

# KNOWLEDGE MANIPULATION IN LANGUAGE MODELS (PART B)\*

## ABSTRACT

Language models can store vast amounts of factual knowledge, but their ability to use this knowledge for logical reasoning remains questionable. This paper explores a language model’s ability to manipulate its stored knowledge during inference. We focus on four manipulation types: **retrieval** (e.g., “What is person A’s attribute X?”), **classification** (e.g., “Is A’s attribute X even or odd?”), **comparison** (e.g., “Is A greater than B in attribute X?”) and **inverse search** (e.g., “Which person’s attribute X equals T?”) We observe that pre-trained language models like GPT2/3/4 excel in knowledge retrieval but struggle with simple classification or comparison tasks unless Chain of Thoughts (CoTs) are employed during both training and inference. They also perform poorly in inverse knowledge search, irrespective of the prompts. Our primary contribution is a synthetic dataset for a *controlled experiment* that confirms these inherent weaknesses: a language model cannot *efficiently* manipulate knowledge from pre-training data, even when such knowledge is perfectly stored and fully extractable in the models, and despite adequate instruct fine-tuning.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is a fundamental component of human civilization and intelligence. Throughout our lives, we accumulate a vast amount of knowledge and learn to use it flexibly. Recently, large language models like GPT4 (OpenAI, 2023) have demonstrated an impressive capacity to memorize extensive amounts of knowledge, arguably more than any human can. These models also show signs of being able to manipulate this knowledge to solve various problems.

In this work, we aim to understand how **transformer based language models** manipulate the knowledge they have memorized during pretraining and use it flexibly to solve different tasks at inference time. For instance, can the language model answer questions like “Is Joe Biden older than Donald Trump” based on its memorization of the two presidents’ birthdays? Can it infer whether Princeton is ranked higher than MIT based on its stored 2023 US News university ranking knowledge?

In this paper, we consider a language model’s ability to answer questions during inference time, where those questions are some *functions* of specific knowledge in its pretraining. These questions or their equivalent forms may not be in the model’s training data, but *the same function* for other knowledge should have been (so the model understands the function). For instance, can the model answer “Was Joe Biden born in an even year?” if it *hasn’t encountered this sentence or its equivalents during pretraining* (such as “Is Joe Biden’s birth year divisible by 2”), but inferring from “Biden was born in 1942” and “1942 is even”? Answering such questions necessitates the model to both memorize and comprehend the knowledge.

**Knowledge manipulation is a form of logical reasoning.** To answer questions like “Is Person A’s attribute X Good?”, a language model not previously exposed to this sentence in its pretraining data may draw from other training data such as “person A’s attribute X equals T” and “T is Good”.

In this paper, “knowledge” refers to *factual knowledge* (e.g., knowledge graph), and we examine if a language model can logically manipulate such knowledge stored in the model weights. Other studies may investigate in-context knowledge or RAG (Cai et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2023; Komeili

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\*Since “knowledge” is a broad subject, we have to write separate papers to cover its different aspects. Our Part A (Anonymous, 2023) addresses how knowledge is *stored*, the conditions under which knowledge can be *extracted* through instruct fine-tuning, and introduces probing techniques. This Part B is built on it to study how such knowledge can be *further manipulated* for downstream tasks. We’ve anonymously submitted both Part A and B to ICLR 2024 as standalone papers, ensuring no result overlap and making each self-contained. Our Part A is also in the supplementary material for interested readers.

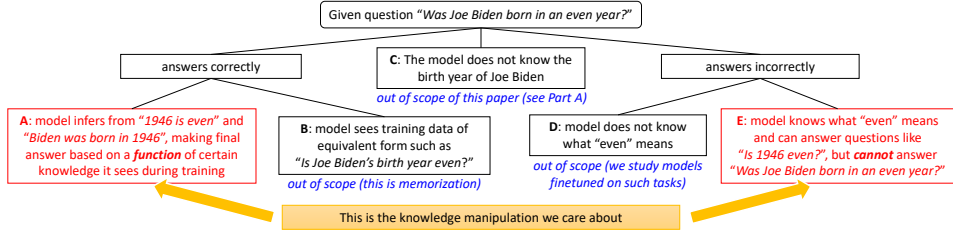


Figure 1: We study (A) vs (E) as knowledge manipulation. With a pre-trained model over internet data, it is very hard to determine whether (B,C,D) has happened due to the uncontrollability of internet data.

et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Mao et al., 2020; Parvez et al., 2021; Ram et al., 2023; Siriwardhana et al., 2023), where the model, given a paragraph during inference, immediately answers logic questions about it.

Research has extensively explored language models’ question-answering abilities during inference time (Hernandez et al., 2023; Naseem et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2022; Petroni et al., 2019; Richardson and Sabharwal, 2020; Singhal et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023). However, these studies primarily focus on models trained on internet data. A key challenge in understanding whether these models can manipulate knowledge is discerning whether the internet data already includes the exact or equivalent sentence, or if the models have correctly stored such knowledge and retrieved it from inference time. Refer to Figure 1.

To address the *unpredictability of internet data*, our concurrent study (Anonymous, 2023) created synthetic pretraining data containing a controlled biography of  $N = 100k$  individuals and pretrained a language model on this data. This prior work investigates *when and how* the model can store and retrieve knowledge about these 100k individuals during inference time after pretraining. Here is an example of the biography data:

Anya Briar Forger was born on October 2, 1996. She spent her early years in Princeton, NJ. She received mentorship and guidance from faculty members at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She completed her education with a focus on Communications. She had a professional role at Meta Platforms. She was employed in Menlo Park, CA.

(1.1)

Our concurrent work (Anonymous, 2023) suggests that a pretrained model may struggle to extract stored knowledge from biographical data unless the data is sufficiently *augmented*, such as when English sentences exhibit ample diversity and are sufficiently permuted (see Section 2). This facilitates knowledge extraction for questions like “Which city was Anya Briar Forger born in?” While we recommend reading our concurrent work first, this paper can be read independently.

This paper further explores whether the model, pre-trained on the already augmented biography data, can manipulate its stored (and extractable) knowledge after instruction finetune. For instance, can it answer questions requiring reasoning based on a person’s attributes, such as “Was Anya born in a southern city?” or “Is Anya’s university better than Sabrina’s?” using information from their biographies. During training, we expose the model to the biographies of all  $N$  people and the knowledge manipulation question-answer (QA) texts from a subset of individuals (the in-distribution set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$ ). We test the model’s *out-of-distribution* generation accuracy on correctly answering such manipulation questions for the remaining subset (the out-of-distribution set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ ), where the model sees the biographies during training, but not the QAs. The existence of the set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  in the training data ensures that the model is exposed to enough training examples to understand the QAs.

## 1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE KNOWLEDGE MANIPULATION TASKS

Our paper explores four types of knowledge manipulation: retrieval, classification, comparison, and inverse search, which we believe encompass most real-world knowledge manipulation scenarios. Each manipulation task is discussed separately below.

**RETRIEVAL.** We extend our work on knowledge extraction (Anonymous, 2023) to a more general setting. After pretraining on biographical data, we finetune the model to (1) retrieve part of an attribute or (2) retrieve multiple attributes simultaneously. We find that retrieving multiple attributes is nearly as easy as extracting individual ones. However, in this broader context, partial retrieval can be significantly more challenging. For instance, a language model may correctly answer “What is the birth date of Anya” as “June 27th, 1997”, but struggle with “What is the birth year of Anya”.



Figure 2: GPT4 struggles to answer simple manipulation questions based on a person’s attributes during inference, despite knowing the knowledge. When a Chain of Thoughts (CoT) approach is used, where the person’s attributes are first explicitly spelled out, GPT4 can correctly answer the manipulation tasks. More ChatGPT examples and details are in Figure 5, Figure 7, Figure 10, and Appendix E.

