Python for Informatics

Exploring Information

Version 0.0.1

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Charles Severance

Preface

Python for Informatics: Remixing an Open Book

It is quite natural for academics who are continuously told to "publish or perish" to want to always create something from scratch that is their own fresh creation. This book is an experiment in not starting from scratch, but instead "re-mixing" the book titled *Think Python: How to Think Like a Computer Scientist* written by Allen B. Downey, Jeff Elkner and others.

In December of 2009, I was preparing to teach **SI502 - Networked Programming** at the University of Michigan for the fifth semester in a row and decided it was time to write a Python textbook that focused on exploring data instead of understanding algorithms and abstractions. My goal in SI502 is to teach people life-long data handling skills using Python. Few of my students were planning to be be professional computer programmers - instead, they planned be librarians, managers, lawyers, biologists, economists, etc. who happenned to want to skillfully use technology in their chosen field.

I never seemed to find the perfect data-oriented Python book for my course so I set out to write just such a book. Luckily at a faculty meeting three weeks before I was about to start my new book from scratch over the holiday break, Dr. Atul Prakash showed me the *Think Python* book which he had used to teach his Python course that semester.

Think Python follows the structure of most introductory Computer Science textbooks. It is a well-written text with a focus on short, direct explanations and ease of learning.

The book was available under the GNU Free Documentation License so I had all the permission I needed to use the book as the base material for my book. As a courtesy, I sent a note to Allen and Cambridge Press letting them know what I was about to do to their book.

I expect that by the time I am done with *Python for Informatics* over fifty percent of the book will be new. The overall structure will be changed to get to doing data analysis problems as quickly as possible and have a series of running examples and exercises about data analysis. Then I will add chapters on regular expressions, data visualization, working with spreadsheet data, structured query launguage using SQLite, web scraping, and calling REST-based Application Program Interfaces.

The ultimate goal in the shift from a Computer Science to an Informatics focus is to pull topics into the first programming class that can be applied even if one chooses not to become a professional programmer.

What is interesting even with this change of focus is how much of the original *Think Python* book material is directly relevant to this book and how much will fit right into *Python for Informatics* with virtually no change.

By starting with the *Think Python* book, I don't have to write the basic descriptions of the Python language or how to debug programs and instead focus on the topical material that is the value-add of *Python for Informatics*.

Students who find this book interesting and want to further explore a career as a professional programmer should probably look at the *Think Python* book. Because there is a lot of overlap between the two books, you will quickly pick up skills in the additional areas of Computer Science which are covered in *Think Python*. And given that the books have a similar writing style and at times have identical text and examples, you should be able to pick up these new topics with a minimum of effort.

I hope that this book serves an example of why open materials are so important to the future of education, and want to thank Allen B. Downey and Cambridge University Press for their forward looking decision to make the book available under an open Copyright. I hope they are pleased with the results of my efforts and I hope that you the reader are pleased with *our* collective efforts.

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December 19, 2009

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Preface for "Think Python"

The strange history of "Think Python"

(Allen B. Downey)

In January 1999 I was preparing to teach an introductory programming class in Java. I had taught it three times and I was getting frustrated. The failure rate in the class was too high and, even for students who succeeded, the overall level of achievement was too low.

One of the problems I saw was the books. They were too big, with too much unnecessary detail about Java, and not enough high-level guidance about how to program. And they all suffered from the trap door effect: they would start out easy, proceed gradually, and then somewhere around Chapter 5 the bottom would fall out. The students would get too much new material, too fast, and I would spend the rest of the semester picking up the pieces.

Two weeks before the first day of classes, I decided to write my own book. My goals were:

- Keep it short. It is better for students to read 10 pages than not read 50 pages.

- Be careful with vocabulary. I tried to minimize the jargon and define each term at first use.

- Build gradually. To avoid trap doors, I took the most difficult topics and split them into a series of small steps.

- Focus on programming, not the programming language. I included the minimum useful subset of Java and left out the rest.

I needed a title, so on a whim I chose *How to Think Like a Computer Scientist*.

My first version was rough, but it worked. Students did the reading, and they understood enough that I could spend class time on the hard topics, the interesting topics and (most important) letting the students practice.

I released the book under the GNU Free Documentation License, which allows users to copy, modify, and distribute the book.

What happened next is the cool part. Jeff Elkner, a high school teacher in Virginia, adopted my book and translated it into Python. He sent me a copy of his translation, and I had the unusual experience of learning Python by reading my own book.

Jeff and I revised the book, incorporated a case study by Chris Meyers, and in 2001 we released *How to Think Like a Computer Scientist: Learning with Python*, also under the GNU Free Documentation License. As Green Tea Press, I published the book and started selling hard copies through Amazon.com and college book stores. Other books from Green Tea Press are available at `greenteapress.com`.

