

CIS5300 Milestone 2: Evaluation Metrics and Baselines

Project: Context-Aware Legal Information Retrieval

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1 Introduction

This report describes the evaluation metrics and baseline systems implemented for the legal passage retrieval task. The goal is to retrieve relevant legal passages from a corpus given a natural language query, as part of the LegalBench-RAG benchmark.

2 Evaluation Metrics

We evaluate our retrieval system using four metrics:

Exact Match, Span F1, Recall@10, and nDCG@10.

2.1 Exact Match

Exact Match (EM) measures whether the top retrieved passage exactly matches any gold standard answer (case-insensitive):

$$EM = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } \text{predicted_text} \equiv \text{gold_text} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

The final score is the average EM over all test queries.

2.2 Span F1

Span F1 measures token-level overlap between predicted and gold passages. We compute:

$$\text{Precision} = \frac{|\text{pred_tokens} \cap \text{gold_tokens}|}{|\text{pred_tokens}|} \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Recall} = \frac{|\text{pred_tokens} \cap \text{gold_tokens}|}{|\text{gold_tokens}|} \quad (3)$$

$$F1 = \frac{2 \times \text{Precision} \times \text{Recall}}{\text{Precision} + \text{Recall}} \quad (4)$$

For queries with multiple gold answers, we use the maximum F1 score.

2.3 Recall@K

Recall@K measures the fraction of gold answer passages found in the top-K retrieved passages:

$$\text{Recall@K} = \frac{|\{\text{gold_passages}\} \cap \{\text{top}_k\text{-retrieved}\}|}{|\{\text{gold_passages}\}|} \quad (5)$$

We use K=10 for our evaluation.

2.4 Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain (nDCG@K)

nDCG@K measures ranking quality by considering the position of relevant items:

$$\text{DCG@K} = \sum_{i=1}^K \frac{\text{rel}_i}{\log_2(i+1)} \quad (6)$$

$$\text{IDCG@K} = \sum_{i=1}^{\min(\text{num_relevant}, K)} \frac{1}{\log_2(i+1)} \quad (7)$$

$$\text{nDCG@K} = \frac{\text{DCG@K}}{\text{IDCG@K}} \quad (8)$$

where $\text{rel}_i = 1$ if passage at position i is relevant (matches a gold answer), 0 otherwise.

3 Simple Baseline: TF-IDF Retrieval

3.1 Approach

The simple baseline uses TF-IDF (Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency) with cosine similarity. TF-IDF weights terms by their frequency in a document and inverse frequency across the corpus:

$$\text{TF-IDF}(t, d, D) = \text{TF}(t, d) \times \text{IDF}(t, D) \quad (9)$$

where:

$$\text{TF}(t, d) = \frac{\text{count of } t \text{ in } d}{\text{total terms in } d} \quad (10)$$

$$\text{IDF}(t, D) = \log \frac{|\text{documents in } D|}{|\text{documents containing } t|} \quad (11)$$

We compute cosine similarity between query and passage TF-IDF vectors to rank passages.

3.2 Implementation

- Max features: 5,000
- N-grams: unigrams and bigrams (1-2 word sequences)
- Stopwords: English stopwords removed
- Text preprocessing: lowercasing, whitespace normalization

4 Strong Baseline: BM25 Retrieval

4.1 Approach

BM25 (Best Matching 25) is a probabilistic ranking function that improves upon TF-IDF:

$$\text{BM25}(Q, D) = \sum_{q_i \in Q} \text{IDF}(q_i) \times \frac{f(q_i, D) \times (k_1 + 1)}{f(q_i, D) + k_1 \times (1 - b + b \times \frac{|D|}{\text{avgdl}})} \quad (12)$$

where:

- $f(q_i, D)$: frequency of term q_i in document D
- $|D|$: document length (in words)
- avgdl: average document length in corpus
- $k_1 = 1.5$: term frequency saturation parameter
- $b = 0.75$: length normalization parameter

BM25 addresses limitations of TF-IDF through term frequency saturation and better length normalization.

4.2 Implementation

- Parameters: $k_1 = 1.5$, $b = 0.75$ (standard values)
- Tokenization: NLTK word tokenizer with stopword removal
- Preprocessing: lowercasing, alphanumeric token filtering

5 Experimental Results

5.1 Dataset

We evaluate on the LegalBench-RAG benchmark:

- Test set: ContractNLI subset (977 queries)
- Corpus: Legal contract documents
- Evaluation: First 100 test queries (for initial results)

5.2 Baseline Performance

5.3 Observations

- BM25 outperforms TF-IDF across all metrics: Span F1 (0.2217 vs 0.2009), Recall@10 (0.5267 vs 0.3717), and nDCG@10 (0.4544 vs 0.2757). This confirms that BM25's term frequency saturation and length normalization provide better ranking for passage retrieval.
- Both baselines achieve 0.0000 Exact Match, indicating that exact string matching is rare in this task. This is expected given that retrieved passages are text chunks that may not exactly match the gold answer spans.

Metric	TF-IDF	BM25
Exact Match	0.0000	0.0000
Span F1	0.2009	0.2217
Recall@10	0.3717	0.5267
nDCG@10	0.2757	0.4544

Table 1: Baseline performance on LegalBench-RAG test set (first 100 queries from ContractNLI subset). The corpus consists of 563 passages extracted from legal contract documents.

- BM25 shows a 41.7% relative improvement in Recall@10 over TF-IDF (0.5267 vs 0.3717), demonstrating its effectiveness at retrieving relevant passages in the top-10 results.
- The nDCG@10 scores (0.4544 for BM25, 0.2757 for TF-IDF) indicate that BM25 not only retrieves more relevant passages but also ranks them better, with relevant items appearing earlier in the ranked list.
- Both baselines rely on lexical matching and do not capture semantic relationships, which presents an opportunity for improvement through semantic embeddings or neural retrieval models.

6 Conclusion

We have implemented evaluation metrics (Exact Match, Span F1, Recall@10, nDCG@10) and two baseline retrieval systems (TF-IDF and BM25) for the legal passage retrieval task. On the LegalBench-RAG ContractNLI subset (first 100 queries), BM25 outperforms TF-IDF with a Recall@10 of 0.5267 (vs 0.3717) and nDCG@10 of 0.4544 (vs 0.2757), demonstrating its effectiveness for lexical retrieval. However, both baselines achieve 0.0000 Exact Match, indicating the difficulty of exact string matching in this task. The BM25 baseline serves as a strong starting point for future improvements, which may include semantic embeddings, neural retrieval models, or hybrid approaches combining lexical and semantic matching to further improve retrieval performance.

References

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