

City, University of London MSc in Artificial Intelligence Project Report Year 2023/2024

# Enhancing Knowledge Grounding in Retrieval-Augmented Language Models: An Empirical Study

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Signed: Martin Fixman

#### ${f Abstract}$

This is an abstract

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1 Introduction and Objectives

#### 2 Context

This research is the latest on a long line of academic articles on the topics of retrievalaugmented generation, counterparametric and contextual data, and how to enhance knowledge on large language models.

This section presents a short summary of some of the articles that were useful in researching this topic.

#### 2.1 Foundational Papers on Large Language Models

- "Language models are unsupervised multitask learners" (Radford et al. 2019).
  - The foundational paper for GPT2.
- "Exploring the Limits of Transfer Learning with a Unified Text-to-Text Transformer" (Raffel et al. 2020).
  - The foundational paper for T5.
- "Language Models are Few-shot Learners" (Brown et al. 2020).
  - Introduces "in-context learning".
- "Prompt programming for large language models: Beyond the few-shot paradigm" (Reynolds & McDonell 2021).
  - Improves the previous paper.

#### 2.2 Papers working with RAG and contextual data

- "Retrieval-Augmented Generation for Knowledge-Intensive NLP Tasks" (Lewis et al. 2020).
  - Foundational paper for RAG.
- "Self-RAG: Learning to Retrieve, Generate, and Critique through Self-Reflection" (Asai et al. 2023).
  - Interesting RAG system.
- "Can Retriever-Augmented Language Models Reason? The Blame Game Between the Retriever and the Language Model" (Ghader et al. 2023).
  - Nice evaluation of RAG models.

#### 2.3 Retrieval-Augmented Language Models

• "Shall We Pretrain Autoregressive Language Models with Retrieval? A Comprehensive Study" (Wang et al. 2023).

<sup>\*</sup>This entire section is in progress — short summaries of the named papers will come soon.

- Reproduces and pretraines RETRO.
- "Atlas: Few-shot Learning with Retrieval Augmented Language Models" (Izacard et al. 2022).
  - Introduces ATLAS.
- "Improving language models by retrieving from trillions of tokens" (Borgeaud et al. 2022).
- "RAGGED: Towards Informed Design of Retrieval Augmented Generation Systems" (Hsia et al. 2024).
  - Analyses results of these systems; compares Llama to Flan-T5.

# 2.4 On disentangling parametric and context-augmented counterparametric knowledge

- "DISCO: Distilling Counterfactuals with Large Language Models" (Chen et al. 2023).
  - Does similar analysis with counterfactuals to this thesis

.

- "DisentQA: Disentangling Parametric and Contextual Knowledge with Counterfactual Question Answering" (Neeman et al. 2022).
  - Also does a similar analysis to this thesis.
- "Characterizing Mechanisms for Factual Recall in Language Models" (Yu et al. 2023).
  - Very simple analysis, but tries to understand WHERE in the model the contextual answers come from.
- "Can We Edit Factual Knowledge by In-Context Learning?" (Zheng et al. 2023).
- "Learning the Difference that Makes a Difference with Counterfactually-Augmented Data" (Kaushik et al. 2020).

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#### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Models and Resources Used

#### • Reader Models

- Llama-8B.
- Llama-70B.
- Flan-T5-XL.
- Flan-T5-XXL.
- Atlas?

#### • Questions

- Our own dataset, shown in Appendix A.
- Maybe add Natural Questions, HotpotQA, and/or BioASQ as in RAGGED (Hsia et al. 2024).

#### 3.2 Preprocessing and Inference Methodology

#### 3.2.1 Source Data Preparation

Our source data is prepared by extending the ideas presented by Yu et al.. Instead of using one simple question, our approach consists of separating this data into 7 categories, where each category has a set of base questions and another set of objects that are paired together and presented to our models.

This work contains 7 categories in the configuration shown by Table 1, for a total of 3840 questions. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

Category	Questions	Objects	Total
Person	14	47	658
City	14	60	840
Principle	10	30	300
Element	10	35	350
Book	10	45	450
Painting	14	39	546
Historical Event	6	56	336
Total	68	312	3840

**Table 1:** The amount of questions for each category. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix A. This is still a work in progress and I expect to add more questions.

