

Narrative Similarity – Annotation Guidelines

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Task Description

In this study, you are tasked with identifying similar stories.

In each annotation, you will be presented with three stories, an *anchor*, and two choices, **a** and **b**. You are to determine which of the candidate stories, **a** and **b**, is the most similar to the *anchor*. The similarity between **a** and **b** is irrelevant.

In each step, you select the candidate story that is more similar to the anchor. Specifically, you will consider the stories' narrative similarity. Additionally, you are asked to specify which general aspects of similarity the two stories share.

Narrative Similarity

The narrative similarity of stories can be broken down into three core aspects: **(1)** the *abstract themes* of the story, **(2)** the *course of action*, and **(3)** the *story outcomes*.

At one extreme, this means that the story deals with the same themes and tells the same order of events with an identical outcome or conclusion, just using a different wording; at the other extreme, the story might be completely different and lack any basis for comparison.

More difficult to assess are stories that only share some similarities. In such cases, you are asked to weigh the three core components of story similarity. You should focus on the core aspects of stories, potentially largely ignoring side storylines. How you weigh the individual factors should be based on your **intuitive impression** of which aspects you consider crucial to the overall similarity of the specific stories.

We define these three aspects as follows:

- **Abstract Theme** describes the defining constellation of problems, central ideas, and core motifs of a story. The definition does not cover the concrete setting of a story.
- **Course of Action** describes sequences of events, actions, conflicts, and turning points in a story and the order in which they happen.
- **Outcomes** describe the results of the plot at the end of the text, for example, the conflict resolution, the characters' fates, moral lessons, etc. It does not cover intermediate statuses that change later in the story.

Each aspect can take different forms in an actual pair of stories. Below, we list one example for each aspect:

- The general setting of the story, if it strongly influences the events in the story or the events necessitate a specific setting (*abstract themes*)
 - A: On the week-long journey from Europe to the Americas, the crew members get into a heated conflict about the best ration packages.
 - B: The flight to Mars is long. After several weeks, the astronauts become better friends than ever before, having to share the limited resources.
 - A and B share some similarities in that the polar opposite outcomes are both enabled by being cut off from the outside world.
- The order of events in the story (*course of action*)
 - A: After the ship capsizes and Alice barely makes it out alive, she starts living life to the fullest.
 - B: Alice is living life to the fullest until, one day, her ship capsizes. She barely makes it out alive.
 - A and B are similar in that both tell of a good life and a shipwreck (*abstract theme*), but they differ in the *course of action*, and the order is very different.
- The outcomes of events (*story outcomes*)
 - A: The man intentionally drops a cup; it breaks.
 - B: He accidentally swipes the bottle off the table, and it shatters.
 - A and B are similar in that the events are comparable and lead to similar outcomes.

There is a range of factors that expressly do **NOT** contribute to the narrative similarity:

- The style of writing in a story
- The concrete setting of a story (also including the time period).
- The names of the characters and locations
- The length of a text
- The level of detail in which the events are told

Differentiating Between Similarity Aspects

Distinguishing the three aspects can be challenging. In general, it is important to consider each aspect independently.

Often, pairs of stories that are similar in terms of *course of action* will also share an *abstract theme*. However, it is possible that similar events emerge from completely different surrounding circumstances. Outcomes, on the other hand, are clearly distinct from the other two aspects: practically identical events in stories with comparable *abstract themes* can result in polar opposite outcomes.

When comparing *abstract themes*, it can help to explicitly formulate them. There is, of course, no single correct answer, and a single story's theme could be formulated in many ways. Two stories share a general theme if there is a description that captures the defining circumstances of both stories.

Question Format:

Which of the two stories A and B is narratively closer to Anchor?

- A
- B

Which of the following aspects significantly contribute to the similarity between the anchor and your choice?

Abstract Theme: []

Course of Action: []

Outcomes: []

Which of the two stories is narratively more similar to the anchor?

INPUT: Anchor text

INPUT: Text A

INPUT: Text B

Which of the two stories is narratively more similar to the anchor? Choose one of two options.

