Revisiting text decomposition methods for NLI-based factuality scoring of summaries

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Abstract

Scoring the factuality of a generated summary involves measuring the degree to which a target text contains factual information using the input document as support. Given the similarities in the problem formulation, previous work has shown that Natural Language Inference models can be effectively repurposed to perform this task. As these models are trained to score entailment at a sentence level, several recent studies have shown that decomposing either the input document or the summary into sentences helps with factuality scoring. But is fine-grained decomposition always a winning strategy? In this paper we systematically compare different granularities of decomposition – from document to sub-sentence level, and we show that the answer is no. Our results show that incorporating additional context can yield improvement, but that this does not necessarily apply to all datasets. We also show that small changes to previously proposed entailment-based scoring methods can result in better performance, highlighting the need for caution in model and methodology selection for downstream tasks.

1 Introduction

With improvements largely driven by recent advances in pre-trained language models (Vaswani et al., 2017; Radford et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2020), modern abstractive summarization models are capable of producing summaries that are both fluent and coherent. However, they are still prone to various forms of “hallucination”, generating statements that are not supported by the input text (Cao et al., 2018; Maynez et al., 2020). This has led to a growing interest in being able to accurately measure the degree to which machine-generated output is non-factual (Falke et al., 2019; Kryscinski et al., 2020; Pagnoni et al., 2021; Laban et al., 2022).

In factuality scoring and other closely related tasks such as fact verification (Vlachos and Riedel, 2014; Thorne et al., 2018), the objective is to assess whether or to what degree the claims in a given text can be supported by other “evidence” texts. Given this setup, previous work has drawn a parallel with the task of Natural Language Inference (NLI), which has a similar goal of determining whether the meaning of one text can be inferred (entailed) from another (Dagan et al., 2006). As a consequence, models trained on large NLI datasets (Bowman et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018; Nie et al., 2020) have often been successfully repurposed for the task of detecting factual inconsistencies in machine-generated summaries (Falke et al., 2019; Kryscinski et al., 2020; Maynez et al., 2020; Zhang and Bansal, 2021). It is now common that high-performance NLI models are trained on a combination of NLI and fact verification datasets (Nie et al., 2020; Schuster et al., 2021).

One way to repurpose NLI models for factuality scoring is to use the full text of the input and summary as the premise and hypothesis respectively, then take the factuality score to be a function of the model output distribution. However, NLI models are usually trained with sentence pairs as input, and can suffer performance degradation with the longer contexts that arise in summarization (Laban et al., 2022; Honovich et al., 2022). Worse yet, the majority of modern NLI models are based on architectures such as the Transformer (Vaswani et al., 2017) that use fixed-length input sizes, and it may not be possible for a full document and summary pair to fit into this context.

Another approach to NLI-based factuality scoring is grounded in the idea of first decomposing the input text into finer levels of granularity, followed by a later score aggregation step. Falke et al. (2019) proposed a scoring method based on sentence level decomposition, but concluded that the NLI models at the time were not robust enough for the task. However, recently both Schuster et al. (2022) and Laban et al. (2022) have shown that variations on this decomposition-based strategy, in combination
with the improved performance of modern NLI models, can produce systems that perform well at the task of detecting factual inconsistencies in generated summaries.

In this work we revisit existing studies of NLI-based factuality scoring and perform a systematic comparison of input-summary decomposition methodologies at different levels of granularity – from document to sub-sentence level. We show that contrary to previous findings, adding more context to the premise (the source document) can sometimes outperform approaches based on a more fine-grained decomposition. We also find that small changes to the factuality scoring function can lead to a substantial increase in performance, but that model performance does not necessarily generalize across benchmarks that use different metrics (even when applied to the same underlying data). Our results highlight the need for caution and additional evaluation when selecting a model and methodology for downstream tasks.

