0.212	0.014
BERT+LSTM - Random	0.870	0.244	0.034	0.122
MultiRC				
BERT+LSTM - Attention	0.655	0.244	0.036	0.052
BERT+LSTM - Gradient	0.655	0.224	0.077	0.064
BERT+LSTM - Lime	0.655	0.208	0.213	-0.079
BERT+LSTM - Random	0.655	0.186	0.029	0.081
CoS-E				
BERT+LSTM - Attention	0.487	0.606	0.080	0.217
BERT+LSTM - Gradient	0.487	0.585	0.124	0.226
BERT+LSTM - Lime	0.487	0.544	0.223	0.143
BERT+LSTM - Random	0.487	0.594	0.072	0.224
e-SNLI				
BERT+LSTM - Attention	0.960	0.395	0.105	0.583
BERT+LSTM - Gradient	0.960	0.416	0.180	0.472
BERT+LSTM - Lime	0.960	0.513	0.437	0.389
BERT+LSTM - Random	0.960	0.357	0.081	0.487

Table 4: Metrics for ‘soft’ scoring models. Perf. is accuracy (CoS-E) or F1 (others). Comprehensiveness and sufficiency are in terms of AOPC (Eq. 3). ‘Random’ assigns random scores to tokens to induce orderings; these are averages over 10 runs.

6 Evaluation

Here we present initial results for the baseline models discussed in Section 5, with respect to the metrics proposed in Section 4. We present results in two parts, reflecting the two classes of rationales discussed above: ‘Hard’ approaches that perform discrete selection of snippets, and ‘soft’ methods that assign continuous importance scores to tokens.

In Table 3 we evaluate models that perform discrete selection of rationales. We view these as inherently faithful, because by construction we know which snippets the decoder used to make a prediction.¹⁰ Therefore, for these methods we report only metrics that measure agreement with human annotations.

¹⁰This assumes independent encoders and decoders.

Due to computational constraints, we were unable to run our BERT-based implementation of [Lei et al. \(2016\)](#) over larger corpora. Conversely, the simple pipeline of [Lehman et al. \(2019\)](#) assumes a setting in which rationales are sentences, and so is not appropriate for datasets in which rationales tend to comprise only very short spans. Again, in our view this highlights the need for models that can rationalize at varying levels of granularity, depending on what is appropriate.

We observe that for the “rationalizing” model of [Lei et al. \(2016\)](#), exploiting rationale-level supervision often (though not always) improves agreement with human-provided rationales, as in prior work ([Zhang et al., 2016](#); [Strout et al., 2019](#)). Interestingly, this does not seem strongly correlated with predictive performance.

[Lei et al. \(2016\)](#) outperforms the simple pipeline model when using a BERT encoder. Further, [Lei et al. \(2016\)](#) outperforms the ‘BERT-to-BERT’ pipeline on the comparable datasets for the final prediction tasks. This may be an artifact of the amount of text each model can select: ‘BERT-to-BERT’ is limited to sentences, while [Lei et al. \(2016\)](#) can select any subset of the text. Designing extraction models that learn to adaptively select contiguous rationales of appropriate length for a given task seems a potentially promising direction.

In Table 4 we report metrics for models that assign continuous importance scores to individual tokens. For these models we again measure downstream (task) performance (macro F1 or accuracy). Here the models are actually the same, and so downstream performance is equivalent. To assess the quality of token scores with respect to human annotations, we report the Area Under the Precision Recall Curve (AUPRC).

These scoring functions assign only soft scores to inputs (and may still use all inputs to come to a particular prediction), so we report the metrics intended to measure faithfulness defined above: comprehensiveness and sufficiency, averaged over ‘bins’ of tokens ordered by importance scores. To provide a point of reference for these metrics — which depend on the underlying model — we report results when rationales are randomly selected (averaged over 10 runs).

Both simple gradient and LIME-based scoring yield more comprehensive rationales than attention weights, consistent with prior work ([Jain and Wallace, 2019](#); [Serrano and Smith, 2019](#)). Attention

fares better in terms of AUPRC — suggesting better agreement with human rationales — which is also in line with prior findings that it may provide plausible, but not faithful, explanation ([Zhong et al., 2019](#)). Interestingly, LIME does particularly well across these tasks in terms of faithfulness.

From the ‘Random’ results that we conclude models with overall poor performance on their final tasks tend to have an overall poor ordering, with marginal differences in comprehensiveness and sufficiency between them. For models that with high sufficiency scores: Movies, FEVER, CoS-E, and e-SNLI, we find that random removal is particularly damaging to performance, indicating poor absolute ranking; whereas those with high comprehensiveness are sensitive to rationale length.

