

Conditionals and Control Flow

CSE 220: Systems Programming

Ethan Blanton & Carl Alphonse

Department of Computer Science and Engineering

University at Buffalo



Advice: Time Management

The **Carnegie Rule**: 2-3 hours of work **outside class** per credit

That's why 12 credits is **full time**!

Plan accordingly:

- **Schedule** ~1.5 hours per lecture in a block
 - Too long: hard to focus
 - Too short: lost time to overhead
- Work **every day**, not all at once
- Schedule the other 0.5–1.5 hours **as needed**

Advice: Time Management

Keep a TODO!

- Don't lose time to "what do I do next?"
- Don't miss deadlines

For **every course**:

- 10-15 minutes **every week** for TODO management
- Make a list of 5-7 items you can **just do**
- If the list gets short, **curate** it!

Example items:

- **Good**: Read Chapter 5 through 5.4
- **Good**: PA1: Check command line arguments for validity
- **Bad**: PA1

Administrivia 1

Deadlines for the following items **are today**:

- Lab 01
- AI Quiz

If you aren't current on your readings, **you are behind**.

If you are struggling with deadlines, or are shy to ask for help, don't be. Our job is to help you learn.

Impostor Syndrome is real!

If you **already knew all of this**, we **wouldn't make you take it**.

Don't abuse!

Our shared compute server `emon.cse.buffalo.edu`

- There are 250+ of you, all using the same computer!
- Don't run VS Code on `emon`, or use VS Code remote access

Autolab

- 5 submissions is fine, 10 is questionable, 20 is too many

Office hours

Review Question

TopHat review question

what is truth?

```
#include <stdio.h>
void printTruthValue(int);
int main() {
    for (int i=-2; i<=2; i++) {
        printTruthValue(i);
    }
    return 0;
}
void printTruthValue(int x) {
    printf("x has value %d, which is ",x);
    if (x) { printf("true\n"); }
    else   { printf("false\n"); }
}
```

stdbool

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <stdbool.h>
void printTruthValue(bool);
int main() {
    for (int i=-2; i<=2; i++) {
        printTruthValue(i);
    }
    return 0;
}
void printTruthValue(bool x) {
    printf("x has value %d, which is ",x);
    if (x) { printf("true\n"); }
    else  { printf("false\n"); }
}
```


operators yield bool

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <stdbool.h>

int main() {
    int x = 2;
    printf("x has value %d, !x has value %d, !!x has
           value %d\n",x,!x,!!x);

    bool r = true;
    printf("r has value %d, !r has value %d, !!r has
           value %d\n",r,!r,!!r);
    return 0;
}
```

short circuiting

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <stdbool.h>
bool f(int x, int y) {
    printf("f(%d,%d) called\n",x,y);
    return x < y;
}
bool g(int z) {
    printf("g(%d) called\n",z);
    return z < 20;
}
int main() {
    if (f(2,3) && g(5)) { puts("main: true"); }
    else                { puts("main: false"); }
    return 0;
}
```

Conditionals in C

Truth in C is simple but possibly non-intuitive:

- Bit-wise \emptyset is false
- anything else is true

However, **boolean expressions** and true and false are less unpredictable:

- true and **true results** are **exactly 1**
- false and **false results** are **exactly \emptyset**

Control Flow

We have discussed only the **for loop** in C.

Required readings in K&R have covered other control flow.

We will look at **if** and its **implementation**.

There are other control flow statements (discussed in K&R), but they **behave similarly**.

Boolean Operators

C uses the following Boolean operators:

- `!`: Logical not; inverts the following expression
- `&&`: Logical and; true iff the LHS and RHS are both true
- `||`: Logical or; true if **either** the RHS or LHS is true

Do not confuse these with the similarly-named **bitwise operators!**
(We will discuss those later.)

Boolean Logic in C

C uses **short circuit evaluation** for Boolean logic.

This means that evaluation of a Boolean sentence stops **as soon as its final truth value is known**.

For example:

`x && y`

If `x` is false, then **this sentence is false**.

In that case, **y will never be evaluated**.

Short Circuit Consequences

The **consequences of short-circuit evaluation** can be surprising.

If terms in the sentence **have side effects**, those side effects **may not run**.

This can be **very useful**, but also surprising!

