Foundations: Pretraining and scaling laws

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August 28, 2025

Course Part I

Part I: Foundations

- **Learning**
- Evaluation
- Inference
- Data

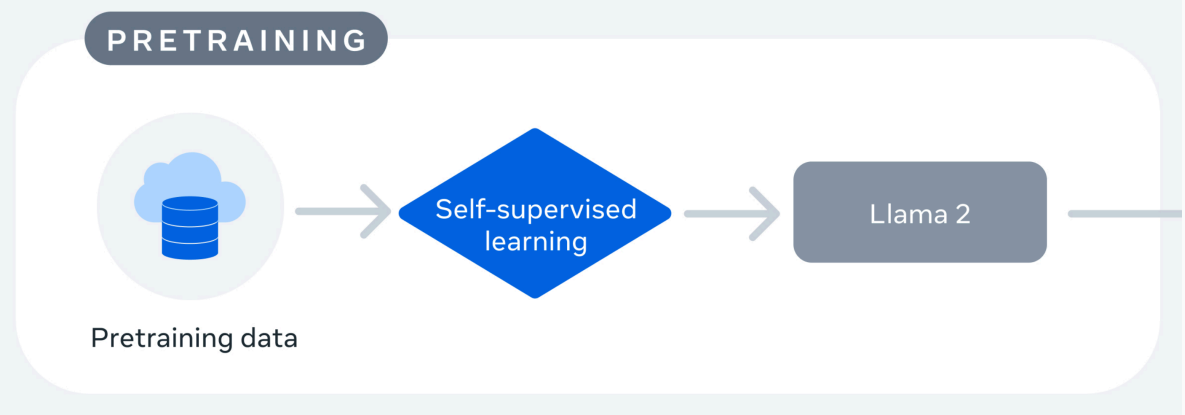
Language models

Language model learning pipeline

- Pretraining
  - Gives a “foundation model”
- Adaptation
  - Continued pretraining
  - Fine-tuning
  - Learning from feedback
  - In-context learning / prompting

Language models

Example: CodeLlama [6]

- **Pretraining**
  - 2 trillion (T) tokens of mixed data (web, code, etc.)
  - 

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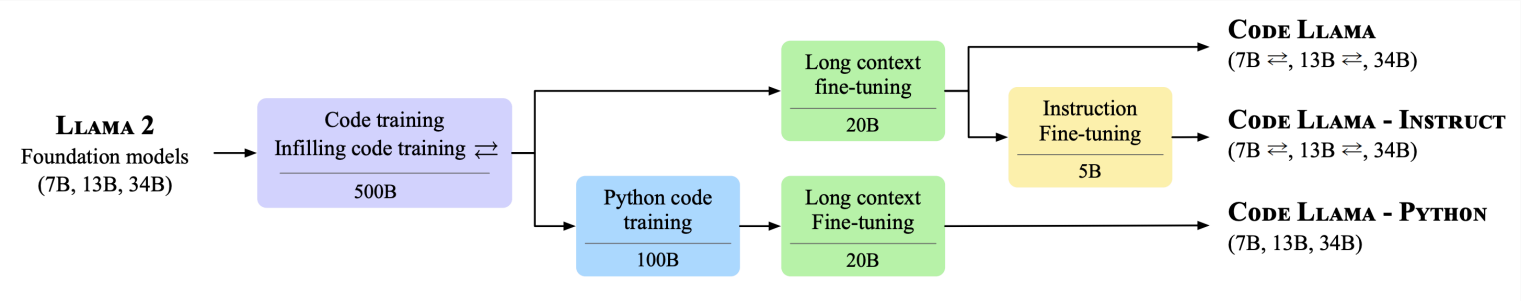

  - Continued pretraining
    - 500 billion (B) tokens of mostly code data
  - Finetuning
    - Long sequences, Python code, and/or instructions

Outline

- Recap of language models and pretraining objective
- Scaling laws for understanding pretraining
- What do these scaling laws not capture?

Recap: Language models

A language model is a probability distribution over sequences:

$$p_\theta(\mathbf{y}) \tag{1}$$

- $\mathbf{y} = (y_1, \ldots, y_T)$
- θ: parameters

Recap: Autoregressive neural language models

Typical language models are autoregressive, and are parameterized by a transformer:

$$p_\theta(\mathbf{y}) = \prod_{t=1}^{T} p_\theta(y_t | y_{<t}) \tag{2}$$

- θ: transformer[1]

[1] For a review of transformers, see Chapter 12 of Bishop, *Deep Learning* `https://www.bishopbook.com/`.

Recap: Autoregressive neural language models

Autoregressive distributions allow for easy sampling:

- $\hat{y}_1 \sim p_\theta(\emptyset)$
- $\hat{y}_2 \sim p_\theta(\cdot|\hat{y}_1)$
- $\ldots$
- $\rightarrow \hat{\mathbf{y}} \sim p_\theta(\mathbf{y})$

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Next: how do we learn the parameters θ?

Learning: maximum likelihood

Make observed data likely under the model; *maximum likelihood*:

$$\arg\max_{\theta} \frac{1}{|\mathcal{D}|} \sum_{\mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{D}} \log p_\theta(\mathbf{y}) \tag{3}$$

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- Example: $\mathcal{D}$ is 2 trillion tokens for Llama 2

Learning: next-token

Equivalently, learn to 'predict the next token':

$$\arg\max_{\theta} \frac{1}{|\mathcal{D}|} \sum_{\mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{D}} \log p_\theta(\mathbf{y}) \tag{4}$$

$$\equiv \arg\min_{\theta} \frac{1}{|\mathcal{D}|} \sum_{\mathbf{y} \in \mathcal{D}} \sum_{t=1}^{T} \underbrace{-\log p_\theta(y_t | y_{<t})}_{L_t} \tag{5}$$

Learning– Distribution matching

Equivalently, **match a target distribution**:

$$\arg\min_{\theta} \mathrm{KL}(q \| p_\theta), \tag{6}$$

where the dataset $\mathcal{D} \sim q$ is sampled from a *target distribution* q.[2]

[2] KL: Kullback-Leibler divergence

Learning– Distribution matching

Equivalently, **match a target distribution**:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\min_\theta \mathrm{KL}(q \| p_\theta) &= \min_\theta -\sum_{\mathsf{y}\in\mathcal{Y}} q(\mathsf{y}) \log \frac{p_\theta(\mathsf{y})}{q(\mathsf{y})} \\
&\equiv \min_\theta -\sum_{\mathsf{y}\in\mathcal{Y}} q(\mathsf{y}) \log p_\theta(\mathsf{y}) + \text{constant} \\
&\equiv \min_\theta -\mathbb{E}_{\mathsf{y}\sim q} \log p_\theta(\mathsf{y}) \\
&\approx \min_\theta -\frac{1}{|\mathcal{D}|} \sum_{\mathsf{y}\in\mathcal{D}} \log p_\theta(\mathsf{y}) \\
&\equiv \underbrace{\max_\theta \sum_{\mathsf{y}\in\mathcal{D}} \log p_\theta(\mathsf{y})}_{\text{Maximum likelihood!}}
\end{aligned}
$$

Recap

Next-token prediction has a nice interpretation: it fits the language model p_θ to a target distribution q represented by the dataset $\mathcal{D}$.

When we cover RL, we'll see how it flips the direction of the KL divergence and adds a reward term.

The Bitter Lesson

We want to fit the distribution better by “adding more compute”:

- *“The biggest lesson that can be read from 70 years of AI research is that general methods that leverage computation are ultimately the most effective, and by a large margin”*[3]

[3] *The Bitter Lesson*, Richard Sutton 2019

The Bitter Lesson

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What is "compute"?

[3] *The Bitter Lesson*, Richard Sutton 2019

Compute

We spend **compute** by performing forward and backward passes using our model on token sequences.

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A rough approximation for *dense* (non-MoE) transformer language models is [4]:

$$C \approx 6ND \tag{7}$$

- N: number of model parameters
- D: number of tokens
- C: compute; floating point operations (FLOPs)

Compute

We spend **compute** by performing forward and backward passes using our model on token sequences.

