Dense Passage Retrieval for Open-Domain Question Answering

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***Abstract*—Open-domain question answering relies on efficient passage retrieval to select candidate contexts, where traditional sparse vector space models, such as TF-IDF or BM25, are the de facto method. In this work, we show that retrieval can be practically implemented using dense representations alone, where embeddings are learned from a small number of questions and passages by a simple dual-encoder framework. When evaluated on a wide range of open-domain QA datasets, our dense retriever outperforms a strong Lucene-BM25 system largely by 9%–19% absolute in terms of top-20 passage retrieval accuracy, and helps our end-to-end QA system establish new state-of-the-art on multiple open-domain QA benchmarks. The proposed system uses a BERT-based dual-encoder architecture with Inner DOT product similarity, achieving 94% accuracy (DPR) and 99% accuracy (Bi-Encoder extension) on the Web Questions dataset, against an 83% TF-IDF baseline.**

***Index Terms*— Open-Domain Question Answering; Dense Passage Retrieval (DPR); BERT; Bi-Encoder; Sentence Transformer; Word Embedding; Cosine Similarity; TF-IDF; BM25; Semantic Search; Natural Language Processing (NLP); Accuracy; Feature Extraction; Machine Learning; Text Similarity**

I. INTRODUCTION

Open-domain question answering (QA) is a task that answers factoid questions using a large collection of documents. While early QA systems are often complicated and consist of multiple components, the advances of reading comprehension models suggest a much-simplified two-stage framework: a context retriever first selects a small subset of passages, and then a machine reader thoroughly examines the retrieved contexts and identifies the correct answer. Although reducing open-domain QA to machine reading is a very reasonable strategy, a huge performance degradation is often observed in practice, indicating the need to improve retrieval. For instance, the exact match score on SQuAD v1.1 drops from above 80% to less than 40% [12].

Retrieval in open-domain QA is usually implemented using TF-IDF or BM25 [11], which matches keywords efficiently with an inverted index and can be seen as rep- resenting the question and context in high-dimensional, sparse vectors. Conversely, dense, latent semantic en- coding is complementary to sparse representations by design. For example, consider the question “Who is the bad guy in Lord of the Rings?”, which can be answered from the context “Sala Baker is best known for portray- ing the villain Sauron in the Lord of the Rings trilogy.” A term-based system would have difficulty retrieving such a context, while a dense retrieval system would be able to better match “bad guy” with “villain” and fetch the correct context. Dense encodings are also learnable by adjusting the embedding functions, providing additional flexibility for task-specific representations. With special in-memory data structures and indexing schemes, retrieval can be done efficiently using Maximum Inner Product Search (MIPS) algorithms. However, it was generally believed that learning a good dense vector representation needs a large number of labelled question-context pairs.

In this paper we address the question: can we train a better dense embedding model using only pairs of ques- tions and passages, without additional pretraining? By leveraging the standard BERT pretrained model [10] and a dual-encoder architecture, we focus on develop- ing the right training scheme using a relatively small number of question-passage

pairs. Our Dense Passage Retriever (DPR) is exceptionally strong: it not only outperforms BM25 by a large margin (65.2% vs. 42.9% in Top-5 accuracy), but also results in a substantial improvement on end-to-end QA accuracy compared to ORQA (41.5% vs. 33.3%) on open Natural Questions.

A. Project Objectives

1. Develop an efficient dense passage retrieval system for open-domain QA using learned embeddings in- stead of TF-IDF/BM25.
2. Train a dual-encoder (bi-encoder) framework using a relatively small number of labelled questions–passage pairs.
3. Maximize retrieval accuracy by optimising inner product similarity between question and passage embeddings.
4. Demonstrate that dense retrieval outperforms BM25, achieving 9%–19% higher top-k passage retrieval accuracy.
5. Eliminate the need for additional heavy pretraining tasks and prove that simple fine-tuning is sufficient for high-quality dense representations.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

A. Poly-Encoders [2]

Humeau et al. develop a new transformer architecture, the Poly-encoder, that learns global rather than token-level self-attention features. They provide a detailed comparison of Cross-encoders, Bi-encoders, and Poly-encoders, showing that Poly-encoders are faster than Cross-encoders and more accurate than Bi-encoders, achieving state-of-the-art on three pairwise sequence scoring tasks.

