

# WIQA: A dataset for "What if..." reasoning over procedural text

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## Abstract

We introduce WIQA, the first large-scale dataset of "What if..." questions over procedural text. WIQA contains three parts: a collection of paragraphs each describing a process, e.g., beach erosion; a set of crowdsourced *influence graphs* for each paragraph, describing how one change affects another; and a large (40k) collection of "What if...?" multiple-choice questions derived from the graphs. For example, given a paragraph about beach erosion, would stormy weather result in more or less erosion (or have no effect)? The task is to answer the questions, given their associated paragraph. WIQA contains three kinds of questions: perturbations to steps mentioned in the paragraph; external (out-of-paragraph) perturbations requiring commonsense knowledge; and irrelevant (no effect) perturbations. We find that state-of-the-art models achieve 73.8% accuracy, well below the human performance of 96.3%. We analyze the challenges, in particular tracking chains of influences, and present the dataset as an open challenge to the community.

## 1 Introduction

Procedural text is common in language, but challenging to comprehend because it describes a dynamically changing world. While recent systems for procedural text comprehension can answer questions about what events happen, e.g., (Bosselut et al., 2018; Henaff et al., 2017; Dalvi et al., 2018), the extent to which they understand the influences *between* those events remains unclear.

One important test of understanding is to predict what would happen if a process was *perturbed* in some way, requiring understanding and tracing

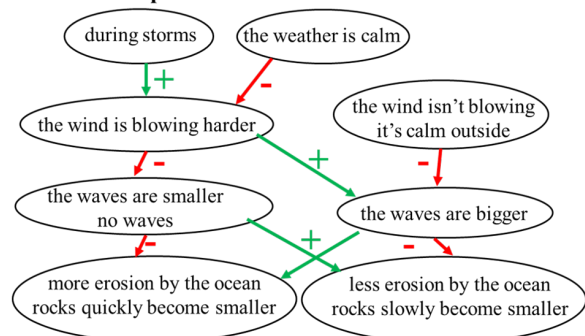
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## Procedural Text (simplified):

### Erosion by the ocean:

1. Wind creates waves in the ocean.
2. The waves wash onto the beaches.
3. The waves hit rocks on the beach.
4. Tiny parts of the rock break off.
5. The rocks become smaller.

## Influence Graph:



## Four example questions + gold answers (bold):

Does the waves are bigger result in more erosion by the ocean?  
(A) **correct** (B) opposite (C) no effect

Does during storms result in more erosion by the ocean?  
(A) **correct** (B) opposite (C) no effect

Does the wind isn't blowing result in more erosion by the ocean?  
(A) correct (B) **opposite** (C) no effect

Does more wildfires result in more erosion by the ocean?  
(A) correct (B) opposite (C) **no effect**

Figure 1: WIQA contains procedural paragraphs, crowdsourced influence graphs associated with them, and a large collection of "Does *changeX* result in *changeY*?" (what-if) questions, derived from the graphs.

the chain of influences through a paragraph. However, to date there is no dataset available to help develop this capability. We aim to fill this gap with WIQA<sup>1</sup>, the first large-scale dataset testing "What if..." reasoning over procedural text.

WIQA contains 40.7K questions, for 379 process paragraphs. To efficiently create the questions, crowdworkers created 2107 *influence graphs* (IGs) for the paragraphs, describing how one perturbation positively or negatively influences another (Fig-

<sup>1</sup>The dataset is available at <http://data.allenai.org/wiqa/>

ure 1). Questions were then derived from paths in the graphs, each asking how the change described in one node affects another. Each question is a templated, multiple choice (MC) question of the form *Does changeX result in changeY? (A) Correct (B) Opposite (C) No effect*, where *Opposite* indicates a negative influence between *changeX* and *changeY*. To bound the task, perturbations are typically qualitative (e.g., “the wind is blowing harder”), and possible effects are restricted to changes to entities and events mentioned in the paragraph (e.g., “the waves are bigger”). Perturbations themselves include in-paragraph, out-of-paragraph, and irrelevant (no effect) changes. The WIQA task is to answer the questions, given the paragraph (but not the IG).

We first describe the task and how the dataset was constructed, and then present results from baselines and strong BERT-based models. We find that the best model is still 23% behind human performance and the gap further widens with indirect and out-of-paragraph effects, illustrating that the dataset is hard. We present a detailed analysis showing WIQA is rich in linguistic and semantic phenomena. Our contributions are: (1) the new dataset (2) performance measures and an analysis of its challenges, to support research on counterfactual, textual reasoning over procedural text.

