Neural Mask Generator: Learning to Generate Adaptive Word Maskings for Language Model Adaptation

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Abstract

We propose a method to automatically generate domain- and task-adaptive maskings of the given text for self-supervised pre-training, such that we can effectively adapt the language model to a particular target task (e.g. question answering). Specifically, we present a novel reinforcement learning-based framework which learns the masking policy, such that using the generated masks for further pre-training of the target language model helps improve task performance on unseen texts. We use off-policy actor-critic with entropy regularization and experience replay for reinforcement learning, and propose a Transformer-based policy network that can consider the relative importance of words in a given text. We validate our Neural Mask Generator (NMG) on several question answering and text classification datasets using BERT and DistilBERT as the language models, on which it outperforms rule-based masking strategies, by automatically learning optimal adaptive maskings.

1 Introduction

The recent success of the language model pre-training approaches (Devlin et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2018; Radford et al., 2019; Raffel et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019), which train language models on diverse text corpora with self-supervised or multi-task learning, have brought huge performance improvements on several natural language understanding (NLU) tasks (Wang et al., 2019; Rajpurkar et al., 2016). The key to this success is their ability to learn generalizable text embeddings that achieve near optimal performance on diverse tasks with only a few additional steps of fine-tuning on each downstream task.

Most of the existing works on language model aim to obtain a universal language model that can address nearly the entire set of available natural language tasks on heterogeneous domains. Although this train-once and use-anywhere approach has been shown to be helpful for various natural language tasks (Devlin et al., 2019; Radford et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2019; Raffel et al., 2019), there have been considerable needs on adapting the learned language models to domain-specific corpora (e.g. healthcare or legal). Such domains may contain new entities that are not included in the common text corpora, and may contain only a small amount of labeled data as obtaining annotation on them may require expert knowledge. Some recent works (Sun et al., 2019a; Lee et al., 2019; Beltagy et al., 2019; Gururangan et al., 2020) suggest to further pre-train the language model with self-supervised tasks on the domain-specific text corpus for adaptation, and show that it yields improved performance on tasks from the target domain.

Masked Language Models (MLMs) objective in BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) has shown to be effective for the language model to learn the knowledge of the language in a bi-directional manner (Vaswani et al., 2017). In general, masks in MLMs are sampled at random (Devlin et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019c), which seems reasonable for learning a generic language model pre-trained from scratch, since it needs to learn about as many words in the vocabulary as possible in diverse contexts.

However, in the case of further pre-training of the already pre-trained language model, such a conventional selection method may lead a domain adaptation in an inefficient way, since not all words will be equally important for the target task. Repeatedly learning for uninformative instances thus will be wasteful. Instead, as done with instance selection (Ngiam et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2019), it will be more effective if the masks focus on the most important words for the target domain, and for the specific

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\(^1\)Code is available at github.com/Nardien/NMG.
NLU task at hands. How can we then obtain such a masking strategy to train the MLMs?

Several works (Joshi et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019b,c; Glass et al., 2019) propose rule-based masking strategies which work better than random masking (Devlin et al., 2019) when applied to language model pre-training from scratch. Based on those works, we assume that adaptation of the pre-trained language model can be improved via a learned masking policy which selects the words to mask. Yet, existing models are inevitably suboptimal since they do not consider the target domain and the task. To overcome this limitation, in this work, we propose to adaptively generate mask by learning the optimal masking policy for the given task, for the task-adaptive pre-training (Gururangan et al., 2020) of the language model.

As described in Figure 1, we want to further pre-train the language model on a specific task with a task-dependent masking policy, such that it directs the solution to the set of parameters that can better adapt to the target domain, while task-agnostic random policy leads the model to an arbitrary solution. To tackle this problem, we pose the given learning problem as a meta-learning problem where we learn the task-adaptive mask-generating policy, such that the model learned with the masking strategy obtains high accuracy on the target task. We refer to this meta-learner as the Neural Mask Generator (NMG). Specifically, we formulate mask learning as a bi-level problem where we pre-train and fine-tune a target language model in the inner loop, and learn the NMG at the outer loop, and solve it using reinforcement learning. We validate our method on diverse NLU tasks, including question answering and text classification. The results show that the models trained using our NMG outperforms the models pre-trained using rule-based masking strategies, as well as finds a proper adaptive masking strategy for each domain and task.

Our contribution is threefold:

- We propose to learn the mask generating policy for further pre-training of masked language models, to obtain optimal maskings that focus on the most important words for the given text domain and the NLU task.
- We formulate the problem of learning the task-adaptive mask generating policy as a bi-level meta-learning framework which learns the LM in the inner loop, and the mask generator at the outer loop using reinforcement learning.
- We validate our mask generator on diverse tasks across various domains, and show that it outperforms heuristic masking strategies by learning an optimal task-adaptive masking for each LM and domain. We also perform empirical studies on various heuristic masking strategies on the language model adaptation.

### 2 Related Work

**Language Model Pre-training** Ever since Howard and Ruder (2018) suggested language model pre-training with multi-task learning, inspired by the success of fine-tuning on ImageNet pre-trained models on computer vision tasks (Liu et al., 2019b), research on the representation learning for natural language understanding tasks have focused on obtaining a global language model that can generalize to any NLU tasks. A popular approach is to use self-supervised pre-training tasks for learning the contextualized embedding from large unannotated text corpora using auto-regressive (Peters et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019) or auto-encoding (Devlin et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019c) language modeling. Following the success of the Masked Language Model (MLM) from (Devlin et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019c), several works have proposed different model architecture (Lan et al., 2019; Raffel et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2020) and pre-training objectives (Sun et al., 2019b,c; Liu et al., 2019c; Joshi et al., 2019; Glass et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2019), to improve upon its performance. Some works have also proposed alternative masking policies for the MLM pre-training over random sampling, such as SpanBERT (Joshi et al., 2019)
and ERNIE (Sun et al., 2019b). Yet, none of the existing approaches have tried to learn the task-adaptive mask in a context-dependent manner which is the problem we target in this work.

