What has AlphaFold3 learned about antibody and nanobody docking, and what remains unsolved?

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Abstract

The development of antibody therapeutics is a major focus in healthcare, owing to their high binding affinity and specificity. To accelerate drug development, significant efforts have been directed toward the design and screening of antibodies. For effective *in silico* development, high modeling accuracy is necessary. To probe the improvement and limitations of AlphaFold3 (AF3), we tested the capability of AF3 to capture the fine details and interplay between antibody structure prediction and antigen docking accuracy. AF3 achieves an 8.9% and 13.4% high-accuracy docking success rate for antibodies and nanobodies, respectively, and a median unbound CDR H3 RMSD accuracy of 2.04 Å and 1.14 Å; CDR H3 accuracy also boosts complex prediction accuracy, and antigen context helps improve CDR H3 accuracy for loops that are greater than 15 residues long. However, AF3's 60% failure rate for antibody and nanobody docking (when sampling a single seed) leaves room for improvement to equip antibody design endeavors.

1 Introduction

Antibodies (Abs) play a critical role in the immune system, and the development of antibody and nanobody therapeutics has become a major interest due to their ability to target cancer, autoimmune, cardiovascular, and infectious diseases, their soluble nature, tunable affinity, and high tolerance by the human body Chungyoun and Gray [2023]. The antigen (Ag) binding interface of an antibody (nanobody) is composed of six (three) hypervariable loops, called the complementarity determining region (CDR) loops. The third loop on the heavy chain of the antibody (CDR H3) is particularly diverse and known to have the highest number of contacts with the epitope Liang Zhao et al. [2011]. These CDR loops sometimes undergo conformational changes upon binding to an antigen Chu'nan Liu et al. [2024]. Designing antibodies is challenging, primarily due to potential off-target effects Chames et al. [2009] and the substantial time and resources required for developability testing Chungyoun and Gray [2023]. To address these limitations, significant effort has gone into developing antibody and antibody-antigen complex structure predictors Weitzner et al. [2017] (see Related Work in Appendix 4).

Due to the flexibility and importance of antibody CDR loops, being able to model structural movement and docking is highly valuable. Until AlphaFold3 (AF3), the highest success rate achieved for antibody docking was 43% by AlphaRED Harmalkar et al. [2024], a hybrid model using AlphaFold2-Multimer (AF2-M) predicted complexes and confidence measures with Rosetta-based replica exchange docking. Despite being trained on the same antibody dataset as AF2-M Abramson et al. [2024], Jumper et al. [2021], in May 2024, DeepMind reported a notable 60% success rate for AF3 when 1,000 seeds were sampled.

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To understand the source of improvement and where AF3 still has limitations, here we thoroughly assess AF3's ability to dock antibody-antigen and nanobody-antigen complexes and predict unbound antibody and nanobody structures. To understand the limitations of learning from the limited experimental structures provided in the PDB, we study the interplay of the CDR H3 loop and Ab-Ag docking using structures from a redundancy-filtered bespoke dataset after the 2021 AF3 training cutoff.

2 Experiments

2.1 AF3 outperforms previous state-of-the-art antibody docking methods.

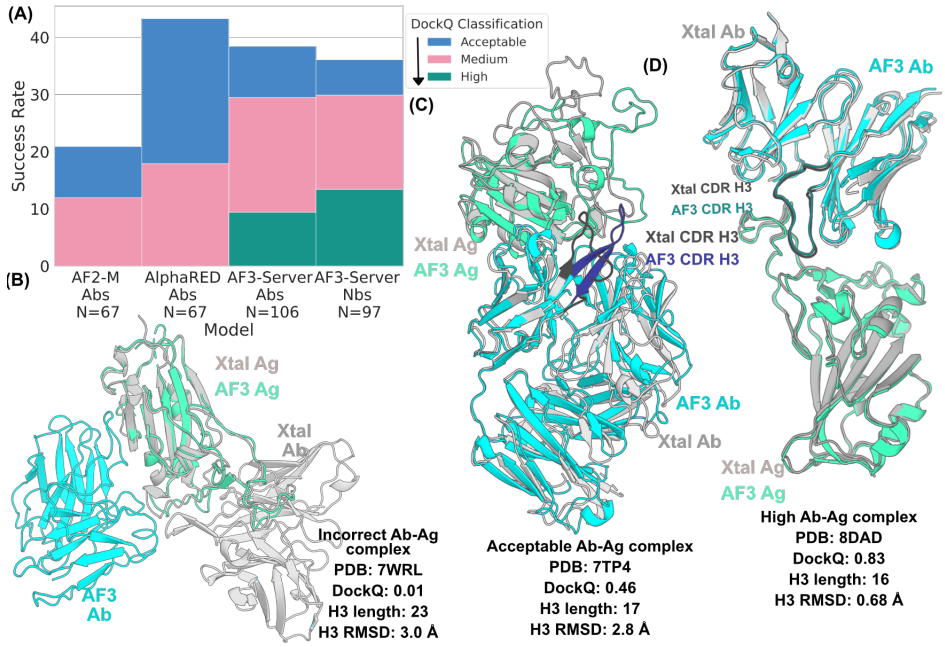

Figure 1: **The success rates in antibody (Ab) and nanobody (Nb) docking for state-of-the-art models. (A)** Performance of AF3 on antibody-antigen docking (N=112) and nanobody-antigen docking (N=97) with our curated dataset against AF2-M and AlphaRED (N=67) using evaluation sets from Harmalkar et al. DockQ scores for the bound antibodies and nanobodies are binned into incorrect, acceptable, medium, and high categories based on CAPRI classifications Collins et al. [2024]. **(B, C, D)** Protein complex structures of example incorrect, acceptable, and high accuracy predictions.