**CLASSIFICATION.** Classification tasks involve determining the validity of a statement based on individual attributes. For instance, answering “What degree did Anya receive?” requires a ternary response (art, science, engineering) based on her major of study. After training on the biography data, we find that language models often struggle with such tasks unless they generate answers in a Chain of Thought (CoT) manner or are finetuned with a much larger number of samples of such tasks than information theoretically necessary. For example, a model might correctly answer “What is Anya’s birth month,” but fail to determine if it’s even without first generating the birth month and then assessing its parity. This remains true even after the model can answer one’s birth month with nearly 100% accuracy, and further trained/finetuned with 25,000 individuals on birth-month parity questions (both with direct answers like “Alice’s birth month is even” and with Chain of Thoughts like “Alice’s birth month is 12, 12 is even”), far exceeding the number needed to classify 12 months into 2 classes. Our findings suggest that the model **can not be trained/finetuned efficiently to perform even a single step of basic knowledge manipulation** during inference time without using CoT, even if it sees a lot of such single-step (either non-CoT or CoT!) knowledge manipulation training data.

**COMPARISON.** Comparison involves determining whether one attribute is greater or smaller than another, based on a predefined ranking or order. For example, “Is Anya’s university better than Sabrina’s?” requires a “Yes” or “No” response based on the universities and their ranking. Similar to classification, we find that language models **cannot be trained/finetuned efficiently to perform this type of knowledge manipulation** unless they generate answers in a CoT manner.

**INVERSE SEARCH.** This involves identifying a person based on their attributes, such as “Who was born in 1996 in Princeton, NJ?” or “Who studied Communications at MIT and worked for Meta?”. We find that language models **cannot perform this task, regardless of training methods or the volume of training examples**, unless the knowledge is presented inversely in the training data, such as “Born in 1991 in New York was Anya” or “Studied at MIT and worked for Meta was Anya”. Merely having forward knowledge data like “Anya was born in 1996 in Princeton, NJ” or “Anya studied at MIT and worked for Meta” in the training is insufficient, irrespective of augmentation or finetuning strategies. A concurrent study (Berglund et al., 2023) also observed a similar “reversal curse”. This strongly suggests that **language models cannot function as databases**.

**Our contribution.** We demonstrate that pre-trained language models, using synthetic biography data, perform poorly at knowledge manipulation. Regardless of the pretraining/finetuning, they still struggle with simple functions about a person’s attributes, such as “Is person A’s birth month even?” unless the function of *the same person* is in the training data. This can be mitigated by training/prompting the model to answer in a Chain of Thought (CoT) manner. However, the model fails at inverse knowledge search, *regardless of prompting/training*. It can generate all attributes of a person given the person’s name, but not vice versa. Even large models like GPT-4 (see Figure 2) perform poorly at these tasks, suggesting **these limitations may be inherent to generative language models and not resolved by scaling up**, but require novel techniques to improve the model’s knowledge manipulation ability. Our synthetic setting serves as a *simple, yet important testbed* for future work on enhancing language models’ knowledge manipulation abilities.

## 2 PRELIMINARIES

To ensure that this paper is self-contained, we briefly summarize some of the datasets, terminologies, models, and training methods introduced in Anonymous (2023).

**BIO datasets bioS.** In Anonymous (2023), we presented a synthetic biography (BIO) dataset, bioS, consisting of  $N = 100,000$  individuals with six attributes: birth date, birth city, university, major, employer, and working city.<sup>1</sup> Six randomly chosen English sentences describe each individual’s attributes as in (1.1). This basic setup, that we call “bioS single”, has one biographical entry per individual with six sentences in the order of (1.1).

We also explored *knowledge augmentation* in Anonymous (2023), including: (1) *multiM*, generating  $M$  equivalent entries per person (using different wordings); (2) *permute*, random sentence shuffling; and (3) *fullname*, replacing pronouns with full names. We considered 15 augmentations, combinations of the above. For instance, “bioS multi5+permute” denotes five biographical entries per individual with shuffled sentences. (Refer to Figure 3 or Appendix A for a complete list of such augmentations.)

**BIO dataset bioR.** We also introduced a realistic bioR dataset in Anonymous (2023), created using LLaMA-30B (Touvron et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023) to write entries similar to real biographies. This paper uses bioS for negative results and both bioS and bioR for positive results.

**QA dataset and single knowledge extraction.** In Anonymous (2023), we analyzed QAs like “What is the birth city of Anya Briar Forger?” corresponding to six individual attributes. We split the  $N$  individuals into two equal parts: a training set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  and a testing set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ . We then explored two training methods:

- In *BIO+QA mixed training*, we simultaneously trained the language model on the BIO for everyone and QA data for  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$ , using a *high ratio QA<sub>r</sub>* to control the percentage of QA data.
- In *BIO pretrain + QA finetune*, we initially pretrained the language model with the BIO data, then fine-tuned it using the QAs for individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$ .

In both cases, we assessed the model’s accuracy to answer questions about individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ , referred to as *QA test accuracy*. **Key findings** from our parallel paper Anonymous (2023) include:

- The success of QA finetune largely depends on pretraining data *augmentation*. For instance, pretraining on bioS multi5+permute yields a mean knowledge extraction accuracy over 96.6%, while bioS single results in just 9.7% accuracy (see right block of Figure 3).<sup>2</sup>
- In BIO+QA mixed training, knowledge augmentation is less critical, with the model achieving over 85% QA test accuracy on bioS single. However, as shown in (Anonymous, 2023), this method mirrors a “study to pass the test” approach, where the knowledge is first learned from QAs, unlike typical human knowledge acquisition and is also less practical.

**Language models.** The standard GPT2-small architecture comprises 12 layers with 12 heads and 768 dimensions (Radford et al., 2019). However, its performance can be limited by its absolute positional embedding. Thus, we use its rotary positional embedding variant (Black et al., 2022; Su et al., 2021), still referred to as GPT2 for short. We train GPT2-small on bioS, but use a larger 12-layer, 20-head, 1280-dim GPT2 for bioR to handle the increased data complexity. A fixed context window length of 512 is used throughout this paper.

### 3 WARM-UP ON KNOWLEDGE RETRIEVAL

We examine two *partial knowledge retrieval* tasks that involve extracting either the person’s birth day or year from the complete birth date information.

1. What is the birth day of Anya Briar Forger? 2.
2. What is the birth year of Anya Briar Forger? 1996.

We consider six *dual knowledge retrieval* tasks:

1. Where was Anya Briar Forger born and which company did this person work for? Princeton, NJ; Meta Platforms.
2. Which company did Anya Briar Forger work for and where was this person born? Meta Platforms; Princeton, NJ.
3. Which university and what major did Anya Briar Forger study? Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Communications.
4. What major and which university did Anya Briar Forger study? Communications; Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
5. Where and which company did Anya Briar Forger work for? Menlo Park, CA; Meta Platforms.
6. Which company and where did Anya Briar Forger work for? Meta Platforms; Menlo Park, CA.

<sup>1</sup>All fields, except the working city (determined by the employer’s headquarters), are randomly selected.