Language Model Adaptation  
Pre-training the language model on the target domain, then fine-tuning on downstream tasks, is the most simple yet successful approach for adapting the language model to a specific task. Some studies (Lee et al., 2019; Beltagy et al., 2019; Whang et al., 2019) have shown the advantage of further pre-training the language model on a large unlabeled text corpus collected from a specific domain. Moreover, Sun et al. (2019a) and Han and Eisenstein (2019) investigate the effectiveness of further pre-training of the language model on small domain-related text corpora. Recently, Gururangan et al. (2020) integrates prior works and defines domain-adaptive pre-training and task-adaptive pre-training, showing that domain adaptation of the language model can be done with additional pre-training with the MLM objective on a domain-related text corpus, as well as a smaller but directly task-relevant text corpus.

Meta-Learning  
Meta-learning (Thrun and Pratt, 1998) aims to train the model to generalize over a distribution of tasks, such that it can generalize to an unseen task. There exist large number of different approaches to train the meta-learner (Santoro et al., 2016; Vinyals et al., 2016; Ravi and Larochelle, 2017; Finn et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019a). However, existing meta-learning approaches do not scale well to the training of large models such as masked language models. Thus, instead of the existing meta-learning method such a gradient based approach, we formulate the problem as a bi-level problem (Franceschi et al., 2018) of learning the language model in the inner loop and the mask at the outer loop, and solving it using reinforcement learning. Such optimization of the outer objective using RL is similar to the formulation used in previous works on neural architecture search (Zoph and Le, 2017; Zoph et al., 2018).

3 Problem Statement

We now describe how to formulate the problem of learning to generate masks for the Masked Language Model (MLM) as a bi-level optimization problem. Then, we describe how we can reformulate it as a reinforcement learning problem.

3.1 Masked Language Model

For pre-training of the language models, we need an unannotated text corpus $S = \{s^{(1)}, \ldots, s^{(T)}\}$. Here the $s = [w_1, w_2, \ldots, w_N]$ is the context, whose element $w_i \in s$ is a single word or token. To formulate the meta-learning objective, we assume each context corpus as the part of the task $T = \{S, D_{tr}, D_{te}\}$ consisting of the context and its corresponding task dataset. For the MLM, we need to generate a noisy version of $s$, which we denote as $\hat{s}$. Let $z_i$ be the indicator of masking $i$-th word of $s$. If $z_i = 1$, $i$-th word is replaced with the [MASK] token. The objective of the MLM then is to predict the original token of each [MASK] token. Therefore, we can formulate this problem as follows:

$$\min_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{MLM}(\theta; S, \hat{S}) = \sum_{s, \hat{s} \in S} - \log p_{\theta}(\hat{s}|s)$$

where $\theta$ is the parameter of the language model and $\hat{s}$ is the original tokens of each [MASK] token, and $\hat{S}$ is the set of masked contexts. Following the formulation from (Yang et al., 2019), we can approximate the MLM objective with $z_i$ as follows:

$$\max_{\theta} \log p_{\theta}(s|\hat{s}) \approx \sum_{i=1}^{N} z_i \log p_{\theta}(w_i|\hat{s}) \tag{1}$$

$$p_{\theta}(w_i|\hat{s}) = \frac{\exp(H_\theta(\hat{s})^\top e(w_i))}{\sum_{w'} \exp(H_\theta(\hat{s})^\top e(w'))}$$

where $H_\theta(\hat{s})$ indicates the contextualized representation of $\hat{s}$ from the language model layer (e.g. Pre-trained Transformer layers in (Devlin et al., 2019)), and $e(w_i)$ denotes the embedding of word $w_i$ from the last prediction layer. Our objective then is to learn the optimal policy for determining each mask indicator $z_i$, which we will describe in detail in the next subsection.

3.2 Bi-level formulation

We now describe how to formulate this learning problem as a bi-level problem consisting of inner and outer level objectives. Consider that $z_i$ can be represented using an arbitrary function $\mathcal{F}$ parameterized with $\lambda$:

$$\pi_\lambda(a_t = i|s) = \mathcal{F}_\lambda(w_i) \tag{2}$$

$$a_\lambda = \arg\max_a \prod_t \pi_\lambda(a_t|s) \tag{3}$$

$$z_{\lambda,i} = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } i \in a_\lambda \\ 0, & \text{if } i \notin a_\lambda \end{cases} \tag{4}$$

where $\pi_\lambda(a_t = i|s)$ is the probability of masking $i$-th word $w_i$ from $s$, and $a_\lambda$ indicates the list of word
indices to be masked and $z_{\lambda,j}$ is the mask indicator parameterized by the parameter $\lambda$. The details of corresponding equations will be described in section 3.3. Therefore, the MLM objective has been slightly changed from its original form, into the following objective:

$$\theta(\lambda) = \arg\min_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{MLM}(\theta, \lambda; S, \hat{S})$$

$$= \arg\max_{\theta} \sum_{s \in S} \log p_{\theta}(\hat{s}|s)$$

(5)

where the masked context $\hat{s}$ is parameterized by the parameter $\lambda$. Now assume that we have found the optimal parameter $\theta(\lambda)$ for language model from equation 5. Then, we need to fine-tune the language model on the downstream task. Although linear heads used in both pre-training and fine-tuning are different, we describe the parameter of both models as $\theta(\lambda)$ for simplicity. Following the bi-level framework notation described in (Franceschi et al., 2018), the inner objective function for fine-tuning can be written as follows:

$$\min_{\theta(\lambda)} \mathcal{L}_{\text{train}}(\theta(\lambda), \lambda) = \sum_{(x,y) \in D_{te}} l(g_{\theta(\lambda)}(x), y)$$

(6)

where $D_{te}$ is a training dataset, $l$ is the loss function of the supervised learning, and $g_{\theta(\lambda)}$ is the function representation of downstream task solver model. In case of question answering task, each $x$ consists of a context and corresponding question and $y$ is the corresponding answer spans.

Assume that we find optimal parameter $\theta^*(\lambda)$ from supervised task fine-tuning. Then, the final outer-level objective can be described as follows:

$$\min_{\lambda} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\lambda, \theta^*(\lambda)) = \sum_{(x,y) \in D_{te}} l(g_{\theta^*(\lambda)}(x), y)$$

$$\text{s.t.} \quad \theta^*(\lambda) = \arg\min_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{\text{train}}(\theta(\lambda), \lambda)$$

$$\text{and} \quad \theta(\lambda) = \arg\min_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{MLM}(\theta, \lambda)$$

(7)

This will allow us to obtain the optimal parameter $\lambda^*$ which minimizes the task objective function on a test dataset $D_{te}$.

