

# A PHASE TRANSITION OF ATTENTION COLLAPSE

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## Abstract

In this brief note, we analyze a toy model of scaled dot-product attention in which the logits are conditionally i.i.d. Gaussian, and the softmax inverse-temperature  $\beta$  controls sharpness. By matching a bulk log-sum-exp approximation for  $\log Z_\beta$  with the extreme-value scaling of the maximum logit  $M_N$ , we obtain a critical inverse temperature  $\beta_c(N, \sigma) = \sigma^{-1} \sqrt{2 \log N}$ . Below  $\beta_c$ , the maximum attention weight  $w_{max}$  vanishes as  $N \rightarrow \infty$ , resulting in a *diffuse* phase. Above  $\beta_c$ , attention *condenses* onto  $O(1)$  keys with  $w_{max} = \Theta(1)$ , approaching  $w_{max} \rightarrow 1$  only in the deeper low-temperature limit  $\beta/\beta_c \rightarrow \infty$ . We interpret the Transformer's  $d^{-1/2}$  scaling as preventing trivial collapse at fixed  $\beta$  and connect the phenomenon to classic condensation in random-energy models.

Let us define a toy attention model. Let  $N$  be the sequence length (the number of competing keys). The Transformer head dimension  $d$  is the embedding and key dimension. Lastly, we define inverse temperature  $\beta \geq 0$ , a softmax sharpness. Let the query be a (possibly random) vector  $q \in \mathbb{R}^d$ . Let the keys be  $k_1, \dots, k_N \in \mathbb{R}^d$ . Using this, let us define scaled dot-product logits:

$$U_j := \frac{1}{\sqrt{d}} q^T k_j, \quad j = 1, \dots, N, \quad (1)$$

and define softmax attention weights

$$w_j := \frac{\exp(\beta U_j)}{\sum_{\ell=1}^N \exp(\beta U_\ell)}, \quad \sum_{j=1}^N w_j = 1, \quad w_j \geq 0. \quad (2)$$

With this, let us define the partition function

$$Z_\beta := \sum_{\ell}^N \exp(\beta U_\ell). \quad (3)$$

We wish to examine *attention collapse*. A clean order parameter is the maximum attention weight

$$w_{max} := \max_{j \in [N]} w_j. \quad (4)$$

A *diffuse* or uniform attention would result in the maximum attention weight vanishing as  $N \rightarrow \infty$ . Typically,  $w_{max} \sim 1/N$ . A *collapsed* attention would mean  $w_{max} \rightarrow 1$ ; almost all mass is on one key. We will show a sharp threshold in  $\beta$  separating these regimes. Assume the keys are i.i.d. standard Gaussian  $k_j \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} \mathcal{N}(0, I_d)$  and  $q$  is independent of  $\{k_j\}$ . First, let us condition on  $q$ . Because  $k_j$  is normally distributed,

$$q^T k_j \mid q \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \|q\|^2) \implies U_j \mid q \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2),$$

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Date: January 5, 2026.

These notes supplement a blog post on [aniketdeshpande.com](https://aniketdeshpande.com).

with the variance defined as  $\sigma^2 := \|q\|^2/d$ . Moreover, conditional on  $q$ , the  $U_j$  are i.i.d. Let  $M_N := \max_{j \in [N]} U_j$ . Then, always,

$$\exp(\beta M_N) \leq Z_\beta \leq N \exp(\beta M_N). \quad (5)$$

Taking logarithms, we arrive at

$$\beta M_N \leq \log Z_\beta \leq \beta M_N + \log N.$$

This is simply because the largest term is at most the sum, and the sum is at most  $N$  times the largest term. The phase transition emerges from a competition. In the *bulk regime*, many terms contribute to  $Z_\beta$ . In the *maximum regime*, one extreme term dominates  $Z_\beta$ . Let us compute the expectation of the partition function using the moment

$$\mathbb{E}[Z_\beta] = N \mathbb{E}[\exp(\beta U)] = N \exp\left(\frac{1}{2} \beta^2 \sigma^2\right), \quad U \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2).$$

In the bulk regime,  $Z_\beta$  concentrates around its mean on the log scale, giving the *typical* approximation

$$\log Z_\beta \approx \log N + \frac{1}{2} \beta^2 \sigma^2. \quad (6)$$

For  $N$  i.i.d. Gaussians, the maximum satisfies the classic scale [3]

$$M_N \approx \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N}$$

up to lower-order corrections. A standard bound gives  $\mathbb{E}[M_N] \leq \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N}$ . If the maximum dominates, then

$$\log Z_\beta \approx \beta M_N \approx \beta \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N}.$$

Now, we solve for the critical inverse temperature  $\beta_c$  by matching bulk and maximum approximations. The transition occurs when the bulk and max approximations are of the same order:

$$\log N + \frac{1}{2} \beta^2 \sigma^2 \approx \beta \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N}. \quad (7)$$

We rearrange and find a condition for when the expression vanishes

$$0 \approx \frac{1}{2} \beta^2 \sigma^2 - \beta \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N} + \log N = \frac{1}{2} \sigma^2 \left( \beta - \frac{1}{\sigma} \sqrt{2 \log N} \right)^2.$$

