

HIGH FREQUENCY LATENTS ARE FEATURES, NOT BUGS

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ABSTRACT

Sparse autoencoders (SAEs) have shown success at decomposing language model activations into a sparse set of interpretable linear representations (“latents”). However, recent work identifies a challenge for SAEs: high frequency latents (HFLs) that are seemingly uninterpretable and occur on greater than 10% of tokens. In this work, we find that HFLs have many unique properties: 1) most HFLs have a “pair”, another HFL pointing in the geometrically opposite direction that they never co-occur with; 2) the HFL subspace is robust to the SAE initialization seed, but HFLs themselves are not; 3) when an SAE is trained on activations with the HFL subspace ablated, no new HFLs are learned; and 4) HFLs have uniquely high similarity with the SAE bias vector. Our experiments lead us to hypothesize that the HFL subspace is not an artifact of SAE training, but instead represents a subspace of truly dense language model features. We present preliminary results interpreting this dense subspace, including finding HFLs that represent context position, HFLs that fire continuously on large blocks of text, HFLs that fire on topic sentences, and HFLs that fire on numeric data.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sparse autoencoders (SAEs) (Bricken et al., 2023; Cunningham et al., 2023a;b) are an unsupervised learning technique that identifies a “dictionary” of latents. Model activations on any one token are a sparse combination of these latents. Most SAE latents are monosemantic, meaning they correspond to human-interpretable concepts. For instance, Templeton et al. (2024) find a “Golden Gate Bridge” latent in Claude 3 Sonnet Anthropic (2024), which they amplify to steer model behaviour.

However, as noted by Anthropic (2024), SAEs often still learn a few high-frequency latents (HFLs) that occur on a significant proportion of input tokens ($f \gtrsim 10\%$). While it seems possible to reduce the number of such learned latents by enforcing greater sparsity (Anthropic, 2024), this does not remove them entirely; we show in Figure 16 that even low sparsity SAEs have a handful of HFLs.

Even if we could make sparsity low enough to remove HFLs, this may be a mistake: there are dense features that language models may need to track for all input tokens, such as context position. **We hypothesize that HFLs span a subspace of these truly dense language model features.** However, SAEs rely on features being sparse. Thus, in this dense regime, SAEs may not learn HFLs that align exactly with the true features (see Section 2), explaining why prior work has found that HFLs are mostly uninterpretable. We explore this hypothesis in two high level steps:

1. In Section 2, we explore the *geometry* and *characteristics* of HFLs and the HFL subspace. We find evidence that the HFL subspace contains true features: HFLs come in geometrically opposite pairs, the same HFL subspace is learned between SAE seeds (but the same HFLs are not), and ablating the HFL subspace causes HFLs not to be learned.
2. In Section 3, we investigate *specific* HFLs, finding that HFLs are actually *somewhat* interpretable: we find HFLs that depend on context position, distance to digit tokens, distance to newlines, and whether the given HFL fired previously.

Additionally, we discuss related work in Appendix A, show example texts that HFL pairs fire on in Appendix D, and show that our results generalize in Appendix E. Overall, our results are promising evidence that the HFL subspace can be understood and contains dense language model features.

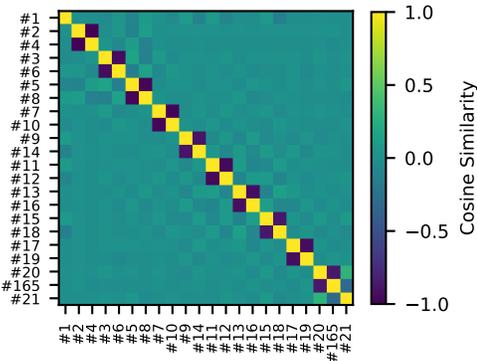


Figure 1: HFL cosine similarity matrix. For the most part, HFLs are perpendicular to each other, except that for all but the first HFL there is another HFL with -1 cosine similarity.

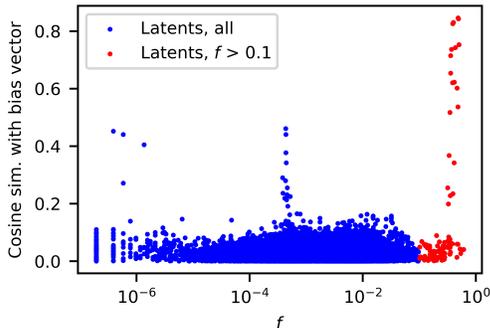


Figure 2: SAE latent frequency vs. cosine similarity with the SAE bias vector across all seeds. HFLs make up most of the latents with a high cosine similarity with the bias.¹

2 CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-FREQUENCY LATENTS

Method: In this section, we examine properties of HFLs and their subspace. We use seeds 42, 43, 44, and 45 to train TopK (Gao et al., 2024) SAEs on layer 12 of Gemma-2-2B (Team et al., 2024; Team, 2024). We obtain frequency data from 5M tokens of RedPajama (Weber et al., 2024), discovering ~ 20 latents with frequency $f > 10\%$. See Appendix B for our full methodology. We note that our findings generalize well; we include reproductions on other SAEs in Appendix E. We denote by $\#i$ the latent with the i th largest frequency.

