
Exploring Zero-Shot Tabular Chain-of-Thought Common Sense Reasoning

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

Pretrained Large Language Models (LLMs) are models which estimate probability distributions over text. In recent years, they have shown remarkable success on a wide range of natural language processing tasks. Regarded as excellent few-shot reasoners when provided with carefully engineered task-specific exemplars and decent zero-shot reasoners when provided with a clear description of the task, LLMs derive their success in part from these reasoning abilities. With growing interest in both large language models and natural language processing, much research has been dedicated to the design of optimal methods of conditioning—referred to as prompting—LLMs.

Although large language models excel at single-step reasoning tasks, they demonstrate considerably lower accuracy with respect to complex reasoning tasks which require carefully structured step-by-step reasoning. To address this shortcoming, Wei et al. proposed in 2022 a *chain-of-thought* prompting method whereby the LLM is provided with exemplars of question/answer pairs in which answers each demonstrate the series of intermediate reasoning steps employed to solve the question [Wei2022]. With these exemplars, the language model produces a consecutive reasoning sequence, which ends with a final answer [Wei2022]. Contrasted with standard few-shot prompting, whereby the provided answers lack reasoning steps, few-shot chain-of-thought prompting demonstrates higher accuracy on a variety of arithmetic, common sense, and symbolic reasoning tasks [Wei2022].

Following the work of Wei et al., Wang et al. proposed a slightly modified version of the few-shot chain-of-thought prompting method whereby they sample a diverse set of reasoning paths produced by the large language model [Wang2022]. From there, they segregate chain-of-thought reasoning sequences from their associated final answers and select the most consistent answer within the final answer set [Wang2022]. This *self-consistency* technique has shown distinctively higher accuracy on both arithmetic and common sense reasoning tasks when compared to the original work of Wei et al. [Wang2022].

In an effort to ameliorate the easy-to-hard generalizability of the few-shot chain-of-thought methods put forth by Wei et al. and Wang et al., Zhou et al. proposed a *least-to-most* prompting technique [Zhou2022]. A term borrowed from educational psychology, least-to-most prompting demonstrates to LLMs an approach to solving complex reasoning tasks by decomposing them into series of simpler subtasks, then solving them sequentially [Zhou2022]. When provided with these rigid exemplar templates, LLMs exhibit a net increase in accuracy on compositional generalization tasks when compared with both few-shot and few-shot chain-of-thought prompting methods [Zhou2022].

With zero-shot prompting methods left largely unexplored, Kojima et al. were the first to design a task-agnostic chain-of-thought prompting method they coined Zero-shot-CoT [Kojima2022]. At the core of their method is the simple phrase *Let’s think step by step* [Kojima2022]. When appended to the input question, the phrase elicits a reasoning sequence much like its few-shot counterpart, despite the language model not having been exposed to such a reasoning process [Kojima2022]. The versatile Zero-shot-CoT demonstrates much higher accuracy than standard zero-shot prompting on arithmetic, symbolic, and other reasoning tasks [Kojima2022]. On certain arithmetic tasks, the accuracy of Zero-shot-CoT even surpasses that of standard few-shot prompting [Kojima2022].

Following the same avenue as Kojima et al., Jin and Lu proposed Tab-CoT: a zero-shot tabular chain-of-thought prompting method [Jin2023]. As in Zero-shot-CoT, Tab-CoT makes use of a task-agnostic prompt to elicit a reasoning sequence [Jin2023]. Eliciting highly structured, table-embedded reasoning sequences, Tab-CoT stems from the discovery that state-of-the-art large language models have a predisposition for reasoning over tabular structured data [Jin2023]. This novel prompt leads to high accuracies on arithmetic, symbolic, and other reasoning tasks [Jin2023].

With carefully designed prompts which elicit structured step-by-step reasoning, LLMs are able to succeed on a variety of natural language processing tasks. Common to all conditioning methods aforementioned, however, is the relatively low accuracy exhibited on common sense reasoning tasks, this being especially true of zero-shot methods. This deficiency in common sense reasoning may partially be attributed to the flexible reasoning paths often needed to solve questions in such a category. Admittedly, common sense reasoning tasks may not be structured in such a way to promote easy decomposition into simpler subquestions.