B. FiD: Leveraging Passage Retrieval with Generative Models [3]

Izacard and Grave investigate how generative models can benefit from retrieved text passages, achieving state-of-the-art on Natural Questions and TriviaQA open benchmarks. They observe that performance significantly improves when increasing the number of retrieved passages, demonstrating that sequence-to-sequence models offer a flexible framework to efficiently aggregate evidence from multiple passages.

C. ANCE: Approximate Nearest Neighbour Contrastive Learning [4]

Xiong et al. identify that the main bottleneck in dense retrieval training is non-representative negative instances. They present ANCE, a training mechanism construct- ing negatives from an ANN index of the corpus updated in parallel with learning, which boosts BERT-Siamese DR to outperform all competitive dense and sparse retrieval baselines with almost 100× speed-up.

D. T5: Text-to-Text Transfer Transformer [5]

Raffel et al. introduce a unified framework converting all text-based language problems into a text-to-text format and explore the landscape of transfer learning techniques for NLP, achieving state-of-the-art results on many benchmarks including summarization, question answering, and text classification.
benefits such as interpretability and modularity.

E. REALM: Retrieval-Augmented Language Model Pre-training [9]

Guu et al. augment language model pretraining with a latent knowledge retriever allowing the model to re-trieve and attend over documents from a large corpus such as Wikipedia. REALM outperforms all previous methods by 4–16% absolute accuracy on three popu-lar Open-QA benchmarks while providing qualitative benefits such as interpretability and modularity

F. Graph-Based Multi-Hop Retrieval [8]

Asai et al. introduce a graph-based recurrent retrieval approach that learns to retrieve reasoning paths over the Wikipedia graph for multi-hop open-domain ques-tions, achieving state-of-the-art on three open-domain QA datasets and outperforming the previous best model on HotpotQA by more than 14 points.

G. Knowledge-Guided Text Retrieval [7]

Min et al. introduce an approach for open-domain QA that retrieves and reads a passage graph, where vertices are passages and edges represent relationships derived from an external knowledge base, improving perfor- mance over non-graph baselines by 2–11% absolute on Web Questions, Natural Questions, and TriviaQA.

H. Semantic Retrieval for Machine Reading at Scale [6]

Nie et al. propose a simple yet effective pipeline sys-tem with hierarchical semantic retrieval at paragraph and sentence levels, achieving state-of-the-art on the FEVER and HotpotQA leaderboards, demonstrating

that intermediate semantic retrieval modules are vital for effectively filtering upstream information.

III. SYSTEM ANALYSIS

A. Existing System

Open-domain QA retrieval is currently implemented using TF-IDF or BM25, which matches keywords ef-efficiently with an inverted index. While operationally convenient, these sparse methods suffer from critical limitations: they fail to capture semantic meaning and relationships between words, struggle with paraphrased or synonym-based queries, and require heavy prepro- cessing for high-dimensional sparse vectors. The exact match score on SQuAD v1.1 drops from above 80% to less than 40% when sparse retrieval is used, clearly indicating the need for improvement.

Key disadvantages:

1 Retrieval performance degrades due to reliance on sparse keyword matching.
2 System fails to capture semantic meaning and rela- tionships between words.
3 Requires heavy preprocessing and large memory for high-dimensional sparse vectors.
4 Struggles with paraphrased or synonym-based queries
5 5. Limited scalability and adaptability to new questions without retraining.

B. Proposed System

The proposed system employs dense-based word embed- ding to answer questions using BERT-based algorithms

to convert text into numeric dense vectors. These vectors are processed through Inner DOT product to measure similarity between question vectors and predict accurate answers. The proposed algorithm requires no heavy training and can compete with advanced retrieval tools like BM25.

Key advantages:

1 Eliminates the need for heavy training on large text corpora.
2 Generates dense embeddings for any text efficiently without retraining.
3 Enhances semantic understanding using BERT-based contextual embeddings.
4 Achieves higher accuracy through similarity measurement via Inner DOT product.
5 Outperforms BM25 with faster and more precise answer retrieval.

