A Thousand Words Are Worth More Than a Picture: Natural Language-Centric Outside-Knowledge Visual Question Answering

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Abstract

Outside-knowledge visual question answering (OK-VQA) requires the agent to comprehend the image, make use of relevant knowledge from the entire web, and digest all the information to answer the question. Most previous works address the problem by first fusing the image and question in the multi-modal space, which is inflexible for further fusion with a vast amount of external knowledge. In this paper, we call for a paradigm shift for the OK-VQA task, which transforms the image into plain text, so that we can enable knowledge passage retrieval, and generative question-answering in the natural language space. This paradigm takes advantage of the sheer volume of gigantic knowledge bases and the richness of pretrained language models. A Transform-Retrieve-Generate framework (TRiG) framework is proposed¹, which can be plug-and-played with alternative image-to-text models and textual knowledge bases. Experimental results show that our TRiG framework outperforms all state-of-the-art supervised methods by at least 11.1% absolute margin.

1. Introduction

The visual question answering (VQA) task is to provide a natural language answer to a natural language question given an image [2]. This task has been well studied in the research communities, and numerous cross-modal methods have achieved state-of-the-art performance [6, 13, 20, 29, 30, 33, 49, 62, 66, 68]. The knowledge-based visual question answering (KB-VQA) task requires more extensive learning since the questions can be answered only by referring to external general knowledge [34, 47, 47, 56, 57]. Most KB-VQA datasets come with pre-defined knowledge bases, and each question is annotated with at least one supporting knowledge fact. Moreover, the recently proposed outside-knowledge visual question answering (OK-VQA) task is the most open in the sense that any external knowledge can be used to answer the questions.

Consider the example in Figure 1. As a human, one needs to first identify objects like giraffes and trees in the image, and associate the giraffes to the word animal in the question. Second, the human needs to apply his/her acquired commonsense knowledge about giraffe’s characteristics and answer the question that giraffe is known for having a long neck. For machine learning models to solve the same problem, there are several unique challenges. First, in order to answer such a question, one has to align the image, the question, and the vast amount of knowledge passages into one common space. One solution is to first fuse the image and question information in the multi-modal space with pre-trained vision-language models, and then inject knowledge into the multi-modal space. Most previous work on OK-VQA follow this paradigm, including directly injecting the knowledge embeddings [12, 48] and fusing the output of a vision-language model with the knowledge graph through graph convolutional network [38]. However, this paradigm is at the cost of squeezing the rich representation of the textual knowledge, in the magnitude of hundreds of millions, into a much smaller multi-modal space. Comparing to knowledge corpus such as BookCorpus (800M words)}
and English Wikipedia (2,500M words), multi-modal pre-training datasets are much smaller such as Visual Genome with 0.01 million images and less than 2 million question-answer pairs [26], which leads to less knowledge. Therefore, we argue that it is possible to transform everything into the language space first, and then take advantage of the tremendous amount of textual knowledge for question answering. Although this seems counter-intuitive, our work proves its advantage. In this paradigm, the challenge is to be able to transform the image into language with minimum information loss. In order to tackle this, we propose three-level image-to-text transformations which significantly outperform baselines that use only captions or object labels.

The second challenge of the OK-VQA task is how to effectively retrieve the most relevant knowledge passages from gigantic knowledge bases. Previous work has explored various retrieval methods such as term-based BM25 [36], and network-based ranking [36, 60]. In the OK-VQA dataset, this task is problematic in that there is no ground-truth knowledge annotation for each question. The retrieval has to rely on either transfer learning from similar knowledge-retrieval tasks or weak supervision from pseudo signals such as whether the passage contains the answer tokens [40]. Our preliminary study finds that there is no guarantee that a passage containing the ground-truth answer will essentially relate to the question or help the answer prediction. Such signals are very weak and may introduce more noise than useful information into the retrieval model. Instead, we adopt the state-of-the-art dense passage retrieval model (DPR) [23] that is pre-trained on large question-answering dataset Natural Questions (NQ) [27] as our knowledge retriever, which is shown to outperform the BM25 method in terms of retrieval coverage rate.

The third challenge of the OK-VQA task is to consolidate all the multi-source input, namely the question, visual context, and the retrieved knowledge passages, to predict answers. Since now everything is in the language space, the problem can be formulated as a multi-passage question answering problem. More specifically, the model needs to not only rank the retrieved passages but also predict an answer according to the ranked passages. Most existing work utilizes extractive methods to predict the answer span in the passage [5, 7, 28, 43, 44, 59, 61]. This is not applicable in the OK-VQA dataset because there is neither annotation of ground-truth passage nor answer span in any passage. Instead, we use the generative question answering model [18] to avoid the defect in span prediction. Furthermore, we use beam-search for robust answer generation. Lastly, since the question-answering model is the last stage in the entire framework, any information distortion or loss in the image-to-text transformation and knowledge retrieval would propagate to the final question answering model. Therefore, it is important for the final question answering model to be more transparent and interpretable to diagnose the root cause of errors. We use cross-attention scores from the decoder of the generative model to rank and highlight the top supporting knowledge passages, which helps to interpret the results of the model.

To bridge the above-mentioned research gaps, we propose the Transform-Retrieve-Generate (TRiG) framework for the OK-VQA task. At the high level, the framework aligns all the information (image, question, and knowledge) into the language space in order to take advantage of the rich semantics of textual knowledge. The framework starts with three-level image-to-text transformations, followed by dense passage retrieval to retrieve the most relevant knowledge passages. Further, the TRiG aggregates the information from all passages and generates an answer that is relatively easy to interpret. Our contributions are as follows:

- We propose a new paradigm shift for the OK-VQA task, from aligning all the information in the multi-modal space, to first transforming an image into plain text and performing knowledge retrieval and question answering all in language space.

- We propose a robust framework Transform-Retrieve-Generate (TRiG), that achieves new state-of-the-art performance on the OK-VQA dataset and leading other supervised methods by 11.1%.

2. Related Work

Visual Question Answering (VQA) The conventional visual question answering (VQA) task aims to answer questions pertaining to a given image. Multiple VQA datasets have been proposed, such as Visual Genome QA [25] VQA [2], GQA [16], CLEVR [22], MovieQA [53] and so on. Many works have shown state-of-the-art performance on VQA tasks, including task-specific VQA models with various cross-modality fusion mechanisms [13, 20, 24, 49, 62, 66, 67] and joint vision-language models that are pretrained on large-scale vision-language corpus and finetuned on VQA tasks [6, 11, 29, 30, 33, 52, 68]. Please note that the conventional VQA task does not require external knowledge by definition, although studies show some VQA questions may require commonsense knowledge to answer correctly [2].

