

Process Anatomy

CSE 220: Systems Programming

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Processes

What is a **process**?

From the text:

[A] process is an instance of a program in execution.

If a **program** is a set of machine instructions, a **process** is:

- Those instructions
- The memory they use
- The system resources they access
- ...

Programs

Source code is compiled into an executable.

The program that a process runs is loaded from an executable. Once loaded, the system provides an execution environment.

Unix Processes

A Unix process is **protected** from other processes:

- It has its own memory.
- It **appears** to execute on a dedicated CPU.
- The system services it uses are dedicated to it.

Hardware assistance is required to maintain this environment.

In particular, **virtual memory** provides the illusion of a private, contiguous memory space.

Basic Layout

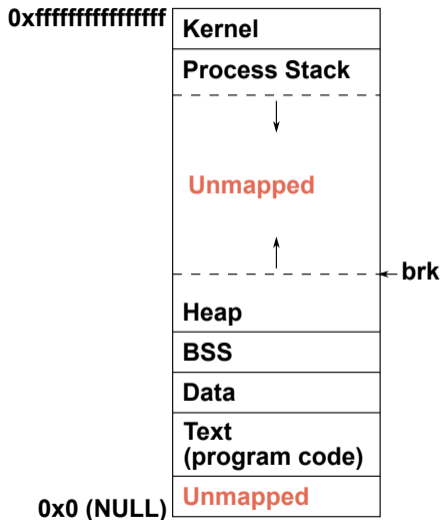
A process's memory is divided into **sections**.

These sections represent **different types of information**.

Some sections come from the **executable**.

Some sections are created at **run time**.

The **lowest addresses** are **not used** — specifically so that NULL remains invalid!



Static Data

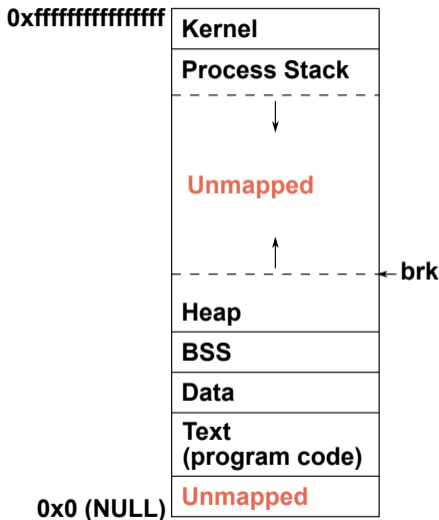
The **lowest sections** are known at compile time.

The **text** section is the **executable code**.

The **data** and **BSS** (“block started by symbol”) sections are **global and static local variables**.

Variables in the data section **have initialized values in the source code**.

Variables in the BSS **do not**.



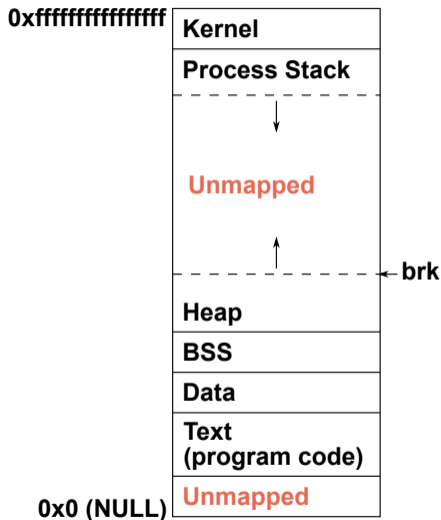
Dynamic Data

The **middle sections** are allocated dynamically as the program runs.

The **heap** is managed by the **dynamic allocator** (`malloc()`).

The **stack** contains **local variables** and information necessary for function calls.

These sections begin with **zero size** and grow as needed during execution.



Using Sections

Section locations can be **valuable debugging information**.

The precise locations of sections **will vary**.

You can assume their **relative positions**, however!

Recognizing whether a pointer is on the stack, on the heap, or in the data section **can be very valuable**.

Recognizing that **very small pointers** are invalid is even more valuable!

Example Layout

```
char *string = "hello";  
int iSize;
```

```
char *f(void) {  
    char *p;  
    iSize = 8;  
    p = malloc(iSize);  
    return p;  
}
```

Consider this function.

Example Layout

```
char *string = "hello";  
int iSize;
```

```
char *f(void) {  
    char *p;  
    iSize = 8;  
    p = malloc(iSize);  
    return p;  
}
```

These components are stored in the [text section](#), created by the compiler at compile time.

Example Layout

```
char *string = "hello";  
int iSize;
```

```
char *f(void) {  
    char *p;  
    iSize = 8;  
    p = malloc(iSize);  
    return p;  
}
```

This variable is stored in the [data section](#), initialized by the compiler at compile time.

