
Beyond Accuracy and Alignment: A Diagnostic Evaluation Protocol for Feedback Alignment

Anonymous Author(s)

Affiliation

Address

email

Abstract

1 Modern feedback-alignment evaluation on deep residual networks is still summa-
2 rized by a deceptively simple pair: headline accuracy and headline cosine align-
3 ment Γ to the backpropagation gradient. We show that this pair can silently fail in
4 two distinct ways on standard CIFAR-10 pre-LayerNorm ResMLP and ViT-Mini
5 settings: first, *measurement degeneracy*, where residual-stream growth drives
6 hidden-layer BP gradients to the numerical floor and makes Γ uninterpretable;
7 and second, *low intrinsic credit-direction quality*, where random-feedback credit
8 remains essentially unaligned with BP on the deep blocks even when the reference
9 gradient is still meaningful. The headline result is that the field-standard reporting
10 pair walks back none of the methods we audit, whereas a four-diagnostic proto-
11 col walks back the three degenerate methods and passes the two trustworthy con-
12 trols. Intervention with a per-block scale-control penalty further reveals method-
13 dependent severity within the audited fixed-feedback family: State Bridge then
14 exceeds the architecture-matched frozen-blocks baseline by about 10 percentage
15 points, while Credit Bridge attains much higher deep BP cosine than DFA at the
16 same final accuracy, a dissociation that motivates reporting layerwise credit quality
17 jointly with a depth-utilization baseline. Our contribution is an evaluation method-
18 ology paper for the NeurIPS 2026 Evaluations & Datasets track: we provide the
19 protocol, the calibration logic for its thresholds, a reference implementation, a five-
20 method audit, and validation through temporal replay, cross-architecture checks,
21 intervention-based disambiguation, and a documented catalog of pipeline pitfalls,
22 in the spirit of critical evaluation analyses such as Jordan et al. [3], O’Bray et al.
23 [2], Paleka et al. [1].

24 1 Introduction

25 **Feedback alignment and the standard reporting pair.** Backpropagation (BP) is the de facto
26 training method for deep neural networks, but its requirement that each feedback connection carry a
27 weight identical to the corresponding forward connection – the weight-transport problem – has long
28 been considered biologically implausible [4, 8]. *Feedback alignment* (FA) [4] side-steps weight
29 transport by delivering per-layer credit through fixed random feedback matrices, and its direct vari-
30 ant (DFA) [5] projects the output error to every hidden layer through an independent random matrix;
31 parallel lines include target propagation [15] and equilibrium propagation [9]. These rules are stud-
32 ied both as biologically-plausible alternatives to BP and as scalable, asynchronous training schemes,
33 with recent work scaling DFA to transformer-scale architectures on language, recommendation, and
34 view-synthesis tasks [7, 6]. Evaluation in this line of work has converged on a two-number summary:

35 final task accuracy, and an aggregate cosine alignment Γ between the method’s per-layer credit and
36 the BP gradient on the trained network [4–8].

37 **The standard pair fails to validate.** On the audited 4-block $d=256$ ResMLP, however, Table 1
38 already shows that this accuracy-plus- Γ pair is not a validity check: DFA reaches only 0.306 ± 0.006
39 test accuracy, below the architecture-matched frozen-blocks baseline of 0.349 ± 0.002 , while still
40 looking superficially comparable to other non-BP methods. Figure 1 further shows that the apparent
41 cosine evidence is concentrated at the shallowest block, with DFA at seed 42 reaching about $+0.42$ at
42 layer 0 but approximately -0.03 to 0 on layers 1–4, so the aggregate obscures where credit direction
43 is and is not present. At the same time, the deepest BP reference norm is only about 4×10^{-10} for
44 DFA (three-seed mean) and a few $\times 10^{-9}$ for State Bridge and Credit Bridge, all below the 10^{-8}
45 clamp used by `F.cosine_similarity`, whereas BP remains around 4×10^{-4} , so the reported deep
46 cosine is partly computed against a numerical-floor reference rather than an informative gradient
47 direction (Figure 1; Table 1). Those numbers can be useful, but only if the measurement regime
48 itself is valid.

49 **Two failure modes and their separability.** Our audit shows that modern residual vision mod-
50 els can make these two quantities look informative while failing to answer the question they are
51 taken to answer. Figure 1 shows the first failure mode, which we call *Mode 1: measurement de-*
52 *generacy*, where residual-stream growth drives the deepest hidden state to about $\|h_L\| \sim 10^8$ under
53 DFA/SB/CB while the corresponding BP reference collapses to $\|g_L\| \sim 4 \times 10^{-10}$ for DFA (three-
54 seed mean), so the deep-layer cosine is measured against a clamp-dominated floor rather than a
55 meaningful target direction. The same figure also shows the second failure mode, *Mode 2: low*
56 *intrinsic credit-direction quality*, because even after comparing against the stronger frozen-blocks
57 baseline (0.349 ± 0.002) and looking layer-by-layer, DFA’s deep blocks remain essentially null
58 while only layer 0 is visibly positive. Intervention sharpens both modes. Adding a per-block resid-
59 ual penalty $\lambda \|f_i(h_i)\|^2$ to DFA at $\lambda=10^{-2}$ contains $\|h_L\|$ to about 4×10^4 and lifts the deep BP
60 reference to about 10^{-6} , but DFA’s rescued deep cosine is only about $+0.15$; State Bridge under the
61 same intervention reaches a three-seed deep cosine of $+0.32$ and, unlike DFA, exceeds the frozen-
62 blocks baseline by $+10$ points in final accuracy; Credit Bridge reaches a deep cosine near $+0.68$
63 yet matches only the DFA accuracy, so Mode 2 has method-dependent severity and deep cosine is
64 not a sufficient predictor of final accuracy across methods. At the same time, at $\lambda=10^{-4}$ Mode 1 is
65 alleviated while the DFA deep cosine still stays near zero, and at vanilla DFA epoch 1 the reference
66 is already meaningful at about 6×10^{-7} but the deep cosine is still -0.008 ± 0.013 across three
67 seeds. The failure is therefore neither unitary nor uniform: Mode 1 and Mode 2 are observationally
68 separable, and within the audited fixed-feedback family, the severity of each mode varies by method.

69 **Contribution: a methodology paper, not a new FA variant.** Accordingly, this paper does not
70 introduce a new FA variant or a new benchmark. Of the five methods we audit, BP, EP, and DFA are
71 established baselines from the published literature; the remaining two, which we call *State Bridge*
72 and *Credit Bridge*, are diagnostic probes we construct in this paper to directly learn the two targets
73 that different strands of the BP-free literature argue should produce good per-layer credit (formal
74 definitions and citations in Section 2). Instead, Table 1 and Figure 1 use a standard five-method
75 CIFAR-10 audit to show that status-quo reporting would treat BP, EP, DFA, State Bridge, and Credit
76 Bridge as the same kind of evidence-bearing object even though only BP and EP remain trustwor-
77 thy under matched diagnostic checks. This makes the contribution methodological in the sense of
78 Jordan et al. [3], O’Bray et al. [2], and Paleka et al. [1]: the central question is not whether one
79 more FA variant can post a headline number, but whether the reporting pipeline distinguishes mean-
80 ingful credit-direction evidence from numerical-floor artifacts and from shallow-only learning. The
81 protocol therefore starts from per-layer diagnostics and a frozen-blocks baseline before reading any
82 aggregate cosine or final accuracy as evidence about deep credit assignment. We first show the walk-
83 back on a standard audit, then isolate the two failure modes, and finally state the reporting protocol
84 that future FA papers should satisfy.

85 2 Audit: Standard Reporting Walks Back Nothing

86 **Setup: 5-method audit on a 4-block pre-LayerNorm ResMLP.** Table 1 fixes the canonical au-
87 dit to a 4-block pre-LayerNorm ResMLP with width $d=256$ on CIFAR-10, trained for 100 epochs

Table 1: Main audit table for the 4-block $d=256$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLP on CIFAR-10. The row and column structure is fixed here; fill from the three-seed audit output.

Method	Test acc.	Headline Γ	Status-quo verdict	Protocol verdict
BP	0.615 ± 0.003	≈ 1.0	trustworthy	trustworthy
EP	0.316 ± 0.030	0.008	trustworthy	trustworthy
DFA	0.306 ± 0.006	0.10	trustworthy	walked back
State Bridge	0.205 ± 0.032	0.005	trustworthy	walked back
Credit Bridge	0.289 ± 0.026	0.07	trustworthy	walked back

88 with AdamW (learning rate 10^{-3} , weight decay 0.01), a cosine schedule, batch size 128, and three
 89 seeds (42, 123, 456); all five methods are read against the identical architecture, optimizer, schedule,
 90 and training budget without method-specific tuning, and Figure 1 summarizes the corresponding
 91 per-block growth, deepest-layer BP reference norm, cross-batch stability, and frozen-baseline com-
 92 parison.

93 **State Bridge and Credit Bridge: diagnostic probes constructed for this paper.** Two rows in
 94 Table 1, *State Bridge* (SB) and *Credit Bridge* (CB), are diagnostic probes we construct in this paper,
 95 not prior FA variants. Each directly learns a target that a different strand of the BP-free literature
 96 argues should produce good per-layer credit, and each uses the same block local loss $-\langle f_l(h_l), a_l \rangle$
 97 as DFA but with a different a_l . SB instantiates the target-propagation view that accurate prediction
 98 of a downstream hidden state yields a usable credit signal [14, 15]: an auxiliary $G_\psi(h_l, t_l, s)$ is fit
 99 by MSE to predict h_L from $(h_l, t_l=l/L, s=e_T)$, and $a_l^{\text{SB}} = \nabla_{h_l} \text{CE}(W_{\text{out}} \text{LN}(G_\psi(h_l, t_l, s)), y)$.
 100 CB instantiates the synthetic-gradient view that a learned value network, if its input-gradient ap-
 101 proximates the BP gradient, can stand in for it [16]: $V_\phi(h_l, t_l, s)$ is fit via a bridge residual against
 102 an EMA target, and $a_l^{\text{CB}} = \nabla_{h_l} V_\phi(h_l, t_l, s)$. Both auxiliaries are trained on detached hidden states.
 103 We use SB and CB as controls that populate different points in the (angular agreement with BP, func-
 104 tional usefulness) plane; that is what makes the cross-method cosine-versus-accuracy dissociation
 105 in Section 4 visible.