In 2003 I started teaching at Olin College and I got to teach Python for the first time. The contrast with Java was striking. Students struggled less, learned more, worked on more interesting projects, and generally had a lot more fun.

Over the last five years I have continued to develop the book, correcting errors, improving some of the examples and adding material, especially exercises. In 2008 I started work on a major revision— at the same time, I was contacted by an editor at Cambridge University Press who was interested in publishing the next edition. Good timing!

I hope you enjoy working with this book, and that it helps you learn to program and think, at least a little bit, like a computer scientist.

Acknowledgements for "Think Python"

(Allen B. Downey)

First and most importantly, I thank Jeff Elkner, who translated my Java book into Python, which got this project started and introduced me to what has turned out to be my favorite language.

I also thank Chris Meyers, who contributed several sections to *How to Think Like a Computer Scientist*.

And I thank the Free Software Foundation for developing the GNU Free Documentation License, which helped make my collaboration with Jeff and Chris possible.

I also thank the editors at Lulu who worked on *How to Think Like a Computer Scientist*.

I thank all the students who worked with earlier versions of this book and all the contributors (listed in an Appendix) who sent in corrections and suggestions.

And I thank my wife, Lisa, for her work on this book, and Green Tea Press, and everything else, too.

Allen B. Downey
Needham MA

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Contents

Chapter 1

Why should you learn to write programs?

Writing programs (or programming) is a very creative and rewarding activity. You can write programs for many reasons ranging from making your living to solving a difficult data analysis problem to having fun to helping someone else solve a problem. This book assumes that *everyone* needs to know how to program and that once you know how to program, you will figure out what you want to do with your newfound skills.

We are surrounded in our daily lives with computers ranging from laptops to cell phones. We can think of these computers as our "personal assistants" who can take care of many things on our behalf. The hardware in our current-day computers is essentially built to continuously ask us the question, "What would you like me to do next?".
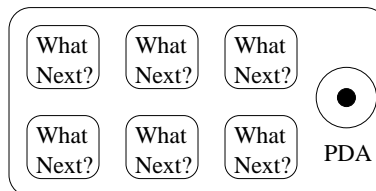
Our computers are fast and have vasts amounts of memory and could be very helpful to us if we only knew the language to speak to explain to the computer what we would like it to "do next". If we knew this language we could tell the computer to do tasks on our behalf that were reptitive. Interestingly, the kinds of things computers can do best are often the kinds of things that we humans find boring and mind-numbing.

For example, look at the first three paragraphs of this chapter and tell me the most commonly used word and how many times the word is used. While you were able to read and understand the words in a few seconds, counting them is almost painful because is is not the kind of problem that human minds are designed to solve. For a computer the opposite is true, reading and understanding text from a piece of paper is hard for a computer to do but counting the words and telling you how many times the most used word was used is very easy for the computer:

```
python words.py
Enter file:words.txt
to 16
```

Our "personal information analysis assistant" quickly told us that the word "to" was used sixteen times in the first three paragraphs of this chapter.

This very fact that computers are good at things that humans are not is why you need to become skilled at talking "computer language". Once you learn this new language, you can delegate mundane tasks to your partner (the computer), leaving more time for you to do the things that you are uniquely suited for. You bring creativity, intuition, and inventiveness to this partnership.

1.1   Creativity and motivation

While this book is not intended for professional programmers, professional programming can be a very rewarding job both financially and personally. Building useful, elegant, and clever programs for others to use is a very creative activity. Your computer or Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) usually contains many different programs from many different groups of programmers, each competing for your attention and interest. They try their best to meet your needs and give you a great user experience in the process. In some situations, when you choose a piece of software, the programmers are directly compensated because of your choice.

If we think of programs as the creative output of groups of programmers, perhaps the following figure is a more sensible version of our PDA:
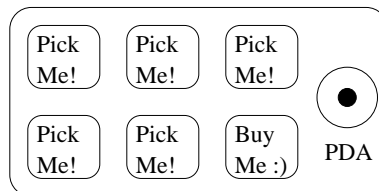
For now, our primary motivation is not to make money or please end-users, but instead for us to be more productive in handling the data and information that we will encounter in our lives. When you first start, you will be both the programmer and end-user of your programs. As you gain skill as a programmer and programming feels more creative to you, your thoughts may turn toward developing programs for others.