## 2 Related Work

While there are several NLP datasets now available for procedural text understanding, e.g., (Kiddon et al., 2016; Dalvi et al., 2018; Weston et al., 2015), these have all targeted the task of tracking entity states throughout the text. WIQA takes the next step of asking how states might *change* if a perturbation was introduced.

Predicting the effects of qualitative change has been studied in the qualitative reasoning (QR) community, but primarily using formal models (Forbus, 1984; Weld and De Kleer, 2013). Similarly, counterfactual reasoning has been studied in the logic community (Lewis, 2013), but again using formal frameworks. In contrast, WIQA treats the task as a mixture of reading comprehension and common-sense reasoning, creating a new NLP challenge.

## 3 Dataset Construction

To efficiently generate questions, we first asked crowdworkers to create *influence graphs* (IGs) for each paragraph. We then create questions from the

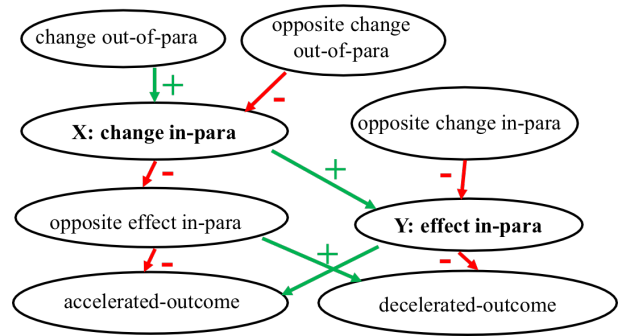


Figure 2: The template used to acquire influence graphs

IGs using paths in the IGs. We now describe this process.

**Influence Graphs** An influence graph  $\mathcal{G}(V, E)$  for a procedural text  $T$  is an unweighted directed graph. Each vertex  $v_i$  is labeled with one or more text strings, each describing a change to the original conditions described or assumed in  $T$ , such that all those changes have the same influence on a connected node  $v_j$ . Each edge is labeled with a *polarity*, + or -, indicating whether the influence is positive (causes/increases) or negative (prevents/reduces). Indirect effects can be found by traversing  $\mathcal{G}$ .

It is useful to distinguish two kinds of nodes:

1. **Out-of-para nodes:** denoting events or changes to entities/events not mentioned in the paragraph, e.g., “during storms” in Figure 1.
2. **In-para nodes:** denoting events or changes to entities/events mentioned in the paragraph, e.g., “the wind is blowing harder” in Figure 1.

**Acquiring influence graphs** For a source of paragraphs, we used the 377 training set paragraphs from the ProPara dataset (Tandon et al., 2018). (Multiple) influence graphs were then crowdsourced for each. To do this, we use an *influence graph template*, shown in Figure 2. Workers were asked to populate this (hidden) template using a sequence of five questions, where the later questions were automatically constructed from their answers to the earlier questions. The first question asks the worker to supply an X and Y in: “If [X] occurs, it will have the intermediate effect [Y] resulting in *accelerated\_outcome*” (where the *accelerated\_outcome* phrase was pre-authored for each paragraph). For X and Y, workers were asked to describe a change in some property/phenomenon mentioned in the paragraph, e.g., if a paragraph sentence  $x_i$  is “Wind creates waves.”, they may author an X saying “the wind is blowing harder” (Figure 1).

(The alignment of  $X$  and  $x_i$ , and whether  $X$  describes an increase or decrease of  $x_i$ , denoted by  $d_X \in \{+, -\}$ , was also recorded.). This fills  $X$  and  $Y$  in Figure 2. Similar questions populate the remaining nodes (see Appendix). 2107 influence graphs were collected in this way.

**Generating Questions from Graphs** Each path in a graph forms a “change→effect?” question, whose answer is either “correct” or “opposite” depending on the product of the polarities of the traversed edges. Questions are labeled with the number of edges traversed (1 = “1-hop”, etc.). We also distinguish *in-para* and *out-of-para* questions depending on the type of node they originated from. We then created a third category of question, whose answer is “no effect”, by selecting out-of-para changes from *other* paragraphs and asking for their effect on nodes in the current graph. Occasionally these changes did affect the selected node, resulting in an erroneous label of “no effect”, but this was rare (and such cases were removed from the test partition, as we now describe).