Although the outer objective is differentiable, we formulate the optimization problem of the outer objective as a reinforcement learning problem to avoid excessive computation cost caused by the two constraint terms.

### Justification of Reinforcement Learning

In this paragraph, we explain why we use the Reinforcement Learning (RL) instead of the differentiable method to train the parameter $\lambda$. As indicated in the equation 7, our inner loop includes consecutive two steps of language model training. The NMG model $\lambda$ is addressed to the pre-training step rather than the task fine-tuning step. Therefore, the direct differentiation of the outer objective contains two second-derivative terms for both the MLM loss $\mathcal{L}_{MLM}$ and the task train loss $\mathcal{L}_{\text{train}}$. With a single-step approximation, the derivative of the outer objective is approximated as follows:

$$\nabla_{\lambda} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\lambda, \theta^*(\lambda)) \approx \nabla_{\lambda} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\lambda, \tilde{\theta}^*(\lambda))$$

$$- \alpha \nabla_{\lambda, \theta}^2 \mathcal{L}_{MLM}(\theta, \lambda) \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\tilde{\theta}^*(\lambda), \lambda)$$

$$- \beta \nabla_{\lambda, \tilde{\theta}(\lambda)}^2 \mathcal{L}_{\text{train}}(\tilde{\theta}(\lambda), \lambda) \nabla_{\tilde{\theta}(\lambda)} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\tilde{\theta}(\lambda), \lambda)$$

where $\tilde{\theta}(\lambda) = \theta - \alpha \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{MLM}(\theta, \lambda), \tilde{\theta}^*(\lambda) = \tilde{\theta}(\lambda) - \beta \nabla_{\tilde{\theta}(\lambda)} \mathcal{L}_{\text{train}}(\tilde{\theta}(\lambda), \lambda)$ are approximated parameters, and $\alpha, \beta$ are learning rates. Such gradient estimation requires high computational costs since it includes the computation of Hessian-product vectors of the massive language model’s parameters approximated as 110 millions (Finn et al., 2017; Devlin et al., 2019).

Instead, we can address the first-order approximation ($\alpha = 0, \beta = 0$) to the derivative of the outer objective to avoid second-order derivative computation as follows:

$$\nabla_{\lambda} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\lambda, \theta^*(\lambda)) \approx \nabla_{\lambda} \mathcal{L}_{\text{test}}(\theta)$$

where $\theta^*(\lambda)$ is approximated to $\theta$. Such approximation trivially results in a meaningless optimization since it ignores the pre-training step induced by the parameter $\lambda$, which decides the masking policy (Liu et al., 2019a). Therefore, we approach solving this optimization problem with RL instead of the differential method to avoid such an issue. In the next section, we introduce how we formulate this problem as the RL with the outer objective as a non-differentiable reward.

### 3.3 Reinforcement learning formulation

We now propose a reinforcement learning (RL) framework, which given the context $s$ as the state, decides on the actions $a = \{a_1, \cdots, a_T\}$ where $T$ is the number of masked tokens in the given context, each $a_t \in [1, N]$ is the token index that indicates a decision on masking the token $w_{a_t}$ fol-
failing equation 4, and \( a_1 \neq a_2 \neq \cdots \neq a_T \). The objective of the RL agent then is to find an optimal masking policy that minimizes \( E(\lambda, \theta) \) from the section 3.2. In addition, minimizing \( E(\lambda, \theta) \) on \( D_{te} \) can be seen as maximizing its performance. Therefore, the objective is the maximization of the performance of the model on \( D_{te} \). We can induce it by setting the reward \( R \) as the accuracy improvement on \( D_{te} \). We will describe the detail of the reward design in section 4.

In general RL formulation (Sutton and Barto, 2018) following Markov Decision Process (MDP), state transition probability can be described as \( p(s_{t+1}|s_t, a_t) \). The probability of masking \( T \) tokens is formalized as \( p(\hat{s}|s) = \prod_{t=1}^{T} p(s_{t+1}|s_t, a_t) \), where \( s \) consists of \( T \) number of [MASK] tokens. Although the representation of \( s_t \) and \( s_{t+1} \) are slightly different because of the addition of [MASK] token, we can approximate them as \( s_t \approx s_{t+1} \) following the approximation in equation 1, which inductively approximates representations after each word masking as a representation of original context.

Therefore, we can approximate the probability of masking \( T \) tokens from the MDP problem to the problem without state-transition formulation as follows:

\[
p(\hat{s}|s) = \prod_{t=1}^{T} p(s_{t+1}|s_t, a_t) \approx \prod_{t=1}^{T} \pi(a_t|s)
\]

where \( a_t \) denotes the index of masked word included in the context \( s \) and \( \pi(\cdot|s) \) is the masking policy of the agent. By this approximation, we do not need to consider the trajectory along the temporal horizon, which makes the problem much easier. Instead, we approximate the problem as the task of selecting multiple discrete actions simultaneously for the same state. We approximate the policy with neural network parameterized by \( \lambda \) as \( \pi_\lambda(a|s) \). As in equations 3 and 4, the mask \( z_{\lambda,i} \) is determined by actions generated from the neural policy \( \pi_\lambda(a|s) \). In the next section, we will describe how to train the Neural Mask Generator to generate the neural policy \( \pi_\lambda(a|s) \) maximizing the reward \( R \) using RL in Section 4.

4 Neural Mask Generator

In this section, we describe our model, Neural Mask Generator (NMG), which learns the masking policy to generate an optimal mask on an unseen context using deep RL with the detailed description of the framework setup. The overview of the meta mask generator framework is shown in Figure 2. For detailed descriptions of the approaches, the procedures of both training and test phase, and algorithm, please see Appendix A.

