NEUROLOGIC A*esque Decoding: Constrained Text Generation with Lookahead Heuristics

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Abstract

The dominant paradigm for neural text generation is left-to-right decoding from autoregressive language models. Constrained or controllable generation under complex lexical constraints, however, requires foresight to plan ahead feasible future paths.

Drawing inspiration from the A* search algorithm, we propose NEUROLOGIC A*esque,† a decoding algorithm that incorporates heuristic estimates of future cost. We develop efficient lookahead heuristics that are efficient for large-scale language models, making our method a drop-in replacement for common techniques such as beam search and top-k sampling. To enable constrained generation, we build on NEUROLOGIC decoding (Lu et al., 2021), combining its flexibility in incorporating logical constraints with A*esque estimates of future constraint satisfaction.

Our approach outperforms competitive baselines on five generation tasks, and achieves new state-of-the-art performance on table-to-text generation, constrained machine translation, and keyword-constrained generation. The improvements are particularly notable on tasks that require complex constraint satisfaction or in few-shot or zero-shot settings. NEUROLOGIC A*esque illustrates the power of decoding for improving and enabling new capabilities of large-scale language models.

1 Introduction

The dominant paradigm for neural text generation is based on left-to-right decoding from autoregressive language models such as GPT-2/3 (Radford et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020). Under this paradigm, common decoding techniques such as beam search or top-k/p sampling (Holtzman et al., 2020) determine which token to generate next based on what happened in the past, without explicitly looking ahead into the future. While this lack of foresight often suffices for open-ended text generation – where any coherent text can be acceptable – for constrained text generation, planning ahead is crucial for incorporating all desired content in the generated output (Hu et al., 2017; Dathathri et al., 2019).

Classical search algorithms such as A* search (Hart et al., 1968; Pearl, 1984; Korf, 1985) address the challenge of planning ahead by using heuristic estimation of future cost when making decisions. Drawing inspiration from A* search, we develop NEUROLOGIC A*esque (shortened to NEUROLOGIC*), which combines A*-like heuristic estimates of future cost (e.g. perplexity, constraint satisfaction) with common decoding algorithms for neural text generation (e.g. beam search, top-k sampling), while preserving the efficiency demanded by large-scale neural language models.

As selecting the next token to generate based on the *optimal* future cost is NP-complete (Chen et al.,...
2018), we develop lookahead heuristics, which approximate cost at each decoding step based on continuations of the sequence-so-far. Figure 1 shows an example, where NEUROLOGIC A⋆esque guides generation towards a decision that would have been ignored based on the past alone, but is selected after looking ahead and incorporating the probability that constraints are satisfied in the future.

Our approach builds on NEUROLOGIC Decoding of Lu et al. (2021), a variation of beam-search for controlling generation through rich logic-based lexical constraints expressed in Conjunctive Normal Form (CNF). Our work generalizes Lu et al. (2021) by (1) incorporating novel lookahead heuristics to estimate future contraint satisfaction, and (2) developing additional unconstrained variants that can work with an empty set of constraints. These new algorithm variants support broad applications of NEUROLOGIC⋆, including unconstrained generation, as demonstrated in our experiments.

Extensive experiments across five generation tasks demonstrate that our approach outperforms competitive baselines. We test NEUROLOGIC⋆ in conjunction with both supervised and unsupervised models and find that the performance gain is pronounced especially in zero-shot or few-shot settings. In particular, on the COMMONGEN benchmark, using our proposed decoding algorithm with an off-the-shelf language model outperforms a host of supervised baselines with conventional decoding algorithms. This demonstrates that a strong inference-time algorithm such as NEUROLOGIC⋆ can alleviate the need for costly datasets that are manually annotated for explicit supervision. Moreover, we find that NEUROLOGIC⋆ achieves state-of-the-art performance in various settings, including WMT17 English-German machine translation with lexical constraints (Dinu et al., 2019) and few-shot E2ENLG table-to-text generation (Chen et al., 2020b).

In summary, we develop NEUROLOGIC A⋆esque, a new decoding algorithm for effective and efficient text generation. To our knowledge this is the first A⋆-like algorithm for guided text generation via lookahead heuristics. Our algorithm is versatile, as it can be applied to a variety of tasks via inference-time constraints, reducing the need for costly labeled data. Extensive experiments show its effectiveness on several important generation benchmarks.

2 NEUROLOGIC A⋆esque Decoding

We describe NEUROLOGIC A⋆esque Decoding (shortened as NEUROLOGIC⋆), our decoding algorithm motivated by A⋆ search (Hart et al., 1968), a best-first search algorithm that finds high-scoring paths using a heuristic estimate of future return. We first introduce the decoding problem, and then describe our heuristics with a novel lookahead procedure for adapting NEUROLOGIC⋆ search to unconstrained and constrained generation with large-scale autoregressive models.

2.1 Decoding With A⋆esque Lookahead
Decoding. Sequence-to-sequence generation is the task of generating an output sequence y given an input sequence x. We consider standard left-to-right, autoregressive models, \( p(y|x) = \prod_{t=1}^{|y|} p(y_t|y_{<t}, x) \), and omit x to reduce clutter. Decoding consists of solving,

\[
y_\star = \arg \max_{y \in \mathcal{Y}} F(y).
\]

Where \( \mathcal{Y} \) is the set of all sequences. In our setting, the objective \( F(y) \) takes the form \( s(y) + H(y) \), where \( s(y) = \log p(y) \), and \( H(y) \) is either zero or a score for satisfying constraints on y.