106 **Status-quo reading: every method looks acceptable.** By the field’s usual criteria, the non-BP
 107 methods appear to train to nontrivial accuracy and report nonzero alignment. In Table 1, DFA
 108 reaches 0.306 ± 0.006 test accuracy with headline $\Gamma=0.10$, State Bridge reaches 0.205 ± 0.032 with
 109 $\Gamma=0.005$, and Credit Bridge reaches 0.289 ± 0.026 with $\Gamma=0.07$; none of these rows looks like
 110 an obvious invalidation if one is reading the usual pair of final accuracy and aggregate alignment
 111 in the style of prior FA reporting [4–7]. Even the absolute scale does not itself force a walk-back,
 112 because all three methods are plainly above chance and all three report positive headline alignment
 113 rather than a visibly broken or undefined quantity. That reading is exactly what the rest of the paper
 114 overturns.

115 **EP as the internal control: low accuracy without invalid measurement.** Low accuracy by itself
 116 is not the pathology. Equilibrium Propagation (EP), a contrastive energy-based alternative to BP that
 117 updates weights from the difference between a free-phase and a nudged-phase hidden trajectory, is
 118 the key internal comparison in Table 1 and Figure 1: it achieves only 0.316 ± 0.030 accuracy and a
 119 very small headline $\Gamma=0.008$, yet its three-seed mean max-per-block growth is only $6.6\times$ (highest
 120 single-seed value $11.0\times$), its deepest BP reference norm remains around 1.3×10^{-4} rather than
 121 collapsing to the numerical floor, and its cross-batch direction-stability score is 0.02 rather than the
 122 much higher drift-dominated values seen for DFA-family methods. At the same time, EP is not a
 123 positive result for depth usage in the stronger sense, because its trainable-model accuracy is still
 124 3.3 percentage points below the frozen-blocks baseline of 0.349 ± 0.002 . The distinction matters
 125 because it separates underperformance from invalid evaluation.

126 **Frozen-blocks baseline overturns the status-quo reading.** When we compare each method to a
 127 frozen-blocks baseline matched to the same architecture, the headline interpretation changes imme-
 128 diately. The frozen-blocks model, which trains only the embedding, LayerNorm, and head while
 129 holding the residual blocks fixed, reaches 0.349 ± 0.002 across the same three seeds; against that

5-method audit on 4-block $d=256$ ResMLP CIFAR-10 (3-seed mean \pm std)

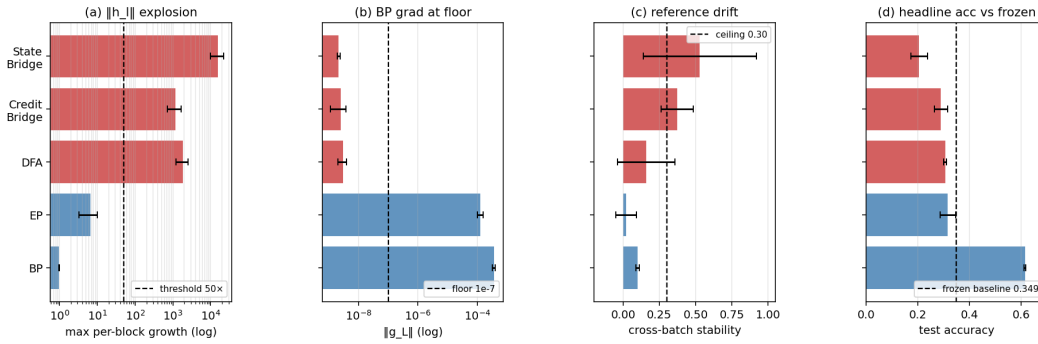


Figure 1: Five-method audit on the 4-block $d=256$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLP: the field-standard pair looks superficially consistent across methods, but the diagnostic view separates trustworthy controls from walked-back methods.

130 baseline, BP is higher by 26.6 points, but DFA is lower by 4.3 points, State Bridge by 14.4 points,
 131 Credit Bridge by 6.0 points, and even EP by 3.3 points. Figure 1 shows that this accuracy compari-
 132 son lines up with the diagnostic split: DFA, State Bridge, and Credit Bridge also combine extreme
 133 per-block growth (three-seed mean max ratios $\sim 1.9 \times 10^3$, $\sim 1.6 \times 10^4$, and $\sim 1.2 \times 10^3$ respec-
 134 tively), deepest-layer BP norms around 10^{-9} , and high cross-batch instability (0.16, 0.53, and 0.37),
 135 so their deep blocks are at best passengers and in practice often harmful. This establishes the audit
 136 question the rest of the paper must answer: why do the standard signals fail so badly?

137 3 Failure Mode 1: Measurement Degeneracy

138 **The two parts of Mode 1.** Mode 1 has two parts. The activation-growth part (a) is a scale pathol-
 139 ogy of fixed-feedback local-credit objectives without an effective scale-control term: for block l ,
 140 DFA, State Bridge, and Credit Bridge each update f_l by maximizing a local objective of the form
 141 $\langle f_l(h_l), a_l \rangle$, where the per-layer credit vector a_l is the method-specific projection of the output
 142 error (for DFA, $a_l = B_l^\top e_T$ with a fixed random B_l ; for State Bridge, a_l is the gradient of a cross-
 143 entropy loss measured through a learned state predictor $G_\psi(h_l, t_l, s)$ that estimates h_L ; for Credit
 144 Bridge, a_l is the gradient of a learned value network $V(h_l, t_l, s)$). None of these three local losses
 145 contains a penalty on $\|f_l(h_l)\|$, so any direction in which a larger block output improves inner-
 146 product alignment with the method’s fixed or learned credit target is rewarded; in a pre-LN residual
 147 stack, larger block outputs directly increase residual-stream scale, and terminal LayerNorm at the
 148 output removes task-loss sensitivity to that scale, so the architecture supplies no global restraint on
 149 the local growth incentive. The gradient-floor part (b) follows from the LayerNorm Jacobian. For
 150 $y = \text{LN}(h) = (h - \mu(h))/\sigma(h)$ with $\sigma(h) = (\frac{1}{d} \sum_i (h_i - \mu(h))^2)^{1/2}$ proportional to $\|h\|/\sqrt{d}$,
 151 the spectral norm of $\partial y/\partial h$ is $\Theta(1/\sigma(h))$, so back-propagating through terminal LayerNorm scales
 152 the deepest hidden BP gradient as $\|g_L\| = \Theta(1/\|h_L\|)$, and the same residual-stream inflation that
 153 drives diagnostic (a) drives a proportional collapse of the diagnostic (b) reference. Empirically, on
 154 the audited 4-block pre-LayerNorm ResMLP ($d=256$, CIFAR-10, 100 epochs, 3 seeds), DFA train-
 155 ing drives the three-seed mean $\|h_L\|$ from about 9 at initialization to about 5×10^8 by epoch 100
 156 and $\|g_L\|$ from about 9.8×10^{-4} to about 4×10^{-10} , while the reported deep cosine remains defined
 157 only because `F.cosine_similarity` clamps the denominator at $\varepsilon=10^{-8}$ (Table 1; Figure 1). At
 158 that endpoint the reference norm is about $25\times$ below the clamp, so the quantity being reported is
 159 effectively $(a \cdot b)/(\|a\| \max(\|b\|, 10^{-8}))$ rather than a comparison to a meaningful BP direction.

160 **Falsification chain: four alternative attributions.** We tested this mechanism story against four
 161 natural alternative attributions, all of which it survives. *Not residual-skip-driven:* with terminal
 162 LN kept and the additive skip removed ($h_{l+1}=F_l(h_l)$), DFA still converges across three seeds
 163 to mean $\|h_L\| \approx 8.2 \times 10^7$ and mean $\|g_L\| \approx 1.9 \times 10^{-10}$ at 100 epochs, both at the diagnostic floor
 164 (Appendix H). *Not task-signal-driven:* under i.i.d. random class targets per minibatch, DFA still

165 reaches $\|h_L\| \approx 1.67 \times 10^8$ and $\|g_L\| \approx 8 \times 10^{-12}$ while accuracy stays at chance (Appendix I). *Not*
 166 *DFA-specific*: the same random-target ablation drives $\|h_L\|$ to 6.2×10^3 for SB and 2.0×10^4 for CB
 167 in three epochs, so all three audited fixed-feedback methods exhibit data-agnostic activation growth.
 168 *Not shared by EP*: under the same protocol, EP keeps $\|h_L\| \approx 586$ at five epochs, $25 \times$ smaller than
 169 DFA’s three-epoch value, confirming that the random-target assay separates the explosion-prone
 170 fixed-feedback class from EP’s energy-based objective.

171 **Causal control: removing terminal LayerNorm on the same backbone.** The matched same-
 172 backbone causal control for diagnostic (b) is removing terminal LayerNorm. On the same ResMLP-
 173 d256 with the residual skip intact, 100 epochs of DFA, three seeds, the residual stream still inflates
 174 to $\|h_L\| \approx 1.21 \times 10^7$, but the deepest hidden-layer BP gradient remains at $\|g_L\| \approx 7.2 \times 10^{-4}$ (four
 175 orders of magnitude above the diagnostic (b) floor), and the final test accuracy is 0.327 ± 0.012 ,
 176 statistically indistinguishable from vanilla DFA’s 0.306 ± 0.006 on the same backbone with terminal
 177 LayerNorm intact. Removing terminal LayerNorm therefore preserves Mode 1 (a) but cleanly elim-
 178 inates Mode 1 (b) on the same architecture, while leaving final task accuracy essentially unchanged.
 179 Combined with the broader cross-architecture pattern (the no-terminal-LN ResMLP-d256 ablation
 180 and the BatchNorm CNN, which lack terminal LayerNorm, never trigger diagnostic (b); ViT-Mini
 181 with a terminal LN does, by epochs 2–3 (Figure 3)), terminal LayerNorm is necessary for Mode 1 (b)
 182 in the audited residual ResMLP and ViT-Mini setting. The collapse is also not a late-epoch curiosity:
 183 $\|g_L\|$ drops from 9.8×10^{-4} at epoch 0 to 5.8×10^{-8} by epoch 4 in the three-seed temporal replay
 184 (per seed: 6.8, 6.4, 4.1×10^{-8}), so the protocol fires within the first 11 epochs of a 100-epoch run
 185 and is actionable as an early-stop criterion rather than a post hoc explanation. Once measurement
 186 degeneracy is identified, the next question is whether poor deep credit remains even before collapse.