For example, Llama 3 405B:

$$C \approx 6 * 405 \text{ billion } * 15.6 \text{ trillion} \tag{8}$$

$$= 3.8 \times 10^{25} FLOPs \tag{9}$$

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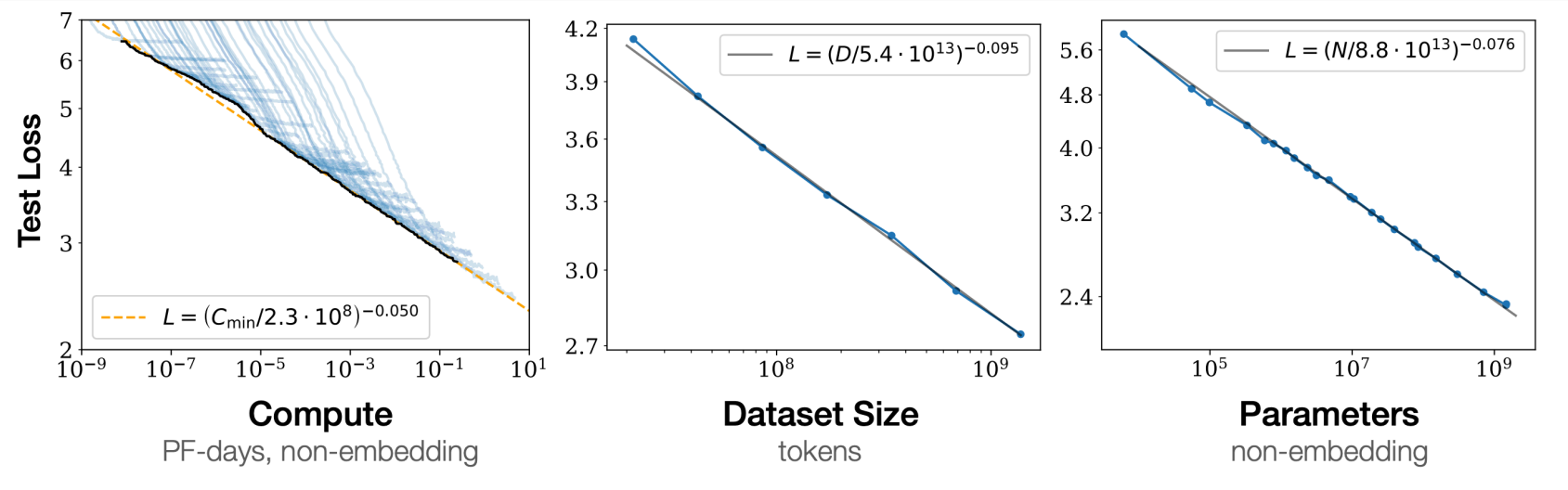
We can **increase compute** by increasing the **number of parameters** ($\uparrow N$), training on **more tokens** ($\uparrow D$), or a **combination** thereof.

Good news: cross entropy loss gets better with more compute



Test loss predictably improves with more compute [Kaplan et al 2020 [4]].

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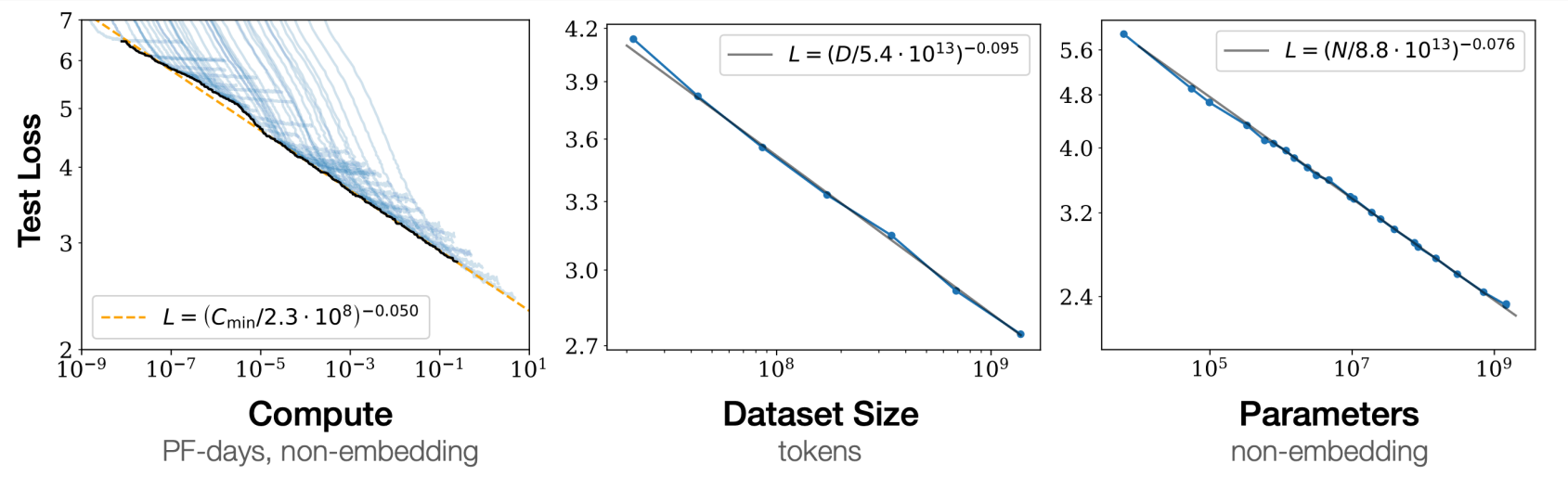

Specifically, loss scales as a power-law with the amount of compute:

$$\underbrace{L(X) \propto 1/X^{\alpha_X}}_{\text{scaling law}}, \tag{10}$$

where X is compute C, dataset size D, or parameters N.

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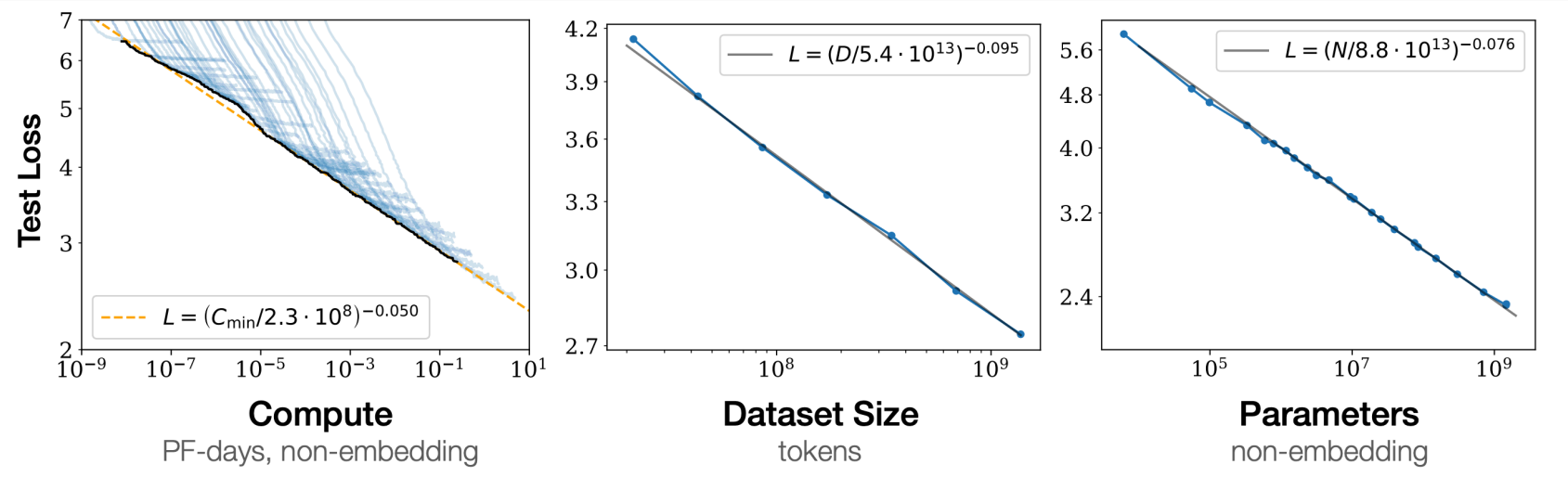

Example:

$$L(C) \propto 1/C^{0.05} \tag{11}$$

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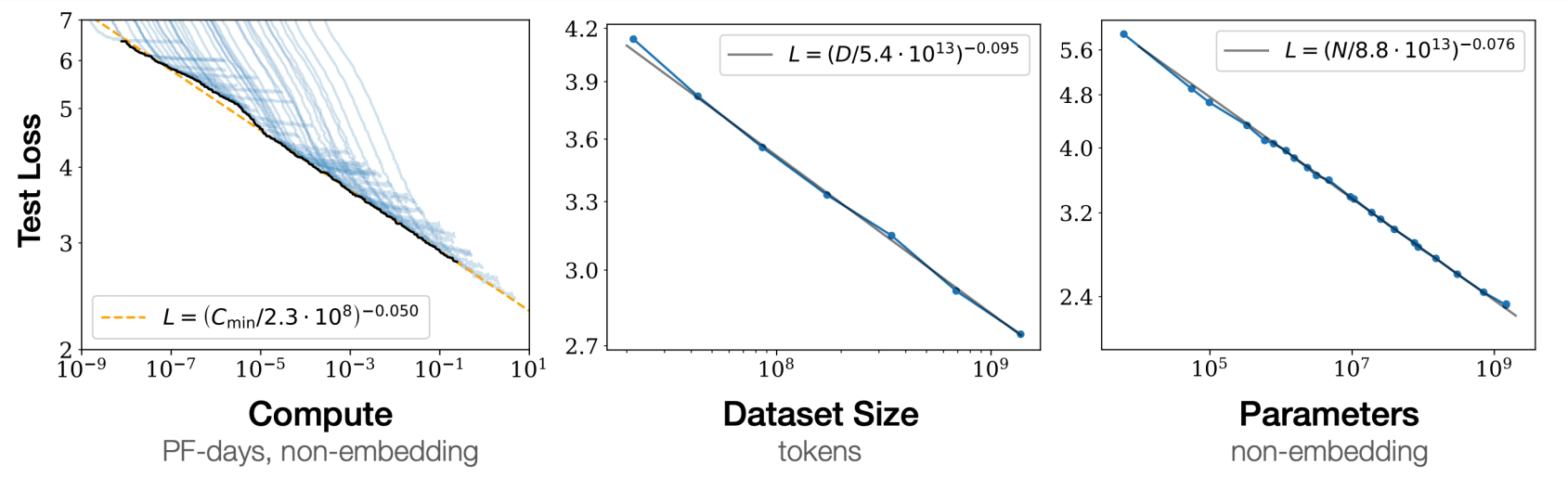

