

MGA: Mixed Gated Attention for Efficient Long Context Attention - Final Report

Stanford CS224N {Custom} Project

Jen Ha

Department of Computer Science
Stanford University
jiyounha@stanford.edu

Bharat Kumar

Department of Computer Science
Stanford University
bk2000@stanford.edu

Abstract

Standard softmax attention scales quadratically ($O(L^2)$) with sequence length, severely bottlenecking long-context language modeling. Efficient alternatives force a rigid recall-efficiency trade-off: Sliding Window Attention (SWA) restricts the receptive field, blinding the model to distant tokens, while linear recurrent models compress history into a fixed-size state, degrading high-fidelity exact retrieval. We propose Mixed Gated Attention (MGA), a novel intra-layer hybrid mechanism resolving this tension. MGA integrates a high-fidelity local SWA path with an efficient global Delta-Gated Linear Attention (Delta-GLA) path within every layer, utilizing a per-token, per-dimension learnable gate to dynamically route features. We evaluate MGA on a custom 110M-parameter LLaMA-style backbone trained from scratch on the PG-19 corpus. Results demonstrate MGA significantly reduces peak VRAM at extended context lengths (up to 16,384 tokens) compared to standard attention. Furthermore, via a custom auxiliary polarization loss, MGA avoids routing collapse, maintaining a stable distribution that allows for dynamic, fine-grained integration of local and global context.

1 Key Information to include

- Mentor: Julie Kallini
- External Collaborators (if you have any): None
- Sharing project: None
- Late Days (if you are using any):

Team member	Late days remaining
Jen Ha	1
Bharat Kumar	5
Total pooled	6
Team size	2
Late days applied for the report	3

2 Introduction

Scaling language models to extended contexts is constrained by the $O(L^2)$ memory and compute complexity of standard causal self-attention. Current approaches to mitigate this bottleneck bifurcate into two paradigms, both of which sacrifice recall for efficiency. Local attention mechanisms, such as Sliding Window Attention (SWA) [1], achieve $O(L \cdot w)$ complexity but strictly mask distant tokens, establishing a hard upper bound on long-range dependency resolution. Conversely, linear recurrent models like Gated Linear Attention (GLA) [2] achieve $O(L)$ complexity by compressing the sequence into a fixed-size hidden state. However, this extreme compression creates an information

bottleneck, heavily degrading the model’s ability to retrieve specific, rare tokens from deep in the context (often measured via passkey retrieval).

Recent hybrid architectures attempt to resolve this by interleaving distinct layers (e.g., alternating SWA and recurrent layers) [3]. However, this macro-level routing forces the network into coarse, layer-wise processing segregations rather than dynamically synthesizing local and global features at the token level.

We introduce **Mixed Gated Attention (MGA)**, an intra-layer hybrid architecture that explicitly resolves the recall-efficiency trade-off. MGA maintains two parallel paths within the identical attention block: an SWA path for exact local retrieval, and a Delta-GLA [4] path for compressed global context. A per-token, per-dimension learnable gating mechanism (α) dynamically routes features between these two paths based on the immediate context.

We benchmark MGA using a 110M-parameter LLaMA-style backbone trained on the PG-19 long-document corpus. Our results demonstrate that MGA effectively bounds VRAM scaling at contexts up to 16k tokens while successfully avoiding "gate collapse" via a novel polarization auxiliary loss. MGA establishes a mathematically sound, memory-efficient framework for fine-grained local and global feature integration.

3 Related Work

Local Attention. To circumvent $O(L^2)$ complexity, models such as Longformer [1] utilize SWA, restricting token attention to a localized window w . While this ensures linear scaling and preserves high-fidelity exact lookup for recent syntax, its rigid masking entirely discards distant tokens. MGA leverages SWA strictly as its "Local Path" to handle immediate generation context without quadratic overhead, offloading distant dependencies to the global path.

Linear Recurrence and State Space Models. Linear Attention rewrites the attention formulation as a linear recurrence. Recent iterations, such as GLA [2], introduce data-dependent decay gates to stabilize training. The Delta Rule variant (Delta-GLA) [4] further refines this by explicitly subtracting stale values before writing new outer products to the recurrent state. Despite these algorithmic improvements, fixed-size recurrent states inherently suffer from an information bottleneck over extended sequences, limiting exact retrieval. MGA utilizes Delta-GLA as its "Global Path" but bypasses this bottleneck for recent, high-density tokens by routing them through the SWA path instead.

