Short Story Generation through Autoregressive Transfer of Narrative Continuations

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Abstract

We introduce a story generation approach that requires as input a source story and the starting paragraph for a target story. The sequence of paragraphs in the source story is distilled into a sequence of continuations that relate conceptually each paragraph to its preceding text. The induced sequence of continuations is then applied in an autoregressive manner to the developing target story. While preserving the conceptual transitions from the source story, the resulting target story diverges from the original source story and feels different due to its different beginning. We present an LLM-based approach for inducing and applying sequences of continuations, together with a comprehensive manual evaluation of the generated outputs showing promising results.

Introduction and Motivation

According to the standard definition of creativity, an artifact is considered creative if it is both *original* and *useful*. The two attributes are variously expressed using related terms, such as novelty, unexpectedness, or surprise in reference to originality, and value, effectiveness, or acceptability in reference to usefulness. In their archaeology of the concept of creativity, Runco and Jaeger (2012) trace the two defining criteria to work from the 1950s and earlier, in particular Stein's *novelty* and *usefulness* (1953) and Barron's *uncommonness* and *adaptation to reality* (1955). With respect to novelty, Stein explains that "the creative product did not exist previously in precisely the same form", as it "arises from a reintegration of already existing materials or knowledge, but when it is completed it contains elements that are new" (1955). Stein's description of the creative process above matches the concept of *combinational creativity* from Boden's categorization of creativity into combinational, exploratory, and transformational (Boden 2003). Combinational creativity refers to unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas; of the three types, it is considered to be the easiest to achieve and therefore the most commonly observed. Given the prevalent nature of combinatorial creativity, Mark Twain was perhaps justified when writing in his Letter to Helen Keller, not without some exaggeration, that "substantially all ideas are second-hand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources" (1868). A similar view of creativity is expressed later in his autobiography (Twain 1907), when he writes that "we simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely"[1]. Whereas Twain deconstructs most creative writing as a combination of *old ideas*, Voltaire takes aim at *the idea* of an entire work when he writes that "almost everything is imitation. The idea of The Persian Letters was taken from The Turkish Spy. Boiardo imitated Pulci, Ariosto imitated Boiardo. The most original minds borrowed from one another. Miguel de Cervantes makes his Don Quixote a fool; but pray is Orlando any other? It would puzzle one to decide whether knight errantry has been made more ridiculous by the grotesque painting of Cervantes, than by the luxuriant imagination of Ariosto" (de Voltaire 1756).

The significant progress in natural language processing achieved recently, in particular the impressive language capabilities of large language models (LLMs), means that one does not need to have an encyclopedic mind in order to be able to identify the occurrence of old ideas in new artifacts, or trace ideas found in one author's work to similar ideas formulated by other authors. In one such exercise, we gave GPT-4 the following monologue:

> Stalker (Tarkovsky): *"Let them be helpless like children, bc. weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it's tender and pliant. But when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being. Because what has hardened will never win."*

When tasked with finding where else a similar idea was expressed, the LLM was able to not only recognize the general theme of the monologue, namely that "weakness, flexibility, and tenderness are valuable qualities, while hardness and strength are associated with death or rigidity", but also the fact that it resonates with sources as diverse as Tao Te Ching (Laozi), the Bible, and Bruce Lee. Determining if a similar idea was used in a different context could serve as a starting point for a more general system that takes as input a purposely creative work and analyzes its narrative (Zhu et

[1]The astute reader might determine that the introduction of our paper so far is itself a product of such a combinational process.

al. 2023; Piper 2023) in order to determine which ideas are truly new, which ideas are old, and how they were combined.

In this paper, we are interested in the inverse problem, which in its most general form refers to taking two or more ideas from existing work and combining them in a way that satisfies the two criteria in the standard definition of creativity. Focusing on the domain of narrative generation, we consider the scenario where the ideas to be combined come from only two texts: the *source* and the *target*. In this setting, we see two general types of combinational creativity:

- **Shallow transfer**: Take a surface level attribute from the source text and apply it to the target text, while preserving its original semantic content as much as possible.
- **Deep transfer**: Take one or more ideas from the source text and transfer them to a different context provided by the target text.