Outside Knowledge-Based VQA (OK-VQA) Beyond the above paradigm, knowledge-based visual question answering (KB-VQA) is proposed where a visual question cannot be answered without external knowledge. Several knowledge-based VQA datasets are proposed, each providing its own knowledge bases and ground-truth supporting fact [34, 47, 56]. More recently, the dataset outside-knowledge visual question answering (OK-VQA) [39] is proposed where the usage of outside knowledge is open to
the entire web. Most existing work for OK-VQA rely on the pre-trained vision-language models as a major workhorse for question answering [12, 36, 38, 48, 60, 63]. In [12, 48], learned knowledge embeddings are injected into vision-language models to perform knowledge-aware question answering. Other work uses vision-language models as a knowledge-free VQA model first and later adjusts the predicted answers by fusion with knowledge graphs [38] or answer validation with knowledge text [60]. Some also propose to directly learn vision-language representation for dense knowledge retrieval [36]. Different from the above, one recent work proposes to first convert the image into text caption and tags and then perform prompt-based QA on GPT-3 model purely in the language space [63]. However, the accessibility to this super-large-scale pre-trained language model is restricted, and it is challenging to interpret the QA result from the generative GPT-3 model.

Open-Domain Question Answering in NLP

Open-domain question answering (Open-Domain QA) has been popular in the NLP community in recent years. The task is to answer a question with external knowledge bases without any given context paragraphs [43]. There are mainly two streams of approaches, namely knowledge graph-based question answering [10, 31, 37, 51, 58, 64] and knowledge retrieval-based question answering [5, 7, 18, 28, 43, 44, 59, 61]. For retrieval-based methods, both elastic-search such as BM25 [45] and semantic search such as Dense Passage Retrieval (DPR) [23] are utilized to retrieve most relevant knowledge snippets from knowledge bases. For question answering, most existing work adopt extractive methods to predict the span of an answer in knowledge snippets [5, 7, 28, 43, 44, 59, 61]. One most recent work proposes to use generative language models for knowledge-based QA, which achieves state-of-the-art performances [18].

3. Methodology

In this section, we introduce the details of our Transform-Retrieve-Generate (TRiG) framework. Shown in Figure 2, our framework contains three stages: (i) image-to-text transformation, (ii) knowledge passage retrieval, (iii) multi-passages open-domain question answer generation.

3.1. Image-to-Text Transformation

Contrary to existing work, we first transform the image into text and then perform all downstream tasks in the language space. In order to minimize the information loss in the process of transforming the image into plain text, three-levels of transformations are performed (Equation 1). First, image-level information is transformed to caption text with a state-of-the-art image captioning model [30]. Second, object-level information is translated to object and attribute labels [1, 14]. Lastly, according to [19], some VQA questions can only be answered with optical character recognition (OCR). We use an off-the-shelf OCR model to detect all possible texts in the images.

We denote $C_i$, $L_i$, and $O_i$ as the generated caption text, attribute and object text, and OCR text from image $I_i$, respectively. In the rest of the paper, we will denote the visual context $v_i = (C_i, L_i, O_i)$ for the corresponding image $I_i$.  

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Figure 2. The overview of our TRiG framework. (1) T: Our TRiG framework transforms all visual information into natural language space on three-levels: image-level captioning, object-level dense labeling and text OCR. (2) R: Our dense knowledge retriever retrieve top-k knowledge passages from Wikipedia that are relevant to the query. (3) G: Our generative question answering model encode all question-context-knowledge tuples and fuses the output to generate a final answer.
Please note that our proposed framework does not necessitate the use of the above-mentioned image-to-text transformation models only. One could choose to plug-and-play alternative methods into the framework.

\[
C_i = (w_0^c, \ldots, w_f^c) \leftarrow f_{ImageCaptioning}(I_i)
\]

\[
L_i = \{ (w_0^{attr}, w_0^{obj}), \ldots, (w_m^{attr}, w_m^{obj}) \} \leftarrow f_{tagging}(I_i)
\]

\[
O_i = \{ w_0^{ocr}, \ldots, w_k^{ocr} \} \leftarrow f_{ocr}(I_i)
\]

(1)

3.2. Knowledge Passage Retrieval

After the image is transformed into plain-text representation, we use the text representation as the query to retrieve knowledge passages in the natural language space. In this paper, we use the Wikipedia dump as the knowledge base, which contains over 21 million Wikipedia passages [28]. We ensure that our framework is designed to be generic enough to support other textual KBs such as GenericsKB [3] or the surface forms of graph knowledge bases such as ConceptNet [50].

More specifically, given a textual query \( q_i \) of an image \( I_i \) and a knowledge base \( \mathcal{K} = \{ p_j \} \) where each \( p_j \) is a knowledge passage, the task is to retrieve top \( k \) knowledge passages \( P_k = [p_1, p_2, \ldots, p_k] \) from \( \mathcal{K} \) that are most relevant to the query \( q_i \), where \( k \ll |\mathcal{K}| \). In this paper, we empirically use the query \( q_i = (Q_i, C_i) \), where \( Q_i \) is the original question and \( C_i \) is the generated caption of the corresponding image \( I_i \).

We use dense passage retrieval (DPR) to retrieve the knowledge passages [23]. DPR encodes both query and passage with Bert layers that could better capture the semantic similarity between them than term-based retrieval methods such as TF-IDF and BM25 [23]. First, the query \( q_i \) and a passage \( p_k \) are encoded with two independent pre-trained BERT encoders [9]. We take the embedding of the [CLS] token \( x_q \) and \( x_p \) in the BERT to represent \( q_i \) and \( p_k \) respectively. Second, a similarity scores \( \text{sim}(q_i, p_k) \) is calculated by taking the dot product of the two encoded dense vectors of the query \( q_i \) and a passage \( p_k \).

\[
x_q = E_Q(q_i), x_p = E_P(p_k)
\]

(2)

\[
\text{sim}(q_i, p_k) = x_q^T \cdot x_p
\]

(3)

Because of the tremendous amount of passages in the Wikipedia knowledge base, it is time-consuming to retrieve the top \( k \) passages for each query from the knowledge base with over 21 million passages. We leverage an open-sourced indexing engine FAISS [21], an extremely efficient library to speed up the clustering and indexing of large number of dense vectors. Given a query \( q_i \), the dense passage retrieval module will return \( k \) passages \( P_k = [p_1, p_2, \ldots, p_k] \) from the entire knowledge base \( \mathcal{K} \) where \( \text{sim}(q_i, p_1) > \text{sim}(q_i, p_2) > \cdots > \text{sim}(q_i, p_k) \) and \( k \ll |\mathcal{K}| \). The retrieved passages \( P_k \) will be later used for downstream question-answering.