7 Conclusions and Future Directions

We have introduced a new publicly available resource: the Evaluating Rationales And Simple English Reasoning (ERASER) benchmark. This comprises seven datasets, all of which include both instance level labels and corresponding supporting snippets (‘rationales’) marked by human annotators. We have augmented many of these datasets with additional annotations, and converted them into a standard format comprising inputs, rationales, and outputs. ERASER is intended to facilitate progress on explainable models for NLP.

We proposed several metrics intended to measure the quality of rationales extracted by models, both in terms of agreement with human annotations, and in terms of ‘faithfulness’. We believe these metrics provide reasonable means of comparison of specific aspects of interpretability, but we view the problem of measuring faithfulness, in particular, a topic ripe for additional research (which ERASER can facilitate).

Our hope is that ERASER enables future work on designing more interpretable NLP models, and comparing their relative strengths across a variety of tasks, datasets, and desired criteria. It also serves as an ideal starting point for several future directions such as better evaluation metrics for interpretability, causal analysis of NLP models and datasets of rationales in other languages.

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Appendix

A Dataset Preprocessing

We describe what, if any, additional processing we perform on a per-dataset basis. All datasets were converted to a unified format.

MultiRC (Khashabi et al., 2018) We perform minimal processing. We use the validation set as the testing set for public release.

Evidence Inference (Lehman et al., 2019) We perform minimal processing. As not all of the provided evidence spans come with offsets, we delete any prompts that had no grounded evidence spans.

Movie reviews (Zaidan and Eisner, 2008) We perform minimal processing. We use the ninth fold as the validation set, and collect annotations on the tenth fold for comprehensive evaluation.

FEVER (Thorne et al., 2018) We perform substantial processing for FEVER - we delete the “Not Enough Info” claim class, delete any claims with support in more than one document, and repartition the validation set into a validation and a test set for this benchmark (using the test set would compromise the information retrieval portion of the original FEVER task). We ensure that there is no document overlap between train, validation, and test sets (we use Pearce (2005) to ensure this, as conceptually a claim may be supported by facts in more than one document). We ensure that the validation set contains the documents used to create the FEVER symmetric dataset (Schuster et al., 2019) (unfortunately, the documents used to create the validation and test sets overlap so we cannot provide this partitioning). Additionally, we clean up some encoding errors in the dataset via Speer (2019).

BoolQ (Clark et al., 2019) The BoolQ dataset required substantial processing. The original dataset did not retain source Wikipedia articles or collection dates. In order to identify the source paragraphs, we download the 12/20/18 Wikipedia archive, and use FuzzyWuzzy <https://github.com/seatgeek/fuzzywuzzy> to identify the source paragraph span that best matches the original release. If the Levenshtein distance ratio does not reach a score of at least 90, the corresponding instance is removed. For public release, we use the official validation set for testing, and repartition train into a training and validation set.

e-SNLI (Camburu et al., 2018) We perform minimal processing. We separate the premise and hypothesis statements into separate documents.

Commonsense Explanations (CoS-E) (Rajani et al., 2019) We perform minimal processing, primarily deletion of any questions without a rationale

Dataset	Documents	Instances	Rationale %	Evidence Statements	Evidence Lengths
MultiRC					
Train	400	24029	17.4	56298	21.5
Val	56	3214	18.5	7498	22.8
Test	83	4848	-	-	-
Evidence Inference					
Train	1924	7958	1.34	10371	39.3
Val	247	972	1.38	1294	40.3
Test	240	959	-	-	-
Exhaustive Evidence Inference					
Val	81	101	4.47	504.0	35.2
Test	106	152	-	-	-
Movie Reviews					
Train	1599	1600	9.35	13878	7.7
Val	150	150	7.45	1143.0	6.6
Test	200	200	-	-	-
Exhaustive Movie Reviews					
Val	50	50	19.10	592.0	12.8
FEVER					
Train	2915	97957	20.0	146856	31.3
Val	570	6122	21.6	8672	28.2
Test	614	6111	-	-	-
BoolQ					
Train	4518	6363	6.64	6363.0	110.2
Val	1092	1491	7.13	1491.0	106.5
Test	2294	2817	-	-	-
e-SNLI					
Train	911938	549309	27.3	1199035.0	1.8
Val	16328	9823	25.6	23639.0	1.6
Test	16299	9807	-	-	-
CoS-E					
Train	8733	8733	26.6	8733	7.4
Val	1092	1092	27.1	1092	7.6
Test	1092	1092	-	-	-

Table 5: Detailed breakdowns for each dataset - the number of documents, instances, evidence statements, and lengths. Additionally we include the percentage of each relevant document that is considered a rationale. For test sets, counts are for all instances including documents with non comprehensive rationales.