1.2   Computer hardware architecture

Before we start learning the language we speak to give instructions to computers to develop software, we need to learn a small amount about how computers are built. If you were to take apart your computer or cell phone and look deep inside, you would find the following parts:
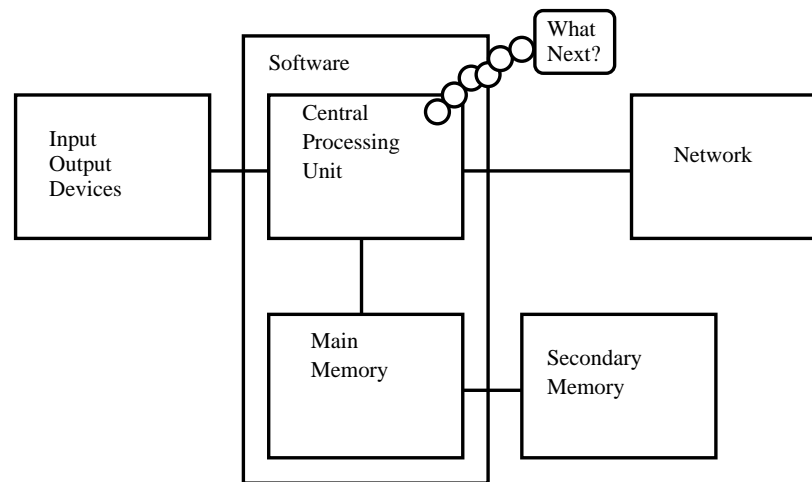
The high-level definitions of these parts are as follows:

- The **Central Processing Unit** (or CPU) is that part of the computer that is built to be obsessed with "what is next?". If your computer is rated at 3.0 Gigahertz, it means that the CPU will ask "What next?" three billion times per second. You are going to have to learn how to talk fast to keep up with the CPU.

- The **Main Memory** is used to store information that the CPU needs in a hurry. The main memory is nearly as fast as the CPU. But the information stored in the main memory vanishes when the computer is turned off.

- The **Secondary Memory** is also used to store information, but it is much slower than the main memory. The advantage of the secondary memory is that it can store information even when there is no power to the computer. Examples of secondary memory are disk drives or flash memory (typically found in USB sticks and portable music players).

- The **Input and Output Devices** are simply our screen, keyboard, mouse, microphone, speaker, touchpad, etc. They are all of the ways we interact with the computer.

- These days, most computers also have a **Network Connection** to retrieve information over a network. We can think of the network as a very slow place to store and retrieve data that might now always be "up". So in a sense, the network is a slower and at times unreliable form of **Secondary Memory**

While most of the detail of how these components work is best left to computer builders, it helps to have a some terminology so we can talk about these different parts as we write our programs.

As a programmer, your job is to use and orchestrate each of these resources to solve the problem that you need solving and analyze the data you need. As a programmer you will mostly be "talking" to the CPU and telling it what to do next. Sometimes you will tell the CPU to use the main memory, secondary memory, network, or the input/output devices.
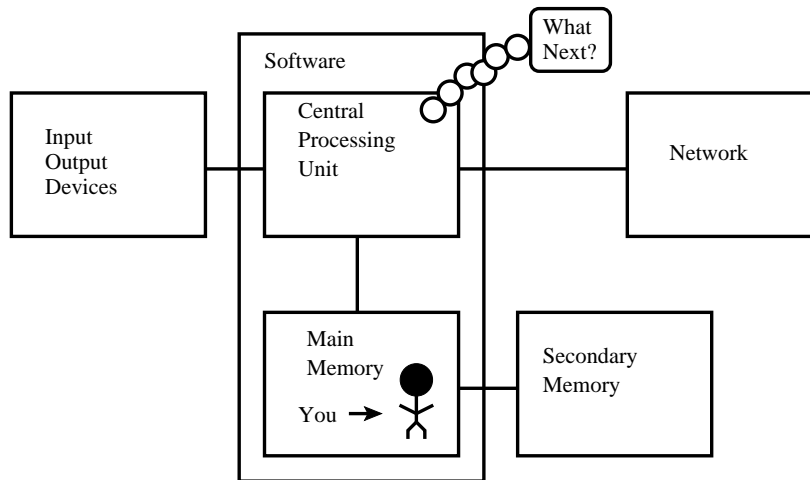
You need to be the person who answers the CPU's "What next?" question. But it would be very uncomfortable to shrink you down to 5mm tall and insert you into the computer just so you could issue a command three billion times per second. So instead, you must write down your instructions in advance. We call these stored instructions a **program** and the act of writing these instructions down and getting the instructions to be correct **programming**.

1.3   Understanding programming

In the rest of this book, we will try to turn you into a person who is skilled in the art of programming. In the end you will be a **programmer** - perhaps not a professional programmer - but at least you will have the skills to look at a data/information analysis problem and develop a program to solve the problem.

In a sense, you need two skills to be a programmer:

- First you need to know the programming language (Python) - you need to know the vocabulary and the grammar. You need to be able spell the words in this new language properly and how to construct well-formed "sentences" in this new languages.

- Second you need to to "tell a story". In writing a story, you combine words and sentences to convey an idea to the reader. There is a skill and art in constructing the story and skill in story writing is improved by doing some writing and getting some feedback. In programming, our program is the "story" and the problem you are trying to solve is the "idea".