High-frequency latents come in geometrically opposite pairs: We find the cosine similarity between all latent directions within a single SAE. While most SAE latents are almost orthogonal to each other, we find that some latents that have a “pair” latent with cosine similarity ≈ -1 . Interestingly, this group of latents is almost entirely HFLs, and almost all HFLs occur in a pair (see Figure 6). We plot the HFL pairs in Figure 1 for the seed=42 SAE, using a cutoff cosine similarity of < -0.85 . These latents are not only geometrically opposing, but also functionally opposing — HFL pairs do not co-occur on the same token, despite individually having high frequencies (Table 2). Thus, each pair represents just one true model feature direction, but instead of the SAE learning one latent for this direction, the zero point (bias) is set at the center of this spread, and the SAE learns two latents in opposite directions.² For most of our experiments, we consider *pairs* of HFLs as the unit of study.

HFLs tend to be more bias-aligned: Most SAE latent directions are orthogonal to the decoder bias direction (which also tends to approximately equal the average input activation). However, a subset of HFLs have large absolute cosine similarity with the decoder bias, and they furthermore tend to be the only latents with such high similarity to the bias. We plot the absolute cosine similarity of each latent with the bias vector versus latent frequency for the seed 42 SAE in Figure 2.

The HFL subspace is rediscovered between SAEs: We train SAEs with 4 different seeds and find their HFL pairs. We then filter the HFLs to only pairs with a combined frequency of greater than 50% and take 1 member of each of these filtered pairs. We find 6-7 such HFLs across all seeds. In Figure 3 we plot the cosine similarity between the HFLs from each seed versus the HFLs from seed 42. We see that, while the HFLs are not always exactly rediscovered, the principal angles between the subspaces spanned by the HFLs from different seeds are extremely low. In other words, the HFL subspace seems to be consistently rediscovered, but not always along the same basis.

¹The spike at moderate frequencies may be due to the presence of latents related to the $\langle \text{bos} \rangle$ token, since our SAEs were trained on all model activations including on $\langle \text{bos} \rangle$.

²We are not sure why the SAE does not just learn the bias such that the “center” is at the corner of the HFL subspace; we suspect that the HFL “center” may be different from the “center” of most other sparse features. The finding that HFLs are similar to the bias supports this hypothesis.

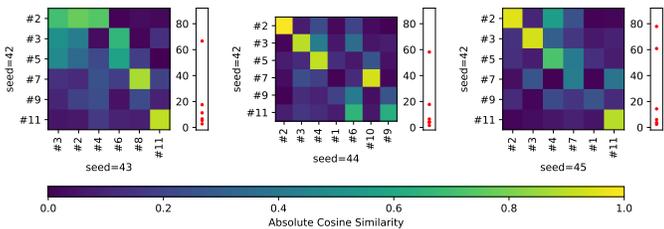


Figure 3: HFL to HFL cosine similarities (grids), and HFL subspace to HFL subspace principal angles (red dots) between seed=42 and seed=43, 44, and 45 SAEs.

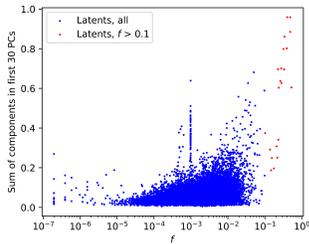


Figure 4: For each latent v_j , we find $\sum_{i=1}^{30} (v_j \cdot u_i)^2$ where u_i is the i -th PC component.³

Addressing Alternative Hypotheses: We address two alternative explanations for the HFL subspace. **Concern 1:** The HFL subspace is an artifact of SAE training. **Concern 2:** The HFL subspace is simply the SAE learning the highest variance dimensions.

To address concern 1, we train an SAE with the same seed = 42, but ablate the subspace spanned by all originally found HFLs with frequency > 10%. Our results (in Figure 8) show that the new SAE discovers only one latent with frequency > 0.1 (at frequency \approx 11%) and no other HFLs. Thus, HFLs truly arise from a specific language model subspace.

To address concern 2, if the HFLs are merely directions of high variance in the data, then we expect the HFL subspace (effectively \approx 10 dimensions) and the top PCA subspace to be extremely similar. However, finding the components of HFLs along the top 30 PCA components (Figure 4), we see a significant proportion of the variance still unexplained. Furthermore, the HFL directions themselves do not simply correspond to the top PCA components (Figure 7). Thus, the SAE seems to be working well to break down the top PCA dimensions.