Dataset	Labels	Instances	Documents	Sentences	Tokens
Evidence Inference	3	9889	2411	156.0	4760.6
BoolQ	2	10661	7026	175.3	3582.5
Movie Reviews	2	2000	1999	36.8	774.1
FEVER	2	110190	4099	12.1	326.5
MultiRC	2	32091	539	14.9	302.5
CoS-E	5	10917	10917	1.0	27.6
e-SNLI	3	568939	944565	1.7	16.0

Table 6: General dataset statistics: number of labels, instances, unique documents, and average numbers of sentences and tokens in documents, across the publicly released train/validation/test splits in ERASER. For CoS-E and e-SNLI, the sentence counts are not meaningful as the partitioning of question/sentence/answer formatting is an arbitrary choice in this framework.

or questions with rationales that were not possible to automatically map back to the underlying text. As recommended by the authors of Talmor et al. (2019) we repartition the train and validation sets into a train, validation, and test set for this benchmark. We encode the entire question and answers as a prompt and convert the problem into a five-class prediction. We also convert the “Sanity” datasets for user convenience.

All datasets in ERASER were tokenized using spaCy¹¹ library (with SciSpacy (Neumann et al., 2019) for Evidence Inference). In addition, we also split all datasets except e-SNLI and CoS-E into sentences using the same library.

B Annotation details

We collected *comprehensive* rationales for a subset of some test sets to accurately evaluate model recall of rationales.

1. **Movies.** We used the Upwork Platform¹² to hire two fluent english speakers to annotate each of the 200 documents in our test set. Workers were paid at rate of USD 8.5 per hour and on average, it took them 5 min to annotate a document. Each annotator was asked to annotate a set of 6 documents and compared against in-house annotations (by authors).
2. **Evidence Inference.** We again used Upwork to hire 4 medical professionals fluent in english and having passed a pilot of 3 documents. 125 documents were annotated (only once by one of the annotators, which we felt was appropriate given their high-level of expertise) with an average cost of USD 13 per document. Average time spent of single document was 31 min.
3. **BoolQ.** We used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to collect reference comprehensive rationales from randomly selected 199 documents from our test set (ranging in 800 to 1500 tokens in length). Only workers from AU, NZ, CA, US, GB with more than 10K approved HITs and an approval rate of greater than 98% were eligible. For every document, 3 annotations were collected and workers were paid USD 1.50 per HIT. The average work time (obtained through MTurk interface) was 21 min. We did not anticipate the task taking so

long (on average); the effective low pay rate was unintended.

C Hyperparameter and training details

C.1 (Lei et al., 2016) models

For these models, we set the sparsity rate at 0.01 and we set the contiguity loss weight to 2 times sparsity rate (following the original paper). We used bert-base-uncased (Wolf et al., 2019) as token embedder (for all datasets except BoolQ, Evidence Inference and FEVER) and Bidirectional LSTM with 128 dimensional hidden state in each direction. A dropout (Srivastava et al., 2014) rate of 0.2 was used before feeding the hidden representations to attention layer in decoder and linear layer in encoder. One layer MLP with 128 dimensional hidden state and ReLU activation was used to compute the decoder output distribution.

For three datasets mentioned above, we use GloVe embeddings (<http://nlp.stanford.edu/data/glove.840B.300d.zip>).

A learning rate of $2e-5$ with Adam (Kingma and Ba, 2014) optimizer was used for all models and we only fine-tuned top two layers of BERT encoder. The models were trained for 20 epochs and early stopping with patience of 5 epochs was used. The best model was selected on validation set using the final task performance metric.

The input for the above model was encoded in form of [CLS] document [SEP] query [SEP].

This model was implemented using the AllenNLP library (Gardner et al., 2018).

C.2 BERT-LSTM/GloVe-LSTM

This model is essentially the same as the decoder in previous section. The BERT-LSTM uses the same hyperparameters, and GloVe-LSTM is trained with a learning rate of $1e-2$.

C.3 Lehman et al. (2019) models

With the exception of the Evidence Inference dataset, these models were trained using the GLoVe (Pennington et al., 2014) 200 dimension word vectors, and Evidence Inference using the (Pyysalo et al., 2013) PubMed word vectors. We use Adam (Kingma and Ba, 2014) with a learning rate of $1e-3$, Dropout (Srivastava et al., 2014) of 0.05 at each layer (embedding, GRU, attention layer) of the model, for 50 epochs with a patience of 10. We monitor validation loss, and keep the best model on the validation set.

¹¹<https://spacy.io/>

¹²<http://www.upwork.com>

C.4 BERT-to-BERT model

We primarily used the ‘bert-base-uncased’ model for both components of the identification and classification pipeline, with the sole exception being Evidence Inference with SciBERT ([Beltagy et al., 2019](#)). We trained with the standard BERT parameters of a learning rate of 1e-5, Adam ([Kingma and Ba, 2014](#)), for 10 epochs. We monitor validation loss, and keep the best model on the validation set.