```
if (i < len && array[i] == SOMEVAL) {  
    /* Useful!  If array[i] is past the end of the  
       array, the illegal access never happens. */  
}
```

Equality Operators

There are two equality operators:

- `==`: Compares **value equality**, returns true if equal
- `!=`: Compares value equality, returns false if equal

Note that these operators compare **values**, not **logical truth!**

In particular, note that **many values are “true”, but true is 1!**

This means that two **logically true values** may compare unequal.

Truthiness

```
bool x = true;
int y = 2;

if (x)
    printf("x is true\n");
if (y)
    printf("y is true\n");
if (x == y)
    printf("x and y are equal\n");
```

Truthiness

```
bool x = true;
int y = 2;

if (x)
    printf("x is true\n");
if (y)
    printf("y is true\n");
if (x == y)
    printf("x and y are equal\n");
```

Output:

```
x is true
y is true
```

stdbool

The header `#include <stdbool.h>` defines some useful things.

- The type `bool`, which holds **only 0 or 1**
- The values `true` and `false`

Before C99, these things **didn't exist in the standard**, but were **widely defined in programs**.

Therefore they were standardized to **require a header**.

```
bool b = 2;  
printf("%d\n", b);
```

Output:

1

Control Flow

Control flow is the path that execution takes through a program.

The C model is **linear flow** by default.

Control flow statements can **change the order** of execution.

This is how our programs make decisions.

We will examine **how this flow is achieved**.

The `if` Statement

The **simplest control statement** in C is `if`.

Its syntax is:

```
if (condition) {  
    body;  
}
```

If the expression `condition` evaluates to any true value, `body` runs.

Otherwise, `body` is **skipped**.

Implementing `if`

The `if` statement must be **compiled** to **machine instructions**.

Those machine instructions must **encode the condition check and jump**.

This is normally implemented as a **conditional branch instruction**.

You don't have to learn assembly for this course, but we will look at some machine instruction concepts.

A Simple Condition — C

```
int main(int argc, char *argv[])
{
    if (argc == 2 && argv[1][0] == '-') {
        puts("negative");
    }
    return 0;
}
```

A Simple Condition — Assembly

```
    cmp1 $2, %edi      ; compare argc to 2
    je   .L8          ; jump to .L8 if ==
.L4:
    xorl %eax, %eax    ; set up return value
    ret               ; return 0
.L8:
    movq 8(%rsi), %rax  ; load argv[1][0] to %rax
    cmpb $45, (%rax)   ; compare %rax to 45 ('-')
    jne  .L4          ; jump to .L4 if !=
    leaq .LC0(%rip), %rdi ; load "negative" to %rdi
    subq $8, %rsp      ; make room on stack
    call puts@PLT     ; call puts("negative")
                    ; another return 0 goes
                    here
```


Conditional Instruction Flow

Note that the **structure of the program** was lost.

One of the advantages of high-level languages is **structure**.

The computer can generally only:

- Make **simple comparisons** (sometimes **only to zero!**)
- **Jump** to a program location

Anything more complicated is a **software construction**.

The `else` Clause

The `else` clause is simply either:

- The `next instruction` after a jump
- The `jump destination` (with the `if` body being the next instruction)

Which layout the compiler uses `depends on the code and architecture`.

else Gotchas

I strongly advocate **always using blocks**.
Here is a place where it really matters:

```
if (modify_x)
    if (negate)
        x = x * -1;
else
    y = -x;
```

else Gotchas

I strongly advocate **always using blocks**.
What this **actually means** is:

```
if (modify_x)
    if (negate)
        x = x * -1;
    else
        y = -x;
```

else Gotchas

I strongly advocate **always using blocks**.
What you **should use** is:

```
if (modify_x) {  
    if (negate) {  
        x = x * -1;  
    }  
} else {  
    y = -x;  
}
```

Summary

- All nonzero values are true conditions in C.
- All Boolean expressions use 1 for true.
- The `bool` keyword holds only 0 or 1.
- C uses short-circuit evaluation of Boolean logic.
- Control flow is implemented with comparisons and jumps.
- Use blocks for if and else!

Next Time ...

- POSIX memory model
- Pointer types
- Process layout

References I

Required Readings

- [1] Brian W. Kernighan and Dennis M. Ritchie. *The C Programming Language*. Second Edition. Chapter 2: 2.6; Chapter 3: Intro, 3.1–3.7. Prentice Hall, 1988.

License

Copyright 2020–2025 Ethan Blanton, All Rights Reserved.

Copyright 2024 Eric Mikida, All Rights Reserved.

Copyright 2022–2025 Carl Alphonse, All Rights Reserved.

Copyright 2019 Karthik Dantu, All Rights Reserved.

Reproduction of this material without written consent of the author is prohibited.

To retrieve a copy of this material, or related materials, see <https://www.cse.buffalo.edu/~eblanton/>.