An Introduction to C

Readings: CP:AMA 2.2, 2.3, 2.7, 4.1, 5.1, 9.1

- the ordering of topics is different in the text
- some portions of the above sections have not been covered yet

The primary goal of this section is to be able to write and test simple functions in C.

A brief history of C

C was developed by Dennis Ritchie in 1969–73 to make the Unix operating system more portable.

It was named “C” because it was a successor to “B”, which was a smaller version of the language BCPL.

C was specifically designed to give programmers “low-level” access to memory (discussed in Section 04 and Section 05) and be easily translatable into “machine code” (Section 13).

Thousands of popular programs and portions of all of the popular operating systems are written in C.

C versions

There are a few different versions of the C standard.

In this course, we use the C99 standard (from 1999).

The C11 standard (2011) added some new features to the language, but those features are not needed in this course.

The C18 standard (2018) only fixes a few bugs from C11.

The C2x standard (202?) is currently in development.
Introductory C

In this section we learn to write simple functions and programs in C. This allows us to become familiar with the C syntax without introducing too many new concepts.

In Section 03 we introduce new programming concepts (imperative programming).

Read your assignments carefully: you may not be able to “jump ahead” and start programming with topics not yet covered (e.g., loops).

Comments

In C, any text on a line after // is a comment. Any text between /* and */ is also a comment.

/* ... */ can extend over multiple lines and can comment out large sections of code.

// C comment (one-line only)

/* This is a multi-line comment */

C's multi-line comment cannot be "nested": /* this /* nested comment is an */ error */

Expressions

C expressions use traditional infix algebraic notation: (e.g., 3 + 3).

Use parentheses to specify the order of operations (normal arithmetic rules apply).

1 + 3 * 2 \Rightarrow 7

(1 + 3) * 2 \Rightarrow 8

Racket uses prefix notation: (+ 3 3)

Languages that use prefix (or postfix) notation do not require parenthesis to specify the order of operations.
Operators

In addition to the traditional mathematical operators (e.g., +, -, *), C also has non-mathematical operators (e.g., data operators).

With over 40 operators in total, the order of operations is complicated (see CP:AMA Appendix A).

C does not have an exponentiation operator (e.g., $x^n$).

Confusingly, the “bitwise exclusive or” operator (^) looks like an exponentiation operator. Bitwise operators are beyond the scope of this course.

In C, each operator is either left or right associative to further clarify any ambiguity (see CP:AMA 4.1).

The multiplication operators are left-associative:

$4 \times 5 \div 2$ is equivalent to $(4 \times 5) \div 2$.

The distinction in this particular example is important in C.

The / operator

When working with integers, the C division operator (/) truncates (rounds toward zero) any intermediate values.

$\begin{align*}
(4 \times 5) \div 2 & \Rightarrow 10 \\
4 \times (5 \div 2) & \Rightarrow 8 \\
-5 \div 2 & \Rightarrow -2
\end{align*}$

Remember, use parentheses to clarify the order of operations.

C99 standardized the “(round toward zero)” behaviour.
The % operator

The C modulo operator (%) produces the remainder after integer division.

\[
9 \% 2 \Rightarrow 1 \\
9 \% 3 \Rightarrow 0 \\
9 \% 5 \Rightarrow 4
\]

The value of \((a \% b)\) is equal to: \(a - (a / b) \times b\).

It is often best to avoid using % with negative integers.

(i % j) has the same sign as i (see CP:AMA 4.1).

C identifiers

Every function, variable and structure requires an identifier (or "name").

C identifiers must start with a letter, and can only contain letters, underscores and numbers.

In this course, use underscore_style (or snake case) for identifiers with compound words.

For example: hst_rate, trace_int, quick_sort

Use underscore_style in your code.
Anatomy of a function definition

```c
int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}
```

- braces ({}) indicate the beginning/end of a function **block**
- `return` keyword, followed by an expression, followed by a semicolon (;)
- parameters (a, b) are separated by a comma
- the function and parameter **types** are specified (*i.e.*, `int`)

Note the placement of the braces ({}) and the use of whitespace and indentation (more on this later).

---

Static type system

C uses a **static type system**: all types **must** be known **before** the program is run and the type of an identifier **cannot change**.

For now, we will only use C **integers** (more types in Section 04).

```c
int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}
```

The **return type** of `my_add` is an `int` (appears **before** `my_add`).

The parameters `a` and `b` are also both `int`s.

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Racket uses a **dynamic** type system.

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If the type in a function definition is omitted:

```c
int my_add(int a, int b) {   // properly typed
    return a + b;
}
```

```c
bad_add(a, b) {         // missing types
    return a + b;
}
```

C assumes a missing type is an `int` and may display a warning such as:

```
type specifier missing, defaults to 'int'
```

This is **very bad style**: specify **every** type.
Because C uses static typing, there are no functions equivalent to the Racket type-checking functions (e.g., integer? and string?).