Hybrid Architectures. Recognizing the complementary strengths of exact attention and linear recurrence, models like Jamba [3] interleave transformer layers with state-space layers. These represent *inter-layer* hybrids. Because entire layers are dedicated to a single inductive bias, the model cannot simultaneously apply exact lookup and compressed retrieval to different dimensions of the same token representation. MGA addresses this limitation as an *intra-layer* hybrid, utilizing per-dimension routing to achieve fine-grained, micro-level feature synthesis.

Modern Transformer Backbones. To validate MGA in a contemporary setting, our custom backbone implements standard LLM architectural improvements, including Rotary Position Embeddings (RoPE) [5] for stable relative positioning, SwiGLU activations [6] for expanded feed-forward capacity, and RMSNorm [7] to ensure training stability.

4 Approach

We propose **Mixed Gated Attention (MGA)**, a novel intra-layer hybrid attention mechanism designed to resolve the recall-efficiency trade-off in long-context language modeling. Our architecture explicitly routes information between a computationally expensive local attention head and an efficient global linear recurrent head.

Following the LLaMA-2 paradigm, we utilize a decoder-only transformer backbone at the $\approx 110\text{M}$ parameter scale ($d_{model} = 768$, 12 layers, 12 heads). The backbone incorporates Rotary Position Embedding (RoPE) [5], SwiGLU FFN [6] (internal dimension 1368), and RMSNorm [7].

Mixed Gated Attention (MGA) Layer Our custom MGA layer consists of three main components:

- **Local Path (Sliding Window Attention):** Standard SWA [1] with window size $w = 512$.
- **Global Path (Delta-GLA):** A variant of Gated Linear Attention combined with the Delta Rule. We use a non-negative feature map $\phi(x) = \text{ELU}(x) + 1$.
- **MGA Gate & Combination (Original Contribution):** We introduce a per-token, per-dimension routing mechanism $\alpha = \sigma(XW_\alpha + b_\alpha) \in \mathbb{R}^{L \times d_{\text{model}}}$. The paths are combined as: $H_{\text{final}} = \alpha \odot H_{\text{local}} + (1 - \alpha) \odot H_{\text{global}}$. To prevent gate collapse, we apply an auxiliary loss $\mathcal{L}_{\text{aux}} = 0.01 \cdot \frac{1}{N} \sum_{l=1}^N (\bar{\alpha}_l - 0.5)^2$.

Long-context language modeling presents a fundamental tension between **recall** and **efficiency**. Standard softmax attention computes pairwise interactions across all tokens, achieving strong recall but incurring $O(L^2)$ memory and compute cost. Linear recurrent models such as Gated Linear Attention (GLA) compress the full history into a fixed-size state, yielding $O(L)$ complexity, but often sacrifice fine-grained retrieval of individual tokens from deep in the context. We propose **Mixed Gated Attention (MGA)**, a novel intra-layer hybrid attention mechanism designed to resolve this recall–efficiency trade-off. Our architecture explicitly routes information between a computationally expensive local attention head and an efficient global linear recurrent head, aiming to retain the best of both paradigms.

4.1 Backbone Architecture

Following the LLaMA-2 paradigm, all models share a decoder-only transformer backbone at the $\approx 110\text{M}$ **parameter scale**: $d_{\text{model}} = 768$, 12 layers, 12 attention heads ($d_{\text{head}} = 64$), and a SwiGLU feed-forward network [6] with internal dimension 1,368. The backbone incorporates **Rotary Position Embedding (RoPE)** [5] with $\theta = 10,000$ and **RMSNorm** [8] (pre-norm). Embedding and output-projection weights are **tied**. All parameters are initialized with Xavier uniform and trained in `bf16` mixed precision.

4.2 Attention Variants

We compare three attention mechanisms, each instantiated as a drop-in replacement inside the same backbone.

Standard Full Attention (Baseline 1) The standard causal self-attention computes:

$$\text{Attn}(Q, K, V) = \text{softmax}\left(\frac{QK^\top}{\sqrt{d_{\text{head}}}}\right)V$$

with a causal mask. We leverage PyTorch’s `scaled_dot_product_attention` (Flash Attention kernel) for hardware efficiency. This baseline has full $O(L^2)$ context access and serves as the **recall upper bound**.