Using a separate crowdsourcing task, questions in the test set were filtered to improve the test set quality. First, five workers independently answered each question, given the paragraph. The inter-annotator agreement between workers, using Krippendorff’s alpha, was moderately high (0.6). We then retained only questions with majority agreement (i.e., at least 3 out of 5 workers agreed), resulting in 88% of questions being retained.

**Balancing the Dataset** From the (many) questions thus generated, we (randomly) selected a subset that approximately balanced the numbers of (a) in-para, out-of-para, and no-effect questions, and (b) questions with each answer (correct, opposite, no-effect), resulting in 40,695 questions. Train, dev, and test partitions do not share paragraphs about the same topic. Statistics are shown in Table 1.

**Explanations** As each question is derived from a path in an IG, we can also generate *explanations* for each answer using that path. Although explanation is not part of the WIQA task, we create an explanation database to support a possible explanation task at a future date.

Consider a question “Does perturbation  $q_p$  result in  $q_e$ ?” with answer  $d_e \in \{+, -\}$  (as a shorthand for {*correct, opposite*}), created from an IG path:

$$q_p \xrightarrow{r_{pX}} X \xrightarrow{r_{XY}} Y \xrightarrow{r_{Ye}} q_e$$

Here,  $r_{pX}$ ,  $r_{XY}$ , and  $r_{Ye}$  denote the polarities (+/-) of the edges  $q_pX$ ,  $XY$ , and  $Xq_e$  in the IG respectively. (As described earlier, answer  $d_e$  is the product of the polarities  $r_{pX} \cdot r_{XY} \cdot r_{Ye}$ ). To define an explanation in terms of the paragraph’s sentences  $x_1, \dots, x_K$ , we define the gold explanation  $E_{gold}$  as the structure:

$$q_p \rightarrow d_i x_i \rightarrow d_j x_j \rightarrow d_e q_e$$

where  $x_i$  is the sentence corresponding to  $X$ ,  $x_j$  is the sentence corresponding to  $Y$ , and  $d_i$ ,  $d_j$ , and  $d_e$  denote the directions of influence (+/-, denoting {more,correct}/{less,opposite}). As workers already annotated the alignment between  $X$  and  $x_i$  (similarly  $Y$  and  $x_j$ ) we know  $x_i$  and  $x_j$ . Similarly, as workers also annotated whether  $X$  describes an increase or decrease of  $x_i$ , denoted by  $d_X \in \{+, -\}$ , we can straightforwardly compute the directions of influence:

$$d_i = r_{pX} \cdot d_X$$

$$d_j = d_i \text{ (in-paragraph influence)}^2$$

$$d_e = r_{pX} \cdot r_{XY} \cdot r_{Ye} = \text{the answer}$$

We can similarly generate explanations for answers derived from 1-hop and 2-hop paths.

We generated a full database of explanations for all the questions with answer “correct” or “opposite” (For “no effect” answers, there is no explanation as there is by definition no path of influence). We then removed the (occasional) explanation where worker annotations were contradictory (e.g.,  $j < i$ ) or had no majority decision for an annotation. This database is available for a possible future explanation task (given question + paragraph, produce the answer + explanation).

## 4 Experiments

### 4.1 Models

We measured the performance of two baselines and three strong neural models on WIQA, to understand how it stresses these models:

**Majority** predicts the most frequent label, *correct*, in the training dataset.

**Polarity** is a rule-based baseline that assumes influences of the form “*more X* → *more Y*” (similarly for “less”) are *correct*, hence “*more X* → *less Y*” are *opposite*. A small lexicon of positive (“*more*”) and negative (“*less*”) words is used to assign the more/less polarities. A random class label is chosen when assignments

<sup>2</sup>Paragraph sentences always describe correct, not opposite, influences on later sentences, HENCE if  $x_i$  is more/accelerated,  $x_j$  will be too (similarly for less/decelerated).

Count of	Train	Dev	Test	Total
Topics	87	23	12	122
Paragraphs	261	77	41	379
Influence graphs	1453	424	230	2107
Questions	29808	6894	3993	40695

		# Questions			
		Train	Dev	Test	Total
Question type	in-para	7303	1655	935	9893
	out-of-para	12567	2941	1598	17108
	no-effect	9936	2298	1460	13694
	Total	29808	6894	3993	40695
Number of hops (in- & out-of-para qns)	#hops=1	6754	1510	835	9099
	#hops=2	8969	2145	1153	12267
	#hops=3	4149	941	545	5635
	Total	19872	4596	2533	27001

Table 1: Dataset statistics

cannot be made.