4.1 Reinforcement Learning Details

Model Architecture The probability of selecting \( i \)-th word \( w_i \) of \( s \) as \( t \)-th action \( a_t \) can be described as \( \pi_\lambda(a_t = i|s) \), where \( \sum_i \pi_\lambda(a_t = i|s) = 1 \). Instead of \( F_\lambda \) in equation 2, the neural policy from the NMG is given as follows:

\[
\pi_\lambda(a_t = i|s) = \frac{\exp(f_\lambda(H_\theta'(s)_i))}{\sum_i \exp(f_\lambda(H_\theta'(s)_i))}
\]

where \( f_\lambda \) is a deep neural network parameterized by \( \lambda \), which has a self-attention layer (Vaswani et al., 2017) followed by linear layers with gelu activation (Hendrycks and Gimpel, 2016), and \( H_\theta'(s)_i \) is the contextualized representation of \( w_i \) of context \( s \) from the frozen language model layer \( \theta' \). Note that \( \theta' \) is shared with the target language model \( \theta \) and not trained during the NMG training. Further, \( f_\lambda(H_\theta'(s)_i) \) outputs the scalar logit of the \( w_i \), and the final probabilistic policy is computed by the softmax function.

Training Objective We train the NMG model using the Advantage Actor-Critic method (Mnih et al., 2016) with the value estimator. Furthermore, we resort to off-policy learning (Degris et al., 2012) such that the agent can explore the optimal policy based on its past experiences. To this end, we leverage a prioritized experience replay, in which we store every state, action, reward, and old-policy pairs (Mnih et al., 2013), and sample them based on their absolute value of the advantage (Schaul et al., 2016). We use importance sampling to estimate the
value of the target policy $\pi_\lambda$ with the samples from the behavior policy $\pi_{\lambda_{old}}$, which are sampled from the replay buffer (Degris et al., 2012; Schulman et al., 2015, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). To sum up, the objectives for both policy and value network are as follows:

$$L_{policy} = \sum_{(s,a,R,\pi_{\lambda_{old}})} -\frac{\pi_\lambda(a|s)}{\pi_{\lambda_{old}}(a|s)} (R - V_\lambda(s)) - \alpha H(\pi_\lambda(a|s))$$

$$L_{value} = \sum_{(s,a,R,\pi_{\lambda_{old}})} \frac{1}{2} (R - V_\lambda(s))^2$$  \hspace{0.5cm} (9)

where the $(s, a, R, \pi_{\lambda_{old}})$ is set of sampled replays from the replay buffer. $H(\pi_\lambda(a|s)) = -\sum \pi_\lambda(a_t|s) \log \pi_\lambda(a_t|s)$, and $\alpha$ is a hyperparameter for entropy regularization. $V_\lambda(s)$ is an estimated value of the state $s$. The value network consists of linear layers with activation function after mean pooling $\frac{1}{N} \sum H(r_t(s))$.

To summarize, the outer-level objective for updating the NMG parameter $\lambda$ can be written as follows:

$$\min_\lambda L_{policy} + L_{value}$$ \hspace{0.5cm} (10)

At each episode of meta-training, we update the NMG parameter $\lambda$ by optimizing the above objective function.

**Reward Design and Self-Play** As in Section 3.3, the reward function is considered as the accuracy improvement on the test set $D_{te}$. Therefore, the pre-training step (equation 5) and the fine-tuning then evaluation step (equation 6, 7) should be done to get the reward in every episodes.

Since using the full size of dataset in the inner loop is generally not feasible, we randomly sample smaller sub-task $T' = \{S', D_{tr}, D_{val}\}$ from $T$ at every episode. For the evaluation, we randomly split the training set $D_{tr}$ to generate a hold-out validation set $D_{val}$ and replace $D_{te}$ in equation 7 to $D_{val}$ while meta-training where $D_{te}$ is unobservable. We use a sufficiently large hold-out validation set $D_{val}$ to prevent the masking policy from over-fitting to $D_{val}$. We assume that the meta-learner NMG also performs well on $T$ if it is trained on diverse sub-tasks $T'$ where $|T| \gg |T'|$.

The problem to be considered for using diverse sub-tasks is that the NMG model encounters different sub-task $T'$ at every new episode. Since $T'$ determines the state distribution $S'$ and the data $D_{te}$ to be trained, it results in the reward scale problem that the expectation of the validation accuracy on $D_{val}$ varies depending on the composition of $T'$ then makes it harder to evaluate the performance increment of the neural policy across episodes.

To address this problem, we introduce the random policy as an opponent policy to evaluate the neural policy relative to it. Therefore, the reward $R$ is defined as $sgn(r - b)$, where $sgn$ is the sign function, $r$ and $b$ are the accuracy score on $D_{val}$ from neural and random policy respectively. However, the random policy may be too weak as the opponent. To overcome this limitation, we add another neural policy as an additional opponent to induce the zero-sum game of two learning agent by the concept of the self-play algorithm (Wei et al., 2017; Grau-Moya et al., 2018).

Then, three distinct policies are compared with each other during episodes and two neural policies are individually trained. Furthermore, in each neural agent training, only actions corresponding to disjoint comparing with others are stored in a global replay buffer for a more accurate reward assignment of each action.

**Continual Adaptive Learning** For fair comparison at every episode, the same language model should be used to evaluate the policy. Initializing the language model before the start of each inner loop can be the simplest choice to handle this. However, since we pre-train the language model for only few steps during each episode of meta-training, the model is always evaluated around the original language model domain (see Figure 1). To avoid this, at each episode, the language model which is pre-trained by the NMG model of former step is continually loaded instead of the fixed checkpoint except for the first episode. By this, we intend that our agent learns the optimal policy of various environments. Furthermore, the agent can learn dynamic policy based on the learned degree of the target language model.

**5 Experiment**

We now experimentally validate our Neural Mask Generator (NMG) model on multiple NLU tasks, including question answering and text classification tasks using two different language models, and analyze its behaviors. In Section 5.1, we evaluate the NMG with several baselines. Then, we evaluate the effect of the specific design choices made for our model through ablation studies in Section 5.2.
Finally, we analyze how the policy learned by the NMG model works in Section 5.3.

**Tasks and Datasets** For question answering, we use three datasets, namely SQuAD v1.1 (Rajpurkar et al., 2016), NewsQA (Trischler et al., 2017), and emrQA (Pampari et al., 2018) to validate our model. We use the MRQA\(^2\) version for both SQuAD and NewsQA to sustain a coherency. We also preprocess emrQA to fit the format of other datasets. We use a standard evaluation metric named Exact-Matchs (EM) and F1 score for question answering task. For text classification, we use IMDb (Maas et al., 2011) and ChemProt (Kringelum et al., 2016), following the experimental settings of (Gururangan et al., 2020).