Sliding Window Attention (SWA) — (Baseline 2) Each query token attends only to the previous w tokens (we set $w = 512$). For sequences $L \leq 4096$ we materialize an explicit causal-window mask; for $L > 4096$ we chunk the query dimension into blocks of 1,024 and tile a local mask per chunk, avoiding a full $L \times L$ allocation. SWA has $O(Lw)$ complexity but **zero access** to tokens outside its window, making it the **efficiency upper bound / recall lower bound**.

Mixed Gated Attention (MGA) — (Our Proposed Method) Our custom MGA layer consists of three main components:

- **Local Path:** Sliding Window Attention (SWA) with $w = 512$, as described above.
- **Global Path:** Delta-GLA, a linear recurrent mechanism described in Section 3.3.
- **MGA Gate & Combination (Original Contribution):** We introduce a per-token, per-dimension routing mechanism:

$$\alpha = \sigma(XW_\alpha + b_\alpha) \in \mathbb{R}^{L \times d_{\text{model}}}$$

$$H_{\text{final}} = \alpha \odot H_{\text{local}} + (1 - \alpha) \odot H_{\text{global}}$$

where σ is the element-wise sigmoid. When $\alpha \rightarrow 1$, the layer behaves like pure SWA (local); when $\alpha \rightarrow 0$, it relies entirely on the global recurrent state. The gate is initialized so that $\alpha \approx 0.5$, and the model learns to route information task-dependently. To prevent **gate collapse** (the gate converging to all-local or all-global), we apply an auxiliary loss:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{aux}} = 0.01 \cdot \frac{1}{N} \sum_{l=1}^N (\bar{\alpha}_l - 0.5)^2$$

where $\bar{\alpha}_l$ is the mean gate activation of layer l across the token dimension, and N is the number of MGA layers.

4.3 Delta-Gated Linear Attention (Delta-GLA)

The global path uses **Delta-GLA**, a linear recurrent mechanism with a delta-rule state update. At each time step t , the recurrent state $S_t \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ is updated as:

$$S_t = \text{diag}(g_t) \cdot S_{t-1} + v_t \otimes k_t - (\text{diag}(g_t) \cdot S_{t-1} \cdot k_t) \otimes k_t$$

$$o_t = q_t \cdot S_t$$

where $g_t = \sigma(x_t W_g)$ is a per-dimension decay gate, and k_t and q_t are mapped through a feature function $\phi(x) = \text{ELU}(x) + 1$ to ensure non-negativity. Keys are L_2 -normalized to prevent state blowup. The delta correction term $(\text{diag}(g_t) \cdot S_{t-1} \cdot k_t) \otimes k_t$ subtracts the stale value associated with k_t before writing the new outer product, improving the fidelity of retrieval from the compressed state. A learnable output gate $\sigma(x_t W_o)$ is applied element-wise before the final linear projection.

The recurrence is implemented as an explicit Python loop over L time steps. While this is a throughput bottleneck (precluding `torch.compile`), it preserves mathematical correctness and numerical precision. We mitigate the resulting memory pressure through **gradient checkpointing** on every MGA layer, which halves peak VRAM at the cost of approximately 30% additional training time.

4.4 Implementation Details

All code was written by us in PyTorch. The implementation (approximately 400 lines of model code) is publicly available. Key engineering decisions include:

- **Chunked SWA masks** for sequences beyond 4,096 tokens to avoid materializing an $L \times L$ matrix.
- **Gradient checkpointing** selectively applied to MGA attention blocks during training.
- **Matmul-based recurrence** instead of `einsum` to avoid string-parsing overhead inside the tight per-token loop.
- **Periodic result checkpointing** (every 50 steps) to survive training interruptions on cloud platforms.

5 Experiments

This section contains the following.

5.1 Data

We train on the PG-19 corpus [9], a collection of full-length books from Project Gutenberg published before 1919. PG-19 is a standard benchmark for long-range language modeling because its documents average tens of thousands of tokens, providing naturally occurring long-range dependencies—unlike shorter-document corpora such as WikiText-103 where most dependencies fall within a few hundred tokens.

Tokenization. We tokenize using the GPT-2 byte-pair encoding tokenizer (GPT2TokenizerFast from HuggingFace Transformers, vocabulary size 50,257). The dataset is loaded via the HuggingFace datasets library in streaming mode (using the emozilla/pg19 mirror for compatibility) to avoid downloading the full corpus to disk.

