

LLMs are Frequency Pattern Learners in Natural Language Inference

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Abstract

While fine-tuning LLMs on NLI corpora improves their inferential performance, the underlying mechanisms driving this improvement remain largely opaque. In this work, we conduct a series of experiments to investigate what LLMs actually learn during fine-tuning. We begin by analyzing predicate frequencies in premises and hypotheses across NLI datasets and identify a consistent **frequency bias**, where predicates in hypotheses occur more frequently than those in premises for positive instances. To assess the impact of this bias, we evaluate both standard and NLI fine-tuned LLMs on bias-consistent and bias-adversarial cases. We find that LLMs exploit frequency bias for inference and perform poorly on adversarial instances. Furthermore, fine-tuned LLMs exhibit significantly increased reliance on this bias, suggesting that they are learning these frequency patterns from datasets. Finally, we compute the frequencies of hyponyms and their corresponding hypernyms from WordNet, revealing a correlation between frequency bias and textual entailment. These findings help explain why learning frequency patterns can enhance model performance on inference tasks.

1 Introduction

Natural Language Inference (NLI) is a core task in language understanding, aiming to determine whether a hypothesis follows logically from a premise. The rise of LLMs has driven significant progress in NLI (He et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024), with studies (Liu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2025) showing that training on NLI corpora improves performance on inference benchmarks. Moreover, Cheng et al. (2025) introduce counterfactual NLI datasets to train LLMs, significantly enhancing their inferential abilities while reducing hallucinations.

Despite the widespread use of NLI datasets for training, the underlying mechanisms by which LLMs acquire inferential capabilities remain unclear. Li et al. (2022) argue that the performance

gains of LLMs from inference data result from overfitting to dataset artifacts. Mckenna et al. (2023a) prove that LLMs benefit from memorizing such artifacts and leveraging them as shortcuts for inference. However, these studies fail to account for the finding of Cheng et al. (2025) that training on counterfactual reasoning data can still lead to improved inference performance. To further understand the source of LLMs’ performance gains from training on NLI corpora, we conduct a series of controlled experiments analyzing their inferential behavior.

First, we examine the frequency of predicates in premises and hypotheses separately across multiple NLI datasets to analyze their underlying distributional properties. Our experiments reveal a clear **frequency biases** in NLI datasets: predicates in hypotheses tend to occur with significantly higher frequency than those in premises in examples labeled as positive. *Second*, we evaluate the performance of both standard and NLI-tuned LLMs on inference benchmarks, presenting evidence that these models are sensitive to frequency bias and tend to rely on this bias during inference. We further prove that fine-tuning on NLI datasets amplifies this reliance on frequency bias. Furthermore, we partition the NLI test set based on whether samples are *consistent* with or *adversarial* to frequency bias. Evaluation results show that models fine-tuned on inference data perform poorly on frequency-adversarial inference, proving that training on NLI datasets leads models to learn the frequency bias from NLI datasets. *Finally*, we present experiments demonstrating a correlation between frequency bias and textual entailment, offering an explanation for why learning frequency bias may serve as a proxy for enhancing inferential capability.

The main contributions of this paper are summarized as follows:

- (a) We identify frequency bias in the various NLI data sets, where hypotheses tend to occur more frequently than premises when labeled is positive.

	Label = Entail			Label = No-Entail		
	premise	hypothesis	more frequent	premise	hypothesis	more frequent
EGs	36.05	209.1	hypothesis	109.35	32.84	premise
Levy/Holt	9.97	24.29	hypothesis	8.38	6.53	premise
RTE	60.89	62.24	hypothesis	73.01	60.09	premise
MNLI	69.30	72.71	hypothesis	69.10	65.80	premise

Table 1: Average predicate frequency in **hypothesis** and **premise** across different datasets. Frequencies are computed separately for positive (Entail) and negative (No-Entail) examples.

(b) We evaluate a range of LLMs and their fine-tuned counterparts, demonstrating that these models tend to exploit frequency bias during inference, and that fine-tuning on NLI datasets further amplifies this reliance.