A

B

Which of the following aspects significantly contribute to the similarity between the anchor and your choice? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Abstract Theme
> If yes, explain _____[2-5 words]__
- ☐ Course of Action
> If yes, explain _____[2-5 words]__
- ☐ Outcomes
> If yes, explain _____[2-5 words]__

(optional) comment field

Guideline Examples

Example 1:

Anchor:

Anna loses her purse. She is terrified because there are important documents in it. She retraces her steps but cannot find it. Dan finds it and helpfully returns it to her.

A

Brian lost his backpack. He did not care too much, as only a water bottle was in it. After an hour of searching, he finally found it.

B

Alex loses his engagement ring while swimming. He freaks out, and after hours of diving for it, he still cannot find it.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcomes: [x]

Explanation: A and Anchor tell the story of a lost item that is retrieved. In the case of A, it is found by a third party (as it is in the Anchor), while in B it is not found at all.

Example 2:

Changes from Example 1 are marked

Anchor:

Anna loses her purse. She retraces her steps but cannot find it. Dan finds it and helpfully returns it to her.

A

Brian lost his backpack. He was terrified because there were important documents in it. After an hour of intense search he finally found it.

B

Alex lost his engagement ring while swimming. After hours of looking, he still can not find it. Karen finds the ring while magnet fishing and, based on the engraved name, manages to return it.

Solution: B

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcomes: [x]

Explanation: Now, B adds an ending where a third party finds the lost item, which means that the outcomes align in both cases. In this case, the third party finding the item is the decisive factor in identifying the more similar story.

Example 3:

Anchor

In the trenches of World War I, Greg is hit by a grenade splinter. He is in tremendous pain, but his comrades manage to evacuate him from the position. After spending weeks fighting the infection in his leg, he succumbs to his injuries.

A

Jill was driving home when another car suddenly crashed into hers. After receiving medical attention, she recovered within just days and now advocates for traffic safety.

B

As Major Miller gives the command to charge, he is not sure if his men can manage it. In a heroic effort, they capture the next position. Only one day later, though, it is again lost to the enemy.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: []

Outcomes: []

Explanation: While the concrete setting in Anchor and B is a battlefield, the similarities end there. A by contrast and B both deal with recovery from injuries as an *abstract theme*. They do not share a similar outcome, and the similarity in the *course of action* is also limited.

Example 4:

Anchor

Maven is a magician; ever since finishing his apprenticeship, he has worked on developing novel magic in his tower. As the years go on, he gets fewer and fewer visitors, focusing his life only on his work. After he dies alone in his tower, nobody finds his body for many decades.

A

The expedition is not going as planned. Some party members have abandoned the mission and tried to return home. One day, the other three remaining members decide to head home, and Ellie realizes she is the last one in the expedition party. Working through snow and ice, she underestimates the storm and freezes to death; nobody ever finds her.

B

Three friends go on a fishing trip. They catch nothing. They still had a great time.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: []

Course of Action: []

Outcomes: [x]

Explanation: Neither option presents a similar course of action or theme. There is however a similar outcome in Anchor and A.

Example 5:

Anchor

Andrew goes to the shop to buy food and drinks. He then heads home and prepares everything for his family's arrival. As aunts and uncles arrive, he can impress them with homemade cookies and fancy drinks.

A

Zoie buys ammunition and guns; she will need them. Back home, she prepares well, setting up traps and protected firing positions. When the Zombies rush her doors, she is prepared and can deal out destruction. Nonetheless, she cannot win against the unending hoards of undead.

B

Erica is great at building paper planes. One day, to her surprise, she attends a competition, and despite little preparation, she wins!

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: []

Course of Action: [x]

Outcomes: []

Explanation: While the *abstract theme* and *outcome* of Anchor and A have little to do with each other, they both describe a process of first purchasing something, then preparing something, and finally making use of the preparations. This is a case of a similar *course of action*.

Training Examples

These examples are intended for annotators to learn the concepts; they are a mixture of handwritten and sampled. We intend to increase the difficulty with the example index.

Example 0: Manual + LLM

Anchor

Simon and his small group of explorers make their way into the rainforest. In a multi-day expedition, they encounter countless difficulties. First, a wild animal attacks the rear of their

party; they can barely fend it off. Afraid of the animal returning, they find little sleep. On the second day, the first party members begin developing a fever. Finally, they reach the goal of their expedition: a pyramid, untouched for centuries, long rumored to be hidden deep in the forest.

