

Explain then Rank: Scale Calibration of Neural Rankers Using Natural Language Explanations from LLMs

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Abstract

In search settings, calibrating the scores during the ranking process to quantities such as click-through rates or relevance levels enhances a system’s usefulness and trustworthiness for downstream users. While previous research has improved this notion of calibration for low complexity learning-to-rank models, the larger data demands and parameter count specific to modern neural text rankers produce unique obstacles that hamper the efficacy of methods intended for the learning-to-rank setting.

This paper proposes exploiting large language models (LLMs) to provide relevance and uncertainty signals for these neural text rankers to produce scale-calibrated scores through Monte Carlo sampling of natural language explanations (NLEs). Our approach transforms the neural ranking task from ranking textual query-document pairs to ranking corresponding synthesized NLEs. Comprehensive experiments on two popular document ranking datasets show that the NLE-based calibration approach consistently outperforms past calibration methods and LLM-based methods for ranking, calibration, and query performance prediction tasks.

1 Introduction

Neural ranking models act as the core component of many search systems, often producing the final document scores. However, these scores are usually treated as transient information and only the relative orderings are preserved to produce a ranking. While this approach results in well-performing systems with respect to common retrieval metrics, such as nDCG and MAP, it ignores vital information used by end users and downstream applications with real-world impacts, such as fair ranking (Zerveas et al., 2022), ranked list truncation (Bahri et al., 2020), and query perfor-

Task: to assign a **meaningful** ranking score to the query-document pair.
0 means irrelevant and 3 means perfectly relevant.

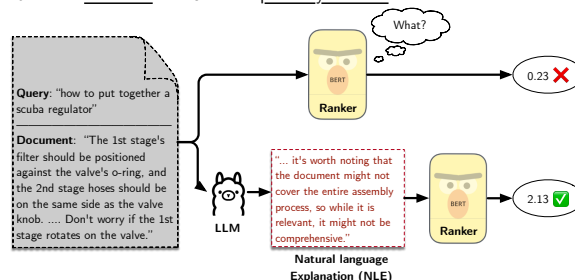


Figure 1: The key idea of this study: Neural ranking models struggle to produce *meaningful* ranking scores when encountering complex query-document pairs. We investigate the integration of natural language explanations as inputs to neural rankers, aiming to simplify the scale-calibrated ranking task for these rankers.

mance prediction (Zhou and Croft, 2007; Shtok et al., 2012; Faggioli et al., 2023b).

The common decision to discard the model scores comes from the fact that almost all neural ranking models, even probabilistic approaches, are trained to optimize relative orderings of documents as opposed to their absolute level of relevance. Aligning these ranking scores to a fixed scale is particularly difficult due to the nature of each query requiring different amounts of information to satisfy relevance, and it is much easier to determine if a document is more relevant than another rather than determining whether the information is sufficient for complex queries (Khattab and Zaharia, 2020; Santhanam et al., 2021; Zhuang et al., 2023b; Laitz et al., 2024).

This concept, that output scores should have meaningful real-world interpretations, is known as *calibration*. Having this property ensures that a model’s predictions reliably reflects the “true score.” The most commonly recognized form of this is, where, for example, a classification model with a confidence of $p = 0.47$ should be correct 47% of the time. Building upon this idea of grounded

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scores, **scale calibration** extends this setting to values that do not have a direct probabilistic interpretation, such as document dwell time (Smucker and Clarke, 2012) and multiple levels of relevance (Yan et al., 2022; Bai et al., 2023).

Studies by Yan et al. (2022) and Bai et al. (2023) have highlighted a conflict between the objectives of the scale calibration and the ranking task, where optimizing for one may compromise the other. They propose new training objectives to improve scale calibration in learning-to-ranking (LTR) models, which are low in parameter count due to relying on these LTR datasets containing solely preprocessed features like length and query-term overlap as inputs. Applying these methods to larger neural rankers over raw text remains a challenge. As opposed to LTR datasets, text-based collections with graded relevance judgments remain limited and orders of magnitude smaller. Further, the drastically higher parameter count of neural text rankers, particularly interaction-based models (Craswell et al., 2021; Nogueira et al., 2019b, 2020; Zhuang et al., 2023b; Ma et al., 2023a), make them even more data-intensive and reduces the efficacy of listwise loss functions due to hardware constraints and data sparsity.

In light of these challenges, we propose an alternative approach to improve scale calibration and score usability in these large text ranking models that does not rely on the loss functions of past works specific to the LTR settings. We instead ground the candidate query-document pairs via external knowledge, i.e., specifically leveraging the recent advances in generative and autoregressive large language models (LLMs) and their emerging capabilities for general language tasks with minimal supervision (Wei et al., 2022a). By producing natural language explanations (NLEs) of relevance with this additional knowledge, the ranking model will be able to leverage this information and produce better calibrated scores. As current LLMs have stability issues when generating text and can produce varying responses given the same input (Ye and Durrett, 2022; Turpin et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023), we hypothesize that the confidence and stability of a NLE generated from a zero-shot LLM *explaining* the relevance of a query-document pair correlates well with a calibrated ranking score. We validate this hypothesis by developing a method that aggregates the Monte Carlo (MC) generated NLEs of query-document relevance that serves as input into a traditional neural ranking model.

This work makes the following contributions:

1. Introduce MC-aggregate NLEs to reduce calibration error and improve downstream usability of document rankings.
2. Significantly enhance the scale calibration of neural text rankers by as much 25% as well as enhance downstream usability while maintaining or improving ranking effectiveness.
3. Conduct a wide set of experiments on two benchmark text ranking datasets to validate performance and properties.