We enhance the zero-shot learning prompt used by Brown et al. by using the prompt format example format presented Jiang et al. for calibrating the T5 language model by adding both the question and the first part of the answer.

#### 3.2.2 Prompting

There is plenty of research that suggests that for zero-shot problems (Brown et al. 2020, Reynolds & McDonell 2021), it's convenient to create a minimal prompt (Jiang et al. 2021, Yu et al. 2023). This is helpful when later calculating the perplexity of the answers, as it tends to bias for short answers without any extra information that might change the individual probabilities of each token.

Examples of the prompting format explained in Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 can be found in Table 2. For later queries, this is enhanced with context as in Table 3.

Base Question	Object	Final Question
		Q: What is the date of birth of Che Guevara? A: The date of birth of Che Guevara is
What is the date of birth of {person}?  The date of birth of {person} is	Che Guevara	Q: What is the date of birth of Confucius? A: The date of birth of Confucius is Q: In what city was Che Guevara born?
In what city was {person} born?	Confucius	A: Che Guevara was born in
$\{person\}$ was born in What country is $\{city\}$ in?	Cairo	Q: In what city was Confucius born? A: Confucius was born in
$\{\mathit{city}\}$ is in		Q: What country is Cairo in? A: Cairo is in
		Q: What country is Mumbai in? A: Mumbai is in

**Table 2:** Some examples of the base-question and object generation that are fed to the models for finding parametric answers.

#### 3.2.3 Generating and scoring parametric answers

We query each of the models listed in Section 3.1 with the data from the previous subsubsections.

To ensure results are simple to interpret and not affected by randomness, we follow the example of Hsia et. al (Hsia et al. 2024) and use greedy decoding to find the answer. While beam search with a short beam width tends to produce more accurate results for long answers (Sutskever et al. 2014, Wu et al. 2016) and there are many other sampling methods that produce better results (Holtzman et al. 2020), this is likely to not have an effect on experiments that result in shorter answers (Raffel et al. 2020).

The negative log-likelihood of an answer x is calculated in base of the conditional probability of generating each token given the prior tokens. We can use this value to calculate the perplexity, which measures the level of "surprise" of a particular answer.

$$NLL(x_{1},...,x_{N}|Q) = -\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \log P(x_{i} | Q, x_{i-1},...,x_{1})$$

$$PPL(x_{1},...,x_{N}|Q) = e^{NLL(x_{1},...,x_{N}|Q)}$$
(1)

		Tokens		
		Parametric $p$	Counterparametric $\overline{p}$	
Context	$\mathop{\rm Empty}_{Q}$	$\mathrm{PPL}\left(p_1,\ldots,p_N\mid Q\right)$	$\mathrm{PPL}\left(\overline{p}_{1},\ldots,\overline{p}_{ar{N}}\mid Q ight)$	
	$\begin{array}{c} \text{Counterparametric} \\ W \end{array}$	$\mathrm{PPL}\left(p_{1},\ldots,p_{N}\mid W ight)$	$\mathrm{PPL}\left(\overline{p}_{1},\ldots,\overline{p}_{ar{N}}\mid W ight)$	

Figure 1: Four different perplexity values: one for each set of tokens, and one for each query context..

We can ensure that the probabilities are calculated based on the intended tokens rather than the "most probable" generated ones by using teacher forcing (Lamb et al. 2016).

#### 3.2.4 Shuffling to generate counterparametric answers

Previous work related to finding per token probabilities of answers in large language models focus on either a pre-existing list of questions or on a single question format (Yu et al. 2023). This approach does not work for our use case for three reasons.

- 1. Having 68 different types of questions, rather than just 1, makes finding counterfactual answers technically challenging.
- 2. Our focus is not on finding *counterfactual* answers, but *counterparametric* ones. We do not care about correctness; we care about answers not being parametric.
- 3. Since we are measuring perplexity of these answers, we focus on answers that are generated by the same base question and the same model. This way we ensure that the format of the answer is the same.

