

Homework 6: Sentence Embeddings

Points: 20 | Due: See WebCampus for deadline

Author: Richard Young, Ph.D. | UNLV Lee Business School

Compute: CPU (free tier) — GPU recommended for faster encoding

Learning Objectives

1. **Understand** the difference between word and sentence embeddings
 2. **Use** Sentence Transformers to encode text semantically
 3. **Compute** semantic similarity between documents
 4. **Build** a simple semantic search system
 5. **Cluster** documents by meaning, not just keywords
-

Why This Matters for Business

Semantic Search: Google processes 8.5 billion searches daily. Traditional keyword matching fails when users search “laptop won’t turn on” but the solution article says “computer not starting.” Sentence embeddings understand meaning, not just words.

Customer Support: Zendesk reduced ticket resolution time by 40% using semantic similarity to match incoming tickets with past solutions—even when customers describe the same problem differently.

Resume Screening: LinkedIn matches job descriptions to candidate profiles using sentence embeddings. “5 years of machine learning experience” matches “extensive background in ML and AI” because the embeddings capture semantic equivalence.

Content Discovery: Spotify’s podcast recommendations use embeddings to find shows similar in meaning to what you’ve enjoyed—not just shows with matching tags or keywords.

Grading

Component	Points	Effort	What We’re Looking For
Model Loading	3	*	Load Sentence Transformer model
Text Encoding	4	*	Encode sentences/documents to vectors
Similarity Computation	5	**	Compute and interpret cosine similarity
Semantic Search Analysis	5	**	Build working search over your dataset
Total	20		Interpret results, document limitations

Effort Key: * Straightforward | ** Requires thinking | *** Challenge

The Big Picture

Word Embeddings (HW4): "king" · [0.2, 0.5, ...] (single word)

Sentence Embeddings (HW6): "The king ruled wisely" · [0.1, 0.3, ...] (whole sentence)

This lets us compare entire sentences for similarity!

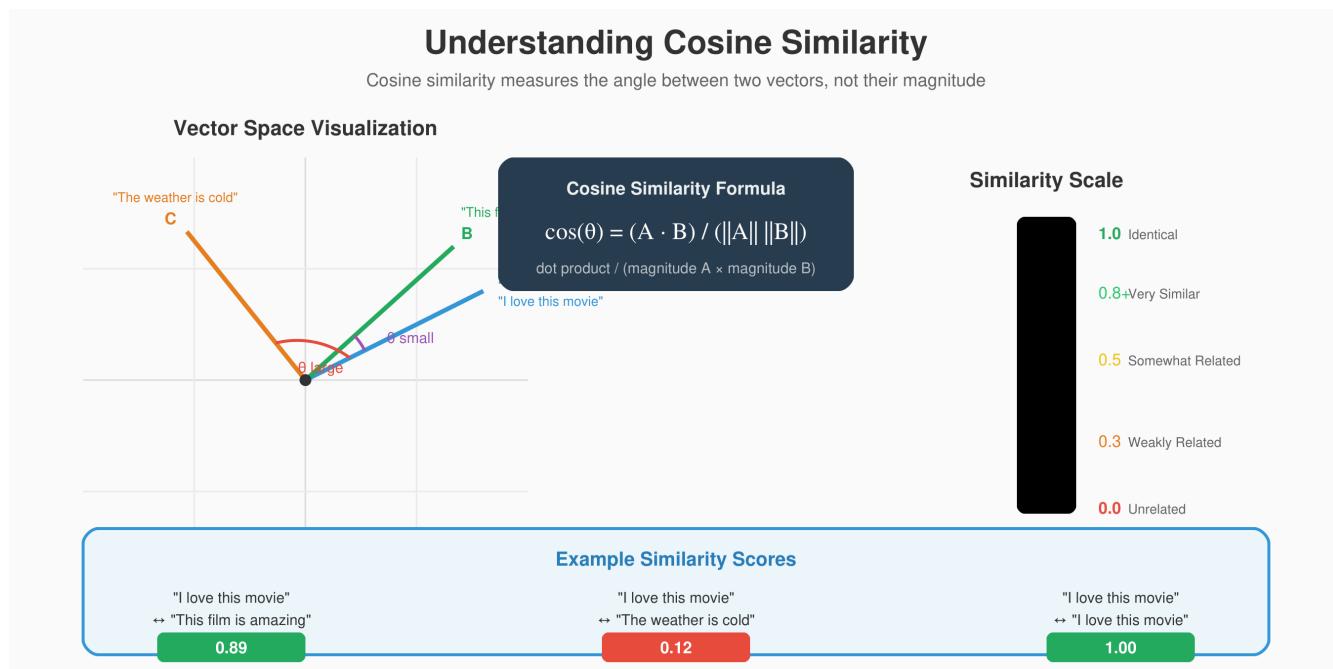


Figure 1: Cosine Similarity for Sentence Comparison

Model: all-MiniLM-L6-v2
 Embedding dimension: 384
 Max sequence length: 256

Similarity Examples:

SEMANTIC SIMILARITY

Sentence A: "The movie was absolutely fantastic!"
 Sentence B: "I loved this film, it was great!"
 Similarity: 0.89 ✓ High (same sentiment, different words)

Sentence A: "The movie was absolutely fantastic!"
 Sentence B: "The movie was terrible and boring."
 Similarity: 0.34 ✗ Low (opposite sentiment)

Sentence A: "The bank is by the river."
 Sentence B: "I need to visit the bank for a loan."
 Similarity: 0.42 (different meanings of "bank")

Semantic Search:

SEMANTIC SEARCH RESULTS

Query: "movies with surprising plot twists"

Top 5 Results:

1. [0.82] "The ending completely caught me off guard..."
 2. [0.79] "Never saw that twist coming, mind blown!"
 3. [0.76] "Predictable at first but the finale shocked me"
 4. [0.71] "Great storytelling with unexpected turns"
 5. [0.68] "The plot kept me guessing until the end"
-

Common Mistakes (and How to Avoid Them)

Mistake	Symptom	Fix
Wrong model for task	Poor similarity scores	Use all-MiniLM-L6-v2 for general use
Not normalizing embeddings	Cosine similarity > 1	Model outputs are already normalized
Encoding one text at a time	Very slow	Use <code>model.encode(list_of_texts)</code> for batches
Texts too long	Truncation warnings	Most models have 256-512 token limit
Comparing different domains	Low similarities	Fine-tune or use domain-specific model

Mistake	Symptom	Fix
Using L2 distance instead of cosine	Results seem wrong	Use co-sine_similarity from sklearn

If you see this error:

RuntimeError: CUDA out of memory

Fix: Reduce batch size: `model.encode(texts, batch_size=32)`

If encoding is slow: - Use GPU: In Colab, Runtime □ Change runtime type □ GPU - Reduce batch size if memory limited - Use a smaller model: all-MiniLM-L6-v2 is fast

Questions to Answer

- **Q1:** What makes two sentences similar according to the model?
 - **Q2:** Find an example where semantic search works better than keyword search.
 - **Q3:** Find an example where the model fails. Why might this happen?
 - **Q4:** How would you use this in a business application?
-

Submission

Upload to Canvas: Your completed .ipynb notebook with all cells executed



Richard Young, Ph.D.

```
model = SentenceTransformer('all-MiniLM-L6-v2')

# Encode single sentence
embedding = model.encode("This is a sentence")
print(f"Shape: {embedding.shape}") # (384,)

# Encode multiple sentences (faster)
sentences = ["First sentence", "Second sentence", "Third sentence"]
embeddings = model.encode(sentences)
print(f"Shape: {embeddings.shape}") # (3, 384)

# Compute cosine similarity
from sklearn.metrics.pairwise import cosine_similarity
import numpy as np

emb1 = model.encode(["I love this movie"])
emb2 = model.encode(["This film is amazing"])
similarity = cosine_similarity(emb1, emb2)[0][0]
print(f"Similarity: {similarity:.3f}") # ~0.85

# Semantic search
query = "exciting action scenes"
query_emb = model.encode([query])

# Assume corpus_embeddings is pre-computed
similarities = cosine_similarity(query_emb, corpus_embeddings)[0]
top_indices = np.argsort(similarities)[-1][:5]

for idx in top_indices:
    print(f"[{similarities[idx]:.2f}] {corpus[idx][:50]}...")

# Built-in semantic search (faster for large corpora)
from sentence_transformers import util

hits = util.semantic_search(query_emb, corpus_embeddings, top_k=5)
for hit in hits[0]:
    print(f"[{hit['score']:.2f}] {corpus[hit['corpus_id']][:50]}...")
```

Popular Sentence Transformer Models: | Model | Dimensions | Speed | Quality | Use Case | |---|---|---|---|---|
| all-MiniLM-L6-v2 | 384 | Fast | Good | General purpose || all-mpnet-base-v2 | 768 | Medium | Best | When quality matters || paraphrase-MiniLM-L6-v2 | 384 | Fast | Good | Paraphrase detection || multi-qa-MiniLM-L6-cos-v1 | 384 | Fast | Good | Question answering |

Going Deeper (Optional Challenges)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Young". A horizontal line extends from the end of the "g" in "Young".

Richard Young, Ph.D.