2 Related Work

Scale Calibration of LTR Models. Previous approaches to calibrating ranking models primarily involved post-processing methods (Tagami et al., 2013; Chaudhuri et al., 2017), where a function maps the outputs for the frozen ranking model (Platt, 2000; Zadrozny and Elkan, 2002). Recent studies, such as those by Yan et al. (2022) and Bai et al. (2023), have identified the issue that commonly used pairwise and listwise ranking objectives theoretically lead to uncalibrated scores and advocate for calibrated ranking objectives as a solution. While effective for the LTR setting that uses extracted features and small models, the limitations imposed by large text ranking models makes their effective application non-trivial.

Uncertainty Calibration of Neural Ranking Models. To achieve a notion of calibration, Cohen et al. (2021) and Penha and Hauff (2021) suggest leveraging a Bayesian interpretation of neural rankers to capture a distribution of possible scores for each document based on the internal uncertainty of the model. However, these approaches fail to ground the scores on any scale as such uncertainty information only makes sense when comparing documents, and is distinct from the type of calibration discussed in this paper.

Natural Language Explanations. NLEs are an emerging point of research in NLP and IR. These explanations can be presented directly to users to elucidate the rationale behind system decisions, such as in recommendation systems (Li et al., 2020) and search results (Yu et al., 2022). More pertinent to this study, NLEs have been employed as intermediaries to enhance task efficacy (Camburu et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2022b; Ferraretto et al., 2023). Ye and Durrett (2022) use the term overlap

ratio between NLEs and their corresponding inputs as a feature to calibrate LLM predictions. [Wadhwa et al. \(2023\)](#) investigated explanation-based rescaling, converting coarse numeric scales into finer gradations. This technique leverages *annotator written* NLEs and scoring rubrics to prompt LLMs in generating rescaled outputs. Our research diverges by concentrating on NLEs *autonomously* generated by LLMs, which we leverage as inputs for neural rankers to facilitate scale calibration.

Calibration of Large Language Models. Recent studies have focused on eliciting well-calibrated confidence scores from LLM responses. Some works treat LLMs as black boxes and use prompting-based techniques to generate confidence scores ([Lin et al., 2022](#); [Kadavath et al., 2022](#)), while others rely on training external models to associate confidence with LLM responses ([Kuhn et al., 2022](#); [Kadavath et al., 2022](#); [Mielke et al., 2022](#)). [Tian et al. \(2023\)](#) evaluated various methods for obtaining confidence scores and found that LLM-verbalized probabilities are better calibrated than conditional probabilities across black-box RLHF-tuned LLMs. This framework was extended to include hybrid methods combining self-consistency and verbalized confidence, with evaluations across five dataset types ([Xiong et al., 2023](#)). Concurrent work by [Oosterhuis et al. \(2024\)](#) proposes using score distribution directly to capture model calibration for ground-truth label creation. In Section 4.3, we present two methods that leverage LLMs’ calibration capabilities to elicit scale calibrated ranking scores.

3 Methodology

3.1 Problem Statement and Motivation

In ad-hoc ranking, we define a scoring function ϕ for a given query q and its n associated candidate documents $\{d^q\}_1^n$. This function, denoted as $\phi_\Phi(q, \{d^q\})$ produces a score for each query-document pair under the given retrieval model parameterized by Φ . The ideal parameters of Φ are obtained by optimizing an empirical loss on a query-grouped training dataset $\mathcal{D} = \{(\{d^q\}, \{y^q\}) \mid q \in Q\}$. Here, Q represents the set of training queries, and $\{y_q\}$ is the corresponding set of labels of documents $\{d^q\}$. The empirical loss is defined as:

$$\mathcal{L}(\Phi) = \frac{1}{|Q|} \sum_{q \in Q} l^{\text{rank}}(\{y^q\}, \phi_\Phi(q, \{d^q\})) \quad (1)$$

where l^{rank} is a ranking loss function for an individual query. In the case of neural ranking, the scoring function ϕ is defined by a backbone neural language model. For instance, using a pretrained BERT checkpoint as Φ , concatenating query and each candidate document with a [SEP] token in between as the inputs, and leveraging cross entropy loss or pairwise cross entropy loss as l^{rank} leads to the development of the widely known monoBERT or duoBERT models ([Nogueira et al., 2019a](#)), respectively. However, it has been observed that popular pairwise and listwise ranking losses are not scale calibrated due to their translation-invariant property ([Yan et al., 2022](#))¹; adding a constant to all outputs of ϕ does not alter the loss value.

Although calibrated ranking losses works well for LTR models ([Yan et al., 2022](#); [Bai et al., 2023](#)), the application of these approaches to neural text rankers is non-trivial. In LTR datasets with graded relevance judgments ([Chapelle and Chang, 2011](#); [Qin and Liu, 2013](#); [Dato et al., 2017](#)), $|Q|$ is orders of magnitude larger than that of text based collections, which often only have less than 100 queries. Further, $|\Phi|$ is much larger in neural text ranking models, limiting the use of listwise loss functions due to GPU VRAM constraints. Addressing scale calibration in neural rankers therefore requires a multifaceted approach extending beyond the mere application of calibrated ranking loss.