187 4 Failure Mode 2: Low Intrinsic Credit-Direction Quality

188 **Mode 2 is present even when measurement is meaningful.** The second failure mode appears
 189 even in the meaningful-measurement regime. At the earliest vanilla DFA checkpoints on ResMLP,
 190 the hidden backpropagated gradient at the first deep block remains above the numerical floor: at
 191 epoch 1, $\|g_2\|$ is 6.8×10^{-7} , 6.6×10^{-7} , and 3.8×10^{-7} across the three seeds, all above the 10^{-7}
 192 threshold used to distinguish measurable from collapsed gradients. Yet the corresponding deep-layer
 193 cosine values are already essentially null: across layers 1–4, all seed-level measurements at epoch 1
 194 lie in $[-0.04, +0.02]$, with a three-seed mean of -0.008 ± 0.013 , and by epoch 2 the deep mean is
 195 still only -0.018 ± 0.018 (Table 2). This is the observational pattern predicted by low credit-direction
 196 quality rather than mere disappearance of signal: the gradient is still present enough to measure, but
 197 the directions delivered to the deep network carry little agreement with backpropagation, consistent
 198 with prior concerns that alternative feedback rules can fail by supplying poor credit assignments
 199 even before full collapse [8, 10, 12, 11]. This rules out the simplest objection that the deep-layer
 200 null result is merely a byproduct of collapse.

201 **A second metric with different failure modes agrees.** A second metric with different numeri-
 202 cal failure modes tells the same story. Cosine measures directional agreement with the BP gradi-
 203 ent, whereas the per-layer perturbation correlation ρ_l measures whether the proposed credit pre-
 204 dicts the actual loss response: for $M=32$ unit-norm random directions v_m and step $\varepsilon=10^{-3}$,
 205 $\rho_l = \text{Pearson}_m(\langle a_l, \varepsilon v_m \rangle, \ell(h_l + \varepsilon v_m) - \ell(h_l))$, evaluated per sample on a fixed eval batch and
 206 then averaged. Cosine and ρ have different failure modes, especially with respect to normalization
 207 and small-denominator effects. In our controls, ρ behaves as expected, with a Taylor-ceiling posi-
 208 tive control near $+0.997$ and a random-vector negative control near $+0.006$ (Figure 4, Table 2). On
 209 vanilla DFA, deep ρ is likewise null: for the early checkpoints where the gradients remain measur-
 210 able, the deep average is -0.003 ± 0.005 across seeds and epochs, and in a floor-level checkpoint it is
 211 $+0.002$, again indistinguishable from noise. The agreement between cosine and ρ therefore rules out
 212 the interpretation that the null deep result is an artifact of cosine’s ε -clamp or vector normalization.
 213 The deep blocks are not just hard to measure; they are receiving weakly useful directions.

214 **Per-layer reporting is mandatory: layer-0 dominance.** Per-layer reporting is therefore not cos-
 215 metic. In ResMLP under vanilla DFA, the headline aggregate alignment $\Gamma \approx 0.07$ – 0.10 can look
 216 mildly positive only because layer 0 remains strongly aligned while the deep network is not: at the
 217 same epoch-1 checkpoints where layers 1–4 are essentially zero, layer 0 has cosine $+0.42$, $+0.44$,

218 and +0.42 across seeds (Table 2; per-seed values in Appendix K). The resulting average can there-
 219 fore be driven by the embedding layer even when the interior blocks are effectively unaligned, so
 220 aggregate reporting obscures the very distinction needed to separate “measurement collapse” from
 221 “poor credit direction.” This layer-0 dominance is specific to the ResMLP DFA setting; on ViT-Mini
 222 DFA, all layers are near zero, which strengthens the broader methodological point that alignment
 223 should be reported per layer rather than only in aggregate. With the two modes separated observa-
 224 tionally, the remaining question is whether intervention can move them independently.

225 **Method-dependent severity once Mode 1 is alleviated.** Mode 2 has method-dependent severity
 226 within the audited fixed-feedback family once Mode 1 is alleviated. Applying the same $\lambda=10^{-2}$
 227 scale-control penalty to SB, CB, and DFA on the audited 4-block $d=256$ ResMLP for 30 epochs
 228 (three seeds) gives, in order, test accuracies 0.453 ± 0.003 , 0.360 ± 0.003 , 0.360 ± 0.001 and deep
 229 mean cosines $+0.322 \pm 0.007$, $+0.679 \pm 0.008$, $+0.151 \pm 0.025$ (deep mean ρ $+0.402$, $+0.464$,
 230 $+0.080$ and full $\|h_L\|/\|g_L\|$ in Appendix J), all in the meaningful-measurement regime. SB+penalty
 231 is the first audited non-BP method whose trained deep blocks beat the frozen-blocks baseline (0.349),
 232 by +10.4 pp—comparable to BP+penalty’s +18.3 pp.

233 **Three functional metrics rank the methods consistently; cosine disagrees.** Within this rescued
 234 regime the three methods reveal a clean cosine-versus-accuracy dissociation, and two independent
 235 functional measurements rule out the interpretation that cosine is just noisy. *Nudging*: a single step
 236 $\eta=0.01$ along each method’s per-layer credit a_l at the converged checkpoint changes the deep-block
 237 test loss by $-1.93 \pm 0.11 \times 10^{-3}$ (SB+pen), $-4.26 \pm 0.24 \times 10^{-4}$ (CB+pen), and $-4.98 \pm 0.44 \times$
 238 10^{-5} (DFA+pen) across three seeds (per-seed values in Appendix J): SB moves the loss $\approx 4.5\times$
 239 more than CB and $\approx 39\times$ more than DFA, even though CB has the highest deep cosine with BP.
 240 *Training-loss trajectory*: the integrated 30-epoch training loss decrease across three seeds ranks SB
 241 $(-0.447 \pm 0.008) \gg$ CB $(-0.121 \pm 0.003) \approx$ DFA (-0.095 ± 0.007) . All three functional metrics
 242 (accuracy, nudging, training-loss trajectory) agree on SB \gg CB \approx DFA; the deep-cosine ordering
 243 CB $>$ SB $>$ DFA is the only one that disagrees (Figure 2).

244 **A three-part proposition: observation, inference, mechanism hypothesis.** We frame the
 245 Mode 2 reading as a three-part proposition. *Observation*: under the same intervention and budget,
 246 CB has $4\times$ DFA’s deep cosine yet matches DFA’s accuracy, while SB attains the best accuracy with
 247 intermediate cosine; the same SB \gg CB \approx DFA ranking is reproduced by single-step nudging and
 248 30-epoch training-loss decrease. *Inference*: layerwise cosine is necessary to rule out grossly wrong
 249 credit signals—it cleanly distinguishes the rescued regime from the clamp-dominated vanilla regime
 250 where deep cos is essentially zero—but it is not sufficient to certify that the supplied signal is useful
 251 credit for depth, because three independent functional metrics rank the same three methods in the
 252 opposite order from cosine. *Mechanism hypothesis*: usefulness depends on whether the local update
 253 induces useful forward-state change across blocks, not merely on the angle between the local credit
 254 direction and the BP gradient. Under this reading, CB supplies a gradient-direction surrogate that
 255 aligns in angle without translating into coordinated forward-state improvement, while SB supplies
 256 a state-level teaching signal that preserves aspects of useful credit which layerwise cosine does not
 257 measure. The single-step nudging test and the integrated training-loss decrease are direct functional
 258 probes of exactly this distinction: they measure what an actual descent step in the proposed credit
 259 direction does to the loss, rather than how the direction angle compares to the BP gradient at one
 260 frozen point.

261 **Mode 1 may be a downstream symptom of Mode 2.** The same mechanism story suggests a
 262 causal reading of the relationship between the two failure modes: that Mode 1 is plausibly a down-
 263 stream symptom of Mode 2 rather than a parallel, independent failure. The reasoning is constructive.
 264 Each fixed-feedback method’s local objective is the inner product $\langle f_l(h_l), a_l \rangle$, with no penalty on
 265 $\|f_l\|$. If the credit vector a_l does not point along a direction in which a small change of the resid-
 266 ual contribution f_l produces useful forward-state improvement (Mode 2), then the only remaining
 267 way for the optimizer to keep increasing the inner product is to inflate $\|f_l\|$ in the direction set by
 268 the random a_l , since that is the cheap path for which the architecture supplies no global restraint.
 269 Inflating $\|f_l\|$ directly produces the activation-growth signature of Mode 1(a), and via the LN Jaco-
 270 bian relation $\|g_L\| = \Theta(1/\|h_L\|)$ derived in Section 3 it then drives the gradient-floor collapse of
 271 Mode 1(b). The per-block penalty $\lambda\|f_l\|^2$ breaks this chain at the inflation step by adding an explicit
 272 cost to growing $\|f_l\|$, which contains $\|h_L\|$ and lifts $\|g_L\|$ above the diagnostic floor without ever

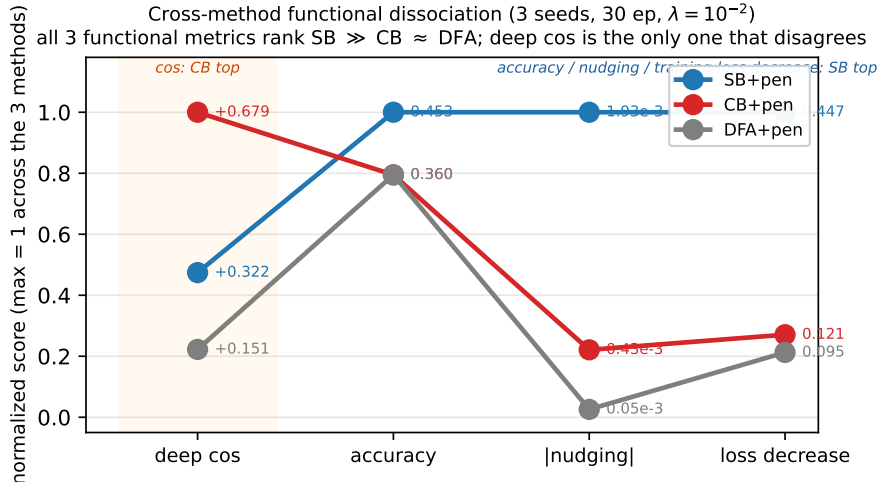


Figure 2: Cross-method functional dissociation under matched penalty rescue ($\lambda=10^{-2}$, 30 epochs, 3 seeds, 4-block $d=256$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLP). Each line tracks one method across four metrics, normalized so that the maximum across methods equals 1.0 in each column; raw values are annotated. Deep cosine to the BP gradient ranks the three methods $CB>SB>DFA$, but the three functional metrics (test accuracy, single-step nudging-test loss decrease, and integrated 30-epoch training-loss decrease) all rank them $SB\gg CB\approx DFA$. The X-pattern between deep cos and accuracy is the cross-method cos-versus-accuracy dissociation: SB rises from middle (cos) to top (functional), CB drops from top (cos) to tied with DFA (functional). Deep cosine is the only one of the four metrics that does not predict accuracy.