**Adaboost** (Freund and Schapire, 1995) was used to make the 3-way classification using several bag-of-word features computed from *change* and *effect*.

**Decomp-Attn** applies the Decomposable Attention (DA) model of (Parikh et al., 2016) to our task. The original DA model computes entailment, i.e., the confidence that a *premise* entails (or contradicts) a *hypothesis*. We recast WIQA as an entailment task where cause-effect becomes premise-hypothesis, and (correct/opposite/no-effect) correspond to (entailment/contradiction/neutral). We retrain the DA model on WIQA using this mapping.

**BERT** (Devlin et al., 2018) is a pre-trained transformer-based language model that has achieved state of the art performance on many NLP tasks. We supply questions to BERT as *[CLS] paragraph [SEP] question [SEP] answer-option* for each of the three options. The [CLS] token is then projected to a single logit and fed through a softmax layer across the three options, using cross entropy loss, and the highest-scoring option selected. We fine-tune BERT on the WIQA training data in this way. We also measure an ablated version where the paragraph is omitted (train and test).

**Human Performance** was estimated by having three people independently answering the same 100 questions (with paragraphs) drawn randomly from the test set. Krippendorff’s alpha (nominal metric) for these answers was

Question Type	in-para	out-of-para	no-effect	Total
# questions	935	1598	1460	3993
<i>Majority</i>	45.46	49.47	0.55	30.66
<i>Polarity</i>	76.31	53.59	0.27	39.43
<i>Adaboost</i>	49.41	36.61	48.42	43.93
<i>Decomp-Attn</i>	56.31	48.56	73.42	59.48
<i>BERT (no para)</i>	60.32	43.74	84.18	62.41
<i>BERT</i>	<b>79.68</b>	<b>56.13</b>	<b>89.38</b>	<b>73.80</b>
Human perf.				96.33

Table 2: Comparing models on WIQA test partition

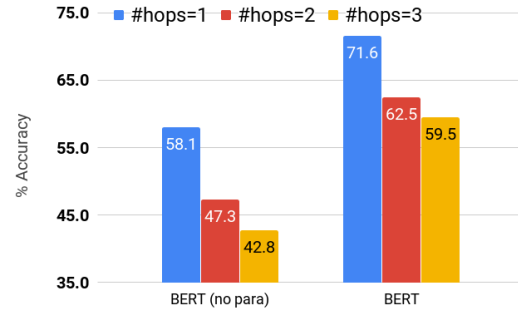


Figure 3: Accuracy of the best baselines drops as number of hops increase, quicker for ‘no para’ version.

0.908 (high agreement) (Krippendorff, 1970).

## 5 Results and Analysis

### 5.1 Prediction Accuracy

The results (Table 2) provide several insights:

- The dataset is hard.** Our strongest model (73.8) is over 20 points behind human performance, suggesting WIQA poses significant challenges. Prediction of out-of-para effects is particularly challenging, 37 points behind human performance.
- BERT already “knows” some change-effect knowledge.** Even without the paragraph, and even though the test paragraphs are on topics unseen in training, BERT scores substantially above the baselines. This suggests BERT has some type of cause-effect information embedded in it.
- Supplying the paragraph helps,** resulting in 10 points higher score, illustrating that WIQA contains questions that require understanding of the paragraph. This suggests more sophisticated reading strategies may further improve results.

### 5.2 Predicting Indirect Effects

In-para and out-of-para questions were derived from chains of different lengths (“hops”) in the influence graphs. Figure 3 shows how performance varies with respect to those lengths, and shows that



“indirect” (2/3-hop) effects are harder to predict than “direct” (1-hop) effects. For example, it is easier to predict “cloudy day” results in “less sunshine” (direct) than “less photosynthesis” (indirect). This suggests that some form of reasoning along influence chains may be needed to predict indirect effects reliably, as those effects are less likely to be explicitly stated in corpora and embedded in pre-trained language models.

### 5.3 Consistency

Are the models making consistent predictions? If a model predicts both  $X \rightarrow Y$  and  $Y \rightarrow Z$  are correct, it should, if it were consistent, also predict  $X \rightarrow Z$  is correct. To measure a model’s *transitivity consistency*, for each influence graph, we measure how often its indirect predictions (2/3-hop) are consistent<sup>3</sup> with its 1-hop predictions. Similarly, we measure *disjunctive consistency* by how often its predictions for edges known to be opposite (eg  $X \rightarrow Y$  and  $X \rightarrow \text{opp-effect-in-para}$  in Fig 2) are indeed so<sup>4</sup>. The results in Figure 4 illustrate that the **models are far from consistent**. This suggests that reasoning with global consistency constraints may improve results, e.g., (Ning et al., 2017; Tandon et al., 2018).