(c) We present the relation between frequency bias and textual entailment, providing explanations why learning frequency bias can improve inference performance.

2 Methods

2.1 Calculate average frequency of predicates

For each hypothesis and premise in NLI datasets, we compute n-gram frequencies using the *WordFreq* library (Speer, 2022), which aggregates frequency data from multiple text sources to provide reliable usage statistics. In our experiments, we focus exclusively on the frequency of *verbal* predicates, abstracting away from the specific entity arguments that accompany them. We calculate the average predicate frequency for each statement. This approach enables us to capture general usage patterns of predicates across corpora while minimizing effects introduced by different subjects or objects¹.

2.2 Metrics

We calculate frequency bias as the difference between the frequencies of the hypothesis and the premise, computed as follows:

$$\text{Bias}(\text{hypo}, \text{prem}) = \text{Freq}(\text{hypo}) - \text{Freq}(\text{prem})$$

where $\text{Freq}(\cdot)$ denotes the average frequency of predicates in a given statement².

3 Experimental Setup

3.1 Datasets

We fine-tune LLMs on a range of widely used NLI datasets and evaluate their inferential performance. The training sets include **RTE** (Dagan et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2019), **MNLI** (Williams

et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019), and **Entailment Graphs (EGs)** (Hosseini et al., 2018, 2021; Cheng et al., 2025), which is a counterfactual yet logically valid reasoning dataset. For evaluation, we use the **Levy/Holt** (Levy and Dagan, 2016; Holt, 2019) dataset, where each premise–hypothesis pair contains a single predicate with two named entity arguments, allowing for clear analysis of predicate frequency patterns.

We adopt the same prompt templates used in prior work (Schmitt and Schütze, 2021; McKenna et al., 2023a; Cheng et al., 2025) for both fine-tuning and inference, which format samples as binary questions to determine whether the premise entails the hypothesis. A positive label corresponds to Entail, and a negative label to No-Entail. Details of the datasets and prompt configurations are provided in Appendix A and B.

3.2 Fine-tune LLMs

We fine-tune several widely used LLMs on NLI datasets, including DeepSeek-R1-Distill-Llama-8B (DeepSeek-AI et al., 2025), Mistral-7B, LLaMA-3-8B-instruct, and LLaMA-3-70B-instruct. Fine-tuning is conducted using LoRA (Hu et al., 2022) within the PEFT framework (Ding et al., 2023), with a learning rate of $1e^{-4}$, 12 training epochs, rank 8, and a dropout rate of 0.05.

4 Results

4.1 Finding 1: Frequency bias in NLI datasets

We analyze average predicate frequency on the various NLI datasets. From Table 1, we observe a consistent pattern: for instances labeled Entail, the hypothesis typically contains predicates with higher corpus frequency. Conversely, for No-Entail instances, predicates in the hypothesis tend to be less frequent. This observation presents a consistent *frequency bias* embedded in these NLI datasets. The presence of frequency biases in NLI datasets raises the potential possibility that LLMs may be learning and leveraging these frequency patterns during fine-tuning.

¹Our code and used data will be released upon publication.

²To better illustrate the frequency differences, we scale all frequency values by a factor of 1,000.