Linear combination hypothesis: The fact that the same subspace is repeatedly learned but the exact same HFLs are not implies an interesting hypothesis: the HFL subspace may be made up of “true” interpretable latents that are dense; however, since such latents occur on almost every token, the sparsity penalty may not be enough to learn the true basis, and the SAE might instead learn a “skewed” basis of the HFL subspace. In the next section, we still try to interpret individual HFLs, as they may be close to the true dense model features and thus still be somewhat interpretable; this partial interpretability is evidence that the true latents may be in the HFL subspace somewhere.

3 INTERPRETABILITY OF HIGH-FREQUENCY SUBSPACE

In this section, we investigate top HFLs from seed=42 by combined frequency. We include a summary of our findings in Table 1, and example firing patterns for each HFL are in Appendix D.

Context position latent (#1): Examining the latent activations at each context position, we find that the top HFL across all seeds ($f \approx 0.5 - 0.6$) is exactly rediscovered (cosine similarity > 0.97 across seeds) and has a strong context position dependence, firing mostly and strongly early in contexts. This latent has a low-frequency (≈ 0.05) pair in two seeds, and no pair in the other two. In the top left of Figure 5, we plot latent firing count against context position.

Phrase-level Semantics (#2 and #4): The next two latents, #2 and #4, seem to have a meaningful firing pattern; latent #2 fires mostly on numeric data and short, common tokens, while latent #4 fires on most other tokens (total $f = 0.888$). We hypothesize that this HFL pair is related to a semantic axis similar to “structured text” vs. “prose / meaningful tokens”. In the bottom left of Figure 5, we show that this latent pair fires at high frequency when it is near a digit token.

Context Indicator Hypothesis: We observe that for some HFL pairs, latent firings are “sticky” and occur in blocks. To quantify this, for a pair, we find the Markov transition matrix between the states

³PCA obtained from model activations on 1000 documents. The spike at $f \approx 10^{-3}$ is due to the <bos> token, which occurs about once every 1024 tokens, as the first PC direction is dominated by activations on the <bos>.

Latent	Total f	Hypothesis	Figures
#1	0.526	Context position	5, 10
#2, #4	0.888	Phrase-level semantic meaning	5, 11, 12
#3, #6	0.824	Context indicator	5, 13a
#5, #8	0.712	Context indicator	5, 13b
#7, #10	0.611	Context indicator	5, 13c
#9, #14	0.510	Body text vs. topic sentence	5, 14, 15

Table 1: HFL pairs with $f > 50\%$ and our hypotheses of their meanings, with figure links.

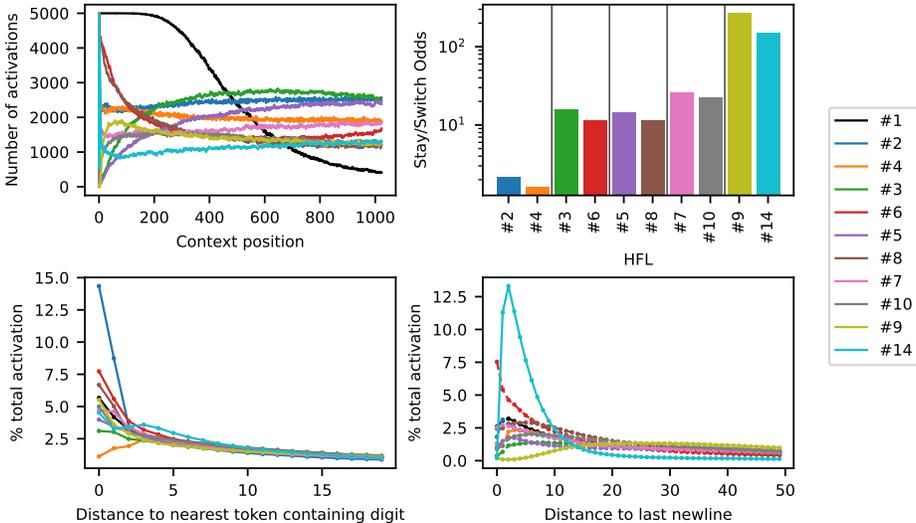


Figure 5: Unique aspects of latents. **Top left:** Context position vs. frequency; latent #1 has a clear dependence on context position. **Bottom left:** Percent of total activation strength vs. distance to the nearest digit; latents #2 and #4 have opposite correlations. **Top right:** “Stay/switch odds ratio” for HFL pairs; latents #2 and #4 are not sticky, but all other pairs are. **Bottom right:** Percent of total activation strength vs. distance to last newline token; latents #14 and #9 have opposite correlations.

“neither fires”, “HFL1 fires”, and “HFL2 fires”. For each HFL, we compute the “stay/switch odds ratio”, which is $P(\text{stay on}|\text{currently on})/P(\text{switch to pair}|\text{currently on})$. We indeed observe that for certain pairs, such as (#3,#6) and (#9,#14), once one latent is firing, the probability to switch to the other latent is very low; these results are shown in the top right of Figure 5. We hypothesize that these latents are “context indicators”, and indicate some property of the text that persists across many tokens, such as “this is a paragraph about this concept” or “this context is of a certain type”.