To compare AF3 to previous state-of-the-art models, we first curated a benchmark set of bound and unbound antibodies and nanobodies (Appendix 5). Then we ran three seeds for every target in AF3, choosing the top-ranked decoy in the first seed for comparison consistency to the AlphaRED evaluation set. As seen in Fig. 1, while AlphaRED improves the percent of acceptably docked structures to 43% compared to AF2-M, AF3 improves overall docking quality by increasing the number of high-accuracy structures. AF2-M and AlphaRED both have negligible success rates for high-accuracy docking, while AF3 has a considerably high accuracy success rate of 8.9%, and overall success rate of 38.4% for antibodies. AF3 has a slightly lower success rate (36.1%) for nanobodies and achieves a 13.4% success rate for highly accurate complexes (structures in Fig. 6). We find that CDR H3 length does not affect antibody or nanobody docking accuracy (see Fig. 7).

2.2 Antibody structure prediction and antibody-antigen docking interdependently improve overall complex accuracy.

The antibody maturation process serves to improve binding affinity for an expressed antigen Mishra and Mariuzza [2018] so that an unbound antibodies can target the antigen by complementing the

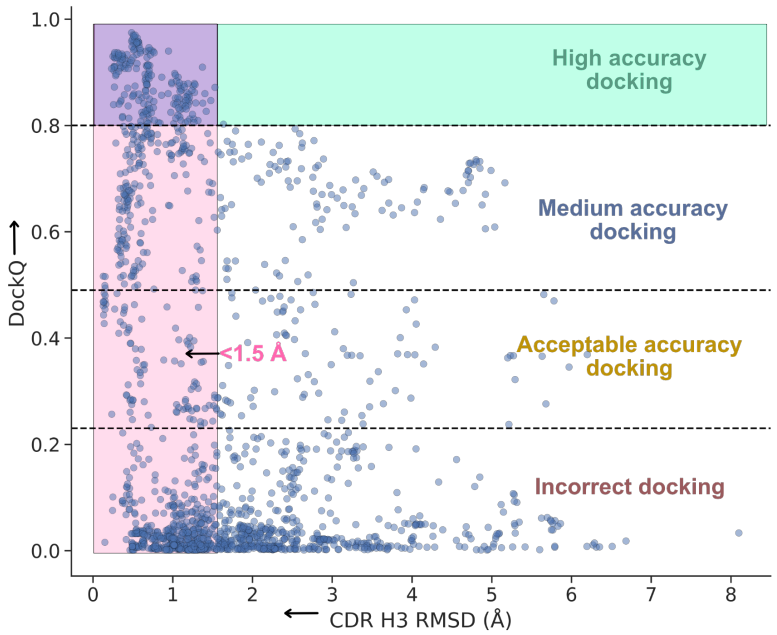

Figure 2: **Distribution of DockQ scores versus CDR H3 loop RMSD of predicted antibody-antigen complexes.** CAPRI classification zones marked, with the high-accuracy docking complex region shaded in green, the less than 1.5 Å CDR H3 loop RMSD region shaded in pink, and the intersection shaded in purple. The conditional probability of the CDR H3 loop RMSD being less than 1.5 Å given a highly accurate complex is the number of points in the intersection of both events (purple) over the number of total points with highly accurate docking (green). The conditional probability of a highly accurate complex given a less than 1.5 Å H3 loop RMSD is the number of points in the intersection (purple) over the number of points in the sub-angstrom H3 loop RMSD region (pink).

paratope Conti et al. [2022]. As the hypervariable H3 loop often makes the majority of contacts between the antibody and antigen Liang Zhao et al. [2011], correctly modeling the CDR H3 loop is pivotal in improving docking quality.

To understand the correlation between modeling the CDR H3 loop and docking accuracy, we measured CDR H3 RMSD for AF3 predictions of antibody-antigen complexes and then compared the conditional probabilities between DockQ and CDR H3 RMSD at each level of docking accuracy (method in Fig. 2's caption). As shown in Fig 2, for highly accurate complexes, the $p(\text{DockQ} > 0.8 \mid \text{ CDR H3 RMSD} \leq 1.5 \text{ Å})$ is 40.8%, while the $p(\text{ CDR H3 RMSD} \leq 1.5 \text{ Å} \mid \text{DockQ} > 0.8)$ becomes very high: 91.3%, implying that a correct CDR H3 loop is critical for high-quality docking predictions. The inequality between the conditional probabilities flips when comparing the effect of CDR H3 RMSD less than 1.5 Å on complexes with acceptable or better accuracy (Table 1, Table 2). Thus, well-sampled interfaces are more important for structural quality at this stage than the CDR H3 loop structure. By varying CDR H3 RMSD cutoffs against DockQ classes, we determine a strong threshold requirement of 3.5 Å RMSD for CDR H3 loop structures to aid global docking (Table 1, Table 2).