3.3. Generative Multi-Passages QA

After aligning the visual information, the question, and the external knowledge into the language space, we introduce our generative question-answering module. Our design of the model takes the following into consideration. First, although previous work on joint vision-language models formulates the task as an answer classification task [38, 50, 60], our preliminary studies show that language models seem to be less flexible in classifying text into such high-dimensional answer space (over 100k) given a relatively small dataset. Second, although most previous language QA models follow a span-based answer prediction paradigm [28, 43, 59, 61], it is impractical in our open-domain setting since there is no ground-truth supporting fact in our task, let alone the ground-truth answer span for prediction. On the other hand, recent work shows that a generative encoder-decoder network can achieve state-of-the-art performance on multiple open-domain QA datasets [41], and it avoids span prediction and directly generates a free-form answer.

To achieve this goal, we use a transformer-like encoder-decoder model T5 as the backbone of our generative question answering module [42]. It is impractical to include all top-\( k \) passages in one T5 model. We use T5 model to encode each \((question, visual context, knowledge)\) tuple independently and then fuse the \( k \) encoded representations to decode an answer following the idea in [18].

Multi-Passages Question Answer Generation First, we feed the concatenated sequence of \((Q_i, v_i, p_i, k)\) into a self-attentive encoder to get per-position hidden embeddings \( z_{Q_i,k} \), where \( q_i \) is the question, \( v_i \) is the visual context text and \( p_i \) is one passage respectively.

\[
z_{Q_i,k} = E_{SelfAttn}(Q_i, v_i, p_i, k)
\]

(4)

where \( z_i \) is the hidden embedding of the \( i \)-th token in the sequence, \( z_{Q_i,k} \in \mathbb{R}^{1 \times L \times h} \) is the hidden representation of the sequence, \( L = |(Q_i, v_i, p_i, k)| \) is the length of the sequence and \( h \) is the size of the hidden embedding.

Subsequently, we perform the same encoding operation on all \( k \) passages to derive \( k \) hidden representations:

\[
z_{Q_i} = (z_{Q_i,1}, \ldots, z_{Q_i,k})
\]

(5)

where we concatenate the \( k \) hidden embeddings to \( z_{Q_i} \in \mathbb{R}^{(k \times L) \times h} \). This operation is to fuse all the information from different question-context-passage interactions together in
order to generate better answers. Then, we feed the concatenated hidden representation \( z^Q \) into a stacked self-attentive decoder to predict per-position word distribution over the vocabulary space \( |V| \):

\[
P(a_1), \ldots, P(a_l) = \sigma(D_{SelfAtt}(z^Q))
\]

(6)

where \( \sigma \) is a non-linear function such as softmax, \( l \) is the length of the answer, and \( Q_i \in \mathbb{R}^{|V|} \) is the word distribution over the vocabulary of size \( |V| \). Finally, we use teacher-enforcing to train the entire model with auto-regressive cross-entropy loss:

\[
L_{\text{ans}} = -\frac{1}{N \cdot l \cdot |V|} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \sum_{j=1}^{l} \sum_{w=1}^{|V|} y_{i,j,w} \cdot \log(p(a_{i,j,w}))
\]

(7)

**Inference of the Multi-Passage Generative Model** During training, teacher-enforcing is used to train the encoder-decoder model auto-regressively. During inference time, the answer tokens are generated iteratively by feeding the decoder model auto-regressively. Inference decoding, and beam-search are applied to get the best answers. Before evaluation, a normalization step is performed on the generated answers, including lower-casing and removing articles, punctuation, and duplicated white space.

**4. Experiments**

In this section, we describe the implementation details of our method and report the experimental results.

**4.1. Implementation Details**

**OK-VQA Dataset** We use the OK-VQA dataset in this research work (version v1.1), license CC-BY 4.0. It is one of the most challenging visual question answering datasets that is open to all external knowledge usage [39]. The dataset contains 14,055 visual questions over 14,031 images from MSCOCO [32]. The dataset split is 9,009 for training and 5,046 for testing. Each entry contains an image, a question, and 10 ground-truth answers annotated by human annotators.

**Dense Passage Retrieval** We use BERT-base encoders, \( E_Q \) and \( E_P \), in the retrieval module and initialize them with the checkpoints pre-trained on the NQ dataset [27]. Due to the extremely large size of the Wikipedia knowledge base, we choose the HNSW indexing algorithm instead of flat indexing for a much faster speed of queries with acceptable accuracy trade-off. For more details, please refer to the implementation of [21]. Each query is composed of the question \( Q_i \) and the corresponding caption \( C_i \). The number of retrieved passages \( k = 100 \) for the best possible QA performance.

**Generative Multi-Passages QA** We use a transformer-based [54] encoder-decoder T5-large [42] model as the backbone. By default, the embedding size of the encoder is 768. The maximum length of the input tokens is restricted to be 300. Padding to the maximum length is applied for multiple questions batch training. Because the training of the generative model with 100 passages is memory-intensive, the batch size is set to be 1 for each GPU. To optimize the QA model, we apply the following techniques: (i) AdamW as the optimizer with a linearly scheduled learning rate starting from \( 1e^{-4} \); (ii) Warm-up of 2000 steps as the learning rate scheduler. We train the multi-passages QA model for 20000 optimization steps on an 8xA100 GPU cluster for 12 hours. During inference, both greedy-decode and beam-search are applied to get the best answers. Before evaluation, a normalization step is performed on the generated answers, including lower-casing and removing articles, punctuation, and duplicated white space.