Our method takes the perspective of decoding as discrete search, in which states are partial prefixes, \( y_{<t} \), actions are tokens in vocabulary \( \mathcal{V} \) (i.e. \( y_t \in \mathcal{V} \)) and transitions add a token to a prefix, \( y_{<t} \odot y_t \). Each step of decoding consists of (1) expanding a set of candidate next-states, 2) scoring each candidate, and 3) selecting the k best candidates:

\[
Y_t' = \{ y_{<t} \odot y_t \mid y_{<t} \in Y_{t-1}, y_t \in \mathcal{V} \}, \\
Y_t = \arg \text{topk}_{(y_{<t},y_t)\in Y_t'} \{ f(y_{<t}, y_t) \},
\]

where \( Y_0 = \{ \{\text{bos}\} \} \) and \( f(\cdot) \) is a scoring function that approximates the objective \( F \). Common decoding algorithms such as beam search scan candidate hypotheses without considering future tokens, e.g., \( f(y_{<t}, y_t) = \log p(y_{<t}) \).

Lookahead heuristics. Our method incorporates an estimate of the future into candidate selection. Ideally, we want to select candidates that are on optimal trajectories, replacing Equation 2 with:

\[
Y_t = \arg \text{topk}_{(y_{<t},y_t)\in Y_t'} \left\{ \max_{y_{>t}} F(y_{<t}, y_t, y_{>t}) \right\}.
\]


However, computing Equation 3 presents two difficulties: 1) the objective $F(y)$ may be unknown or difficult to compute, and 2) the space of future trajectories $y_{>t}$ is prohibitively large.

Motivated by A* search (Hart et al., 1968), a best-first search algorithm that finds high-scoring paths by selecting actions that maximize,

$$f(a) = s(a) + h(a),$$

where $s(a)$ is the score-so-far and $h(a)$ is a heuristic estimate of the future score. We approximate the objective using a lightweight heuristic $h(\cdot)$,

$$Y_t = \arg \text{topk}_{y_{\leq t} \in Y_t^\prime} \left\{ s(y_{\leq t}) + \max_{y_{>t}} h(y_{<t}, y_t, y_{>t}) \right\},$$

where $s(y_{\leq t}) = \log p_0(y_{\leq t})$. To make the search tractable, we search over a set of lookahead continuations, approximating Equation 3 as,

$$Y_t = \arg \text{topk}_{y_{\leq t} \in Y_t^\prime} \left\{ s(y_{\leq t}) + \max_{y_{\leq t+\ell}} h(y_{\leq t+\ell}) \right\},$$

where each element $y_{t+1:t+\ell}$ of $\mathcal{L}_t(y_{\leq t})$ is a length-$\ell$ continuation of $y_{\leq t}$. Beam search corresponds to setting $\ell$ and $h$ to 0.

**A*-esque decoding.** Beam search, A* search, and our method fall under a general class of algorithms that differ based on (1) which candidates are expanded, (2) which candidates are pruned, (3) how candidates are scored (Meister et al., 2020). We inherit the practical advantages of beam search-style expansion and pruning, while drawing on A*-like heuristics to incorporate estimates of the future, and refer to our method as A*-esque decoding.

**Generating lookaheads.** We compare several methods for generating the lookaheads $\mathcal{L}_t(y_{\leq t})$.

The greedy lookahead produces a single sequence, $\mathcal{L}_t = \{y_{t+1:t+\ell}\}$, starting from $y_{\leq t}$ and selecting each token according to $y_t = \arg \max_{y_{\leq t} \in Y_t} p_0(y_{|y_{<t}})$. We also consider a relaxation which interpolates between providing the greedy token and a uniform mixture of tokens as input at each step. Specifically, we adjust the model’s probabilities with a temperature, $\tilde{p}_0(y_t|y_{<t}) = \text{softmax}(s_t/\tau)$, where $s_t \in \mathbb{R}^{|y|}$ is a vector of logits, and feed the expected token embedding as input at step $t$,

$$e_t = \mathbb{E}_{y_t \sim \tilde{p}(y_t|y_{<t})} [E(y_t)],$$

where $E \in \mathbb{R}^{|y| \times d}$ is the model’s token embedding matrix. This soft lookahead moves from providing the greedy token as input ($\tau \to 0$) to a uniform mixture of tokens ($\tau \to \infty$) based on the value of temperature $\tau$. When using the soft lookahead, we use $\tilde{p}$ in place of $p$ when scoring tokens. The soft (and greedy) lookahead is efficient, but only explores a single trajectory.

The beam lookahead trades off efficiency for exploration, returning a set $\mathcal{L}_t$ containing the top-$k$ candidates obtained by running beam search for $\ell$ steps starting from $y_{\leq t}$. Finally, the sampling lookahead explores beyond the highly-probable beam search continuations, generating each $y_{t+1:t+\ell} \in \mathcal{L}_t$ using,

$$y_{t'} \sim p_\theta(y|y_{<t'}),$$

for $t'+1$ to $t+k$.

Next, we move to our proposed lookahead heuristics, starting with the unconstrained setting.