Once you learn one programming language such as Python, you will find it much easier to learn a second programming language such as JavaScript or C++. The new programming language has very different vocabulary and grammar but once you learn problem solving skills, they will be the same across all programming languages.

You will learn the "vocabulary" and "sentences" of Python pretty quickly. It will take longer for you to be able to write a coherent program to solve a brand new problem. We teach programming much like we teach writing. We start reading and explaining programs and then we write simple programs and then write increasingly complex programs over time. At some point you "get your muse" and see the patterns on your own and can see more naturally how to take a problem and write a program that solves that problem. And once you get to that point, programming becomes a very pleasant and creative process.

We start with the vocabulary and structure of Python programs. Be patient as the simple examples remind you of when you started reading for the first time.

1.4   The Python programming language

The programming language you will learn is Python. Python is an example of a **high-level language**; other high-level languages you might have heard of are C, C++, Perl, Java, Ruby, and JavaScript. At times, we will include a few examples of the JavaScript language to help cement the basic grammar ideas using two different "vocabularies".

There are also **low-level languages**, sometimes referred to as "machine languages" or "assembly languages." Loosely speaking, computers can only execute programs written in low-level languages. So programs written in a high-level language have to be processed before they can run. This extra processing takes some time, which is a small disadvantage of high-level languages.

The advantages are enormous. First, it is much easier to program in a high-level language. Programs written in a high-level language take less time to write, they are shorter and easier to read, and they are more likely to be correct. Second, high-level languages are **portable**, meaning that they can run on different kinds of computers with few or no modifications. Low-level programs can run on only one kind of computer and have to be rewritten to run on another.

Due to these advantages, almost all programs are written in high-level languages. Low-level languages are used only for a few specialized applications.

Two kinds of programs process high-level languages into low-level languages: **interpreters** and **compilers**. An interpreter reads a high-level program and executes it, meaning that it does what the program says. It processes the program a little at a time, alternately reading lines and performing computations.

A compiler reads the program and translates it completely before the program starts running. In this context, the high-level program is called the **source code**, and the translated program is called the **object code**, **machine code** or the **executable**. Once a program is compiled, you can execute it repeatedly without further translation.
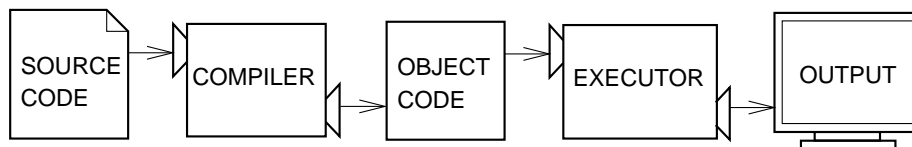
Python is considered an interpreted language because Python programs are executed by an interpreter. There are two ways to use the interpreter: **interactive mode** and **script mode**. In interactive mode, you type Python programs and the interpreter prints the result:

```
>>> 1 + 1
2
>>>
```

The chevron, `>>>`, is the **prompt** the interpreter uses to indicate that it is ready. If you type `1 + 1`, the interpreter replies `2`. The chevron is the Python interpreter's way of asking you, "What do you want me to do next?". You will notice that as soon as Python finishes one statement - it immediately is ready for you to type another statement.

Typing commands into the Python interpreter is a great way to experiment with Python's features, but it is a bad way to type in many commands to solve a more complex problem. When we want to write a program, we use a text editor to write the Python instructions into a file, which is called a **script**. By convention, Python scripts have names that end with `.py`.

To execute the script, you have to tell the interpreter the name of the file. In a UNIX command window, you would type `python dinsdale.py`. In other development environments, the details of executing scripts are different. You can find instructions for your environment at the Python Website `python.org`.

Working in interactive mode is convenient for testing small pieces of code because you can type and execute them immediately. But for anything more than a few lines, you should save your code as a script so you can modify and execute it in the future.

1.5   What is a program?

A **program** is a sequence of instructions that specifies how to perform a computation. The computation might be something mathematical, such as solving a system of equations or finding the roots of a polynomial, but it can also be a symbolic computation, such as searching and replacing text in a document or (strangely enough) compiling a program.

The details look different in different languages, but a few basic instructions appear in just about every language:

input: Get data from the keyboard, a file, or some other device, pausing if necessary.

output: Display data on the screen or send data to a file or other device.

sequential execution: Perform statements one after another in the order they are encountered in the script.

conditional execution: Check for certain conditions and execute or skip a sequence of statements.

repeated execution: Perform some set of statements repeatedly, usually with some variation.

reuse: Write a set of instructions once and give them a name and then reuse those instructions as needed throuhgout your program.,

Believe it or not, that's pretty much all there is to it. Every program you've ever used, no matter how complicated, is made up of instructions that look pretty much like these. So you can think of programming as the process of breaking a large, complex task into smaller and smaller subtasks until the subtasks are simple enough to be performed with one of these basic instructions.