2 Decomposition-based factuality scoring

In this work we are primarily concerned with referenceless factuality scoring of document summaries. To do so, we therefore require a function from an input \((document, summary)\) pair to a score value \(Z \in \mathbb{R}\). NLI models typically learn a function that maps a pair of input text strings \((X_{\text{prem}}, X_{\text{hyp}})\), commonly referred to as the premise and hypothesis, to a probability distribution over the output classes entailment, neutral, or contradiction. One simple way to repurpose NLI models for factuality scoring is with \((document, summary)\) as \((X_{\text{prem}}, X_{\text{hyp}})\), and to take the score \(Z\) to be some function \(f_Z(p_e, p_n, p_c)\) over the probability values given for entailment \((p_e)\), neutral \((p_n)\), or contradiction \((p_c)\). We experiment with three decomposition-based scoring methods, described in the following sections.

2.1 SummaC

The SummaC models proposed by Laban et al. (2022) decompose the document and summary into sentences. A document is split into \(M\) sentences labelled \(D_1, \ldots, D_M\), and a summary into \(N\) sentences \(S_1, \ldots, S_N\). Each \((D_n, S_n)\) combination is then passed through an NLI model, with scores computed using a function of the output probabilities. This decomposition results in an \(M \times N\) score matrix for each \((document, summary)\). Laban et al. (2022) describe two model classes, which differ in how they process the score matrix to create a final factuality score for a summary:¹

**Summac Zero-Shot (SC\(_{ZS}\))**: each summary sentence is first scored by taking the maximum score value computed against any of the document sentences \((\max\) over each column in the \(M \times N\) matrix). These summary sentence scores are then averaged to compute the final score.

**Summac Convolution (SC\(_{Conv}\))**: the pair matrix is converted to a histogram by placing the score values into evenly spaced bins, then the resulting matrix is passed through a 1-D convolutional layer. We refer the reader to Laban et al. (2022) for further details.

We observe that although Laban et al. (2022) indicate that the scoring function \(f_Z\) that they use is given by \(f_Z = p_e\), the default parameters in their publicly available code³ describe \(f_Z = p_e - p_c\). We compare these two variants of the score function \(f_Z\) in § 3.1.

2.2 SENTLi

Similarly to Laban et al. (2022), Schuster et al. (2022) propose a factuality scoring model that assigns a score for each summary sentence \(S_n\) according to the maximum score across all \((D_1, \ldots, M, S_n)\) pairs. Each \((D_m, S_n)\) is scored using a custom NLI model based on T5 (Raffel et al., 2020) and fine-tuned on a combination of the SNLI (Bowman et al., 2015), MNLI (Williams et al., 2018), ANLI (Nie et al., 2020), FEVER (Thorner et al., 2018) and VitaminC (Schuster et al., 2021) datasets.

Final scores are either the average score for all \(S_1, \ldots, S_N\) in an aggregation method referred to as “soft aggregation”, or the minimum score across \(S_1, \ldots, S_N\) in their “hard aggregation” method. In addition, Schuster et al. (2022) propose an extension to this approach called “retrieve and rerank” (SENTrLiRR). Here they again first score all \((D_m, S_n)\) using an NLI model. For each \(S_n\), the top-K \(D_m\) are selected according to both the entailment and contradiction scores \(p_e\) and \(p_c\). The NLI

¹We note that generally the NLI models are not well-calibrated, and so these probability values may not necessarily have semantically meaningful interpretations, but empirically they can often be used directly in this manner.

²These models are agnostic to the particular NLI model being used for scoring, but the best performing model in the paper uses a version of ALBERT (Lan et al., 2020) fine-tuned on a combination of MNLI and VitaminC.

³https://github.com/tingofurro/summac
model is then presented with the same hypothesis \( S_n \), together with a concatenation of the top-\( K \) entailing and contradicting sentences, with the output used to create the final score that \( S_n \). For further details we refer the reader to Schuster et al. (2022).

### 2.3 Summarization Content Units (SCU)

Following Nenkova and Passonneau (2004) and Shapira et al. (2019), we take decomposition a step further and segment each summary into smaller units called Summarization Content Units (SCUs). In its original formulation, SCUs are hand-crafted short spans of text describing a single fact contained in one or more reference summaries\(^4\). As our evaluation data is not manually annotated with SCUs, we follow the method in Zhang and Bansal (2021), where the authors show that SCUs can be approximated using heuristics applied to the output of a Semantic Role Labeler. However, whereas these methods apply to reference-based evaluation of summaries, in the absence of human reference, here we adapt them to fit the referenceless evaluation scenario. We refer to our method of decomposition and scoring with SCUs as SCU\(_{ZS}\), and describe the details of the method in Appendix D.