### 2.2 Unconstrained Generation with NEUROLOGIC*

First we consider a standard decoding setting,

$$\arg \max_{y \in \mathcal{Y}} \log p_\theta(y|x).$$

We score candidates based on a combination of the history and estimated future, by using the likelihood of the lookahead as a heuristic. That is, at the $t$th step of decoding, we use Equation 5:

$$h(y_{\leq t+\ell}) = \lambda \log p_\theta(y_{t+1:t+\ell}|y_{\leq t}, x),$$

where $\lambda$ controls how much we rely on the estimated future versus the history, similar to weighted A* (Pohl, 1970).

### 2.3 NEUROLOGIC* for Constrained Generation

Our lookahead heuristics lend themselves to decoding with lexical constraints in a way that standard beam search does not. For constrained generation, we build on and generalize NEUROLOGIC decoding algorithm of Lu et al. (2021)—a beam-based search algorithm that supports a wide class of logical constraints for lexically constrained generation—with estimates of future constraint satisfaction.

**Background of NEUROLOGIC.** NEUROLOGIC Lu et al. (2021) accepts lexical constraints in Conjunctive Normal Form (CNF):

$$\left( \bigvee_{i \in C_1} D_i \right) \land \cdots \land \left( \bigvee_{i \in C_M} D_{i'} \lor D_{i'+1} \cdots \lor D_{N} \right),$$
where each $D_l$ represents a single positive or negative constraint, $D_l(a, y)$ or $\neg D_l(a, y)$, enforcing the phrase $a$ to be included in or omitted from $y$. Lu et al. (2021) refer to each constraint $D_l$ as a literal, and each disjunction $C_i$ of literals as a clause.

NEUROLOGIC is a beam-based approximate search for an objective which seeks fluent sequences in which all clauses are satisfied:

$$
\arg\max_{y \in \mathcal{Y}} p_\theta(y|x) - \lambda' \sum_{j=1}^{M} (1 - C_j),
$$

where $\lambda' \gg 0$ penalizes unsatisfied clauses. At each step of the search, NEUROLOGIC scores each of the $k \times |\mathcal{V}|$ candidates $(y_{\leq t}, y_t)$ based on whether they (partially) satisfy new constraints,

$$
f(y_{\leq t}) = \log p_\theta(y_{\leq t}|x) + \lambda_1 \max_{D_l(a,y_{\leq t})} |\hat{a}|, \quad (8)
$$

where the maximization is over a set of unsatisfied multi-token constraints $a$ tracked by NEUROLOGIC, and $\hat{a}$ is the prefix of $a$ in the ongoing generation. For example, for $y_{\leq t} = \text{“The boy climbs an apple”}$ and constraint $a = \text{“apple tree”}$, $\hat{a}$ is “apple”.

Intuitively, this function rewards candidates that are in the process of satisfying a constraint.

In lieu of taking the top-$k$ scoring candidates (Equation 5), NEUROLOGIC prunes candidates that contain clauses that violate constraints, groups the candidates to promote diversity, and selects high-scoring candidates from each group. We use the same pruning and grouping approach, and refer the reader to Lu et al. (2021) for further details.

NEUROLOGIC$^*$ decoding. Our method improves upon the NEUROLOGIC scoring function with an estimate of future constraint satisfaction. Our key addition is a lookahead heuristic that adjusts a candidate $(y_{\leq t}, y_t)$’s score proportional to the probability of satisfying additional constraints in the lookahead $y_{t+1:t+\ell}$:

$$
h_{\text{future}}(y_{\leq t+\ell}) = \lambda_2 \max_{D_l(a,y_{\leq t})} \log p_\theta(D_l(a,y_{t+1:t+\ell})|x,y_{\leq t}), \quad (9)
$$

where we define the probability that constraint $a$ is satisfied using the most probable subsequence,

$$
p_\theta(D_l(a,y_{t+1:t+\ell})|x,y_{\leq t}) = \max_{\ell' \in [t,t+\ell]} p_\theta(y_{t:t'+|a|} = a|x,y_{< t'}), \quad (10)
$$

$\lambda_2$ is a scaling hyperparameter for the heuristic.

We add our lookahead heuristic to the NEUROLOGIC$^*$ scoring function (Equation 8), and call the resulting decoding procedure NEUROLOGIC A$^*$esque (or, NEUROLOGIC$^*$ in short).

### 3 Experiments: Constrained Generation

We present experimental results on various constrained generation benchmarks: COMMONGen (§3.1), constrained machine translation (§3.2), table-to-text generation (§3.3), and interrogative sentence generation (§3.4). NEUROLOGIC$^*$ consistently outperforms NEUROLOGIC and all previous approaches. The improvement is especially substantial in zero-shot and few-shot cases where the search problem is much harder.

#### Experimental setups.

We explore a variety of experimental setups (Table 1). In terms of supervision, we consider different configurations of zero-shot, few-shot and full-shot. The former two supervision regimes are particularly important as many realistic generation application do not come with many manually-annotated labeled data. Additionally, we study both constrained and unconstrained tasks, even though we focus on the former.

#### Evaluation metrics.

We use the following automatic metrics that are commonly used for evaluating text generation: BLEU (Papineni et al., 2002), ROUGE (Lin, 2004), METEOR (Banerjee and Lavie, 2005), CIDEr (Vedantam et al., 2015), SPICE (Anderson et al., 2016) and NIST (Lin and Hovy, 2003). Any other domain specific metrics are detailed in each task description.