<sup>2</sup>In Anonymous (2023), we used probing to explain this phenomenon. Essentially, knowledge augmentation in the BIO pretraining data ensures that knowledge is more closely tied to an individual’s name.

baseline	3.6	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.5	0.3	1.0	0.4	13.7
bioS single	37.2	15.6	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	1.0	33.5	6.3	2.3	4.0	1.1	13.8
bioS single + fullname	58.5	43.5	27.6	23.1	41.1	35.3	55.2	56.2	58.8	63.0	53.7	50.5	14.1
bioS single + permute1	8.5	2.6	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	3.6	0.5	3.3	2.4	3.0	3.5	13.7
bioS single + permute2	62.1	16.6	27.1	27.1	32.1	31.9	52.5	57.3	48.3	53.1	55.0	51.8	58.3
bioS single + permute5	67.6	18.8	49.1	49.1	42.0	42.7	94.9	56.4	57.7	58.3	64.9	90.5	97.7
bioS single + permute1 + fullname	43.9	30.5	9.5	10.4	12.3	11.0	32.0	26.6	29.3	36.9	31.1	31.4	37.9
bioS single + permute2 + fullname	70.1	65.0	54.3	53.9	43.0	44.2	91.1	69.0	60.6	64.2	64.0	87.9	95.0
bioS single + permute5 + fullname	82.4	68.7	65.5	63.9	49.7	54.6	95.9	83.7	67.8	72.6	69.1	93.0	98.6
bioS multi2	90.6	47.1	52.2	53.1	19.8	9.6	2.4	100	71.7	89.1	73.1	85.2	114.0
bioS multi2 + fullname	97.6	77.1	94.0	97.5	93.8	94.3	98.5	100	97.7	89.5	97.6	91.3	35.3
bioS multi2 + permute	95.7	46.5	85.2	88.2	93.8	95.1	87.9	99.3	98.7	89.8	96.7	83.3	83.5
bioS multi2 + permute + fullname	96.2	67.2	95.1	97.0	95.3	94.3	97.4	100	98.8	91.3	98.1	93.7	97.8
bioS multi5	85.0	37.3	6.9	4.6	31.5	16.7	9.7	100	50.8	30.9	43.5	10.2	13.8
bioS multi5 + fullname	97.4	68.0	94.0	95.4	92.0	94.6	94.9	100	98.6	88.4	96.1	91.9	26.8
bioS multi5 + permute	82.3	20.4	96.5	97.6	94.8	94.6	97.0	100	99.0	91.3	97.7	95.1	98.7
bioS multi5 + permute + fullname	97.6	76.7	95.6	98.6	95.1	95.1	98.7	100	98.7	90.6	97.9	93.7	99.0

Figure 3: Partial (left) and dual (middle) knowledge retrieval, versus the single knowledge extraction (right).

Each row denotes a unique pretrained model with its corresponding knowledge augmentation on the bioS data. The **left**, **middle**, and **right blocks** depict QA finetune test accuracies for *partial*, *dual*, and *single knowledge retrieval* tasks, with the right block from Anonymous (2023). Details on the knowledge augmentations and additional experiments on the bioR dataset are in Appendix A and B.

**Methodology.** We aim to determine if a model pretrained on BIO data can be fine-tuned to address the eight questions related to partial or dual knowledge retrieval. We divide the  $N$  individuals equally into training set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  and testing set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ . The model is fine-tuned using the above eight QA tasks for individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  and evaluated on its *out-of-distribution* generation accuracy by testing its responses to the questions for individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ . We use LoRA fine-tuning Hu et al. (2021) to enhance performance, as suggested by Anonymous (2023) (see Appendix B for details).

**Our findings.** For dual knowledge retrieval, the fine-tuning accuracy largely depends on the extractability of knowledge related to the two individual tasks from the retrained model.

- If a language model is pretrained on sufficiently augmented data, such as bioS multi5+permute, which generates five biographical entries per person and permutes the six sentences randomly, the accuracy for dual knowledge retrieval is nearly perfect. In other words, **dual knowledge retrieval is straightforward when the individual tasks are**.
- However, if the pretraining data exhibits spatial dependency between the two knowledge pieces, the *sequence of their retrieval can impact accuracy*. For example, with bioS multi5+fullname, where biographical entries always maintain the same order (specifically, the company name always precedes the company city, and recall company city is uniquely determined by the company name as noted in Footnote 1), answering the company name first yields near-perfect accuracy, but answering the company city first drastically reduces accuracy.

Even with near-perfect extraction of an attribute (e.g., a birth date), partial retrieval (e.g., the birth year) may still be poor. The model may fail to answer questions like “What is the birth year of person Anya”, despite correctly answering “What is the birth date of person Anya”.

- This is preliminary evidence that the model requires Chain of Thoughts (CoTs) for knowledge manipulation. For instance, during inference, the model must state the birth month before the birth year, adhering to the data order in pretraining. It may not necessarily be able to “skip” tokens to directly generate subsequent knowledge from pretraining.

## 4 OUR RESULTS ON KNOWLEDGE CLASSIFICATION AND COMPARISON

This section illustrates that a generative model, despite its ability to extract knowledge effectively, may struggle with downstream tasks requiring basic operations to manipulate such knowledge. This is unless the Chain of Thought (CoT) is implemented during *both* training and testing phases.

**Classification QA.** We investigate classification tasks related to a person’s birth month and field of study. For the birth month, we use modular arithmetic with  $p = 2, 6, 12$ :

1. Was Anya Briar Forger born in an even month? Answer: *Yes*.
2. What is Anya Briar Forger’s birth month mod 6? Answer: *4*.
3. What is Anya Briar Forger’s birth month in numerics? Answer: *10*.

We assigned a “luckiness” index to 100 unique majors in our BIO dataset.<sup>3</sup> We then queried “What is the luckiness of Anya Briar Forger’s major modulo  $m$ ?” for  $m = 5, 20, 100$ . Classifying birth

<sup>3</sup>For instance, Computer Science is 0, Communications is 28, and Music is 99.

field	task	#train individuals	baseline	pretrained model				QA finetuned model			
				trained w/o hint	trained with hint			trained w/o hint	trained with hint		
				test acc	test acc (with hint)	test acc (w/o hint)	hint acc	test acc	test acc (with hint)	test acc (w/o hint)	hint acc
birthmonth	classify %2	(2.5k)	50.0	60.4	77.8	65.2	64.5	61.9	80.4	65.2	69.1
birthmonth	classify %2	(5k)	50.0	67.3	87.3	72.7	80.3	68.0	89.5	72.6	83.9
birthmonth	classify %2	(10k)	50.0	72.9	94.2	80.3	91.0	76.4	95.0	79.9	92.8
birthmonth	classify %2	(25k)	50.0	86.4	98.6	91.1	97.8	87.1	98.8	90.9	98.4
birthmonth	classify %2	(50k)	50.0	95.3	99.5	97.5	99.2	96.3	99.7	97.5	99.5
birthmonth	classify %12	(2.5k)	8.3	51.5	61.5	53.7	61.5	58.3	64.1	53.8	64.0
birthmonth	classify %12	(5k)	8.3	74.2	79.0	70.1	79.0	80.3	82.5	75.0	82.4
birthmonth	classify %12	(10k)	8.3	91.6	92.0	86.8	92.0	93.5	94.7	91.2	94.7
birthmonth	classify %12	(25k)	8.3	97.9	98.5	96.8	98.5	98.9	99.2	98.3	99.2
birthmonth	classify %12	(50k)	8.3	99.4	99.5	99.4	99.5	99.6	99.8	99.7	99.8
birthmonth	ranking	(2.5k)	54.2	53.7	65.4	59.6	44.2	57.3	65.5	57.6	44.9
birthmonth	ranking	(5k)	54.2	59.2	75.5	63.4	63.6	62.5	75.1	63.1	62.6
birthmonth	ranking	(10k)	54.2	65.4	87.7	67.0	82.7	65.9	88.9	66.3	83.9
birthmonth	ranking	(25k)	54.2	75.6	96.7	75.8	95.4	78.3	97.4	72.5	96.3
birthmonth	ranking	(50k)	54.2	95.6	99.0	96.7	98.5	88.6	98.9	82.9	98.3
major	classify %5	(10k)	20.0	23.6	86.4	24.1	84.5	22.8	89.6	23.9	87.9
major	classify %5	(25k)	20.0	24.6	96.7	26.8	96.3	24.8	97.7	27.0	97.2
major	classify %5	(50k)	20.0	31.6	99.3	34.2	99.2	30.0	99.5	33.9	99.4
major	classify %100	(10k)	1.0	30.1	78.7	34.6	79.0	8.9	75.8	22.2	76.1
major	classify %100	(25k)	1.0	79.3	96.0	74.4	96.0	80.0	95.6	77.1	95.3
major	classify %100	(50k)	1.0	91.7	99.0	90.7	99.1	91.8	98.3	92.5	98.1
major	ranking	(10k)	50.5	52.5	88.8	54.1	86.2	52.4	90.3	54.1	88.3
major	ranking	(25k)	50.5	52.2	96.4	53.7	97.3	52.6	96.9	53.6	97.5
major	ranking	(50k)	50.5	53.9	99.6	55.0	99.5	53.6	99.4	55.0	99.3
major	subtraction	(10k)	1.0	1.1	21.6	1.1	82.5	1.0	23.2	1.1	84.3
major	subtraction	(25k)	1.0	1.1	89.1	1.2	96.7	1.2	84.7	1.2	97.0
major	subtraction	(50k)	1.0	1.1	98.4	1.2	99.3	1.1	97.3	1.2	99.0