Basic idea:

- Train models of size $N_1, \ldots, N_n$ for $D_1, \ldots, D_d$ tokens.
- Plot loss at each step (light blue lines)
- Pick the minimum loss at each amount of compute (black line)
- Run linear regression on the resulting $(\log L, \log C)$ pairs

Good news: it appears to hold for code

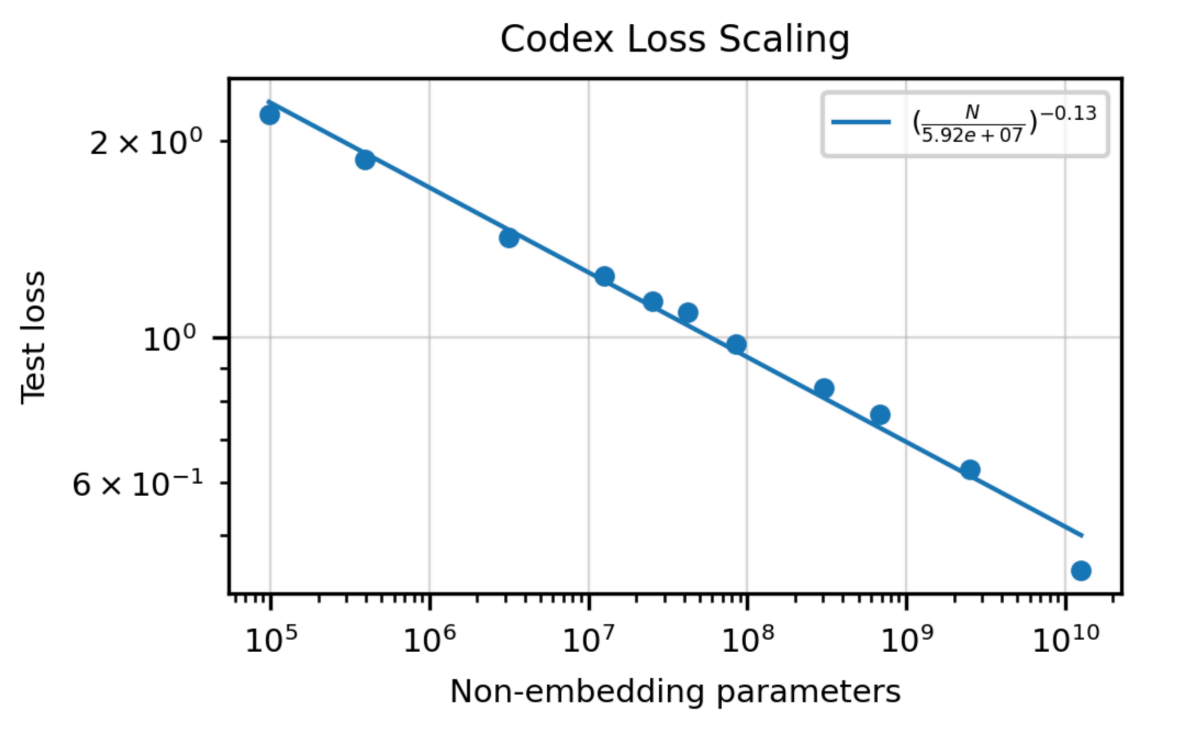

Figure 1: Codex test loss scaling in number of parameters N, from Chen et al. 2021

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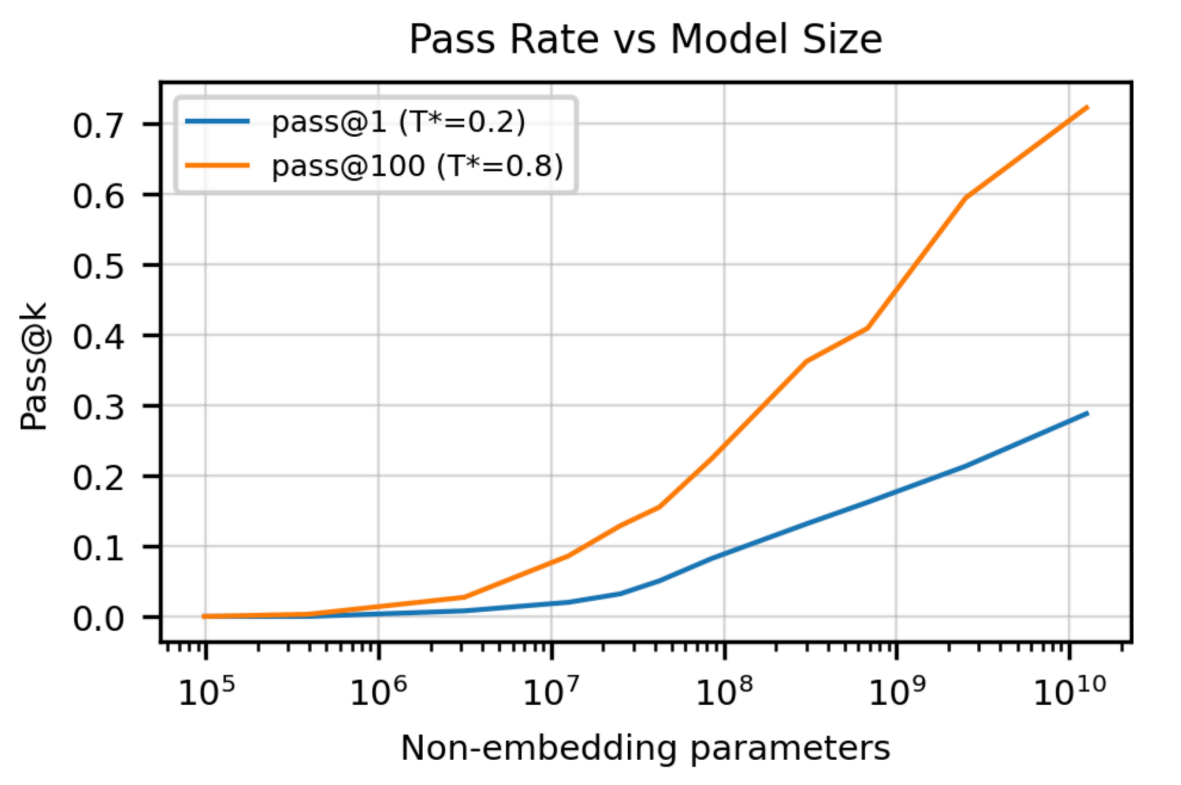

Figure 2: Codex pass rate on HumanEval as a function of parameters N, from Chen et al. 2021

Recap

- Pretraining is equivalent to fitting a target distribution
- The fit predictably gets better as we increase compute, as described by a scaling law

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- Pretraining is equivalent to fitting a target distribution
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If I have a fixed amount of training compute, should I spend it on a larger model, or on more data, to get the strongest possible model?

Training scaling laws: allocation

Allocation:

For compute budget C, choose number of parameters N and tokens D that minimizes loss.

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For compute budget C, choose number of parameters N and tokens D that minimizes loss.

$$\arg\min_{N,D} L(N, D)$$

$$\text{subject to } 6ND \leq C$$

Investigated in "the Chinchilla paper" [Hoffmann et al 2022 [3]]

Allocation: Chinchilla

To choose Chinchilla's allocation, the authors fit scaling laws on runs with smaller amounts of compute. They used three approaches.

Approach	Coeff. a where $N_{opt} \propto C^a$	Coeff. b where $D_{opt} \propto C^b$
1. Minimum over training curves	0.50 $(0.488, 0.502)$	0.50 $(0.501, 0.512)$
2. IsoFLOP profiles	0.49 $(0.462, 0.534)$	0.51 $(0.483, 0.529)$
3. Parametric modelling of the loss	0.46 $(0.454, 0.455)$	0.54 $(0.542, 0.543)$
Kaplan *et al.* (2020) [23]	0.73	0.27

$a \approx b$: parameters and tokens should be scaled at the same rate.