**4.2. Empirical Results on OK-VQA**

**4.2.1 Performance of Knowledge Retrieval**

To evaluate the performance of the knowledge passage retrieval module, we consider a question that has a hit in its retrieved knowledge passages if at least one of its ground-truth answers appears in the retrieved passages. Then the hit@k is defined as the percentage of questions in the entire dataset who get a hit in their top k retrieved knowledge passages.

| Top-K   | OK-VQA Train | OK-VQA Test |
|---------|--------------|-------------|
| Top-5   | 42.72%       | 45.83%      |
| Top-10  | 54.66%       | 57.88%      |
| Top-20  | 68.76%       | 72.11%      |
| Top-50  | 72.27%       | 80.49%      |
| Top-100 | 83.76%       | 86.56%      |

Table 1. Hit@k of the dense passage retrieval (k = the number of retrieved knowledge passages).

From Table 1, we can observe that the answer retrieval rate hit@k increases along with the number of passages k from 42.7% to 83.7% as k increases from 5 to 100. A larger
Comparison with Supervised-Learning SOTAs

The subjectively. The truth answers over others based on the annotators’ consensus.

Mechanism of the VQA score may promote some ground-weighted scores over the entire test set. Arguably, the voting on the annotated answers considers every answer as equally ground-truth the same. On the other hand, VQA score defines a voting mechanism so that each annotated answer $a_i$ is assigned a score $s_i$ between 0 and 1 [2].

A generated answer $\hat{a}_i$ would get $s_i$ score if it matches the annotated $a_i$. The VQA metric is an average of the weighted scores over the entire test set. Arguably, the voting mechanism of the VQA score may promote some ground-truth answers over others based on the annotators’ consensus subjectively.

### 4.2.2 Performance of the Generative QA Model

#### Exact Match and VQA Score

The OK-VQA dataset has 10 annotated answers for each question, and we consider both Exact Match and VQA Score as metrics to evaluate the generative QA model. The Exact Match (EM) is defined as the percentage of questions whose predicted answer exactly matches any of the 10 annotated answers. EM metric considers every answer as equally ground-truth the same.

A generated answer $\hat{a}_i$ would get $s_i$ score if it matches the annotated $a_i$. The VQA metric is an average of the weighted scores over the entire test set. Arguably, the voting mechanism of the VQA score may promote some ground-truth answers over others based on the annotators’ consensus subjectively.

#### Comparison with Supervised-Learning SOTAs

The performance of our proposed TRiG framework with state-of-the-art models is reported in Table 2. Please note that all the models in comparison are supervised-learning models. Several observations can be made from the table. First, most previous methods utilize the vision-language model as the backbone for question answering and then integrate it with external knowledge. Some represent the knowledge in the form of graph (KRISP [38], ConceptBert [12], RVLESK [48]) while others fuse the output of the vision-language model with textual knowledge representation (MAVEx [60]) or implicit knowledge from a language QA model [46]. Second, a concurrent work, VRR [36], transforms the image into caption text and performs span-based question answering on a trimmed knowledge base using Google search engine. Last and most importantly, all of the above methods achieve very similar VQA scores between 38.60 and 39.4, despite usage of diverse sources of knowledge bases such as ConceptNet [12, 38, 48, 60], Google Image [60], Google Web Search [36] and Wikipedia [60] and pretraining on other datasets such as VQA [12, 38, 48, 60] and Visual Genome [48].

Our proposed TRiG framework significantly outperforms all state-of-the-art supervised-learning methods with at least a 11.1% margin. Our TRiG framework differs from the existing methods as (i) instead of aligning representation of the vision-language QA model with external knowledge in the multimodal space, TRiG transforms the image into text information as accurately as possible and aligns all the information of the image, question, and knowledge in the language space; (ii) the generative QA model in TRiG is not pre-trained on other multimodal datasets, which helps the model to start learning to reason over external knowledge, rather than inducing data bias from other multimodal datasets.

We would like to also highlight the Exact Match (EM) score of our TRiG models, which are higher than the VQA scores. As in Figure 4, we observe that sometimes the generative QA model predicts a reasonable answer but is not credited with the highest VQA score or not even any score according to annotators’ voting.

#### Table 2. Comparison of supervised-learning methods on the OK-VQA dataset. In TRiG Model, Q: Question, C: Caption, DL: Dense Labels, O: OCR Text, G: Greedy Decode, BS: Beam-Search, $E^*$: Ensembles of the 6 TRiG models.

| Model | #Params | VQA Score |
|-------|---------|-----------|
| KRISP [38] | | 32.31 |
| ConceptBert [12] | | 33.66 |
| CBM [46] | | 38.60 |
| KRISP w/ VQA2.0 pretrained | | 38.70 |
| MAVEx [60] | | 38.70 |
| RVLESK [48] | | 39.04 |
| Weakly Supervised VRR [36] | | 39.20 |
| MAVEx w/(Ensemble 5) [60] | | 39.40 |
| **Ours** | | |
| TRiG w/ Q+C+DL+O, G | $53.62\%$ | $49.24$ |
| TRiG w/ Q+C+DL+O, BS | $53.59\%$ | $49.35$ |
| TRiG w/ Q+C+DL+O, G, $E^*$ | $54.73\%$ | $50.50$ |

#### Table 3. Comparison of Proposed TRiG with SOTA Prompt-Based Method on the OK-VQA Dataset. In [63], RP: Random Prompt, SP: Selected Prompt, C: Caption, T: Image-Tagging, E: Prompt Ensemble. In TRiG model, Q: Question, C: Caption, DL: Dense Labels, O: OCR Text, G: Greedy Decode, BS: Beam-Search, $E^*$: Ensembles of the 6 TRiG models.

| Model | #Params | VQA Score |
|-------|---------|-----------|
| PICa w/16 RP C+T | 175B | 43.30 |
| PICa w/16 SP C+T | 175B | 46.50 |
| PICa w/16 SP C+T, 3×E | 175B | 47.70 |
| PICa w/16 SP C+T, 5×E | 175B | 48.00 |
| **Ours** | | |
| TRiG w/ Q+C+DL+O, G | $0.77B$ | $49.24$ |
| TRiG w/ Q+C+DL+O, BS | $0.77B$ | $49.35$ |
| TRiG w/ Q+C+DL+O, G, $E^*$ | $0.77B$ | $50.50$ |

#### Comparison with Prompt-Based SOTA

We also compare our method with one very recent prompt-based method...
on the OK-VQA problem [63]. By taking advantage of the super large-scale language model GPT-3 [4], the proposed prompt-based method (PICa) surpasses all existing supervised methods with sophisticated prompting. As shown in Table 3, PICa achieves 43.3 VQA score with 16 prompts randomly selected from the training data. By carefully selecting 16 prompts based on the similarity between testing and training questions, PICa further achieves 46.5. With 5 ensembles of 16 prompts, PICa reaches 48.0 VQA score.