### 3 Experiments and evaluation

We evaluate the performance of our models on the SummaC benchmark (Laban et al., 2022), which comprises of six datasets for summary inconsistency detection: CoGenSumm (CGS) (Falke et al., 2019), XSumFaith (XSF) (Maynez et al., 2020), Polytope (PT) (Huang et al., 2020), FactCC (FCC) (Kryscinski et al., 2020), SummEval (SE) (Fabbri et al., 2021), and FRANK (FR) (Pagnoni et al., 2021). Evaluation is standardized by casting each task as binary classification, and then measuring performance using balanced accuracy. As the NLI-based factuality scoring methods all output a scalar score value, we follow Laban et al. (2022) and tune thresholds separately for all methods and all datasets on the validation set, and report results using these threshold values on the test set. Although the FRANK dataset is part of SummaC, we also perform a separate evaluation of it using the original metrics of Pearson and Spearman correlations of the model output scores with (non-binary) human scores.

To assess the benefits of decomposing text for NLI-based factuality scoring, we compare the performance of the aforementioned decomposition methods with full text scoring, where either or both the source document or the summary has not been decomposed. We also test with a context length of several sentences, computed using a simplified version of the seNtLI\(_{RR}\) method that we refer to as TopK, as follows:

- First decompose the document and summary into individual sentences \((D_1, \ldots, D_M, S_1, \ldots, S_N)\), and score all combinations using an NLI model.
- For each \( S_n \), select the top-\( K \) sentences in \( D_1, \ldots, D_M \) according to \( p_e \).
- Concatenate these top-\( K \) sentences to form a new premise string.
- Run hypothesis \( S_n \) and the new premise through the NLI model, again taking \( p_e \) as the final score for \( S_n \).
- Compute the final factuality score as the average over the scores for each \( S_n \).

To split text into sentences we use spaCy (Honnibal et al., 2020). We note that Laban et al. (2022) used NLTK (Bird et al., 2009) for sentence-splitting, but this fails to correctly split sentences on some examples with bad punctuation (which are common in the FRANK dataset in particular\(^5\)). In all experiments, unless otherwise specified we use the NLI model from Schuster et al. (2021) that is fine-tuned on a combination of Vitamin-C and MNLI datasets\(^6\), which we refer to as ViTc. For fair comparison with Laban et al. (2022), we set the maximum “full document” context for the premise to be 500 tokens.

### 3.1 Results

Our main results are summarized in Table 1, with SummaC results at the top and FRANK results at the bottom. In general, we find that factuality scoring using \( f_Z = p_e \) has superior performance to \( f_Z = p_e - p_c \), for all levels of input granularity, and for all evaluation metrics. We surpass both the original SC\(_{ZS}\)/SC\(_{Conv}\) and seNtLI/seNtLI\(_{RR}\) SummaC results using SC\(_{ZS}\) with this scoring function. Further performance gains are also obtained from using additional context for the premise using TopK, and we find that including the full document

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\(^4\)Example SCUs are given in Appendix D

\(^5\)See Appendix A for details

\(^6\)This is the best performing NLI model in Laban et al. (2022).
context in the premise performs best of all, in contradiction to previous findings on this benchmark\textsuperscript{7}. We see no additional performance benefit in going below the sentence level and using SCUs on these benchmarks, but the SCU decomposition does perform competitively across both benchmarks.

None of our variations achieve similar performance to the published SC\textsubscript{ZS} results, either performing better or worse depending on whether $f_Z$ is $p_c$ or $p_c - p_e$ respectively. We believe that this discrepancy is due to the fact that the published SC\textsubscript{ZS} results use classification thresholds that are tuned on the test set\textsuperscript{8} rather than validation set.

On FRANK, we find that there is no single method that performs best across both correlation metrics, TopK having the highest Pearson correlation, and the sentence level SC\textsubscript{ZS} the highest Spearman correlation. It is notable however that the larger premise context granularity DOC-SENT is not as strong when using the original FRANK metrics as it is on SummaC, highlighting the need to be careful when comparing methods using different metrics, even on the same underlying data.

