

Programming Practices

CSE 220: Systems Programming

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Effective Programming

The difference between a programmer and a good programmer is large.

Some of that difference is talent and knowledge.

A lot of that difference is experience and practice.

There are practices you can adopt to become a better programmer.

Work Habits

The advice in this section is mostly **things you already know**.

- Start early
- Work diligently
- Comment and document
- Write a second draft
- **Read and write**

Start Early

Start your programs early.

This is more than just time management.

Think about where and when you've had programming insights.

- Shower?
- Driving?
- Walking?
- Anywhere there's no way you can type it in?

Your subconscious will work for you if you give it time.

Comment and Document

Comment your code **judiciously**:

- Include insightful comments
- Avoid useless comments

Never do this:

```
i++;                                /* Increment i */
```

Document **while you are writing the code**.

This will help crystallize your ideas and identify logical errors.

Write a Second Draft

Plan to throw one away; you will, anyhow.
— Fred Brooks, *The Mythical Man Month*

If you find that your approach is getting unwieldy:

- Stop and consider what you've learned
- Rewrite as necessary!

Getting Started

Sometimes the hardest part is **getting started**.

Find **something you know how to do**, and **do it**.

Maybe you can:

- Process program arguments
- Perform a simple sub-calculation
- Define a data structure

Once the problem is **started**, it seems more tractable.

Read and Write

Read **documentation**

- Man pages
- API specifications
- Standards

Read **Programming texts**

- There are several in the references

Write **code**

- There is **no substitute!**

Write **documentation**

Top Down and Bottom Up

For **many projects**, I recommend a two-pass process:

- Divide the task **top down**
- Implement **bottom up**

Top Down Design

Recursively apply the following steps:

- Identify the problem to be solved
- Determine **what you need** to solve it
- Define a function/data structure/*etc.* to obtain what you need
- Apply this method to each of those things

Try to identify **common functionality among tasks** while doing this.

Bottom Up Implementation

Recursively apply the following steps:

- Identify sub-tasks you **know how to solve**
- Solve them
- Identify sub-tasks that can now be solved

You may need or want to **refine your top-down design** during this phase!

Managing Complexity

During development, you may find **complexity growing**.

You can manage this by:

- Identifying routines that can be abstracted into functions
- Defining and using constants
- Creating data structures to simplify computation
- Using standard library functions

Tools

Using tools effectively is critical to efficient programming.

These tools might include:

- Your editor
- The compiler
- Build system tools such as make
- The debugger
- Text or data processing tools

It's worth taking extra time to learn your tools.

It will pay itself back!

The Compiler

The compiler is **very helpful in producing correct code**.

Always compile with `-Wall` and maybe `-Wextra`.

Silence warnings.

Use **functions** instead of macros to get type checking.

Use the preprocessor for debugging.

The Debugger

You **don't have time** to not learn gdb.

Learn when to `printf()` and when to gdb.

Explore `xxgdb`, Emacs gdb mode, scripts, *etc.*

Your Editor

Find a **good editor**, and **trust it**.

If it thinks something is hinky, **figure out why**.

For example:

- It wants to indent funny
- It colors a variable name unexpectedly
- It can't find a completion
- ...

This may mean things like:

- You've misplaced braces
- You're shadowing a system variable
- *etc.*

Helper Functions

Use **helper functions** to:

- Factor out repeated operations
- Reduce the state in any given function
- Provide debug assistance

Declare **file local** helper functions **static**.

Declare **project-wide** helper functions in header files.

Keep an eye out for **refactoring opportunities**:

- Easy ways to handle more cases in the same function
- More code that can be lifted into helpers
- Different approaches that factor out larger blocks

Types

Pay close attention to types!

Don't fix type errors **without understanding them!**

Declare variables as the **tightest type possible**:

- Prefer something `*` over `void *`
- Prefer `something[]` over `something *`
- Prefer `int32_t` over `int`
- ...

Magic Values

Never use **magic values**!

Use **named constants** instead of integers or strings with semantic meaning.

```
#define MESSAGE 2  
#define LIVE 'X'
```

Once you have them, **use them**.

```
grid[y][x] = 'X';           // WHYYYYYYYYYYYY???????
```

Format Your Code

Format your code **precisely**.

The style you pick is not as important as **picking a style**.

Badly-indented code **should bother you**.

Code formatting should **help you spot logical errors**.

Invariants

Invariants are properties of a program that are always true, or predictably true.

We often speak of loop invariants.

You should know and define invariants.

A professor once told me:

If you write a loop and you don't know its invariant, it's wrong.

Violating Invariants

Invariants must often be violated **temporarily**.

If you violate an invariant, you must:

- **not invoke code** that expects it to be maintained
- Know **when and where** it will be restored
- Ensure that it is restored **on every code path**

Example:

A doubly-linked list's prev and next pointers are inconsistent **during node insertion**.

Pre- and Post-Conditions

Closely related to **invariants**.

Rules that must be maintained **before and after** an operation.

- Loop
- Function
- I/O
- *etc.*

Identify and document pre- and post-conditions in comments!

Verify conditions at run time!

Make Purposeful Changes

Don't just **change code** without forethought.

Make **purposeful changes** designed to **address an issue**.

It is better to take longer and understand the problem.

Programming by Brownian Motion is seldom successful.

Sometimes **quick fixes** **cover up a problem** without fixing!

Summary

- Cultivate good work habits
- Design your programs purposefully
- Use your tools!
- Practice good style and form
- Debug with a plan

The only way to become a good programmer is to write programs.

References I

Optional Readings

- [1] [Andrew Hunt and Dave Thomas](#). *The Pragmatic Programmer: From Journeyman to Master*. Addison-Wesley, 1999.
- [2] [Frederick P. Brooks Jr.](#) *The Mythical Man-Month: Essays on Software Engineering*. 20th Anniversary Edition. Addison-Wesley, 1995.
- [3] [Brian W. Kernighan and Rob Pike](#). *The Practice of Programming*. Addison-Wesley, 1999.

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