We propose a novel way of generating counterparametric answers while focusing on these three points: rather than generating new answers for each question, counterfactual answers are randomly sampled from the parametric answers corresponding to the same base question. An example of this approach can be seen in Table 3.

#### 3.2.5 Counterparametric and contextual perplexity scores

This works extends the approach of analysing answers found in [citation needed] and explained in Section 3.2.3 by also calculating the perplexity of *alternative* answers to each question.

That is, we take the result of applying each model to both the answer with and without counterparametric context, and we calculate the perplexity scores of getting both the parametric and counterparametric answer to each one of these. This produces four different scores which are detailed in Figure 1: one for each answer using either empty and counterparametric context.

<sup>\*</sup>I am finding it hard to explain this subsubsection. Maybe I should add pseudocode here.

Base Question	Parametric Answer	Counterparametric Answer	Question with counter- parametric context
What is the date of birth of Che Guevara?	June 14, 1928	June 21, 1947	Context: [the date of birth of Che Guevara is June 21, 1947]. Q: What is the date of birth of Che Guevara? A: The date of birth of Che Guevara is
What is the date of birth of Ibn al-Haytham?	965 AD	June 14, 1928	Context: [the date of birth of Ibn al-Haytham is June 14, 1928]. Q: What is the date of birth of Ibn al-Haytham? A: The date of birth of Ibn al-Haytham is
What is the date of birth of Boyan Slat?	27 January 1994	February 23, 1868	Context: [the date of birth of Boyan Slat is February 23, 1868]. Q: What is the date of birth of Boyan Slat? A: The date of birth of Boyan Slat is
What is the date of birth of W.E.B Du Bois?	February 23, 1868	June 14, 1928	Context: [the date of birth of W.E.B Du Bois is June 14, 1928]. Q: What is the date of birth of W.E.B Du Bois? A: The date of birth of W.E.B Du Bois is
What is the date of birth of Stephen Hawking?	January 8, 1942	965 AD	Context: [the date of birth of Stephen Hawking is 965 AD]. Q: What is the date of birth of Stephen Hawking? A: The date of birth of Stephen Hawking is
What is the date of birth of Shirin Ebadi?	June 21, 1947	June 14, 1928	Context: [the date of birth of Shirin Ebadi is June 14, 1928]. Q: What is the date of birth of Shirin Ebadi? A: The date of birth of Shirin Ebadi is

**Table 3:** Example of the sampling done to produce counterparametric answers. Counterparametric answers are generated by sampling a random answer from the parametric answers from the same base questions; to ensure that no parametric and counterparametric pair are identical, we only sample between different parametric answers. Note that the same parametric answer can appear several times as a counterparametric in different questions.

By definition, the tokens of the parametric answer  $p_1, \ldots, p_N$  are the ones corresponding to the lowest perplexity answer for the query without any context. This is not the case for the tokens of the counterparametric answer  $\bar{p}_1, \ldots, \bar{p}_{\bar{N}}$ , which produces the inequality in Equation (2).

$$PPL(p_1, \dots, p_N \mid Q) \le PPL(\bar{p}_1, \dots, \bar{p}_{\bar{N}} \mid Q)$$
(2)

Finding the result of the inequality for the queries with the counterparametric context W is one of the main goals of this research. In fact, we know that if the perplexity of the parametric tokens  $p_1, \ldots, p_N$  is greater than the tokens for the counterparametric answer  $\bar{p}_1, \ldots, \bar{p}_{\bar{N}}$  then the answer was memorised. Otherwise, the answer was generated in-context.

Answer Source = 
$$\begin{cases} \text{Memory} & \text{if } P(p_1, \dots, p_N \mid W) < P(\overline{p}_1, \dots, \overline{p}_{\bar{N}} \mid W) \\ \text{Context} & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$
(3)

#### 3.2.6 Comparing the Final Answers

There is a third case that's not present in Equations (2) and (3): the case where the answer comes from neither the model's memory nor the query's context, but that instead the model generates a third answer combining both.

There are several cases where this can happen. The most interesting are explained in ??, while the full results can be found in Appendix B.

In particular, we categorise the final answers in one of three groups depending on whether the answer with minimal perplexity on the query with the counterfactual context W is equal to the parametric answer, to the counterparametric answer, or to something else.