#### 3.1 Constrained Commonsense Generation

COMMONGen (Lin et al., 2020) is a constrained commonsense generation task with lexical constraints.
Table 2: Performance of various decoding methods with supervised or off-the-shelf GPT-2 on the COMMONGen test set, measured with automatic and human evaluations. We only tried NEOUROLOGIC* (greedy) in the unsupervised setting because of the computational cost. The best numbers are bolded and the second best ones are underlined.

| Decode Method | Automatic Evaluation | Human Evaluation |
|---------------|----------------------|------------------|
|               | ROUGE-L | BLEU-4 | METEOR | CIDEr | SPICE | Coverage | Quality | Plausibility | Concepts | Overall |
| Supervised    |          |        |        |       |       |          |         |             |          |         |
| CBS (Anderson et al., 2017) | 38.8 | 20.6 | 28.5 | 12.9 | 27.1 | 97.6 | 2.27 | 2.35 | 2.51 | 2.23 |
| GBS (Hokamp and Liu, 2017) | 38.2 | 18.4 | 26.7 | 11.7 | 26.1 | 97.4 | 2.06 | 2.17 | 2.29 | 2.01 |
| DBA (Post and Vilar, 2018a) | 38.3 | 18.7 | 27.7 | 12.4 | 26.3 | 97.5 | 2.23 | 2.30 | 2.43 | 2.15 |
| NEOUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021) | 42.8 | 26.7 | 30.2 | 14.7 | 30.3 | 97.7 | 2.54 | 2.56 | 2.67 | 2.50 |
| NEOUROLOGIC* (greedy) | 43.6 | 28.2 | 30.8 | 15.2 | 30.8 | 97.8 | 2.66 | 2.67 | 2.73 | 2.59 |
| NEOUROLOGIC* (sample) | 43.4 | 27.9 | 30.8 | 15.3 | 31.0 | 97.7 | 2.64 | 2.64 | 2.74 | 2.58 |
| NEOUROLOGIC* (beam) | 43.2 | 28.2 | 30.7 | 15.2 | 31.0 | 97.6 | 2.68 | 2.67 | 2.76 | 2.60 |
| Unsupervised |          |        |        |       |       |          |         |             |          |         |
| TSMH (Zhang et al., 2020) | 24.7 | 2.2 | 14.5 | 3.6 | 15.4 | 71.5 | 1.85 | 1.92 | 1.95 | 1.63 |
| NEOUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021) | 41.9 | 24.7 | 29.5 | 14.4 | 27.5 | 96.7 | 2.64 | 2.52 | 2.68 | 2.50 |
| NEOUROLOGIC* (greedy) | 44.3 | 28.6 | 30.7 | 15.6 | 29.6 | 97.1 | 2.78 | 2.70 | 2.77 | 2.70 |

Table 3: Example generations for the COMMONGen task across supervised NEOUROLOGIC* and baselines, including GBS (Hokamp and Liu, 2017), DBA (Post and Vilar, 2018a), and NEOUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021) and TSMH (Zhang et al., 2020)

Words | Method | Generation
--- | --- | ---

cut | GBS | Cut a piece of wood to use as a fence.
dog | DBA | A dog running with a ball in its mouth.
wood | NEOUROLOGIC* | A man cuts a piece of wood using a circular saw.
ball | GBS | A dog is run over by a ball and mouth agape.
dog | DBA | A dog is run over by a ball and bites his mouth.
mouth | NEOUROLOGIC | A dog is running and chewing on a ball in its mouth.
run | NEOUROLOGIC* | A dog running with a ball in its mouth.

dog | GBS | A man runs on a track and throws a javelin.
scrub | DBA | Soap and water on a dog and scrubbed skin.
soap | NEOUROLOGIC | A dog is scrubbing his paws with soap and water.
water | NEOUROLOGIC* | A man is scrubbing a dog with soap and water.

Given a set of concepts (e.g., {throw, run, javelin, track}), the task is to generate a coherent sentence describing a plausible scenario using all of the given concepts (e.g., “a man runs on a track and throws a javelin.”)

Approach and Baselines. Following Lu et al. (2021), we enforce that each given concept \( c_i \) must appear in output \( y \) under some morphological inflection. We experiment with both supervised and zero-shot settings. In the supervised setting, we formulate it as conditional sentence generation task and finetune GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019) as a sequence-to-sequence model. In the zero-shot setting, we use GPT-2 off-the-shelf (no fine-tuning), and rely on constrained decoding to guide the generations. We compare with previous constrained decoding algorithms, including CBS (Anderson et al., 2017), GBS (Hokamp and Liu, 2017), DBA (Post and Vilar, 2018a), NEOUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021) and TSMH (Zhang et al., 2020)

Metrics. Following Lin et al. (2020), we report automatic generation metrics as well as coverage, defined as the average percentage of the provided concepts that are present in lemmatized outputs. Additionally, we conduct human evaluation on 100 test examples with workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). We include our evaluation template in Figure 5 of Appendix A. Workers are given a pair of concepts and a model generation, and asked to rate each pair on language quality, scenario plausibility, coverage of given concepts, and an overall score, in the Likert scale: Agree, Neutral, and Disagree. Each pair is rated by 3 workers.