	Label = Entail				Label = No-Entail			
	premise	hypothesis	<i>Bias(hypo,premise)</i>	<i>follow bias</i>	premise	hypothesis	<i>Bias(prem,hypo)</i>	<i>follow bias</i>
DeepSeek-8B ✓	20.27	65.84	45.57	consistent	88.98	11.75	77.23	consistent
DeepSeek-8B ✗	8.27	52.59	44.32	consistent	40.83	24.15	16.68	consistent
LLaMA-3-8B ✓	17.58	66.18	48.6	consistent	112.15	13.36	98.79	consistent
LLaMA-3-8B ✗	26.28	33.63	7.35	consistent	45.95	20.07	25.88	consistent
Mistral-7B ✓	20.06	66.83	46.77	consistent	92.87	18.31	74.56	consistent
Mistral-7B ✗	11.02	50.71	39.69	consistent	36.39	18.25	18.14	consistent
LLaMA-3-70B ✓	17.13	67.96	50.83	consistent	77.56	19.37	58.19	consistent
LLaMA-3-70B ✗	24.66	39.15	14.49	consistent	44.03	16.75	27.28	consistent
DeepSeek-8B _{EG} ✓	15.78	79.85	64.07	consistent	95.18	8.26	86.92	consistent
DeepSeek-8B _{EG} ✗	25.64	15.55	-10.09	<i>adversarial</i>	26.50	30.06	-3.56	<i>adversarial</i>
LLaMA-3-8B _{EG} ✓	14.92	66.27	51.35	consistent	130.86	8.26	122.6	consistent
LLaMA-3-8B _{EG} ✗	69.18	23.45	-45.73	<i>adversarial</i>	38.01	22.10	15.91	consistent
Mistral-7B _{EG} ✓	18.23	75.67	57.44	consistent	96.69	8.02	88.67	consistent
Mistral-7B _{EG} ✗	18.39	15.66	-2.73	<i>adversarial</i>	28.49	29.88	-1.39	<i>adversarial</i>
LLaMA-3-70B _{EG} ✓	13.83	103.23	89.4	consistent	71.65	9.76	61.89	consistent
LLaMA-3-70B _{EG} ✗	23.60	16.02	-7.58	<i>adversarial</i>	19.67	64.88	-45.21	<i>adversarial</i>

Table 2: Frequency of **premise** and **hypothesis** when evaluating the Levy/Holt dataset using different LLMs and their EG-tuned variants (_{EG}). ✓ indicates correct predictions, while ✗ indicates incorrect predictions.

	Label = Entail			Label = No-Entail		
	premise	hypothesis	<i>Bias(hypo,premise)</i>	premise	hypothesis	<i>Bias(prem,hypo)</i>
DeepSeek-8B ✓	20.27	65.84	45.57	88.98	11.75	77.23
DeepSeek-8B ✗	8.27	52.59	44.32	40.83	24.15	16.68
DeepSeek-8B _{EG} ✓	15.78	79.85	64.07	95.18	8.26	86.92
DeepSeek-8B _{EG} ✗	25.64	15.55	-10.09	26.50	30.06	-3.56
DeepSeek-8B _{RTE} ✓	21.17	75.42	54.25	73.99	10.86	63.13
DeepSeek-8B _{RTE} ✗	12.97	42.14	29.17	44.88	31.68	13.2
DeepSeek-8B _{MNLI} ✓	19.62	71.14	51.52	86.89	8.86	78.03
DeepSeek-8B _{MNLI} ✗	9.29	13.88	4.59	51.33	23.25	28.08

Table 3: Frequency of **premise** and **hypothesis** when evaluating the Levy/Holt using LLMs fine-tuned on different NLI datasets. ✓ denotes correct predictions, while ✗ indicates incorrect predictions.

4.2 Finding 2: LLMs are sensitive to frequency bias

We evaluate a range of LLMs and their EGs-tuned variants on Levy/Holt. Model predictions are classified as either *correct* (✓) or *incorrect* (✗), and we analyze frequency bias across these categories.

We reports the frequency biases in Table 2. The results reveal a clear trend: both standard and fine-tuned LLMs can make *correct* predictions when test samples are consistent with the frequency bias. In contrast, when this bias is reduced or adversarial, the likelihood of *incorrect* predictions increases. It shows that LLMs’ performance is sensitive to the frequency bias. Furthermore, we observe that the sensitivity is especially pronounced in EG-tuned models, where the frequency bias is higher in *correct* predictions and more reduced in *incorrect* ones, compared to standard LLMs.

We also evaluate LLMs fine-tuned on different NLI datasets. As shown in Table 3, we observe that models consistently tend to make correct predictions on samples with stronger frequency bias, but are more likely to produce incorrect predictions

Hypothesis: The ash contains iron.		Levy/Holt _{cons}
Premise: the ash is rich with iron.		Frequency: contains > is rich with
Label: Entail		
Hypothesis: Comte discussed mathematics.		Levy/Holt _{adv}
Premise: Comte taught mathematics.		Frequency: discussed < taught
Label: Entail		

Figure 1: A sample in Levy/Holt_{cons} and Levy/Holt_{adv}.

when the bias is reduced. The phenomenon is consistently more pronounced in LLMs fine-tuned on NLI datasets compared to standard models.