This vanishes at exactly

$$\beta_c(N, \sigma) = \frac{1}{\sigma} \sqrt{2 \log N}. \quad (8)$$

This is the *critical* inverse temperature for softmax condensation over  $N$  Gaussian logits, analogous to the freezing transition in random energy models [2]. Now, let us show that the order parameter jumps from 0 to 1. Pick  $j^* := \arg \max_j U_j$ , so that  $U_{j^*} = M_N$ . Then,

$$w_{\max} = w_{j^*} = \frac{\exp(\beta M_N)}{Z_\beta}. \quad (9)$$

When  $w_{max} \rightarrow 0$ , we are below criticality. We use the bulk approximations  $Z_\beta \approx N \exp^{(\beta^2 \sigma^2)/2}$  and  $M_N \approx \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N}$ :

$$w_{max} \approx \exp \left( \beta \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N} - \log N - \frac{1}{2} \beta^2 \sigma^2 \right). \quad (10)$$

Let us define the term inside the exponential as  $\Phi(\beta)$  and complete the square,

$$\Phi(\beta) = -\frac{1}{2} \sigma^2 \left( \beta - \frac{1}{\sigma} \sqrt{2 \log N} \right)^2 = -\frac{1}{2} \sigma^2 (\beta - \beta_c)^2 \leq 0.$$

If  $\beta = (1 - \delta) \beta_c(N)$  with fixed  $\beta > 0$ , then  $\Phi(\beta) \sim -\delta^2 \log N$  and  $w_{max} \rightarrow 0$  as  $N \rightarrow \infty$ . More precisely, the maximum weight stays vanishingly small compared to 1 and attention remains diffuse. Now, let us consider the regime above criticality. When  $\beta > \beta_c$ , the partition function is no longer controlled by the bulk of  $O(N)$  typical logits, but instead by the extreme tail. So, only the largest few  $U_j$  contribute appreciably to

$$Z_\beta = \sum_{j=1}^N \exp(\beta U_j).$$

Although the top logit  $M_N = \max_j U_j$  is separated from the bulk by a gap of order  $\sqrt{\log N}$ , the gaps between the top few logits are much smaller, so we should not generally expect a deterministic single-winner limit  $w_{max} \rightarrow 1$  and fixed  $\beta/\beta_c > 1$ . Instead, writing  $j^* = \arg \max_j U_j$ , we have the exact identity:

$$w_{max} := w_{j^*} = \frac{\exp(\beta M_N)}{\sum_{j=1}^N \exp(\beta U_j)} = \frac{1}{1 + \sum_{j \neq j^*} \exp(-\beta(M_N - U_j))},$$

and for  $\beta > \beta_c$ , the sum receives non-negligible contributions only from a finite number of near-maximum logits. Hence  $w_{max}$  becomes  $\Theta(1)$  (bounded away from 0) and attention concentrates on the top  $O(1)$  keys. This is the collapsed or *condensed* phase. In the deeper low-temperature limit  $\beta/\beta_c \rightarrow \infty$ , the softmax approaches a hard argmax and  $w_{max} \rightarrow 1$ .

$$w_{max} = \frac{1}{1 + \sum_{j \neq j^*} \exp(-\beta(M_N - U_j))} = \Theta(1), \quad \beta > \beta_c. \quad (11)$$

Thus, the model exhibits an attention collapse transition at the critical inverse temperature  $\beta_c$ . Let us substitute in Transformer variables and explore dependence on  $N$  and  $d$ . Recall that  $\sigma^2 = \|q\|^2/d$ . If  $q$  is typical isotropic with  $\|q\|^2 \approx d$ , then  $\sigma \approx 1$  and

$$\beta_c(N) \approx \sqrt{2 \log N} \quad (12)$$

for a single attention head with Gaussian-like logits. If we *remove* the Transformer scaling and instead use logits  $U_j = q^T k_j$ , then  $\sigma^2 \approx \|q\|^2 \approx d$ , so

$$\beta_c \approx \sqrt{\frac{2 \log N}{d}}.$$

For any fixed  $\beta = O(1)$ , large  $d$  would push far above  $\beta_c$ , resulting in *trivial collapse*. This is why the  $d^{-1/2}$  factor is essential. Finally, in more realistic long-context attention-layer models (with LayerNorm and residual structure and evolving tokens), the critical scaling can shift. For example, the critical

scaling can shift as  $\beta_n \asymp \log n$  in the tractable model studied by [1]. However, the mechanism is the same: a sharp regime change governed by how  $\beta$  compares to the extreme value scale of  $N$  competing logits. If one key has a deterministic advantage  $m$ <sup>1</sup> while the others are  $U_j \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2)$ , then the target weight is

$$w_* = \frac{\exp(\beta m)}{\exp(\beta m) + \sum_{j=2}^N \exp(\beta U_j)}. \quad (13)$$

In the collapsed regime,  $\sum \exp(\beta U_j) \approx \exp(\beta M_N)$ , so

$$w_* \approx \frac{1}{1 + \exp(\beta(M_N - m))}.$$

Successful retrieval occurs when the signal advantage  $m$  is strong enough to outcompete the noise floor. Specifically, the condition is

$$m > \sigma \sqrt{2 \log N}.$$

When this inequality fails, we have *condensation on noise*: the softmax collapses onto a random key from the noise distribution, resulting in hallucination. When the inequality holds, we have *condensation on signal*: the target key with advantage  $m$  captures most of the attention mass, enabling successful retrieval. Alternatively, increasing  $\beta$  can sharpen the separation even when the signal advantage is marginal.

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<sup>1</sup>the target logit =  $m$ .

## References

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