Figure 4: Knowledge classification and comparison tasks on a BIO pretrained model vs a QA finetuned model. The **#train individuals** column shows the size  $|\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}|$ . The **trained w/o hint** column indicates the model finetuned on the classification/comparison tasks without adding hints. The **trained with hint** block shows the model finetuned with hints added with a probability of 0.5. **Test acc (with hint)** and **test acc (w/o hint)** represent the accuracy for individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$  with or without hints, while **hint acc** shows the model’s hint generation accuracy. See Figure 9 and Appendix C for more experiments.

month with  $p = 12$  or major with  $p = 100$  is a form of *transfer learning*, similar to tasks in (Anonymous, 2023), but with altered question phrasing and response format.

**Knowledge comparison QA.** We examine tasks related to *ranking* and *subtraction* based on a person’s birth month and major of study. The questions include:<sup>4</sup>

1. Was Anya Briar Forger born in a month in a year later than Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger? [Yes/No].
2. What is Anya Briar Forger’s birth month minus Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger’s birth month? [-11..11].
3. Did Anya Briar Forger major in a field luckier than Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger? [Yes/No].
4. How luckier is Anya Briar Forger’s major compared with Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger’s major? [-99..99]

**Methodology.** We evaluate knowledge manipulation using a model proficient in knowledge extraction, ensuring any difficulties arise from manipulation, not extraction. We utilize our knowledge-augmented biographical data, *bioS multi5+permute*, which allows nearly 100% test accuracy for extracting birth date/month and 97.9% for major of study.

We employ either a model pretrained from this BIO data (the *BIO pretrained model*), or one that is BIO pretrained + QA finetuned for single knowledge extraction tasks, such as “What is the birth date of Anya Briar Forger?” (the *QA finetuned model*). Given the QA finetuned model’s proven extraction ability, one might anticipate a better performance in knowledge manipulation.

**TRAIN WITHOUT HINT.** Our BIO data comprises biographical entries of  $N = 100k$  individuals. We reserve half (i.e.,  $50k$ ) as the testing set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ , and select a separate subset  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  as the training set, with  $|\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}| = 2.5k, 5k, \dots, 50k$ .

Starting from one of the two aforementioned models, we perform additional LoRA fine-tuning using the classification or comparison QA tasks described earlier, trained using individuals from  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$ . We then evaluate the model’s *out-of-distribution* generation accuracy by assessing its performance on the classification/comparison tasks for individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ .

**TRAIN WITH HINT.** To enhance the model’s knowledge manipulation capabilities, we LoRA fine-tune it using *knowledge hints*. These hints state a person’s attributes in English before answering the manipulation question. For example, in our tasks, the underlined sentences serve as hints:<sup>5</sup>

1. Was Anya Briar Forger born in a month in a year later than Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger? October; September. No.
2. How luckier is Anya Briar Forger’s major compared with Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger’s major? Communications; Music. -71.
3. What is the luckiness of Anya Briar Forger’s major modular 20? Communications. 8.

<sup>4</sup>These questions have practical relevance: our luckiness index could be replaced with, for instance, the popularity of majors from US News.

<sup>5</sup>For context, apart from (1.1), we consider another individual Sabrina Eugeo Zuberger who was born in September and majored in Music. We have previously assigned specific luckiness values to each major: Communications holds a value of 28, while Music is valued at 99.



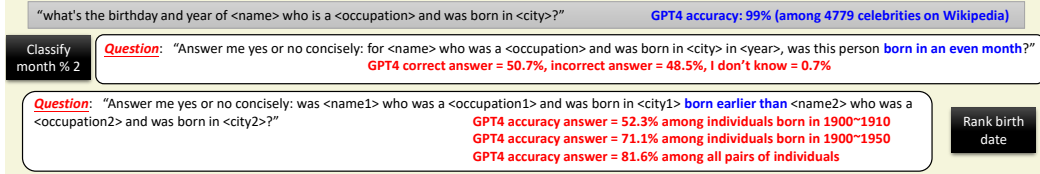


Figure 5: Knowledge classification and ranking on WikiBio using GPT3.5 / GPT4. Details are in Appendix E.2.

Including hints in the training data allows the language model to use a *chain of thought (CoT)* approach: it can first extract the necessary knowledge and then learn the manipulation task by directly using this knowledge. Similar to “train without hint”, we train using QAs for individuals in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  and test on  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ . For each individual in  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$  (or each pair for comparison tasks), we include hints with a 50% probability. Thus, the model sees training data *both with and without hints*. We then test the model’s *out-of-distribution* generation accuracy under both conditions. Our goal is to determine: does the **integration of CoT data improve the model’s knowledge manipulation skills, even without CoT?**

**Our Findings.** As shown in Figure 4, we found significant challenges in knowledge classification/comparison unless hints are used consistently throughout training and testing. Specifically, we observed:

1. The difference between a BIO pretrained and a QA finetuned model is minimal for downstream knowledge manipulation tasks. Fine-tuning the model to answer questions like “What major did Anya Briar Forger study” does not necessarily improve its performance on future tasks like ranking and classification based on the major of study.
2. Without CoT examples, the model’s test accuracy is significantly low, even for simple tasks.
  - Determining whether a month is even or odd requires 10,000 training samples to achieve a 75% accuracy, despite theoretically needing a sample complexity on the order of  $O(12)$ .
  - Ranking months requires 50,000 training samples to reach an 85% test accuracy, even with a theoretical sample complexity of  $O(12^2)$ , provided no hint is given.
  - The “transfer learning” task, which involves rephrasing the same knowledge, has a relatively better test accuracy.
  - Classifying or ranking majors from a list of 100 possible majors barely outperforms random guessing, even with a maximum of 50,000 training individuals.
3. When CoT examples are included during training:
  - The model still struggles to answer without a hint during testing, indicating that *including hints during training does not improve test-time accuracy when hints are removed*.
  - However, when the model is prompted with a hint during testing, there’s a significant improvement in test accuracy, closely aligning with the accuracy achieved when producing the intermediate steps. For example:
    - In the task “birth month classify %2”, with a hint accuracy 91.0%, the test accuracy (with hint) is 94.2%, nearly aligning with the calculation:  $91.0\% + (1 - 91.0\%) \times 50\% = 95.5\%$ .
    - In the task “birth month subtraction”, a hint accuracy of 78.1% results in a test accuracy (with hint) of 61.5%, comparable to the value derived from the formula:  $78.1\% \times 78.1\% + (1 - 78.1\% \times 78.1\%) \times 8.3\% = 64.2\%$ .

Thus, in scenarios with CoTs, if the model can accurately navigate the intermediate step, it is highly likely to successfully tackle the subsequent manipulation task, and vice versa.

**Connection to GPT4 in practice.** Figure 5 illustrates GPT4’s struggle with biographical data classification and comparison tasks in the absence of CoTs. Figure 2 and Figure 10 show that CoTs can rectify this. This suggests that scaling up model size may not mitigate the issues discovered in this section. The GPT4 experiment is included solely for illustrative purposes. Without control over its pretrained data, distinguishing between Case (A)-(E) from Figure 1 is difficult. In Figure 5, we ensured the model could accurately identify individuals’ birth dates 99% of the time, thereby eliminating Case (C). However, we cannot dismiss Case (D) due to uncertainty about the number of relevant training examples in GPT4’s data. Interestingly, GPT4 has a 71.1% accuracy rate when comparing birth dates from 1900-1950, but this drops to 52.3% for 1900-1910, suggesting a correlation with the number of samples in its training data. Therefore, our primary focus of this paper is on a controlled, synthetic experiment to study knowledge manipulation.





