
OBDA Access HOWTO

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This is a HOWTO written in DocBook (XML) that explains how to set up and use the Open
Biological Database Access system.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Using the OBDA Registry System	2
3. Installing the Registry File	2
4. Modifying the Search Path	2
5. Format of the Registry File	3
6. The Protocol Tag	4
7. The Location Tag	4
8. Other Tags	4
9. Installing Local Databases	4
10. Writing code to use the Registry	5
11. Using biogetseq to Access Registry Databases	5

1. Introduction

Importing sequences with annotations is a central part of most bioinformatics tasks. Bioperl supports importing sequences from indexed flat-files, local relational databases and remote (internet) databases. Previously, separate programming syntax was required for each of these types of data access (see for example Section III.1 of the Bioperl tutorial). In addition, if one wanted to change one's mode of sequence-data acquisition (for example, by implementing a local relational database version of Genbank when previously the data had been stored in an indexed flat-file) one had to rewrite all of the data-access subroutines in one's application code.

The Open Biological Database Access (OBDA) System was designed so that one could use the same application code to access data from all three of the database types by simply changing a few lines in a configuration file. This makes application code more portable and easier to maintain. This document shows how to set up the required OBDA-registry configuration file and how to access data from the databases referred to in the configuration file using a perl script as well as from the command line. The Web site for OBDA is *obda.open-bio.org* [<http://obda.open-bio.org>].

Note

Accessing data via the OBDA system is optional in Bioperl. It is still possible to access sequence data via the old database-format-specific modules such as `Bio::Index::Fasta` or `Bio::DB::Fasta`.

2. Using the OBDA Registry System

The OBDA BioDirectory Registry is a platform-independent system for specifying how BioPerl programs find sequence databases. It uses both local and site-wide configuration files, known as the registry, which define one or more databases and the access methods to use to access them.

For instance, you might start out by accessing sequence data over the web, and later decide to install a locally mirrored copy of GenBank. By changing one line in the registry file, all `Bio{Perl,Java,Python,Ruby}` applications will start using the mirrored local copy automatically - no source code changes are necessary.

3. Installing the Registry File

The registry file should be named `seqdatabase.ini`. By default, it should be installed in one or more of the following locations:

```
$HOME/.bioinformatics/seqdatabase.ini
/etc/bioinformatics/seqdatabase.ini
```

The `Bio{Perl,Java,Python,Ruby}` registry-handling code will initialize itself from the registry file located in the home directory first, and then it will read the system-wide default in `/etc`. Windows Perl users should make sure to set the `$HOME` variable, otherwise the `seqdatabase.ini` file may not be found. Unix users need not do this since the code will use the `getpwuid()` method.

If a local registry file cannot be found, the registry-handling code will attempt to copy the file located at this URL to a `$HOME/.bioinformatics` directory:

```
http://www.open-bio.org/registry/seqdatabase.ini
```

4. Modifying the Search Path

The registry file search path can be modified by setting the environment variable `OBDA_SEARCH_PATH`. This variable is a semicolon-delimited string of directories and URLs, for example:

```
OBDA_SEARCH_PATH=/home/lstein/;http://foo.org/
```

Important

Note that the fact that the search path is for an entire file (seqdatabase.ini) rather than for single entry (e.g. 'genbank') means that you have to copy any default values you want to keep from the (old) default configuration file to your new configuration file.

For example, say you have been using biofetch with the default configuration file `http://www.open-bio.org/registry/seqdatabase.ini` for all your sequence-data retrieval. If you now install a local copy of genbank, your local `seqdatabase.ini` must not only have a section indicating that the genbank copy is local but it must have sections configuring the web access for all the other databases you use, since `http://www.open-bio.org/registry/seqdatabase.ini` will no longer be found in a registry-file search.

5. Format of the Registry File

The registry file is a simple text file, as shown in the following example:

```
VERSION=1.00

[embl]
protocol=biofetch
location=http://www.ebi.ac.uk/cgi-bin/dbfetch
dbname=embl

[swissprot]
protocol=biofetch
location=http://www.ebi.ac.uk/cgi-bin/dbfetch
dbname=swall
```

The first line is the registry format version number in the format `VERSION=X.XX`. The current version is 1.00.

The rest of the file is composed of simple sections, formatted as:

```
[database-name]
tag=value
tag=value

[database-name]
tag=value
tag=value
```

Each section starts with a symbolic database service name enclosed in square brackets. Service names are case-insensitive. The remainder of the section is followed by a series of `tag=value` pairs that configure access to the service.

Database-name sections can be repeated, in which case the client should try each service in turn from top to bottom.