An example of shallow transfer would be the rewriting of a target news article so that it reflects the political leaning of a source news article. If the value of the surface level attribute is already known, e.g. the political leaning is left or the sentiment is positive, then the source text in shallow transfer is not needed, resulting in an NLP task known as style transfer. This type of low level combination of source style with target content is typically done to satisfy various pragmatic aims (Hovy 1987), such as formality (Heylighen and Dewaele 1999), sentiment (Hearst 1992), framing (Masters 1992), or point of view (van Peer and Chatman 2001).

In this paper, we introduce a short story generation task that belongs to the deep transfer class of combinational creativity. In this task, the ideas to be combined are as follows:

- The source text provides the conceptual relationships that link a text unit, i.e. a paragraph, to the text before it.
- The target text provides the first textual unit of the generated text.

The output narrative is then generated iteratively through the autoregressive application of the conceptual relationships extracted from the source text to the output text generated so far, starting from the target text. An LLM will be used for both the extraction of conceptual relationships and their projection to the generated text.

The short story generation procedure above can also be interpreted through the lens of the conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), according to which the source and target texts provide two *input mental spaces*, whereas the output narrative would correspond to the *blended space*. The conceptual relationships lifted from the source can be seen as forming a skeletal structure that applies to both spaces, i.e. the *generic space*.

Deep Transfer: Definition and Implementation

Given as input a source collection of short stories $\mathcal{S} = \{S_1, S_2, ..., S_n\}$ and the beginning paragraph $T.p_1$ of a yet-to-be-written target story T, the deep transfer task requires the following:

- Identify a source story $S \in \mathcal{S}$ whose main idea is compatible with the target paragraph $T.p_1$.
- Generate the rest of the target story T such that it maintains the main idea of the source story S while being coherent and following logically from the given first paragraph $T.p_1$.

The task is implemented using a sequence of 3 main steps, as illustrated in Figure 1 and detailed below.

Step 1: Iterate through the source collection of short stories in random order, where each short story in the collection is a sequence of paragraphs. For each source story S in this collection, the LLM is prompted to identify and summarize its main idea $S.Idea$ and the the aspects $S.Aspects$ that make it interesting to read, such as surprise, irony, sarcasm, or humor, as shown in Table 1. In the same prompt, the model is also asked to determine if the target paragraph $T.p_1$ can be continued to create a new story that preserves the source story's main idea and the aspects that made it interesting. To emphasize that the target paragraph $T.p_1$ is meant to take the role of the first paragraph in the source text, the first paragraph $S.p_1$ and the rest $S.rest$ of the source text are made explicit through special headings in the prompt. Thus, the source story can be seen as $S = S.p_1 + S.rest$. If the model determines that the target paragraph $T.p_1$ cannot be continued to create a new story that preserves the main idea of source story S, this source story is discarded and the model proceeds to analyze the next source story in the collection. There may be various reasons why a source story is incompatible with a target paragraph, e.g. the first paragraph in the source story contains two main protagonists and a number of secondary characters whereas the target paragraph contains just one protagonist; or the relationships between the characters in $S.p_1$ are essential to the story's main idea and at the same time too different from the relationships in the target paragraph $T.p_1$.

To improve the LLM's performance, we use in-context learning and augment the prompt instructions with 4 few-shot examples: 2 positive examples where a source story is compatible with a target paragraph, and 2 negative examples where the source story is incompatible with the target paragraph. Each few-shot example is also provided with a rationale explaining why the source story is (or is not) compatible with the target paragraph.

The linear search process above stops at the first source story that the model deems suitable to transfer to the target paragraph. The identified source story is represented as a sequence of paragraphs $S = S.p_1 + S.p_2 + ... + S.p_k$ and, together with the extracted main idea $S.Idea$ and aspects $S.Aspects$, it is used as input to Step 2 as described below.