Jane Austen Novel Task	<b><u>Inverse search:</u></b> "In <Pride and Prejudice>, what's the sentence <b>before</b> : <sentence2>?" <b><u>Forward search:</u></b> "In <Pride and Prejudice>, what's the sentence <b>after</b> : <sentence1>?"						
	forward vs inverse accuracy by GPT3.5	0.5% vs 14.4%	0.3% vs 5.4%	0.07% vs 4.3%	0.6% vs 5.5%	0.8% vs 7.2%	0.7% vs 5.5%
	forward vs inverse accuracy by GPT4	0.8% vs 65.9%	0.9% vs 40.2%	0.5% vs 33.9%	0.9% vs 41.0%	0.6% vs 42.7%	0.3% vs 31.7%
Wiki Bio Task	<b><u>Inverse search:</u></b> "what's the full name of the celebrity born on <date> in <city> who is a <occupation>?" <b><u>Forward search:</u></b> "what's the birthday and year of <name> who is a <occupation> and was born in <city>?"				GPT3.5 acc = <b>23.9%</b> GPT3.5 acc = <b>89.5%</b>	GPT4: <b>42%</b> GPT4: <b>99%</b>	
Chinese Idiom Task	Given a common 4-letter Chinese idiom such as 指鹿为马, mask out its i-th letter (for i=1,2,3, or 4) and let GPT fill out the missing letter.						
	<b><u>Prompt 1:</u></b> 成语"鹿为马"的X是什么字?	GPT3.5 accuracy <b>9.4%</b> ,		GPT4 accuracy <b>17.6%</b>			
	<b><u>Prompt 2:</u></b> 成语"指X为马"的X是什么字?	GPT3.5 accuracy <b>29.5%</b> ,		GPT4 accuracy <b>36.1%</b>			
	<b><u>Prompt 3:</u></b> 成语"指鹿X马"的X是什么字?	GPT3.5 accuracy <b>32.0%</b> ,		GPT4 accuracy <b>76.7%</b>			
	<b><u>Prompt 4:</u></b> 成语"指鹿为X"的X是什么字?	GPT3.5 accuracy <b>56.7%</b> ,		GPT4 accuracy <b>90.6%</b>			
Chinese Poem Task	Given a famous two-sentence Chinese poem such as 劝君更尽一杯酒, 西出阳关无故人, let GPT answer what's the sentence <b>before/after</b> <sentence2/1>						
	<b><u>Inverse search:</u></b> "西出阳关无故人"的上一句是什么?						
	GPT3.5 accuracy <b>2.1%</b> ,		GPT4 accuracy <b>7.3%</b>				
	<b><u>Forward search:</u></b> "劝君更尽一杯酒"的下一句是什么?		GPT3.5 accuracy <b>33.0%</b> ,		GPT4 accuracy <b>66.5%</b>		

Figure 7: Forward search vs inverse search on ChatGPT (GPT3.5 / GPT4).

**Our findings.** Our results, shown in Figure 6, reveal:

- The model has almost zero accuracy in the inverse knowledge search on the test set  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ , **even with** strong pretraining knowledge augmentation like bioS multi5+permute+fullname,<sup>6</sup> **even for** the simplest inverse knowledge task, all\_to\_first, and **even with** the BIO+QA mixed training approach.
- However, when the order of knowledge is reversed during pretraining, presenting some attributes before the person’s name (see bioS multi5+reverseP or bioS multi5+permute+reverse6), the QA test accuracies improve. This is for illustration purpose only; once the order is reversed, the QA task is no longer an *inverse* knowledge search.

In conclusion, our findings underscore a **fundamental limitation** of the generative model: it cannot perform an inverse knowledge search **unless the knowledge was pretrained in reverse order**. This is due to its left-to-right autoregressive training design. For instance, if the model learns “A equals B” during pretraining, it cannot infer “B equals A” unless it was also in the training data. A bidirectional model like BERT can somewhat mitigate this limitation. However, BERT-like models have their own issues even with forward, single knowledge extraction, even with extensive knowledge augmentation, as discussed in Anonymous (2023).<sup>7</sup>

**Connection to GPT3.5/4 in practice.** Large-scale language models such as GPT3.5/GPT-4 exhibit huge difficulties with inverse knowledge search (Figure 7). For example, while GPT4 can predict the next sentence in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* with 65.9% accuracy, it only manages 0.8% accuracy when tasked with predicting the preceding sentence. This indicates a deficiency in inverse knowledge search capabilities, regardless of their forward knowledge accuracy and model size.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we design a synthetic biography dataset and use it to perform controlled experiments showing the fundamental limitation of the language model’s ability to manipulate knowledge during inference time even under the strongest pretraining setting. Our work sheds light on why extremely large language models like GPT4 are still bad at knowledge manipulation, and give surprisingly simple examples (recall “Was Joe Biden born in an even month?”) in which Chain of Thought becomes necessary. On the other hand, the language model simply can not perform an inverse search, indicating its limitation to be used as a database. Our synthetic dataset can also be used as an important testbed for designing novel training approaches to mitigate this issue in the future. We believe that our work gives strong support that the language model should be paired with the knowledge base during inference time (retrieval augmented generation (Lewis et al., 2020)) to perform knowledge manipulation efficiently, as it can not be solved efficiently by scaling up the model size/data size.

<sup>6</sup>This implies the BIO data includes five diverse biographical entries per individual, with the full name in each sentence, and random shuffling of the six attribute sentences.

<sup>7</sup>As per Anonymous (2023), BERT-like models already struggle with knowledge extraction due to their whole-word masked language modeling (MLM) nature — not to say knowledge manipulation. For example, a company attribute like “Meta Platforms” might lead BERT to correlate the embedding of “Meta” with that of “Platform”, rather than associating the company information to the individual’s full name. For more details, see our separate paper (Anonymous, 2023).

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# APPENDIX

## A MORE DETAILS ON DATA PREPARATION

In (Anonymous, 2023), we introduced a synthetic biography data family **bioS** and a “close-to-real” dataset family **bioR**. For completeness, we provide a summary here, but we encourage interested readers to find more details in (Anonymous, 2023). We primarily use **bioS** to present negative results due to its controllable knowledge order. For positive results, specifically for partial/dual knowledge retrieval, we also use **bioR**.

### A.1 BIO DATASET BIOS

In the synthetic dataset labeled as **bioS**, we generate profiles for  $N = 100,000$  individuals. Each individual’s first, middle, and last names, birth date, birth city, university attended, major of study, and current employer are selected *independently* and randomly from a uniform distribution, out of 400, 400, 1000,  $200 \times 12 \times 28$ , 200, 300, 100, 263 choices respectively. Additionally, we introduce a ‘company city’ field that *depends* on the US location of the employer’s headquarters. For instance, an employee of Meta would list Menlo Park, CA as their company city. Notably, 13.7% of the companies are headquartered in New York, NY. Thus, defaulting to New York, NY when predicting a person’s work city yields a base accuracy of 13.7%.

In the **bioS** dataset, we craft a biographical text entry for each individual, distilling their profile into six sentences. Each sentence illuminates a distinct attribute of the individual. To increase diversity, we select each sentence randomly from a set of  $\sim 50$  pre-defined templates. Beyond (1.1), we provide more examples below:

Carlos Jameson Stokes has his annual celebration on November 12, 2088. He celebrates his birth in San Francisco, CA. He graduated from Oklahoma State University. He explored the theoretical aspects of Information Systems. He contributed his expertise to United Airlines Holdings. He acquired industry knowledge while working in Chicago, IL.