**Baselines** According to Devlin et al. (2019) and Joshi et al. (2019), training the language models with difficult objectives is much more beneficial when pre-training from scratch. To test whether it is also the case for task-adaptive pre-training, we experiment with two heuristic masking strategies, which we refer to as whole-random and span-random. In addition, we also tested the named entity masking proposed by Sun et al. (2019b) (entity-random). Below is the complete list of the heuristic baselines we compare against in the experiments.

1) **No-PT** A baseline without any further pre-training of the language model.
2) **Random** A random masking strategy introduced in BERT (Devlin et al., 2019).
3) **Whole-Random** A random masking strategy which masks the entire word instead of the token (sub-word). This method is introduced by the authors of BERT (Devlin et al., 2019)\(^3\).
4) **Span-Random** A random masking strategy which selects multiple consecutive tokens.
5) **Entity-Random** A random masking strategy which selects named entities with highest priorities, then randomly selects other tokens.
6) **Punctuation-Random** A random masking strategy which selects punctuation tokens first, then randomly selects other tokens.

**Implementation Details** For the language model \(\theta\), we use the same hyperparameters and architecture with DistilBERT (Sanh et al., 2019) model (66M params) and BERT\(_{BASE}\) (Devlin et al., 2019) model (110M params). Our implementation is based on the huggingface’s Pytorch implementation version (Wolf et al., 2019; Paszke et al., 2019). We load the pre-trained parameters from the checkpoint of each language model in meta-testing and the first episode of meta-training. As for the text corpus \(S\) to pre-train the language model, we use the collection of contexts from the given NLU task. We only use the Masked Language Model (MLM) objective for further pre-training. In the initial stage of meta-training, the NMG randomly selects actions for exploration. In meta-testing, it takes maximum probability indices as actions. We describe the details of language model training in Appendix B since we use different settings for each task and experiments. As for reinforcement learning (RL), we use the off-policy actor-critic method described in Section 4. For more details of the reinforcement learning framework, please see Appendix B.

**5.1 Results**
First of all, we need to discuss how the MLM works on the language model pre-training. In practice, the Cloze task (Taylor, 1953) benefits when words that need to learn are masked. However, for the MLM, we observed that the masking prevents learning the masked words in the language model. Rather the MLM learns representations and relations between non-masked words by predicting the masked words using them. In the case of adaptive pre-training, learning the domain-specific vocabulary is crucial for the domain adaptation. Therefore, masking out trivial words (e.g. Punctuations) may be more beneficial than masking out unique words (e.g. Named Entities) for the language model to learn the knowledge of a new domain. To see how it works, we experiment for punctuation-random, which masks only the punctuations, which are clearly useless for the domain adaptation.

In Table 1 and 2, we report the performance of baselines and our model on both question answering and text classification tasks. From the baseline results of Table 1, we speculate on the important aspects of a masking strategy for better adaptation. The whole-word, span and entity maskings often lead to better results since it makes the MLM objective more difficult and meaningful (Joshi et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019b). For instance, in emrQA, most words are tokenized to sub-words since contexts include a lot of unique words such as medical terminologies. Therefore, whole-word masking could be most suitable for domain adaptation on
Table 1: Performance of various masking strategies on the QA tasks. We run the model three times with different random seeds then report the average performances, with standard deviations (subscripts). The numbers in bold fonts denote best scores, and the numbers with underlines denote the second best scores.

| Base LM | Model          | SQuAD EM | SQuAD F1 | emrQA EM | emrQA F1 | NewsQA EM | NewsQA F1 |
|---------|----------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|         |                |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| BERT    | No PT          | 80.63±0.32 | 88.18±0.25 | 70.58±0.09 | 76.60±0.29 | 51.60±0.31 | 66.23±0.16 |
|         | Random         | 80.64±0.02 | 88.14±0.10 | 71.40±0.01 | 77.31±0.78 | 51.40±0.19 | 66.21±0.22 |
|         | Whole          | 80.73±0.23 | 88.20±0.11 | 71.65±0.33 | 77.84±0.31 | 51.12±0.28 | 65.94±0.51 |
|         | Span           | 80.69±0.19 | 88.19±0.11 | 70.87±0.38 | 76.76±0.33 | 51.17±0.63 | 65.93±0.50 |
|         | Entity         | 80.79±0.13 | 88.23±0.22 | 71.50±0.34 | 77.57±0.27 | 51.55±0.43 | 65.44±0.34 |
|         | Punct.         | 80.64±0.24 | 88.07±0.25 | 71.17±0.58 | 77.48±0.57 | 51.47±0.37 | 66.18±0.36 |
|         | NMG            | 80.83±0.20 | 88.28±0.21 | 71.84±0.68 | 77.49±0.55 | 51.81±0.33 | 66.57±0.48 |
| DistilBERT | No PT         | 76.75±0.41 | 85.13±0.26 | 68.52±0.39 | 75.00±0.53 | 48.61±0.39 | 63.45±0.56 |
|         | Random         | 76.46±0.35 | 84.92±0.17 | 69.02±0.40 | 75.70±0.29 | 48.52±0.46 | 63.06±0.21 |
|         | Whole          | 76.48±0.27 | 84.96±0.15 | 69.64±0.39 | 76.16±0.24 | 48.22±0.41 | 62.92±0.33 |
|         | Span           | 76.73±0.13 | 84.96±0.13 | 69.54±0.21 | 76.11±0.33 | 48.59±0.09 | 63.15±0.39 |
|         | Entity         | 76.94±0.36 | 84.78±0.21 | 69.25±0.43 | 75.98±0.39 | 48.19±0.20 | 62.97±0.16 |
|         | Punct.         | 76.85±0.09 | 85.16±0.02 | 69.41±0.21 | 76.14±0.18 | 48.58±0.26 | 63.14±0.20 |
|         | NMG            | 76.93±0.32 | 85.30±0.23 | 69.98±0.37 | 76.51±0.45 | 48.75±0.08 | 63.55±0.14 |

Table 2: Performance of various masking strategies on the text classification tasks. The presentation format is the same as in Table 1.

| Base LM | Model          | ChemProt Acc | IMDb Acc |
|---------|----------------|--------------|----------|
|         |                |              |          |
| BERT    | No PT          | 80.40±0.10   | 92.28±0.05 |
|         | Random         | 81.25±0.72   | 92.45±0.21 |
|         | Whole          | 80.18±0.20   | 92.55±0.04 |
|         | Span           | 78.06±0.72   | 92.40±0.10 |
|         | Entity         | 79.68±0.32   | 92.38±0.13 |
|         | Punct.         | 79.68±0.30   | 92.40±0.18 |
|         | NMG            | 81.66±0.37   | 92.53±0.03 |

Table 3: Ablation Results on the NewsQA dataset.