3.2 Scale Calibration via Natural Language Explanations

We propose a novel two-step approach to obtain a scale-calibrated numerical score from the textual query and document: map the query-document to a NLE and then score this NLE using a standard neural ranking model. This overall strategy is grounded in the recent success of LLMs to establish the relevance of query-document pairs ([Ferraretto et al., 2023](#)) and the demonstrated efficacy of LLM-generated explanations in various reasoning tasks ([Wei et al., 2022b](#)). We use an LLM, denoted as $g(\cdot)$, to generate NLEs $\{e^q\}$ for query-document pairs $\{d^q\}$, and then leverage a neural ranker over *only* the NLEs to predict relevance scores. This process can be formally represented as a decomposition of ϕ into:

¹Although the cross entropy loss used in monoBERT is scale-calibrated, but it assumes only binary labels; which is something not observed in real-world datasets (e.g., multiple levels of relevance ([Craswell et al., 2020](#); [Mao et al., 2019](#))).

$$\phi_{\Phi}(q, \{d^q\}) = f_{\Theta}(g_{\Psi}(q, \{d^q\})) \quad (2)$$

$$= f_{\Theta}(\{e^q\}) \quad (3)$$

where Ψ represents the parameters of the LLM, and Θ encapsulates the parameters of the neural ranker. The neural ranker $f(\cdot)$ in this setup is adapted to take the NLEs of the original inputs as its new inputs. Note that when using Eq. 1 to optimize parameters $\Phi = \{\Theta, \Psi\}$, we can optimize the parameters of the LLM and the neural ranker. While it is possible to perform full or partial fine-tuning on the LLM parameters Ψ , for simplicity and considering the limited amount of training data, we choose to freeze Ψ and only optimize parameters of the neural ranker Θ .

3.3 Acquiring NLEs via LLM Prompting

Given the impact of prompting, we investigate two distinct methods for acquiring NLEs with varying characteristics.

3.3.1 Literal Explanation

We present the query-document pair to the LLM and ask for both a relevance prediction (either “relevant” or “non-relevant”) and an accompanying explanation. The exact prompt we use to generate such literal explanations is listed in Appendix B.1.

A notable limitation of this approach is its susceptibility to inaccuracies stemming from the LLM’s prediction errors. To mitigate this, we employ a strategy involving Monte Carlo (MC) sampling of multiple NLEs for the same input and then forming a single meta NLE via an aggregation function AGGR (detailed in Section 3.4):

$$e^q = \text{AGGR}(\{y_i \sim g_{\Psi}(y|q, d^q)\}) \quad (4)$$

which aims to diminish erroneous predictions in the preference of the most likely generation.

3.3.2 Conditional Explanation

To address instances where the LLM persistently errs in judging the relevance of an input, we also explore a different explanation generation strategy termed *conditional explanation*. Motivated by the work of sampling multiple reasoning paths to enhance the self-consistency capabilities of LLMs (Wang et al., 2023), this method involves prompting the LLM to generate rationales supporting both the relevance and non-relevance of a given query-document pair. The exact prompt we use to generate conditional explanations is also listed in Appendix B.1. Both conditional explanations are then used by the neural ranker $f(\cdot)$ to produce a scale calibrated ranking score (Eq. 3).

Algorithm 1: Novelty-based Aggregation

```

1 Inputs:  $x$ : input prompt;  $\mathcal{E}$ : sentence splitter;  $\mathcal{S}$  &
    $\lambda$ : text similarity function & threshold;  $k_l$  &  $k_s$ :
   sampling budgets;  $g_{\Psi}(y|x)$ : conditional output
   distribution defined by LLM.
2 Output: Meta NLE  $e$ .
3 Function AGGR( $x, \mathcal{E}, \mathcal{S}, \lambda, k_l, k_s, g_{\Psi}$ ):
4    $e \leftarrow \emptyset$ 
5   for  $i \in 1, 2, \dots, k_l$  do
6      $y_i \leftarrow y \sim g_{\Psi}(y|x)$ 
7     for  $s \in \mathcal{E}(y_i)$  do
8       if  $e \neq \emptyset$  and
9          $\max(\{\mathcal{S}(s, e_j); e_j \in e\}) > \lambda$ 
10        then
11          continue
12        else
13           $e \leftarrow e \cup s$ 
14          if  $|e| \geq k_s$  then
15            return  $e$ 
16  return  $e$ 

```

3.4 Aggregating Multiple NLEs

As previously discussed, relying solely on the most probable output generated by the LLM, particularly in the literal explanation approach, could result in incorrect and overconfident explanations (Ye and Durrett, 2022). To mitigate this issue, we propose sampling multiple generations from the LLMs. This technique has the advantage to introduce additional information, which may either support the initial judgment with varied reasoning or present contrasting viewpoints. We consider both outcomes to be advantageous: in the former scenario, it leads to a more robust and multi-faceted argument supporting a specific prediction; in the latter scenario, the generation of conflicting information by the LLM partially reveals its uncertainty in comprehending and assessing the relevance of the input query-document pair. We hypothesize that this uncertainty is indicative of predicting a more calibrated ranking score.

Combining the information contained in the collection of Monte Carlo sampled NLEs produces a **meta NLE**. This meta NLE then serves as a more comprehensive and nuanced representation of the query-document relationship.

To create the meta NLE, we adopt an iterative approach (Algorithm 1) to continually add novel information. This process begins with an initially empty set of sentences (Line 4). If a sentence from

the newly generated explanation (Line 6-7) introduces novel information – as determined by its maximum text similarity to the existing sentences in the set being at or below a predefined threshold – then this sentence is added to the set (Line 11). This sampling of explanations continues until we either reach the predefined maximum number of sampling iterations (Line 5) or fulfill the limit for the number of sentences in the meta NLE set (Line 12). This approach latently encodes the uncertainty of the LLM, as high variance sampled NLEs will inevitably produce a longer meta NLE. Note that in practice, the LLM is not invoked multiple times for the same input. Instead, we extract the top-likely samples (explanations). As a result, the computational complexity of our approach is comparable to existing point-wise and list-wise LLM-based rerankers and is actually more efficient than pair-wise approaches.

4 Experiments

In this section, we assess our proposed methods using two real-world, extensively used document ranking datasets to evaluate the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1:** How do LLM-generated natural language explanations impact the calibration and ranking performance of neural rankers?
- RQ2:** Is there a consistent improvement across different training objectives when using these explanations?
- RQ3:** Does the MC sampled aggregate-NLEs from the LLM yield empirical improvements?
- RQ4:** Does the proposed methodology produce meaningful scores in a real-world setting?