Alondra Bennett Rooney celebrates their life journey every year on April 1, 1909. They owe their roots to Durham, NC. They benefited from the resources and facilities provided by University of South Alabama. They developed a strong foundation in Data Science. They had a job at The Southern Company. They were involved in the industry of Atlanta, GA.

Aidan Alexa Dennis’s birth is celebrated annually on July 17, 1968. She calls Palmdale, CA her birthplace. She specialized in her field of study at Stevens Institute of Technology. She completed a rigorous program in International Business. She had employment prospects at Johnson & Johnson. She gained work experience in New Brunswick, NJ.

In the basic configuration, we produce a *single biographical entry* for each individual, maintaining a consistent order for the six sentences as previously outlined. We denote this configuration as “**bioS single**.” In (Anonymous, 2023), we delved into 15 knowledge augmentations:

- **bioS single+fullname**: Pronouns are replaced with the person’s full name.
- **bioS single+permute1/2/5**: The six sentences in the biography entry are randomly permuted 1/2/5 times for each person. However, the full name only appears in the first sentence, with subsequent sentences using pronouns. This results in 1/2/5 biography entries for each person.
- **bioS single+permute1/2/5+fullname**: As with the previous augmentation, but the full name is used in all six sentences.
- **bioS multi2/5**: 2 or 5 biographical entries are generated for each person, with each generation employing a re-sampled set of sentence templates.
- **bioS multi2/5+permute**: Building on **bioS multi2/5**, the six sentences within each biographical entry are randomly permuted. However, the full name appears only once in the first sentence.
- **bioS multi2/5+fullname**: Building on **bioS multi2/5**, pronouns are replaced with the individual’s full name across all sentences.
- **bioS multi2/5+permute+fullname**: Incorporating features from both **bioS multi2/5+permute** and **bioS multi2/5+fullname**, the pronouns are replaced with the individual’s full name and the six sentences are randomly permuted.

In this paper, in Section 5 when considering inverse knowledge search, we have also introduced a few auxiliary knowledge augmentations for comparison purpose:

- `bioS multi5+reverse1`, in this case we move the full name of the person to the second sentence:

The person was born on October 2, 1996. Anya Briar Forger spent her early years in Princeton, NJ...

- `bioS multi5+reverse2`, in this case we move the full name of the person to the third sentence:

The person was born on October 2, 1996. She spent her early years in Princeton, NJ. Anya Briar Forger...

- `bioS multi5+reverse6`, we move the full name of the person to the end of the biographical entry:

The person was born on October 2, 1996. She spent her early years in Princeton, NJ... The person’s name is Anya Briar Forger.

- `bioS multi5+permute+reverse6`, in this case on top of `bioS multi5+reverse6` we also randomly permute the six sentences. Here is an example.

The person spent her early years in Princeton, NJ. [... 4 more sentences in random order ...] She had a professional role at Meta Platforms. The person’s name is Anya Briar Forger.

## A.2 BIO DATASET BIO R

We also examine a “close-to-real” dataset produced by LLaMA (Touvron et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). Specifically, for the previously mentioned set of  $N = 100,000$  individuals, we provide an instructive prompt to LLaMA, directing it to generate a biographical entry for us. Here are some generated outputs:

Nicole Kevin Pratt is an American business executive. She is currently the Vice President of P&G Global Business Services at Procter & Gamble. She was born on January 25, 1977, in Baltimore, Maryland. She graduated from Haverford College with a degree in Management. P&G recruited her as an Assistant Brand Manager in 2000. She held various leadership positions in brand management, marketing, and sales across different business units and categories. She was named Vice President of P&G Global Business Services in 2019. Nicole currently lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband and three children.

Hunter Bennett Kenny is a talented political science graduate from Queens College, City University of New York. He hails from Augusta, Georgia and was born on March 25, 2033. During his time at college, he was an active member of the student council and served as its president in his senior year. He interned at the office of New York Senator Chuck Schumer. After graduating cum laude, he worked for Kohl’s in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin. He currently resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Johnathan Charles Wade is a successful insurance agent who works for Allstate. He was born on January 7, 2098, in New York City, NY. He graduated from Colorado State University, where he majored in Sociology. He currently resides in Northbrook, IL.

In the basic configuration, we produce a single biographical entry for each person, denoted as “`bioR single`.” For comparison, we also introduce the `multiM` augmentation, which creates  $M$  entries per person, and the `fullname` augmentation.

## B MORE DETAILS ON KNOWLEDGE RETRIEVAL

Recall from Section 3 that we examined two *partial knowledge retrieval* tasks, which involved extracting either a person’s birth day or year from complete birth date information. We also considered six *dual knowledge retrieval* tasks that involved extracting two attributes of a person simultaneously.

Following (Anonymous, 2023), we initially used a *BIO-pretrained model* checkpoint and then applied *LoRA finetuning* on top of it, utilizing the QA texts of the aforementioned eight tasks for half of the individuals (denoted by  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{train}}$ ).<sup>8</sup> We then presented its *out-of-distribution* generation accuracies for answering those eight tasks on the remaining individuals (denoted by  $\mathcal{P}_{\text{test}}$ ).

We used the same BIO pretrained checkpoints from (Anonymous, 2023).<sup>9</sup>

In LoRA fine-tuning, as described by (Hu et al., 2021), one selects certain weight matrices  $\mathbf{W}^{d \times k}$  in the transformer and applies a rank- $r$  update on top:  $\mathbf{W}' \leftarrow \mathbf{W} + \alpha \mathbf{A} \mathbf{B}$  with  $\mathbf{A} \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times r}$  and  $\mathbf{B} \in \mathbb{R}^{r \times k}$  for some small number  $r$ . Here,  $\alpha$  is a constant, and both  $\mathbf{A}$  and  $\mathbf{B}$  are trainable parameters.<sup>10</sup> Notably,  $\mathbf{B}$  is initialized with Gaussians and  $\mathbf{A}$  is initialized with zeros.

<sup>8</sup>LoRA finetuning has been proven to be a better choice compared to full finetuning, as it prevents overfitting and yields higher QA test accuracies. A detailed comparison can be found in (Anonymous, 2023).

<sup>9</sup>They were obtained using AdamW with weight decay 0.1,  $\varepsilon = 10^{-6}$ , initial learning rate 0.001, 1000-step linear warmup, and cosine learning rate decay (decreasing to 0.0001). It was trained using a batch size of 96 with 80,000 steps (for `bioS`) or with 150,000 steps (for `bioR`). Recall the context window size was 512.

<sup>10</sup>In this paper, we choose  $\alpha = 4$ . This choice only affects the learning rate and does not require tuning. (Hu et al., 2021)