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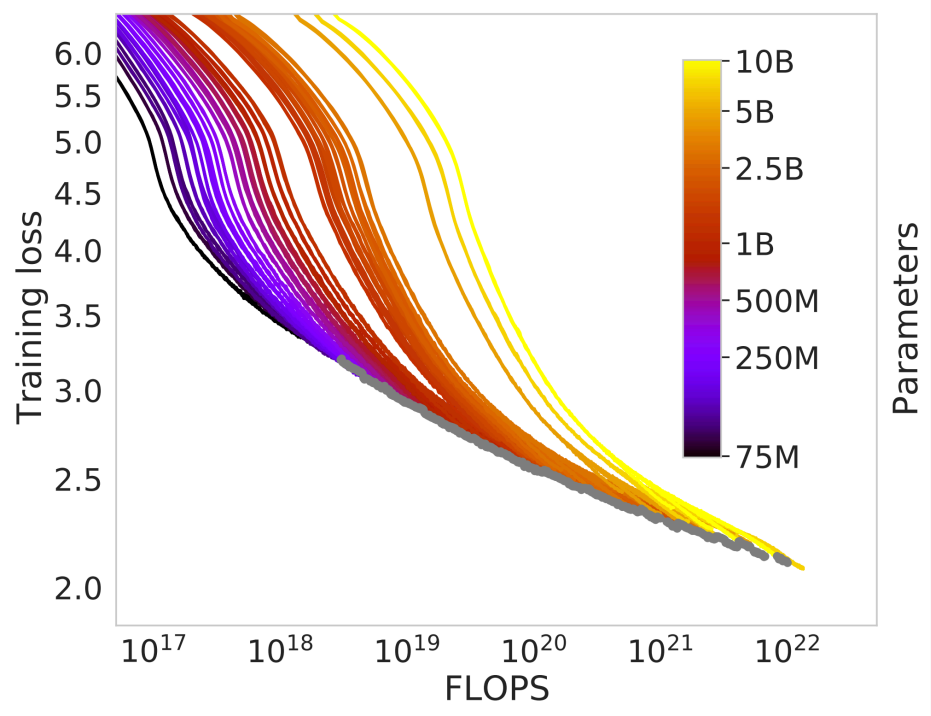
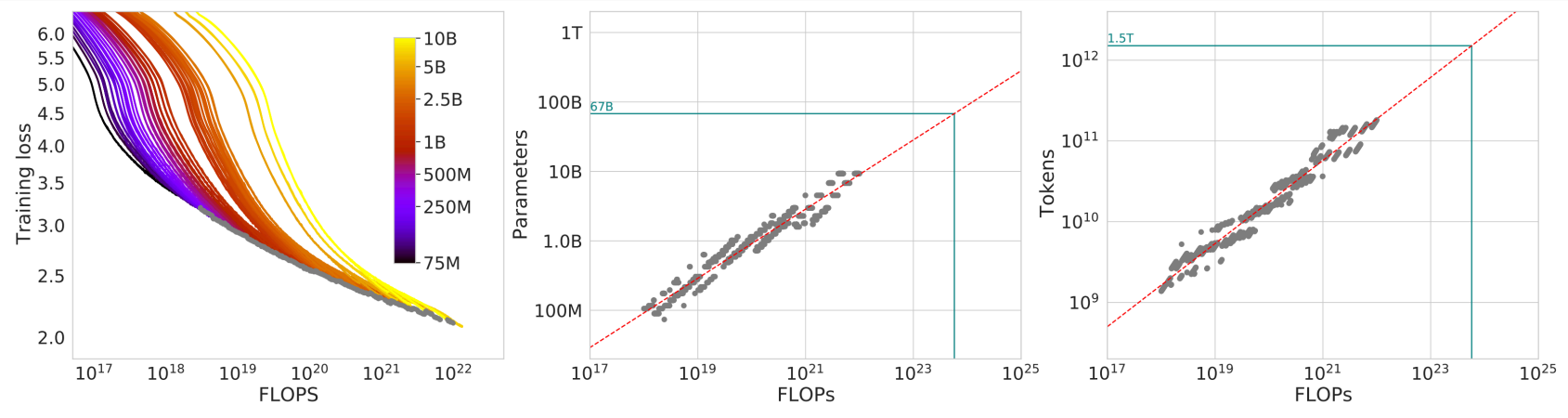
To understand this kind of analysis, we will look at Approach 1

Approach 1: fix N and vary D



- For each size N, train 4 models with different number of tokens D
- For each compute C, pick the model with the lowest loss L
- We now have (C, N, D, L) examples (grey points)

Approach 1: fix N and vary D



- Fit power laws using the (C, N, D, L) examples.
  - Middle: $N_{\text{opt}} \propto C^a$ (optimal model size)
  - Right $D_{\text{opt}} \propto C^b$ (optimal number of tokens)

Allocation: scale parameters and data equally

As a recap, the slope of the lines appears in the table: scale parameters and tokens at similar rates.

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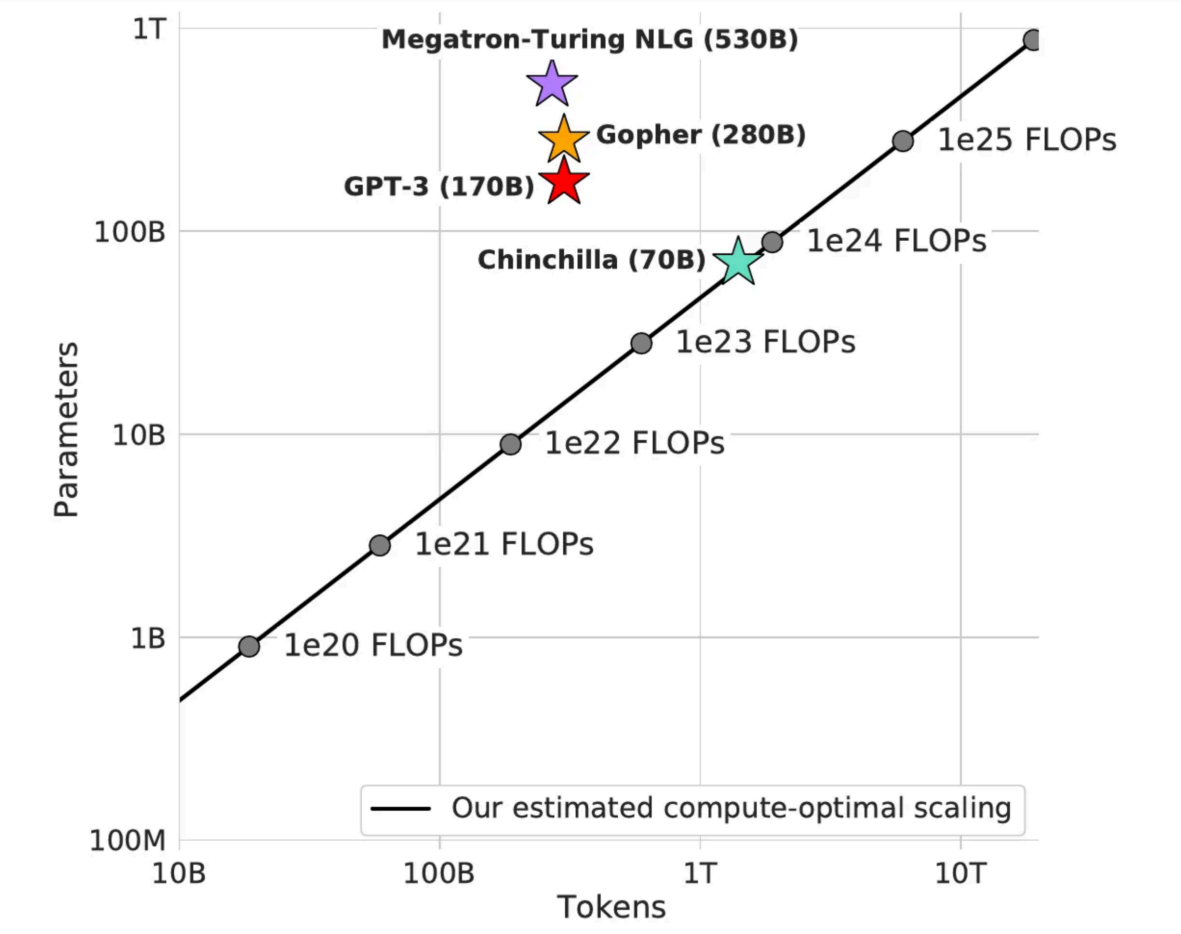


Figure 3: Previous models (e.g. Gopher) allocate a large portion of compute to model size. Chinchilla is a smaller model trained on more tokens that outperforms Gopher.