Example Layout

```
char *string = "hello";  
int iSize;
```

```
char *f(void) {  
    char *p;  
    iSize = 8;  
    p = malloc(iSize);  
    return p;  
}
```

This variable is stored in the **BSS**, provisioned at compile time and **set to zero** at run time.

Example Layout

```
char *string = "hello";  
int iSize;
```

```
char *f(void) {  
    char *p;  
    iSize = 8;  
    p = malloc(iSize);  
    return p;  
}
```

This variable is stored on the [stack](#), created by the compiled code at run time.

Example Layout

```
char *string = "hello";  
int iSize;
```

```
char *f(void) {  
    char *p;  
    iSize = 8;  
    p = malloc(iSize);  
    return p;  
}
```

This memory is stored on the [heap](#), allocated at run time and its address assigned to a variable on the stack.

Static Allocations

The static allocations, the **data** and **BSS** sections, are created when the program starts.

The data section is **copied from the executable** into memory.

The BSS is **set to its final size and cleared to binary zeroes**.

The sizes of both of these sections are **known at compile time**.

This memory is released **only when the program exits!**

Dynamic Allocations

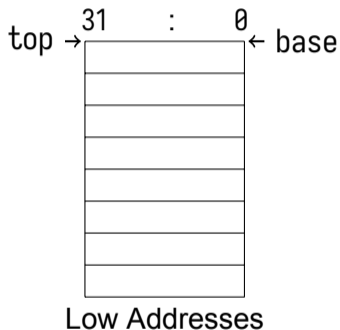
The dynamic allocations, the `heap` and `stack` sections, are resized as the program runs.

Stack frames are created and destroyed as functions are called.

Heap memory is allocated with `malloc()` *et al.* and freed with `free()`.

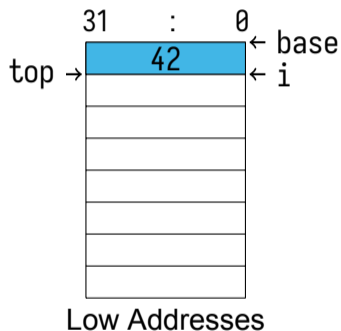
Un-freed memory is `released by the OS when the program ends.`

Stack Operations



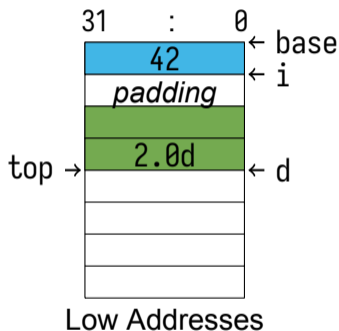
(An empty stack; each row is 32 bits.)

Stack Operations



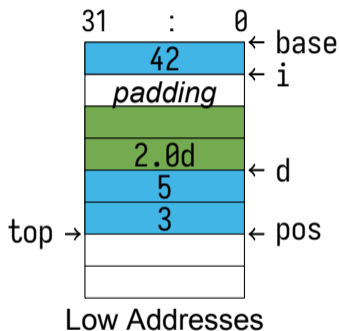
```
push int i = 42;
```

Stack Operations



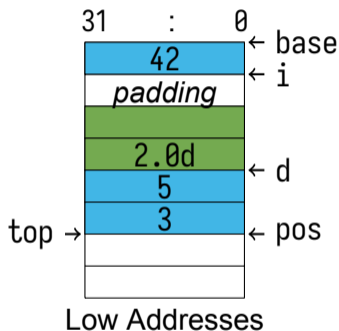
```
push double d = 2.0;  
(Remember padding!)
```

Stack Operations



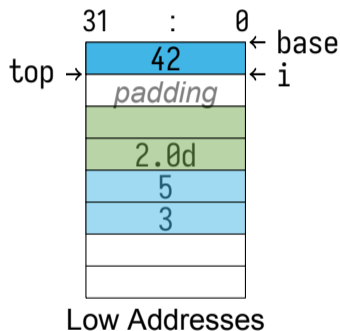
```
push struct { int x; int y; } pos = { x = 3, y = 5 };
```

Stack Operations



Stack items are typically referenced with respect to its **top**.
E.g., d is at $\text{top} + 8$

Stack Operations



pop 20 bytes to remove pos and d

Note that **the unused data remains present on the stack.**

Variable Declarations

A **variable declaration** does two things:

- Asks the compiler to **reserve space on the stack** for data
- **Names** the location of that data

```
int array[32];
```

“Make space for 32 integers and call that space array.”