5.2 Ablation study

Effectiveness of Self-Play We further investigate the effectiveness of self-play by comparing it with the NMG model without self-play, where the model only competes with the random agent. We validate this on the NewsQA dataset. The result in Table 3 shows that the NMG model with self-play obtains better performance than its counterpart without self-play. This result verifies that competing with the opponent neural agent while learning helps the NMG model to learn better policy.

Continual Adaptation We also perform an ablation study of the continual adaptation learning. The result in Table 3 shows that the continual-adaptive masking strategy is significantly effective for the language model adaptation. The result suggests that helpful words for the language model to learn depends on the adaptation degree of it.

5.3 Analysis

Masked Word Statistics To analyze how our model performs, we measure the difference between which kind of word token is masked by both the random and neural policy on the pre-trained checkpoint. For qualitative analysis, we provide examples of masked tokens on the context in Figure 3. As shown in Figure 3, NMG tends to mask highly informative words such as *seminary* or *Islam*, which are parts of the answer spans. Furthermore, we analyze the masking behavior of our NMG by performing Part-of-Speech (POS) tagging on the masked words using spaCy.

<sup>4</sup>https://spacy.io
Neural (SQuAD) … holy cross (albeit not its official headquarters, which are in rome), its main seminary, moreau seminary, is located on the campus across st. joseph lake from the main building. old college, the oldest building on campus and located near the shore of st. mary lake, houses undergraduate …

Random (SQuAD) … holy cross (albeit not its official headquarters, which are in rome), its main seminary, moreau seminary, is located on the campus across st. joseph lake from the main building. old college, the oldest building on campus and located near the shore of st. mary lake, houses undergraduate …

Question What is the primary seminary of the Congregation of the Holy Cross? Answer Moreau Seminary

Neural (NewsQA) … iraqi officials have said the families were frightened by a series of killings and threats by muslim extremists ordering them to convert to islam or face death. fourteen christians have been slain in …

Random (NewsQA) … iraqi officials have said the families were frightened by a series of killings and threats by muslim extremists ordering them to convert to islam or face death. fourteen christians have been slain in …

Question What did extremists order them to do? Answer islam or face death.

Figure 3: Examples of masked tokens using our Neural Mask Generator (Neural) model and random sampling (Random). The tokens colored in red denote masked tokens by the model, and words highlighted with a yellow box is the answer to the given question. For more examples on multiple datasets, please see Appendix C.

Figure 4: Top-6 POS of Masked Words on NewsQA.

Figure 5: Reinforcement learning curves on NewsQA.

Learning Curves As already known, the RL-based methods often suffer from the instability problem. Therefore, we further analyze the learning curves of the NMG training in this section. In Figure 5, we plot three kinds of learning curves to show the detailed training process. Cumulative Regret indicates how many times the neural agent is defeated against the random agent until certain episodes. The grey plot indicates the worst case that the random agent always defeats against the neural agent. Entropy indicates the average entropy of policy for states given in a certain episode. Lower entropy means that the policy has a high probability of a few significant actions. Loss indicates the RL loss described in the equation 10. We ignore outliers in the loss plot for brevity.

From the entropy and loss plots, we can notice that the policy converges as learning proceeds. However, it seems that such convergence is not continually sustained. From the cumulative regret plot, we can observe that the neural policy still often loses against the random policy, although it is trained for a while. Such instability may come from the difficulty of the exact credit assignment on each action. Otherwise, continuous change of state distribution from the continual adaptive learning may hinder the neural policy’s convergence.

Even if the NMG shows the notable results, there is room for improvement on RL in terms of efficiency and stability. We leave it as the future work.

6 Conclusion

We proposed a novel framework which automatically generates an adaptive masking for masked language models based on the given context, for language model adaptation to low-resource domains. To this end, we proposed the Neural Mask Generator (NMG), which is trained with reinforcement learning to mask out words that are helpful for domain adaptation. We performed an empirical study of various rule-based masking strategies on multiple datasets for question answering and text classification tasks, which shows that the optimal masking strategy depends on both the language model and the domain. We then validated NMG against rule-based masking strategies, and the results show that it either outperforms, or obtains comparable performance to the best heuristic. Further qualitative analysis suggests that such good performance comes from its ability to adaptively mask meaningful words for the given task.
Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Samsung Advanced Institute of Technology (SAIT), the Engineering Research Center Program through the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) funded by the Korea Government MSIT (NRF2018R1A5A1059921), Institute for Information & communications Technology Promotion (IITP) grant funded by the Korea Government (MSIT) (No.2016-0-00563, Research on Adaptive Machine Learning Technology Development for Intelligent Autonomous Digital Companion, and No.2019-0-00075, Artificial Intelligence Graduate School Program (KAIST)), and a study on the “HPC Support” Project supported by the ‘Ministry of Science and ICT’ and NIPA.

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A Algorithms

We provide the pseudocode of algorithm for meta-training of the Neural Mask Generator (NMG).

In the case of meta-testing, \textit{InnerLoop} with the full task $T$, pre-trained language model checkpoint $\theta$, and trained policy $\pi_{\lambda}$ as inputs can be considered as the meta-testing algorithm.