Body vs. Topic Sentence Detection (#9, #14): One particularly interpretable context indicator HFL pair is #9 and #14, which seems to indicate “body text” vs “topic sentences”. We quantify this by examining the propensity to fire versus the distance from the last newline. The bottom right of Figure 5) shows that #14 fires strongly after newlines (but not trivially so, see Figure 15) while #9 fires minimally.

4 CONCLUSION

In this work, we argue that high frequency latents likely represent true dense language model features, and that because SAEs are optimized for sparsity, it is not surprising that these features are not learned cleanly by SAEs. Overall, we believe that our work provides a way forward to understand HFLs: if we carefully focus on each HFL one by one, they seem feasible to interpret. We also can try rotating the HFL space to result in maximally interpretable latents by some metric, as we hypothesize that the HFL subspace’s current orientation may not line up with the model’s ontology.

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A RELATED WORK

A.1 INVESTIGATING SPARSE AUTOENCODER LATENTS

Cunningham et al. (2023a) and Bricken et al. (2023) demonstrate that SAEs can decompose model activations into a set of over-complete latents that are *more monosemantic* than the original neuron basis. To quantify this monosemanticity, these works perform extensive analysis of individual latents, both manually and using language models, and generate *explanations* of each latent using input text that they activate on. This work has been extended by Paulo et al. (2024), who develop more efficient methods for doing this “automated-interpretability” process at scale. Our work follows in this tradition of carefully examining individual SAE latents.

However, not all latents are interpretable, and SAEs do not capture all types of language model features. Dense latents, those that occur on greater than 10% of examples (and the subject of this work) were identified by both the early SAE work mentioned above and by Anthropic (2024). The phenomenon of “dark matter” in SAEs—features that exist in the model but are persistently not captured by the SAE as it scales—was first identified by Gao et al. (2024) and explored further by Engels et al. (2024).

SAEs also struggle with learning even sparse, interpretable features. Chanin et al. (2024) study feature splitting—the phenomenon that as SAEs scale the sparsity penalty causes interpretable latents to split into more specific versions—and feature absorption—the phenomenon that latents merge with other latents they frequently co-occur with. We hypothesize that these phenomenon occur to some extent with the HFL subspace identified in this work: if the sparsity is made extremely low, the HFL subspace is broken apart, even if it is truly dense.

A.2 LANGUAGE MODEL FEATURE STRUCTURE

Understanding the geometry of language model representations has been an active area of research since the early days of word embeddings. Mikolov et al. (2013b) show that word embeddings exhibit linear structure and have semantic relationships that can be captured through vector arithmetic. Elhage et al. (2022) formalize this observation as the Linear Representation Hypothesis (LRH) and develop toy models to understand how networks might learn to represent an over-complete basis of linear features in a lower-dimensional space through superposition. Park et al. (2023) provide further theoretical grounding for when and why linear features might emerge in language models.

However, some recent work has challenged the universality of linear representations. Engels et al. (2024) demonstrate that some language model features are fundamentally multi-dimensional, and Csordás et al. (2024) find non-linear onion-like features in a toy RNN. On the other hand, while Li et al. (2022) study models trained on Othello and find that some representations seems to be nonlinearly encoded in the model, Nanda et al. (2023) find that with a change of basis these same variables are actually linearly encoded.

The geometry of features learned by sparse autoencoders has also received attention. Mendel (2024) argues that SAE features are not merely almost orthogonal random vectors, and that the relationships between them matter, while Li et al. (2024) studies SAE latent structure at many different layers of structure. In this work, we do not seek to propose an entirely new theory for how language model features and SAE latents are structured, but instead we just aim to explain high frequency features by postulating that they represent truly dense language model features.

A.3 DENSE MODEL REPRESENTATIONS

While much work has focused on sparse features in language models, there is a scattering of evidence for dense representations. Yedidia (2023a;b) finds that GPT-2’s positional embeddings form a helix structure; the “height” of the helix is thus a feature that always activates. Gurnee et al. (2024) identify “universal neurons” that participate in many dense tasks, including encoding the context position and allowing the model to increase uncertainty (“entropy” neurons). Michaud et al. (2024) find structured lattice-like representations in toy models, an example of possible dense geometric structure. Mixed dense-sparse representations have also been explored in classical sparse coding:

Tasissa et al. develop dictionary learning methods for learning combined dense and sparse representations.

B METHODOLOGY

TopK SAEs: SAEs reconstruct model activations \mathbf{x} as a sparse linear combination of a set of d_{SAE} latents, with $d_{\text{SAE}} \gg d_{\text{model}}$. The rows of the SAE decoder matrix correspond to SAE latent directions. We use TopK SAEs, which enforce sparsity by zeroing out the activations of all but the top k latent pre-activations \mathbf{f} :

$$\mathbf{f} = \text{ReLU}(W_e(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{b}_d) + \mathbf{b}_e) \quad (1)$$

$$\hat{\mathbf{x}} = W_d \mathbf{f} + \mathbf{b}_d \quad (2)$$

For our main paper experiments, we train TopK SAEs with $d_{\text{SAE}} = 16384$ and $k = 64$.