That may be a little vague, but we will come back to this topic when we talk about **algorithms**.

1.6 What is debugging?

Programming is error-prone. For whimsical reasons, programming errors are called **bugs** and the process of tracking them down is called **debugging**.

Three kinds of errors can occur in a program: syntax errors, runtime errors, and semantic errors. It is useful to distinguish between them in order to track them down more quickly.

1.6.1 Syntax errors

Python can only execute a program if the syntax is correct; otherwise, the interpreter displays an error message. **Syntax** refers to the structure of a program and the rules about that structure. For example, parentheses have to come in matching pairs, so (1 + 2) is legal, but 8) is a **syntax error**.

In English readers can tolerate most syntax errors, which is why we can read the poetry of e. e. cummings without spewing error messages. Python is not so forgiving. If there is a single syntax error anywhere in your program, Python will display an error message and quit, and you will not be able to run your program. During the first few weeks of your programming career, you will probably spend a lot of time tracking down syntax errors. As you gain experience, you will make fewer errors and find them faster.

1.6.2 Runtime errors

The second type of error is a runtime error, so called because the error does not appear until after the program has started running. These errors are also called **exceptions** because they usually indicate that something exceptional (and bad) has happened.

Runtime errors are rare in the simple programs you will see in the first few chapters, so it might be a while before you encounter one.

1.6.3 Semantic errors

The third type of error is the **semantic error**. If there is a semantic error in your program, it will run successfully in the sense that the computer will not generate any error messages, but it will not do the right thing. It will do something else. Specifically, it will do what you told it to do but not what you meant for it to do.

The problem is that the program you wrote is not the program you wanted to write. The meaning of the program (its semantics) is wrong. Identifying semantic errors can be tricky because it requires you to work backward by looking at the output of the program and trying to figure out what it is doing.

1.6.4 Experimental debugging

One of the most important skills you will acquire is debugging. Although it can be frustrating, debugging is one of the most intellectually rich, challenging, and interesting parts of programming.

In some ways, debugging is like detective work. You are confronted with clues, and you have to infer the processes and events that led to the results you see.

Debugging is also like an experimental science. Once you have an idea about what is going wrong, you modify your program and try again. If your hypothesis was correct, then you can predict the result of the modification, and you take a step closer to a working program. If your hypothesis was wrong, you have to come up with a new one. As Sherlock Holmes pointed out, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." (A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*)

For some people, programming and debugging are the same thing. That is, programming is the process of gradually debugging a program until it does what you want. The idea is that you should start with a program that does *something* and make small modifications, debugging them as you go, so that you always have a working program.

For example, Linux is an operating system that contains thousands of lines of code, but it started out as a simple program Linus Torvalds used to explore the Intel 80386 chip. According to Larry Greenfield, "One of Linus's earlier projects was a program that would switch between printing AAAA and BBBB. This later evolved to Linux." (*The Linux Users' Guide* Beta Version 1).

Later chapters will make more suggestions about debugging and other programming practices.

1.7   Building "sentences" in Python

The rules (or grammar) of Python are simpler and more precise than the rules of a natural language that we use to speak and write.

Natural languages are the languages people speak, such as English, Spanish, and French. They were not designed by people (although people try to impose some order on them); they evolved naturally.

Formal languages are languages that are designed by people for specific applications. For example, the notation that mathematicians use is a formal language that is particularly good at denoting relationships among numbers and symbols. Chemists use a formal language to represent the chemical structure of molecules. And most importantly:

> **Programming languages are formal languages that have been designed to express computations.**

Formal languages tend to have strict rules about syntax. For example, $3+3 = 6$ is a syntactically correct mathematical statement, but $3+ = 3\$6$ is not. H_2O is a syntactically correct chemical formula, but $_2Zz$ is not.

Syntax rules come in two flavors, pertaining to **tokens** and structure. Tokens are the basic elements of the language, such as words, numbers, and chemical elements. One of the problems with $3+ = 3\$6$ is that \$ is not a legal token in mathematics (at least as far as I know). Similarly, $_2Zz$ is not legal because there is no element with the abbreviation Zz.

The second type of syntax error pertains to the structure of a statement; that is, the way the tokens are arranged. The statement $3+ = 3\$6$ is illegal because even though $+$ and $=$ are legal tokens, you can't have one right after the other. Similarly, in a chemical formula the subscript comes after the element name, not before.

Exercise 1.1 Write a well-structured English sentence with invalid tokens in it. Then write another sentence with all valid tokens but with invalid structure.

When you read a sentence in English or a statement in a formal language, you have to figure out what the structure of the sentence is (although in a natural language you do this subconsciously). This process is called **parsing**.