With this in mind, we extend the work of Jin and Lu by exploring a novel way of conditioning LLMs which allows for slightly more flexibility in the reasoning sequence while maintaining a sensible level of structure. We coin this method CS-Tab-CoT.

2 CS-Tab-CoT

A zero-shot tabular chain-of-thought method specifically designed for common sense reasoning, CS-Tab-CoT is at its core an adaptable prompt template designed to elicit reasoning sequences consistent with specific forms of logical inference. The template is formatted as follows, where the underscores are replaced with the form of inference wished to be used:

|_____ reasoning process|result|

With this template, we explored thirteen forms of logical inference: ten of which were designed to elicit correct reasoning structures (those listed in the first two columns below), and three of which were designed to elicit incorrect reasoning structures (those listed in the last column below).

- | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------|
| • logical | • analogical | • illogical |
| • deductive | • critical | |
| • inductive | • counter-factual | • delusional |
| • abductive | • cause-for-effect | |
| • inferential | • creative | • erroneous |

As with both Zero-shot-CoT and Tab-CoT methods, CS-Tab-CoT prompts the LLM twice so as to extract both chain-of-thought reasoning and answer. Illustrated in Figure 1, we begin by appending the template, which incorporates the chosen form of inference, to the common sense question we wish the LLM to answer. Together, the question/template pair is fed to the LLM so as to extract the tabular chain-of-thought reasoning. The question/template pair is then concatenated with the reasoning sequence, then fed to the LLM along with the desired answer format so as to extract the answer.

As a consequence of the two-step prompting method, the concatenated prompt fed to the language model in the answer extraction step is in fact a *self-augmented* prompt. It is the self-augmented quality of CS-Tab-CoT that enables the extraction of such a refined answer.

To estimate the capabilities of LLMs when conditioned with the CS-Tab-CoT method, we consider samples of 100 questions from two common sense datasets: CommonSenseQA (a collection

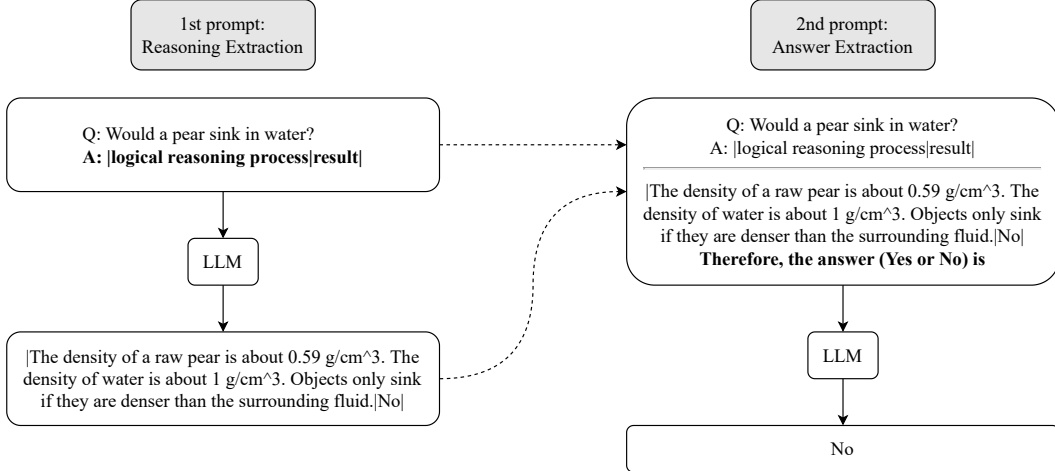


Figure 1: Pipeline of CS-Tab-CoT as described in section 2.

of multiple-choice questions) [Talmor2019] and StrategyQA (a collection of yes-no questions) [Geva2021]. We evaluate CS-Tab-CoT through Instruct-GPT3 (text-davinci-002) [Ouyang2022]. Unique in their **forms** of logical inference, we compare the achieved accuracies of each templated prompt with those of their counterparts in order to determine the interrelation of the CS-Tab-CoT prompts. As well, we compare to the accuracies of the best CS-Tab-CoT prompts to those of standard, Zero-shot-CoT, and Tab-CoT methods. For a fair comparison, we evaluate each method with the same model and question samples.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 CS-Tab-CoT Accuracies

Presented in Table 1 are the accuracies of CS-Tab-CoT, arranged by templated prompt.