Variable Declarations

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int array[32];
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“Make space for 32 integers and **call that space array.**”

Variable Declarations

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- **Names** the location of that data

```
int array[32];
```

“Make space for 32 integers and call that space array.”

Every **non-static local variable** is an automatic variable.

Automatic Variable Lifetime

Automatic variables are:

- Guaranteed to be **allocated** before they **are first referenced**
- Guaranteed to be **valid** until their **enclosing block is done**

In many cases they are created when the **function is entered**.

Placing automatic variables on the stack allows this.

Automatic Variable Placement

Automatic variables **may be allocated anywhere.**

The programmer **cannot predict** their order or location.

They may only be in registers!

Their structure **will be preserved.**

Automatic Variable Placement

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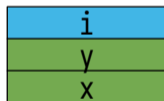
The programmer **cannot predict** their order or location.

They may only be in registers!

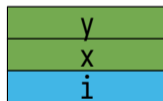
Their structure **will be preserved**.

```
int i;
struct {
    int x; int y;
} pos;
```

Valid



Valid



Invalid



Function Call Nesting

Note that:

- Function calls form a **tree** over the life of a program
- Function calls form a **stack** at any point in time

This is because:

- A function may call **many functions** consecutively
- A function can call **only one function** at a time

These properties directly affect the program stack.

Function Calls

At its simplest, a function call consists of:

- A **jump** to a new program location
- Execution of the **function code**
- A **jump back** to the calling location

However, **many function calls are more complicated**. They may:

- Allocate **automatic variables**
- Call other functions
- Temporarily save registers
- ...

In these cases, functions require a **stack frame**.

Stack Frames

A **stack frame**¹ holds information for a **single function invocation**.

While the details vary by platform, it will include:

- Saved processor registers
- Local variables for the **current function**
- Arguments for any **called function**
- The **return location** for any called function

We will discuss all of these **except saved processor registers**.
(Maybe we'll get to those later.)

¹You will sometimes see this called an **activation record**.

Local Variables

We have previously discussed automatic variables.

Often, **all local variables** for a function are allocated together.

When the function is entered, it will immediately **move the top of the stack** to make room for its local storage.

This portion of the stack frame is then of **fixed size**.

Its size is often **not saved**, but recorded in the program instructions **by the compiler**.

The location of **individual variables** are likewise recorded.

Function Arguments

The platform **ABI** will determine how arguments are passed.

Normally, it is a combination of **registers** and **stack space**.

On x86-64 Linux, **the first six 64-bit values** will be in registers.

Any additional arguments are **pushed onto the stack**.

Therefore, **many functions have no arguments on the stack**.

Function Arguments Layout

If function arguments are pushed onto the stack, they are normally pushed **in reverse order**.

That is, the **first function argument** is **closest to the top**.

Among other reasons, this allows for **a variable number of arguments**.

Consider printf: it takes 1 or more arguments.

The first format argument **tells it how many**.

The Program Counter

The other major item that must be tracked for the function call stack is the **program counter**.

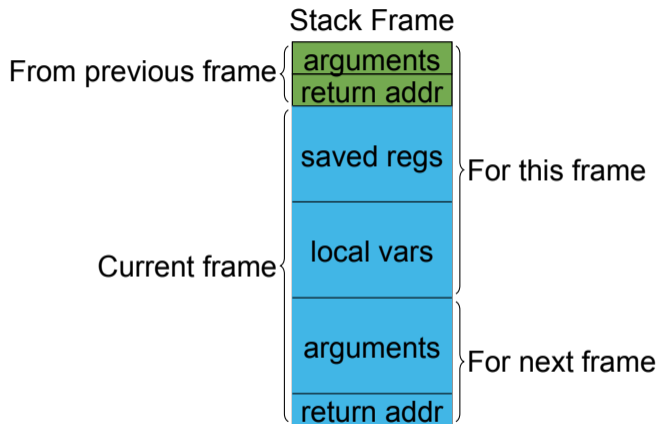
The **program counter** is the **address of the machine instruction** the processor is **currently executing**.

For a function call:

- the current program counter is **pushed** before jumping to the called function
- the called function **pops** the program counter in order to return

On some architectures there is a **dedicated instruction** for this.

A Stack Frame

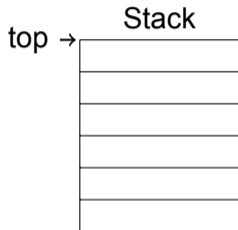


(Exactly which elements are part of which frame is debatable.)

