

# BERT: Pre-training of Deep Bidirectional Transformers for Language Understanding

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## Abstract

We introduce a new language representation model called **BERT**, which stands for **Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers**. Unlike recent language representation models (Peters et al., 2018a; Radford et al., 2018), BERT is designed to pre-train deep bidirectional representations from unlabeled text by jointly conditioning on both left and right context in all layers. As a result, the pre-trained BERT model can be fine-tuned with just one additional output layer to create state-of-the-art models for a wide range of tasks, such as question answering and language inference, without substantial task-specific architecture modifications.

BERT is conceptually simple and empirically powerful. It obtains new state-of-the-art results on eleven natural language processing tasks, including pushing the GLUE score to 80.5% (7.7% point absolute improvement), MultiNLI accuracy to 86.7% (4.6% absolute improvement), SQuAD v1.1 question answering Test F1 to 93.2 (1.5 point absolute improvement) and SQuAD v2.0 Test F1 to 83.1 (5.1 point absolute improvement).

## 1 Introduction

Language model pre-training has been shown to be effective for improving many natural language processing tasks (Dai and Le, 2015; Peters et al., 2018a; Radford et al., 2018; Howard and Ruder, 2018). These include sentence-level tasks such as natural language inference (Bowman et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018) and paraphrasing (Dolan and Brockett, 2005), which aim to predict the relationships between sentences by analyzing them holistically, as well as token-level tasks such as named entity recognition and question answering, where models are required to produce fine-grained output at the token level (Tjong Kim Sang and De Meulder, 2003; Rajpurkar et al., 2016).

There are two existing strategies for applying pre-trained language representations to downstream tasks: *feature-based* and *fine-tuning*. The feature-based approach, such as ELMo (Peters et al., 2018a), uses task-specific architectures that include the pre-trained representations as additional features. The fine-tuning approach, such as the Generative Pre-trained Transformer (OpenAI GPT) (Radford et al., 2018), introduces minimal task-specific parameters, and is trained on the downstream tasks by simply fine-tuning *all* pre-trained parameters. The two approaches share the same objective function during pre-training, where they use unidirectional language models to learn general language representations.

We argue that current techniques restrict the power of the pre-trained representations, especially for the fine-tuning approaches. The major limitation is that standard language models are unidirectional, and this limits the choice of architectures that can be used during pre-training. For example, in OpenAI GPT, the authors use a left-to-right architecture, where every token can only attend to previous tokens in the self-attention layers of the Transformer (Vaswani et al., 2017). Such restrictions are sub-optimal for sentence-level tasks, and could be very harmful when applying fine-tuning based approaches to token-level tasks such as question answering, where it is crucial to incorporate context from both directions.

In this paper, we improve the fine-tuning based approaches by proposing BERT: **Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers**. BERT alleviates the previously mentioned unidirectionality constraint by using a “masked language model” (MLM) pre-training objective, inspired by the Cloze task (Taylor, 1953). The masked language model randomly masks some of the tokens from the input, and the objective is to predict the original vocabulary id of the masked

word based only on its context. Unlike left-to-right language model pre-training, the MLM objective enables the representation to fuse the left and the right context, which allows us to pre-train a deep bidirectional Transformer. In addition to the masked language model, we also use a “next sentence prediction” task that jointly pre-trains text-pair representations. The contributions of our paper are as follows:

- We demonstrate the importance of bidirectional pre-training for language representations. Unlike Radford et al. (2018), which uses unidirectional language models for pre-training, BERT uses masked language models to enable pre-trained deep bidirectional representations. This is also in contrast to Peters et al. (2018a), which uses a shallow concatenation of independently trained left-to-right and right-to-left LMs.
- We show that pre-trained representations reduce the need for many heavily-engineered task-specific architectures. BERT is the first fine-tuning based representation model that achieves state-of-the-art performance on a large suite of sentence-level and token-level tasks, outperforming many task-specific architectures.
- BERT advances the state of the art for eleven NLP tasks. The code and pre-trained models are available at <https://github.com/google-research/bert>.

## 2 Related Work

There is a long history of pre-training general language representations, and we briefly review the most widely-used approaches in this section.