Group = 
$$\begin{cases} \text{Parametric} & \text{if } (\nexists x_1, \dots, x_N) \text{ PPL}(x_1, \dots, x_N \mid W) < A \\ \text{Counterparametric} & \text{if } (\nexists x_1, \dots, x_N) \text{ PPL}(x_1, \dots, x_N \mid W) < B \end{cases}$$
(4)
$$\text{Other} & \text{otherwise}$$

where

$$A = PPL(p_1, ..., p_N \mid W)$$
  
$$B = PPL(\overline{p}_1, ..., \overline{p}_{\overline{N}} \mid W)$$

There is a correlation between Equation (4) and Equation (3): an answer in the Parametric group will come from the model's memory, and an answer in the Counterparametric group will come from the query's (counterparametric) context.

#### 4 Results

Some results I want to show.

- Larger models tend to prefer parametric knowledge over contextual knowledge.
  - This is the case in "Characterizing Mechanisms for Factual Recall in Language Models" (Yu et al. 2023), but I'm proving this on a larger set of question.
  - This is using exact match. Maybe attempting Unigram F<sub>1</sub> would produce interesting results (Petroni et al. 2021).
- How this compares between Decoder-only models, Seq2Seq models, and Retrieval-Augmented Language Models.
- How does the perplexity between parametric answers and contextual answers compare within the same model.
  - From the perplexity alone, can we predict whether an answer came from the model's memory or from the context?
  - It might be worth experimenting this with factual answers in the context, to simulate a RAG-difference detector.
- Is there any correlation between the perplexity of the parametric and contextual answer without any context and which one will be chosen when adding context?
  - This one is interesting, but I'm not sure we'll get significative results.
- Interesting "Other" results.
- Anything else?

## 5 Discussion

6 Evaluations, Reflections, and Conclusions

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# **Appendices**

#### A Questions and objects used to form the queries

```
What is the date of birth of {person}? The date of birth of {person} is
In what city was {person} born? {person} was born in
What is the date of death of {person}? The date of death of {person} is
What is the date of death of {person}? The primary profession of {person} is
What is the primary profession of {person}? The primary profession of {person} is
What is the primary profession of {person}? The primary profession of {person} is
What is the primary profession of {person}? The primary profession of {person} is
What educational institution did {person} strend?
What country is {city} in? {city} is in
What 's the highest administrative subdivision {city} is part of? {city} is part of
In what year was {city} founded? {city} was founded in
What as of river is nearest to {city}? The nearest major river to {city} is
What is the time zone of {city}? The time zone of {city} is
What is the current population of {city}? The current population of {city} is
What is the altitude of {city} above sea level? {city} is at an altitude of
Who is credited with the discovery of {principle}? {principle} as discovered by
What is the primary application of {principle}? The primary application of {principle} is
In which year was {principle} irst formulated? {principle} is encompassed by
What is the primary application of {principle}? The primary application of {principle} is
In which year was {principle} irst formulated? {principle}? The SI unit most commonly associated with {principle}? The sit unit most commonly associated with {princip
```