A Call Stack

```
void foo() {  
    int i = 3;  
  
    bar(i);  
    /* ... */  
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {  
    int j = 2;  
  
    i = 5 + j;  
}
```



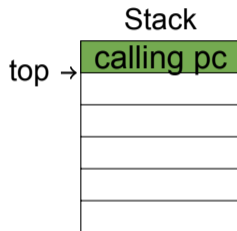
A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;

    bar(i);
    /* ... */
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;

    i = 5 + j;
}
```



call foo()

A Call Stack

```

void foo() {
    int i = 3;

    bar(i);
    /* ... */
}

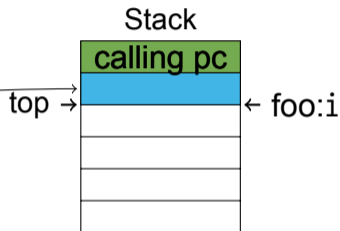
```

```

void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;

    i = 5 + j;
}

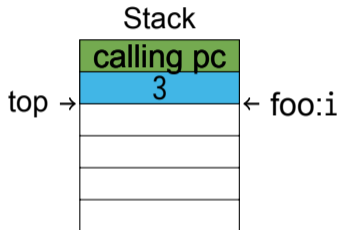
```



Reserve space for foo()'s locals

A Call Stack

```
void foo() {  
    int i = 3;  
  
    bar(i);  
    /* ... */  
}  
  
void bar(int i) {  
    int j = 2;  
  
    i = 5 + j;  
}
```



Execute foo()

A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;
```

```
    bar(i);
```

```
    /* ... */
```

```
}
```

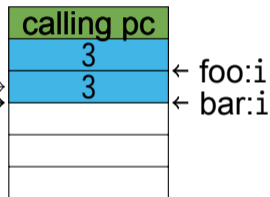
```
void bar(int i) {
```

```
    int j = 2;
```

```
    i = 5 + j;
```

```
}
```

Stack



Execute foo();
prepare to call bar()

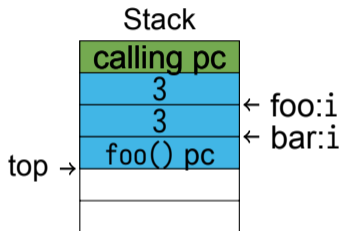
A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;

    bar(i);
    /* ... */
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;

    i = 5 + j;
}
```



Push PC; call bar()

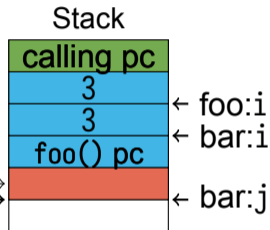
A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;

    bar(i);
    /* ... */
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;

    i = 5 + j;
}
```



Reserve space for bar()'s locals

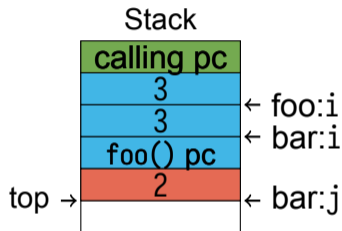
A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;

    bar(i);
    /* ... */
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;

    i = 5 + j;
}
```



Execute bar()

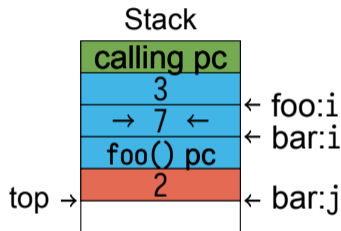
A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;

    bar(i);
    /* ... */
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;

    i = 5 + j;
}
```



Execute bar()

A Call Stack

```
void foo() {
    int i = 3;
```

```
    bar(i);
```

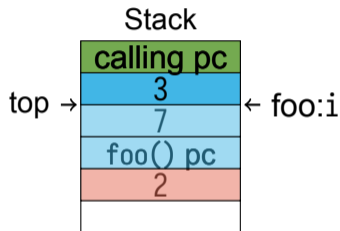
```
    /* ... */
```

```
}
```

```
void bar(int i) {
    int j = 2;
```

```
    i = 5 + j;
```

```
}
```



Return from bar();
 Pop bar()'s stack frame;
 Execute foo()

Summary

- POSIX programs are laid out in sections
- The stack grows downward
- Automatic variables are allocated on the stack
- Stack frames track function calls
- Items removed from the stack are not cleared
- Stack-allocated arguments are how C is call-by-value

References I

Required Readings

- [1] Randal E. Bryant and David R. O'Hallaron. *Computer Science: A Programmer's Perspective*. Third Edition. Chapter 3: 3.7 Intro, 3.7.1. Pearson, 2016.
- [2] Brian W. Kernighan and Dennis M. Ritchie. *The C Programming Language*. Second Edition. Chapter 4. Prentice Hall, 1988.

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