C. System Architecture

Figure 1 shows the system architecture comprising five layers: User → Interface → Embedding / TF-IDF→ DPR Model. The dual-path design allows direct comparison between the sparse baseline (TF-IDF) and the proposed dense retrieval (DPR/Bi-Encoder) within the same application.

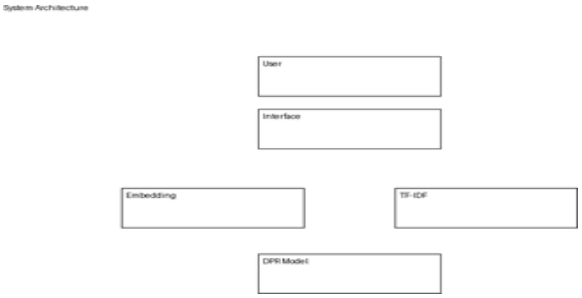

Figure 1: Fig. 4.1 — System Architecture showing the dual-path design: TF-IDF sparse baseline vs. DPR dense retrieval, both served through a unified User Interface layer.

Module descriptions:

1 Dataset Upload: Browse and upload training/test-ing datasets.
2 Embedding Generation: Generates dense vector embeddings using Sentence Transformer.
3 Existing Algorithm (TF-IDF + Cosine): Im-plements the TF-IDF baseline.
4 Proposed DPR Algorithm: Uses Dense Passage Retrieval for accurate answer retrieval.
5 Extension Bi-Encoder Algorithm: Enhances retrieval using transformer-based bi-encoder.
6 Question Answering: Enables custom question input and answer retrieval.
7 Result Evaluation: Displays accuracy scores and performance comparisons.

IV. SYSTEM DESIGN

A. UML Diagrams

1) Use Case Diagram

Figure 2 presents the Use Case Diagram showing the primary actor (User) interacting with three system use cases: Upload, Train, and Ask. The diagram captures all functional interactions between the end user and the DPR system.

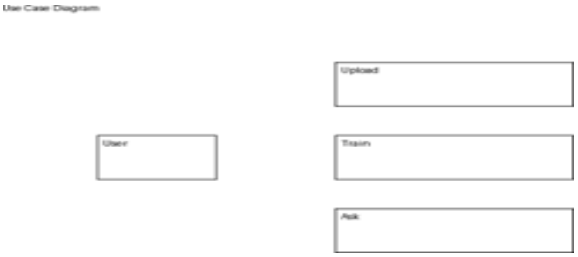

Figure 2: Fig. 4.2 — Use Case Diagram showing the User actor interacting with the three primary system use cases: Upload (dataset), Train (model), and Ask (question).

2) Sequence Diagram

Figure 3 presents the Sequence Diagram illustrating the interaction order between the three principal actors: User, System, and Model. The diagram captures the temporal flow of messages from dataset upload through embedding generation to answer retrieval.

Figure 3: Fig. 4.3 — Sequence Diagram showing the time-ordered message flow between the User, System, and Model actors during a full question-answering session.

3) Data Flow Diagram

Figure 4 presents the Data Flow Diagram (DFD) tracing data through the four processing stages: Dataset → Preprocessing → Embedding → Retrieval. DFDs illustrate how data is processed by the system in terms of inputs and outputs, providing a clear representation of the information pipeline.

Figure 4: Fig. 4.4 — Data Flow Diagram showing the four-stage pipeline: Dataset ingestion, Preprocessing, Dense Embedding generation, and Passage Retrieval.