field	task	#train individuals	baseline	pretrained model				QA finetuned model			
				trained w/o hint		trained with hint		trained w/o hint		trained with hint	
				test acc	test acc (with hint)	test acc (w/o hint)	hint acc	test acc	test acc (with hint)	test acc (w/o hint)	hint acc
birthmonth	classify %2	(2.5k)	50.0	60.4	77.8	65.2	64.5	61.9	80.4	65.2	69.1
birthmonth	classify %2	(5k)	50.0	67.3	87.3	72.7	80.3	68.0	89.5	72.8	83.9
birthmonth	classify %2	(10k)	50.0	75.9	94.2	80.3	91.0	76.4	95.0	79.9	92.8
birthmonth	classify %2	(25k)	50.0	86.4	98.6	91.1	97.8	87.1	98.8	90.9	98.4
birthmonth	classify %2	(50k)	50.0	95.3	99.5	97.5	99.2	96.3	99.7	97.5	99.5
birthmonth	classify %6	(2.5k)	16.7	42.1	64.4	48.6	61.8	45.9	68.0	49.8	66.0
birthmonth	classify %6	(5k)	16.7	55.6	79.6	62.0	78.1	63.0	82.1	64.4	80.8
birthmonth	classify %6	(10k)	16.7	76.4	90.2	75.4	89.4	79.3	92.9	78.7	92.4
birthmonth	classify %6	(25k)	16.7	91.9	97.5	91.5	97.2	92.8	98.5	92.1	98.4
birthmonth	classify %6	(50k)	16.7	98.2	99.4	98.0	99.3	98.4	99.6	98.4	99.6
birthmonth	classify %12	(2.5k)	8.3	31.5	61.5	51.7	61.5	38.3	64.1	53.8	64.0
birthmonth	classify %12	(5k)	8.3	74.2	79.0	70.1	79.0	80.3	82.5	75.0	82.4
birthmonth	classify %12	(10k)	8.3	91.6	92.0	86.8	92.0	93.5	94.7	91.2	94.7
birthmonth	classify %12	(25k)	8.3	97.9	98.5	96.8	98.5	98.9	99.2	98.3	99.2
birthmonth	classify %12	(50k)	8.3	99.4	99.5	99.4	99.5	99.6	99.8	99.7	99.8
birthmonth	ranking	(2.5k)	54.2	53.7	65.4	59.6	44.2	57.3	65.5	57.6	44.9
birthmonth	ranking	(5k)	54.2	59.2	75.5	63.4	63.6	62.5	75.1	63.1	62.6
birthmonth	ranking	(10k)	54.2	65.4	87.7	67.0	82.7	65.9	88.9	66.3	83.9
birthmonth	ranking	(25k)	54.2	75.6	96.7	75.8	95.4	78.3	97.4	72.5	96.3
birthmonth	ranking	(50k)	54.2	85.6	99.0	86.7	98.5	88.6	98.9	82.9	98.3
birthmonth	subtraction	(2.5k)	8.3	7.0	15.6	7.9	36.5	7.1	17.0	8.5	38.1
birthmonth	subtraction	(5k)	8.3	9.9	34.3	9.8	57.3	8.7	32.7	12.5	55.9
birthmonth	subtraction	(10k)	8.3	18.8	61.5	17.4	78.1	25.1	62.0	25.0	78.3
birthmonth	subtraction	(25k)	8.3	46.7	87.0	43.7	93.7	57.0	91.4	48.2	95.4
birthmonth	subtraction	(50k)	8.3	67.2	95.4	63.0	97.8	78.1	96.1	69.1	97.7
major	classify %5	(10k)	20.0	23.6	86.4	24.1	84.5	22.8	89.6	23.9	87.9
major	classify %5	(25k)	20.0	24.6	96.7	26.8	96.3	24.8	97.7	27.0	97.2
major	classify %5	(50k)	20.0	31.6	99.3	34.2	99.2	30.0	99.5	33.9	99.4
major	classify %20	(10k)	5.0	9.6	72.6	14.5	72.1	8.8	78.3	12.0	78.1
major	classify %20	(25k)	5.0	22.6	90.6	27.3	90.4	17.8	92.3	23.8	92.1
major	classify %20	(50k)	5.0	33.4	97.8	36.4	97.7	32.3	98.0	37.4	97.9
major	classify %100	(10k)	1.0	30.1	78.7	34.6	79.0	8.9	75.8	22.2	76.1
major	classify %100	(25k)	1.0	79.3	96.0	74.4	96.0	80.0	95.6	77.1	95.3
major	classify %100	(50k)	1.0	91.7	99.0	90.7	99.1	91.8	98.3	92.5	98.1
major	ranking	(10k)	50.5	52.5	88.8	54.1	86.2	52.4	90.3	54.1	88.3
major	ranking	(25k)	50.5	52.2	96.4	53.7	97.3	52.6	96.9	53.6	97.5
major	ranking	(50k)	50.5	53.9	99.6	55.0	99.5	53.6	99.4	55.0	99.3
major	subtraction	(10k)	1.0	1.1	21.6	1.1	82.5	1.0	23.2	1.1	84.3
major	subtraction	(25k)	1.0	1.1	89.1	1.2	96.7	1.2	84.7	1.2	97.0
major	subtraction	(50k)	1.0	1.1	98.4	1.2	99.3	1.1	97.3	1.2	99.0
birthday	ranking	(50k)	51.8	56.7	80.0	56.0	69.0	56.8	80.5	55.8	69.6
birthday	subtraction	(50k)	3.6	4.0	45.0	4.1	68.1	4.2	45.2	4.1	69.1

Figure 9: Extension of Figure 4, to give more examples on knowledge classification and comparison tasks.

Additionally, we document the model’s accuracy at correctly generating hints for each individual. This information is presented in the “hint acc” column of Figure 4 and 9.

**Parameters.** The BIO-pretrained model  $M$  and QA-finetuned model  $M'$  were directly copied from Anonymous (2023). There were obtained using the same AdamW parameters as described in Appendix B.

Throughout the experiment for both “train without / with hint”, we utilize a LoRA finetuning strategy with the rank-16 update on the query/value matrices and rank-128 update on the embedding layer. Additionally, we employ the AdamW optimizer with  $\varepsilon = 10^{-6}$ . The weight decay is set at 0.01, and the initial learning rate is 0.001. We do not utilize warmup, but we do implement cosine learning rate scheduling, reducing to 10% of the initial learning rate. The batch size is set at 48 with a total of 50,000 training steps.

**Additional results.** Our complete experiments are presented in Figure 9, and a selective set of them was presented in Figure 4 in the main body. Note that not only have we included more classification/ranking/subtraction tasks in Figure 9, but we have also added ranking/subtraction tasks on the birth day attribute, such as “Was [name1] born on a day of the month later than [name2]?”

One may note that unlike birth month or major of study, the knowledge of “birth day” can only be retrieved with a less perfect test accuracy of 82.3%. Therefore, one should expect that even with hints added, the knowledge ranking/subtraction accuracy may still be far from perfect. See the last two rows in Figure 4.

## D MORE DETAILS ON KNOWLEDGE INVERSE SEARCH

In Section 5, we examine 10 knowledge inverse search tasks, asking for a person’s first or full name given (part or all) of their attributes. We consider the bioS data family with all knowledge augmentation choices as discussed in Appendix A.1.

Similar to knowledge retrieval outlined in Appendix B, given a BIO pretrained model checkpoint, we apply LoRA finetuning on top of it. We do this by utilizing the QA texts of the 10 inverse knowledge search tasks for half of the individuals and test its *out-of-distribution* generation accuracies for answering those QAs on the remaining half. We use the same LoRA settings as discussed in Appendix B, in particular, rank 8 or 16 for the query/value matrices and rank 128 for the embedding

layer, among other parameters.

Furthermore, since we are presenting a negative result, we also consider BIO+QA mixed training. Specifically, we train the model using both the BIO data from all individuals and also the inverse knowledge search QA data from *half* of them. For simplicity, each training sequence of 512 tokens comes either entirely from the BIO entries or entirely from the QA entries (from randomly sampled individuals, concatenated using `<EOS>` tokens). We introduce a parameter  $QA_r$  to control the frequency of using QA entries. Both  $QA_r = 0.5$  and  $QA_r = 0.8$  are tested, and we present the better result of the two. We evaluate the model’s generation accuracy using inverse knowledge search questions from the other half of the individuals.<sup>13</sup>

Our results are detailed in Figure 6.

## E MORE DETAILS ON CHATGPT EXPERIMENTS

All of our experiments on GPT-3.5 / GPT-4 were conducted between June and September of 2023 using the latest models `gpt-3.5-turbo` and `gpt-4` at the moment.

### E.1 INVERSE KNOWLEDGE SEARCH

In Figure 7 in Section 5, we argued that even massive language models such as GPT-3.5/GPT-4 also perform poorly in inverse knowledge search. We consider four such tasks.

**JANE AUSTEN NOVEL TASK.** We select pairs of consecutive sentences in the six novels of Jane Austen, and let GPT-3.5/4 generate the next/previous sentence given the other in the pair. Here, generating the previous sentence can be considered inverse knowledge search, and generating the next sentence can be considered forward knowledge search.