2.3 AF3 outperforms AF2.3-M, AF2-M, and IgFold in predicting unbound Fv structures.

Considering the impact of CDR H3 loop accuracy on overall docking success, we sought to evaluate AF3's predictive accuracy for unbound CDR H3 loops. To compare AF3 against previous state-of-the-art structure prediction models, we use IgFold's curated benchmark of 197 unbound antibody variable fragments, 71 unbound nanobodies, and published results for IgFold and AF2.0-M Ruffolo et al. [2023]. We predicted one seed from AF3 (seed = 1) and used the top-ranked antibody from the

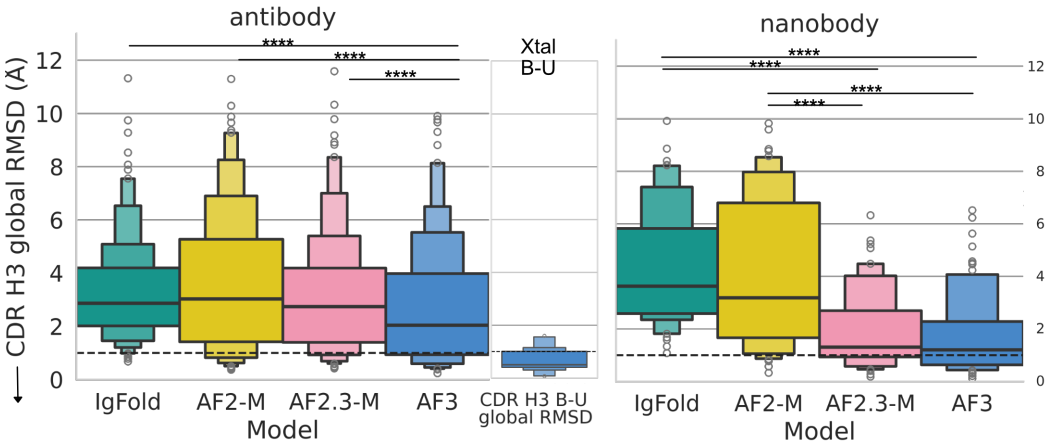

Figure 3: **Performance of AF3 on predicting unbound CDR H3 loop structures of 197 antibodies and 71 nanobodies compared to previous models. (A)** AF3 improves upon the average median to 2.04 Å. For reference, unbound and antigen-bound antibody CDR H3 loops vary by a median of 0.5 Å. **(B)** While IgFold and AF2.0-M have a median H3 RMSD for nanobodies above 3 Å, AF2.3-M improves the median to 1.30 Å and AF3 to 1.14 Å.

five decoys predicted for the comparison, with ranking determined by AF3's combination of ipTM, pTM, and disorder confidence measures Abramson et al. [2024] (Fig. 4).

While AF2.3-M has the lowest median CDR H3 RMSD of the three previous state-of-the-art models at 2.74 Å, AF3 achieves 2.04 Å. IgFold and AF2.3-M perform similarly (2.87 Å, 2.74 Å respectively), with AF2-M performing the worst (3.03 Å). Thus, AF3 has improved CDR H3 loop prediction by 0.7Å ($p \leq 0.0001$). The accuracy plateau reached by IgFold, AF2-M and AF2.3-M led to questions about the limit of accuracy for the loop considering its flexibility. In a recent survey of 177 pairs of bound-unbound antibody complexes, Liu et al. Chu'nan Liu et al. [2024] found that in 70.6% of antibody CDR H3 loops, binding-induced conformational changes are under 1 Å (B-U column in Fig. 4). Thus, despite the loop's potential flexibility, in principle, models may someday be able to reach sub-angstrom predictive accuracy, meaning there is still room for improvement.

2.4 Antigen context affects antibody CDR H3 loop prediction accuracy.

To further observe how the H3 loop's structure is affected by antigen context, we compared the RMSD of bound antibody H3 loops against unbound antibody H3 loops. We divide the RMSDs into the H3 global RMSD, calculated by superposing heavy chains, and the H3 local RMSD, calculated by superposing only CDR H3 residues. The global RMSD captures the loop shape and placement, while the local RMSD only represents the loop's shape. As shown in Fig. 4 (A), both AF3 and AF2.3-M have sub-angstrom H3 local RMSD, whether they are bound or unbound, however,when given antigen context, AF3 shows an improvement in H3 global RMSD, from 1.65 Å to 1.34 Å.

Previous antibody structure prediction studies report H3 loop RMSD increasing as loop length increases Ruffolo et al. [2021] due to the degrees of freedom granted to the loop. As seen in Fig. 4 (B), CDR H3 accuracy is improved from 2.11 Å to 1.38 Å when antigen context is present to help constrain longer loops.