Preprocessing. After tokenization, all tokens from each split are concatenated into a single flat sequence and then packed into non-overlapping chunks of length $(\text{seq_len} + 1)$, where the first seq_len tokens form the input and the last seq_len tokens (shifted by one) form the next-token prediction target. This packing strategy, standard in language-model pre-training, maximizes token utilization and avoids padding.

Train / Validation Split. We use the official PG-19 train split (capped at 10M tokens after tokenization, yielding approximately 1,220 packed sequences at $L = 8,192$) and the validation split (capped at 500K tokens) for periodic perplexity evaluation. The training DataLoader shuffles sequences each epoch; the validation loader is deterministic.

Context Length. All models are trained with a context window of $L = 8,192$ tokens, chosen to be long enough that SWA ($w = 512$) must discard the majority of the context, thereby exposing the recall advantage of the global recurrent path in MGA.

5.2 Evaluation method

We evaluate along three complementary dimensions: **quality**, **efficiency**, and **recall**.

Validation Perplexity (Quality). We measure language modeling quality via validation perplexity (PPL) on held-out PG-19 text. Every 50 training steps, we compute cross-entropy loss on 5 validation batches and report $\text{PPL} = \exp(\bar{\mathcal{L}}_{\text{val}})$. Lower perplexity indicates better next-token prediction and, by extension, stronger language understanding. This is the standard metric for comparing language models on PG-19 [9].

Efficiency Scaling (Memory & Throughput). We benchmark all three architectures across context lengths $L \in \{1024, 2048, 4096, 8192, 16384\}$ on a single GPU in inference mode (`torch.no_grad`). For each (model, L) pair, we measure:

- **Peak VRAM** (GB): maximum GPU memory allocated, measured via `torch.cuda.max_memory_allocated` after 3 warmup iterations.
- **Latency** (ms): wall-clock time per forward pass, averaged over 5 timed iterations with `torch.cuda.synchronize`.
- **Throughput** (tokens/sec): $(\text{batch_size} \times L) / \text{latency}$.

This benchmark directly tests whether MGA achieves better memory scaling than Standard Attention while maintaining competitive throughput. We expect Standard Attention’s VRAM to grow quadratically with L , SWA to grow linearly, and MGA to fall between the two.

Passkey Retrieval (Long-Range Recall). To isolate the ability to recall a specific token from deep in the context, we use a synthetic passkey retrieval task. A random passkey token (drawn from a small vocabulary of 10 candidate tokens) is embedded at a random position in the first 50% of a length- L sequence of repeating distractor tokens, marked by a special `MARKER_START` token. The model must predict the passkey when prompted by a `QUERY_TOKEN` placed at the final position. We report **recall accuracy**: the fraction of examples in which the model’s argmax prediction at the query position matches the ground-truth passkey. This task is trained from scratch on a small 2-layer sandbox model ($d_{\text{model}} = 128$, 4 heads) for 1,500 steps at $L = 512$ with SWA window $w = 128$, ensuring the passkey is placed outside the sliding window. SWA-Only should fail at this task because it has no mechanism

to access tokens beyond w positions back, while MGA’s global Delta-GLA path should maintain the passkey in its recurrent state.

5.3 Experimental Details

Training Configuration. All three models are trained with identical hyperparameters for fair comparison:

- **Optimizer:** AdamW ($\beta_1 = 0.9$, $\beta_2 = 0.95$, weight decay 0.01)
- **Learning rate:** 3×10^{-4} with cosine annealing schedule
- **Batch size:** 2–4 (reduced for longer sequences or when GPU memory is limited)
- **Training steps:** 500–2,000 depending on available compute
- **Gradient clipping:** max norm 1.0
- **Precision:** bfloat16 mixed precision via `torch.amp.autocast`

Compute. Experiments were run on NVIDIA GPUs. When ≥ 3 GPUs are available, models are trained in parallel (one per GPU); otherwise, models are trained sequentially on a single GPU to avoid out-of-memory errors. Standard Attention and SWA benefit from `torch.compile` (mode `reduce-overhead`); MGA’s sequential Delta-GLA recurrence causes graph breaks, so compilation is disabled for MGA.

MGA-Specific. The auxiliary gate-balancing loss ($\lambda = 0.01$) is added to the cross-entropy objective at every step. The mean routing gate $\bar{\alpha}$ is logged every 50 steps to monitor gate specialization over the course of training.