Results. Table 2 compares different constrained decoding methods on top of the finetuned and off-the-shelf GPT-2, in supervised and zero-shot settings respectively. The key observations are:
1. NEOUROLOGIC* outperforms all previous constrained-decoding methods in both supervised and zero-shot settings. Surprisingly, unsupervised NEOUROLOGIC* outperforms all supervised methods based on human evaluation.
2. Compared to vanilla NEOUROLOGIC, NEOUROLOGIC* improves the generation quality while maintaining high constraint satisfaction. The difference is especially substantial in the zero-shot case, where there is more room for incorporating constraint-driven signals due to the lack of supervision and the large output space.
3. NEOUROLOGIC* reaches similar performance with different lookahead strategies, among which beam lookahead slightly outperforms the
Figure 2: Performance (y-axis) of supervised GPT-2 in terms of BLEU-4 and Coverage with varying lookahead parameters (x-axis) on COMMONGEN validation set.

others based on human evaluation, and greedy lookahead has the lowest runtime.

Studying lookahead strategies. With an infinite lookahead length $\ell$ and number of lookaheads $|L|$, lookahead decoding exactly solves Equation 3. For practical choices of $\ell$ and $|L|$, we empirically study how varying the lookahead strategy and hyperparameters affects performance. In Figure 2, we study the greedy, soft, beam, and sampling lookahead strategies (§2.1).

Figure 2(a) shows the effect of increasing the lookahead horizon $\ell$ for the greedy strategy. Increasing the horizon improves up to one point -- e.g., 5-7 steps -- then decreases thereafter, likely due to the difficulty of long-horizon approximation.

Figure 2(b) studies the temperature in the soft lookahead, showing that greedy ($\tau = 0.0$) performs well, with slight gains if $\tau$ is carefully selected. The results suggest that one can safely bypass tuning $\tau$ using fast, greedy lookahead.

Next, Figure 2(c) shows that with beam lookahead, increasing the beam width improves performance up to a certain point (here, 11). Similarly, increasing the number of samples with sampling lookahead improves over a single sample, and then reaches an inflection point (Figure 2(d)).

3.2 Constrained Machine Translation

It is often critical to have control over machine translation output. For example, domain-specific dictionaries can be incorporated to force a model to use certain terminology (Post and Vilar, 2018a; Dinu et al., 2019). To achieve this goal, much recent work proposed constrained decoding algorithms (Chatterjee et al., 2017; Hokamp and Liu, 2017; Hasler et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2019, inter alia) or specialized training (Dinu et al., 2019). We demonstrate that NEUROLOGIC$^\star$ can be readily applied to off-the-shelf MT systems for constrained machine translation. Specifically, we follow the setup in Dinu et al. (2019) and evaluate our method on the WMT17 EN-DE test data (Bojar et al., 2017). The constraint here is to integrate a given custom terminology into the translation output; constraint terms are automatically created from the IATE EU terminology database for 414 test sentences.\footnote{https://github.com/mtresearcher/terminology_dataset.}

Approach, Baselines, and Metrics. We experiment with two MT systems: Dinu et al. (two-layer transformer) and the off-the-shelf Marian MT (Junczys-Dowmunt et al., 2018). We compare with previous constrained decoding algorithms, including DBA (Post and Vilar, 2018a), NEUROLOGIC$^\star$.
and also specialized training proposed by Dinu et al. (2019). Following Dinu et al. (2019), we report BLEU scores and term use rates, computed as the percentage of times a given constraint term was generated in the output out of the total number of constraint terms.

Results. Table 4 presents experimental results with Dinu et al.’s model and Marian MT. We can see that in either case, NEUROLOGIC* outperforms all prior methods both in BLEU and term coverage. Besides better generation quality and constraint coverage, NEUROLOGIC* also benefits from its plug-and-play flexibility with any off-the-shelf MT system compared to previous training-based methods. Table 5 breaks down the model performance by the number of constraint terms. We see that NEUROLOGIC* improves upon the others, especially when the constraint is complex with multiple constraint terms. (e.g., 96.5 vs. 93.7 from NEUROLOGIC* in term coverage).

3.3 Table-to-text Generation

The table-to-text task aims to generate natural language text conditioned on structured table data; their applications include automatic generation of weather/sports reports (Liang et al., 2009; Wiseman et al., 2017) or dialogue responses (Wen et al., 2016). Constrained generation algorithms can be used to ensure that the output text is consistent with the input structured data. We follow the few-shot setup of Chen et al. (2020b) on the E2ENLG (Dušek et al., 2018) dataset, where we use randomly-sampled 0.1%, 0.5%, 1%, 5% of training instances for finetuning.

Approach, Baselines, and Metrics. Following Shen et al. (2019), we linearize the given table into a string and finetune GPT-2 with given few-shot examples. We first compare NEUROLOGIC* with three previous constrained decoding algorithms: CBS (Anderson et al., 2017), GBS (Hokamp and Liu, 2017), and NEUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021), based on few-shot GPT-2 finetuned with 0.1% data. Then we compare our approach, NEUROLOGIC* on top of GPT-2, with previous table-to-text methods, including TGen (Dušek and Jurčiček, 2016), Template-GPT-2 (Chen et al., 2020a), KGPT (Chen et al., 2020b), in multiple few-shot settings with various numbers of training instances. We report standard automatic metrics used in the E2ENLG challenge, as well as information coverage– the average percentage of given information that is present in the generation.