\textbf{Algorithm 1 NMG Training Algorithm}

\begin{algorithmic}
\STATE Initialize random policy $\psi \sim \text{Uniform}$
\STATE Initialize two neural agents $\lambda, \lambda^{\text{op}}$ for Self-Play
\STATE Initialize replay buffer $D, D^{\text{op}}$
\STATE Arbitrarily split $D_{\text{tr}} \rightarrow D_{\text{tr}}, D_{\text{val}}$
\STATE Load pre-trained language model $\theta$
\WHILE{not done}
\STATE Randomly Sample $T'$ from $T$
\STATE $r_{\psi}, E_{\psi}, \theta(\psi) = \text{InnerLoop}(T', \theta, \psi)$
\STATE $r_{\text{op}}, E_{\lambda^{\text{op}}}, \theta(\lambda^{\text{op}}) = \text{InnerLoop}(T', \theta, \pi_{\lambda^{\text{op}}})$
\STATE $r, E_{\lambda}, \theta(\lambda) = \text{InnerLoop}(T', \theta, \pi_{\lambda})$
\STATE $A^{\text{op}} \leftarrow E_{\psi}, r_{\psi}, E, r_{\text{op}}, r_{\text{op}}$
\STATE $D^{\text{op}}, \lambda^{\text{op}} \leftarrow \text{OuterLoop}(D^{\text{op}}, A^{\text{op}}, \lambda^{\text{op}})$
\STATE $A \leftarrow E_{\psi}, r_{\psi}, E_{\text{op}}, r_{\text{op}}, E, r$
\STATE $D, \lambda \leftarrow \text{OuterLoop}(D, A, \lambda)$
\STATE $\theta \leftarrow \theta(\lambda)$
\ENDWHILE
\end{algorithmic}

\textbf{Algorithm 2 InnerLoop}

\begin{algorithmic}
\STATE \textbf{Input:}
\hspace{1em} Task $T$, LM $\theta$, Policy $\pi$
\STATE \textbf{Output:}
\hspace{1em} Episode buffer $E$, Accuracy $r$, LM $\theta(\lambda)$
\STATE Initialize episode buffer $E$
\STATE $\hat{S} = \{\}$, $S, D_{\text{tr}}, D_{\text{val}} \leftarrow T$
\FOR{$s$ in $S$}
\STATE Masking $s$ following equation 3, 4
\STATE $\hat{S} \leftarrow \hat{S} \cup \hat{s}$, $E \leftarrow E \cup (s, a, \pi)$
\ENDFOR
\STATE \# Actually, below two updates are done with mini-batch optimization with multiple steps
\STATE $\theta(\lambda) \leftarrow \theta - \nabla_{\theta} L_{\text{MLM}}(\theta, \lambda; S, \hat{S})$
\STATE $\theta^{\ast}(\lambda) \leftarrow \theta(\lambda) - \nabla_{\theta(\lambda)} L_{\text{train}}(\theta(\lambda), \lambda; D_{\text{tr}})$
\STATE Evaluate $\theta$ on $D_{\text{val}}$ and acquire $r$
\end{algorithmic}

B Hyperparameters

B.1 Reinforcement Learning (Outer Loop)

We describe detailed hyperparameters in Table 4 for reinforcement learning (RL). We use the prioritized experience replay (Schaul et al., 2016) with
Algorithm 3 OuterLoop

Input:
- $D$, $E$, $\psi$, $r$, $E_{opt}$, $r_{opt}$, $E$, $r$, Agent $\lambda$

Output:
- Replay buffer $D$, Trained Agent $\lambda$

```
$R \leftarrow \text{sgn}(r - r_{psi})$
```

```
for $(s, a)$ in $E$ do
  if $(s, a) \notin E \cap E_{opt}$ and $(s, a) \notin E \cap E_{psi}$ then
    $R \leftarrow \min(\text{sgn}(r - r_{psi}), \text{sgn}(r - r_{opt}))$
  else if $(s, a) \notin E \cap E_{opt}$ then
    $R \leftarrow \text{sgn}(r - r_{opt})$
  else if $(s, a) \notin E \cap E_{psi}$ then
    $R \leftarrow \text{sgn}(r - r_{psi})$
  else
    continue
  end if
  $D \leftarrow D \cup \{(s, a, R, \pi_{old})\}
```

end for

Sample a mini-batch $\{(s, a, R, \pi_{old})\}$ from $D$

```
$\lambda \leftarrow \lambda + \nabla_\lambda \mathcal{L}$ following equation 8, 9 using sampled replays
```

exponent value as 1. In addition, we address the concept of susampling (Mikolov et al., 2013) on replay sampling. Specifically, we divide the priority of each replay by the square root of word frequency within the corresponding context. For optimization, we use Adam (Kingma and Ba, 2015) optimizer to train the NMG model and its opponent (Self-Play).

| Hyperparameters    | Value |
|--------------------|-------|
| Learning Rate      | 0.0001|
| Number of Epochs   | 10    |
| Minibatch Size     | 64    |
| Replay Buffer Size | 50000 |
| Entropy Regularization | 0.01 |
| Maximum Episodes   | 200   |

Table 4: Hyperparameters for Reinforcement Learning Training (Outer Loop). QA is short for Question Answering and TC is short for Text Classification.

B.2 LM Training in Meta-Train (Inner Loop)

We describe detailed hyperparameters in Table 5 for language model (LM) training in the meta-training. In the case of pre-processing of pre-training dataset, we use the context of triplets in Question Answering and sentences in Text Classification. Especially for emrQA (Pampari et al., 2018), we preprocess it to be the same as other QA’s formats by removing yes-no and multiple answer type questions. Furthermore, we arbitrarily split a train dataset to a train and a validation set by 8 to 2 since Pampari et al. (2018) do not provide a separate validation set. For optimization, we used AdamW optimizer (Loshchilov and Hutter, 2019), with a linear learning rate scheduler. Each meta-training is done on the two Titan XP or RTX 2080 Ti GPUs and it costs maximum of 2 days in the case of BERT. The batch size is adequately selected according to the size of the data and the model.

B.3 LM Training in Meta-Test

We describe detailed hyperparameters in Table 6 for LM training meta-testing. In the meta-testing, we use same setting described in Section B.2 for pre-processing and optimization. The batch size is also adequately selected according to the size of the data and the model.