Step 2: Here the LLM is instructed to determine is the starting target paragraph $T.p_1$ needs modification to make it more suitable for generating the continuation for a new story that preserves the main idea and the interesting aspects of the source story S. If the answer is positive, then the LLM is instructed to minimally edit it to make it more suitable, while retaining its theme and core elements, as shown in the prompt from Table 2. In the example from Figure 1, the "plans" mentioned in the target paragraph $T.p_1$ do not have a correspondent in the source paragraph $S.p_1$, as such it would likely be difficult to generate a continuation that preserves the same main idea from the source. Correspondingly, the

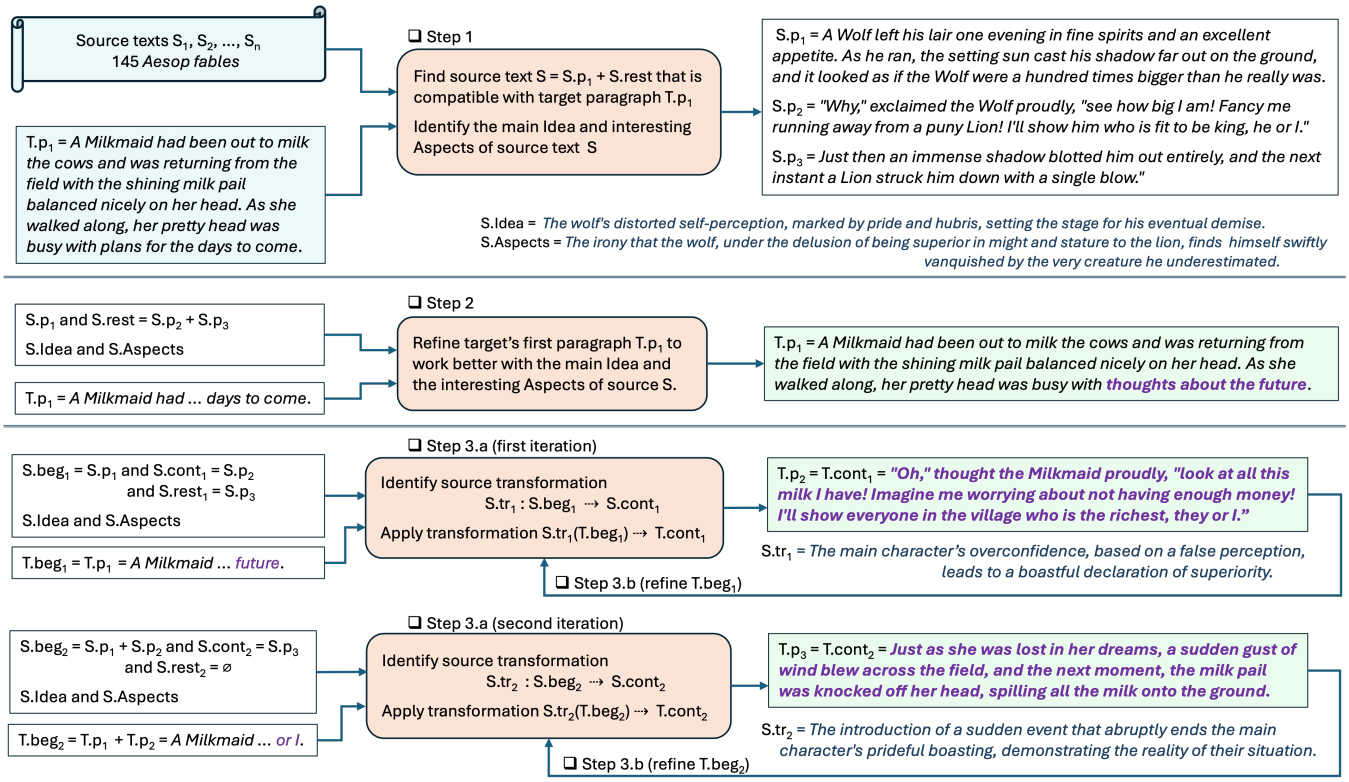

Figure 1: Example of deep transfer from a source story S to a starting paragraph $T.p_1$ through auto-regression generation. Text that is generated is shown either in *blue* for the main idea and aspects, or bold *purple* for text edited or added to the target paragraph in order to create the new story.

phrase *"plans for the days to come"* is replaced in $T.p_1$ with the more suitable phrase *"thoughts for the future"*.