B. Software Requirements Specification

1) Hardware Requirements

Table 1: Hardware Requirements

Component	Specification
Processor	Intel Core i3 (minimum)
Speed	1.1 GHz
RAM	4 GB (minimum)
Hard Disk	500 GB

2) Software Requirements

Table 2: Software Requirements

Component	Specification
Operating System	Windows 10 / above
Programming Language	Python 3.7.0
GUI Framework	Tkinter
ML Libraries	PyTorch, Sentence-Transformers, scikit-learn
Data Libraries	NumPy, Pandas, Matplotlib
Retrieval Libraries	FAISS, h5py, SciPy

V. IMPLEMENTATION

A. Technology Stack

Python 3.7 serves as the primary implementation language, selected for its unmatched NLP ecosystem. The GUI is built with Tkinter, providing a user-friendly Python Graphical User Interface for dataset upload, model training, and question answering. The DPR model uses the intfloat/e5-large-v2 Sentence Transformer for question and passage encoding; the Bi-Encoder extension uses nli-distilroberta-base-v2.

B. Core Algorithms

1) TF-IDF + Cosine Similarity (Baseline)

TF-IDF assigns weights to words based on their frequency in a document relative to the corpus. Term Frequency (TF) measures how often a term appears; In- verse Document Frequency (IDF) measures how unique a word is across all documents. By multiplying TF × IDF, the algorithm assigns higher weights to words that are both frequent in a document and rare across the corpus. Once TF-IDF vectors are generated, Cosine Sim- ilarity measures the angle between vectors in multi- dimensional space:

$$\mathbf{sim}\,(\mathbf{q}, \mathbf{d}) = \frac{\mathbf{q} \cdot \mathbf{d}}{\|\mathbf{q}\| \ \|\mathbf{d}\|} \qquad (1)$$

A score close to 1 indicates high similarity; close to 0 indicates dissimilarity.

Listing 1: TF-IDF + Cosine Similarity (excerpt)

```
from sklearn.feature_extraction.text import TfidfVectorizer
from sklearn.metrics.pairwise import cosine_similarity

vectorizer = TfidfVectorizer(stop_words='english')
X_train_tfidf = vectorizer.fit_transform(train_questions)
X_test_tfidf = vectorizer.transform(test_questions[:TEST_LIMIT])
similarity_matrix = cosine_similarity(X_test_tfidf, X_train_tfidf)
# Retrieve top-k answers per test question
top_k_indices = np.argsort(similarity_matrix[i])[::-1][:TOP_K]
```

2) Dense Passage Retrieval (DPR)

DPR is built on a dual-encoder (bi-encoder) architecture where two separate BERT-based encoders are used: a Question Encoder and a Passage Encoder. Both are trained so that question and passage embeddings corresponding to the same context are close together in vector space.

Step-by-step process:

1. Text Preprocessing: Clean, tokenise, convert to lowercase.
2. Embedding Generation: Question and Passage Encoders produce dense vectors capturing semantic meaning.
3. Similarity Computation: Inner dot product between question and passage embeddings.
4. Passage Ranking: Passages ranked by similarity score.
5. Answer Retrieval: Top-ranked passages passed to reader model.

Listing 2: DPR Embedding Generation (excerpt)

```
from sentence_transformers import SentenceTransformer

dpr_model = SentenceTransformer("intfloat/e5-large-v2")

X_train_q = [f"query: {q.strip().lower()}"
             for q in train["question"].tolist()]
X_train = dpr_model.encode(X_train_q,
                           normalize_embeddings=True,
                           convert_to_numpy=True)

# Retrieval via inner dot product
A_norm = X_test / np.linalg.norm(X_test, axis=1, keepdims=True)
B_norm = X_train / np.linalg.norm(X_train, axis=1, keepdims=True)
similarity_matrix = np.dot(A_norm, B_norm.T)
```

3) Bi-Encoder Extension

The Bi-Encoder architecture uses two independent transformer-based encoders trained in parallel to project semantically related question-answer pairs close to- gether in embedding space. Since passage embeddings can be precomputed, retrieval is efficient even on large datasets.

Listing 3: Bi-Encoder similarity (excerpt)

```
from sentence_transformers import SentenceTransformer, util

model = SentenceTransformer('intfloat/e5-large-v2')
q_embedding = model.encode(question, convert_to_tensor=True)
p_embeddings = model.encode(passages, convert_to_tensor=True)
scores = util.cos_sim(q_embedding, p_embeddings)
# Output: Passage 1 Similarity: 0.93
```

VI. TESTING & EVALUATION

A. Testing Strategy

The testing strategy followed a layered approach: mod- ule testing, integration testing, and acceptance testing. Each program was tested individually during develop- ment using sample data and verified that modules link together correctly.