As displayed in the “CommonSenseQA” column, the *inductive* reasoning prompt achieved the highest accuracy, at sixty-five percent. This result is consistent with our intuition, since inductive reasoning is a method well suited to common sense reasoning, in which a general principle is derived from a set of observations. With these being multiple-choice questions with 4 choices on average, the level of accuracy is respectable.

Displayed in the “StrategyQA” column, the *erroneous* reasoning prompt achieved the highest accuracy, at fifty-one percent. This result is unexpected, since erroneous reasoning is a method in which an answer is derived from error. By using such a method, one would expect the LLM to output an incorrect answer more often than not. Furthermore, with these being yes-no questions, the fact that the erroneous reasoning prompt was the only one that achieved an accuracy beyond fifty percent is shocking.

Displayed in the “Avg” column, in which we take the average of the accuracies of CommonSenseQA and StrategyQA for each prompt, the *logical* reasoning process appears to be the best overall prompt, with an average of 54 percent. Since logical reasoning is a process in which a conclusion is drawn from a set of premises by way of careful reasoning, this, as with the first presented result, is consistent with our intuition.

Comparing the *logical* reasoning prompt with the *illogical* reasoning prompt, we notice that the two are not complements of one another. Since these are antonyms, we had hypothesized that their accuracies would sum to one hundred. More generally, we had expected a clear division in the accuracies of the prompts designed to elicit correct responses versus those designed to elicit incorrect ones; a property not exhibited by the model. In actuality, the three prompts designed to elicit incorrect responses, namely the *illogical*, *delusional*, and *erroneous* reasoning prompts, have much higher accuracies than previously envisioned.

Table 1: CS-Tab-CoT accuracies on common sense reasoning tasks

CS-Tab-CoT Prompt	CommonSenseQA	StrategyQA	Avg
logical reasoning process result	61.0	47.0	54.0
deductive reasoning process result	59.0	47.0	53.0
inductive reasoning process result	65.0	36.0	50.5
abductive reasoning process result	62.0	43.0	52.5
inferential reasoning process result	61.0	39.0	50.0
analogical reasoning process result	59.0	38.0	48.5
critical reasoning process result	59.0	24.0	41.5
counter-factual reasoning process result	56.0	48.0	52.0
cause-for-effect reasoning process result	63.0	17.0	40.0
creative reasoning process result	61.0	35.0	48.0
illogical reasoning process result	52.0	38.0	45.0
delusional reasoning process result	53.0	37.0	45.0
erroneous reasoning process result	53.0	51.0	52.0

Considering Table 1 in its entirety, we note that the accuracy levels of each prompt is affected by the specific dataset on which the prompt was evaluated; a quality most prominent in the *cause-for-effect* reasoning prompt, with which the model achieved an accuracy of 63 percent on the CommonSenseQA dataset and an accuracy of 17 percent on the StrategyQA dataset. Together with the fact that these CS-Tab-CoT prompts each vary in accuracy in relation to the dataset on which the prompt was evaluated, the fact that there is no single prompt which exhibits best accuracies over both datasets implies that specific forms of logical inferences may be better suited to specific types of common sense reasoning tasks.

3.2 Cross Comparison of Accuracies

Presented in Table 2 are the accuracies of standard, Zero-shot-CoT, and Tab-CoT, versus best-CS-Tab-CoT prompting methods. As described in Section 3.1, the *inductive*, *erroneous*, and *logical* reasoning processes achieved the highest accuracies for the CommonSenseQA dataset, the StrategyQA dataset, and the average between the two preceding datasets, respectively. These three reasoning processes constitute best-CS-Tab-CoT prompting methods, and are displayed in their respective subtables of Table 2.

Inspecting the first subtable, we note that the best-performing CS-Tab-CoT prompt for the CommonSenseQA dataset, namely the *inductive* reasoning prompt, has an accuracy equivalent to that of Tab-CoT, and an accuracy lower than those of Zero-shot-CoT and standard prompting. This demonstrates that, with respect to the CommonSenseQA dataset, tabular inductive reasoning has as much value as step-by-step tabular reasoning, and less value than both unrestrictive chain-of-thought reasoning and no explicit reasoning.