Regarding the pre-training epoch and the masking probability $p$ in meta-testing, we use two distinct settings for the baselines and NMG model. For the baselines, we train the LM for 1 epoch with $p = 0.15$ following a conventional setting. However, we observed that the fewer masking with a more pre-training epoch is much more beneficial in the meta-training on the task with long contexts since it makes the NMG evaluate actions more precisely. Therefore, for the NMG model, we train the LM for 3 epochs with $p = 0.05$, following the setting of the meta-training.

B.4 Neural Mask Generator Architecture

The policy network of the NMG model consists of the single self-attention layer and two linear layers. The self-attention layer follows the configuration of the transformer layer of BERT BASE. We omit the linear layers of the original transformer (Vaswani et al., 2017) implementation in our architecture. The hidden size of linear layers is 128 and gelu (Hendrycks and Gimpel, 2016) is used as an activation function. The value network also consists of the same linear layers after mean-pooling of word representations. The total number of parameters of the NMG model is approximately 2.5M, which is far smaller than the conventional language model.

B.5 Hyperparameter Searching

For searching proper hyperparameter, we use a manual tuning which tries conventional hyperparameters for the reinforcement learning (RL) and the language model (LM) training. A selection
Table 5: Hyperparameters for LM Training of Meta-Train (Inner Loop).

| Hyperparameters                          | Value                                                  |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Pre-Training Masking Probability         | 0.05                                                   |
| Pre-Training Learning Rate               | 0.000002                                               |
| Pre-Training Epoch                       | 3                                                      |
| Sampled Pre-training Dataset Size        | 200                                                    |
| Pre-Training Batch Size                  | Chosen from \{8, 16, 32\}                             |
| Maximum sequence length in Pre-Training  | 512 (QA) or 256 (TC)                                   |
| Fine-Tuning Learning Rate                | 0.000003 (QA) or 0.000002 (TC)                        |
| Fine-Tuning Epoch                        | 1 (QA) or 5 (TC)                                      |
| Maximum Training Set Size                | 1000                                                   |
| Validation set Size                      | 10000                                                  |
| Fine-Tuning Batch Size                   | Chosen from \{8, 16, 32\}                             |

Table 6: Hyperparameters for LM Training of Meta-Test.

| Hyperparameters                          | Value                                                  |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Pre-Training Masking Probability         | Chosen from \{0.05, 0.15\}                            |
| Pre-Training Learning Rate               | 0.000002                                               |
| Pre-Training Epoch                       | Chosen from \{1, 3\}                                   |
| Pre-Training Batch Size                  | Chosen from \{12, 16, 24\}                            |
| Maximum sequence length in Pre-Training  | 512 (QA) or 256 (TC)                                   |
| Fine-Tuning Learning Rate                | 0.000003 (QA) or 0.000002 (TC)                        |
| Fine-Tuning Epoch                        | 2 (QA) or 3 (TC)                                      |
| Fine-Tuning Batch Size                   | Chosen from \{12, 16, 32\}                            |

criterion depends on the result of the meta-testing. Especially, we set the criterion to F1 score and accuracy for question answering and classification task respectively.

C  More Examples

To show the masking strategy from our NMG model, we additionally append additional examples from various datasets used in our experiments.
**Figure 6:** SQuAD Examples of masked tokens using the Neural Mask Generator (NMG). The red mark and yellow box indicates masked tokens by the model and the answer given a question, respectively.

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**Context** [CLS] architecturally, the school has a catholic character. atop the main building's gold dome is a golden statue of the virgin mary. immediately in front of the main building and facing it, is a copper statue of christ with arms upraised with the legend “venite ad me omnes”.

next to the main building is the basilica of the sacred heart. immediately behind the basilica is the grotto, a marian place of prayer and reflection. It is a replica of the grotto at lourdes, france where the virgin mary reputedly appeared to saint bernadette soubirous in 1858. at the end of the main drive (and in a direct line that connects through 3 statues and the gold dome), is a simple, modern stone statue of mary. [SEP]

**Question 1** To whom did the Virgin Mary allegedly appear in 1858 in Lourdes France?
**Answer 1** Saint Bernadette Soubirous

**Question 2** What sits on top of the Main Building at Notre Dame?
**Answer 2** A golden statue of the Virgin Mary

**Question 3** What is the Grotto at Notre Dame?
**Answer 3** A Marian place of prayer and reflection

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**Context** [CLS] all of notre dame's undergraduate students are a part of one of the five undergraduate colleges at the school or are in the first year of studies program. the first year of studies program was established in 1962 to guide incoming freshmen in their first year at the school before they have declared a major. each student is given an academic advisor from the program who helps them to choose classes that give them exposure to any major in which they are interested. the program also includes a learning resource center which provides time management, collaborative learning, and subject tutoring. this program has been recognized previously, by u.s. news & world report, as outstanding. [SEP]

**Question 1** What was created at Notre Dame in 1962 to assist first year students?
**Answer 1** The First Year of Studies program

**Question 2** Which organization declared the First Year of Studies program at Notre Dame’s outstanding?
**Answer 2** U.S. News & World Report

**Question 3** How many colleges for undergraduates are at Notre Dame?
**Answer 3** Five

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**Context** [CLS] the university owns several centers around the world used for international studies and research, conferences abroad, and alumni support. the university has had a presence in london, england, since 1968. since 1998, its london center has been based in the former united university club at 1 suffolk street in trafalgar square. the center enables the colleges of arts & letters, business administration, science, engineering and the law school to develop their own programs in london, as well as hosting conferences and symposia. other global gateways are located in beijing, chicago, dublin, jerusalem and rome. [SEP]

**Question 1** In what year did Notre Dame first have a facility in England?
**Answer 1** 1968

**Question 2** Notre Dame has a center in Beijing, what is it referred to as?
**Answer 2** Global Gateways

**Question 3** In what year did the Suffolk Street location start to house a Notre Dame facility?
**Answer 3** 1998

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Figure 7: emrQA Examples of masked tokens using the Neural Mask Generator (NMG). The red mark and yellow box indicates masked tokens by the model and the answer given a question, respectively.
Figure 8: NewsQA Examples of masked tokens using the Neural Mask Generator (NMG). The red mark and yellow box indicates masked tokens by the model and the answer given a question, respectively.
Figure 9: ChemProt and IMDb Examples of masked tokens using the Neural Mask Generator (NMG). The red mark indicates masked tokens by the model.