### 5.4 Linguistic and Semantic Phenomena

We analyzed 200 descriptions of changes in 100 random questions, and observe the following challenging (overlapping) phenomena to handle:

**1. Qualitative Language:**  $\approx 65\%$  of the change statements are expressed qualitatively, using a broad vocabulary of comparatives (e.g., more, fewer, smaller, larger, cooler, slower, higher, harder, decreased, hotter) or their corresponding adjectives (small, cool, etc.). In addition, whether the change is a positive or negative influence on the process is context-dependent (“more X” can be positive or negative, depending on X, and sometimes depending on the paragraph topic itself).

**2. Commonsense** ( $\approx 45\%$ ): Exogenous influences are (by definition) not stated in the paragraph, and so require substantial commonsense to understand, e.g., that “heavy rainfall” (out of para) negatively influences “more wild fires” (in para); or that “overfishing” (out of para) negatively influences “fish lay eggs” (in para).

<sup>3</sup>i.e., the polarity (+/-, for correct/opposite) of edge  $XZ$  = the product of the polarities of edges chaining from X to Z. As models can also predict “no effect”, random score is 1/3.

<sup>4</sup>Only edge pairs with labels +&- , or -&+ , are disjunctively consistent (of 9 possible labelings), hence random is 2/9.

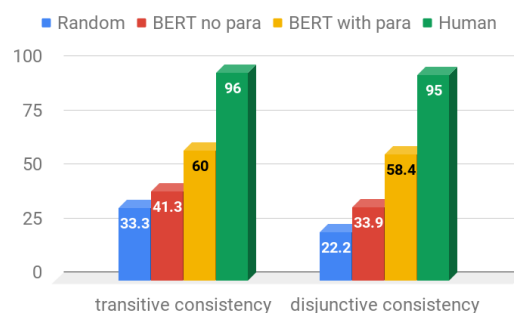


Figure 4: The best models (red,yellow) make substantially less consistent predictions than humans (green).

**3. Lexical matching**  $\approx 15\%$  of the in-para changes refer to paragraph entities using different terms, e.g., “insect” (para)  $\leftrightarrow$  “bee” (question), “becomes”  $\leftrightarrow$  “forms”, “removes”  $\leftrightarrow$  “expels”, complicating aligning questions with the paragraph.

**4. Negation** ( $\approx 6\%$ ): Negation occurs in about 6% of the changes, e.g., “drought does not occur”, “soil is not fertile”, “magma does not get larger”.

**5. Juxtaposed polarities** ( $\approx 3\%$ ): Sometimes positive- and negative-related terms are juxtaposed, (e.g., “much less”, “increased deforestation”, “less severe”) again challenging to process.

These all illustrate the diversity of linguistic and semantic challenges in WIQA.

## 6 Conclusion

An important test of understanding procedural text is whether the effects of *perturbations* to the process can be predicted. To that end, we have introduced WIQA, the first large-scale dataset for “what if” reasoning over text. While our experiments suggest language models have some built-in knowledge of influences, and some ability to identify influences in paragraphs, these capabilities are limited, producing predictions that are over 20 points worse than humans, often inconsistent, and particularly erroneous about indirect (multi-hop) effects. WIQA aims to improve this state of affairs, offering a new challenge and resource to the community. The dataset is available at <http://data.allenai.org/wiqa/>.

### Acknowledgements

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## Appendix A: Topicwise consistency

We study trends in topic-wise accuracy of models as they read more context information. Bert no-para model does not have access to any context or paragraph, except the language model’s background knowledge from Wikipedia. By reading the paragraph context Bert with-para model performs much better on certain topics such as `Pollination`, `blood`, `mountain`, `evaporation` but the impact of reading is much less on topics such as `Igneous rocks`, `plant crops`, `solar eclipse`, `DNA replication`. Topics such as `blood` are very popular on Wikipedia and distributed across several very different articles. These topics are harder for BERT as it requires additional paragraph context to understand the question.

topic	BERT (no para)	BERT
igneous rock	0.66	0.64
plant crops	0.61	0.61
solar eclipse	0.43	0.43
frog	0.59	0.62
DNA replication	0.58	0.63
water cycle	0.63	0.69
fish	0.5	0.57
pumpkin	0.61	0.69
pollination	0.62	0.75
blood	0.62	0.76
mountain	0.57	0.72
evaporation	0.42	0.67

Table 3: As the Bert model (that has access to the paragraph in context) reads more paragraphs in context, its accuracy is better. Reading helps certain topics such as `Pollination`, `blood`, `mountain`, `evaporation` more than others

## Appendix B: Crowdsourcing Influence Graphs

We crowdsource influence graphs by getting the graphs constructed progressively, with the help of five questions stated in Figure 7. At first, the turkers see an empty graph in Figure 5.