For example, when you hear the sentence, "The penny dropped," you understand that "the penny" is the subject and "dropped" is the predicate. Once you have parsed a sentence, you can figure out what it means, or the semantics of the sentence. Assuming that you know what a penny is and what it means to drop, you will understand the general implication of this sentence.

Although formal and natural languages have many features in common—tokens, structure, syntax, and semantics—there are some differences:

ambiguity: Natural languages are full of ambiguity, which people deal with by using contextual clues and other information. Formal languages are designed to be nearly or completely unambiguous, which means that any statement has exactly one meaning, regardless of context.

redundancy: In order to make up for ambiguity and reduce misunderstandings, natural languages employ lots of redundancy. As a result, they are often verbose. Formal languages are less redundant and more concise.

literalness: Natural languages are full of idiom and metaphor. If I say, "The penny dropped," there is probably no penny and nothing dropping[1]. Formal languages mean exactly what they say.

People who grow up speaking a natural language—everyone—often have a hard time adjusting to formal languages. In some ways, the difference between formal and natural language is like the difference between poetry and prose, but more so:

Poetry: Words are used for their sounds as well as for their meaning, and the whole poem together creates an effect or emotional response. Ambiguity is not only common but often deliberate.

Prose: The literal meaning of words is more important, and the structure contributes more meaning. Prose is more amenable to analysis than poetry but still often ambiguous.

Programs: The meaning of a computer program is unambiguous and literal, and can be understood entirely by analysis of the tokens and structure.

Here are some suggestions for reading programs (and other formal languages). First, remember that formal languages are much more dense than natural languages, so it takes longer to read them. Also, the structure is very important, so it is usually not a good idea to read from top to bottom, left to right. Instead, learn to parse the program in your head, identifying the tokens and interpreting the structure. Finally, the details matter. Small errors in spelling and punctuation, which you can get away with in natural languages, can make a big difference in a formal language.

1.8 The first program

Traditionally, the first program you write in a new language is called "Hello, World!" because all it does is display the words, "Hello, World!" In Python, it looks like this:

```
print 'Hello, World!'
```

---

[1] This idiom means that someone realized something after a period of confusion.

This is an example of a **print statement**[2], which doesn't actually print anything on paper. It displays a value on the screen. In this case, the result is the words

```
Hello, World!
```

The quotation marks in the program mark the beginning and end of the text to be displayed; they don't appear in the result.

Some people judge the quality of a programming language by the simplicity of the "Hello, World!" program. By this standard, Python does about as well as possible.

1.9 Debugging

It is a good idea to read this book in front of a computer so you can try out the examples as you go. You can run most of the examples in interactive mode, but if you put the code into a script, it is easier to try out variations.

Whenever you are experimenting with a new feature, you should try to make mistakes. For example, in the "Hello, world!" program, what happens if you leave out one of the quotation marks? What if you leave out both? What if you spell `print` wrong?

This kind of experiment helps you remember what you read; it also helps with debugging, because you get to know what the error messages mean. It is better to make mistakes now and on purpose than later and accidentally.

Programming, and especially debugging, sometimes brings out strong emotions. If you are struggling with a difficult bug, you might feel angry, despondent or embarrassed.

There is evidence that people naturally respond to computers as if they were people[3]. When they work well, we think of them as teammates, and when they are obstinate or rude, we respond to them the same way we respond to rude, obstinate people.

Preparing for these reactions might help you deal with them. One approach is to think of the computer as an employee with certain strengths, like speed and precision, and particular weaknesses, like lack of empathy and inability to grasp the big picture.

Your job is to be a good manager: find ways to take advantage of the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses. And find ways to use your emotions to engage with the problem, without letting your reactions interfere with your ability to work effectively.

Learning to debug can be frustrating, but it is a valuable skill that is useful for many activities beyond programming. At the end of each chapter there is a debugging section, like this one, with my thoughts about debugging. I hope they help!

1.10 Glossary

central processing unit: The heart of any computer. It is what runs the software that we write; also called "CPU" or "the processor".

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[2]In Python 3.0, `print` is a function, not a statement, so the syntax is `print('Hello, World!')`. We will get to functions soon!

