When Things Go Wrong: Debugging

Jamie Saxon

Introduction to Programming for Public Policy

October 12, 2016

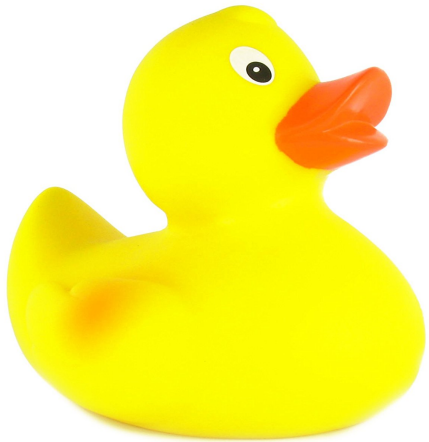
Debugging

> Everyone knows that debugging is twice as hard as writing a program in the first place. So if you're as clever as you can be when you write it, how will you ever debug it?
>
> – Brian Kernighan

- Bugs are inevitable; debugging is hard.
- Let's talk briefly about how to deal with bugs.

Steps

1. **Read the error!** Python tells you the location of and code for syntactical errors. That may be enough.
2. If you don't understand the error, google it.
3. For semantic errors, add lots of `print` statements, near where you believe the code is failing, to understand the state of the program.
   - Or, possibly, use `pdb`: covered next.
4. Build the minimal piece of code that reproduces the bug.
   - If your 'minimal example' works, then build up from there.
5. Explain your code to a friend (or an inanimate object = duck).



The Python Debugger

A fast way to see what the computer's actual state is to use pdb

```
python -m pdb jamie_spirograph.py
```

n: to go to next line of code

l: list source code for the current file (or `ll`).

b: set a breakpoint

c: continue debugging until you hit a breakpoint

s: step into a function

p: to print the value of an expression in the current context

If you are still lost, ask! (But ask well!)

- Many forums where you can get help, but they can be snarky.
  - In this class, we have Piazza; in the real world, stack**overflow**.
  - Of course – start by searching the forum (indexed on google).
- A few tips for good questions: [1, 2, 3, 4]
  - Ask in public, in the right place. Tag it so people can find it.
  - Meaningful subject line: 'python problem' or 'help!' don't cut it.
  - Be specific about what you wanted (what are you trying to do), expected from the program, and got.
  - Provide your minimal example, so others can reproduce your error.
  - List the steps you've already tried (demonstrate commitment).
- Good questions get answered; bad ones get **LMGTFY** (or RTFM).