Our method (TRiG) outperforms PICa with greedy-decode 49.24, beam-search decoding 49.35 and ensemble 50.50. Both PICa and our method share the same idea of unifying the image, the visual question, and knowledge in language space and then performing question answering with language models. The significant performance gain of both methods (9-11.1% over SOTA) highlights the potential of this idea – if the image could be transformed into plain text information faithfully, then one could take advantage of the vast volume of external knowledge in text form and advanced language models pre-trained on rich variations of human natural language to yield better answer prediction.

We would like to also highlight that our method outperforms PICa by a margin of 2.50%, especially considering the among of parameters (175 billion over 0.77 billion of our model) and accessibility of the GPT-3 model. Moreover, we argue that our prediction results are relatively easier to interpret by selecting supporting knowledge passages, whereas in PICa the explanation is generated by GPT-3 in a black-box manner. We use the averaged cross-attention score of the generative model to select supporting facts [17]. For concrete examples of such interpretability, please see the examples in Figure 4.

### 4.3. Ablation Study

**Variant Visual Context Input** We investigate the empirical differences among the combination of the visual contexts inputs to the generative QA model, namely image caption (C), object label (L and DL), and OCR (O).

| Inputs                          | VQA Score |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Question + K + C               | 42.54     |
| Question + K + C + L           | 42.94     |
| Question + K + C + L + O       | 43.53     |
| Question + K + C + DL + O      | 49.35     |

Table 4. Ablation Study of the Different Variants of Text Input into the Generative QA Model (K: Knowledge passages, C: Caption, L = Bottom-Up Labels [1], DL = Dense Labels, O = OCR Text).

As in Table 4, we find that adding caption (C) to the input yields decent performance (42.5), suggesting that caption conveys basic information of the image. Adding sparse object labels and attributes (L) also helps a little (42.9). By adding OCR, the performance is further improved (43.5), which is in accord with previous findings that some questions in OK-VQA require understanding the text in the image through OCR [19]. Interestingly, the largest gain is achieved by replacing sparse object and attribute labels with more semantically rich dense object labels (49.4), which again highlights that the faithfulness of image-to-text transformation is a crucial prerequisite for downstream QA in the language space.

### Generative Multi-Passages QA with Varying K passages

We also investigate how the generative QA model behaves with a different number of passages k. We apply our best model trained on 100 passages and test it with varying k passages. From Figure 3-(a), we can see that the testing performance of this model steadily increases along with the growing number of passages k. However, the improvement becomes marginal after k=25 (47.62 to 49.35), while the coverage Hit@k still increases by 15% as Figure 3-(b). This also supports our hypothesis that there may be a long-tail effect of the retrieval. Yet it is difficult to quantify as to which passages are essentially relevant to the question-answering.

### 4.4. Discussion

**Error Analysis** To investigate the behavior of our TRiG model, we conduct error analysis with our best model using greedy-decoded predictions. The quantitative results are illustrated in Figure 5. We observe that answers with numerical values are harder to predict, where the model could get into a blunt generation (Figure 5-(a)). Furthermore, as the length of the answer increases, it is harder for the generative model to predict every token in the phrase correctly (Figure 5-(b)).

We also manually reviewed 50 examples where TRiG makes wrong predictions. Among these random examples, 50% of the errors are due to the information loss during image-to-text transformation, such as in Figure 4-(h), where the caption and dense labels failed to characterize the special features of the bird. We also found that 24% of the error are due to the failure in retrieving highly-relevant passages.
Figure 4. Examples of our TRiG model prediction together with the supporting passage. **Top:** four examples where TRiG model makes correct predictions. **Bottom:** four examples where TRiG model makes incorrect predictions. In each example: Q: question, GT: ground-truth answers, Pred: predicted answer, C: image caption, DL: dense labels, O: OCR text, K: top-1 supporting knowledge passage.

The high Hit@k value doesn’t guarantee the passages are indeed relevant to the question. Note that some examples failed due to multiple reasons including QA error (22%) or subjective human annotations (30%) as in Figure 4(g).

Figure 5. Performance of Generative QA model by different answer types. **Left:** whether numerical answers are harder to predict. **Right:** whether longer answers are harder to predict.

Interpretability To interpret the visual question-answering models, previous works attempt to supervise the VQA models with visual grounding annotations [8, 8, 69] or neural symbolic network [15, 55, 65]. When it comes to knowledge-based VQA, it is all the more challenging to interpret the model in multimodal space because the knowledge has been transformed into a fused representation and loses its meaning.

Our TRiG framework alleviates this problem by providing transparent explanations in the language space. In the top row in Figure 4, the image-to-text transformations provide sufficient information for both the knowledge retrieval and QA model. Meanwhile, when Figure 4(e, f, g, h) make wrong predictions, the QA model is still predicting the answer according to the visual context and retrieved passages.

**OK-VQA Evaluation Metrics** Some researchers [35] also argue that the VQA score metric is subjective. In one OK-VQA example, a model will achieve 1.0 VQA score for the answer wetsuit but only 0.66 score for the answer wet suit. In daily language, the usage of any of the semantically-similar answers is subtle and sometimes random. We also look at the top-3 answers of our TRiG model using beam search, and the model achieves significantly higher performance, i.e., 67.4 VQA score and 71.8% EM. We call for better VQA metrics that probably compare two sets of answers instead of comparing only the top one answer or other alternatives such as AAS that automatically expands the ground-truth answer set for better matching [35].