### 2.1 Unsupervised Feature-based Approaches

Learning widely applicable representations of words has been an active area of research for decades, including non-neural (Brown et al., 1992; Ando and Zhang, 2005; Blitzer et al., 2006) and neural (Mikolov et al., 2013; Pennington et al., 2014) methods. Pre-trained word embeddings are an integral part of modern NLP systems, offering significant improvements over embeddings learned from scratch (Turian et al., 2010). To pre-train word embedding vectors, left-to-right language modeling objectives have been used (Mnih and Hinton, 2009), as well as objectives to discriminate correct from incorrect words in left and right context (Mikolov et al., 2013).

These approaches have been generalized to coarser granularities, such as sentence embeddings (Kiros et al., 2015; Logeswaran and Lee, 2018) or paragraph embeddings (Le and Mikolov, 2014). To train sentence representations, prior work has used objectives to rank candidate next sentences (Jernite et al., 2017; Logeswaran and Lee, 2018), left-to-right generation of next sentence words given a representation of the previous sentence (Kiros et al., 2015), or denoising auto-encoder derived objectives (Hill et al., 2016).

ELMo and its predecessor (Peters et al., 2017, 2018a) generalize traditional word embedding research along a different dimension. They extract *context-sensitive* features from a left-to-right and a right-to-left language model. The contextual representation of each token is the concatenation of the left-to-right and right-to-left representations. When integrating contextual word embeddings with existing task-specific architectures, ELMo advances the state of the art for several major NLP benchmarks (Peters et al., 2018a) including question answering (Rajpurkar et al., 2016), sentiment analysis (Socher et al., 2013), and named entity recognition (Tjong Kim Sang and De Meulder, 2003). Melamud et al. (2016) proposed learning contextual representations through a task to predict a single word from both left and right context using LSTMs. Similar to ELMo, their model is feature-based and not deeply bidirectional. Fedus et al. (2018) shows that the cloze task can be used to improve the robustness of text generation models.

### 2.2 Unsupervised Fine-tuning Approaches

As with the feature-based approaches, the first works in this direction only pre-trained word embedding parameters from unlabeled text (Collobert and Weston, 2008).

More recently, sentence or document encoders which produce contextual token representations have been pre-trained from unlabeled text and fine-tuned for a supervised downstream task (Dai and Le, 2015; Howard and Ruder, 2018; Radford et al., 2018). The advantage of these approaches is that few parameters need to be learned from scratch. At least partly due to this advantage, OpenAI GPT (Radford et al., 2018) achieved previously state-of-the-art results on many sentence-level tasks from the GLUE benchmark (Wang et al., 2018a). Left-to-right language model-



Figure 1: Overall pre-training and fine-tuning procedures for BERT. Apart from output layers, the same architectures are used in both pre-training and fine-tuning. The same pre-trained model parameters are used to initialize models for different down-stream tasks. During fine-tuning, all parameters are fine-tuned. [CLS] is a special symbol added in front of every input example, and [SEP] is a special separator token (e.g. separating questions/answers).

ing and auto-encoder objectives have been used for pre-training such models (Howard and Ruder, 2018; Radford et al., 2018; Dai and Le, 2015).

### 2.3 Transfer Learning from Supervised Data

There has also been work showing effective transfer from supervised tasks with large datasets, such as natural language inference (Conneau et al., 2017) and machine translation (McCann et al., 2017). Computer vision research has also demonstrated the importance of transfer learning from large pre-trained models, where an effective recipe is to fine-tune models pre-trained with ImageNet (Deng et al., 2009; Yosinski et al., 2014).

## 3 BERT

We introduce BERT and its detailed implementation in this section. There are two steps in our framework: *pre-training* and *fine-tuning*. During pre-training, the model is trained on unlabeled data over different pre-training tasks. For fine-tuning, the BERT model is first initialized with the pre-trained parameters, and all of the parameters are fine-tuned using labeled data from the downstream tasks. Each downstream task has separate fine-tuned models, even though they are initialized with the same pre-trained parameters. The question-answering example in Figure 1 will serve as a running example for this section.

A distinctive feature of BERT is its unified architecture across different tasks. There is mini-

mal difference between the pre-trained architecture and the final downstream architecture.

**Model Architecture** BERT’s model architecture is a multi-layer bidirectional Transformer encoder based on the original implementation described in Vaswani et al. (2017) and released in the `tensorflow/tensor2tensor` library.<sup>1</sup> Because the use of Transformers has become common and our implementation is almost identical to the original, we will omit an exhaustive background description of the model architecture and refer readers to Vaswani et al. (2017) as well as excellent guides such as “The Annotated Transformer.”<sup>2</sup>

In this work, we denote the number of layers (i.e., Transformer blocks) as  $L$ , the hidden size as  $H$ , and the number of self-attention heads as  $A$ .<sup>3</sup> We primarily report results on two model sizes: **BERT<sub>BASE</sub>** ( $L=12$ ,  $H=768$ ,  $A=12$ , Total Parameters=110M) and **BERT<sub>LARGE</sub>** ( $L=24$ ,  $H=1024$ ,  $A=16$ , Total Parameters=340M).