In more detail, we select only those pairs of consecutive sentences when both of them have between 50 and 300 characters (so that we skip short sentences like “What is his name?”). After this filtering, we consider:

- 2873 sentence pairs in *Pride and Prejudice*, out of 5909 sentences;
- 2296 sentence pairs in *Sense and Sensibility*, out of 4897 sentences;
- 2730 sentence pairs in *Persuasion*, out of 3634 sentences;
- 1446 sentence pairs in *Northanger Abbey*, out of 3655 sentences;
- 3234 sentence pairs in *Emma*, out of 8477 sentences;
- 2730 sentence pairs in *Mansfield Park*, out of 6907 sentences.

We then ask GPT3.5/4, “In [bookname], what’s the sentence before/after: [sentence]?”

**WIKIBIO TASK.** We use the wikibio dataset Lebre et al. (2016), which contains biographies of individuals extracted from Wikipedia. Our goal is to have GPT3.5/4 identify people’s names based on their attribute values.

The wikibio dataset consists of 582,659 individuals. We first select only those individuals who have fully specified birth dates, birth places, occupations, and death dates. This results in a total of 33,617 individuals. We then query GPT-3.5 once with the prompt “Answer short: what’s the birth day and year of [name] who is a [occupation] and was born in [birthplace]?” and select 4,779 individuals whose birth dates can be corrected answer. This ensures that we only consider individuals that GPT-3.5 has clearly encountered during its pretraining.

Finally, we test these 4,779 individuals using either GPT-3.5 or GPT-4 with the inverse search question “what’s the full name of the celebrity born on [date] in [city] who is a [occupation]?” or the forward search question “what’s the birthday and year of [name] who is a [occupation] and was born in [city]?” We assign a score of 1 if the answer is fully correct, and a score of 0.5 if the answer is

<sup>13</sup>As shown in (Anonymous, 2023), it is deduced that  $QA_r = 0.8$  (specifically, a 2 : 8 ratio between BIO and QA entries in terms of the number of pre-trained tokens) is a good choice for mixed training. However, in the context of inverse knowledge search, the average length of QAs tends to be longer than that of the original knowledge extraction QAs. For this reason, we also explore the alternative option of  $QA_r = 0.5$  to account for this discrepancy.

only partially correct.<sup>14</sup>

**CHINESE IDIOM TASK.** We prepared a list of 2,244 four-character Chinese idioms that are commonly used in both oral and written texts. We mask one of the four characters in each idiom and ask GPT3.5/4 to fill in the masked character. In this task, generating the first character given the remaining three characters is considered an inverse knowledge search. Here are a few examples of the idioms that we have used:

1.实事求是;2.引人注目;3.成千上万;4.当务之急;5.一如既往; ... 2243.秉公守法;2244.等闲置之

We chose to use Chinese because the idioms are of equal length in characters, making it easy to calculate per-character accuracy. An average Chinese individual with a middle school education should be able to achieve an accuracy of over 80% when answering the first character given the other three.

**CHINESE POEM TASK.** We prepared a list of 233 Chinese poem sentence pairs that are commonly used in written Chinese. We mask either the first or second sentence and ask GPT-3.5/GPT-4 to complete the other. We provide a few examples of the poem sentence pairs below:

1.两岸猿声啼不住，轻舟已过万重山      2.感时花溅泪，恨别鸟惊心 ...  
... 232.千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭      233.东边日出西边雨，道是无晴却有晴

**OTHER TASKS.** Though we have only presented four tasks related to inverse knowledge search, we have also experimented with a few other tasks not included in the paper. We mention these tasks below for the benefit of interested readers.

- We have tested a wider set of Chinese poems (less frequently used) and Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets (which consist of 14 lines of poems each). However, we found that ChatGPT is not very capable at performing even forward search on such tasks. Therefore, it seemed less compelling to test ChatGPT’s performance on the corresponding inverse search tasks.
- We have also tested ChatGPT on the Bible, asking it to identify the verse preceding each verse in the same chapter. We found that ChatGPT is capable of performing this task, often with a Chain of Thought (CoT).

Specifically, remember that the verses in the Bible are properly numbered (for instance, “Gen 15:18” refers to Genesis, chapter 15, verse 18), and the numbers may appear sometimes before and sometimes after the verse. This allows ChatGPT to determine the chapter/verse numbering for a given verse (forward knowledge), perform a “subtract by 1” operation (chain of thought), and then identify the verse using this new number (forward knowledge).

In other words, we believe the task of asking for the verse preceding each verse in the Bible is actually accomplished by ChatGPT through forward knowledge search + CoT. It is not truly an inverse knowledge search task.

## E.2 KNOWLEDGE CLASSIFICATION AND COMPARISON

For knowledge classification and comparison, we once again utilize the pool of 4779 individuals selected from the WikiBio dataset (refer to Section E.1). We then perform the following tasks on GPT4:

- “Answer me yes or no concisely: for [name] who was a [occupation] and was born in [city] in [year], was this person born in an even month?”  
We pose this question for every individual in the pool of 4779 people. The baseline accuracy for random guessing in this task is 50%.
- “Answer me yes or no concisely: was [name1] who was a [occupation1] and was born in [city1] born earlier than [name2] who was a [occupation2] and was born in [city2]?”  
We pose this question for 1000 randomly selected pairs of individuals from the pool of 4779 individuals who were either (1) born between 1900-1910, (2) born between 1900-1950, or (3) born in any year. The baseline accuracies for random guessing in these three tasks are: 54.5%, 51.0%, and 50% respectively.

<sup>14</sup>If only the first or last name is correct, we assign a score of 0.5. If only the birth year is correct, or if both the birth month and day are correct but the year is wrong, we also assign a score of 0.5.

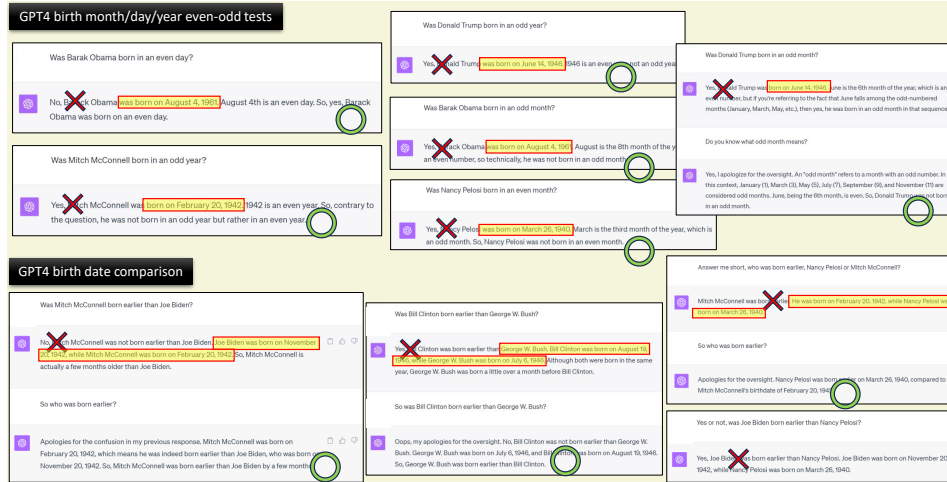


Figure 10: Extension to Figure 2. This figure provides additional examples illustrating GPT4’s difficulty in answering simple manipulation questions based on a person’s attributes during inference, despite possessing the necessary knowledge. However, when a Chain of Thoughts (CoT) approach is employed, in which the person’s attributes are explicitly stated, GPT4 is able to correctly answer the manipulation tasks.

Note that in all cases, we prefixed the questions with “answer me yes or no concisely” to compel the model to directly answer with Yes or No without generating a hint first. We present the results in Figure 5.

In addition to the above experiment on WikiBio, we also present some real-life QA examples to illustrate the necessity of the Chain of Thought (CoT). We ask GPT4 to tell us whether the birth months/days/years of certain politicians are even, as well as to compare the birth dates of some politicians. From the response in Figure 10, it is evident that GPT4 can easily make mistakes when not using hints (i.e., when answering yes/no without stating the politician’s birthdate first), but is capable of correcting such errors once CoT is employed.