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we approach the OK-VQA task from a new perspective, where all the visual information is aligned into the language space to take advantage of the comprehensiveness in textual knowledge bases. Moreover, we propose a robust Transform-Retrieve-Generate (TRiG) framework that outperforms state-of-the-art supervised methods by 11.1%. One can plug-and-play with different image-to-text methods and textual knowledge bases into TRiG for potential further improvement. Our work has limitations that the dense passage retrieval is not optimized for the OK-VQA task, due to the unavailability of ground-truth supporting facts. We consider this as one of our future work, as well as improving the quality of image-to-text transformation.
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6. Additional Details for Methodology

6.1. Generative Multi-Passages QA Details

Hyper-parameters  To better illustrate the implementation of the generative multi-passages QA model, we introduce some key hyper-parameters in Table 5.

| Hyper-Parameter | Value |
|-----------------|-------|
| Max Input Length | 300   |
| Max Decoding Length | 20    |
| Early Stopping   | True  |
| Pad to Max Length| True  |
| Max Number of Beams | 3     |
| Learning Rate    | 0.0001|
| LR Scheduler     | Linear|
| Total Optimization Step | 20000 |

Table 5. Hyper-parameters of the generative multi-passages QA model, not including hyper-parameters for T5 backbone.

Input Format  Different from the default input format to the pre-train a T5 model, we use a alternative formatting for the input sequences. We concatenate the question, the visual context and one retrieved Wikipedia knowledge passage as the input sequence, without any special token such as “[SEP]” between them. The question has a prefix “question:” before it. The visual context is the concatenation of image caption, dense labels and OCR text. The knowledge passage consists of a Wikipedia title and a Wikipedia paragraph. The two are concatenated by putting a prefix “title:” and a prefix “context:” before them respectively.

Vocabulary  We also want to highlight the effect of the different sizes of QA model vocabulary. As in Table 6, we notice a trend that models with larger vocabulary sizes achieve higher performance. In particular, models using the default vocabulary (PICa and TRiG) perform better on OK-VQA dataset.

| Method                | Size  | VQA Score |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------|
| KRISP w/o VQA2 pre-train | 2,250 | 32.31     |
| Weakly Supervised VRR (C) | 11,060| 36.78     |
| RVLESK                | 14,456| 39.04     |
| PICa (5 Ensembles)    | 50,257| 48.00     |
| Ours (6 Ensembles)    | 32,128| 50.50     |

Table 6. The vocabulary size and performances of different SOTA methods on OK-VQA. (C) represents classification. Some numbers may not be public accessible and we only report the numbers directly from the authors.

7. Additional Details for Ablation Study

7.1. Answer Accuracy in Beam-Search

In the main paper, we argue that the ground-truth answers of an OK-VQA question might be a semantically-similar cluster, such as (swimsuit, bath suit, bikini). This may also hold true for the question answering models, in terms of both classification models (top-k class prediction) and generative models (top-k beam prediction).

| k     | Exact Match | VQA Score |
|-------|-------------|-----------|
| Top-1 | 53.59%      | 49.35     |
| Top-2 | 65.99%      | 61.61     |
| Top-3 | 71.78%      | 67.48     |

Table 7. Ablation on Different k in Beam-Search Decoding.

We report the performance of our generative question answering model using top-1/2/3 beam-search decoding. As shown in Table 7, we can find that both the Exact Match (EM) and VQA score increase as the k of beam-search increase. This suggests that while the top-one answers only achieve 49.35 VQA score, their semantically-similar candidates could reach as high as 67.48 VQA score. Therefore, we call out for new metrics that compare two sets of answers instead of top-one answer versus many ground-truth answers.

8. Additional Details for Error Analysis

To further understand the behavior of our TRiG framework, we conducted several error analysis.

Question Keywords / Types  First, we investigate whether the model is likely to predict correctly over some question keywords than others. As in Figure 6-top, we can observe that majority of the questions contain the keyword “what”, where our model is more likely to make correct predictions. On the other hand, for questions containing keywords such as “how” and “why”, our model is more likely to make mistakes. We hypothesize that the “how” and “why” questions usually entail longer answers, which is harder for the generative model to predict. For example, for the question why is this sign here? (a sign for animal protection), the ground-truth answers are (protect animal, safety, don’t feed animal, direct).

Second, we report prediction distribution over 10 question types that are available from the OK-VQA dataset. As in Figure 6-bottom, we can see that our model is more likely to predict correctly on category of sports and recreation. On the contrary, our model makes more mistakes in Vehicles and Transportation and Plants and Animals.
The Impact of Visual Context and Knowledge Passages
First, we would like to further investigate the effectiveness of the image-to-text transformation module, since it is the first stage in our TRiG framework. Shown in Figure 7-A, we find that if the visual contexts contain the ground-truth answers, the generative question answering model is more likely to generate a correct answer. In contrast, the model makes more mistakes if the visual contexts do not contain the ground-truth answers.

Second, we also investigate how the retrieved passages impact the generative question answering model. As is illustrated in Figure 7-B, we find that if the top-5 passages that contain the ground-truth answers, our generative question answering model is much more likely to predict correct answers. On the opposite side, if top-5 passages do not contain the ground-truth answers, it is more likely for the QA model to make a wrong prediction.

Manual Error Review We also conducted manual eye-balling on 50 random examples where the model has made wrong predictions. We look into each example with all the available information (question, caption, dense labels, OCR text, knowledge passages, ground-truth answers) and attribute each example to one or more error categories. A brief statistics is shown in Table 8. Please note that the percentages of error types are not mutually exclusive because some wrong cases may fall in multiple categories.

| Category                | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Image-to-Text           | 50%        |
| Annotation              | 30%        |
| Dense Passage Retrieval  | 24%        |
| Generative QA           | 22%        |

Table 8. Ablation on Different $k$ in Beam-Search Decoding.

We can observe that the first contributing factor to the errors is in image-to-text transformation (50%). The second category is the answer annotation ambiguity (30%), where the predicted answers are reasonable according to human judgement, but do not match any ground-truth answers. There are also failures related to dense passage retrieval (24%) and generative QA model (22%). For more details of each error category, please see the examples in page 5-6.
### Correct Examples

**Q:** What location do these vehicles stop?

**GT:** station, train station, train stops

**Pred:** station

---

**Q:** A pair of black handled scissors lying on a roll of tape.

**GT:** scissors

**Pred:** scissor

---

**Q:** Which object in the picture is described as sharp?

**GT:** tell time, time tell

**Pred:** tell time

---

**Q:** Signs are attached to a light pole, featuring a large clock.

**GT:** plant, grass, vegetation

**Pred:** vegetation

---

**Q:** The kid is skateboarding on the street while wearing a jacket.

**GT:** tony hawk, shaun white

**Pred:** tony hawk

---

**Q:** Two glasses of juice are on a cutting board near diced vegetables.

**GT:** eye, brain

**Pred:** eye

---

**Q:** A zebra standing on a dirt road with trees.

**GT:** striped standing black white zebra

**Pred:** standing black white zebra

---

**Q:** A dog is tied up to a fire hydrant.

**GT:** leash, fire hydrant

**Pred:** leash

---

**Q:** A dot ticket sales and waiting rooms.

**GT:** station, train station, train stops

**Pred:** station

---

**Q:** Scissors are used for cutting various thin materials, such as paper, cardboard, metal foil, cloth, rope, and wire. Blade angles ideal for cutting hair...