[3]See Reeves and Nass, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places*.

main memory: Stores programs and data. Main memory loses its information when the power is turned off.

secondary memory: Stores programs and data and retains its information even when the power is turned off. Generally slower than main memory. Examples of secondary memory include disk drives and flash member in USB sticks.

problem solving: The process of formulating a problem, finding a solution, and expressing the solution.

high-level language: A programming language like Python that is designed to be easy for humans to read and write.

low-level language: A programming language that is designed to be easy for a computer to execute; also called "machine code" or "assembly language."

machine code: The lowest level language for software which is the language that is directly executed by the central processing unit (CPU).

portability: A property of a program that can run on more than one kind of computer.

interpret: To execute a program in a high-level language by translating it one line at a time.

compile: To translate a program written in a high-level language into a low-level language all at once, in preparation for later execution.

source code: A program in a high-level language before being compiled.

object code: The output of the compiler after it translates the program.

executable: Another name for object code that is ready to be executed.

prompt: Characters displayed by the interpreter to indicate that it is ready to take input from the user.

script: A program stored in a file (usually one that will be interpreted).

interactive mode: A way of using the Python interpreter by typing commands and expressions at the prompt.

script mode: A way of using the Python interpreter to read and execute statements in a script.

program: A set of instructions that specifies a computation.

algorithm: A general process for solving a category of problems.

bug: An error in a program.

debugging: The process of finding and removing any of the three kinds of programming errors.

syntax: The structure of a program.

syntax error: An error in a program that makes it impossible to parse (and therefore impossible to interpret).

exception: An error that is detected while the program is running.

semantics: The meaning of a program.

semantic error: An error in a program that makes it do something other than what the programmer intended.

natural language: Any one of the languages that people speak that evolved naturally.

formal language: Any one of the languages that people have designed for specific purposes, such as representing mathematical ideas or computer programs; all programming languages are formal languages.

token: One of the basic elements of the syntactic structure of a program, analogous to a word in a natural language.

parse: To examine a program and analyze the syntactic structure.

print statement: An instruction that causes the Python interpreter to display a value on the screen.

1.11   Exercises

Exercise 1.2 Use a web browser to go to the Python Website `python.org`. This page contains information about Python and links to Python-related pages, and it gives you the ability to search the Python documentation.

For example, if you enter `print` in the search window, the first link that appears is the documentation of the `print` statement. At this point, not all of it will make sense to you, but it is good to know where it is.

Exercise 1.3 Start the Python interpreter and type `help()` to start the online help utility. Or you can type `help('print')` to get information about the `print` statement.

If this example doesn't work, you may need to install additional Python documentation or set an environment variable; the details depend on your operating system and version of Python.

Exercise 1.4 Start the Python interpreter and use it as a calculator. Python's syntax for math operations is almost the same as standard mathematical notation. For example, the symbols +, - and / denote addition, subtraction and division, as you would expect. The symbol for multiplication is *.

If you run a 10 kilometer race in 43 minutes 30 seconds, what is your average time per mile? What is your average speed in miles per hour? (Hint: there are 1.61 kilometers in a mile).

Chapter 2

Variables, expressions and statements

2.1   Values and types

A **value** is one of the basic things a program works with, like a letter or a number. The values we have seen so far are 1, 2, and 'Hello, World!'.

These values belong to different **types**: 2 is an integer, and 'Hello, World!' is a **string**, so-called because it contains a "string" of letters. You (and the interpreter) can identify strings because they are enclosed in quotation marks.

The print statement also works for integers.

```
>>> print 4
4
```

If you are not sure what type a value has, the interpreter can tell you.

```
>>> type('Hello, World!')
<type 'str'>
>>> type(17)
<type 'int'>
```

Not surprisingly, strings belong to the type str and integers belong to the type int. Less obviously, numbers with a decimal point belong to a type called float, because these numbers are represented in a format called **floating-point**.

```
>>> type(3.2)
<type 'float'>
```

What about values like '17' and '3.2'? They look like numbers, but they are in quotation marks like strings.

```
>>> type('17')
<type 'str'>
>>> type('3.2')
<type 'str'>
```

They're strings.

When you type a large integer, you might be tempted to use commas between groups of three digits, as in `1,000,000`. This is not a legal integer in Python, but it is legal:

```
>>> print 1,000,000
1 0 0
```

Well, that's not what we expected at all! Python interprets `1,000,000` as a comma-separated sequence of integers, which it prints with spaces between.

This is the first example we have seen of a semantic error: the code runs without producing an error message, but it doesn't do the "right" thing.

2.2 Variables

One of the most powerful features of a programming language is the ability to manipulate **variables**. A variable is a name that refers to a value.

An **assignment statement** creates new variables and gives them values:

```
>>> message = 'And now for something completely different'
>>> n = 17
>>> pi = 3.1415926535897931
```

This example makes three assignments. The first assigns a string to a new variable named `message`; the second gives the integer `17` to `n`; the third assigns the (approximate) value of π to `pi`.