3 Discussion

AF3 builds on established performance-enhancing methods for AF2 (see Related Work 4) and protein data representation Watson et al. [2023]. In our work, we demonstrate that AF3 improves the rate of high-quality docked antibody-antigen from 0 to 13%; however, AF3 (with one seed) still leaves 60% of the targets incorrect. The accuracy of the model has been reported to increase to 60% when evaluating 1,000 seeds in non-reproducible work Abramson et al. [2024]. The model appears to have

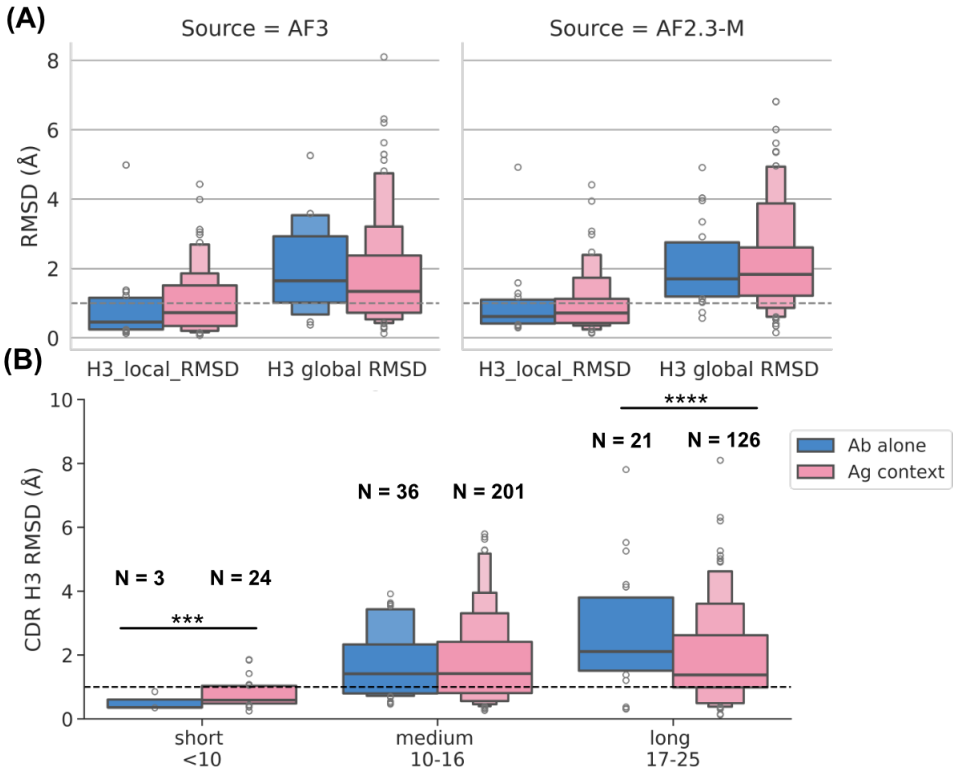

Figure 4: **Effect of antigen context on AF3 (left) and AF2.3-M (right) antibody CDR H3 loop prediction, and the effect of antigen context on AF3 antibody CDR H3 loop prediction per length.** **(A)** Bound structures predicted with antigen, unbound structures predicted with the antibody alone. Global RMSD calculated after superposition of the VH domain; local RMSD calculated by superposing the loop residues only. **(B)** Bound structures predicted performed with antigen, unbound structures predicted with the antibody alone. Short loops are defined as less than 10 residues, medium loops between 10 to 15 residues, and long loops longer than 15 residues.

difficulty finding the correct antigen interface for a given antibody interface. AF3 struggles the most in global docking and may be enhanced by a global sampling protocol such as AlphaRED Harmalkar et al. [2024]. Impressively, AF3 docking success is independent of loop length for both antibodies and nanobodies (Fig. 7). AF3's confidence measures correlate with docking accuracy, with a high overall linear correlation between DockQ and ipTM between the heavy chain and antigen (Fig. 8).

Generative models learn continuous distributions instead of discrete points, making them suited to simulate protein plasticity Jing et al. [2024, 2023]. Thus, AF3's generative framework, combined with simultaneous structure and docking prediction, led us to study whether AF3 can capture the relationships between CDR H3 loop prediction and Ab-Ag docking. We find that AF3 learns the dependence between the antibody binding interface and docking accuracy, perhaps because the model predicts structure and the docked complex simultaneously Abramson et al. [2024]. AF3 demonstrates a 1.34 Å CDR H3 RMSD when given the antigen sequence. Another generative network, AbODE, achieves a 1.73 Å average antibody CDR H3 loop RMSD when conditioned on the antigen sequence and structure using a dataset from SabDab with a CDR sequence redundancy of 40% through MMseq2 (the same as AF3). The multi-resolution structures of AF3 and AbODE can be interpreted to have initial steps corresponding to rigid backbone sampling and later steps learning local docking Corso et al.. The success of both models may be due to the concurrent structure and docking prediction task. As per Yin et al. Yin and Pierce [2023], recycling plays an important part in docking accuracy in AF2.3-M. Recycling may also bolster AF3, especially with antigen context, as the model iteratively refines the local and global structure of the complex.