**GT:** plastic black handle | open round silver hole | round open plastic | black | plastic white metal | silver sharp blade | cut

**Pred:** plastic black handle | open round silver hole | round open plastic | black | plastic white metal | silver sharp blade | cut

---

**Q:** What is this machine used for?

**GT:** plant, grass, vegetation

**Pred:** vegetation

---

**Q:** A stunt would probably be...

**GT:** gray hole | black metal scissors | silver metal screw

**Pred:** gray hole | black metal scissors | silver metal screw

---

**Q:** What is holding this dog here?

**GT:** leash, fire hydrant

**Pred:** leash

---

**Q:** What is this animal's diet?

**GT:** small orange | sliced carrot | plastic white metal | silver sharp blade | cut

**Pred:** small orange | sliced carrot | plastic white metal | silver sharp blade | cut

---

**Q:** What video game was made with the name of arguably the most famous athlete in this sport?

**GT:** Hyperdunk

**Pred:** Hyperdunk

---

**Q:** A dot ticket sales and waiting rooms...

**GT:** station, train station, train stops

**Pred:** station

---

**Q:** The stunt was considered to be fake, and the Williams sisters are two professional American tennis players: Venus Williams (b. 1980), a seven-time Grand Slam title winner (singles), and Serena Williams (b. 1981), twenty-three-time Grand Slam title winner (singles), both of whom were coached from an early age by their parents Richard Williams and Oracene Price..."
| Q: What sport might this animal be used for? | GT: horse race, race, polo | Pred: polo |
|---|---|---|
| C: Woman outside her car approaching to pet a horse in fence. | DL: driving black silver parked car | smiling standing woman | leafy tall large green tree | standing white gray horse | wood fence | short brown red hair | clear dark black glasses |
| K: "...to bring race horses to the track, to accompany them as they warm up for exercise, and then pick them back up after they run. Pony riders are required to wear helmets and safety vests when on the track with their charges. control of the ponied horse. The pony horse must have a calm and steady disposition..." | Vanzilla LEMON |
| Q: Why are they carving pumpkins? | GT: halloween | Pred: halloween |
| C: Two boys carving pumpkins while a lady watches. | DL: empty wine clear glass | big round large orange pumpkin | red bowl | standing woman | playing smiling young standing boy | blue jean | kitchen dark black glasses | brown wood cabinet |
| K: "...Pumpkins are commonly carved into decorative lanterns called jack-o'-lanterns for the Halloween season in North America... The practice of carving pumpkins for Halloween originated from an Irish myth about a man named. The turnip has traditionally been used in Ireland and Scotland at Halloween." | Vanzilla LEMON |
| Q: When was this sport invented? | GT: 1850, 1700s', 1930 | Pred: 1850 |
| C: A skier skiing down a slope with their skiis. | DL: long gray silver black ski | black glove | white snow black boot | standing young sking boy | black blue jacket | black glove | black hat gray black boot | gray blue leg |
| K: "...History of skiing Skiing, or traveling over snow on skis, has a history of at least eight millennia. Originally purely utilitarian, starting in the mid-1800s skiing became a popular recreational activity and sport, becoming practiced in snow-covered regions worldwide, and providing a market for the development of ski resorts and their related communities..." | Vanzilla LEMON |
| Q: What food do these animals eat? | GT: hay, grass | Pred: hay |
| C: A man walks a horse, while people take photographs. | DL: black brown horse | black pant long brown tail | pink purple flower | standing walking man | large black camera | blue saddle | gray black hoof|white bag | black shoe | cement stone | brown wood... |
| K: "...Horses are grazing animals, and their major source of nutrients is good-quality forage from hay or pasture. They can consume approximately 2% to 2.5% of their body weight in dry feed each day. Therefore, a adult horse could eat up to of food. Sometimes, concentrated feed such as grain is fed in addition to pasture or hay..." | Vanzilla LEMON |
| Q: What flavour of cake is this? | GT: vanilla, lemon, lemon vanilla | Pred: vanilla |
| C: A tall white cake with red flowers on top and some orange pots. | DL: large white cake | yellow sign | frosted chocolate | white cupcake | white fence | frosted white chocolate cupcake |
| Q: Why is he having an orange vest? | GT: safety, to be visible to other, for protection, visibility in traffic | Pred: safety |
| C: A man is riding a motorcycle on a street in traffic. | DL: parked black blue car | yellow orange vest | parked gray silver car | white line | chrome round blue silver mirror... |
| Q: "What nationality is this food? | GT: american, germany | Pred: american |
| C: A hotdog on a plate with two green things. | DL: cooked brown long hot dog | white paper | white table | white black shadow | round white plate | cast black dark shadow |
| K: "...Japanese Fusion Dogs are not actually from Japan but are a Pacific Northwest invention that pairs hot dogs with Japanese and Asian condiments like wasabi, kimchi and teriyaki. In October 2016 the Malaysian Islamic Development Department ruled that hot dog vendors must rename their product or risk not getting halal certification..." | Vanzilla LEMON |
| Q: What is the purpose of this vehicle? | GT: transportation, travel transport good, carry freight | Pred: transport good |
| C: A train makes its way down a train track. | DL: long red yellow train | circular small round window | cloudy blue sky | large clear glass windshield | yellow black engine | tall gray metal pole | black yellow front black yellow stripe | gray metal pole train |
| K: "...goods. Overland trains are used to carry cargo over rough terrain. Much of the world’s freight is transported by train, and the rail system in the United States is used mostly for transporting freight rather than passengers and also more energy efficient than transporting freight by road. Rail freight is most economic when goods..." | Vanzilla LEMON |
| Failures Related to Image-to-Text Transformation | Failures Related to Dense Knowledge Retrieval |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Q: What kind of trees are shown?  
GT: evergreen, pine, fir  
**Pred:** maple | Q: Name the material used to make this skating board shown in this picture?  
GT: fiberglass, plastic  
**Pred:** wood |
| **C:** Fenced in field of snow with mountains and overcast sky.  
**DL:** white wire metal fence | **C:** A person is skiing down a mountain next to a blue line in the snow.  
**DL:** red white ski |  
K: "...The forests in the national park, which exhibit the characteristics of European-Siberian vegetation... Other notable trees include broadleaves such as oak (5%), alder, aspen, maple, dogwood... Coniferous trees predominate in the hemiboreal zone, but a significant number of deciduous species, such as aspens, oaks, maples..."  
**K:** "...Skateboard A skateboard is a type of sports equipment used primarily for the sport of skateboarding. It usually consists of a specially designed maplewood board combined with a polyurethane coating used for making smoother slides and stronger durability... Snowboards are generally constructed of a hardwood core which is sandwiched between multiple layers of fibreglass..." |
| **C:** A tennis player winds up a backhand.  
**DL:** white short | **C:** A white plate with some broccoli and meat.  
**DL:** cooked green broccoli |  
K: "...Tennis shot was pioneered in the 1970s by Guillermo Vilas and Yannick Noah... Forward-facing between-the-legs shots are also occasionally employed; they are sometimes called front tweens. The Bucharest Backfire is an over-the-shoulder backward shot, generally used to recover lobs..."  
**K:** "...Fries known as steak fries. Chili, rice, pasta, or beans are also common sides. A side salad or a small serving of cooked vegetables often accompanies the meat and side, with corn on the cob, green beans, creamed spinach, asparagus, tomatoes, mushrooms, peas, and onion rings being popular... New side orders introduced within the past decade, such as rice and couscous, have grown to be quite popular throughout Europe..." |
| **C:** A glass of beer sitting next to a laptop.  
**DL:** wine full clear tall glass | **C:** A double deckered bus on a city street.  
**DL:** double decker red bus |  
K: "Beer writer Michael Jackson proposed a five-level scale for serving temperatures: well chilled for light beers (pale lagers)...Pale ale is a beer which uses a top-fermenting yeast and predominantly pale malt. It is one of the world's major beer styles... Budweiser Budweiser is an American-style pale lager produced by Anheuser-Busch...It has grown to become one of the largest selling beers in the United States..."  
**K:** "...Double-decker buses on longer-distance routes, most notably commuter buses crossing the Bosphorus Bridge linking the European and the Asian sides of the city..." |
| **C:** A plate of food that has some french fries and a burger.  
**DL:** silver white napkin | **C:** The dog is resting on the floor in the living room.  
**DL:** an brown dog |  
K: "...The corned beef sandwich is a sandwich prepared with corned beef. The salt beef style corned beef sandwiches are traditionally served with mustard and a pickle..."  
**K:** "...Prior to filming, director Guillermo Morales worked hard on a story board. For Shearsmith, the small space added to the need to meticulously plan the production process... Glenn Forbes, the set designer, thought that this made the show look cheap..." |
| **GT:** pulled pork, brisket, pork, meat  
**Pred:** beef | **GT:** acton, london, high street  
**Pred:** taipei |  
**GT:** steam, steamed, pan fry, boil  
**Pred:** grill | **GT:** 427 Acton Orjalan VNS7365 First TFDL5Z  
**Pred:** taipei |
| **Q:** What is the meat called on the sandwich?  
**GT:** pulled pork, brisket, pork, meat  
**Pred:** beef | **Q:** How would you cook this side dish?  
**GT:** acted, london, high street  
**Pred:** taipei |  
**Q:** Where is this bus headed to?  
**GT:** acton, london, high street  
**Pred:** taipei | **Q:** Who staged this room?  
**GT:** staged 4 more, design, stage4more  
**Pred:** home depot |
### Failures Related to Generative Question Answering