When the annotators answer the first question (shown in Fig. 7), two nodes of the partial influence graph are filled (depicted in Fig. 6).

Once all the questions are answered, the influence graph will be ready. During the process of annotation, there are appropriate validations for quality control.

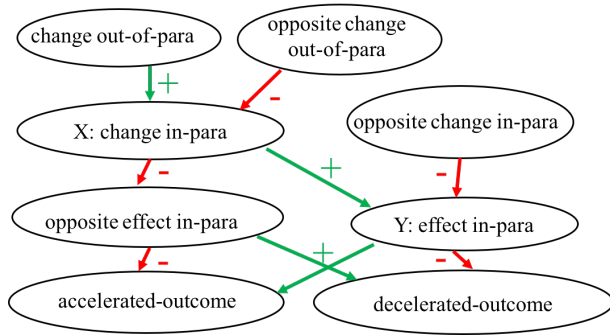


Figure 5: At the start of the process to annotate an influence graph for a given paragraph, the annotators see a blank influence graph with the basic structure.

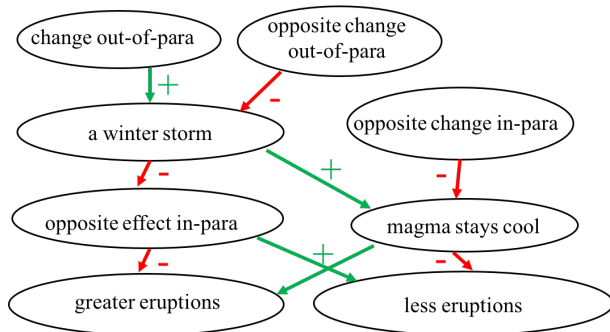


Figure 6: As the annotators answer questions in Fig. 7, a partial influence graph emerges. As they answer questions, the annotators found it useful to validate their answers by examining the emerged influence graph.

### Appendix C: Sample Influence Graphs

To get an impression of our crowdsourced influence graph repository, we display four paragraphs (not hand picked) in Figures 8, 9, 10, 11. These range from natural process, to human body process and mechanical process.

Consider the paragraph explaining step by step "What causes a volcano to erupt?":

- Magma builds up.
- The magma becomes larger and larger.
- It gets to much.
- The pressure builds.
- The volcaon erupts.

1) In this paragraph, suppose this change occurs: . It will have the intermediate effect: , finally resulting in .

2) If the *opposite* of a winter storm is true, some intermediate effects will be: .

3) Enter some changes  that will result in the *opposite* of magma stays cool inside of a volcano.

4) Imagine! In general,  are reasonable situations that can result in a winter storm.

5) Imagine! In general,  are reasonable situations that can result in the *opposite* of a winter storm.

**Helpful advice:** An abbreviated example again (from a different paragraph about rain), to show you the style we're looking for:

1. Suppose [the air is warmer], it causes [more water evaporates] -> [more rain]
2. If the *opposite* of "the air is warmer" is true (i.e., "the air is cooler"), some intermediate effects are [less water evaporates, fewer clouds grow]
3. Changes [the weather is cooler, there is less sunshine] cause the *opposite* of "more water to evaporate" (i.e., "less evapoaration").
4. Imagine! In general, [El Nino forms, longer sunny days] causes the air is warmer.
5. Imagine! In general, [an Arctic chill, a heavy snowstorm] causes the *opposite* of the air is warmer (i.e., "air is cooler")

Figure 7: The interface shown to the annotators on Mechanical turk platform. Given a paragraph in yellow background, the annotators answer the five questions and an influence graph emerges from their answers.

**13. Describe the process of evaporation**

Water is exposed to heat energy, like sunlight.  
 The water temperature is raised above 212 degrees fahrenheit.  
 The heat breaks down the molecules in the water.  
 These molecules escape from the water.  
 The water becomes vapor.  
 The vapor evaporates into the atmosphere.