Step 3: Given the target first paragraph $T.p_1$, original or refined, and the compatible source story $S = S.p_1 + S.p_2 + ... + S.p_k$, the $k-1$ remaining target paragraphs $T.p_2, T.p_2, ..., T.p_k$ are generated in an autoregressive manner such that they follow the same narrative transitions between consecutive paragraphs as in the source story. Thus, if the source contains k paragraphs, this 3^{rd} step will be applied $k-1$ times. At each time step $j \in \{2, 3, ..., k\}$, the paragraphs so far in the source are accumulated in the beginning context $S.beg_{j-1} = S.p_1 + S.p_2 + ... + S.p_{j-1}$, the current source paragraph is stored in the continuation $S.cont_{j-1} = S.p_j$, and the remaining paragraphs are stored in $S.rest_{j-1} = S.p_{j+1} + ... + S.p_k$. Similarly, the paragraphs so far in the target are accumulated in the beginning context $T.beg_{j-1} = S.p_1 + S.p_2 + ... + S.p_{j-1}$. Thus, the LLM is provided the source story segmented into 3 parts, the beginning, the current continuation paragraph, and the rest, i.e. $S = S.beg_{j-1} + S.cont_{j-1} + S.rest_{j-1}$. The model is also provided with all the paragraphs available so far in the target story, i.e. $T.beg_{j-1}$. To improve overall coherence and logical flow, at each timestep j the LLM is also provided with the main idea and interesting aspects of the source story, which better guide the generation of the target continuation paragraph $T.p_j = T.cont_{j-1}$. Given all this source and target information, the model is instructed to focus on the continuation paragraph $S.cont_{j-1}$ and to identify the narrative transformation that links it to the beginning context $S.beg_{j-1}$. The instructions require that the identified transformation $S.tr_{j-1}$ generated by the LLM capture aspects that enhance the reading experience, such as surprise, irony, sarcasm or humor. In the same prompt, the model is instructed to apply the identified source transformation $S.tr_{j-1}$ on the target text so far $T.beg_{j-1}$ in order to generate a coherent, cohesive and engaging continuation paragraph $T.p_j = T.cont_{j-1}$ for the target story that seamlessly and logically extends it in a manner similar to how the source continuation $S.cont_{j-1}$ extended the beginning $S.beg_{j-1}$.

Similar to step 1, to improve the LLM's performance, we use in-context learning and augment the prompt instructions with 4 few-shot examples showing the ground truth source transformation $S.tr_{j-1}$ and the desired target continuation paragraph $T.p_j = T.cont_{j-1}$ for different source and target contexts, and for different timesteps j.

The process described above is referred to as *Step 3.a* and is implemented using prompt 3.a shown in Table 3, resulting in a source transformation $S.tr_{j-1}$ and the corresponding target continuation paragraph $T.p_j = S.tr_{j-1}(T.beg_{j-1})$. In a subsequent self-verification and backward-edit *Step 3.b*, we provide the target text so far $T.beg_{j-1}$ and the generated continuation paragraph $T.p_j$ to the LLM and instruct it to

You are given an Original story and the beginning paragraph of a New story. The Original story is given segmented in these two parts:
– Original Beginning is the beginning paragraph of the Original story.
– Original Rest contains the remaining text that appears after the Original Beginning paragraph in the story.
The beginning paragraph of a New story is given under the name New Beginning. Your are to execute the tasks below:
1. Identify the main idea of the Original story as well as the aspects that make it interesting to read, such as surprise, irony, sarcasm, or humor.
2. Determine if the New Beginning paragraph can be continued to create a New story that preserves the Original story's main idea and the aspects that made it interesting to read.
Below are $\langle k \rangle$ examples for this task: Example 1: ... Example 2: ... Example $\langle k \rangle$
Now solve the task for the Original Beginning, Original Rest, and New Beginning given below:
Original Beginning: {paragraph} Original Rest: {text} New Beginning: {paragraph}
Format your output as a Python dictionary, as shown below:
{"Idea and Interesting Aspects": "⟨ideas and aspects⟩", "Evaluation answer": "⟨Yes/No⟩,
"Evaluation rationale": "⟨why the New Beginning paragraph can or cannot be used as is⟩"}

Table 1: Prompt for finding a source text compatible with target paragraph, and identifying its main idea and interesting aspects.