4.3 Finding 3: NLI-tuned LLMs struggle with frequency-adversarial inference

To further measure the impact of frequency bias, we divide the Levy/Holt dataset into two subsets: those *consistent* with the frequency bias (Levy/Holt_{cons}) and those that are *adversarial* to it (Levy/Holt_{adv}). As illustrated in Figure 1, in Levy/Holt_{cons} samples labeled Entail, the predicate in the hypothesis is more frequent than that in the premise. In contrast,

Models	Levy/Holt _{cons}	Levy/Holt _{adv}	Δ
LLaMA-3-8B	74.0	61.74	-12.26
DeepSeek-8B	73.51	64.99	-8.52
Mistral-7B	65.31	57.23	-8.08
LLaMA-3-70B	84.25	70.55	-13.7
LLaMA-3-8B _{EG}	85.2	62.5	-22.7
DeepSeek-8B _{EG}	80.8	62.18	-18.62
Mistral-7B _{EG}	83.61	58.79	-24.82
LLaMA-3-70B _{EG}	85.25	69.67	-15.58

Table 4: AUC scores on the frequency-consistent and frequency-adversarial Levy/Holt.

Levy/Holt_{adv} contains cases, where the premise is more frequent than the hypothesis.

We evaluate model performance separately on Levy/Holt_{cons} and Levy/Holt_{adv}, and report the Area Under the Curve (AUC) scores in Table 4. Results show a substantial drop in AUC scores on Levy/Holt_{adv} for both standard and fine-tuned LLMs. This performance gaps on Levy/Holt_{cons} and Levy/Holt_{adv} suggests that LLMs rely on frequency bias as a shortcut, performing well on reasoning from low-frequency to high-frequency statements but struggling when this pattern is reversed. Compared to standard LLMs, EG-tuned LLMs exhibit a more substantial performance gaps, indicating that training on EGs reinforces their reliance on the frequency bias in datasets. We further fine-tune LLMs on additional NLI datasets and observe consistent findings, as shown in Appendix D.

These results highlight two key findings: (1) LLMs perform well on bias-consistent cases but struggle with adversarial ones, indicating that they exploit frequency bias as a proxy for inference. (2) After fine-tuned on NLI datasets, LLMs exhibit increased reliance on frequency bias. This suggests that fine-tuning process encourages learning frequency-based patterns from these datasets, which reinforces inferences from low-frequency to high-frequency statements while diminishing the ability to reason in the opposite direction.

4.4 Finding 4: Frequency bias is a proxy for gradient of semantic generalization

To further investigate the relationship between predicate frequency and entailment relation, we analyze the frequency of **hyponym-hypernym pairs**³ extracted from WordNet (Miller, 1994). These pairs represent a specific form of upward semantic entailment, namely generalization, where a more specific

³Unlike Mckenna et al. (2023b), we focus on *verb* pairs to examine generalization and specificity, as verbs often involve more abstract and dynamic semantic shifts than nouns.

	Hyponyms	Hypernyms
WordNet	4.13	12.18

Table 5: Average frequency of Hyponym-Hypernym in WordNet. The results prove that more general concepts (hypernym) have higher frequency.

concept (hyponym) entails its corresponding general one (hypernym). For example, “*whisper*” is a hyponym of “*talk*”, so the statement “*X whisper to Y*” semantically entails “*X talk to Y*”.

Table 5 reports the average frequency of hyponyms and hypernyms separately. Hypernyms occur more frequently than their corresponding hyponyms, indicating that more general concept are more frequent in natural language. This finding suggests that frequency bias may serve as a proxy for the generalization gradient, whereby inferences from lower-frequency to higher-frequency predicates reflect a generalization from specific to more abstract concepts. In NLI datasets, we also observe that when the label is Entail, hypotheses often contain more hypernyms than corresponding premises, as shown in Appendix C. This suggests that most samples in NLI datasets require inference from more specific concepts to more general ones.