In Racket, a contract violation may cause a “type” runtime error.

```racket
(my-add "hello" 3) ; Racket runtime error
```

In C, it is impossible to violate the contract type.

“Type” runtime errors do not exist.

```c
my_add("hello", 3) // does not run in C
```

---

**Function terminology**

We **call** a function by **passing** it **arguments**.

A function **returns** a value.

```c
my_add(1, 2) ⇒ 3
```

We **call** `my_add` and **pass** it the **arguments** `1` and `2`.

`my_add(1, 2)` **returns** `3`.

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In “functional” language terminology (e.g., Racket) we **apply** a function, which **consumes** arguments and it **produces** a value.

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**Functions without parameters**

Use the `void` keyword to indicate a function has no parameters.

```c
int my_num(void) {
    return my_add(40, 2);
}
```

To call a parameterless function, put nothing between the parentheses (do not pass `void`).

```c
my_num() ⇒ 42
```
If the void is omitted in a parameterless function definition:

```c
int my_num() {
    // ...
}
```

C allows it. This is because () is used in an older C syntax to indicate an “unknown” or “arbitrary” number of parameters (beyond the scope of this course).

**Always use void** to clearly communicate (and enforce) that there are no parameters.

```c
int my_num(void) {
    // ...
}
```

---

**No nested functions**

In C, functions **cannot** be “nested” (defined) **inside** of another function (a.k.a. local functions).

```c
int outer(int i) {
    int inner(int j) {   // INVALID
        // ...
    }
    // ...
}
```

The GNU C environment (gcc) has introduced a language extension for nested C functions, but it is not part of the C standard.

---

**Function documentation**

Provide a purpose for every function that shows an example of it being called, followed by a brief description of **what** the function does (not **how** it does it).

No contract **types** are necessary (they are part of the definition).

Add a **requires** comment if appropriate.

```c
// my_divide(x, y) evaluates x/y using
// integer division
// requires: y is not 0

int my_divide(int x, int y) {
    return x / y;
}
```
Whitespace

C mostly ignores whitespace.

// The following three functions are equivalent
int my_add(int a, int b) { // GOOD
    return a + b;
}
int my_add(int a, int b) { // BAD
    return a + b;
}
int my_add(int a, int b) { // RIDICULOUSLY BAD
    return a + b;
}

Follow the course style. The course staff and markers may not follow your code if it is poorly formatted.

CS 136 style

int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}

• a block start (open brace {) appears at the end of a line
• a block end (close brace }) is aligned with the line that started it, and appears on a line by itself
• indent a block 2 (recommended), 3 or 4 spaces: be consistent
• add a space after commas and around arithmetic operators

Typing Ctrl-I in Seashell will auto-indent your code for you.

When there are a large number of parameters, a large expression or a long purpose, continue (indented) on the following line.

// my_super_long_function(a, b, c, d, e, f, g) does some amazing things with those parameters...
int my_super_long_function(int a, int b, int c, int d, int e, int f, int g) {
    return a * b + b * c + c * d + d * e + e * f + f * g + g * a;
}

The “best” way to style code (e.g., block formatting) is a matter of taste and is often a topic of debate.

The style we have chosen is the most widely accepted style for C (and C++) projects (e.g., it conforms to the Google style guide).
Getting started

At this point you are probably eager to write your own functions in C.

Unfortunately, we do not have an environment similar to DrRacket’s interactions window to evaluate expressions and informally test functions.

Next, we demonstrate how to run and test a simple C program.

Entry point

Typically, a program is “run” (or “launched”) by an Operating System (OS) through a shell or another program such as DrRacket.

The OS needs to know where to start running the program. This is known as the entry point.

In C, the entry point is a special function named main.

Every C program must have one (and only one) main function.

In many interpreted languages (including Racket), the entry point is simply the top of the file being “run”.

main

main has no parameters† and an int return type.

```c
int main(void) {
    //...
    return 0;       // success!
}
```

The return value communicates to the OS the “error code” (also known as the “exit code”, “error number” or errno).

A successful program returns zero (no error code).

† main has optional parameters (discussed in Section 13).
main is a special function and does not require an explicit return value. The default value is success (zero).

```c
int main(void) {
    //...
    return 0;    // this is optional
}
```

Unless an assignment has special instructions, your `main` function should never return a non-zero value, as it causes your marmoset tests to fail.

There is no consensus on whether requiring a return 0; in `main` is “good style”. In this course, we do not require it.

**Top-level expressions**

In C, **top-level expressions** (code outside of a function) are not allowed.

