

# Memory and Pointers

CSE 220: Systems Programming

Ethan Blanton & Carl Alphonse

Department of Computer Science and Engineering  
University at Buffalo



# Memory

Memory on POSIX systems is data storage identified by [address](#).

All of the data accessible to your C program has an address.¶

The CPU uses this address to retrieve data from memory.

# C/POSIX Memory Model

On a **POSIX system**, every process appears to have **its own memory**.

This memory ranges from address **zero** to the **maximum allowable address**.

It may be the case that **not all of it is available**, however!

On Unix systems, the usage of that memory is predictable.¶

# Pointers

C pointers are variables that hold memory addresses.

This lets your program interact with memory explicitly.

Pointers are very powerful but inherently unsafe tools.

The C compiler doesn't know which pointers are valid!

Most non-trivial data structures in C use pointers.

# Time Management

Make progress by **setting a timer**.

Set a timer for **15 minutes**. When it expires:

- Are you still working?
  - If not, why not? Fix the problem!
- Are you **making progress**?
  - If not, why not? Fix the problem!

**Time spent** is different from **results achieved**.

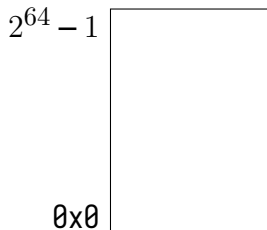
# Memory Addresses

On our platform, you can consider memory as a **large array**.

A **pointer** is an **index** into that array.

If memory starts at address 0, a pointer with value  $p$  is the  $p$ 'th byte of that array.

Note that **any given byte may not exist!**



# Pointer Concepts

A pointer:

- Is an **address**
- Allows the memory at that address to be **manipulated**
- **Associates a type** with the manipulated memory

Remember, to the computer, **memory is just bits**.

**Programmers** supply the meaning.

The **special pointer value** NULL represents an **invalid address**.

# Pointer Syntax — Declaration

A pointer variable is marked with `*`.

```
char *str;
```

`str` is a variable which stores a [pointer to char](#).

(`char *` is the [idiomatic string type](#) in C.)

A pointer variable may be marked `const`, in which case [the memory it points to is const](#).<sup>1</sup>

```
const char *str;
```

It is a good idea to [mark pointer variables const](#) if you don't intend to modify their contents.

<sup>1</sup>There is another type of constant pointer that we won't talk about now.



# Pointer Types

What is a **pointer to char** anyway?

An **address** of a **character-size integer**.

```
char *str = "Hello";
```

This says:

- str contains an **address**
- The data at the object stored in str is of type **char**

# Addresses

Pointer variables must store a **valid address** to be used.¶

There are **limited opportunities** to create valid addresses:

- **Acquire the address** of a variable
- Request **new memory** from the system
- Create a **string or array constant**
- **Calculation** from other addresses

Pointers created in other manners **probably are not valid**.

# Pointer Syntax — Taking Addresses

A pointer may be **created from a variable** using **unary &**. This is sometimes called the **address-of operator**.

```
int x = 42;  
int *px = &x;
```

px now stores a **pointer to x**.  
(More on the implications of this later.)

# Dereferencing a Pointer

Dereferencing a pointer is **accessing the data it points to**.

It can be dereferenced to **read** or **modify** that data.

Dereferencing an **invalid pointer** is **undefined behavior**.

This will **often result in a segmentation fault**, but may silently corrupt memory!

# Pointer Syntax — Dereferencing

A pointer is **dereferenced** with `*`, `->`, or `[]`.  
(More on `->` when we get to structures.)

The `*` notation reads **the value at the pointer address**.

```
int *px = &x;  
int y = *px;
```

- The variable `px` is initialized with a **pointer to `x`, an integer**.
- The variable `y` is created as an integer.
- `y` is assigned **the value of `x` by dereferencing `px` with `*`**.

# Pointer Syntax — Dereferencing

A pointer can also be dereferenced like an array, with `[]`.

```
y = px[0];
```

- This is exactly the same as `y = *px;`.

```
y = px[1];
```

- This treats `px` like an array, and retrieves the second element.
- We will explore how this works in more detail later.

# Pointers and Arrays

Arrays and pointers are **closely related** in C.

You can often think of an array variable as a **pointer to the first array element**, and a pointer variable as an array.

However, they are **not the same**.

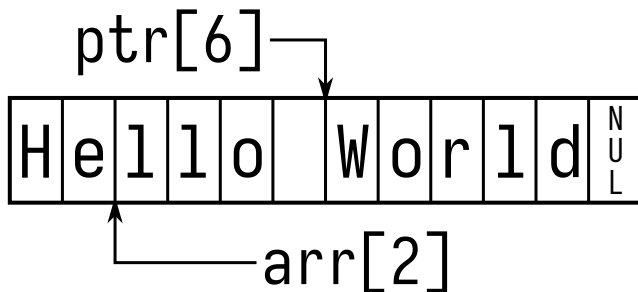
In **both cases**, dereferencing with `[i]` says

*...add  $i$  times the size of the type of this variable to the base address (first element of the array or pointer value), then treat the memory at that location as if it is of the type of this variable.*

# Pointers and Arrays

Consider:

```
char arr[] = "Hello World";  
char *ptr = arr;
```





# Arrays Are Not Pointers

```
char arr[] = "string";  
char arr2[] = arr;
```

“error: invalid initializer”

```
char arr[] = "Hello World";  
char *ptr = arr;
```

ptr points to arr[0].

# Exploring Pointers

We will explore pointers in a program and the debugger.

# Summary

- Memory locations are identified by **addresses**.
- Addresses are **integers**.
- Our system's memory is **like one large array**.
- POSIX processes **appear to have their own dedicated memory**.
- Pointers **hold addresses** and **have types**.
- Pointers and arrays are **closely related**, but **not the same**.

# References I

## Required Readings

- [1] Brian W. Kernighan and Dennis M. Ritchie. *The C Programming Language*. Second Edition. Chapter 5: Intro, 5.1-5.4. Prentice Hall, 1988.

# License

Copyright 2019–2023 Ethan Blanton, All Rights Reserved.  
Copyright 2022, 2023 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/>.