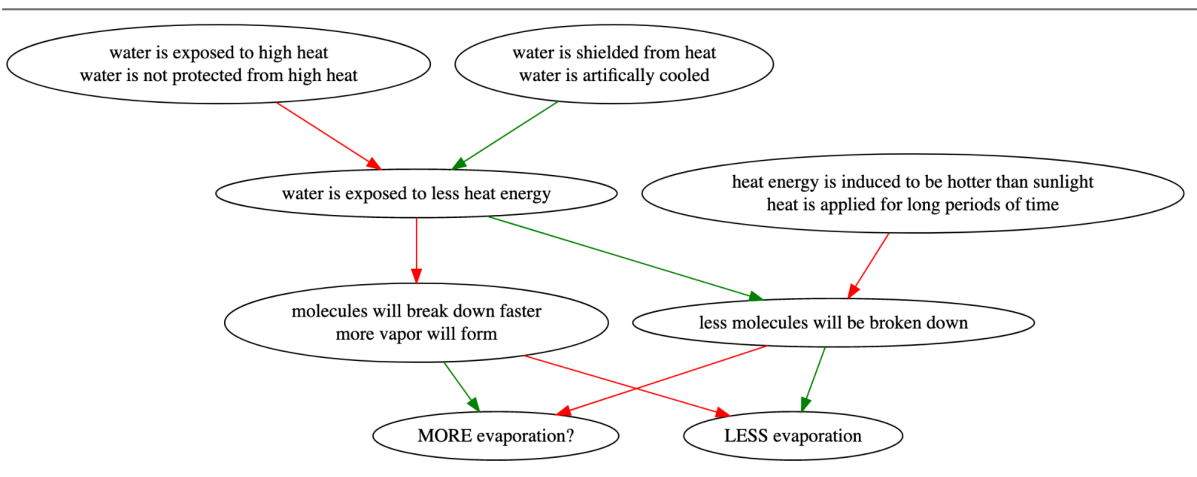


Figure 8: Influence graph for a paragraph from the topic evaporation



**451. Describe how a flashlight works**

Batteries are put in a flashlight.  
 The flashlight is turned on.  
 Two contact strips touch one another.  
 A circuit is completed between the batteries and the lamp.  
 The lamp in the flashlight begins to glow.  
 The reflector in the flashlight directs the lamps beam.  
 A straight beam of light is generated.  
 The flashlight is turned off.  
 The circuit is broken.  
 The beam is no longer visible.

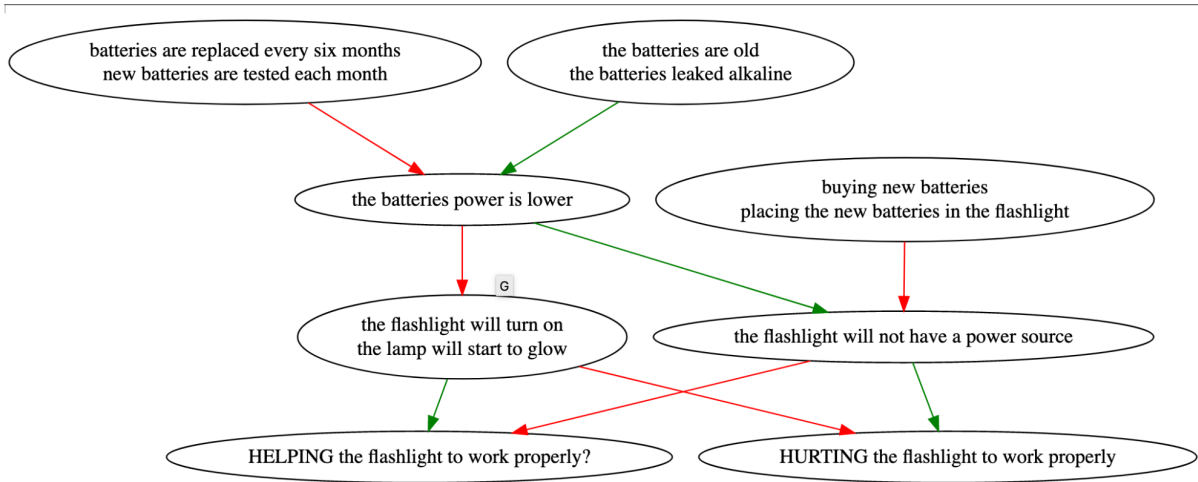


Figure 9: Influence graph for a paragraph from the topic flashlight

**16. What do lungs do?**

You breathe oxygen into your body through the nose or mouth.  
 The oxygen travels to the lungs through the windpipe.  
 The air sacs in the lungs send the oxygen into the blood stream.  
 The carbon dioxide in the blood stream is transferred to the air sacs.  
 The lungs expel through the nose or mouth back into the environment.