Inspecting the second subtable, we note that the best-performing CS-Tab-CoT prompt for the StrategyQA dataset, namely the *erroneous* reasoning prompt, has an accuracy which surpasses those of Tab-CoT, Zero-shot-CoT, and standard prompting. This demonstrates that, with respect to the StrategyQA dataset, tabular erroneous reasoning has greater value than step-by-step tabular reasoning, unrestrictive chain-of-thought reasoning, and no explicit reasoning. This finding is inconsistent with our intuition, as erroneous reasoning is a form of reasoning which is not typically expected to lead to positive results.

Inspecting the third subtable, we note that the best-performing CS-Tab-CoT prompt when considering the average of accuracies over the CommonSenseQA and StrategyQA datasets, namely the *logical* reasoning prompt, has an accuracy which is lower than those of Tab-CoT, Zero-shot-CoT, and standard prompting. This demonstrates that, with respect to the the average of CommonSenseQA and StrategyQA dataset accuracies, tabular logical reasoning has lesser value than step-by-step tabular reasoning, unrestrictive chain-of-thought reasoning, and no explicit reasoning.

Table 2: Accuracies of four prompting methods compared to best-accuracies of CS-Tab-CoT

Method	Prompt	CommonSenseQA
Standard Prompting	-	67.0
CoT	Let’s think step by step	68.0
Tab-CoT	step subquestion process result	65.0
CS-Tab-CoT	inductive reasoning process result	65.0
Method	Prompt	StrategyQA
Standard Prompting	-	43.0
CoT	Let’s think step by step	44.0
Tab-CoT	step subquestion process result	50.0
CS-Tab-CoT	erroneous reasoning process result	51.0
Method	Prompt	Avg
Standard Prompting	-	55.0
CoT	Let’s think step by step	56.0
Tab-CoT	step subquestion process result	57.5
CS-Tab-CoT	logical reasoning process result	54.0

Though there are differences in accuracy within each subtable of Table 2, the differences are minimal. Specifically, the way in which we prompt the language model has little impact on accuracy when it comes to common sense reasoning tasks.

Considering every conditioning method and dataset, StrategyQA appears to be the most difficult dataset on which to do well—an attribute common to every explored method. By manually scrutinizing a subset of question/answer pairs from the dataset, we discovered many questions which required multi-step reasoning in addition to a global perspective. With large language models being statistical models which estimate probability distributions over text, if a question consists of concepts which are distantly related and would by extension require many reasoning steps in order to potentially link these concepts, the model has a low chance of success. Consider the following question/answer pair, taken from StrategyQA [Geva2021]:

Q: Has Burger King contributed to a decrease in need for snowshoes?
A: Yes

To correctly answer this question, the LLM must have some representation of the concepts ‘Burger King’ and ‘snowshoes’, which are likely distantly related. From there, model must make use of multi-step reasoning, along with a comprehensive view of the world to arrive at a reasoning path approximately structured like so:

Burger King serves beef. Beef farming is associated with increased global temperatures and decreased snowfall. Snowshoes are used in the snow. If there is a decrease in snowfall then there is a decrease in need for snowshoes. Therefore, Burger King has contributed to a decrease in need for snowshoes.

This type of reasoning structure is involved, and difficult to achieve. If most questions from the StrategyQA dataset require a similar number of steps and similar level of global perspective as the Burger King question, then we expected the LLM to exhibit poor accuracy regardless of the prompting method, given the method’s limited impact on common sense reasoning—a result observed in Table 1. Although the prompting method has limited impact on this class of reasoning, if LLMs exhibit poor accuracy when attempting to reason correctly, then an erroneous reasoning process might achieve higher accuracy—a result observed in Tables 1 and 2.

4 Conclusion and Future Work

Overall, in the context of common sense reasoning, the model minimally responds to instructions on chain-of-thought reasoning, whether that be within the CS-Tab-CoT prompts, or across prompting methods. This implies that, in the context of common sense reasoning, the model doesn't have a fixed reasoning pattern and largely ignores the chain-of-thought prompt.

Future work should consider the unabridged CommonSenseQA and StrategyQA datasets. As well, some extra datasets from <https://commonsense.run/datasets/> in order to gain a better overview/estimate of true common sense reasoning abilities. Research suggests that common sense reasoning... [Kejriwal2022].

Test on more LLMs, especially more recent ones.

Disclosure

The research presented in this paper has been conducted solely for the purpose of the Advanced Machine Learning course project.

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