Latent activations: We obtain latent activations by running Gemma on 5000 documents with context length of 1024 tokens from the shuffled RedPajama 1T sample (Weber et al., 2024), and capture all SAE latent activations on layer 12. High-frequency latents are defined as those that occur on $> 10\%$ of tokens.

SAE training: We train SAEs on the layer 12 activations on 1B tokens from the RedPajama 1T sample dataset, with 4 random seeds: 42, 43, 44, and 45. For our studies where we ablate part of the HFL subspace, we first subtract the learned \mathbf{b}_d , ablate the HFL subspace, add back \mathbf{b}_d , and then train the SAE on that.

C FURTHER ANALYSIS OF HFL CHARACTERISTICS

Linear probing: Since we suspect true dense features may be stored in the HFL subspace, but not exactly aligned with the learned HFLs, we attempt to probe true features by running a linear regression on the model activations with the “true” feature. We repeat this for the model activations projected only onto the HFL ($f > 0.1$) encoder subspace, and its complement.

Preliminary analysis finds that for context position, probing on the HFL subspace indeed performs better ($r^2 \approx 0.55$) than its complement ($r^2 \approx 0.45$) and on a random subspace spanned by the same number of latents ($r^2 \approx 0.05$), despite the context position not necessarily being linearly represented. However, attempting to probe other “true” features such as token length and $\log(\text{token frequency})$ have not shown much success, and one reason could be that the “true” features are not necessarily token-level.

Quantifying semantic predictability: We train a `word2vec` (Mikolov et al., 2013a; Řehůřek & Sojka, 2010) model on all Gemma tokenized tokens (removing spaces) in the RedPajama dataset with window = 7, to generate the 300-dim embedding of the n tokens. This is concatenated into a $300n$ -dim vector and passed through a logistic regression or simple MLP. Preliminary testing on some non-context-position HFLs such as #2 with $n = 5$ gives a balanced accuracy of around 70%, compared to the baseline test on the context position HFL #1 that gives a balanced accuracy of around 50%, suggesting a greater degree of semantic predictability.

Latent 1			Latent 2			Pair		
ID	#	Freq.	ID	#	Freq.	Cosine Sim.	Total Freq.	Jaccard Sim.
12723	1	0.526	-	-	-	-	0.526	-
13312	2	0.485	10028	4	0.403	-0.991	0.888	0
2837	3	0.483	600	6	0.341	-0.930	0.824	0
5019	5	0.393	10751	8	0.319	-0.972	0.712	0
8286	7	0.333	3817	10	0.279	-0.968	0.611	0
15161	9	0.283	6324	14	0.227	-0.892	0.510	0
3208	11	0.263	2242	12	0.238	-0.957	0.501	0
9929	13	0.233	12628	16	0.209	-0.925	0.442	0
11298	15	0.218	9900	18	0.155	-0.874	0.373	0
6279	17	0.176	14012	19	0.148	-0.934	0.324	0
11549	20	0.138	10430	165	0.026	-0.861	0.163	1.59×10^{-6}
522	21	0.102	-	-	-	-	0.102	-

Table 2: Table with HFLs, shown by their IDs and frequency ranks. For pairs, we show their cosine similarity, total frequency, and Jaccard similarity.

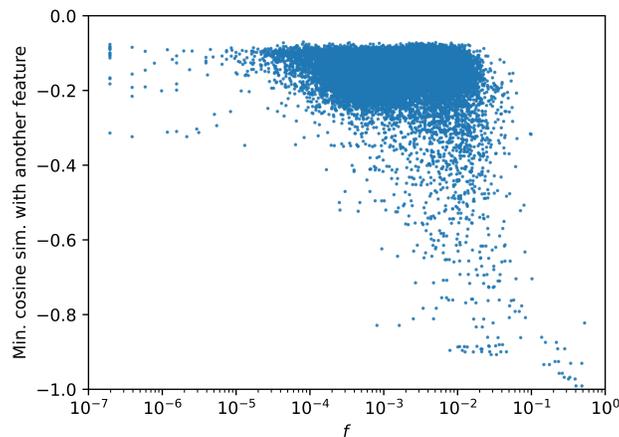


Figure 6: For each latent in seed=42, we find the minimum cosine similarity it has with another feature, and plot against frequency of the latent. We observe a distinct high-frequency group with highly negative minimum cosine similarity, while average features have minimum cosine similarity closer to zero.