### 4 Conclusion

In this work we revisited prior findings that the best way to use NLI models for factuality scoring of machine-generated summaries is to first decompose the input to sentence level, score using NLI, then aggregate the sentence level scores to produce a document-level score. Contrary to prior work, we find that there is no single optimal level of decomposition that performs best across all tasks and evaluation metrics. We showed that in general, sentence level decomposition is preferable for the summary/hypothesis side of the NLI input, but on the premise side recent models such as VITC often benefit from having longer input contexts available when scoring. We also show that for the six datasets in the SummaC benchmark, there is still considerable variation in the performance of our methods both across the individual datasets, and also within different metrics on the same dataset.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
System & $f_Z$ & PG & HG & CGS & XSF & PT & FCC & SE & FR & Overall \\
\hline
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & 70.4* & 58.4* & 62.0* & 83.8* & 78.7* & 79.0* & 72.1* & & & 72.1* \\
SC\textsubscript{Conv} & 64.7* & 66.4* & 62.7* & 89.5* & 81.7* & 81.6* & 74.4* & & & 74.4* \\
SENTL\textsubscript{(soft)} & 79.3* & 59.3* & 52.4* & 89.5* & 77.2* & 82.1* & 73.3* & & & 73.3* \\
SENTL\textsubscript{rg} (soft) & 79.6* & 62.7* & 52.8* & 86.1* & 78.5* & 80.4* & 73.3* & & & 73.3* \\
SENTL\textsubscript{rg} (hard) & 80.5* & 64.2* & 55.1* & 83.3* & 79.7* & 78.4* & 73.5* & & & 73.5* \\
\hline
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & $p_c - p_e$ & sent & sent & 62.5 & 53.8 & 57.6 & 83.9 & 77.1 & 79.2 & 69.0 \\
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & $p_c$ & sent & sent & 76.8 & 65.6 & 57.6 & 89.9 & 79.7 & 81.3 & 75.1 \\
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & $p_e$ & doc & doc & 59.3 & 69.9 & 59.9 & 84.7 & 78.7 & 81.2 & 72.3 \\
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & $p_c$ & TopK & sent & 79.7 & 67.3 & 56.9 & 89.4 & 81.8 & 81.4 & 76.1 \\
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & $p_c - p_e$ & doc & sent & 76.3 & 69.0 & 58.2 & 85.4 & 83.3 & 82.6 & 75.8 \\
SC\textsubscript{ZS} & $p_c$ & doc & sent & 76.2 & 69.8 & 61.7 & 84.6 & 84.0 & 82.0 & 76.4 \\
SC\textsubscript{UZS} & $p_c$ & TopK & SCU & 72.9 & 65.6 & 57.1 & 80.5 & 82.1 & 81.7 & 73.3 \\
SC\textsubscript{UZS} & $p_e$ & sent & SCU & 71.4 & 63.4 & 55.0 & 77.0 & 80.0 & 81.4 & 71.4 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Test set results for SummaC and FRANK. Results marked “*” are taken from prior work, the rest are from our implementations. “PG” and “HG” are the premise and hypothesis levels of granularity respectively. Sentences in our implementations are split using spaCy.}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{7}In Appendix B we show that some of these findings appear to be unique to this particular choice of NLI model.

\textsuperscript{8}Confirmed via correspondence with Laban et al. (2022).
Limitations

Although we evaluate our methods across six different datasets, all are broadly from the same narrow domain, namely English news articles. We also note that despite the methods in Section 2 being agnostic to the choice of the NLI model that is used for scoring, there can be considerable degradation in the performance of methods that use longer premise contexts with some NLI models. More details can be found in Appendix B.