Allocation: Chinchilla

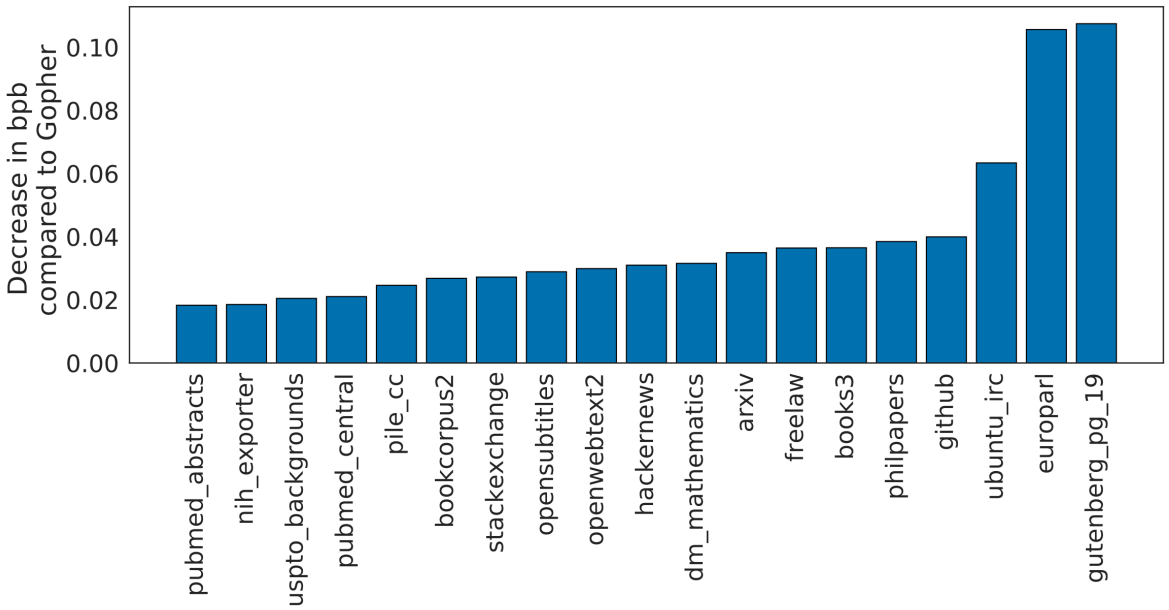


Figure 5 | **Pile Evaluation.** For the different evaluation sets in The Pile (Gao et al., 2020), we show the bits-per-byte (bpb) improvement (decrease) of *Chinchilla* compared to *Gopher*. On all subsets, *Chinchilla* outperforms *Gopher*.

Example from Llama3

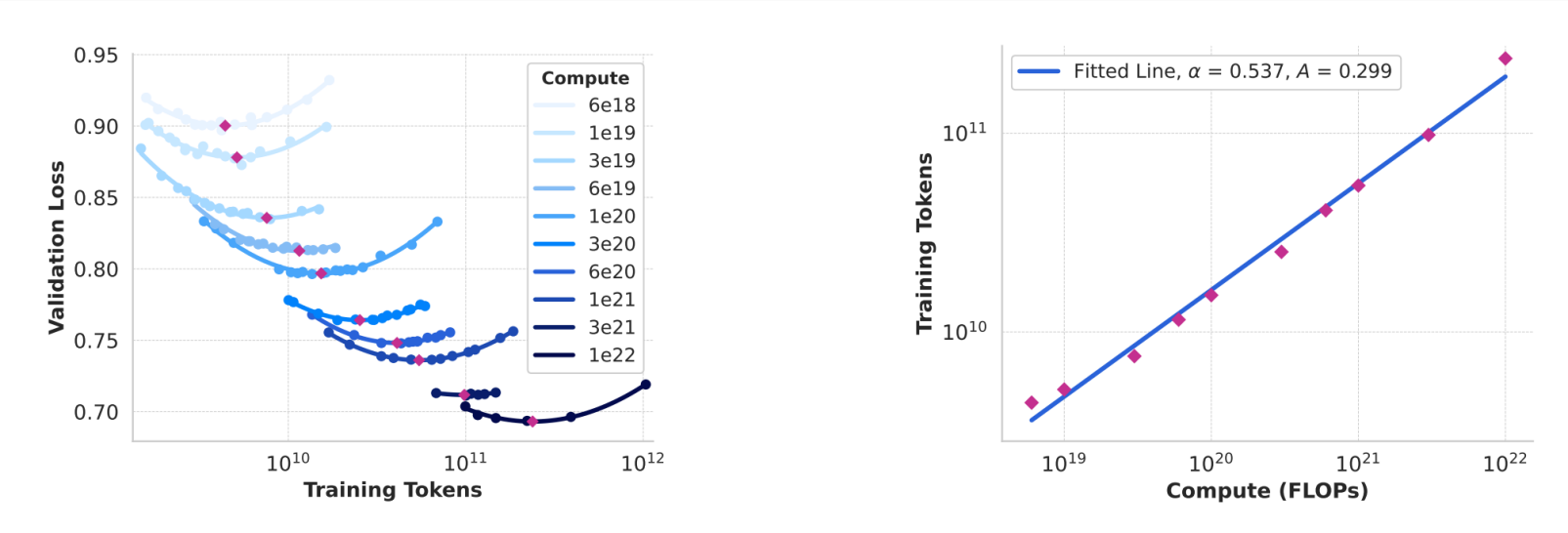


Figure 4: Llama3 scaling curves

Typically translates to better task performance

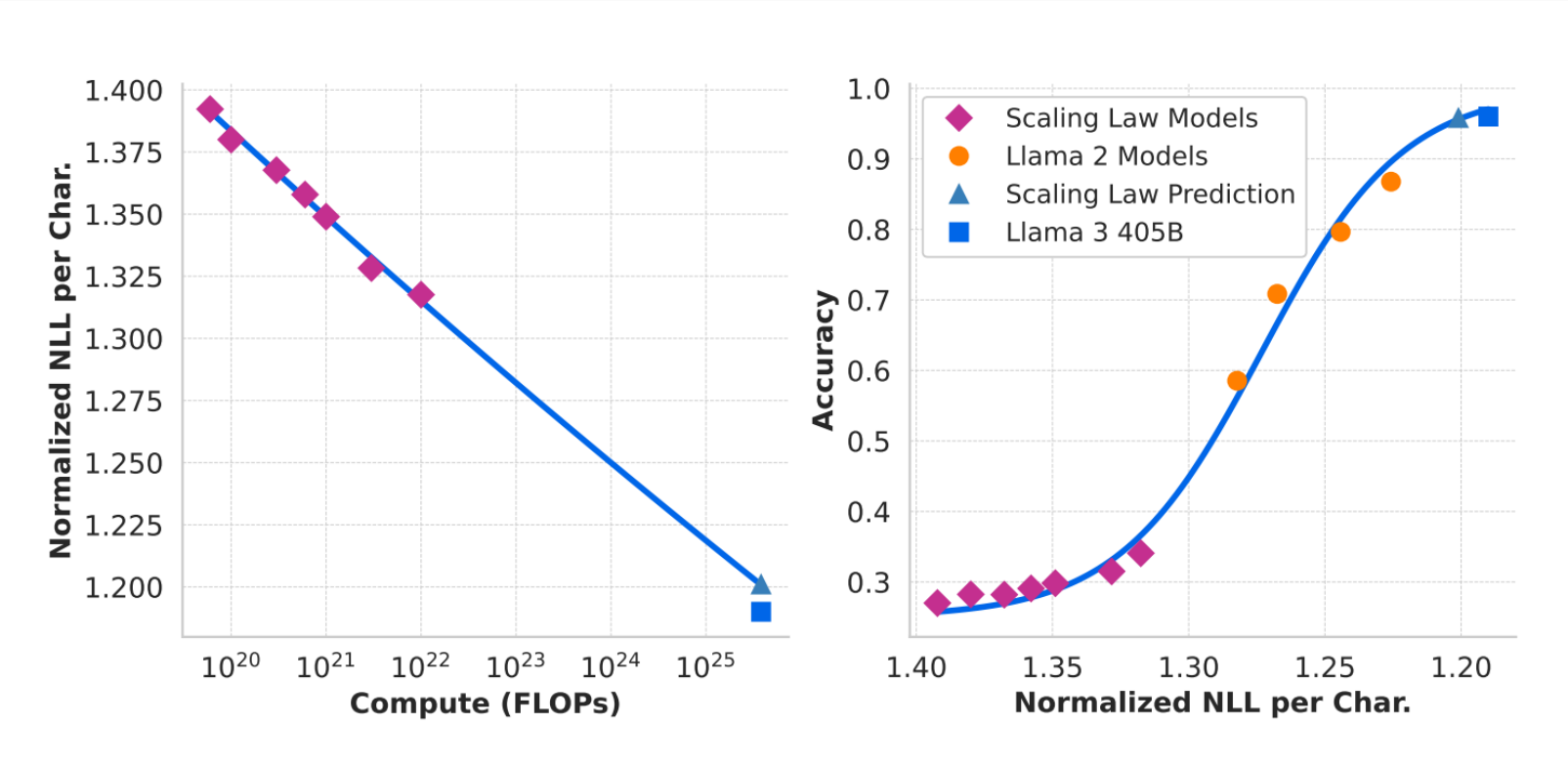


Figure 5: Llama3 accuracy prediction

Post-Chinchilla: over-training models

- The Chinchilla scaling law arguably led to a focus on scaling data
- But, these laws don't account for test time use: smaller models are faster to generate with.
- Trend: train on ***even more tokens*** than suggested by the compute-optimal scaling law => stronger model.
- See `https://www.harmdevries.com/post/model-size-vs-compute-overhead/`