**BERT<sub>BASE</sub>** was chosen to have the same model size as OpenAI GPT for comparison purposes. Critically, however, the BERT Transformer uses bidirectional self-attention, while the GPT Transformer uses constrained self-attention where every token can only attend to context to its left.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup><https://github.com/tensorflow/tensor2tensor>

<sup>2</sup><http://nlp.seas.harvard.edu/2018/04/03/attention.html>

<sup>3</sup>In all cases we set the feed-forward/filter size to be  $4H$ , i.e., 3072 for the  $H = 768$  and 4096 for the  $H = 1024$ .

<sup>4</sup>We note that in the literature the bidirectional Trans-

**Input/Output Representations** To make BERT handle a variety of down-stream tasks, our input representation is able to unambiguously represent both a single sentence and a pair of sentences (e.g.,  $\langle \text{Question, Answer} \rangle$ ) in one token sequence. Throughout this work, a “sentence” can be an arbitrary span of contiguous text, rather than an actual linguistic sentence. A “sequence” refers to the input token sequence to BERT, which may be a single sentence or two sentences packed together.

We use WordPiece embeddings (Wu et al., 2016) with a 30,000 token vocabulary. The first token of every sequence is always a special classification token ( $[\text{CLS}]$ ). The final hidden state corresponding to this token is used as the aggregate sequence representation for classification tasks. Sentence pairs are packed together into a single sequence. We differentiate the sentences in two ways. First, we separate them with a special token ( $[\text{SEP}]$ ). Second, we add a learned embedding to every token indicating whether it belongs to sentence A or sentence B. As shown in Figure 1, we denote input embedding as  $E$ , the final hidden vector of the special  $[\text{CLS}]$  token as  $C \in \mathbb{R}^H$ , and the final hidden vector for the  $i^{\text{th}}$  input token as  $T_i \in \mathbb{R}^H$ .

For a given token, its input representation is constructed by summing the corresponding token, segment, and position embeddings. A visualization of this construction can be seen in Figure 2.

### 3.1 Pre-training BERT

Unlike Peters et al. (2018a) and Radford et al. (2018), we do not use traditional left-to-right or right-to-left language models to pre-train BERT. Instead, we pre-train BERT using two unsupervised tasks, described in this section. This step is presented in the left part of Figure 1.

**Task #1: Masked LM** Intuitively, it is reasonable to believe that a deep bidirectional model is strictly more powerful than either a left-to-right model or the shallow concatenation of a left-to-right and a right-to-left model. Unfortunately, standard conditional language models can only be trained left-to-right *or* right-to-left, since bidirectional conditioning would allow each word to indirectly “see itself”, and the model could trivially predict the target word in a multi-layered context.

former is often referred to as a “Transformer encoder” while the left-context-only version is referred to as a “Transformer decoder” since it can be used for text generation.

In order to train a deep bidirectional representation, we simply mask some percentage of the input tokens at random, and then predict those masked tokens. We refer to this procedure as a “masked LM” (MLM), although it is often referred to as a *Cloze* task in the literature (Taylor, 1953). In this case, the final hidden vectors corresponding to the mask tokens are fed into an output softmax over the vocabulary, as in a standard LM. In all of our experiments, we mask 15% of all WordPiece tokens in each sequence at random. In contrast to denoising auto-encoders (Vincent et al., 2008), we only predict the masked words rather than reconstructing the entire input.

Although this allows us to obtain a bidirectional pre-trained model, a downside is that we are creating a mismatch between pre-training and fine-tuning, since the  $[\text{MASK}]$  token does not appear during fine-tuning. To mitigate this, we do not always replace “masked” words with the actual  $[\text{MASK}]$  token. The training data generator chooses 15% of the token positions at random for prediction. If the  $i$ -th token is chosen, we replace the  $i$ -th token with (1) the  $[\text{MASK}]$  token 80% of the time (2) a random token 10% of the time (3) the unchanged  $i$ -th token 10% of the time. Then,  $T_i$  will be used to predict the original token with cross entropy loss. We compare variations of this procedure in Appendix C.2.