Our study was limited by the number of jobs available per day on the AF3 server, and the small dataset size due to data contamination concerns. Our results show that while AF3 is considerably more accurate in modeling antibody and nanobody structures and docked complexes than previous approaches, there remains room for improvement of the 60% failure rate for both antibody and nanobody docking for single seed predictions. The impressive CDR H3 loop structure prediction accuracy for bound (1.34 Å) and unbound structures (1.65 Å) can also in principle still be improved relative to the limited overall bound-to-unbound conformational changes in antibodies measured by Liu et al. Chu'nan Liu et al. [2024].

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4 Related Work

Traditional docking algorithms Traditional Rosetta-based antibody-antigen docking algorithms use ensembles of homology models of antibodies, and sampling of rigid backbones, loop conformation, and VH-VL relative orientations Weitzner et al. [2017]. This protocol has a 20% success rate for antibody-antigen docking, defined by a DockQ score > 0.23 Ambrosetti et al. [2020]. Several other physics- and structure-based methods have been published with similar performance Sircar and Gray [2010], Jiménez-García et al. [2018], noa [e], Kozakov et al. [2017]. While these methods are independent of data, the calculations are very time-consuming. Like here, success rates were also limited by the ability to accurately model CDR H3.

ML antibody-antigen structure and complex prediction Machine learning methods have significantly improved antibody-antigen and nanobody-antigen complex prediction and need less time. There are a variety of methods, with some focusing on only structure prediction or docking Ruffolo et al. [2023], Abanades et al. [2023], Corso et al. [2023], Jing et al. [2023], Chu et al. [2024], while others combine the tasks Jumper et al. [2021], Verma et al. [2023], Jin et al. [2022]. Tested architectures have included convolutional neural networks, transformers, diffusion models, and normalizing flow models for structure and complex prediction Peng and Xu [2011], Rao et al. [2021], Ruffolo et al. [2023], Corso et al. [2023], Jin et al. [2022], Verma et al. [2023], Jing et al. [2023, 2024], with the dataset and loss functions being adjusted for the task. While these methods have improved protein-protein docking success rates, especially for complexes that have co-evolved, the lack of co-evolution context between antibody-antigen complexes noa [a] has stunted overall docking success rates, with AF2.3-M having a 20% success rate for antibody-antigen docking Ambrosetti et al. [2020], Harmalkar et al. [2024]. In addition to docking and structure prediction tasks, context extraction from query sequences has also been improved through neural networks that process MSAs Jumper et al. [2021], Evans et al. [2021], Abramson et al. [2024], Rao et al. [2021], and protein language models (PLMs) Lin et al., noa [d].

Methods enhancing AF2 docking performance After the release of AF2, Mirdita et al. found that adding glycine linkers between monomeric chains allowed the model to predict multimers Mirdita et al. [2022], essential to model both chains of an antibody variable fragment. Evans et al. then published a combined structure and complex prediction model: AF2-M Evans et al. [2021]. The updated AF2.3-M model was trained with an expanded dataset (training date cutoff change from 04/30/2018 to 09/30/2021). Many methods have sought to improve the docking performance of AF2.3-M, such as large sampling rates with increased diversity via tuned dropout rates and generative frameworks noa [a], Jing et al. [2023], replica exchange docking applied to AF2.3-M predicted complexes Harmalkar et al. [2024], and MSA sub-sampling Rao et al. [2021]. MSA sub-sampling and generative frameworks have been proven to extract conformational change information from sequence data, while massive sampling and AlphaRED have been shown to improve sampling diversity for multimers with little co-evolutionary context. When comparing AF2 and ESMFold adapted into generative networks via a normalizing flow objective, Jing et al Jing et al. [2024] found that context from MSA sub-sampling combined with AlphaFold provided richer context for extracting structural conformation data than ESM's embeddings. This model has not been extended to multimer

prediction yet, but would likely further improve antibody-antigen docking prediction accuracy when considering the effect of seeds for antibody-antigen complexes seen in Abramson et al. [2024]. AF3 is a culmination of many of these established methods.