You are given an Original story and the beginning text of a New story. The Original story is given segmented in these two parts:
– Original Beginning is the beginning text of the Original story. This part may contain one or more paragraphs.
– Original Rest contains the remaining text that appears after the Original Beginning paragraph in the story.
The main idea and the interesting aspects of the Original Story are summarized under the heading Original Story Main Idea and Interesting Aspects. The beginning paragraph of a New story is given under the name New Beginning. You are to execute the tasks below:
1. Assess whether the New Beginning paragraph needs modification to make it more suitable to be used in generating the continuation for a new story that preserves the main idea and the interesting aspects of the original story.
2. If the answer at 1 is yes, while retaining the core elements and theme in the New Beginning, minimally edit it to improve its suitability.
Below are $\langle k \rangle$ examples for this task: Example 1: ... Example 3: ... Example $\langle k \rangle$
Now solve the task for the Original Beginning, Original Continuation, Original Rest, and New Beginning given below:
Original Beginning: {text} Original Rest: {text} Original Idea and Interesting Aspects: {idea and aspects} New Beginning: {paragraph}

Table 2: Prompt for refining the target's first paragraph to accomodate the main idea and the interesting aspects of the source.

assess whether the overall sequence of target paragraphs is coherent, in the sense that $T.p_j$ logically follows $T.beg_{j-1}$. If there are any issues, the LLM is asked to explain and to minimally edit the last paragraph in $T.beg_{j-1}$ such that the issues are resolved, as shown in prompt 3.b from Table 3.

Once steps 3.a and 3.b are executed for timestep j, the newly generated continuation $T.p_j$ is appended to $T.beg_{j-1}$ to create a new target text so far $T.beg_j$. Then j is incremented and the entire Step 3 is executed for the new timestep. The iteration stops when $j = k$ and the last continuation paragraph $T.p_k$ is generated.

Figure 1 shows 2 iterations of the 3^{rd} step – only 2 iterations are needed because the source story contains 3 paragraphs, and the first target paragraph is already available.

Experimental Evaluation

To evaluate the deep transfer procedure, we used the 146 fables from the book *The Aesop for Children* (Aesop 1919). A subset of 21 stories was chosen at random, then the first paragraph from each of these stories was extracted, resulting in a target set of 21 paragraphs $T.p_1$. Then, for each starting target paragraph, all Aesop fables minus the one that contained this paragraph, for a total of 145 fables, were used as the source collection $\mathcal{S}$, and upon running Step 1 in the deep transfer model, a suitable source story was identified. The 21 stories had a minimum, median, mean, and maximum length of 2, 4, 5, and 15 paragraphs, respectively. On average, 2.05 source stories needed to be checked in Step 1 to find one compatible with $T.p_1$. Upon continuing with Steps 2 and 3, for each target paragraph and source pair $\langle T.p_1, S \rangle$ a complete target story T was generated. Overall, the deep transfer process process resulted in 21 pairs of source and target texts $S \rightarrow T$, where the target text is supposed to follow the same main idea and narrative transitions as the source text, while starting from a different first paragraph. We used GPT-4 with a temperature of 0.

The generated target stories were manually graded by an evaluator with a PhD in English literature, using two sets of criteria: one set referring to their quality as standalone stories, and another set referring to how well they parallel the ideas in the source story while also maintaining the divergence implied by the starting paragraph. Drawing from (Chakrabarty et al. 2024), we designed the first grading set to contain the following 3 rubrics:

1. **Coherence**: Overall cohesiveness and readability of the story, meaning the narrative should read like a coherent whole, more than just a compilation of disparate elements.
2. **Plot logic**: The story should exhibit logical progression and consistency, ensuring that the plot unfolds in a sensible manner, without unexplained jumps or contradictions.
3. **Interestingness**: How engaging the user found the story, focusing on its ability to captivate and maintain the reader's interest throughout. The evaluation considers elements like irony, metaphor, and other language and plot devices in order to produce surprise and unexpected twists that contribute to the overall appeal of the story.