These findings offer an explanation for why training LLMs on NLI datasets can serve as a proxy for enhancing inferential capability: LLMs learn frequency biases from datasets during training and these biases align with a generalization gradient that supports entailment from specific to more general concepts. Although LLMs can learn frequency bias as a proxy to enhance their inferential capability, learning this bias limits model robustness in frequency-adversarial settings, as observed in §4.3.

5 Conclusion

In this work, we investigate what LLMs actually learn during the fine-tuning process. First, we identify significant frequency bias in various NLI datasets. Next we prove that LLMs exploit this bias for inference, and that fine-tuning further increases their reliance on such patterns. Finally, we show a strong correlation between frequency bias and a particular variety of entailment that is common in NLI datasets, namely hyponym-to-hypernym generalization. It offers an explanation for why learning these frequency patterns can enhance model inference performance. Our work also reveals that a key limitation of LLMs is their vulnerability to frequency-adversarial inference cases.

Limitations

In this work, our findings suggest that LLMs internalize frequency biases from training data and utilize them as a proxy for inference. However, due to computational constraints, our experiments are limited to a range of smaller LLMs with 8B variants and a single extremely large-scale model, LLaMA-3-70B. This restricts our ability to draw conclusions about extremely large models. In future work, we will explore broader model scales to assess the consistency of these trends.

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A Dataset

A.1 Train set

Entailment Graphs (EGs) (Berant et al., 2010, 2011; Hosseini et al., 2018, 2021) are symbolic graphs to preserve the textual entailment in open-domain corpora. These graphs contain entailment between predicates, formatted as triples consisting of predicate pairs and their typed arguments. Cheng et al. (2025) propose a method to initialize the extracted EGs into inference datasets for training LLMs. The datasets comprise premise–hypothesis pairs, with each hypothesis being counterfactual yet logically entailed by its corresponding premise. Fine-tuning LLMs on this data has been shown to substantially enhance inferential capability while reducing hallucinations (Cheng et al., 2025).

RTE (Dagan et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2019) is a NLI benchmark dataset designed for evaluating models on the task of recognizing textual entailment (RTE). It consists of sentence-level premise–hypothesis pairs collected from various sources, which are collected from various sources such as news articles and information extraction tasks.

MNLI (Williams et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019) is a widely used benchmark for evaluating language models on NLI. It consists of sentence-level premise–hypothesis pairs, with premises drawn from diverse sources and hypotheses manually written. In our experiments, we fine-tune LLMs using the MNLI training split.

A.2 Test set

Levy/Holt (Levy and Dagan, 2016; Holt, 2019) dataset is a widely used for NLI, which comprises premise–hypothesis pairs structured in a specific task format: “Given [premise P], is it true that [hypothesis H]?”. Each P - and H -statement has the property of containing one predicate with two named entity arguments, where the same entities appear in both P and H . The Levy/Holt dataset contains inverse of all entailment pairs. In our experiments, we study the challenging directional subset, where the entailments hold in one direction but not both.

B Prompts Used in Experiments

Prompt templates are widely acknowledged for their significant and sometimes decisive impact on the behavior of LLMs. In our experiments, we categorize the prompt templates into two distinct types

based on their usage: prompt templates for fine-tuning LLMs and prompt templates used during inference.

B.1 prompt template for fine-tuning

We follow the fine-tuning setup of Cheng et al. (2025), adopting the same prompt templates used in prior inference studies (Schmitt and Schütze, 2021; Mckenna et al., 2023a; Cheng et al., 2025), which follow the format outlined below:

If [PREMISE], then [HYPOTHESIS].

To make LLMs better understanding the task, we format it as Boolean questions and include indicator words such as “Question:” and “Answer:”. For each option, we automatically provide explanations for every answer by adding affirmation or negation to the propositions. As a result, the NLI training data is structured as shown in Table 8. We fine-tune our models using these templates.