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A Performance variations with different sentence-splitting methods

Table 2 describes how the performance of the SummaC Zero-Shot factuality scoring method varies based on whether NLTK or spaCy is used for sentence-splitting. All methods use the VITC NLI model. On SummaC, we see that using spaCy results in a slight improvement overall, whether our scoring function is \( f_Z = p_e \) or \( f_Z = p_c - p_e \). We note that this is true for the FRANK dataset when scored using the SummaC balanced accuracy metric. However, on the FRANK dataset with the original metrics, we mostly see the opposite effect; using NLTK results in higher Pearson correlations for both scoring functions, and a higher Spearman for \( f_Z = p_e - p_c \). Notably, the 0.39 Pearson correlation for SC\(_{ZS}\) at sentence level granularity using NLTK is the highest score that we obtain on this benchmark.

However, the results on Frank seem to be partly an artifact of inaccurate sentence-splitting by NLTK resulting in \( \text{(premise, hypothesis)} \) pairs that are in fact at much larger levels of granularity than the intended sentence level, making this result
Table 2: Performance differences on SummaC and FRANK test sets based on choice of sentence-splitting method. All methods use sentence level granularity for both premise and hypothesis. For SummaC all methods use thresholds selected using the validation set.

| System  | $f_Z$ | Splitter | CGS | XSF | PT | FCC | SE | FR | Overall |
|---------|-------|----------|-----|-----|----|-----|----|----|---------|
| SC/NS  | $p_e - p_c$ | NLTK  | 61.9 | 53.7 | 56.3 | 83.4 | 78.2 | 78.4 | 68.6 |
| SC/NS  | $p_e - p_c$ | spaCy | 62.5 | 53.8 | 57.6 | 83.9 | 77.1 | 79.2 | 69.0 |
| SC/NS  | $p_c$    | NLTK  | 75.6 | 65.3 | 60.4 | 89.5 | 80.1 | 79.1 | 75.0 |
| SC/NS  | $p_c$    | spaCy | 76.8 | 65.6 | 57.6 | 89.9 | 79.7 | 81.3 | 75.1 |

Table 2: Performance differences on SummaC and FRANK test sets based on choice of sentence-splitting method. All methods use sentence level granularity for both premise and hypothesis. For SummaC all methods use thresholds selected using the validation set.

Figure 1: The number of sentences produced by NLTK and spaCy on SummaC and FRANK.

We note that in this example there is no space after the fullstops, which causes NLTK’s parser to break. NLTk produces 1 sentence for this block of text, while spaCy produces 4 as we would expect. This issue is relatively frequent in the FRANK dataset. Figure 1 shows the distributions of the number of sentences produced by NLTK versus spaCy for all of the documents in both SummaC and FRANK, with statistics given in Table 4. We see that spaCy produces more sentences generally, with the difference being more pronounced on the FRANK dataset.

B Performance variations with different NLI models and levels of granularity

In Table 3 we investigate how changing the level of decomposition effects the performance of two additional NLI models. Notably with both of these models, scoring using the full document as the premise is significantly worse than either sentence level decomposition, TOPK, or SCU, emphasizing that the results in Table 3 are highly dependent on the performance of the VITC NLI model. TOPK and sentence level both perform reasonably well with these NLI models however, with the former being the best method to use on SummaC with ROBERTAANLI and the latter the best with ROBERTAMNLI. Again, we see no performance benefit when going to the SCU level.

C SCU examples

Two example one-line summaries, along with two extracted SCUs are shown below. Colors indicate which parts of the generated summaries the SCUs are extracted from.

Summary 1: In 1998 two Libyans indicted in 1991 for the Lockerbie bombing were still in
Table 3: Performance differences on SummaC and FRANK test sets based on choice of NLI model and level of granularity. For SummaC all methods use thresholds selected using the validation set. Sentences are split using spaCy. ROBERTAMNLI is the NLI model from Liu et al. (2019), and ROBERTAANLI is from Nie et al. (2020).