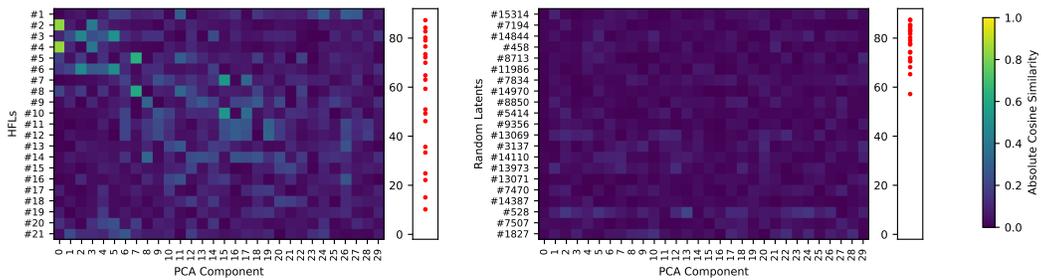


Figure 7: **Left:** Absolute cosine similarity between HFLs and the first 30 PC components, with the principal angles between the subspaces shown. **Right:** A similar plot for random features. We notice that while the HFLs are not closely aligned with the PCA components, they span a more similar subspace than random latents.

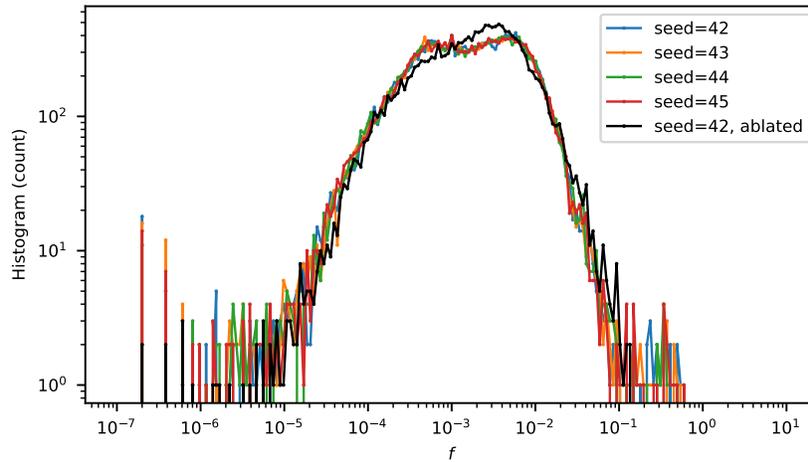


Figure 8: Histogram (count) of feature frequencies, in 200 log-spaced bins from 10^{-7} to 10^0 . We observe that across all seeds, there are a handful of HFLs that fire $> 10\%$ of the time. However, when this HFL subspace is ablated, almost no latents discovered fire $> 10\%$.

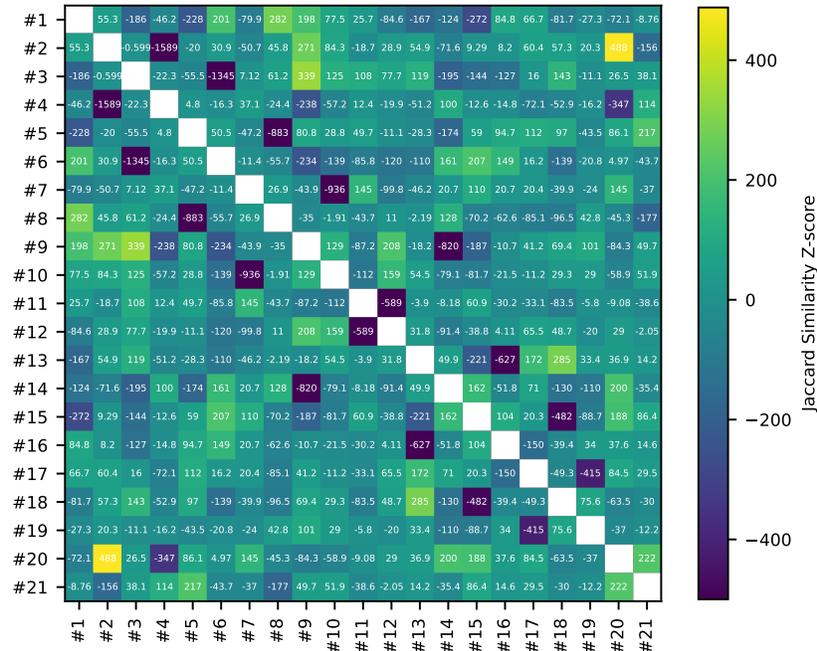


Figure 9: Jaccard similarity Z-score between latents' activations, ranked by their frequencies. The expected Jaccard similarity is calculated by randomly shuffling the activations across all tokens, repeating 50 times to obtain a mean and standard deviation. We observe that HFL pairs which never co-occur have an extremely low z-score. Between some non-pair HFLs, Jaccard similarity z-scores are high, indicating some relationship in their firing pattern.