4.1 Data

We employ two widely acknowledged datasets in information retrieval research: the TREC Deep Learning Track (**TREC**) (Craswell et al., 2021), covering the period from 2019 to 2022, and the NTCIR-14 WWW-2 (**NTCIR**) (Mao et al., 2019).

The choice of these datasets is motivated by their comprehensive multi-level relevance judgments provided by human annotators and the ample volume of labeled documents for each query. Specifically, TREC uses passages from the MS MARCO collection (Bajaj et al., 2018), while NTCIR employs web pages from ClueWeb12 Category-B.²

²<https://lemurproject.org/clueweb12/>

Metric	TREC	NTCIR
# Query (train/val/test)	97/53/67	48/16/16
Avg. # docs per query	282.7	345.3
Relevance labels	0/1/2/3	0/1/2/3/4
Label dist. (low to high)	58/22/14/6	48/23/17/8/3
Avg. query length	8.0	22.0
Avg. doc. length	70.9	493.2

Table 1: Statistics of the TREC and NTCIR datasets.

For TREC, we partition the queries from the years 2019 and 2020 for training, use the 2021 queries for validation, and the 2022 queries for testing. For NTCIR, the queries are divided into training, validation, and testing sets in a 6:2:2 ratio. We directly use all labeled documents as candidates instead of choosing an arbitrary first-stage retriever. Table 1 shows provides the statistics for these collections.

4.2 Metrics

Our goal is to devise methods that not only enhance the calibration of neural rankers but also maintain their ranking effectiveness. Accordingly, we evaluate both calibration and ranking aspects.

Ranking Metrics: We employ the normalized discounted cumulative gain (**nDCG**), which accounts for multiple levels of relevance judgment. We report **nDCG** and **nDCG@10**.

Calibration Metrics: For calibration effectiveness, mean square error (**MSE**), as well as the expected calibration error (**ECE**) (Guo et al., 2017), a metric initially developed for *classification* calibration, are commonly used in ranking literature (Yan et al., 2022; Bai et al., 2023; Penha and Hauff, 2021). ECE measures the discrepancy between a model’s predictions and gold labels in a binning approach:

$$ECE = \sum_{m=1}^M \frac{|B_m|}{n} |acc(B_m) - conf(B_m)|, \quad (5)$$

where M is the number of bins B . However, given the highly skewed and unbalanced label distribution in our test set, as indicated in Table 1, MSE and ECE are biased. Opting for scores that are near the most frequent label results in lower errors while having no real world usability. This bias undermines these metrics’ effectiveness in the ranking context, and is further discussed in Appendix A. To achieve a metric that more closely aligns with real world usability for the search task, we propose the adoption of a class-balanced version of ECE, called **CB-ECE**, which allocates equal significance to all candidate scale values. The CB-ECE is computed by initially calculating the ECE for

each individual class, and subsequently taking the mean, $CB-ECE = \frac{1}{C} \sum_{c=1}^C ECE_c$, with ECE_c as the error for each class c .

4.3 Baselines

Due to the scarcity of relevant work in scale calibrated neural rankers, we have developed several methods to establish meaningful baselines in addition to the past relevant work of Yan et al. (2022). For consistency, we use the same neural ranking architecture, when applicable, for all approaches.

No calibration (NC) (Nogueira and Cho, 2019). We directly evaluate BERT-based rankers. Despite strong performance in ranking tasks on TREC and NTCIR, they lack scale calibration even when finetuned on MS MARCO (monoBERT). This is attributed to the binary relevance labels in MS MARCO, which differ from the multi-level relevance judgments used in TREC and NTCIR.

Post-hoc calibration (PC) (Platt, 2000). We adjust the output scores of the rankers using a learnable function. Following the approach of Yan et al. (2022), we apply Platt scaling (Platt, 2000), adapted for regression calibration. Given the output ranking scores of the model s , the calibrated scores are computed as $s' = \exp(ws + b)/2$, where w and b are learnable parameters. It is important to note that under this method, the parameters of the rankers remain fixed; only the parameters w and b are optimized using the scale calibration data.

Full calibration (FC) (Yan et al., 2022). This strategy involves directly fine-tuning a neural ranker with “query-[SEP]-document” style inputs on scale calibration data using calibrated softmax loss, which represents a straight adoption of the approach from LTR to neural ranking. As discussed, due to substantially larger size of the neural ranker and reduced training data, we are forced to only use a small fraction of negatives for each query compared to under the LTR setting.

LLM prompting with rubrics (PR) (Oosterhuis et al., 2024). Inspired by studies on using LLMs for rendering relevance judgments (Zhuang et al., 2023a; Thomas et al., 2023; Faggioli et al., 2023a) and rescaling (Wadhwa et al., 2023), we explore leveraging the scoring rubrics as a contextual guide for LLM prompting. We present each query-document pair, along with the rubrics from each dataset that were initially used to instruct human annotators, to the LLM and produce 20 scores from the LLM, taking the average as the final query-

document score. This closely resembles the method proposed by the parallel work of Oosterhuis et al. (2024), where they use a fine-tuned LLM to directly capture the score distribution. The underlying concept is that the LLM should be able to comprehend the given rubrics and automatically produced calibrated scores that align with the rubrics, thereby removing the need for any post-hoc calibration steps. See Appendix B.2 for details of prompts.