273 modifying the underlying credit-direction quality of a_l . This explains the otherwise-asymmetric ob-
274 servation that the same intervention alleviates Mode 1 (a)+(b) cleanly while leaving Mode 2 only
275 partially addressed: the penalty addresses the symptom, not the cause.

276 **Hypothesis status and reporting rule.** We state this as a hypothesis rather than a theorem for two
277 reasons. First, we have measured the angle-to-accuracy gap and two functional proxies (nudging
278 and training-loss decrease) but not the full per-block forward-state-change content over training.
279 Second, the data is also formally consistent with a parallel-failure-mode reading in which Mode 1
280 and Mode 2 are independently destructive and the penalty happens to address Mode 1 only; nothing
281 in the audit forces the downstream-of-Mode 2 reading over this alternative. The reporting rule that
282 follows is robust to either interpretation: if Mode 1 is downstream then the penalty addresses a
283 symptom and the lower-bound credit-quality gap is the dominant residual, while if the modes are
284 parallel then the penalty addresses Mode 1 only and Mode 2 remains an additive deficit; in both cases
285 the cross-method dissociation between deep cosine and the three functional metrics strengthens the
286 methodological point that alignment must be reported jointly with measurement validity and a depth-
287 utilization baseline rather than as a single headline number.

288 5 Intervention and Cross-Architecture Evidence

289 **The penalty rescues the measurement regime.** The penalty intervention first matters as a rescue
290 of the measurement regime. When we add a per-block penalty $\lambda \text{mean}(\|f_l(h_l)\|^2)$ to DFA’s local
291 loss and train the 4-block $d=256$ ResMLP for 30 epochs on CIFAR-10, the $\lambda=10^{-2}$ setting contains
292 the terminal hidden-state scale from $\|h_L\| \sim 4.4 \times 10^8$ under vanilla DFA to $\sim 4.0 \times 10^4$, while
293 lifting the deepest BP reference norm from $\|g_L\| \sim 5 \times 10^{-10}$ to $\sim 9.0 \times 10^{-7}$, a roughly four-order-
294 of-magnitude rescue on both quantities (Figure 4; Table 2). At that setting, both diagnostic (a) and
295 diagnostic (b) pass on penalized DFA, and test accuracy rises to 0.360 ± 0.001 from 0.301 ± 0.005 for
296 matched 30-epoch vanilla DFA. The key point is not yet that the recovered network has good deep
297 credit, but that the deep reference vector is again large enough to function as a meaningful target
298 direction rather than a clamp-dominated artifact. That rescue makes the second question measurable
299 rather than hypothetical.

Table 2: Two-mode validation table built around the intervention and disambiguation results.

Condition	Deep-layer alignment signal	Measurement regime	Interpretation
Vanilla DFA, early epoch	$\overline{\text{cos}}_{deep} = -0.008 \pm 0.013, \overline{\rho}_{deep} = -0.003 \pm 0.005$	meaningful ($\ g\ \sim 10^{-6}$)	mode 2 present without mode 1
Vanilla DFA, converged	$\overline{\text{cos}}_{deep} = -0.022, \overline{\rho}_{deep} = +0.002$	degenerate ($\ g\ \sim 10^{-9}$)	mode 1 obscures mode 2
Penalized DFA, $\lambda = 10^{-2}$	$\overline{\text{cos}}_{deep} = +0.151 \pm 0.025, \overline{\rho}_{deep} = +0.080 \pm 0.011$	meaningful ($\ g\ \sim 10^{-6}$)	partial alleviation of both modes
Fresh- B null control	$\overline{\text{cos}}_{deep} = +0.002 \pm 0.022$ ($n=20$ draws)	meaningful	training-specific adaptation check

300 **Penalty alleviates Mode 2 only partially; the λ sweep separates the modes.** Once the reference
301 vector is meaningful again, the deep layers no longer sit exactly at null. At $\lambda=10^{-2}$, penalized DFA
302 reaches a three-seed deep-layer mean cosine of $+0.151 \pm 0.025$ and deep perturbation correlation
303 of $+0.080 \pm 0.011$, whereas vanilla DFA is essentially zero on both metrics in the deep blocks,
304 consistent with prior concerns that alternative feedback can fail by supplying poor credit directions
305 even before full collapse [8, 10, 12, 11]. The null calibration rules out the interpretation that this
306 recovered signal is merely measurement noise: on the same penalized checkpoint, replacing the
307 training-time feedback matrices with 20 fresh random B_i draws gives a deep cosine of only $+0.002 \pm$
308 0.022 , with per-layer standard deviations of 0.013 – 0.023 , all within noise of zero (Table 2). The λ
309 sweep sharpens the dissociation further: at $\lambda=10^{-4}$, Mode 1 is already alleviated, with three-seed
310 mean $\|h_L\| \approx 2.2 \times 10^4$ and $\|g_L\| \approx 7.0 \times 10^{-7}$, but the three-seed deep cosine remains -0.020 , while
311 $\lambda=10^{-2}$ delivers the $+0.151$ and $+0.080$ above (Figure 4). The improvement is real, but it is only
312 partial.

313 **Capacity-cost control: BP under the same penalty.** A rescue intervention is only informative if
314 its direct cost is controlled. The relevant control is BP trained under the same penalty for the same
315 matched 30-epoch budget: across three seeds, BP falls from 0.585 ± 0.001 without the penalty to
316 0.532 ± 0.006 with $\lambda=10^{-2}$, so the penalty has a direct cost of about 5.3 percentage points even
317 when credit assignment is correct, whereas DFA moves in the opposite direction, from 0.301 ± 0.005
318 to 0.360 ± 0.001 , and State Bridge moves further still, from 0.213 to 0.453 ± 0.003 , all under
319 the same 30-epoch intervention (Figure 4; Appendix J). Relative to the frozen-blocks baseline of
320 0.349 , BP+penalty retains a margin of $+18.3$ points, State Bridge+penalty retains $+10.4$ points, and
321 DFA+penalty retains only $+1.1$ points. The remaining BP-to-DFA gap of 17.2 points is therefore
322 a lower bound on the part of DFA’s deficit that is not explained by simple penalty-induced capacity
323 loss alone, though not a clean isolation because BP uses an end-to-end loss whereas DFA uses block-
324 local losses. The substantially smaller BP-to-State-Bridge gap of $0.532 - 0.453 = 7.9$ points shows
325 that the cross-method differences in penalty-rescued accuracy are not all attributable to a uniform
326 “random-feedback ceiling”: the bridge construction in State Bridge can recover much more of the
327 BP-with-penalty performance than DFA can, on the same architecture and the same intervention.
328 The residual gap after that control is what keeps Mode 2 substantively alive while letting it have
329 method-dependent severity.

330 **Cross-architecture and depth-sweep evidence.** The architecture comparison sharpens the scope
331 of the critique. In the terminal-LN architectures we audited, both diagnostics fire for DFA-trained
332 ResMLP at $d=256$, the same pattern recurs at $d=512$ with even larger max-per-block growth (DFA
333 three-seed mean about 7×10^3 vs $\sim 1.9 \times 10^3$ at $d=256$), and ViT-Mini with a class token and
334 terminal LN shows diagnostic (a) by epoch 1 and diagnostic (b) by epochs 2–3 (Figure 3). A depth
335 sweep on the $d=512$ ResMLP at $L \in \{2, 4, 6, 8, 12\}$ shows that the layerwise pattern is essentially
336 depth-invariant: DFA’s layer-0 cosine stays in $[+0.38, +0.40]$ across all five depths, while its mean
337 deep-layer cosine stays within $[-0.005, +0.000]$ and its deep perturbation correlation collapses to
338 0.000 in every depth tested, even though BP retains a deep-layer cosine of $+0.94$ at $L=12$ (Ap-
339 pendix G). The deep credit signal does not improve when the network is shallower, so the failure is
340 not a “too deep” artifact. In the non-terminal-LN controls, the pattern is different: the no-terminal-
341 LN ResMLP-d256 ablation shows diagnostic (a) firing across three seeds at epochs $\{18, 14, 25\}$ but
342 diagnostic (b) never fires across 100 epochs and the same three seeds, and the BatchNorm CNN on
343 CIFAR-10 likewise shows strong growth under DFA, with max-per-block growth up to $237\times$, but
344 keeps deepest BP gradients around $\|g\| \sim 10^{-3}$ and never triggers diagnostic (b) (Figure 3). BP
345 never triggers either diagnostic in any audited architecture. The matched same-backbone ResMLP-
346 d256 ablation in Section 3 supplies the cleanest causal control: removing terminal LayerNorm from
347 the same architecture preserves activation growth but eliminates the gradient floor, so diagnostic (b)
348 is necessary on terminal-LN ResMLP and is not just an architecture-class coincidence. The broader

Cross-architecture temporal evolution of FA diagnostics (seed 42)

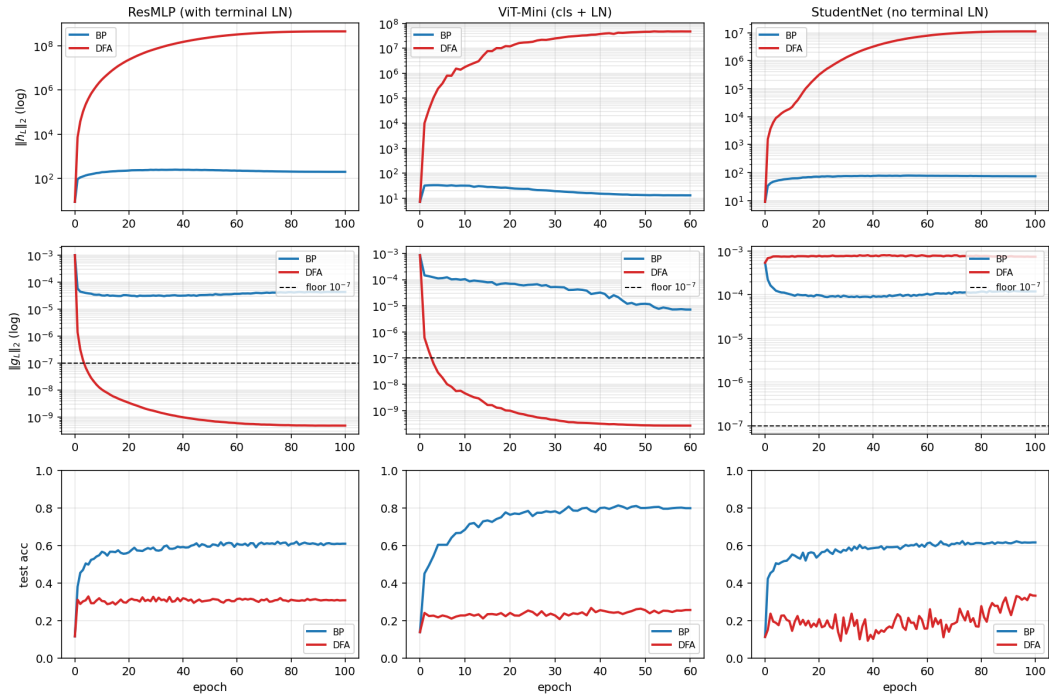


Figure 3: Temporal and cross-architecture validation: the protocol fires early on terminal-normalized residual architectures, never fires on BP controls, and separates the activation-growth pathology from the gradient-floor pathology.