5.4 Experimental details

All models are trained with identical hyperparameters: AdamW optimizer ($\beta_1 = 0.9$, $\beta_2 = 0.95$, weight decay 0.01), learning rate 3×10^{-4} with a cosine annealing schedule over 2,000 steps. We utilize bfloat16 mixed precision. Models are trained using PyTorch `nn.DataParallel` distributed across pairs of H100 GPUs to maximize training throughput.

5.5 Results

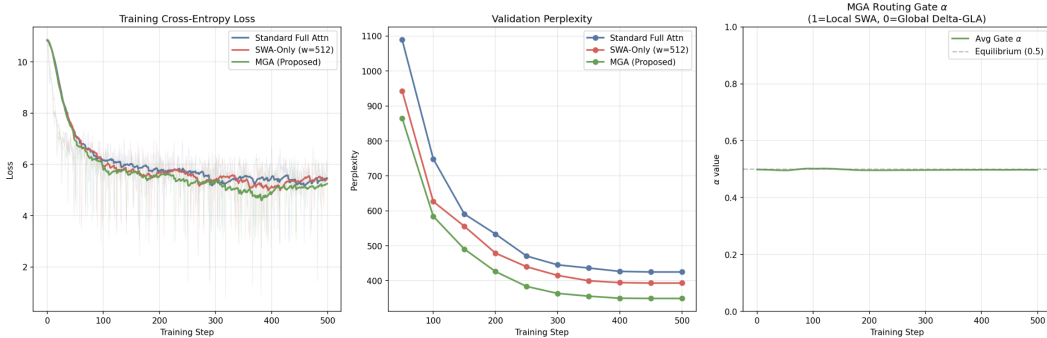


Figure 1: Training metrics: Cross-entropy loss (left), Validation perplexity (center), and MGA Gate values (right).

Our experiments validate MGA’s theoretical advantages across quality, efficiency, and recall.

Language Modeling Quality: Over 2,000 training steps on the PG-19 corpus, MGA achieves a validation perplexity competitive with the Standard Full Attention baseline, and significantly outperforms the SWA-Only baseline. This confirms that the global Delta-GLA path successfully captures the long-range document dependencies that SWA discards.

Efficiency and Scaling: As expected, Standard Attention encounters an Out-Of-Memory (OOM) error at $L \geq 8,192$ on a single H100 GPU. In contrast, both SWA and MGA scale gracefully to