Results. Table 6 presents results from varying decoding algorithms based on few-shot GPT-2 finetuned with 0.1% of the data. NEUROLOGIC* substantially outperforms all previous methods with respect to all metrics; it consistently improves generation quality while achieving (almost) perfect constraint satisfaction. Previous work, like CBS and GBS, improves constraint satisfaction, but negatively affects the text quality, as indicated by drops in BLEU and ROUGE. Table 7 compares NEUROLOGIC* on top of GPT-2 with previous table-to-text approaches. As before, NEUROLOGIC* outperforms all prior approaches by a large margin, even if the latter ones leverage either specialized model architecture or additional pretraining on massive table-to-text corpora. Additionally, Figure 3 compares the performance (y-axis) of few-shot GPT-2 with NEUROLOGIC* (purple line), NEUROLOGIC (blue line), and conventional beam search (black line) as a function of the varying amount of training instances (x-axis). We find the relative gain brought by NEUROLOGIC* increases as we reduce the amount of few-shot examples. Results above demonstrate the promise of decoding algorithms to address unsatisfying performance in few-shot scenarios due to insufficient learning.
| Decode Method                  | Automatic Evaluation | Human Evaluation |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
|                              | ROUGE    | BLEU   | METEOR | CIDEr | SPICE | Coverage | Grammar | Fluency | Meaningfulness | Overall |
| CGMH (Miao et al., 2019)     | 28.8     | 2.0    | 18.0   | 5.5   | 21.5 | 18.3      | 2.28    | 2.34    | 2.11           | 2.02    |
| TSMH (Zhang et al., 2020)    | 42.0     | 4.3    | 25.9   | 10.4  | 37.7 | 92.7      | 2.35    | 2.28    | 2.37           | 2.22    |
| NEUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021) | 38.8     | 11.2   | 24.5   | 18.0  | 41.7 | 90.6      | 2.78    | 2.71    | 2.49           | 2.51    |
| NEUROLOGIC⋆ (greedy)         | 43.7     | 14.7   | 28.0   | 20.9  | 47.7 | 100.0     | 2.83    | 2.77    | 2.74           | 2.76    |
| NEUROLOGIC⋆ (beam)           | 42.9     | 14.4   | 27.8   | 20.3  | 46.9 | 100.0     | 2.81    | 2.86    | 2.76           | 2.75    |
| NEUROLOGIC⋆ (sample)         | 43.5     | 14.6   | 28.2   | 20.8  | 47.8 | 100.0     | 2.83    | 2.75    | 2.76           | 2.73    |

Table 8: Performance of different unsupervised decoding algorithms on interrogative question generation.

3.4 Constrained Question Generation

Despite the success of supervised techniques in natural language generation, it needs to be trained with massive task-specific data, which is non-trivial to acquire. We investigate a zero-shot text generation task proposed by Zhang et al. (2020): constrained question generation, where no training data is available. Given a set of keywords (e.g., Nevada, desert, border), the task is to use an off-the-self language model to generate an interrogative question containing given keywords (e.g., “What is the name of the desert near the border of Nevada?”). Two types of constraints are enforced for this task: 1) keyword constraints - the output question must include all the keywords provided, and 2) syntactic constraints - the output question must be in the interrogative form, the first word must be \textit{wh}-question words, and the second or third word must be auxiliary verbs or copula words.

Approach, Baselines, and Metrics. We leverage off-the-shelf language model GPT-2 and compare NEUROLOGIC⋆ with three previous constrained decoding methods, CGMH (Miao et al., 2019), TSMH (Zhang et al., 2020) and NEUROLOGIC (Lu et al., 2021). CGMH and TSMH are two Metropolis-Hastings sampling-based decoding algorithms that have shown strong performance in unsupervised constrained generation. For automatic evaluation, we report standard generation metrics and keyword Coverage similar to previous task COMMONGEN. For the human evaluation, we sample 100 test examples and employ workers from AMT to evaluate the generated interrogative questions. Workers are given a set of keywords and model generation. They are asked to evaluate the generation based on 3 individual qualities (i.e., grammar, fluency, meaningfulness) and provide an overall quality score, using the 3-point Likert scale. Each example is averaged across 3 workers. We include the human evaluation template in Figure 6 of the Appendix A.

Results. Table 8 presents comparisons across different decoding methods based on off-the-shelf language models. We can see that NEUROLOGIC⋆ outperforms all previous methods with respect to both automatic and manual metrics; it remarkably enhances the generation quality while achieves perfect constraint satisfaction. The difference between NEUROLOGIC and NEUROLOGIC⋆ is particularly large compared to other tasks. The search problem is much harder here, due to the lack of supervision and complex logical constraint involving both keywords and syntax. Results above demonstrate the effectiveness of NEUROLOGIC⋆ in tackling more challenging constrained generation problems.
4 Experiments: Unconstrained Generation

So far we have experimented with constrained text generation, but here we demonstrate that NEUROLOGIC* decoding can also improve unconstrained generation. Specifically, we investigate whether A*esque decoding with our unconstrained lookahead heuristic (Equation 7) can (i) improve beam search, which typically struggles in open-ended settings (Holtzman et al., 2020; Welleck et al., 2019b), (ii) improve sampling algorithms that are commonly used in open-ended generation.

4.1 Commonsense Story Generation

We investigate story generation with RocStories (Mostafazadeh et al., 2016). Given the first sentence as a prompt x, the task is to generate the rest of story continuation y.

**Approach, Baselines and Metrics.** We consider storytelling as a conditional generation task, and finetune GPT-2 as a sequence-to-sequence model.