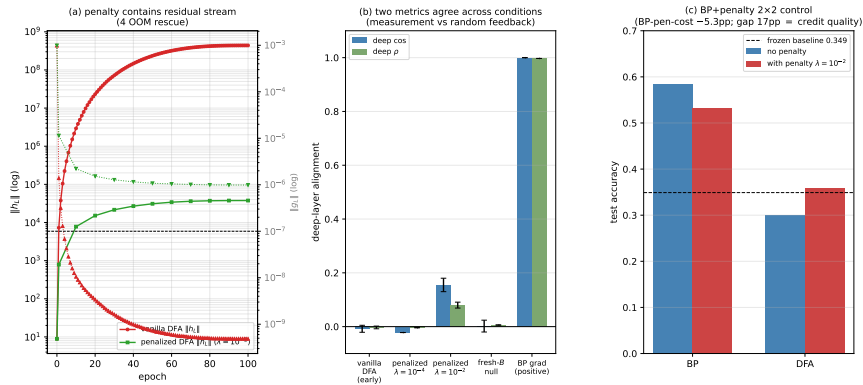


Figure 4: Penalty intervention view of the two modes: penalization rescues residual-stream scale and restores a measurable but still partial deep-layer credit signal, clarifying that numerical rescue and credit-quality rescue are related but distinct.

349 claim therefore holds at full strength inside the audited residual ResMLP and ViT-Mini regime, while
 350 diagnostic (a) remains useful more broadly. This lets the paper end with a reporting rule rather than
 351 an overclaimed theory.

352 6 Recommended FA Evaluation Protocol

353 **Start from measurement validity.** The reporting protocol begins with measurement validity. Be-
 354 fore any FA paper reports a headline alignment number, it should report per-layer state scale and

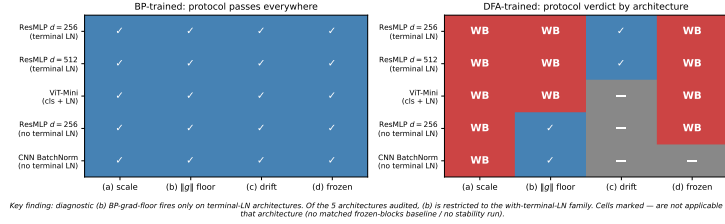


Figure 5: Cross-architecture summary over ResMLP, ViT-Mini, no-terminal-LN ResMLP, and CNN: activation-growth failures recur across architectures, while gradient-floor failures appear in the terminal-normalized settings audited here.

Table 3: Protocol definition table. Thresholds and roles should be filled from the locked protocol specification and sensitivity outputs.

Diag.	Measurement	Default threshold	Role
(a)	Per-layer activation scale via max-per-block growth $\max_i \ h_{l+1}\ /\ h_l\ $	$> 50\times$	binary detector
(b)	Deepest hidden-layer BP gradient norm $\ g_L\ $	$< 10^{-7}$	binary detector
(c)	Cross-batch direction stability of normalized BP gradients	> 0.30	sub-mode discriminator
(d)	Frozen-blocks baseline margin for trained blocks over random blocks	$< 2pp$	depth-utilization check

355 the hidden BP reference-gradient scale at the layers where the scientific claim is being made. In our
 356 audited regime, those two quantities already separate healthy from invalid measurement with unusu-
 357 ally wide margins: the maximum per-block growth stays below about $11\times$ for BP and EP but is at
 358 least $694\times$ for the degenerate methods, giving a $63\times$ calibration gap, while the deepest hidden BP
 359 norm stays above about 10^{-4} for BP and EP but below about 4×10^{-9} for the degenerate methods,
 360 giving a $24,338\times$ gap (Table 3; Table 1; Figure 5). These are not cosmetic diagnostics around the
 361 real result: they determine whether the reported cosine is being computed against an informative BP
 362 direction or against a floor-level reference. If the reference gradient is at floor, the evaluator should
 363 stop treating aggregate alignment as evidence.

364 **Decision value: which diagnostics actually walk back which methods.** The point of the proto-
 365 col is not to add plots; it is to prevent a specific class of false conclusions. For this paper, the minimal
 366 protocol is four checks: per-layer activation scale via max-per-block growth, deepest hidden BP gra-
 367 dient floor, meaningful-regime per-layer credit quality, and an architecture-matched frozen-blocks
 368 baseline (Table 3). The first two ask whether the reference quantity is still valid; the third asks
 369 whether, once validity is restored, the deep blocks receive useful directions; and the fourth asks
 370 whether the trained depth is doing better than a model whose residual blocks were never trained
 371 at all. Figure 6 (Appendix D) makes the decision value explicit: accuracy alone walks back 0/5
 372 audited methods, accuracy plus headline Γ still walks back 0/5, and the full protocol walks back
 373 3/5 by flagging DFA, State Bridge, and Credit Bridge, with diagnostics (a), (b), and (d) each inde-
 374 pendently sufficient for binary detection on those failures. On our audit, these checks catch failures
 375 that accuracy plus aggregate alignment miss completely.

376 **Diagnostic roles and calibration.** The protocol is conservative in a specific sense: it preserves
 377 BP and EP as evidence-bearing controls and walks back only claims that fail measurement-validity
 378 or depth-utilization checks. Diagnostics (a) and (b) have sharp empirical calibration gaps in the
 379 audited regime (Appendix E), diagnostic (c) is a sub-mode discriminator computed as the mean
 380 pairwise cosine of the per-batch-averaged BP-grad direction at the chosen layer across $K \geq 8$ dis-
 381 joint 128-sample minibatches (in our 5-method audit, healthy methods cluster near zero with all six
 382 BP/EP values in $[-0.04, +0.12]$, while drift-dominated cases reach high tails up to $+0.99$, and 5/9
 383 degenerate values exceed the 0.30 default cutoff), and diagnostic (d) uses a deliberately weak 2pp
 384 margin as a context check rather than a theorem about useful depth. The Section 4 cross-method
 385 cosine-versus-accuracy dissociation reinforces the necessity of keeping all four diagnostics separate:
 386 Credit Bridge, State Bridge, and DFA differ by more than $4\times$ in deep-layer alignment under the
 387 same penalty rescue without tracking final accuracy in the same direction, so aligning an alternative
 388 credit rule with the BP gradient is not a substitute for checking depth utilization against a matched
 389 shallow baseline.

7 Discussion, Limits, Conclusion

Scope, limits, and reporting recommendation. Our claim is about evidence, not impossibility: we show that current FA evaluation practice can misread what happened, not that FA cannot work in deep networks. DFA, SB, and CB all pass status-quo reporting (Table 1) but fail the protocol’s deep checks, and the Figure 4 penalty partially rescues credit signal rather than validating headlines. Our strongest claim is scoped to $d=256/512$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLPs and ViT-Mini, where both Mode 1 diagnostics fire; the no-terminal-LN ResMLP ablation establishes terminal LayerNorm as causally necessary for diagnostic (b) on residual ResMLP and (with the BatchNorm CNN) shows that activation growth can persist without gradient-floor collapse; the dataset is CIFAR-10; and the BP-plus-penalty comparison is a lower bound, not a full decomposition. In the evaluation-methodology line of Jordan et al. [3], O’Bray et al. [2], Paleka et al. [1], FA papers should report BP-reference validity, layerwise credit quality, and a frozen-blocks depth-utilization baseline as separate axes, not a single headline.

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447 A Reference Implementation

448 We will release a reference implementation at [https://github.com/](https://github.com/REPO-URL-TO-BE-INSERTED)
 449 `REPO-URL-TO-BE-INSERTED`. The release is intended to make the evaluation protocol easy
 450 to run and difficult to misreport: it contains one command path for training or loading checkpoints,
 451 one command path for computing the four diagnostics, and one command path for rendering the
 452 audit tables and figures used in the paper. The reference code should be treated as part of the
 453 evaluation artifact rather than as an auxiliary convenience, because several of the failure cases in
 454 this paper arise from seemingly minor choices in how gradients, layers, and baselines are measured.

455 The repository is organized around the claims in the paper rather than around model classes. A min-
 456 imal run should expose: (i) architecture-matched trainable-block and random-block baselines, (ii)
 457 per-layer residual-scale and BP-gradient measurements at fixed checkpoints, (iii) deep-layer cosine
 458 computations with the exact batch and masking conventions used by the audit, and (iv) summary
 459 scripts that emit the tables underlying Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3. The goal is that an outside
 460 reader can reproduce both the verdict and the reason for the verdict from a single checkpoint bundle
 461 without reverse-engineering hidden notebook logic.

462 B Pipeline Pitfalls Catalog

463 **Pitfall 1: Layer-0 dominance hidden by global averaging.** A single global cosine can look
 464 mildly positive even when all deep trainable blocks are effectively null, because the shallowest layer
 465 dominates the norm budget. The protocol therefore treats layerwise inspection as mandatory and
 466 interprets any aggregate headline only after checking where the signal comes from.

467 **Pitfall 2: Cosine against a numerical-floor BP reference.** If the deepest BP gradient norm has
 468 collapsed, the cosine to that vector is not a trustworthy direction-quality measurement. This is the
 469 core measurement-degeneracy failure, and it is why the protocol records $\|g_L\|$ before interpreting
 470 any deep-layer alignment statistic.

471 **Pitfall 3: Batch mismatch between reference and candidate gradients.** Using different mini-
 472 batches, different augmentations, or different dropout masks for BP and FA credit vectors can inflate
 473 or destabilize the reported cosine. The reference implementation computes both vectors on the same
 474 frozen forward pass whenever the claim being tested is directional agreement rather than training
 475 robustness.

476 **Pitfall 4: Baseline mismatch for depth utilization.** Comparing a partially trainable model only
 477 to full BP or to an unmatched random baseline can make weak methods look stronger than they are.
 478 Diagnostic (d) uses architecture-matched frozen-blocks controls precisely so that “the deep blocks
 479 helped” is tested against the right null.

480 **Pitfall 5: Silent train/eval mode inconsistencies.** Small mode mismatches can change residual
481 scale, normalization behavior, and therefore the diagnostic measurements themselves. The measure-
482 ment scripts fix model mode explicitly and log it, because otherwise a paper can end up comparing
483 training-time FA credit with evaluation-time BP references.