The options under each section must have two non-optional `tag=value` lines being

```
protocol="protocol-type"
location="location-string"
```

6. The Protocol Tag

The protocol tag species what access mode to use. Currently it can be one of:

```
flat
biofetch
biosql
```

"flat" is used to fetch sequences from local flat files that have been indexed using BerkeleyDB or binary search indexing.

"biofetch" is used to fetch sequences from web-based databses. Due to restrictions on the use of these databases, this is recommended only for lightweight applications.

"biosql" fetches sequences from BioSQL databases. To use this module you will need to have an instantiated relational database conforming to the BioSQL schema, and install the bioperl-db distribution.

Important

Support for the biosql protocol is disabled as of Bioperl version 1.4. We hope to remedy this in a subsequent release.

7. The Location Tag

The location tag tells the bioperl sequence fetching code where the database is located. Its interpretation depends on the protocol chosen. For example, it might be a directory on the local file system, or a remote URL. See below for protocol-specific details.

8. Other Tags

Any number of additional tag values are allowed. The number and nature of these tags depends on the access protocol selected. Some protocols require no additional tags, whereas others will require several.

Table 1. OBDA Protocols

9. Installing Local Databases

If you are using the biofetch protocol, you're all set. You can start reading sequences immediately. For the flat protocol, you will need to create and initialize a local database. See the following documentation on how to do this:

flat protocol: *Flat Databases HOWTO* [http://bioperl.org/HOWTOs/Flat_Databases/index.html]

biosql protocol: BioSQL INSTALL (from the biosql-schema package, available at obda.open-bio.org [<http://obda.open-bio.org/>]). Download the Biosql tar file to view all the documentation.

Important

Support for the biosql protocol in OBDA is disabled as of Bioperl version 1.4. We hope to remedy this in a subsequent release.

Once the flat database is created you can configure your `seqdatabase.ini` file. Let's say that you have used the `bioflat_index.pl` script to create the flat database and a new directory called "ppp" has been created in your `/home/sally/bioinf/` directory (and the `ppp/` directory contains the `config.dat` file). Your `sequence.ini` entry should contain these lines:

```
protocol=flat
location=/home/sally/bioinf
dbname=ppp
```

The "database-name" can be any useful name, it does not have to refer to existing files or directories, but the "dbname" should be the name of the newly created directory.

10. Writing code to use the Registry

Once you've set up the OBDA registry file, accessing sequence data from within a perl script is simple. The following example shows how; note that nowhere in the script do you explicitly specify whether the data is stored in a flat file, a local relational database or a database on the internet.

To use the registry from a Perl script, use the following idiom:

```
1 use Bio::DB::Registry;
2 $registry = Bio::DB::Registry->new;
3 $db = $registry->get_database('embl');
4 $seq = $db->get_seq_by_acc("J02231");
5 print $seq->seq, "\n";
```

In lines 1 and 2, we bring in the `Bio::DB::Registry` module and create a new `Bio::DB::Registry` object. We then ask the registry to return a database accessor for the symbolic data source "embl", which must be defined in an [embl] section in the `seqdatabase.ini` registry file.

The returned accessor is a `Bio::DB::RandomAccessI` object (see the appropriate manual page), which has just three methods:

```
$db->get_seq_by_id($id);
$db->get_seq_by_acc($acc);
$db->get_seq_by_version($versioned_acc);
```

These methods return `Bio::Seq` objects by searching for their primary IDs, accession numbers and accession.version numbers respectively. The returned objects have all the methods defined by `Bio::Seq` (see the appropriate manual page, online at *doc.bioperl.org* [<http://doc.bioperl.org>]). In line 5, we call the sequence object's `seq()` method to fetch and print out the DNA or protein string.

11. Using biogetseq to Access Registry Databases

As a convenience, the Bioperl distribution includes the script `biogetseq.PLS` that enables one to have OBDA access to sequence data from the command line. It's located in the `scripts/DB` directory of the bioperl distribution (it may also have been installed in your system if you asked for a script installation after 'make install'. Move or add it into your path to run it. You can get this help text by running it with no arguments:

```
Usage: biogetseq --dbname embl --format embl --namespace acc id [ id ... ]*
       dbname defaults to embl
```

```
format defaults to embl
namespace defaults to 'acc' ['id', 'acc', 'version']
rest of the arguments is a list of ids in the given namespace
```

If you have a set of ids you want to fetch from EMBL database, you just give them as space-separated parameters:

```
% biogetseq J02231 A21530 A10516
```

The output is directed to STDOUT, so it can be redirected to a file. The options can be given in the long "double hyphen" format or abbreviated to one-letter format ("--fasta" or "-f"):

```
% biogetseq -f fasta -n acc J02231 A21530 A10516 > filed.seq
```