We apply A*esque decoding with our unconstrained lookahead heuristic (Equation 7) to (i) beam search, the setting used so far in the experiments, and (ii) top-k sampling (Fan et al., 2018), a commonly used sampling algorithm in open-ended generation. For top-k sampling, we use the heuristic to adjust the probability scores, then renormalize.

For automatic evaluation, besides commonly used automatic metrics for storytelling, including perplexity and BLEU, we also report unique n-grams as a measure for diversity. For the human evaluation, we sample 100 stories from the test set and we employ workers from AMT to evaluate the model generations. Workers are given the first sentence of the story (i.e., prompt), and the model-generated continuation of the story. They are asked to evaluate the continuation of the story on 4 individual qualities (i.e., grammar, fluency, story flow, interestingness) and provide an overall quality score, using the 3-point Likert scale. Each example is averaged across 3 workers. We include the human evaluation template in Figure 7 of the Appendix A.

**Results.** Table 9 presents the results of beam search and top-k sampling with and without A*esque heuristics. We can see that A*esque heuristics enable both beam search and top-k sampling to generate more fluent, coherent and interesting stories. For beam search, our A*esque heuristic not only enhances generation quality—e.g. improving human evaluation scores from 2.32 to 2.63—but also boosts generation diversity, as reflected by the number of unique n-grams. For top-k sampling, A* heuristics also improves generation quality, while maintaining comparable diversity. We notice that beam lookahead works the best for beam search, and greedy lookahead works the best for top-k sampling. We suspect that beam lookahead gives the most accurate estimate of the future path that beam search is likely to reach, while the greedy lookahead provides an estimate that is lower than what obtained by beam search, which may better resemble a continuation from top-k sampling.

**Ablations.** We study the effect of A*esque decoding with different decoding hyperparameters: beam size in beam search and k value in top-k sampling. Figure 4 plots the fluency (measured by likelihood) versus diversity (measured by unique 3-grams) for generations with various beam sizes or k values. Ideally, we want generations to be both fluent and diverse, centering around the top-right corner. However, we observe a fluency and diversity tradeoff in practice. Interestingly, we observe that A*esque decoding flattens this trend and results in larger area under the curve. The effect is especially obvious for beam search. The results above demonstrate that A*esque decoding can guide generation towards a more favorable output space that cannot be reached with conventional decoding methods.

| Decode Method                  | Fluency   | Diversity          | Human Eval |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------|
|                               | PPL       | BLEU-1 | BLEU-2 | Uniq. 3-gram | Uniq. 4-gram | Grammar | Fluency | Coherence | Interest | Overall |
| beam search                   | 2.24      | 33.7   | 16.5   | 34.09k      | 41.91k      | 2.81    | 2.50   | 2.46      | 2.27     | 2.32    |
| beam search + A*esque (greedy) | 2.11      | 34.3   | 16.7   | 34.94k      | 43.02k      | 2.94    | 2.71   | 2.56      | 2.50     | 2.57    |
| beam search + A*esque (beam)  | 2.14      | 34.4   | 16.8   | 35.03k      | 43.12k      | 2.94    | 2.72   | 2.62      | 2.61     | 2.63    |
| beam search + A*esque (sample)| 2.16      | 34.4   | 16.2   | 35.41k      | 43.64k      | 2.92    | 2.71   | 2.59      | 2.62     | 2.65    |
| top-k sample                   | 4.01      | 31.4   | 13.9   | 48.36k      | 56.62k      | 3.69    | 2.38   | 2.23      | 2.30     | 2.15    |
| top-k sample + A*esque (greedy)| 4.00      | 32.1   | 14.3   | 48.44k      | 56.63k      | 4.88    | 2.57   | 2.48      | 2.49     | 2.47    |
| top-k sample + A*esque (beam) | 3.75      | 32.2   | 14.4   | 48.27k      | 56.36k      | 4.84    | 2.49   | 2.39      | 2.40     | 2.34    |
| top-k sample + A*esque (sample)| 3.70      | 32.0   | 14.2   | 48.04k      | 56.15k      | 4.84    | 2.55   | 2.47      | 2.48     | 2.44    |

Table 9: Performance of different decoding algorithms on RocStories test set.
regardless of decoding hyperparameters.

5 Related Work

A* search in NLP. Many classical NLP problems (e.g., parsing, text alignment) can be seen as structured prediction subject to a set of task-specific constraints. For many such problems, A* search has been used effectively (Och et al., 2001; Haghighi et al., 2007; Hopkins and Langmead, 2009; Meister et al., 2020). For example, Klein and Manning (2003); Zhang and Gildea (2006); Auli and Lopez (2011); Lee et al. (2016) have used it in the context of parsing. Similar approaches are used for finding high-probability alignments (Naim et al., 2013). Despite these applications, applying informed heuristic search to text generation with autoregressive language models has been under-explored, which is the focus of this work.

Decoding strategies for text generation. The rise of autoregressive language models like GPT (Radford et al., 2018) has inspired a flurry of work on decoding strategies (Post and Vilar, 2018a; Ippolito et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2020; Leblond et al., 2021; West et al., 2021). These works often focus on incorporating factors like diversity (Ippolito et al., 2019), fluency (Holtzman et al., 2020) or constraints (Anderson et al., 2017; Hokamp and Liu, 2017; Post and Vilar, 2018b; Miao et al., 2019; Welleck et al., 2019a; Zhang et al., 2020; Qin et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021). Among constrained decoding methods, previous works such as constrained beam search (Anderson et al., 2017) and grid beam search (Hokamp and Liu, 2017), have worked on extending beam search to satisfy lexical constraints during generation.