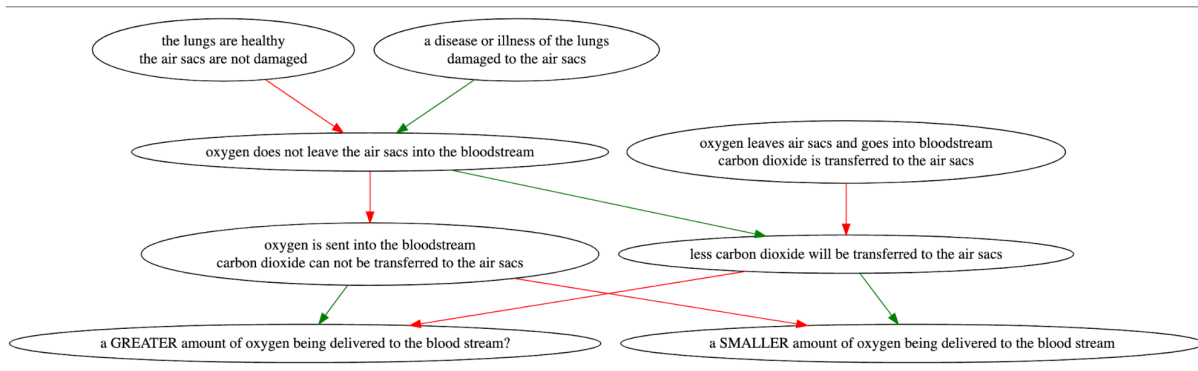


Figure 10: Influence graph for a paragraph from the topic lungs

### 5. How do minerals form?

Magma comes up to the surface of the earth.  
The magma cools.  
Particles inside the magma move closer together.  
Crystals are formed.  
The crystals contain minerals.

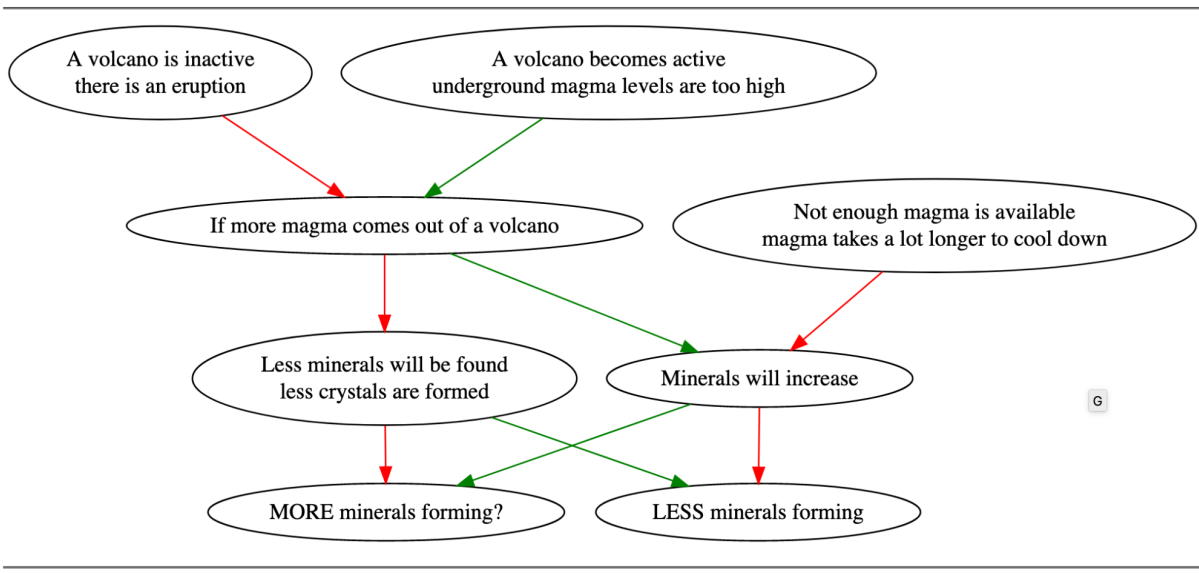


Figure 11: Influence graph for a paragraph from the topic minerals