5 Benchmark dataset

5.0.1 Individual structure evaluation set

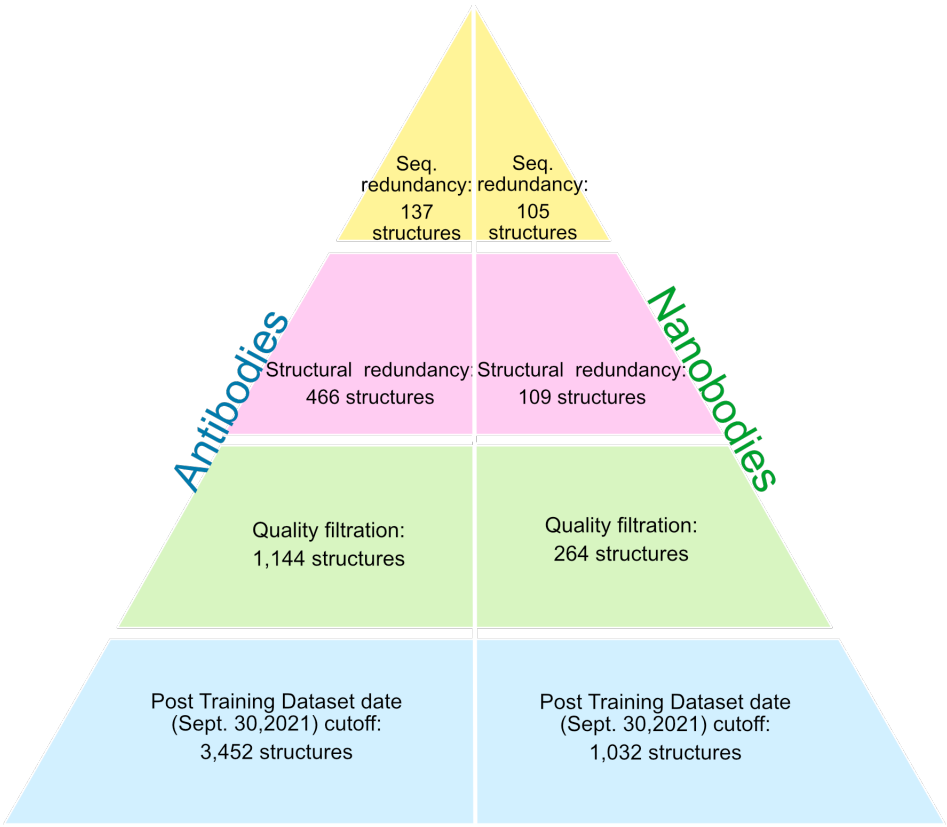

Figure 5: **The process of dataset curation for evaluating antibody structure prediction and how many structures came out of each step.**

To create an immunoglobulin structure prediction dataset, we pulled structures from SabDab (May 31, 2024 for Abs, June 4, 2024 for Nbs) Dunbar et al. [2014], and temporally separated evaluation structures using the Sept. 30, 2021 training dataset date cutoff by AF3. Firstly, we separated all antibody copies in the remaining PDBs, then conducted a quality filtration similar to Chu'nan Liu et al. [2024], where we removed PDBs with a resolution $\geq$ 2.8 Å, and had missing residues in the CDR loops by comparing atomic sequence and sequence residues using the Bio.Seq python package noa [c]. We used the Kabsch alignment algorithm to calculate the structural redundancy of variable heavy and light chains between pairs of structures Ruffolo et al. [2023], and kept pairs of structures that had heavy and light chain RMSD > 1Å, but only one representative out of a pair of redundant structures. Finally, we filtered the remaining structures based on sequence redundancy against each other and AF3's training set with a sequence identity cutoff of 99% and 95% respectively. We conducted MSA alignment on the heavy and light chains separately via Abalign Zong et al. [2023], and then a custom Python function to calculate the sequence identities. The number of structures at each step of this process is shown in Figure 5.

6 Evaluation Methods

6.0.1 AF2.3-M predictions

We used a local ColabFold installation downloaded from (https://github.com/YoshitakaMo/localcolabfold) with AlphaFold-Multimer version 2.3. We predicted a single decoy for each target and did not use templates.

6.0.2 AF3 predictions

We used the AF3 server (https://alphafoldserver.com) to generate decoys. The server generates five decoys (diffusion samples) per seed. To test the diversity produced by seeds, we predicted three seeds per target, with the seed number pre-set to either one, two, or three by using the JSON file upload option.

6.0.3 RMSD calculations

To calculate RMSD, we used the PyRosetta AntibodyInfo class Chaudhury et al. [2010]. For calculating the H3 global RMSD, we used the CDR backbone function, and for H3 local RMSD, we extracted sub-poses for the H3 loops also using the AntibodyInfo class, then calculated the Cα loop RMSD using the Rosetta Scoring class.

6.0.4 Figures and statistical analysis

We conducted Mann-Whitney-U and Pearson correlation statistical analyses through the Scipy package noa [f] in Python (https://www.python.org), and generated boxen plots, scatter plots, and regression plots using the Seaborn package Waskom [2021] also from Python. We used PyMol 3.0 (Schrodinger, Inc.) Schrödinger, LLC [2015] for protein structure visualization images.

6.0.5 Average H3 pLDDT calculations

We used AbNumber noa [b] (IMGT scheme) and heavy chain sequences to extract pLDDTs of Cα residues for each H3 loop from AF3's confidence summary files, then averaged them in Python.