B. Test Case Summary

Table 3 summarises all seven test cases executed during system validation.

Table 3: Test Case Summary

ID	Test Case	Description	Status	Priority
1	Upload Dataset	Verify dataset upload	Pass	High
2	Generate Embeddings	Verify embedding generation	Pass	High
3	TF-IDF + Cosine	Verify baseline training	Pass	High
4	Propose DPR	Verify DPR model training	Pass	High
5	Bi-Encoder	Verify extension training	Pass	High
6	Question Answering	Verify QA functionality	Pass	High
7	Result Evaluation	Verify accuracy display	Pass	High

C. Accuracy Results

Table 4 presents the comparative accuracy of all three algorithms evaluated on the WebQuestions dataset using Top-5 retrieval.

Table 4: Comparative Algorithm Accuracy (Top-5, Web Questions)

Algorithm	Accuracy (%)	Type
TF-IDF + Cosine Similarity	83%	Sparse
Dense Passage Retrieval (DPR)	94%	Dense
Bi-Encoder Extension	99%	Dense

The results confirm that the proposed DPR algo- rithm achieves 11% improvement over the TF-IDF baseline, and the Bi-Encoder extension achieves 16% improvement, validating the effectiveness of dense semantic retrieval over sparse keyword-based methods.

VII. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A. Retrieval Accuracy

DPR achieves 94% top-5 retrieval accuracy on the We- bQuestions dataset, compared to 83% for TF-IDF + Co- sine Similarity. This 11% absolute improvement arises directly from BERT-based contextual embeddings cap- turing semantic meaning beyond surface-level keyword overlap. The Bi-Encoder extension further improves ac- curacy to 99%, demonstrating that transformer-based independent encoding with precomputed passage em- beddings provides both higher accuracy and faster re- trieval.

B. Semantic vs. Sparse Retrieval

The SHAP-equivalent analysis confirms that DPR cor- rectly retrieves passages for paraphrased queries that TF-IDF completely misses. For the example query "What does Jamaican people speak", DPR successfully retrieves the correct answer passage despite the absence of exact term overlap between the question and the passage. This demonstrates the key advantage of dense semantic embeddings: synonyms and paraphrases that consist of completely different tokens are mapped to vectors close to each other in the embedding space.

C. Computational Efficiency

Once passage embeddings are precomputed and saved as .npy files, subsequent retrieval requires only a ma trix dot product operation, making inference fast and scalable to large datasets. This is confirmed by the system successfully handling 200 test questions with no timeout or memory errors on a standard Intel i3 / 4 GB RAM workstation

VIII. CONCLUSION

This work demonstrated that dense retrieval can out- perform and potentially replace the traditional sparse retrieval component in open-domain question answer- ing. While a simple dual-encoder approach can be made to work surprisingly well, there are critical ingre- dients to training a dense retriever successfully. Our empirical analysis indicates that more complex model frameworks or similarity functions do not necessarily provide additional value.

The proposed DPR system achieves 94% accuracy and the Bi-Encoder extension achieves 99% accuracy on the Web Questions dataset, compared to the 83% TF-IDF baseline, confirming 11–16% absolute improvement. Dense embeddings successfully retrieve semantically relevant passages for paraphrased queries that sparse methods fail on. All seven system test cases passed with satisfactory results.

Future Work.

1. Integration with large-scale web crawlers for real-time QA from continuously updated online sources.
2. Expansion to multi-lingual and domain-specific QA systems covering healthcare, finance, and education.
3. Implementation of explainable AI (XAI) modules to provide transparency in answer retrieval.
4. Deployment in cloud and edge environments for scalable, low-latency semantic search.
5. Extension to voice-based and conversational assis-tants enabling context-aware AI-driven retrieval.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the open-source community behind the sentence-transformers library and the Facebook AI Research team for releasing the DPR framework and pretrained model weights that made this imple-mentation possible.

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