B.2 prompt template for inference

Following the evaluation settings of prior works (Schmitt and Schütze, 2021; Mckenna et al., 2023a; Cheng et al., 2025), we use the same few-shot examples in our inference prompts for NLI tasks, consisting of two positive and two negative instances. The examples are shown in Table 9.

C Hyponym–Hypernym Pairs in NLI datasets

We analyze the distribution of hyponym–hypernym pairs in the NLI dataset by counting the occurrences of hypernyms and hyponyms in premises and hypotheses. We focus our analysis on the EG and Levy/Holt datasets because their samples contain explicit predicate structures, unlike MNLI and RTE, which are at the sentence level and lack clearly defined predicates. As shown in Table 6, we observe that for instances labeled as Entail, hypernyms appear more frequently in the hypothesis than in the premise. Conversely, for No–Entail instances, hypernyms are more frequent in the premise. These results suggest that hypotheses tend to contain more abstract concepts than premises in positive examples, aligning with the observed frequency bias and reinforcing the findings discussed in §4.4.

	when Label = Entail		when Label = No-Entail	
	Hypernymys	Hyponyms	Hypernymys	Hyponyms
Levy/Holt	92	65	56	101
EG	93	64	31	61

Table 6: Counts of Hypernyms and Hyponyms in hypotheses and premises of Levy/Holt and EGs. We extract all hyponym–hypernym pairs from the data. For samples labeled as Entail, hypotheses tend to contain more hypernyms, indicating a more general statement. In contrast, for No-Entail samples, premises typically include more hypernyms, suggesting that the corresponding hypotheses are more specific or less general.

Models	Levy/Holt _{cons}	Levy/Holt _{adu}	Δ
DeepSeek-R1-8B	73.51	64.99	-8.52
DeepSeek-R1-8B _{EG}	80.8	62.18	-18.62
DeepSeek-R1-8B _{RTE}	73.12	61.74	-11.38
DeepSeek-R1-8B _{MNLI}	74.09	61.85	-12.24
LLaMA-3-8B	74.0	61.74	-12.26
LLaMA-3-8B _{EG}	85.2	62.5	-22.7
LLaMA-3-8B _{RTE}	73.97	57.49	-16.48
LLaMA-3-8B _{MNLI}	72.33	58.91	-13.42

Table 7: AUC scores on the frequency-consistent and frequency-adversarial Levy/Holt.

D Fine-tuned LLMs Performance on Frequency-adversarial Inference

Table 7 presents the performance of LLMs fine-tuned on various NLI datasets, consistently showing that these models struggle with frequency-adversarial inference.

E Computing Costs

We fine-tuned the LLaMA-3-70B model on the EGs dataset using four NVIDIA RTX A6000 GPUs over 21 hours. Fine-tuning on the MNLI dataset required approximately 46 hours. For inference, evaluation on the Levy/Hot datasets takes around 30 minutes.

	Question: If [PREMISE], then [HYPOTHESIS]. Is that true or false? (A) True; (B) false
label= <i>True</i>	(A) True. Yes, it is true. [PREMISE] entails [HYPOTHESIS].
label= <i>False</i>	(B) False. No, it is false. [PREMISE] does not entail [HYPOTHESIS].

Table 8: The table present the prompt template using in our training steps.

Few-shot Examples Instantiated Prompt for Inference Task

If Google bought Youtube, then Google owns Youtube. Is that true or false?
A) True
B) False
Answer: A) True. Owning is a consequence of buying.

If Google owns Youtube, then Google bought Youtube. Is that true or false?
A) True
B) False
Answer: B) False. Owning does not imply buying, the ownership may come from other means.

If John went to the mall, then John drove to the mall. Is that true or false?
A) True
B) False
Answer: B) False. John may have gone to the mall by other means.

If John drove to the mall, then John went to the mall. Is that true or false?
A) True
B) False
Answer: A) true. Driving is a means of going to the mall.

If John F. Kennedy was killed in Dallas, then John F. Kennedy died in Dallas.
Is that true or false?
A) True
B) False
Answer:

Table 9: Example instantiated prompts in Few-shot settings, for the sample “PREMISE: [Google bought Youtube], HYPOTHESIS: [Google owns Youtube]”.