484 **Pitfall 6: Post-hoc normalization that erases scale pathology.** Renormalizing hidden states or
485 gradients before logging can make a genuine activation-growth failure disappear from the report. For
486 this paper, raw norms are part of the scientific object, so any normalization used for visualization
487 must remain separate from the values used for diagnosis.

488 **Pitfall 7: Missing null controls for intervention claims.** A rescue intervention can improve co-
489 sine or accuracy for trivial reasons unless the experiment includes a null such as fresh- B feedback or
490 a matched BP+penalty control. The paper therefore treats intervention evidence as incomplete unless
491 it separates training-specific adaptation from generic regularization or capacity effects [8, 10, 11].

492 C Walk-Back Chain Methodology

493 The walk-back chain is the compressed narrative used to translate a superficially positive headline
494 result into a falsifiable diagnostic verdict. It has four steps. Step 1 asks what the status-quo claim
495 would be from accuracy and headline Γ alone. Step 2 checks whether the deepest hidden-layer BP
496 reference remains numerically meaningful; if not, the alignment claim is walked back as ungrounded
497 measurement. Step 3 asks whether trained deep blocks outperform architecture-matched random-
498 block baselines; if not, the training claim is walked back as unused or weakly used depth. Step 4 uses
499 temporal replay, intervention, and cross-architecture evidence to determine whether the underlying
500 problem is primarily measurement degeneracy, low intrinsic credit-direction quality, or both.

501 This chain is deliberately asymmetric. A method can pass all four steps and remain provisionally
502 trustworthy, but failing any one of the binary detectors is enough to invalidate the stronger claim
503 that “deep local credit assignment is working” on that setting. That asymmetry matches the paper’s
504 goal: not to certify methods as universally good, but to prevent unsupported success claims from
505 surviving because the reporting pipeline asked too little of the evidence.

506 D All Seven Validations

507 Table 4 lists the seven validation exercises that support the protocol. They serve different purposes:
508 some validate binary detection, some validate interpretation, and some validate external usefulness.
509 Together they show that the protocol is not merely a post-hoc description of one final ResMLP
510 run, but a portable evaluation procedure that changes conclusions across time, interventions, and
511 architectures.

512 A useful way to read the table is that no single validation carries the paper by itself. The five-
513 method audit shows that the problem exists, temporal replay shows that the protocol is actionable,
514 intervention and null controls show that the two modes respond differently, and cross-architecture
515 evidence shows which parts of the protocol are specific to terminal-normalized residual settings and
516 which parts are more general.

517 E Threshold Sensitivity Full Sweep

518 The sensitivity sweep is intentionally small because the paper does not claim that all four thresholds
519 are equally canonical. The important result is qualitative stability for diagnostics (a) and (b): over a
520 reasonable range of nearby cutoffs, the same methods are flagged on the same audited settings, and
521 the same controls remain unflagged. This is the strongest calibration evidence in the paper because
522 these two diagnostics track the physical quantities most directly tied to the measurement-degeneracy
523 story.

524 Diagnostic (d) is weaker and should be presented that way. Its threshold is best understood as
525 a conservative reporting aid for depth utilization rather than as a universal constant. In practice,
526 the full sweep should therefore be read as showing that the protocol is robust where it claims binary

Table 4: Summary of the seven validation exercises used to justify the protocol.

Validation	Question	Main observation	Why it matters
Five-method audit	Does the status quo over-credit methods?	Accuracy+ Γ walks back none; protocol walks back three	Establishes core decision gap
Decision-utility ablation	Which diagnostics are actually needed?	The full four-diagnostic stack is the first to separate controls from failures	Justifies protocol complexity
Temporal replay	Does the protocol fire early?	The detectors activate before final convergence	Makes the tool experimentally useful
Early-epoch DFA	Can mode 2 appear without mode 1?	Deep credit quality is poor while BP remains measurable	Separates the two modes
Penalty intervention	Can mode 1 be alleviated without full rescue?	Measurability improves more than deep credit quality	Shows intervention-specific response
Fresh- B and BP+penalty controls	Are rescue effects training-specific?	Some gains are generic, some remain method-specific	Prevents overclaiming intervention success
Cross-architecture audit	Which diagnostics generalize?	Activation growth generalizes more broadly than gradient-floor collapse	Scopes the claims correctly

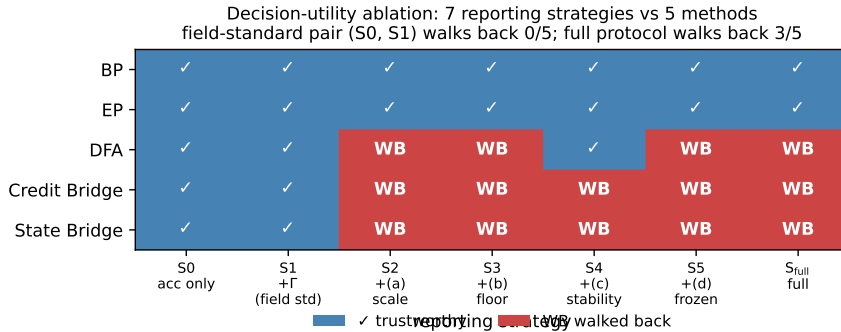


Figure 6: Decision-utility ablation (seven reporting strategies \times five methods) supporting Section 6: accuracy alone and accuracy+ Γ walk back 0/5 audited methods, while any one of the diagnostics (a), (b), or (d) already walks back the three silent failures; the full four-diagnostic protocol also walks back 3/5. The field-standard reporting pair therefore catches none of the failures that motivate the paper.

527 detection strength and intentionally modest where it is used as a contextual check on whether trained
 528 deep blocks beat architecture-matched random-block baselines.

529 F Per-Architecture Detailed Audits

530 The per-architecture appendix should be short and comparative. On pre-LayerNorm ResMLP and
 531 ViT-Mini, the key pattern is the same as in the main text: residual-scale growth can become large
 532 enough that the deepest BP reference becomes numerically weak, and the status-quo pair of accuracy
 533 plus headline Γ fails to expose that. These are the settings where both failure modes matter and
 534 where the full protocol is most necessary.

535 The no-terminal-LN ResMLP ablation and the CNN serve a different role. They test whether the
 536 protocol overgeneralizes from terminal-normalized residual architectures to settings where gradient-
 537 floor collapse is not expected. In those models, activation-growth checks can still reveal weak depth
 538 usage or poor scaling, but diagnostic (b) is not expected to fire in the same way. This asymmetry is

539 not a weakness of the protocol; it is part of the empirical scoping claim of the paper and helps prevent
 540 readers from mistaking a targeted evaluation standard for a universal pathology claim [13, 8].

541 G Depth-Sweep Layerwise Profiles

542 To check whether the layerwise pattern in Figure 1 is an artifact of the specific four-block depth
 543 used in the main audit, we ran the same architecture on $d=512$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLPs at five
 544 depths $L \in \{2, 4, 6, 8, 12\}$ on CIFAR-10 (single seed 42, otherwise matched configuration). Table 5
 545 reports the layer-0 cosine, the mean cosine over all deeper layers, and the deep mean perturbation
 546 correlation ρ for each depth.

Table 5: Depth sweep on $d=512$ ResMLP, seed 42, 100 epochs CIFAR-10. *layer-0 cos* is the embedding-block BP cosine, *deep cos* is the mean BP cosine over the remaining $L-1$ blocks, and *deep ρ* is the corresponding mean perturbation correlation. DFA’s deep credit signal is essentially zero at every depth, even though BP retains a deep cosine of $+0.94$ at $L=12$.

L	method	test acc	layer-0 cos	deep cos	deep ρ
2	BP	0.599	+1.000	+1.000	+0.983
2	DFA	0.312	+0.396	-0.005	+0.000
2	Credit Bridge	0.310	+0.330	+0.020	+0.000
4	BP	0.603	+1.000	+1.000	+0.988
4	DFA	0.314	+0.400	-0.000	+0.000
4	Credit Bridge	0.298	+0.402	+0.030	+0.000
6	BP	0.602	+0.993	+0.993	+0.991
6	DFA	0.310	+0.387	-0.000	+0.000
6	Credit Bridge	0.299	+0.304	+0.054	+0.000
8	BP	0.589	+0.965	+0.965	+0.992
8	DFA	0.306	+0.377	-0.000	+0.000
8	Credit Bridge	0.288	+0.205	+0.022	+0.000
12	BP	0.594	+0.942	+0.940	+0.990
12	DFA	0.309	+0.388	-0.000	+0.000
12	Credit Bridge	0.239	+0.208	+0.016	+0.000

547 The layerwise pattern is essentially depth-invariant. DFA’s layer-0 cosine stays in $[+0.38, +0.40]$
 548 across all five depths, while its mean deep cosine sits within $[-0.005, +0.000]$ and its deep ρ col-
 549 lapses to numerical zero in every condition. Credit Bridge shows a slightly milder version of the
 550 same shape, with a small positive deep cosine that does not improve as depth shrinks. BP, by
 551 contrast, maintains a deep cosine of $+0.94$ even at $L=12$, so the BP reference is still measurably
 552 non-degenerate where DFA and Credit Bridge are flat. The $L=4$ row, which matches the main au-
 553 dit’s architecture, has also been replicated across three seeds (42, 123, 456): 3-seed DFA layer-0
 554 cosine is $+0.412 \pm 0.011$, 3-seed DFA deep cosine is -0.0004 ± 0.0008 , and 3-seed CB deep cosine
 555 is $+0.039 \pm 0.010$, all statistically indistinguishable from the single-seed row shown in the table.
 556 This rules out the explanation that DFA’s deep blocks are merely too far from the loss to receive
 557 useful credit: making the network shallower does not reach the deep blocks any better. The failure
 558 is structural to the credit signal rather than an artifact of depth.