Post-Chinchilla

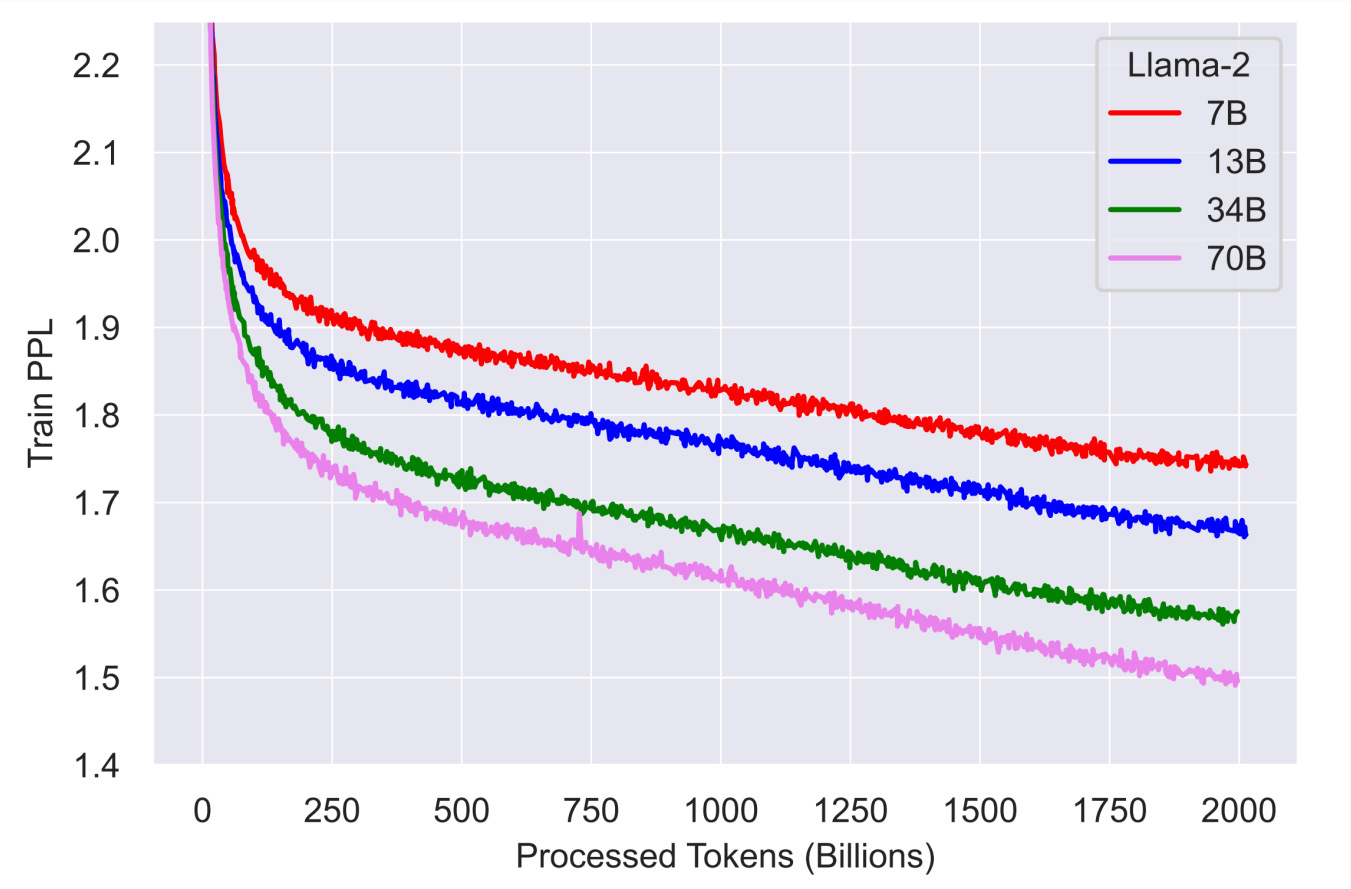


Figure 6: Example: Llama 2 – more tokens than Chinchilla, equal size (70B)

Recap

- Scaling laws can determine “compute-optimal training”
  - I.e., the choice of N and D that minimizes loss at compute budget C.
- Scaling the amount of data is important!!

Data constraints

What if we run out of data?

Data-constrained scaling

Data-constrained setting

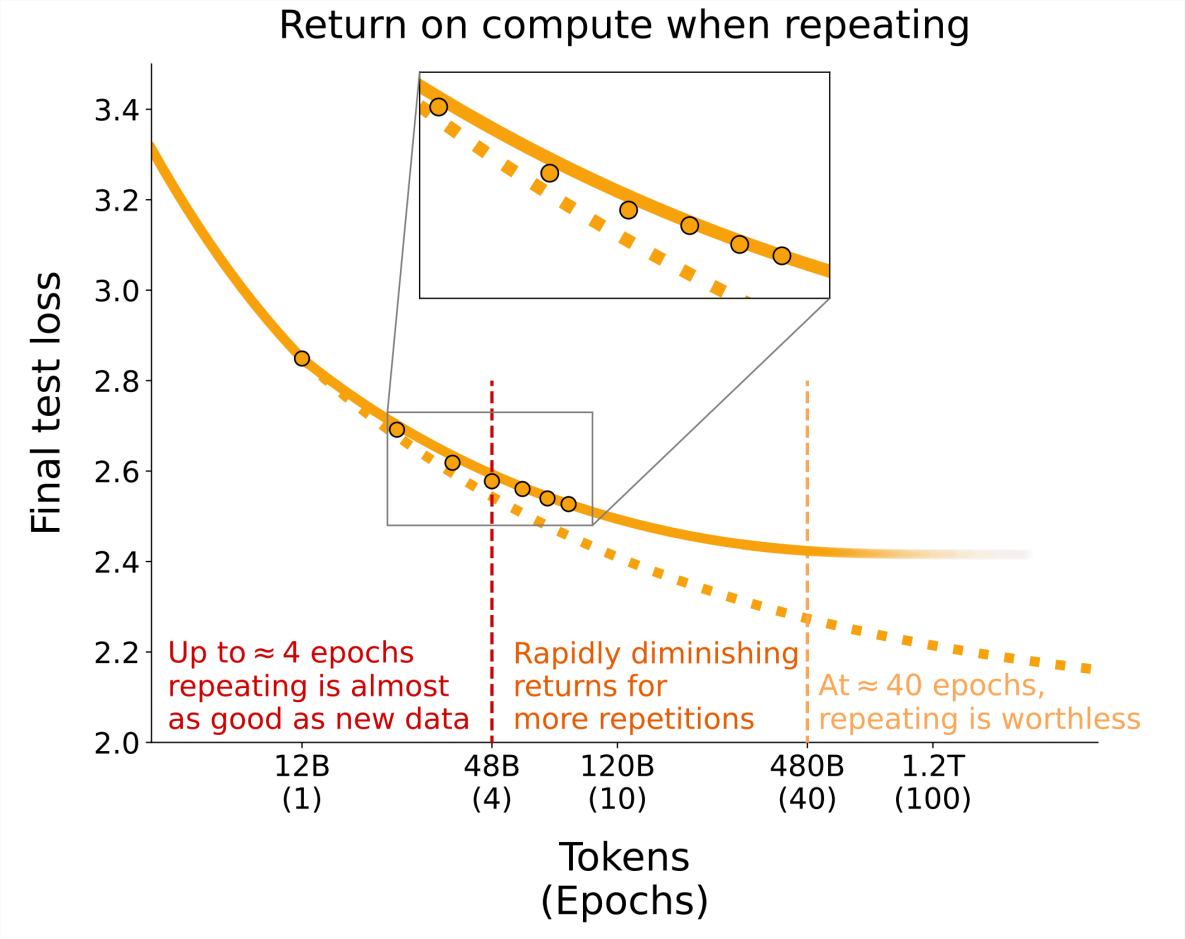
- We might want to train on much more than 2 trillion tokens
- Some programming languages have fewer tokens
  - E.g. Starcoder pretraining data: $\approx$ 300 billion code tokens
  - E.g. Lean has $\approx$ 300 million tokens [1]