Other works have focused on the mismatch between monotonic decoding and satisfying constraints that may depend on a full generation. Miao et al. (2019) propose a sampling-based conditional generation method using Metropolis-Hastings sampling (CGMH), where the constrained words are inserted/deleted/edited by the Metropolis-Hastings scheme, allowing a full generation to be edited towards desired properties. Welleck et al. (2019a) develop a tree-based constrained text generation, which recursively generates text in a non-monotonic order given constraint tokens, ensuring constraints are satisfied. Zhang et al. (2020) proposes tree search enhanced MCMC that handles combinatorial constraints (TSMH). Qin et al. (2020) instead casts constrained decoding as a continuous optimization problem that permits gradient-based updates. West et al. (2021) encodes constraints as generated contexts which models condition on to encourage satisfaction. Compared to these past works, NEUROLOGIC A*esque explicitly samples future text to estimate viability of different paths towards satisfying constraints. Our approach is based on Lu et al. (2021), which incorporates constraints in Conjunctive Normal Form (CNF), but we extend this into the future with our lookahead heuristics.

6 Conclusion

Inspired by the A* search algorithm, we introduce NEUROLOGIC A*esque decoding, which brings A*-like heuristic estimates of the future to common left-to-right decoding algorithms for neural text generation. NEUROLOGIC A*esque’s lookahead heuristics improve over existing decoding methods (e.g., NEUROLOGIC, beam, greedy, sample decoding methods) in both constrained and unconstrained settings across a wide spectrum of tasks. Our work demonstrates the promise of moving beyond the current paradigm of unidirectional decoding for text generation, by taking bidirectional information from both the past and future into account to generate more globally compatible text.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported in part by Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) (funding reference number 401233309), DARPA MCS program through NIWC Pacific (N66001-19-2-4031), Google Cloud Compute, and Allen Institute for AI, Microsoft PhD Fellowship.

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A Human Evaluation

We include screenshots of the human evaluation templates for CommonGen (Figure 5), Interrogative Sentence Generation (Figure 6), and RocStories (Figure 7) tasks.
Figure 5: Human evaluation template for the Constrained Commonsense Generation task.

**Concepts:**
- \$(source)\$

**Sentence:**
- \$(generation)\$

1. **Sentence Quality**: Is the sentence well-formed?
   - **Yes**: The sentence is well-formed and fluent.
   - **Somewhat**: The sentence is understandable but a bit awkward.
   - **No**: The sentence is neither well-formed or fluent.

2. **Plausibility**: Does the sentence describe a plausible scenario?
   - **Yes**: The sentence describes a realistic or plausible scenario.
   - **Somewhat**: The sentence describes an acceptable scenario but a bit awkward.
   - **No**: The sentence describes a nonsensical scenario.

3. **Concepts**: Does the sentence include the given concepts meaningfully?
   - **Yes**: The sentence meaningfully includes all of the concepts.
   - **Somewhat**: The sentence meaningfully includes some, but not all of the concepts. Or, the sentence includes all concepts but some of them are not meaningful or properly incorporated.
   - **No**: The sentence does not include concepts in a meaningful way.

4. **Overall**: Considering your answers to 1., 2., and 3., Does the sentence meaningfully combine all of the concepts into a well-formed and plausible scenario?
   - **Yes**: The sentence is reasonably well-formed/understandable, and meaningfully combines all the concepts into a plausible scenario.
   - **Somewhat**: The sentence looks okay in terms of above questions.
   - **No**: The sentence is not well-formed/understandable, or fails to properly combine all the concepts into a plausible scenario.
Figure 6: Human evaluation template for the Interrogative Sentence Generation task.
Figure 7: Human evaluation template for the RocStories task.

| Question | Description | Options |
|----------|-------------|---------|
| **Q1. Grammar** | Is the continuation of the story written in a **grammatically correct** way? | Yes | It is entirely or mostly grammatically correct, with no or minimal grammatical mistakes. | Somewhat | It is partially grammatically correct, with some grammatical mistakes. | No | It is mostly not grammatically correct, with many grammatical mistakes. |
| **Q2. Fluency** | Is the continuation of the story written in a **fluent** and **understandable** way? | Yes | It is entirely or mostly fluent and understandable. | Somewhat | It is somewhat fluent and understandable, but it reads a bit awkward. | No | It is mostly poorly written and hard to understand. |
| **Q3. Story Flow** | Does the continuation of the story flow **coherently** from the prompt and stay **on-topic**? | Yes | It is entirely or mostly coherent from the prompt, and stays on-topic. | Somewhat | It is somewhat coherent from the prompt, but it reads a bit off-topic. | No | It is mostly not coherent from the prompt, and mostly off-topic. |
| **Q4. Interestingness** | Is the continuation of the story written in an **interesting** way? | Yes | It is a very interesting story. | Somewhat | It is a somewhat interesting story. | No | It is not an interesting story. |
| **Q5. Overall** | Consider the above questions, overall, what’s the quality of the continuation of the story? | Good | The overall quality is **high**. | OK | The overall quality is **ok**. | Bad | The overall quality is **low**. |