### Task #2: Next Sentence Prediction (NSP)

Many important downstream tasks such as Question Answering (QA) and Natural Language Inference (NLI) are based on understanding the *relationship* between two sentences, which is not directly captured by language modeling. In order to train a model that understands sentence relationships, we pre-train for a binarized *next sentence prediction* task that can be trivially generated from any monolingual corpus. Specifically, when choosing the sentences A and B for each pre-training example, 50% of the time B is the actual next sentence that follows A (labeled as  $\text{IsNext}$ ), and 50% of the time it is a random sentence from the corpus (labeled as  $\text{NotNext}$ ). As we show in Figure 1,  $C$  is used for next sentence prediction (NSP).<sup>5</sup> Despite its simplicity, we demonstrate in Section 5.1 that pre-training towards this task is very beneficial to both QA and NLI.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>The final model achieves 97%-98% accuracy on NSP.

<sup>6</sup>The vector  $C$  is not a meaningful sentence representation without fine-tuning, since it was trained with NSP.





Figure 2: BERT input representation. The input embeddings are the sum of the token embeddings, the segmentation embeddings and the position embeddings.

The NSP task is closely related to representation-learning objectives used in [Jernite et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Logeswaran and Lee \(2018\)](#). However, in prior work, only sentence embeddings are transferred to down-stream tasks, where BERT transfers all parameters to initialize end-task model parameters.

**Pre-training data** The pre-training procedure largely follows the existing literature on language model pre-training. For the pre-training corpus we use the BooksCorpus (800M words) ([Zhu et al., 2015](#)) and English Wikipedia (2,500M words). For Wikipedia we extract only the text passages and ignore lists, tables, and headers. It is critical to use a document-level corpus rather than a shuffled sentence-level corpus such as the Billion Word Benchmark ([Chelba et al., 2013](#)) in order to extract long contiguous sequences.

### 3.2 Fine-tuning BERT

Fine-tuning is straightforward since the self-attention mechanism in the Transformer allows BERT to model many downstream tasks—whether they involve single text or text pairs—by swapping out the appropriate inputs and outputs. For applications involving text pairs, a common pattern is to independently encode text pairs before applying bidirectional cross attention, such as [Parikh et al. \(2016\)](#); [Seo et al. \(2017\)](#). BERT instead uses the self-attention mechanism to unify these two stages, as encoding a concatenated text pair with self-attention effectively includes *bidirectional* cross attention between two sentences.

For each task, we simply plug in the task-specific inputs and outputs into BERT and fine-tune all the parameters end-to-end. At the input, sentence A and sentence B from pre-training are analogous to (1) sentence pairs in paraphrasing, (2) hypothesis-premise pairs in entailment, (3) question-passage pairs in question answering, and

(4) a degenerate text- $\emptyset$  pair in text classification or sequence tagging. At the output, the token representations are fed into an output layer for token-level tasks, such as sequence tagging or question answering, and the  $[CLS]$  representation is fed into an output layer for classification, such as entailment or sentiment analysis.

Compared to pre-training, fine-tuning is relatively inexpensive. All of the results in the paper can be replicated in at most 1 hour on a single Cloud TPU, or a few hours on a GPU, starting from the exact same pre-trained model.<sup>7</sup> We describe the task-specific details in the corresponding subsections of Section 4. More details can be found in Appendix A.5.

## 4 Experiments

In this section, we present BERT fine-tuning results on 11 NLP tasks.

### 4.1 GLUE

The General Language Understanding Evaluation (GLUE) benchmark ([Wang et al., 2018a](#)) is a collection of diverse natural language understanding tasks. Detailed descriptions of GLUE datasets are included in Appendix B.1.

To fine-tune on GLUE, we represent the input sequence (for single sentence or sentence pairs) as described in Section 3, and use the final hidden vector  $C \in \mathbb{R}^H$  corresponding to the first input token ( $[CLS]$ ) as the aggregate representation. The only new parameters introduced during fine-tuning are classification layer weights  $W \in \mathbb{R}^{K \times H}$ , where  $K$  is the number of labels. We compute a standard classification loss with  $C$  and  $W$ , i.e.,  $\log(\text{softmax}(CW^T))$ .

<sup>7</sup>For example, the BERT SQuAD model can be trained in around 30 minutes on a single Cloud TPU to achieve a Dev F1 score of 91.0%.

<sup>8</sup>See (10) in <https://gluebenchmark.com/faq>.