Data-constrained scaling

Option 1: repeat the data

- Studied in *Scaling Data-Constrained Language Models* [5]

Data-constrained scaling

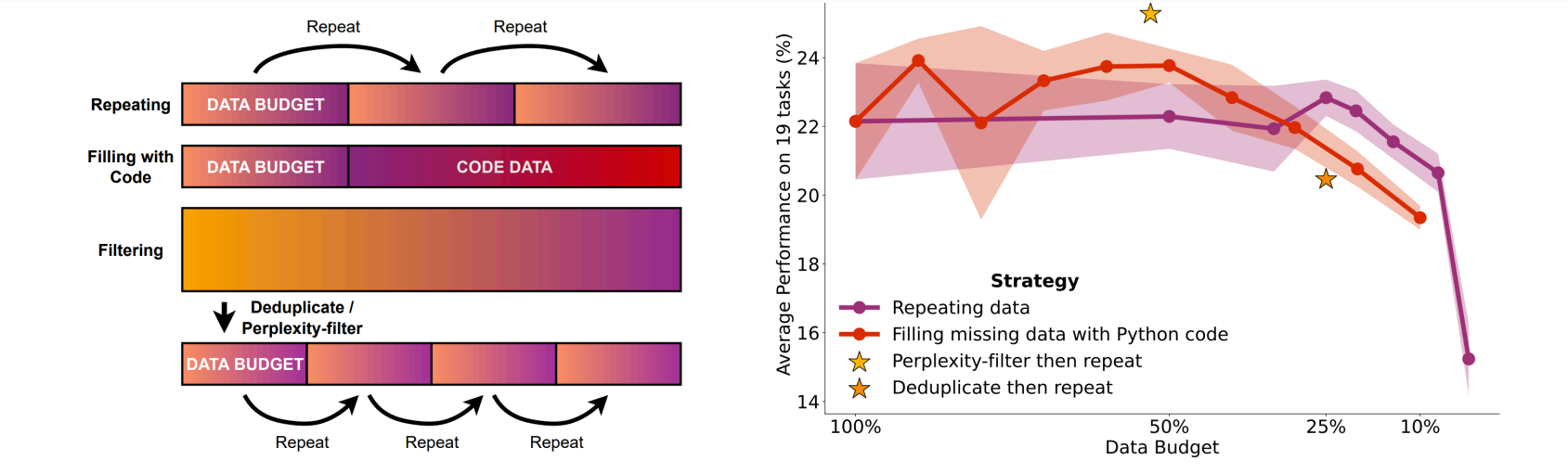


Finding: repeating can be good

- 4 epochs is nearly as good as 1 epoch with 4x the data

Data-constrained scaling

Option 2: mix in other data



- N_1 web tokens + N_2 code tokens $\approx$ repeating N_1 web tokens

Data-constrained scaling

Option 3: transfer

- Pretrain on $\mathcal{D} \sim q$ (e.g. web)
- Continue training on $\mathcal{D}' \sim q'$ (e.g. code)

Scaling laws of transfer

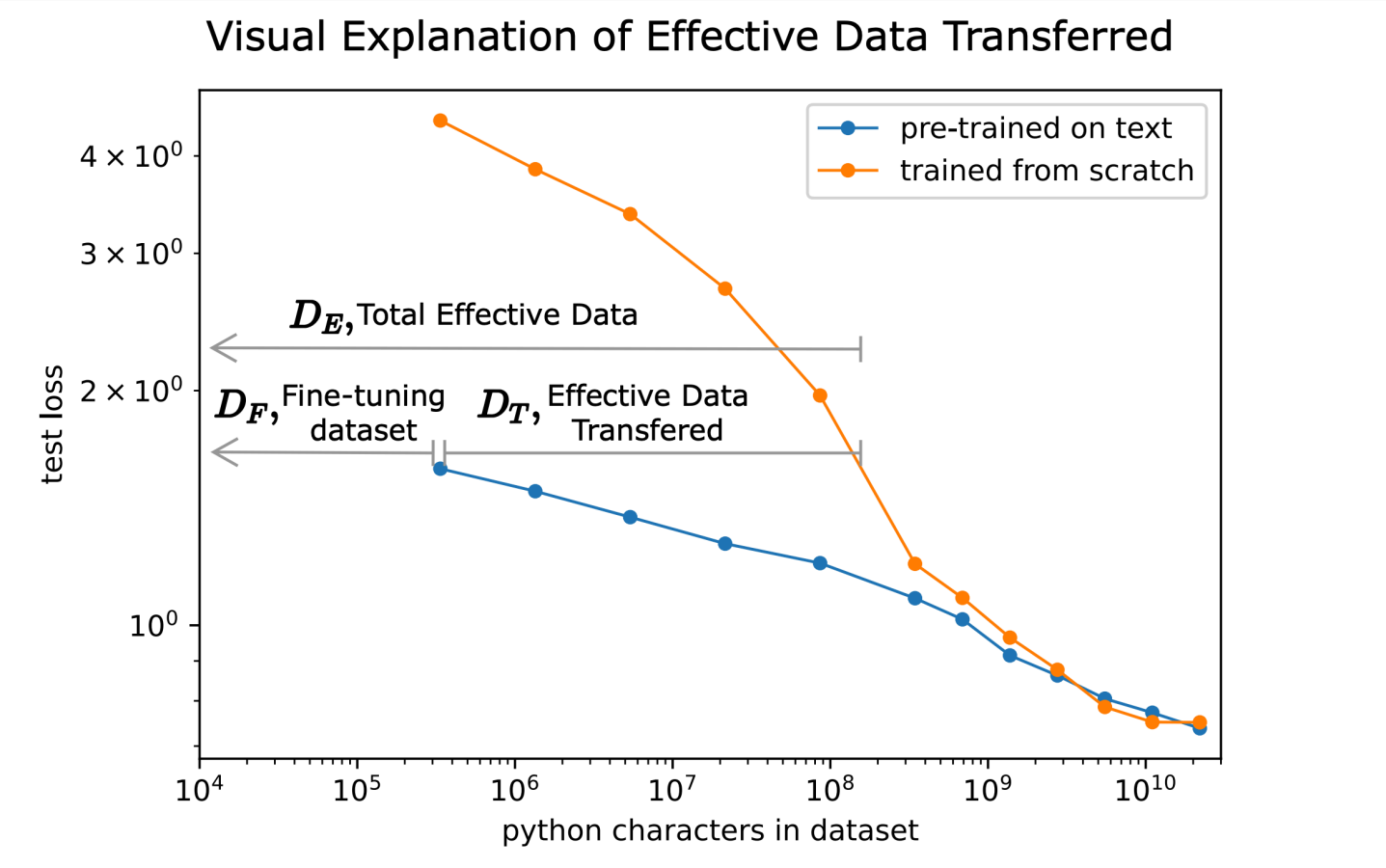


Figure 7: *Scaling Laws for Transfer* [2]