A

Ed and his team of interstellar explorers traverse the rugged terrain of the barren planet Xylox. A swarm of robotic drones, remnants of a forgotten war, attacks the rear of their group, and they barely fend them off. Fearful of another attack, they find little rest. On the second day, several members develop disorienting fevers due to the planet's harsh radiation levels. Finally, they reach their goal: an ancient, untouched monolith, rumored to hold secrets of a lost civilization, hidden beneath the planet's shifting sands.

B

Mary and her small group of explorers push into the rainforest, but their expedition takes its toll on the team with multiple severe injuries. When they finally reach their destination, no pyramid awaits—only dense jungle and disappointment. Weakened and lost, they struggle to find their way back. One by one, they succumb to fever and exhaustion, with the rainforest swallowing any trace of their hopes and dreams.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: [x]

Explanation: A has a different setting to the anchor, but the story is identical with an identical *abstract theme*. Meanwhile, B describes a failed mission meaning it has a similar *abstract theme* but with a different *course of action* and a different *outcome*.

Example 1 - Manually Written

Anchor

Alice and Bob get married. They buy a farm and raise wonderful children.

A

Harry and Louise found a business together. Investing much effort, they lead it to success over the years.

B

Alice and Bob are neighbors. After pleasantly chatting every now and then, in a turn of events, they start a fight about the tree growing on their property line.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: []

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: [x]

Explanation: Founding the business and marrying are different kinds of partnerships that could be considered similar abstract themes. In Anchor and A, they lead to success. In B, there is no strong partnership, and the story ends in a negative situation. The names do not matter. There is an argument to be made that there is a domestic setting (meaning a comparable *abstract theme*) in A and B, but this consideration is not central to the story.

Example 2 - Manually + LLM

Anchor

In a tapestry woven with love, Alice and Bob embarked on a splendid journey, uniting their hearts in the sacred bond of marriage. Seeking solace in nature, they acquired a picturesque farm, a haven for their dreams. Here, they nurtured delightful children, each a sparkling gem in their blossoming family, filling their lives with laughter, joy, and enchanting memories.

A

Harry and Louise found a business together. Investing much effort, they lead it to success over the years.

B

In a charming neighborhood kissed by the gentle whispers of the breeze, Alice and Bob thrived as amicable neighbors, their days brightened by delightful exchanges that sparkled like sunlight on dewy grass. Yet, fate wove a different tale, for a grand tree, its branches intertwining across their property line, became the unwitting catalyst for an unexpected rift. What was once a harmonious symphony of camaraderie now descended into a tempest of disagreements, overshadowing the vibrant blossoms of their former friendship.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]
Course of Action: [x]
Outcome: [x]

Explanation: The same arguments as before apply. Only the style of the text has changed, which is not a part of the narrative similarity.

Example 3 - Manually Written (only A has changed from Example 1)

Anchor

Alice and Bob get married. They buy a farm and raise wonderful children.

A

Harry and Louise found a business together. Investing much effort over multiple years, they have built a prosperous business. As the country's economy hits a recession, they are forced to sell their business.

B

Alice and Bob are neighbors. After pleasantly chatting every now and then, in a turn of events, they start a fight about the tree growing on their property line.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]
Course of Action: [x]
Outcome: []

Explanation: The similarity of A and B is irrelevant. A is still somewhat similar to the anchor. It just adds a negative ending. Beyond, potentially, the setting, there is still no similarity between B and the Anchor.

Example 4 - Manually Written

Anchor

After an accident, Neo, a lonely man in his 40s, loses his eyesight. He learns to handle the new challenges the world now has for him. He makes a new friend, Anna, who is very willing to help him out, finding connections that he never thought possible before.

A

Adam has a large circle of friends. One day, he loses his hearing in an accident. He struggles with the new challenges in communication, alienating his friends, and finally becomes very lonely.

B

Brian is a London-based artist who creates street art. He leads a lonely life. One day, he encounters a fellow artist who is painting what looks to be an identical picture to the one he is working on. The two make a deep connection over their shared love for art and remain friends to this day.