| System      | PG   | HG | CGS | XSF | PT | FCC | SE | FR | Overall |
|-------------|------|----|-----|-----|----|-----|----|----|---------|
| ROBERTAMNLI | doc  | sent | 58.1 | 56.2 | 52.9 | 62.5 | 57.0 | 66.2 | 58.8 |
| ROBERTAMNLI | TโอPK | sent | 61.5 | 63.3 | 60.0 | 81.5 | 75.1 | 76.4 | 69.6 |
| ROBERTAMNLI | sent | SCU | 66.3 | 62.0 | 51.5 | 74.8 | 73.2 | 76.2 | 67.3 |
| ROBERTAMNLI | TโอPK | SCU | 71.6 | 65.1 | 53.9 | 81.9 | 77.0 | 80.0 | 71.6 |

| System      | PG   | HG | Pearson | p-val | Spearman | r | p-val |
|-------------|------|----|---------|-------|----------|---|-------|
| ROBERTAMNLI | doc  | sent | 0.16 | 0.00 | 0.11 | 0.00 |
| ROBERTAMNLI | TโอPK | sent | 0.23 | 0.00 | 0.21 | 0.00 |
| ROBERTAMNLI | sent | SCU | 0.26 | 0.00 | 0.27 | 0.00 |
| ROBERTAMNLI | TโอPK | SCU | 0.23 | 0.00 | 0.21 | 0.00 |

Summary2: Two Libyans were indicted in 1991 for blowing up a Pan Am jumbo jet over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988.

SCUs: [two Libyans were officially accused of the Lockerbie bombing, the indictment of the two Lockerbie suspects was in 1991]

D SCU-based decomposition details

To score a \((document, summary)\) pair, we experimented with decomposing either the document, the summary, or both into SCUs. Here we describe the two variations that performed best on initial validation experiments. The first scores summary SCUs against document sentences, and the second scores summary SCUs using longer passages of text from the document as context.

D.1 sent-SCU

This method is the most similar conceptually to SCZS.

- First decompose the document and summary into individual sentences \((D_1, \ldots, D_M, S_1, \ldots, S_N)\), and then further decompose each \(S_n\) into SCUs \(S_{SCU_1}, \ldots, S_{SCU_J}\).
- Score all \((D_m, S_{SCU_j})\) combinations using an NLI model, and \(f_Z = p_e\).
- The score for each \(S_{SCU_j}\) is taken to be the maximum over the \((D_1, \ldots, D_M, S_{SCU_j})\) pairs.
- For each \(S_n\), average over the scores for \(S_{SCU_1}, \ldots, S_{SCU_J}\) to calculate a score for SCUs.

Libya.

Summary2: Two Libyans were indicted in 1991 for blowing up a Pan Am jumbo jet over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988.

SCUs: [two Libyans were officially accused of the Lockerbie bombing, the indictment of the two Lockerbie suspects was in 1991]
Table 4: Mean, standard deviation, and percentiles of the number of sentences produced by NLTK and spaCy on SummaC and FRANK.

|            | SummaC |            | FRANK |            |
|------------|--------|------------|-------|------------|
|            | NLTK   | spaCy      | NLTK  | spaCy      |
| Mean       | 20.6   | 22.4       | 16.0  | 20.9       |
| Std. dev.  | 16.4   | 18.0       | 11.3  | 11.3       |
| 25th %     | 11.0   | 12.0       | 7.0   | 13.0       |
| 50th %     | 17.0   | 18.0       | 14.0  | 18.0       |
| 75th %     | 26.0   | 28.0       | 24.0  | 28.0       |

that summary sentence, before averaging over the scores for each $S_n$ to create the document factuality score.

D.2 TopK-SCU

This is similar to the TopK scoring method from § 3.

- First decompose the document and summary into individual sentences $(D_1, \ldots, M, S_1, \ldots, N)$, and then further decompose each $S_n$ into SCUs $S_{SCU_1}, \ldots, S_{SCU_J}$.
- Score all $(D_m, S_{SCU_j})$ combinations using an NLI model, and $f_Z = p_e$.
- For each $S_{SCU_j}$, we select the top-K sentences in $D_1, \ldots, D_M$ according to $f_Z = p_e$, and concatenate them to form a new premise string.
- Hypothesis $S_{SCU_j}$ is re-scored using the new premise string, using $f_Z = p_e$ as the score for $S_{SCU_j}$.
- For each $S_n$ we then first average over the scores for $S_{SCU_1}, \ldots, S_{SCU_J}$ to calculate a score for that summary sentence, before averaging over the scores for each $S_n$ to create the document factuality score.