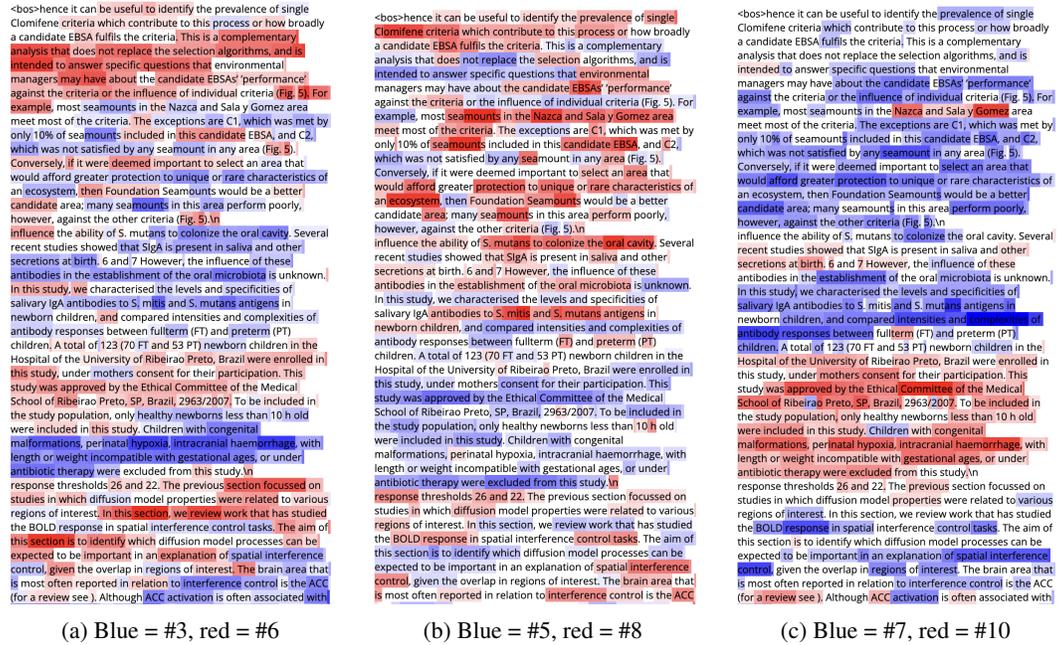


Figure 13: Firing pattern of “sticky” feature pairs, on same text. While it is difficult to concretely interpret what these features represent, they seem to correspond to specific general concepts present in the context. For instance, biological facts, scientific analysis / self-reference in text, and information on the study or experiments.

<bos>Playtesters - Code of Conduct\n — Last updated: 9th of March, 2015\n Members of the playtesting domain are required to agree to this code of conduct and to uphold it to their best abilities. Any violation of this code should be reported to the administration of the playtesting domain.\n Being a playtester, like being a creator, is a responsibility and not a right. Part of being a playtester is being trustworthy enough that creators feel confident that you will not violate the confidentiality of the process. If you feel you cannot as a playtester accept the code of conduct here then you should bring your concerns to the attention of the administration of the playtesting domain.\n Like all rules on Discworld, the important aspect here is the spirit and not the letter. Basically if you feel the only way your actions are justifiable is through some loophole or radical interpretation of this code of conduct then you will still be judged to have violated the code of conduct.\n Violation of this code can be grounds for dismissal from the playtesting domain and depending on the violation may result in further punishment\n Playtesters are expected to be 'model players' and conduct themselves in a manner befitting someone who has been formally trusted with additional responsibilities on Discworld. This means that you do not do anything that brings yourself or the playtesting domain into disrepute.\n

Figure 14: Latent pair #9 and #14 firing on a context (#9 in blue and #14 in red). Latent #14 seems to fire on topic sentences, while latent #9 seems to fire on body text.

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Figure 15: The latents seem robust to artificially adding newlines; they are doing something more than just detecting newlines.

E GENERALIZATION OF MAIN RESULTS

In Figure 16, Figure 17, and Figure 18 we reproduce our key results on feature geometry on the Gemma Scope (Lieberum et al., 2024) and Llama Scope (He et al., 2024) suites of SAEs, and find that HFLs are indeed discovered in different SAEs and different models (focusing on middle model layers).