Post-hoc calibrating LLM predictions (PL) (Zhuang et al., 2023a). Motivated by prior studies that LLM confidence scores are well-calibrated (Kadavath et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2023), we use the LLM as a zero-shot classifier to determine whether a given query and document pair is relevant (scores 1) or not (0). To mitigate the bias inherent in the most probable generation and to minimize instances of tied scores, which complicate the derivation of rankings, we sample the LLM’s responses 20 times for each input and calculate the average of these scores. Subsequently, we employ Platt scaling to these averaged scores and refine the parameters using the training set. See Appendix B.3 for details of prompts.

Full calibration with NLEs (NLE, this work). Building on our methods for generating and aggregating natural language explanations (NLEs) for query-document pairs (Section 3), we finetune a vanilla BERT model with calibrated softmax loss to process meta NLEs and produce scale-calibrated ranking scores. For the conditional explanation approach (Section 3.3.2), where each input has two meta NLEs—one for relevance and one for non-relevance—we concatenate the [CLS] hidden states from both NLEs. This representation then passes through a linear layer to generate the final ranking score, integrating insights from both perspectives.

4.4 Downstream Performance: Query Performance Prediction

A key objective of calibrated neural ranking models is to provide interpretable ranking scores for both users and *algorithms*. While our primary experiments focus on user interpretability by measuring errors between model outputs and golden labels, in this section, we examine how these scores can benefit algorithms through query performance prediction (QPP). As outlined by Arabzadeh et al. (2024), QPP estimates the performance of individual queries to help search systems better handle challenging queries. To investigate

Collection	TREC					NTCIR				
Metric	Ranking		Calibration			Ranking		Calibration		
	nDCG(\uparrow)	nDCG@10(\uparrow)	CB-ECE(\downarrow)	ECE(\downarrow)	MSE(\downarrow)	nDCG(\uparrow)	nDCG@10(\uparrow)	CB-ECE(\downarrow)	ECE(\downarrow)	MSE(\downarrow)
NC (monoBERT)	0.799	0.494	1.205	0.320	0.773	0.735	0.337	1.757	0.799	1.824
NC (vanilla BERT)	0.716	0.401	1.332	0.390	0.803	0.726	0.319	1.802	0.903	2.013
PC (monoBERT)	0.799	0.494	1.141	0.125	0.684	0.735	0.337	1.624	0.457	1.462
PC (vanilla BERT)	0.716	0.401	1.222	0.171	0.697	0.726	0.319	1.733	0.549	1.532
FC (monoBERT)	0.776	0.422	1.093	0.221	0.721	0.696	0.268	1.843	0.709	1.874
FC (vanilla BERT)	0.738	0.327	1.253	0.266	0.785	0.727	0.285	1.756	0.546	1.416
PR	0.786	0.457	1.000	1.246	2.137	0.728	0.328	1.294	1.194	2.773
PL	0.790	0.473	1.165	0.145	0.673	0.736	0.364	1.677	0.472	1.540
NLE (literal)	0.815 [†]	0.529 [†]	0.996	0.067[†]	0.602[†]	0.742	0.340	1.534	0.355 [†]	1.330 [†]
NLE (conditional)	0.822[†]	0.534[†]	0.862[†]	0.428	0.832	0.720	0.322	1.405	0.257[†]	1.290[†]

Table 2: Ranking and scale calibration performance on TREC and NTCIR. Note that lower is better with calibration metrics (CB-ECE, ECE and MSE). Statistically significant improvements (t-tests with Bonferroni correction at the 95% confidence level) over all baselines are marked with [†].

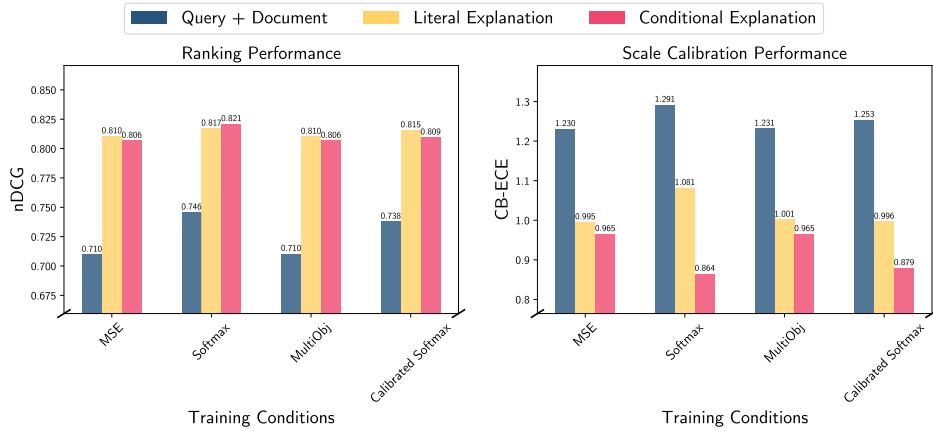


Figure 2: Ranking and scale calibration performance on TREC of full calibration of BERT, taking query + document inputs (FC BERT) and our proposed explanations, using four different optimization objectives. NLE-based approaches consistently yield better ranking (left) and calibration (right) performance.

whether our NLE-based approaches produce more effective scores, we apply two established post-hoc QPP methods—Weighted Information Gain (WIG) (Zhou and Croft, 2007) and Normalized Query Commitment (NQC) (Shtok et al., 2012).

Evaluation Protocol. Post-hoc QPP methods rely on the top-k document scores for each query to predict query performance metrics. In our evaluation, we use the top-10 document scores to predict nDCG@10, and then calculate correlations between the predicted and actual nDCG@10 across all test queries in the TREC dataset. These correlations are measured using **Pearson’s ρ** and **Kendall’s τ** . The rationale is that better calibrated models will yield ranking scores that enable post-hoc QPP methods to better predict query performance, leading to stronger correlations with the ground truth.

4.5 Results and Analysis

Here we answer each research question.