| Q: Is this red wine or grape juice? | GT: red wine, wine | Pred: grape juice | C: A woman holding two wine glasses, one in each of her hands. |
| Q: What type of car is this? | GT: old, vintage, wood car, station wagon | Pred: t | C: A classic car with a lady inside sitting in a parking lot. |
| Q: What is the name of this type of small oven? | GT: toaster, toaster oven, microwave oven, ge | Pred: convection | C: A tray of muffins sits in an open oven while two more sit on plates. |
| Q: How might this be prepared? | GT: fried, pan, frypan | Pred: grilled | C: A plate of french toast and breakfast potatoes. |
| Q: What is the object of this game? | GT: score, hit ball run base, computation, run base | Pred: run | C: A lot of seagulls flying around at the beach. |

### Failures Related to Ambiguous Answer Annotation

| Q: Name the model of train shown in this picture? | GT: subway, lionel, passenger, commuter | Pred: commuter | C: A red train traveling past a white train. |
| Q: What is the man doing with his phone? | GT: watch video, picture, video tape, take photo | Pred: take picture | C: A person is holding up their cell phone to take a picture. |
| Q: How might this be prepared? | GT: fried, pan, frypan | Pred: grilled | C: A plate of french toast and breakfast potatoes. |
| Q: How would you dress for this setting? | GT: short, bath suit, bikini, summer | Pred: swimsuit | C: A lot of seagulls flying around at the beach. |

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**More Examples:**
- **Q:** Is this red wine or grape juice?  
  **GT:** red wine, wine  
  **Pred:** grape juice  
  **C:** A woman holding two wine glasses, one in each of her hands.  
- **Q:** What type of car is this?  
  **GT:** old, vintage, wood car, station wagon  
  **Pred:** t  
  **C:** A classic car with a lady inside sitting in a parking lot.  
- **Q:** What is the name of this type of small oven?  
  **GT:** toaster, toaster oven, microwave oven, ge  
  **Pred:** convection  
  **C:** A tray of muffins sits in an open oven while two more sit on plates.  
- **Q:** How might this be prepared?  
  **GT:** fried, pan, frypan  
  **Pred:** grilled  
  **C:** A plate of french toast and breakfast potatoes.  
- **Q:** What is the object of this game?  
  **GT:** score, hit ball run base, computation, run base  
  **Pred:** run  
  **C:** A baseball player is running to a base.