Solution: B

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: []

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: [x]

Explanation: Anchor and A are essentially opposites. While the anchor and A share a common theme, the *course of action* and *outcome* outweigh this similarity.

Example 5 - Sampled

Anchor: The Master Gunfighter

In 1836 in southern California near Santa Barbara shortly after California became part of the United States, American settlers and the U.S. government discriminate against the Mexican landowners and frequently take their land by force or legal skullduggery. Wealthy Latino ranchers whose land and wealth are at risk decide to misdirect a U.S. government ship carrying gold so that it will be wrecked and plundered. To prevent themselves from being caught, they plan to massacre the local Chumash Indians. The hero is the now-estranged adoptive son Finley (Tom Laughlin), a master swordsman and gunfighter, who tries to prevent this while still saving his family.

A: The Star and Death of Joaquin Murieta

Joaquin Murieta goes to California with the hope of finding gold there. On the way, he meets a beautiful girl whom he marries, but their happiness was short-lived. Suddenly his wife dies.

B: Seven Guns for Timothy

Timothy Benson, a young intellectual and greenhorn inherits a gold mine. Rodrigo Rodriguez, a bandito leader will stop at nothing to get Timothy to deed him the mine. It is up to Timothy's foreman and his friends to teach Timothy to be a tough hombre and with their help, stop the bandit, Rodrigo Rodriguez.

Solution: B

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: []

Explanation:

In both Anchor and B the main character struggles to protect something he cares about.

Example 6 - Sampled

Triple Origin: Merci Docteur Rey

Thomas Beaumont is young man recruited into an illicit love triangle to watch a much older man's sexual liaison, but ends up witnessing what turns out to be the older man's murder. The next day his opera diva mother, Elisabeth Beaumont, informs him that his estranged father has been in Paris... until the previous night when he was murdered. Seeking help with infamous psychiatrist Docteur Rey, the young man comes across Pénélope, an eccentric actress who has come totally unhinged by the death of Rey. At first mistaking her for the doctor, the young man embarks on a madcap mystery, reminiscent of an Agatha Christie novel, with Paris as the backdrop.

A: The Truth About Charlie

British newlywed Regina Lambert lives in Paris with her husband Charles. She returns home following a short vacation, determined to divorce Charles only to discover their apartment has been stripped bare and that her husband has been murdered. The French police are in her apartment. Charles had liquidated their possessions for \$1.8M and the money is missing. Regina is soon reunited with a mysterious stranger Joshua (Mark Wahlberg) she met on her

holiday. He helps her piece together the truth about the deceased Charlie and deal with three menacing people who are now following her.

B: Sgt. Kabukiman N.Y.P.D.

The film follows Sergeant Detective Harry Griswold, a clumsy N.Y.P.D. cop investigating a string of murders involving kabuki actors. While attending an amateur kabuki play, Harry witnesses thugs gun down the entire cast. In the ensuing gunfight, Harry is forcibly kissed by one of the dying actors, unknowingly becoming blessed with the powers of kabuki. Before he knows it, Griswold finds out that he has the ability to transform into Kabukiman, a colorfully dressed slapstick superhero who has the ability to fly and access to such unique weapons as heat seeking chopsticks and fatal sushi. With the assistance of the beautiful Lotus, he helps clean up the crime-ridden streets of New York and try to stop maniacal businessman Reginald Stuart and his Goons, who plan to fulfill an ancient evil prophecy that will summon The Evil One whose demonic powers can enslave the world.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: [x]

Explanation: Sudden murder (of a love interest) followed by the main character getting help in investigating the respective murder.

Example 7 – Sampled

Anchor: Gospel Hill

Gospel Hill tells the intersecting story of two men in the fictional South Carolina town of Julia. Danny Glover plays John Malcolm, the son of a slain civil rights activist Paul Malcolm (Samuel L. Jackson). Jack Herrod (Tom Bower) is the white former sheriff who never officially solved the murder. Their paths begin to cross when a development corporation comes to town with plans to raze Julia's historic African-American community of Gospel Hill, now fallen into disrepair, to build a golf course. John Malcolm's wife Sarah (Angela Bassett), a schoolteacher, seems alone in her opposition to the project, which is being endorsed by Gospel Hill's prominent African-American physician, Dr. Palmer (Esposito). Meanwhile, a young white teacher (Julia Stiles) comes to town and falls for a handsome young landscaper (Taylor Kitsch), whose business is booming thanks to Dr. Palmer's patronage.