**Code only executes inside of a function.**

```c
1 + 1;       // INVALID

int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}

my_add(1, 2);  // INVALID
```

In DrRacket, the final values of top-level expressions are displayed in the “interactions window”.

```racket
;; my racket program
(+ 1 1)       ;; <-- top level
(define (my-add a b)
             (+ a b))
(my-add 1 2)  ;; <-- top level
```

2
3

---

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We have provided *tracing tools* to help you “see” what your code is doing. Here, we use `trace_int` inside of `main` to trace several expressions and display them to the screen (console):

```c
int main(void) {
    trace_int(1 + 1);
    trace_int(my_add(1, 2));
}
```

1 + 1 => 2
my_add(1, 2) => 3

Leave your *tracing* in your code. It is ignored in our tests and does not affect your results (no need to comment it out).

We’re now ready to run our first program.

```c
// My first C program (documentation omitted)
#include "cs136.h" // <-- more on this later
int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}
int main(void) {
    trace_int(1 + 1);
    trace_int(my_add(1, 2));
}
```

Note the necessary `#include` line at the top of the program. For now, always add this line (it is explained in Section 06).
Function ordering

If the two functions are re-ordered:

```c
int main(void) {
    trace_int(1 + 1);
    trace_int(my_add(1, 2));
}

int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}
```

There is an error (such as):

```
implicit declaration of function 'my_add' is invalid
```

For now, always place function definitions above any other functions that reference them (so main is at the bottom).

Program documentation

Document a program (state its purpose) at the top of the file (not necessarily where main is defined).

```c
// This program informally tests the my_add function
#include "cs136.h"

// my_add(a, b) calculates the sum of a and b
int my_add(int a, int b) {
    return a + b;
}

int main(void) {
    trace_int(1 + 1);
    trace_int(my_add(1, 2));
}
```

There is no need to add additional documentation for main itself.

Testing

Our tracing tools are an excellent way for you to interact with your code and help you “see” what is happening.

They are helpful to informally test your code.

They are not a viable strategy to thoroughly test.

However, to facilitate more thorough testing, we will need Boolean expressions...
**Boolean expressions**

In C, Boolean expressions do not produce “true” or “false”.

They produce either:

- zero (0) for “false”, or
- one (1) for “true”.

In our environment, the constants true and false have been defined to be 1 and 0 (for convenience).

---

**Comparison operators**

The *equality operator* in C is == (note the *double* equals).

\[
(3 == 3) \Rightarrow 1 \text{ (true)} \\
(2 == 3) \Rightarrow 0 \text{ (false)}
\]

The *not equal operator* is !=.

\[
(2 != 3) \Rightarrow 1 \text{ (true)}
\]

The operators <, <=, > and >= behave exactly as expected.

\[
(2 < 3) \Rightarrow 1 \text{ (true)} \\
(2 >= 3) \Rightarrow 0 \text{ (false)}
\]

**Always use a double == for equality, not a single =.**

---

The accidental use of a single = instead of a double == for equality is one of the most common programming mistakes in C.

This can be a serious bug (we revisit this in Section 03). It is such a serious concern that it warrants an extra slide as a reminder.
Logical Operators

The Logical operators are: ! (not), && (and), || (or):

! (3 == 3) ⇒ 0
(3 == 3) && (2 == 3) ⇒ 0
(3 == 3) && !(2 == 3) ⇒ 1
(3 == 3) || (2 == 3) ⇒ 1

Similar to Racket, C short-circuits and stops evaluating an expression when the value is known.

(a != 0) && (b / a == 2)
does not generate an error if a is 0.

A common mistake is to use a single & or | instead of && or ||.

All non-zero values are true

Operators that produce a Boolean value (e.g., ==) will always produce 0 or 1.

Operators (or functions) that expect a Boolean value (e.g., &&) will consider any non-zero value to be “true”.

Only zero (0) is “false”†.

(2 && 3) ⇒ 1
(0 || -2) ⇒ 1
!5 ⇒ 0

† The value NULL (Section 05) is also considered false.

You are not expected to “memorize” the order of operations.
When in doubt (or to add clarity) add parentheses.
bool type

The bool type is an integer that can only have a value of 0 or 1.

```c
bool is_even(int n) {
  return (n % 2) == 0;
}

bool my_negate(bool v) {
  return !v;
}
```

Assertions

Use the assert function to test functions:

```c
assert(my_add(1, 2) == 3);
```

assert(exp) stops the program and displays a message if the expression exp is false (zero).

If exp is true (non-zero), it does “nothing” and continues to the next line of code.

```
assert is very similar to Racket's check-expect:
(check-expect (my-add 1 2) 3)
```

// My second C program (now with better testing!)

```c
#include "cs136.h"

int my_add(int a, int b) {
  return a + b;
}

int main(void) {
  assert(my_add(0, 0) == 0);
  assert(my_add(1, 1) == 2);
  assert(my_add(-2, 1) == -1);
}
```

We discuss additional testing methods later. For now, test your code with asserts in your main function as above.
Testing strategies

You are expected to test your own code.
Simply relying on the public marmoset tests is not a viable strategy to succeed in this course.