RQ1: How do LLM-generated natural language explanations impact the calibration and ranking performance of neural rankers? We find in Table 2 that NLE-based methods yield statistically significant improvements for both aspects. For scale calibration, NLEs exhibit lower CB-ECE compared to both post-hoc calibration (PC) and full calibration (FC) across both datasets, with literal NLEs performing better on TREC while conditional NLEs perform slightly better on NTCIR. Regarding ranking, the proposed approach significantly surpasses NC and FC baselines, which shares the same fine-tuning data and initial weights, with improvements of up to 11.4% in nDCG and 63.3% in nDCG@10 in the TREC dataset. This indicates that LLM-generated NLEs provide valuable insights for document differentiation beyond the scope of calibration.

Explanation	Selection	nDCG(\uparrow)	CB-ECE(\downarrow)
Literal	Most Probable	0.789	1.093
	Aggregate MC	0.815[†]	0.996[†]
	Oracle	0.883	0.801
Conditional	Most Probable	0.797	0.895
	Aggregate MC	0.822[†]	0.862[†]

Table 3: The effect of different types of natural language explanations and selection strategies on the ranking and scale calibration performance of neural rankers.

RQ2: Is there a consistent improvement across different training objectives when using these explanations? Yan et al. (2022) and Bai et al. (2023) advocate for addressing the scale calibration of LTR models through calibrated loss functions. As a significant motivator for this work are the challenges of applying LTR approaches to larger text models, we investigate the efficacy of naively applying these objectives to the neural ranking task. To this end, we experiment with four fine-tuning objectives commonly used in this setting: MSE as a pointwise regression loss, uncalibrated listwise softmax (Softmax), a multi-objective combination of MSE and Softmax (MultiObj) from Bai et al. (2023), and the calibrated listwise softmax (Calibrated Softmax) from Yan et al. (2022). The FC baseline is also trained with each of these objectives. As seen in Fig. 2, the NLE-based approaches consistently surpass the performance of neural models that process raw text queries and documents across all four optimization methods. Further, while these objectives do produce different results, the majority of the improved calibration performance comes from the NLEs themselves and is relatively agnostic of the loss function.

RQ3: Does the MC sampled aggregate-NLEs from the LLM yield empirical improvements?

To further the understanding of the dynamics between LLM-generated NLEs and their impact on scale calibration and ranking, we perform additional experiments on the TREC dataset. We evaluate the decision to use an aggregate NLE rather than the most probable NLE (discussed in Section 3.4) in Table 3. We include an oracle baseline, where we repeatedly sample a NLE until we achieve one that aligns with the true relevance label. If this is not achieved within 20 samples, we default to the most confident NLE even if it’s incorrect. It can be observed from the results that, across both literal and conditional NLE settings, using the proposed aggregate MC method achieves better performance both w.r.t. ranking as well as calibration.

Metric	WIG		NQC	
	P- ρ	K- τ	P- ρ	K- τ
NC	0.176	0.091	0.003	-0.083
PC	0.198	0.113	-0.173	-0.123
FC	-0.001	-0.012	-0.385	-0.242
PR	0.052	0.003	-0.002	-0.025
PL	0.019	0.057	-0.262	-0.101
NLE (lit.)	0.063	0.104	0.075	0.048
NLE (con.)	0.268	0.165	0.183	0.146

Table 4: The effect of scale calibration on post-hoc QPP.

RQ4: Does the proposed methodology produce meaningful scores in a real-world setting? The results from using ranking scores from different calibration approaches for QPP are reported in Table 4, and we are able to definitively show that the scores produced via NLEs result in substantially more usable scores. Interestingly, directly adapting the calibrated ranking loss of Yan et al. (2022) from LTR to neural ranking (FC) leads to much worse QPP performance compared to no calibration (NC). PC, PR, and PL, though improving calibration metrics, do not consistently improve QPP either. Comparing between the literal and conditional NLE methods, there is a large gap in performance suggesting that including the two extreme perspectives of the conditional NLEs play a critical role. We highlight that while MSE, ECE and CB-ECE are often used in past works for ranking calibration, it leaves out critical information for the ranking task. We hope to investigate more effective metrics in future work.

5 Conclusions and Future Works

This study tackled the challenge of scale calibration for neural rankers. Our method leverages zero-shot LLMs’ inherent understanding of textual data through NLEs to enhance scale calibration while maintaining or improving ranking performance. We showed that our approach surpasses established baselines in ranking and calibration metrics, demonstrates consistency across various training objectives, and is effective for downstream post-hoc QPP applications.

This work prototypes the idea of leveraging LLM-generated NLEs of query-document pairs to improve the scale calibration of neural ranking models. Like many recent works that incorporate LLMs as an integral part of the document ranking process (Ma et al., 2023b; Qin et al., 2023; Zhuang et al., 2024), our approach is not yet efficient enough to be directly applied to an online ranking system with high latency requirements.

Having validated the feasibility of NLEs for calibration, future work could incorporate techniques such as distillation to improve run-time efficiency.

6 Limitations

This work prototypes the idea of leveraging LLM-generated NLEs of query-document pairs to improve the scale calibration of neural ranking models. Like many recent works that incorporate LLMs as an integral part of the document ranking process (Ma et al., 2023b; Qin et al., 2023; Zhuang et al., 2024), our approach is not yet efficient enough to be directly applied to an online ranking system with high latency requirements. Having validated the feasibility of NLEs for calibration, future work could incorporate techniques such as distillation to improve run-time efficiency.

Another limitation stems from the unreliability and inconsistency of NLEs from LLMs (Ye and Durrett, 2022). Although we paradoxically leverage the inconsistency of NLEs to further improve the scale calibration of neural ranking models, the potential effects of addressing unreliability or inconsistency on the calibration task remain unclear. Moreover, while we aim for the scale-calibrated ranking *scores* to be useful for explainability purposes as they correspond to certain criteria, the NLEs themselves are not meant to be, nor should they be directly displayed to users for interpretability purposes in the current form.