**Listing 1:** All base questions used in this work. Each one of these will get combined with data from Listing 2 as detailed in Section 3.2.1.

```
Ada Lovelace, person
Alan Turing, person
Albert Einstein, person
Alexander Fleming, person
Aristotle, person
Billie Jean King, person
Boyan Slat, person
Catherine the Great, person
Cleopatra, person
Cleopatra, person
Confucius, person
Frida Kahlo, person
Fromer Nightingale, person
Frida Kahlo, person
Greta Thunberg, person
Harriet Tubman, person
Isaac Newton, person
Karl Marx, person
Karl Marx, person
Leonardo da Vinci, person
Mahatma Gandhi, person
Mahatma Gandhi, person
```

```
Malala Yousafzai, person
   Mansa Musa, person
Marie Curie, person
   Martin Luther King Jr., person Michelangelo, person
 Michelangelo, person
Mohandas Gandhi, person
Mozart, person
Muhammad Ali, person
Neil Armstrong, person
Nikola Tesla, person
Pablo Picasso, person
Rosalind Franklin, person
Rosalind Franklin, person
   Shirin Ebadi, perso
Simon Bolivar, perso
  Srinivasa Ramanujan, person
Stephen Hawking, person
  Stephen Hawking, person
Sun Yat-sen, person
Virginia Woolf, person
Vladimir Lenin, person
Wangari Maathai, person
W.E.B. Du Bois, person
William Shakespeare, person
W. Zatian, person
  Wu Zetian, person
Yuri Gagarin, person
Alexandria, city
Amsterdam, city
Antananarivo, city
   Athens, city
Baghdad, city
   Berlin, city
Buenos Aires, city
 Buenos Aires, c:
Bukhara, city
Cairo, city
Cape Town, city
Cartagena, city
Chicago, city
Cusco, city
Cuzco, city
Delhi, city
Dubrounik city
   Dubrovnik, city
  Dubrovnik, city
Fez, city
Havana, city
Istanbul, city
Jerusalem, city
Kyoto, city
   La Paz, city
Lhasa, city
 Lhasa,city
Lisbon,city
London,city
Luang Prabang,city
Marrakech,city
Mexico City,city
Montevideo,city
Moscow,city
Mumbai,city
Muscat.city
   Muscat, city
New York, city
Nur-Sultan, city
   Paris, city
 Paris, city
Petra, city
Prague, city
Quebec City, city
Reykjavik, city
Rome, city
Sao Paulo, city
Sarajevo, city
Shanghai, city
Singapore, city
St. Petersburg, city
Sydney, city
Tbilisi, city
Tenochtitlan, city
Thimphu, city
  Thimphu, city
Timbuktu, city
Tokyo, city
Ulaanbaatar, city
   Varanasi, city
Venice, city
   Vienna, city
Wellington, city
Windhoek, city
Xi'an, city
```

```
Yogyakarta, city
rogyakarta,ctv
Zanzibar City,city
Archimedes' Principle,principle
Bernoulli's Principle,principle
Boyle's Law,principle
Cell Theory,principle
Conservation of Energy,principle
DNA Replication, principle
Electromagnetism, principle
Entropy, principle
Evolution by Natural Selection, principle
Evolution, principle
General Relativity, principle
Germ Theory of Disease, principle
Gravity, principle
Hardy-Weinberg Principle, principle
Heliocentrism, principle
Heubble's Law, principle
Kepler's Laws of Planetary Motion, principle
Le Chatelier's Principle, principle
Mendel's Laws of Inheritance, principle
Newton's Laws of Motion, principle
Pauli Exclusion Principle, principle
Periodic Law principle
Periodic Law, principle
Photosynthesis, principle
Photosynthesis,principle
Plate Tectonics,principle
Principle of Least Action,principle
Quantum Mechanics,principle
Relativity,principle
Superconductivity,principle
Thermodynamics,principle
Uncertainty Principle,principle
Aluminum,element
Barium,element
 Barium, element
Bismuth, element
Bromine, element
Calcium, element
Carbon, element
Chlorine, element Chromium, element
Copper, element Gold, element
Helium, element
Helium, element
Hydrogen, element
Iodine, element
Iron, element
Lead, element
Lithium, element
Magnesium, element
Manganese, element
Mercury, element
Neon, element
Nitrogen, element
Oxygen, element
Phosphorus, element
Plutonium, element
Potassium, element
Radon, element
Silicon, element
Silver, element
Sodium, element
Sulfur, element
 Thorium, element
Tin, element
Titanium, element
Uranium, element
Zinc, element
1984, book
Anna Karenina, book
Beloved, book
Brave New World, book
Catch-22, book
Crime and Punishment, book
Don Quixote, book
Fahrenheit 451, book
 Frankenstein, be
Jane Eyre, book
Midnight's Children, book
Moby-Dick, book
Moby-Dick, book
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, book
One Hundred Years of Solitude, book
Pride and Prejudice,
Slaughterhouse-Five,
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The Alchemist, b
The Art of War,
The Book Thief,
The Brothers Karamazov, book
The Catcher in the Rye, book
The Chronicles of Narnia, book
The Color Purple, book
The Count of Monte Cristo, book
The Grapes of Wrath, book
The Great Gatsby, book
The Handmaid's Tale, book
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, book