Function requirements

The assert function is also very useful for verifying function requirements.

```c
// my_divide(x, y) ....
// requires: y is not 0

int my_divide(int x, int y) {
    assert(y != 0); // assert(y) also works
    return x / y;
}
```

In the slides, we often omit asserts to save space.

assert any feasible function requirements.

Infeasible requirements

Some requirements are infeasible to assert, or (as we will discuss in Section 08) they would be inefficient to assert.

It is good style to communicate (i.e., document) that a requirement is not asserted:

```c
// my_function(n) ....
// requires: n is a prime number [not asserted]
```
Multiple requirements

With multiple requirements, it is better to have several small
asserts.

It makes it easier to determine which assertion failed (which
requirement was not met).

```c
// my_function(x, y, z) ....
// requires: x is positive
// y < z

int my_function(int x, int y, int z) {
    assert((x > 0) && (y < z)); // OK
    assert(x > 0); // BETTER
    assert(y < z);
    //...
}
```

Statements

Blocks ({}), can contain multiple statements:

```c
int my_divide(int x, int y) {
    assert(y); // statement
    trace_int(y); // statement
    return x / y; // statement
    trace_int(x); // unreachable statement
}
```

Statements are executed in sequence (one after the other).

The return statement ends the function.

In the above code, trace_int(x); will never execute.

We define statements more precisely in Section 03.

Brief introduction to control flow

The return statement is a special kind of statement known as a
collection statement.

return "controls the flow" of the program by ending the function
and returning to the caller.

We explore control flow statements in Section 04, but first we will
introduce one more control flow statement...
Conditionals

The if control flow statement allows us to have functions with conditional behaviour.

```c
int my_abs(int n) {
    if (n < 0) { // note: the () are required
        return -n;
    } else {
        return n;
    }
}
```

There can be more than one return in a function, but only one value is ever returned. The function stops when the first return is executed.

example: recursion in C

```c
// sum_first(n) sums the natural numbers 0...n
// requires: n >= 0
int sum_first(int n) {
    assert(n >= 0);
    if (n == 0) {
        return 0;
    } else {
        return n + sum_first(n - 1);
    }
}
```

else if

If there are more than two possible results, use else if.

```c
// in_between(x, lo, hi) determines if lo <= x <= hi
// requires: lo <= hi
bool in_between(int x, int lo, int hi) {
    assert(lo <= hi);
    if (x < lo) {
        return false;
    } else if (x > hi) {
        return false;
    } else {
        return true;
    }
}
```
Racket's cond special form consumes a sequence of question and answer pairs (where questions are Boolean expressions).

Racket functions that have the following cond behaviour can be re-written in C using if, else if and else:

```
(define (my-function ...) (cond

(q1 a1)

(q2 a2)
[else a3]))
```

```
int my_function(...) {

if (q1) {
  return a1;
}
else if (q2) {
  return a2;
}
else {
  return a3;
}
}
```

C's if statement does not produce a value: it only controls the “flow of execution” and cannot be used inside of an expression.

We revisit if in Section 04 after we understand how “statements” differ from expressions. For now, only use if as we have demonstrated.

Given the examples we have seen so far, it might appear that Racket's cond and C's if are “the same”.

Fundamentally, they are quite different. Unlike if, cond does produces a value and can be used inside of an expression:

```
(+ y (cond 

[(< x 0) -x]

[else x]))
```

Unlike C's if statement, the C ternary conditional operator (?:) does produce a value.

The value of the expression:

```
q ? a : b
```

is a if q is true (non-zero), and b otherwise.

For example:

```
(v >= 0) ? v : -v  // abs(v)
(a > b) ? a : b     // max(a, b)
```

You may use the ?: operator in this course, but use it sparingly. Overuse of the ?: operator can make your code hard to follow.
When working with integer values in C, do not add a leading (preceeding) zero (0) to the value. For example, do not write 017 if you want to represent the number 17.

A leading zero may seem harmless, but it is not:

```
trace_int(17); 17 => 17
trace_int(017); 017 => 15
trace_int(my_add(010, 010)); my_add(010, 010) => 16
```

In C, integer values that start with a zero are evaluated in octal (base 8), so 010 is equivalent to 8.

Integer values that start with 0x are evaluated in hexadecimal, so 0x10 is equivalent to 16.

**Goals of this Section**

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- demonstrate the use of the C syntax and terminology introduced
- Write a simple function in C
- use the C operators introduced in this module
  (including % == != >= && ||)
- explain the significance of the main function in C
- perform basic tracing in C using trace_int
- use assert for testing and to verify requirements
- provide the required documentation for C functions