The second grading set contained the following rubrics:

3.a: You are given an Original story and the beginning text of a New story. The Original story is given segmented in these three parts: – Original Beginning is the beginning text of the Original story. This part may contain one or more paragraphs. – Original Continuation is the paragraph that appears after the Original Beginning in the story. – Original Rest contains the remaining text that appears after the Original Continuation in the story. The main idea and the interesting aspects of the Original Story are summarized under the heading Original Story Main Idea and Interesting Aspects. The beginning text of a New story is given under the name New Beginning. You are to execute the tasks below: 1. Given the context of the Original Beginning, the Original Rest and the Original Story's Main Idea and Interesting Aspects, focus on the Original Continuation. Identify the precise transformation that produces it from the Original Beginning. Ensure that the transformation captures aspects such as surprise, irony, sarcasm or humor, that enriches the reader's experience. 2. Using the identified transformation and the New Beginning, generate a coherent, cohesive and engaging continuation of the new story that seamlessly and logically extends the New Beginning in a manner similar to how the Original Continuation extends the Original Beginning. Below are $\langle k \rangle$ examples for this task: Example 1: ... Example 2: ... Example $\langle k \rangle$ Now solve the task for the Original Beginning, Original Continuation, Original Rest, and New Beginning given below: Original Beginning: {text} Original Continuation: {text} Original Rest: {text} New Beginning: {text} Format your output as a Python dictionary: {"Transformation": "⟨transformation⟩", "New Continuation": "⟨continuation⟩"}
3.b: Your are given the following sequence of paragraphs from a story: Paragraph 1: {previous paragraph} Paragraph 2: {current paragraph} You are to execute the tasks below: 1: Assess whether the sequence of paragraphs is coherent, in the sense that the second paragraph logically continues the first and that there are no unresolved elements in the sequence. If there are issues, please explain the specific issues. 2: If the answer at step 1 is negative, minimally edit the first paragraph to resolve the identified issues. Format your output as a Python dictionary: {"Evaluation answer": "⟨Yes/No⟩", "Evaluation rationale": "⟨why the paragraph sequence contains issues or nor⟩", "Edited Paragraph 1": "⟨edited first paragraph if revised, or the unedited first paragraph if no revision⟩"}

Table 3: Prompt 3.a for auto-regressive story continuation (top) and prompt 3.b for paragraph refinement (bottom).

4. **Parallelism**: How well does the generated story follow and implement the main idea of the original story? The following two sub-criteria were graded:
   (a) **Summarization**: How well the extracted idea in $S.Idea$ reflects what is truly important about the original story S.
   (b) **Implementation**: How well the generated target story implements the extracted idea $S.Idea$.
5. **Originality**: Ignoring the similarity between the target and source stories due to having the same main idea, how different is the generated target story from the source story? The target story should go beyond a simple substitution of key elements from the source story, and should be as different as possible from the source story.

A grading range between 1 and 5 was used for each rubric. For the first set of rubrics (1, 2, and 3), the 21 source and 21 target stories were shuffled together and presented to the annotator for grading in one list, without any information about which one was the original Aesop source fable and which one was generated. For the second set of rubrics, the annotator was presented with source and target pairs.

The average grades for each rubric are shown in Table 4, where "–" means not applicable. The results show that the proposed deep transfer method is very promising, with the largest difference in quality between source and target being in terms of coherence, where on average target stories have $5/1.24 \approx 25\%$ lower grades than the source. Error analysis revealed various reasons for lower coherence, such as occasional gaps in the plot logic, or the violation of the *Chekhov's Gun* narrative principle, where the first paragraph in the target had elements that were immaterial to the development of the main idea.

Average μ	1.**Co**	2.**PL**	3.**In**	4.a.**Su**	4.b.**Im**	5.**Or**
Source $S.\mu$	4.83	4.86	4.88	4.88	–	–
Target $T.\mu$	3.60	3.62	4.40	–	4.45	–
$S.\mu - T.\mu$	1.24	1.24	0.48	–	–	4.29

Table 4: Average grades for rubrics 1, 2, and 3: across the 21 source stories ($S.\mu$), across the 21 target stories ($T.\mu$), and average difference across the 21 pairs.

Conclusion and Future Work

We presented a combinational creativity approach to story generation, where a beginning paragraph is continued in a way that mirrors the main idea and narrative transitions from a source story. The proposed deep transfer approach obtains promising results, especially in terms of interestingness and parallelism. Future work includes improvements in coherence and application to longer stories.

The annotated dataset, the prompts, the few-shot examples, and the code will be made publicly available at https://github.com/uoseremen/NarrativeContinuations. OOU's contributions include system design and implementation, data acquisition and pre-processing, and experimental evaluations. RCB's contributions include the main idea of narrative continuations, system design, evaluation rubrics, and paper writing. LLL's contribution was in the scoring and annotation of experimental results.

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