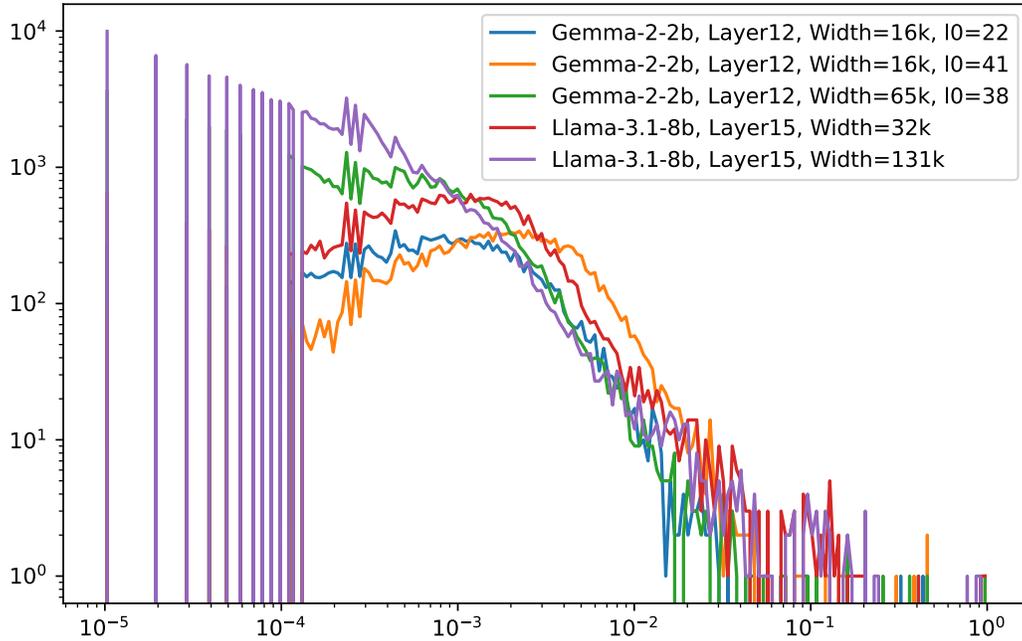


Figure 16: Frequency histogram for different SAEs on different models. We notice that in all SAEs, there are a handful of features with frequencies $> 10\%$.

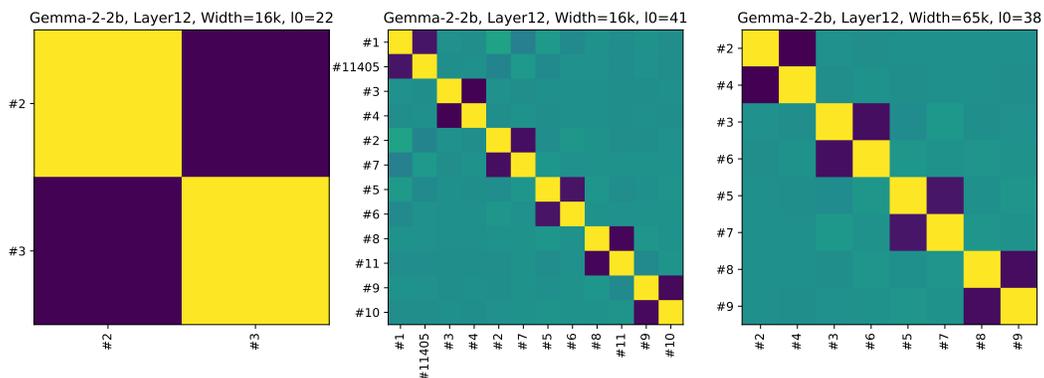


Figure 17: For each HFL ($f > 0.1$) in Gemma-2-2b SAEs of different widths and sparsities, we search for a geometrically opposite pair, and present their cosine similarities here.

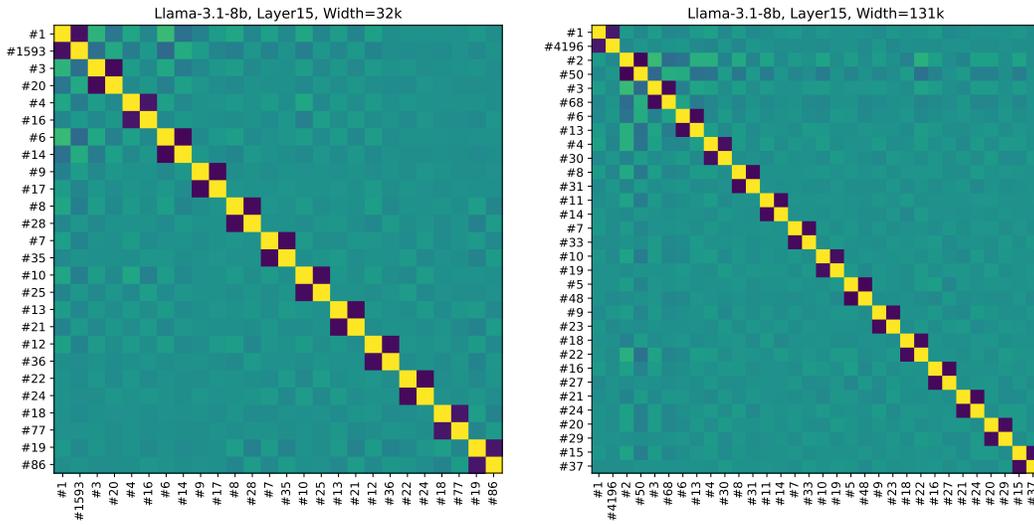


Figure 18: Similarly, for each HFL ($f > 0.1$) in Llama-3.1-8b SAEs of different widths, we search for a geometrically opposite pair, and present their cosine similarities.