7 Additional experiments

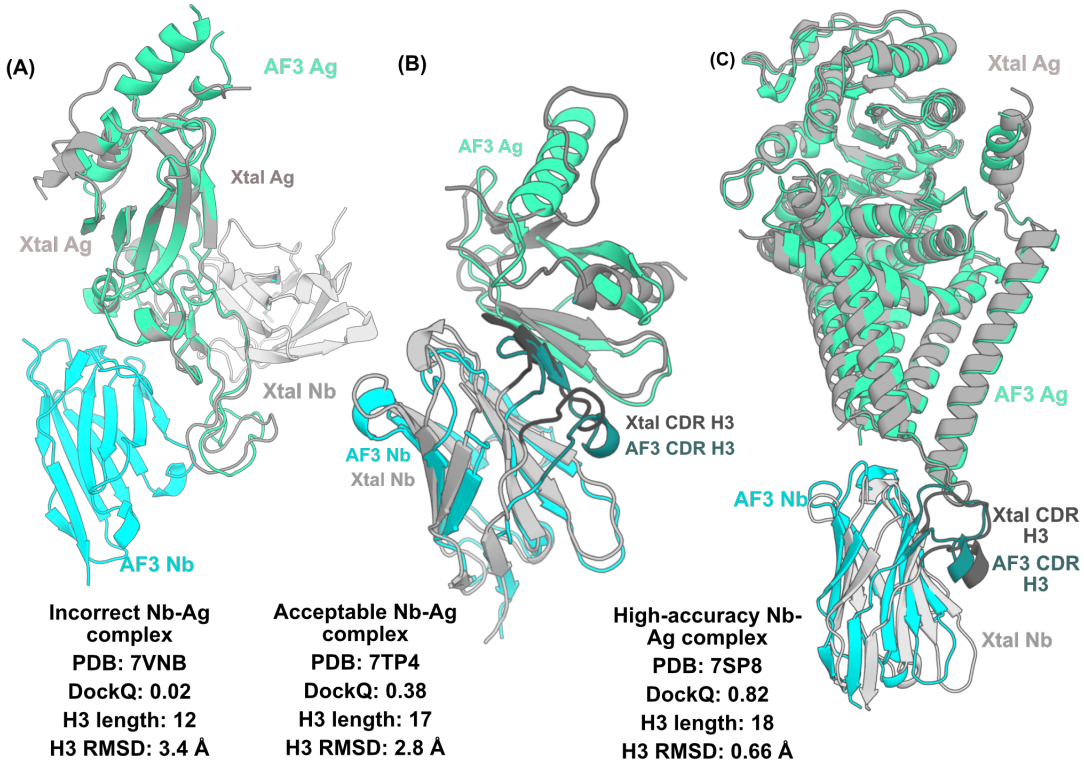

Figure 6: **The figure shows examples of incorrect, acceptable, and high accuracy docked nanobody-antigen complexes. (A)** shows an incorrect nanobody-antigen complex compared to the crystal structure. The prediction samples the incorrect antigen interface and has a lower antigen structure prediction accuracy. **(B)** shows an acceptably docked nanobody-antigen complex, where the antigen structure prediction accuracy is low, affecting the sampled paratope. The nanobody CDR H3 loop's shape is correct, but the positioning is not. **(C)** The antigen and CDR H3 loop of the nanobody are correctly predicted, and the correct binding interface is sampled.