The Hobbit, book
The Hunger Games,
The Kite Runner, b
The Little Prince, book
The Lord of the Rings, book
The Metamorphosis, book
The Name of the Rose, book
The Odyssey, book
The Picture of Dorian Gray, book
 The Pillars of the Earth,
The Stranger, book
The Sun Also Rises, book
The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, book
 To Kill a Mockingbird, bo
 Ulysses,b
 War and Peace,
Wuthering Heights, book
American Gothic, painting
Christina's World, painting
Girl with a Pearl Earring, painting
Guernica, painting
Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, painting
Liberty Leading the People, painting
 Mona Lisa, painting
School of Athens, painting
Starry Night, painting
The Absinthe Drinker, painting
The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, painting
 The Arnolfini Portrait, painting
The Astronomer, painting
The Birth of Venus, painting
The Calling of Saint Matthew, painting
The Card Players, painting
The Death of Marat, painting
The Fighting Temeraire, painting
The Garden of Earthly Delights, painting
The Gross Clinic, painting
The Hay Wain, painting
The Kiss, painting
The Last Supper, painting
The Nighthawks, painting
The Night Watch, painting
The Ninth Wave, painting
The Persistence of Memory, painting
The Potato Eaters, painting
The Raft of the Medusa, painting
The Scream, painting
The Sleeping Gypsy, painting
The Son of Man, painting
The Sung, painting
The Swing, painting
The Third of May 1808, painting
The Tower of Babel, painting
The Treachery of Images, painting
The Triumph of Galatea, painting
The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, painting
Water Lilies, painting
Decimalisation in the UK, historical_event
Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee, historical_event Queen Victoria's Coronation, historical_event
Queen Victoria's Coronation, historical_event
The Act of Union between England and Scotland, historical_event
The Battle of Adrianople, historical_event
The Battle of Adwa, historical_event
The Battle of Agincourt, historical_event
The Battle of Hastings, historical_event
The Battle of Sekigahara, historical_event
The Battle of Teutoburg Forest, historical_event
The Battle of the Milvian Bridge, historical_event
The Battle of Waterloo, historical_event The Brexit Referendum, historical_event
The Codification of Roman Law by Justinian, historical_event The Construction of Hadrian's Wall, historical_event
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The Construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza, historical_event
The Conversion of Constantine, historical_event
The Crisis of the Third Century, historical_event
The Discovery of the Americas by Columbus, historical_event
The Discovery of the Soviet Union, historical_event
The Discovery of the Roman Empire, historical_event
The Division of the Roman Empire, historical_event
The Dunkirk Evacuation, historical_event
The Edict of Caracalla, historical_event
The Fall of Constantinople, historical_event
The Fall of the Western Roman Empire, historical_event
The Fall of the Western Roman Empire, historical_event
The First Circumnavigation of the Earth, historical_event
The First Council of Nicaea, historical_event
The First Council of Nicaea, historical_event
The Founding of Constantinople, historical_event
The Founding of Rome, historical_event
The Founding of the British Broadcasting Corporation, historical_event
The Founding of the League of Nations, historical_event
The Founding of the League of Nations, historical_event
The Gothic War in Italy, historical_event
The Gothic War in Italy, historical_event
The Gothic War in Italy, historical_event
The Indian Independence Act, historical_event
The Indian Independence Act, historical_event
The Monity Restoration, historical_event
The New The Reform of Diocletian, historical_event
The Reforms of Diocletian, historical_event
The Restoration of the Empire by Aurelian, historical_event
The Sack of Rome by Alaric, historical_event
The Sack of Rome by the Vandals, historical_event
The Sugning of the Magna Carta, historical_event
The Sugning of the Magna Carta, historical_event
The War Abolition of the Slave Trad Act, historical_event
The War Abolition of the Slave Trad Act, historical_event
The War Abolition of the Slave Trad Act, historical_event
The War Abolition of the Slave Trad Act, historical_event
The War Abolition of the Slave Trad A
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Listing 2: All objects which will be conbined with the questions in Listing 1.

- B Full Results for Each Question
- C Source Code and Usage