Effective data transfer: code tokens saved by pretraining on text

Scaling laws of transfer

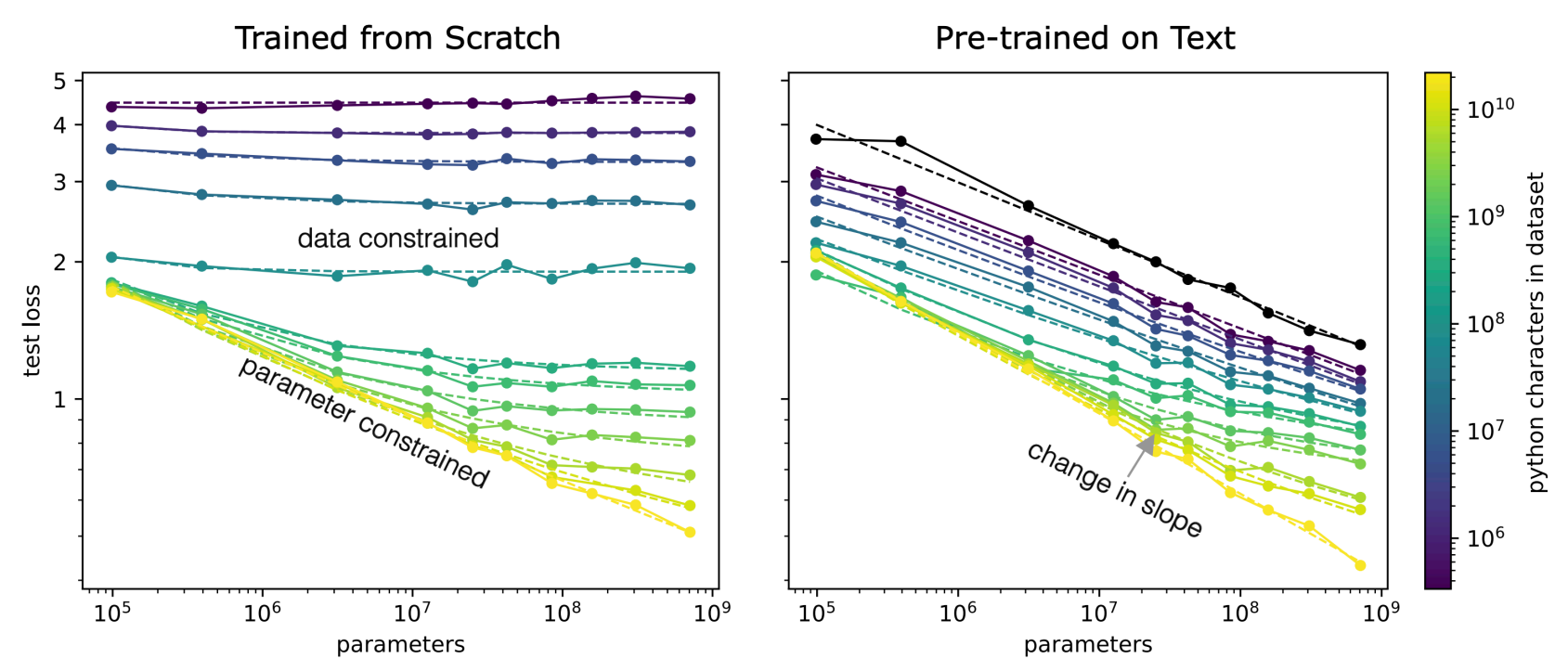


Figure 8: *Scaling Laws for Transfer* [2]

Low-data setting: without pretraining on text, we get no benefit from increasing parameters.

Data-constrained scaling: Llemma

LLEMMA [1]:

- Pretrain on web and code
  - Initialize with $\theta_{\text{codellama}}$
- Transfer to specialized programming languages and math
  - Continue training on $\mathcal{D}'$: 55 billion token PROOFPILE II

Data-constrained scaling: Llemma

LLEMMA [1]:

- Pretrain on web and code
  - Initialize with $\theta_{\text{codellama}}$
- Transfer to specialized programming languages and math
  - Continue training on $\mathcal{D}'$: 55 billion token PROOFPILE II
    - Mathematical code (e.g., Lean)
    - Mathematical web data
    - Scientific papers

Data-constrained scaling: Llemma

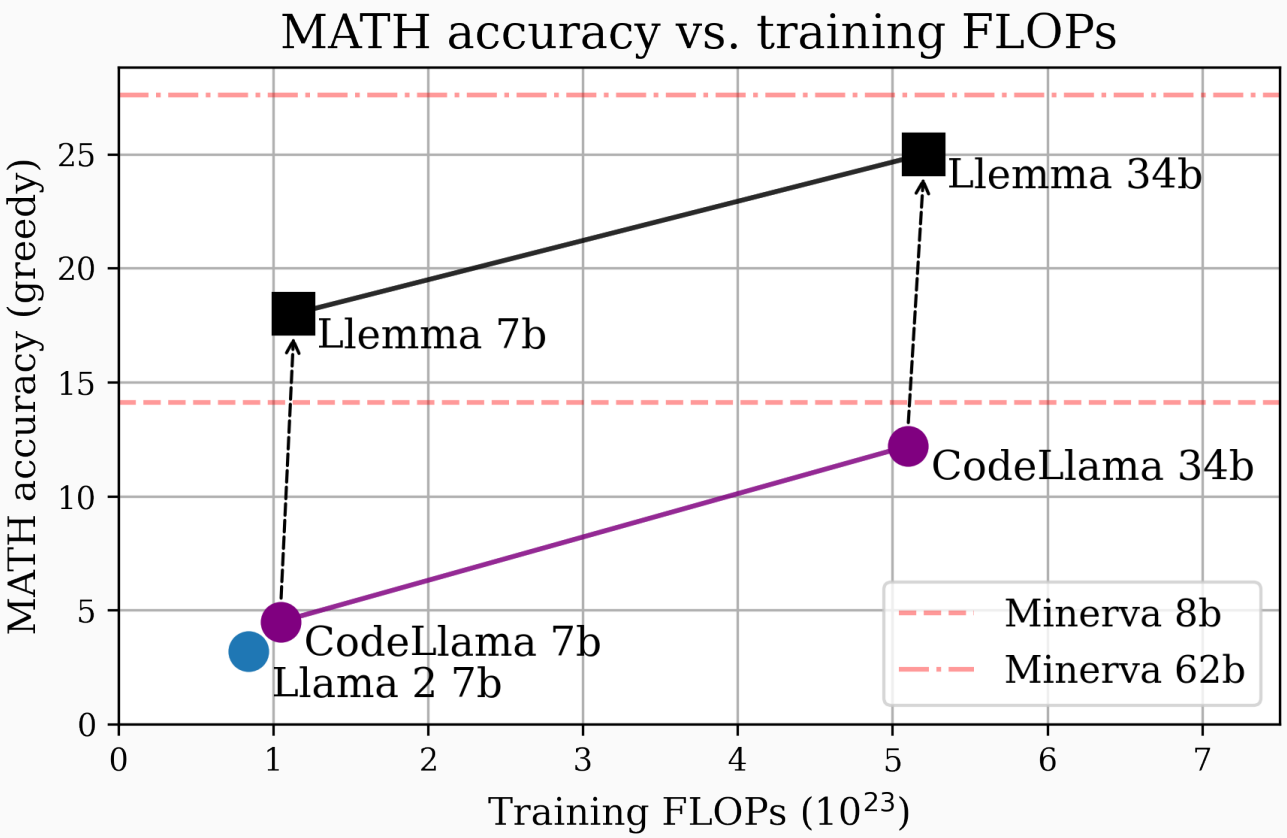


Figure 9: LLEMMA improves with a modest amount of math-specific compute

Recap

To keep reducing loss, we need many tokens. What if we run out?

- Repeating tokens can be a useful allocation of compute
- Leverage tokens from a data-rich distribution (e.g. web text)

Summary

- Pretraining fits the distribution of pretraining data
- Scaling laws let us forecast performance, allocate compute, and choose hyperparameters
- In low-data settings: repeat data, mix in other data, transfer

Looking ahead

What do these scaling laws **not** cover?

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We will discuss all of these during the semester!

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- **Data quality**: 'better' data may be more compute efficient
- **Training objective**: next-token may not be optimally efficient
- **Distribution mismatch**: what if we perfectly fit q, but want q'
  - q: code on the internet
  - q': code that satisfies a user's intent

We will discuss all of these during the semester!

Looking ahead

What do these scaling laws **not** cover?

- **Data quality**: 'better' data may be more compute efficient
- **Training objective**: next-token may not be optimally efficient
- **Distribution mismatch**: what if we perfectly fit q, but want q'
  - q: code on the internet
  - q': code that satisfies a user's intent
- Many others: architecture, inference cost, performance metric,...

We will discuss all of these during the semester!

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Appendix

Appendix

Approach 3: parametric fit

Step 1: hypothesize a scaling law

$$L(N, D) = E + \frac{A}{N^{\alpha}} + \frac{B}{D^{\beta}} \tag{12}$$

Allocation

Step 1: hypothesize a scaling law

$$L(N, D) = \underbrace{E} + \frac{A}{N^{\alpha}} + \frac{B}{D^{\beta}} \tag{13}$$

"Entropy term": with infinite parameters and infinite data ($N, D \to \infty$), we should approach the minimum achievable loss (entropy).

Allocation

Step 1: hypothesize a scaling law

$$L(N, D) = E + \underbrace{\frac{A}{N^\alpha}} + \frac{B}{D^\beta} \tag{14}$$

"Modeling cost": with infinite data ($D \to \infty$), we should incur a cost from using a transformer with N parameters.

Allocation

Step 1: hypothesize a scaling law

$$L(N, D) = E + \frac{A}{N^{\alpha}} + \underbrace{\frac{B}{D^{\beta}}} \tag{15}$$

"Optimization cost": with infinite parameters ($N \to \infty$), we should incur a cost from using only D tokens with gradient descent.

Allocation: scale parameters and data equally

Step 2: fit constants E, A, α, B, β using losses from training runs

$$L(N, D) = E + \underbrace{\frac{A}{N^{0.34}}} + \underbrace{\frac{B}{D^{0.28}}} \tag{16}$$

Allocation: scale parameters and data equally

Step 3: derive the optimal parameters and tokens from L, plug in α, β:

$$N_{opt}(C) = G\left(\frac{C}{6}\right)^{a}, \quad D_{opt}(C) = G^{-1}\left(\frac{C}{6}\right)^{b}, \quad \text{where} \quad G = \left(\frac{\alpha A}{\beta B}\right)^{\frac{1}{\alpha+\beta}}, \quad a = \frac{\beta}{\alpha+\beta}, \text{ and } b = \frac{\alpha}{\alpha+\beta}$$

Result: $a = 0.46$, $b = 0.54$