A notable performance disparity is observed between our current aggregate MC approach and the oracle explanation setting in Table 3. This gap highlights a significant potential for improvement in NLE-based neural rankers contingent upon better alignment of LLM judgments with human annotators on a *binary* scale. Although we experimented with various prompts for generating NLEs in some pilot studies, this research is designed to explore the feasibility of LLM-generated NLEs for a specific important task. Consequently, various directions that could potentially improve the LLMs in terms of accuracy of predictions and quality of explanations—including but not limited to few-shot prompting, prompt tuning and optimization, LLM fine-tuning, and leveraging better (even closed-source) LLMs—are beyond the interest and scope of this study.

7 Potential Risks

Although calibrated ranking scores can be leveraged in certain ways to mitigate bias for fairer document ranking (Heuss et al., 2023), the use of NLEs acts as an information transformation, filtering parts of the candidate document while adding the LLM’s own biases. Certain topics, demographics, and perspectives could be impacted and consequently change the proposed document rankings. While traditional *ad-hoc* web search is transitioning to retrieval augmented generation, the consequence remains the same. These systems act as information brokers for the general public, and can easily introduce or reinforce biases into the population based on the retrieved information. With this in mind, we elected to use an off-the-shelf text ranking paradigm as the final scorer. This facilitates the drop in use of the many techniques already developed to improve fairness in ranking (Zehlike et al., 2023a,b).

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A Class-balanced ECE and the limitations of ECE

We discuss in Section 4.2 the limitations inherent in using the expected calibration error (ECE) (Guo et al., 2017) for scale calibration data, especially when faced with imbalanced label distributions. To counter this challenge, we propose a straightforward modification: the adoption of class-balanced ECE (CB-ECE). This section uses model outputs on TREC as illustrative examples to provide detailed insights and empirical support for our approach.

We employ reliability diagrams (Murphy and Winkler, 1977), a widely-used technique in calibration, to visualize calibration performance. In ECE calculations, samples are sorted by their predicted

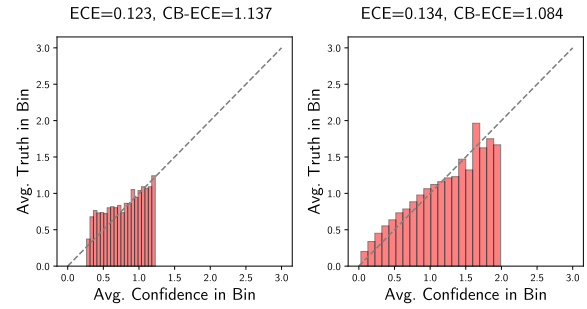


Figure 3: Reliability diagrams for two models on TREC: The left diagram shows a model with ranking scores densely concentrated on the lower part of the scale, which exhibits better ECE performance due to ECE’s failure to account for prediction coverage across the target scale. On the right, the CB-ECE penalizes this undesirable behavior, indicating that the model providing better coverage across the scale is more effectively calibrated.

values and divided into several buckets. The calibration error for each bucket is determined by the absolute difference between the mean labels and mean predictions of samples within that bucket, further *weighted* by the number of samples falling in the bucket. Reliability diagrams concretely visualize this concept, with each bucket represented by a bar. The mean predictions are indicated on the x-axis, while the mean labels (i.e., scale) are represented by the height of the bars. In an ideal scenario, a perfectly calibrated model would yield a reliability diagram aligning with the diagonal line, indicating that mean predictions correspond accurately to the labels for every bucket. However, ECE overlooks a critical aspect of scale calibration: **coverage**. This refers to the model’s ability to adequately span the target scale range. Figure 3 illustrates this point with two diagrams. The left diagram shows a model whose outputs are narrowly concentrated around lower values on TREC’s 0-3 scale. The right diagram, conversely, exhibits outputs covering a broader range on the target scale, also closely aligned with the diagonal line. Relying solely on ECE values would misleadingly suggest that the first model is better calibrated ($0.123 < 0.134$; lower is better). However, we argue that a model with predictions confined to a limited portion of the desired scale, particularly skewed towards certain values popular in the evaluation set, cannot be considered well-calibrated. CB-ECE offers a solution by re-adjusting the significance of each target scale. In the example shown in Fig. 3,

CB-ECE more accurately indicates that the second model exhibits better scale calibration (CB-ECE: $1.137 > 1.084$; lower is better), which is more in line with our intuitive understanding of model calibration.

B Prompts

B.1 Prompts for Generating Explanations

Both prompts were selected based on performance on validation data with minimal prompt engineering as the intention was not to achieve the upper bound of performance, but to determine whether the explanations produced from a LLM aids in scale calibration.

The format of the prompt we employ for literal explanation is as follows: “For the following query and document, judge whether they are relevant or non-relevant by outputting ‘Relevant’ or ‘Nonrelevant’, and provide an explanation. Do not repeat the content of the query or the document. Query: {query} Document: {document} Output:” This method parallels the prompt used by [Ferraretto et al. \(2023\)](#) to generate explanations for query-document relevance for training generative rankers. However, our approach differs due to its simplicity and broader generalizability across datasets, utilizing zero-shot prompting in contrast to their use of a fixed set of 7 examples as demonstrations for few-shot prompting.