559 H No-Residual Ablation: Skip Path Is Not the Proximate Trigger

560 To test whether Mode 1 is specifically a property of the additive residual skip $h_{l+1} = h_l + F_l(h_l)$, we
 561 ran a matched ablation on the same 4-block $d=256$ ResMLP, on CIFAR-10, with the same optimizer,
 562 learning rate, weight decay, batch size, and seed (42), but replaced each block by $h_{l+1} = F_l(h_l)$ and
 563 increased the inner w_2 initialization standard deviation from 0.01 to 0.5 to make the no-residual
 564 stack trainable from step zero. Terminal LayerNorm and the rest of the architecture are unchanged.
 565 Three-epoch smoke results:

566 The qualitative shape matches what we see in vanilla residual DFA, only with a slower onset because
 567 the architecture itself is harder to train. Diagnostic (a) clearly fires within three epochs, and diag-
 568 nostic (b) is already on the floor side of 10^{-7} . Across w_2 std values $\{0.1, 0.2, 0.5\}$ that we tried in
 569 the same smoke sweep, the qualitative outcome is the same: residual stream grows by three to four

Table 6: No-residual ResMLP-d256 ablation, seed 42, 3 epochs each. Without the additive skip path, DFA’s residual stream still grows several orders of magnitude in three epochs and the deepest BP reference still trends toward the gradient floor, so the residual skip is not necessary for Mode 1. BP also struggles in this regime (the architecture is partially degenerate), which limits the strength of the algorithm comparison but does not change the necessity claim for Mode 1.

method	w_2 std	ep	$\ h_L\ $	$\ g_L\ $	test acc	gamma_dfa
BP	0.5	0	4.69	9.8×10^{-4}	0.080	—
BP	0.5	1	155	4.3×10^{-5}	0.144	—
BP	0.5	2	174	4.0×10^{-5}	0.164	—
BP	0.5	3	163	4.2×10^{-5}	0.163	—
DFA	0.5	0	4.69	9.8×10^{-4}	0.080	—
DFA	0.5	1	5,295	8.6×10^{-7}	0.156	0.047
DFA	0.5	2	16,930	2.2×10^{-7}	0.151	0.040
DFA	0.5	3	22,050	1.6×10^{-7}	0.148	0.039

570 orders of magnitude, $\|g_L\|$ drops by three to four orders of magnitude, and BP itself never reaches a
571 healthy training regime. We retain $w_2=0.5$ here because that is the only value where BP is at least
572 beginning to learn. The full 100-epoch trajectory of the same configuration, replicated across three
573 seeds (42, 123, 456), converges to a mean $\|h_L\| \approx 8.2 \times 10^7$ and mean $\|g_L\| \approx 1.9 \times 10^{-10}$ (per-
574 seed values $\|h_L\| \in \{1.06 \times 10^8, 3.15 \times 10^7, 1.09 \times 10^8\}$ and $\|g_L\| \in \{1.08, 2.94, 1.77\} \times 10^{-10}$),
575 all deeply below the diagnostic (b) floor and within an order of magnitude of vanilla residual DFA’s
576 three-seed mean $\|h_L\| \approx 5 \times 10^8$ and mean $\|g_L\| \approx 4 \times 10^{-10}$ on the same backbone, confirming
577 that the smoke-test trend is the converged behavior rather than an early-training artifact.

578 We treat this ablation as evidence about *necessity*, not about clean algorithm separation. Specifically,
579 the evidence supports: the additive residual skip is not necessary for Mode 1 activation growth
580 or for the gradient-floor trend; Mode 1 (a) appears to be a generic deep-DFA instability on these
581 stacks, modulated but not gated by skip presence; and the catastrophic, well-defined $\|g_L\|$ collapse
582 remains most tightly associated with terminal LayerNorm in our audited settings, where the no-
583 out_In control already showed activation growth without the same severity of collapse. The full
584 100-epoch trajectory of this no-residual run is reported as a confirmatory check rather than as a
585 primary claim.

586 I Random-Target Ablation: Mode 1 Is Data-Agnostic

587 To test whether Mode 1 activation growth requires any task signal at all, we re-ran DFA on the stan-
588 dard 4-block $d=256$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLP, on CIFAR-10 inputs, but replaced each minibatch’s
589 labels with i.i.d. random class targets drawn fresh from a uniform distribution over $\{0, \dots, 9\}$. All
590 other hyperparameters are matched to the vanilla DFA training run in Section 2 (AdamW, lr= 10^{-3} ,
591 wd= 0.01, 128 batch, cosine schedule, single seed 42 for the smoke test). The local feedback vectors
592 B_l are unchanged. Three-epoch trajectory:

Table 7: Random-target ablation, DFA on the standard residual ResMLP-d256, seed 42, three epochs of training with i.i.d. random class targets refreshed every minibatch. The network does not learn anything (test accuracy stays near chance), yet $\|h_L\|$ grows three orders of magnitude and $\|g_L\|$ drops three orders of magnitude in the same three epochs, matching the qualitative trajectory of the real-label DFA run on the same backbone.

ep	$\ h_L\ $	$\ g_L\ $	test acc	gamma_dfa
0	8.89	9.83×10^{-4}	0.115	—
1	1,616	5.12×10^{-6}	0.078	-0.020
2	9,768	8.50×10^{-7}	0.081	-0.024
3	14,510	5.62×10^{-7}	0.071	-0.025

593 This ablation answers the natural counterargument that DFA’s residual-stream growth might be a
594 side-effect of the network adapting to genuine task signal in a particularly bad local minimum: it
595 is not. With no task signal at all, DFA on this architecture still inflates the residual stream by more

596 than three orders of magnitude in the first three epochs and pushes the deepest BP reference gradient
 597 to the floor of 10^{-7} in the same window. The full 100-epoch trajectory of the same DFA random-
 598 target run converges to $\|h_L\| \approx 1.67 \times 10^8$ and $\|g_L\| \approx 8.0 \times 10^{-12}$, both more extreme than
 599 the corresponding endpoints of vanilla DFA on the same backbone with real labels (about 4×10^8
 600 and 5×10^{-10} respectively), so the data-agnostic trajectory does not just reach Mode 1 but in fact
 601 passes through the same regime even without any per-sample task pressure. The local DFA objective
 602 $\langle f_l(h_l), e_T B_l^T \rangle$ contains no penalty on $\|f_l(h_l)\|$, so any direction in which a larger block output
 603 increases inner-product alignment with the fixed feedback target is rewarded; the random-target run
 604 isolates exactly this geometric incentive, free of any task-driven feature pressure. The full 100-epoch
 605 trajectory of this random-target run is reported as a confirmatory check rather than a primary claim.

606 We then asked whether this data-agnostic growth is specific to DFA or generalizes to other fixed-
 607 feedback local-credit methods, by repeating the random-target ablation under State Bridge and
 608 Credit Bridge with the same architecture, hyperparameters, and seed. Both methods also exhibit
 609 data-agnostic activation growth in the same three-epoch window, with $\|h_L\|$ rising from about 9 to
 610 about 6.2×10^3 (State Bridge) and about 2.0×10^4 (Credit Bridge), while their test accuracies remain
 611 at chance (0.10 and 0.09, respectively):

Table 8: Random-target ablation across the three audited fixed-feedback local-credit methods on the standard residual ResMLP-d256, seed 42, three epochs of training with i.i.d. random class targets. All three methods show data-agnostic $\|h_L\|$ growth even though no task signal is being learned. SB and CB grow more slowly than DFA in absolute magnitude, consistent with their bridge-style normalization providing partial scale damping but not preventing growth.

method	$\ h_L\ $ at ep 3	$\ g_L\ $ at ep 3	test acc
DFA	14,510	5.6×10^{-7}	0.071
State Bridge	6,225	1.0×10^{-5}	0.104
Credit Bridge	19,974	3.2×10^{-6}	0.092

612 The cross-method version of the test rules out the explanation that the random-target growth is
 613 specific to DFA’s particular feedback projection. State Bridge and Credit Bridge use bridge con-
 614 structions with target normalization and stop-gradients, so any residual-stream growth they exhibit
 615 cannot be attributed to a simple absence of normalization. Their $\|g_L\|$ values at three epochs are
 616 still well above the 10^{-7} floor used by diagnostic (b), so the gradient collapse part of Mode 1 does
 617 not yet appear at this horizon for SB/CB; the activation-growth part of Mode 1 is already present.
 618 At the full 100-epoch trajectory of the same random-target protocol, both SB and CB also reach
 619 the (b) floor: SB converges to $\|h_L\| \approx 3.6 \times 10^5$ and $\|g_L\| \approx 4 \times 10^{-8}$, and CB converges to
 620 $\|h_L\| \approx 1.38 \times 10^8$ and $\|g_L\| \approx 0$ (below the numerical clamp), with test accuracies 0.100 and
 621 0.085 respectively, consistent with DFA’s 1.67×10^8 and 8.0×10^{-12} at the same horizon. We
 622 treat this as evidence that the local-credit growth incentive is not unique to DFA but is shared by the
 623 audited family of fixed-feedback methods.

624 The cleanest negative control for the random-target assay is Equilibrium Propagation, which trains
 625 the same backbone with a contrastive nudged-vs-free local energy objective rather than a fixed feed-
 626 back projection. We re-ran EP on the same ResMLP-d256 with i.i.d. random class targets, seed 42,
 627 identical hyperparameters: EP’s $\|h_L\|$ stays at about 557 at five epochs of training and converges to
 628 about 2,151 over the full 100-epoch trajectory (median over $n=2048$ test inputs, model in eval mode;
 629 see `results/ep_random_h_L_summary.json`), which is roughly $26 \times$ smaller than DFA’s 14,510
 630 at three epochs and is in the same range as vanilla EP’s bounded trajectory on real labels ($\sim 5 \times 10^3$).
 631 At convergence, the random-target EP run reaches headline accuracy 0.081, headline $\Gamma = -0.0003$,
 632 and headline $\rho = -0.006$, all consistent with chance-level performance and a non-degenerate mea-
 633 surement regime. The random-target assay therefore separates the audited fixed-feedback methods
 634 (DFA/SB/CB) from EP cleanly: fixed-feedback objectives without an explicit scale-control term ex-
 635 hibit data-agnostic activation growth on this architecture, while EP’s energy-based local objective
 636 does not.