A: Hurry Sundown

In 1946, bigoted, draft-dodging, gold-digging Henry Warren and his heiress, land-owning wife Julie Ann, are determined to sell their land in rural Georgia to owners of a northern canning plant, but the deal rests on selling two adjoining plots as well, one owned by Henry's cousin Rad McDowell and his wife Lou, the other by black farmer Reeve Scott, whose ailing mother Rose had been Julie's wet nurse. Neither farmer is interested in selling his land, and they form a dangerous and controversial black and white partnership to strengthen their legal claim to their land, which infuriates Henry. When Rose suddenly dies, Henry tries to persuade his wife to charge Reeve with illegal ownership of his property, but local black teacher Vivian Thurlow searches the town's records and uncovers proof that Reeve legally registered the deed to his land. Julie, upset with Henry's treatment of their mentally challenged young son, decides to leave him and drops her suit against Reeve. With the help of Ku Klux Klansmen, Henry dynamites the levee above the farms, and Rad's oldest child drowns in the ensuing flood, much to Henry's dismay. Rather than admit defeat, Rad and Reeve decide to rebuild their devastated properties with the assistance of their neighbors.

B: Intruder in the Dust

The film closely follows the plot line of the Faulkner novel. It tells the story of Lucas Beauchamp, (pronounced 'Bee-cham'), a respectable and independent black man, who is unjustly accused of the murder of white man Vinson Gowrie. Through the help of two teenage boys, the town lawyer and an elderly lady, he is able to prove his innocence.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: []

Explanation: While all three stories are set in the American south. Only Anchor and A discuss land disputes with one set of characters working to retain the status quo in each story.

Example 8 – Manually Written

Anchor

A mysterious visitor, known only as Tom, comes to a small town. He checks out the local bar but the regulars take him for trouble and he just barely escapes an altercation with two of them. It is revealed that he is looking for his long-lost father. Some of the townsfolk decide to help him. Using local archives and the memory of some of the older residents, they manage to identify his ancestors and can confirm his father's death. After a long search, Tom can finally mourn at his father's grave.

A:

As Warren enters the town, he is looking for trouble. The regulars at the local bar are about to fight him but are settled down by the barkeeper. In a drug-fueled rage, Warren finally lights a fire, burning not only the bar but also two adjacent houses.

B:

Alana is looking for her mother, who has been missing for years. As she searches through records on the internet, she finally discovers that her mother is already dead. She makes her way to New York, which she identified as her mother's final resting place. In a small cemetery, Alana places flowers on her mother's grave.

Solution: B

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: []

Explanation: The core story is not the altercation with the bar regulars but the finding of the long-lost relative.

Example 9 – Manually Written

Anchor

Two travelers, Eli and Stan, in medieval Europe are stopped by a roadblock. A group of robbers descends upon them. The two defend themselves. The robbers capture Stan. Eli is forced to make a decision: flee the scene or give up and stay with Stan. He surrenders, and the robbers take their belongings but let the two live.

A

A small group of travelers is heading west by train in 1800s USA. At night, the train stops, and as passengers peer out the windows, they spot hoards of zombies. The group makes their way out, fighting off multiple zombie attacks as they go. It is only as they leave the train that they notice one of their own, Dan, is missing. Deciding not to leave Dan behind, they perform a daring rescue, saving him just before the zombies close in on him and still make it out. In a multi-day effort, the group manages to lose zombies and make it out unharmed.

B

Two travelers, Eli and Stan, make their way from their home village to the kingdom's capital. The roads are dangerous. The two hear countless tales of robbers, but sticking to the main roads

and only traveling by daylight, they make it to their destination and are able to explore the kingdom's center of power for themselves.

Solution: A

Aspects:

Abstract Theme: [x]

Course of Action: [x]

Outcome: [x]

Explanation: Anchor and A tell of travelers encountering and surpassing difficulties. In both stories, a choice is made to help the other.