Programming Practices

CSE 220: Systems Programming

Ethan Blanton & Carl Alphonce

Department of Computer Science and Engineering

University at Buffalo

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';        // WHYYYYYYYYY???????
```

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.

License

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