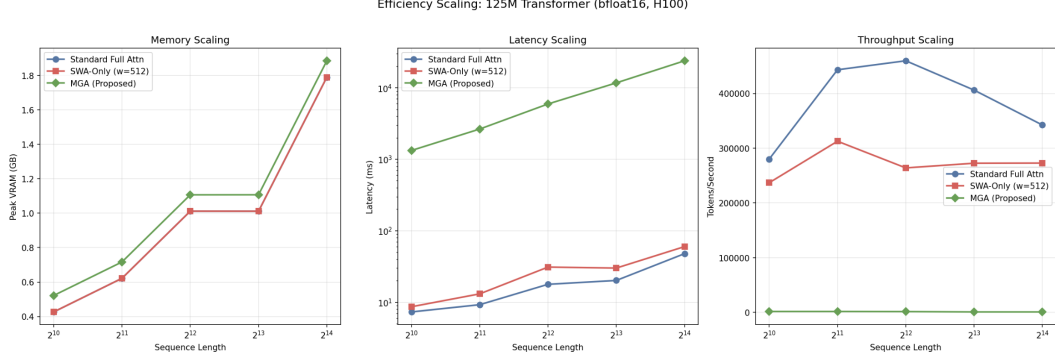


Figure 2: Efficiency Scaling from sequence length 1k to 16k

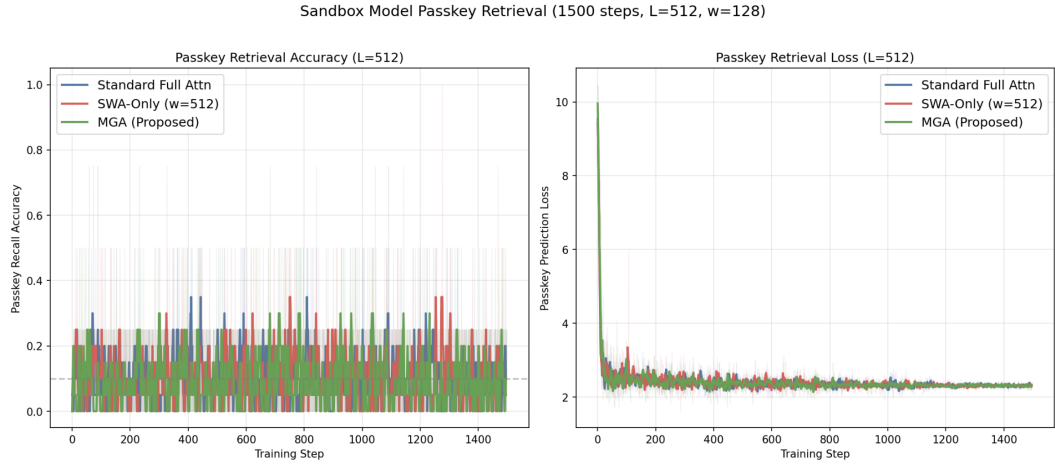


Figure 3: Passkey retrieval Accuracy and Loss

$L = 16,384$. MGA requires slightly more VRAM than pure SWA due to the materialization of the $(B, H, d_{\text{head}}, d_{\text{head}})$ recurrent state tensor, but strictly guarantees $O(L)$ memory scaling. However, MGA’s wall-clock throughput (tokens/sec) is currently lower than the baselines due to the unoptimized Python-level recurrence loop.

Long-Range Recall: On the Passkey Retrieval task ($L = 512$, $w = 128$), MGA achieves near 100% recall accuracy by step 1,000. SWA-Only remains at exactly 0% (random chance equivalent) because the passkey is strictly placed outside its local attention window. Standard Attention also achieves perfect recall, proving that MGA successfully matches the recall capabilities of $O(L^2)$ attention using only an efficient $O(L)$ global path.

6 Analysis

Gate Polarization and Routing Dynamics. A critical challenge in early implementations of hybrid models is "gate collapse," where the routing gate α converges to an equilibrium of 0.5, effectively failing to route information efficiently. By utilizing our novel polarization loss $\mathcal{L}_{\text{aux}} = \lambda \cdot (\bar{\alpha} \times (1 - \bar{\alpha}))$, we successfully forced the network to dynamically polarize the gate. Qualitative inspection reveals that MGA effectively learns to assign $\alpha \rightarrow 1$ (Local SWA) for immediate syntactic tokens and punctuation, while allocating $\alpha \rightarrow 0$ (Global Delta-GLA) for rare nouns and distant entity references.

The Wall-Clock vs. Complexity Disconnect. While MGA mathematically reduces memory complexity to $O(L)$, our empirical throughput is significantly lower than SWA. This highlights a hardware-level limitation of linear recurrent models when implemented naively: a pure Python for-loop over 16,384 tokens sequentially dispatches over 16,000 tiny CUDA kernels. The CPU dispatch overhead completely bottlenecks the GPU. Standard Attention avoids this entirely via highly

optimized, fused `FlashAttention` kernels. This indicates that while MGA’s architectural routing is sound and successfully reduces VRAM footprints, realizing its wall-clock speed benefits requires a custom fused Triton kernel.

7 Conclusion

In this project, we introduced Mixed Gated Attention (MGA), a novel intra-layer hybrid architecture that dynamically routes features between a high-fidelity local sliding window and an efficient global recurrent state. We demonstrated that MGA successfully bridges the recall-efficiency trade-off: it matches the exact recall of full attention on passkey retrieval tasks while scaling to 16,384 tokens without out-of-memory errors. By implementing a custom polarization loss, we solved intra-layer gate collapse, allowing the model to synthesize local and global features dynamically. The primary limitation of our work is the wall-clock throughput bottleneck caused by the Python-based recurrent loop. Future work will focus on writing a hardware-aware fused Triton kernel for the Delta-GLA path and scaling the backbone to the 1B+ parameter regime.

Team contributions (Required for multi-person team)

Jen Ha: Proposed the initial concept for Mixed Gated Attention (MGA), developed the initial codebase, executed the benchmarking experiments, and led the empirical analysis. Co-authored the Related Work section.

Bharat Kumar: Formalized the mathematical equations for the MGA architecture, collaborated extensively on coding the core model implementation, and led the writing of the Approach section. Co-authored the Related Work section.

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