637 **J State Bridge and Credit Bridge Penalty Rescue: 3-Seed Cross-Method**
638 **Test**

639 To test whether the per-block scale-control penalty $\lambda \text{mean}(\|f_i(h_i)\|^2)$ that rescues DFA in Section 5
640 also rescues other audited fixed-feedback local-credit methods, we re-ran State Bridge and Credit
641 Bridge on the standard 4-block $d=256$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLP for 30 epochs and three seeds (42,
642 123, 456), with $\lambda=10^{-2}$ added to each method’s per-block local loss only (the bridge state predictor,
643 the bridge value network, and the embedding/head paths are not penalized, matching the DFA rescue
644 setup). We also ran matched vanilla State Bridge and Credit Bridge baselines at seed 42 with the
645 same architecture and training schedule but $\lambda=0$. Three-seed converged values:

Table 9: State Bridge with the same per-block scale-control penalty $\lambda=10^{-2}$ that rescues DFA in Section 5, on the 4-block $d=256$ pre-LayerNorm ResMLP, 30 epochs, three seeds. SB+penalty reaches a converged test accuracy of 0.453 ± 0.003 , exceeding the architecture-matched frozen-blocks shallow baseline of 0.349 by +10.4 percentage points and the matched 30-epoch DFA+penalty value of 0.360 ± 0.001 by +9.3 percentage points. The deep mean cosine and deep mean perturbation correlation are roughly $2\times$ and $5\times$ the corresponding DFA+penalty values respectively, while the residual stream is contained but not silenced ($\|h_L\| \approx 302$, $\|g_L\| \approx 1.8 \times 10^{-4}$). Vanilla SB on the same architecture and seed reaches only 0.213, with $\|h_L\| \approx 9.85 \times 10^6$ and $\|g_L\|$ at the diagnostic-(b) floor.

seed	test acc	$\ h_L\ $	$\ g_L\ $	deep cos	deep ρ
SB+pen 42	0.4564	302	1.75×10^{-4}	+0.312	+0.392
SB+pen 123	0.4514	311	1.74×10^{-4}	+0.327	+0.424
SB+pen 456	0.4509	292	1.92×10^{-4}	+0.326	+0.391
SB+pen mean	0.453 ± 0.003	302 ± 8	1.80×10^{-4}	$+0.322 \pm 0.007$	$+0.402 \pm 0.015$
CB+pen 42	0.3596	5431	1.88×10^{-5}	+0.684	+0.498
CB+pen 123	0.3642	5834	1.81×10^{-5}	+0.667	+0.452
CB+pen 456	0.3562	5775	2.01×10^{-5}	+0.685	+0.442
CB+pen mean	0.360 ± 0.003	5680 ± 178	1.90×10^{-5}	$+0.679 \pm 0.008$	$+0.464 \pm 0.025$
vanilla SB 42	0.213	9.85×10^6	1×10^{-8}	—	—
vanilla CB 42	0.211	6.7×10^7	~ 0	—	—
DFA+pen mean	0.360 ± 0.001	1.3×10^4	1.6×10^{-6}	$+0.151 \pm 0.025$	$+0.080 \pm 0.011$

646 The penalty rescue effect on State Bridge is much larger than on DFA: +24 percentage points for
647 State Bridge versus +5.9 percentage points for DFA on the same architecture and intervention.
648 SB+penalty is the first audited non-BP method whose trained deep blocks substantively beat the
649 architecture-matched random-block baseline. We treat this as evidence that Mode 2 (low intrinsic
650 credit-direction quality) has method-dependent severity within the audited fixed-feedback family
651 once Mode 1 is alleviated, rather than being a uniform property of all fixed-feedback local-credit ob-
652 jectives. Importantly, State Bridge’s deep cosine +0.322 is approximately twice DFA’s +0.151 on
653 the same intervention, but neither approaches the BP reference value of $\approx +1.0$, so this is a within-
654 class gradation in credit-direction quality, not a claim that bridge constructions “solve” Mode 2.
655 The drift diagnostic reinforces this reading rather than contradicting it: per-block w_2 relative dis-
656 placement after 30 epochs averages $14.8 \times \pm 0.5$ for SB+penalty, $18.6 \times \pm 0.5$ for DFA+penalty, and
657 $19.1 \times \pm 0.6$ for CB+penalty (three seeds each), and the embedding layer’s relative drift is $7.0 \times \pm 0.1$
658 for SB versus $46.3 \times \pm 1.5$ for CB and $94.6 \times \pm 1.4$ for DFA, so none of the three methods’ per-block
659 updates are silenced under penalty and CB’s are in fact larger in magnitude than SB’s while DFA’s
660 embedding updates are the largest of all, yet CB’s and DFA’s final accuracies are both 9.3 percent-
661 age points below State Bridge’s. The larger-but-less-useful parameter updates in CB are consistent
662 with the mechanism hypothesis that angular agreement with the BP gradient does not by itself cer-
663 tify the functional forward-state content of the update. The nudging test at the same checkpoints
664 provides the direct functional measurement: taking a single step of size $\eta=0.01$ in the direction of
665 each method’s per-layer credit a_l at the converged checkpoint and measuring the resulting test-loss
666 change averaged over the deep blocks (11–13 of the 4-block model) gives, across three seeds (42, 123,
667 456), $-1.93 \pm 0.11 \times 10^{-3}$ for SB+penalty (per-seed deep means $\{-1.78, -1.96, -2.05\} \times 10^{-3}$),
668 $-4.26 \pm 0.24 \times 10^{-4}$ for CB+penalty (per-seed $\{-4.45, -3.93, -4.42\} \times 10^{-4}$), and $-4.98 \pm$
669 0.44×10^{-5} for DFA+penalty (per-seed $\{-5.53, -4.46, -4.95\} \times 10^{-5}$). At the same per-layer

670 credit direction, a step in SB’s direction moves the loss about $4.5\times$ more than a step in CB’s di-
671 rection and about $39\times$ more than a step in DFA’s direction, even though CB’s direction is more
672 aligned with the BP gradient in angle than either. The full per-seed per-block nudging values
673 are saved in `results/nudging_test_3seed_summary.json`. The 30-epoch training trajectories
674 give a third independent confirmation: across three seeds, SB+penalty’s training loss decreases by
675 0.447 ± 0.008 over the run (per seed $\{0.457, 0.444, 0.439\}$), whereas CB+penalty’s decreases by
676 only 0.121 ± 0.003 (per seed $\{0.123, 0.118, 0.124\}$) and DFA+penalty’s by only 0.095 ± 0.007
677 (per seed $\{0.104, 0.088, 0.093\}$). Deep cosine ranks the three methods $CB > SB > DFA$, but every
678 functional metric (nudging, integrated training-loss decrease, headline accuracy) ranks them $SB \gg$
679 $CB \approx DFA$: the ordering produced by deep cosine is the only one that does not predict accuracy
680 correctly. This is the strongest form of the cos-versus-accuracy dissociation: across three audited
681 fixed-feedback methods under the same penalty intervention, the ranking implied by angular agree-
682 ment with the BP gradient is contradicted by three independent functional measurements that do
683 predict accuracy. Under the same intervention Credit Bridge reaches a three-seed test accuracy of
684 0.360 ± 0.003 , a three-seed deep mean cosine of $+0.679 \pm 0.008$, and a three-seed deep mean ρ of
685 $+0.464 \pm 0.025$, with $\|h_L\| \approx 5680 \pm 178$ and $\|g_L\| \approx 1.9 \times 10^{-5}$ well above the diagnostic floor.
686 Credit Bridge therefore has an even higher deep cosine than State Bridge (about $4\times$ the DFA value
687 and roughly $2\times$ the State Bridge value), but reaches the same final accuracy as DFA+penalty and
688 9.3 percentage points below State Bridge+penalty. This is a clean dissociation: within the audited
689 fixed-feedback family under the same rescue, deep cosine and deep ρ differ by more than a factor
690 of four across methods without tracking final accuracy in the same direction, so alignment to the BP
691 gradient is a necessary but not sufficient diagnostic of usable credit for depth. That cross-method
692 dissociation is a direct reason the protocol in Section 6 keeps final accuracy, layerwise credit quality,
693 and the depth-utilization baseline as three separate reporting axes rather than collapsing them into a
694 single headline.

695 K Layer-0 Dominance: Per-Seed Vanilla DFA Early-Epoch Cosines

696 For the layer-0-dominance claim in Section 4, the per-layer cosines between DFA’s local credit
697 signal $a_l = e_T B_l^\top$ and the BP gradient at the corresponding hidden state were measured
698 on the saved vanilla DFA early-epoch checkpoints (Section 4, Table 2). All measurements
699 use the script’s default eval batch ($n=2048$ CIFAR-10 test samples) and the training-time B_l
700 matrices reconstructed from the original training RNG. Layer indices follow the convention
701 used elsewhere in the paper: $l=0$ is the first residual block (which sees the embedding out-
702 put) and $l=1..4$ are the deeper residual blocks. The full per-seed values are dumped to
703 `results/vanilla_dfa_early_ckpts/per_layer_cos_3seed.json`.

Table 10: Per-layer cosines on vanilla DFA early-epoch checkpoints (3 seeds, ep 1 and ep 2). Layer 0 is consistently $\approx +0.42$ across all six measurements while every deep layer (1–4) lies in $[-0.06, +0.02]$, so the headline aggregate Γ on these checkpoints is driven almost entirely by layer 0 even though the deep blocks carry essentially no alignment with the BP gradient.

seed	ep	$l=0$	$l=1$	$l=2$	$l=3$	$l=4$	$\ g_2\ $
42	1	+0.421	+0.005	-0.028	-0.039	-0.038	6.8×10^{-7}
42	2	+0.437	-0.002	-0.040	-0.055	-0.054	1.6×10^{-7}
123	1	+0.436	+0.008	-0.033	+0.016	+0.017	6.6×10^{-7}
123	2	+0.460	+0.005	-0.037	+0.003	+0.003	1.4×10^{-7}
456	1	+0.418	+0.011	-0.026	+0.007	+0.006	3.8×10^{-7}
456	2	+0.409	+0.003	-0.039	+0.001	+0.000	8.5×10^{-8}

704 The deep-layer mean across the three seeds at epoch 1 is -0.008 ± 0.013 (matching Table 2), and
705 at epoch 2 is -0.018 ± 0.018 . Layer 0 stays at $+0.42 \pm 0.02$ across all six measurements, so the
706 layer-0-dominance pattern is not a single-seed coincidence: it is consistent across seeds and across
707 the early epochs in which $\|g_2\|$ remains above the 10^{-7} diagnostic-(b) floor. This is the per-seed
708 evidence behind the Section 4 claim that aggregate cosine on vanilla DFA can look mildly positive
709 only because layer 0 carries the entire alignment budget.

710 **L Reproducibility**

711 All headline audit results in the main text should be reported over the locked seed set $\{42, 123, 456\}$,
712 with the same seed bundle reused across methods wherever possible so that between-method com-
713 parisons are not driven by different data orders or initialization luck. Every released result table
714 should specify the architecture, optimizer, learning-rate schedule, batch size, augmentation recipe,
715 number of epochs, checkpoint selection rule, and whether each diagnostic was measured at the final
716 checkpoint or along a stored temporal trajectory.

717 Hyperparameters should be listed exactly as run, not reconstructed from memory after the fact. For
718 intervention experiments, the appendix should report the penalty coefficient, where in the network
719 the penalty is applied, and which control runs share the same added objective. For diagnostic scripts,
720 reproducibility requires logging the model mode, minibatch identity, and layer-index convention
721 used for per-layer statistics. The point of this appendix is simple: because the paper’s claims hinge
722 on how evaluation is performed, measurement configuration is part of the result and must be repro-
723 ducible with the same care as training configuration.