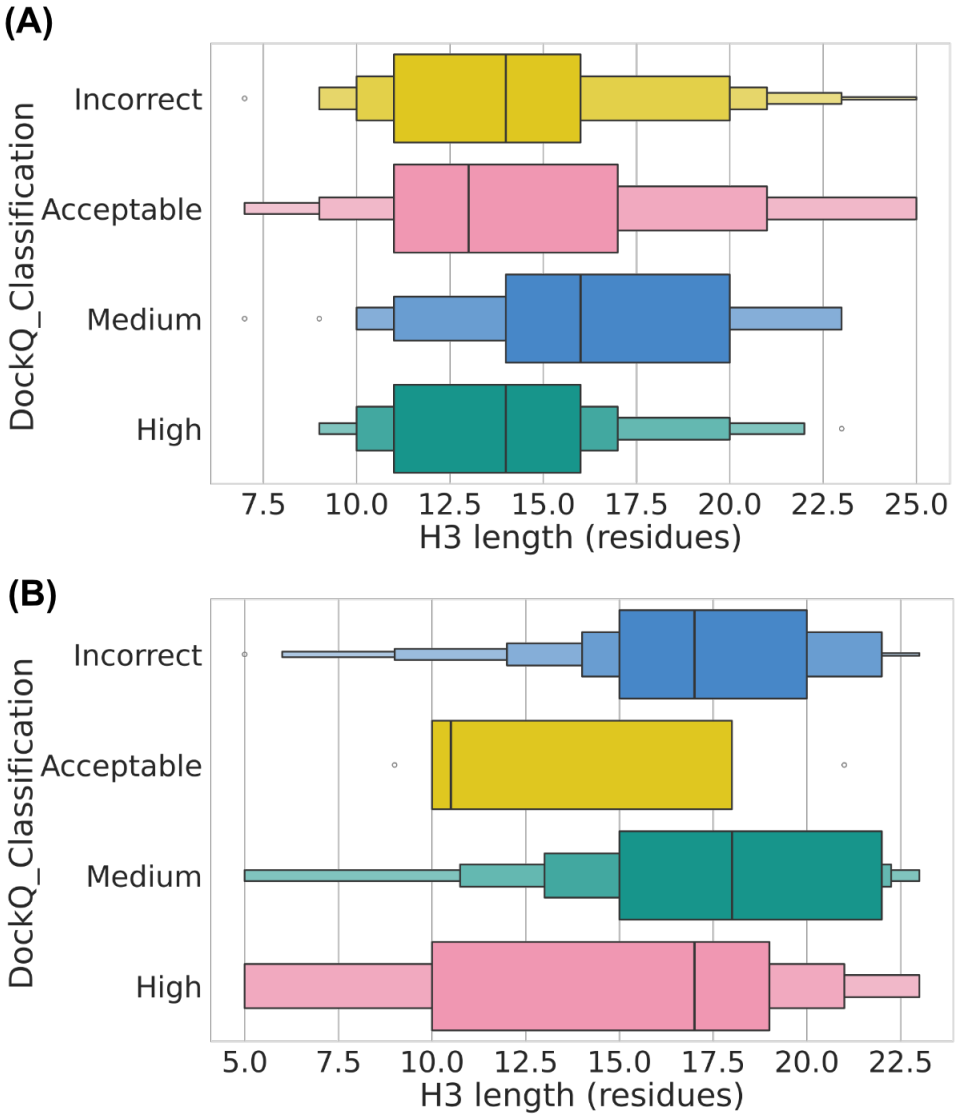

Figure 7: **The figure shows the distribution of nanobody CDR H3 loop lengths per DockQ class and examples of incorrect, acceptable, and high accuracy docked nanobody-antigen complexes. (A)** shows that CDR H3 loop length is not a factor in docking accuracy for nanobody-antigen complexes. **(B)** shows that CDR H3 loop length is not a factor in docking accuracy for nanobody-antigen complexes.

Table 1: **Conditional probability of docking accuracies given varying CDR H3 loop accuracies**

DockQ Class \ H3 RMSD	<1 Å	<1.5 Å	<2 Å
High	0.26	0.21	0.17
High and Medium	0.54	0.42	0.36
High, Medium, and Acceptable	0.64	0.51	0.46

Table 2: **Conditional probability of CDR H3 loop accuracies given varying docking accuracies**

DockQ Class \ H3 RMSD	<1 Å	<1.5 Å	<2 Å
High	0.70	0.99	1.0
High and Medium	0.58	0.77	0.82
High, Medium, and Acceptable	0.50	0.70	0.77

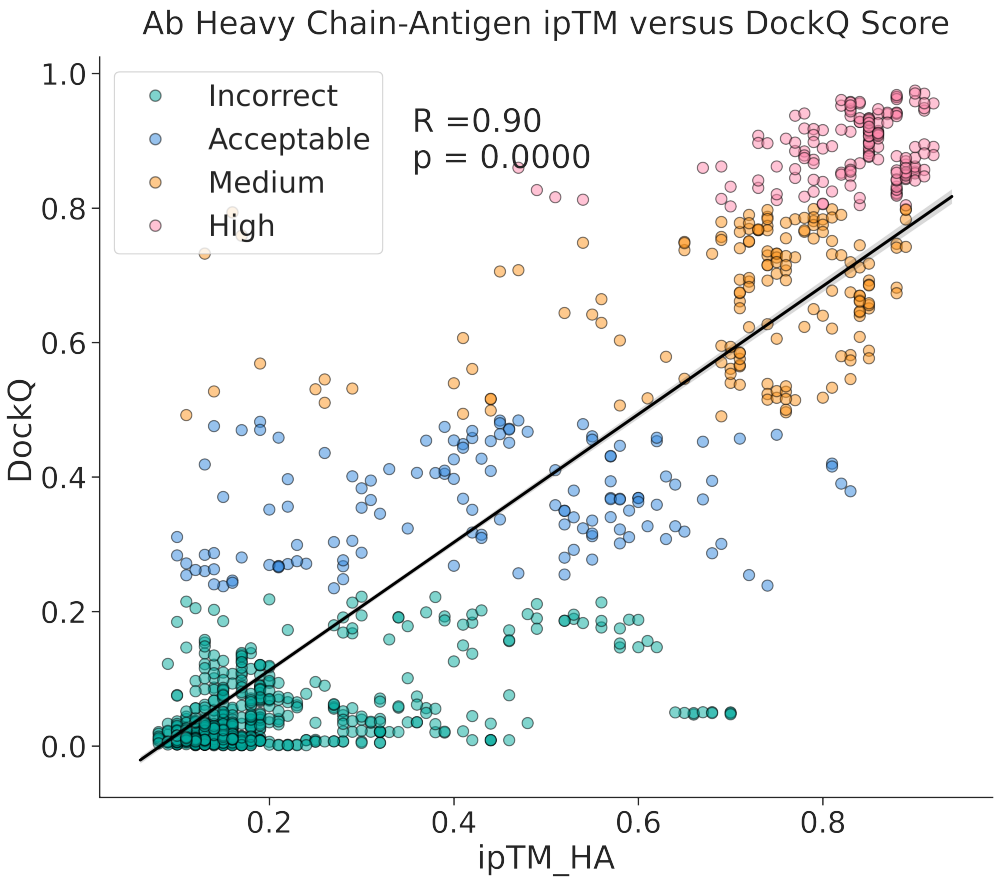

Figure 8: **Scatterplot of ipTM confidence measures against all docked antibody complexes. (A)** shows a linear correlation (R=0.91) between the DockQ scores of all evaluated antibody-antigen complexes and the predicted ipTM between the heavy chain and antigen.