The prompt we use for the conditional explanation approach is as follows: “For the following query and document, explain why they are {relevant/nonrelevant}. Query: {query} Document: {document} Output:”

B.2 Prompt for LLM prompting with rubrics (PR)

For the TREC dataset, we adopt the prompt method used by [Thomas et al. \(2023\)](#). Conversely, for NTCIR, we adapt the approach to incorporate the specific rubric outlined in the task description of NTCIR-14 WWW-2 ([Mao et al., 2019](#)). It is noteworthy that the NTCIR rubric is defined based on scores provided by two annotators (e.g., “relevance=3: One annotator rated as highly relevant, one as relevant”), focusing on the quantitative synthesis of annotations. In contrast, the TREC rubric is more qualitatively oriented, emphasizing the explanation of query-document relationships.

B.3 Prompt for Post-hoc calibrating LLM predictions (PL)

The prompt we use is similar to that of [Zhuang et al. \(2023a\)](#), with one significant modification: we instruct the LLM to output either “relevant” or “nonrelevant” in lieu of “yes” or “no”. This alteration stems from our observation that the LLM exhibits a strong prior towards generating affirmative responses such as “Yes, I can help you with this request...”, which could potentially skew the predictions. By specifying the terms “relevant” and “non-relevant”, we aim to reduce this bias and achieve more accurate relevance predictions.

C Case Study

We randomly show a pair of query and document from TREC, as well as LLM-generated explanations for them in order to predict calibrated ranking scores. The example is shown in Table 5. The superior effectiveness of our methods in assessing the relevance of the query “example of what a family advocate does” to a specific document can be attributed to several aspects. Firstly, the use of NLEs generated by an LLM provides a deeper contextual understanding. For instance, the first approach’s explanation elucidates the direct relevance by highlighting how the document exemplifies the role of a family advocate, particularly in advocating for a child’s best interests. This detailed breakdown goes beyond mere textual similarity, offering a richer interpretation of the document’s relevance to the query. Furthermore, our second approach’s dual perspective in explaining both relevance and non-relevance brings a comprehensive understanding. It captures the essence of the document’s role description and contrasts it with the lack of specific examples, thereby offering a deeper analysis of the document-query relationship. By feeding these elaborate explanations into BERT, our methods effectively leverage more informative data, allowing for a more refined and accurate relevance assessment. Consequently, our methods demonstrate a notable improvement in capturing the subtleties and depths of relevance, as evidenced by the scores closer to the label compared to the baseline approaches.

D Reproducibility

For all experiments that involve LLM, we employ the LLaMA2-13B-Chat model ([Touvron et al., 2023](#)), hosted locally through vLLM and using

Query: “Example of what a family advocate does” Document: “This person advocates for the best interest of the child, and is tasked with investigating the family situation and advising the court what custody situation would be in the best interests of the child.” Label: 2 (Highly relevant: The passage has some answer for the query, but the answer may be a bit unclear, or hidden amongst extraneous information).		
Approach	Explanation	Score
Uncalibrated monoBERT	N/A	0.872
Calibrated monoBERT	N/A	0.397
Literal Explanation	here’s my answer: relevant the query asks for an example of what a family advocate does, and the document provides an example of a family advocate’s role, specifically advocating for the best interests of the child and investigating the family situation to advise the court on the appropriate custody arrangement. this is directly related to the query and the document provides relevant information. the document provides a clear example of what a family advocate does, making it relevant to the query. the document directly addresses the query’s question, making it a relevant match. sure, i can help you with that!	1.980
Conditional Explanation	<p>Relevance: the query “example of what a family advocate does” is relevant to the provided document because the document describes the role of a family advocate, which is to advocate for the best interests of the child in family law cases. the document highlights the key aspects of a family advocate this is an example of what a family advocate might do in practice. this connection between the query and document makes them relevant to each other. 3. focus on the child’s best interests: the document emphasizes the importance of prioritizing the child’s best interests when making decisions about child custody.</p> <p>Non-Relevance: the query “example of what a family advocate does” is not relevant to the document provided because the document does not provide an example of what a family advocate does, but rather describes the responsibilities of a family advocate. the document states that a family advocate advocates for the best interests of the child and investigates the family situation to advise the court on the custody situation that would be in the best interests of the child. this is a description of the role and responsibilities of a family advocate, but it does not provide an example of what a family advocate does in a specific situation.</p>	2.053

Table 5: An example showing natural language explanations generated by the LLM lead to better calibrated scores.

quantized weights, operated on an A100 GPU. In this study, our neural rankers are based on BERT (Devlin et al., 2019). We initialize these rankers with weights fine-tuned on MS MARCO, referred to as monoBERT³ in Table 2, or with weights without retrieval-oriented fine-tuning, denoted as vanilla BERT. For fine-tuning on scale calibration data, we use the AdamW optimizer (Loshchilov and Hutter, 2019) with a learning rate of $3e^{-6}$ and effective batch size of 64 query-document pairs or meta NLEs.⁴ The training is conducted over a maximum of 10 epochs, selecting the best model based on validation set loss. To mitigate the impact of randomness due to the limited dataset size in terms of query numbers, each

³<https://huggingface.co/venereis/monobert-msmarco>

⁴Note that due to larger model size and more complex input representations, the batch size for fine-tuning neural ranking models is much smaller than training LTR models.

experiment is run with 5 different random seeds. The metrics reported are averaged across these five runs and the statistical significance is determined using t-tests with Bonferroni correction (Weisstein) at the 95% confidence level.

In relation to the components and hyperparameters used in Algorithm 1, following Quach et al. (2023), we employ ROUGE-L (Lin, 2004) as the text similarity function \mathcal{S} , set the similarity threshold λ to 0.35, the sampling budget k_l (maximum number of responses) to 20 and k_s (maximum number of sentences in the meta NLE) to 30.

We use PyGaggle⁵ for acquiring the ranking scores from pre-trained neural ranking models, which are then used for the post-hoc calibration baseline. We use WIG and NQC’s implementations in QPP4CS (Meng et al., 2023) for the downstream evaluation of QPP.

⁵<https://github.com/castorini/pygaggle>