A common way to represent variables on paper is to write the name with an arrow pointing to the variable's value. This kind of figure is called a **state diagram** because it shows what state each of the variables is in (think of it as the variable's state of mind). This diagram shows the result of the previous example:

```
message  ——⟩ 'And now for something completely different'
      n ——⟩ 17
     pi ——⟩ 3.1415926535897931
```

To display the value of a variable, you can use a print statement:

```
>>> print n
17
>>> print pi
3.14159265359
```

The type of a variable is the type of the value it refers to.

```
>>> type(message)
<type 'str'>
>>> type(n)
<type 'int'>
>>> type(pi)
<type 'float'>
```

Exercise 2.1 If you type an integer with a leading zero, you might get a confusing error:

```
>>> zipcode = 02492
                   ^
SyntaxError: invalid token
```

Other numbers seem to work, but the results are bizarre:

```
>>> zipcode = 02132
>>> print zipcode
1114
```

Can you figure out what is going on? Hint: print the values `01`, `010`, `0100` and `01000`.

2.3   Variable names and keywords

Programmers generally choose names for their variables that are meaningful—they document what the variable is used for.

Variable names can be arbitrarily long. They can contain both letters and numbers, but they have to begin with a letter. It is legal to use uppercase letters, but it is a good idea to begin variable names with a lowercase letter (you'll see why later).

The underscore character (_) can appear in a name. It is often used in names with multiple words, such as `my_name` or `airspeed_of_unladen_swallow`.

If you give a variable an illegal name, you get a syntax error:

```
>>> 76trombones = 'big parade'
SyntaxError: invalid syntax
>>> more@ = 1000000
SyntaxError: invalid syntax
>>> class = 'Advanced Theoretical Zymurgy'
SyntaxError: invalid syntax
```

`76trombones` is illegal because it does not begin with a letter. `more@` is illegal because it contains an illegal character, `@`. But what's wrong with `class`?

It turns out that `class` is one of Python's **keywords**. The interpreter uses keywords to recognize the structure of the program, and they cannot be used as variable names.

Python has 31 keywords[1]:

```
and       del       from      not       while
as        elif      global    or        with
assert    else      if        pass      yield
break     except    import    print
class     exec      in        raise
continue  finally   is        return
def       for       lambda    try
```

You might want to keep this list handy. If the interpreter complains about one of your variable names and you don't know why, see if it is on this list.

---

[1]In Python 3.0, `exec` is no longer a keyword, but `nonlocal` is.

2.4   Statements

A statement is a unit of code that the Python interpreter can execute. We have seen two kinds of statements: print and assignment.

When you type a statement in interactive mode, the interpreter executes it and displays the result, if there is one.

A script usually contains a sequence of statements. If there is more than one statement, the results appear one at a time as the statements execute.

For example, the script

```
print 1
x = 2
print x
```

produces the output

```
1
2
```

The assignment statement produces no output.

2.5   Operators and operands

Operators are special symbols that represent computations like addition and multiplication. The values the operator is applied to are called **operands**.

The operators +, -, *, / and ** perform addition, subtraction, multiplication, division and exponentiation, as in the following examples:

```
20+32   hour-1   hour*60+minute   minute/60   5**2   (5+9)*(15-7)
```

In some other languages, ^ is used for exponentiation, but in Python it is a bitwise operator called XOR. I won't cover bitwise operators in this book, but you can read about them at `wiki.python.org/moin/BitwiseOperators`.

The division operator might not do what you expect:

```
>>> minute = 59
>>> minute/60
0
```

The value of `minute` is 59, and in conventional arithmetic 59 divided by 60 is 0.98333, not 0. The reason for the discrepancy is that Python is performing **floor division**[2].

When both of the operands are integers, the result is also an integer; floor division chops off the fraction part, so in this example it rounds down to zero.

If either of the operands is a floating-point number, Python performs floating-point division, and the result is a `float`:

```
>>> minute/60.0
0.98333333333333328
```

---

[2]In Python 3.0, the result of this division is a `float`. The new operator `//` performs integer division.

2.6 Expressions

An **expression** is a combination of values, variables, and operators. A value all by itself is considered an expression, and so is a variable, so the following are all legal expressions (assuming that the variable x has been assigned a value):

```
17
x
x + 17
```

If you type an expression in interactive mode, the interpreter **evaluates** it and displays the result:

```
>>> 1 + 1
2
```

But in a script, an expression all by itself doesn't do anything! This is a common source of confusion for beginners.

Exercise 2.2 Type the following statements in the Python interpreter to see what they do:

```
5
x = 5
x + 1
```

Now put the same statements into a script and run it. What is the output? Modify the script by transforming each *expression* into a print statement and then run it again.

2.7 Order of operations

When more than one operator appears in an expression, the order of evaluation depends on the **rules of precedence**. For mathematical operators, Python follows mathematical convention. The acronym **PEMDAS** is a useful way to remember the rules:

- **P**arentheses have the highest precedence and can be used to force an expression to evaluate in the order you want. Since expressions in parentheses are evaluated first, 2 * (3-1) is 4, and (1+1)**(5-2) is 8. You can also use parentheses to make an expression easier to read, as in (minute * 100) / 60, even if it doesn't change the result.

- **E**xponentiation has the next highest precedence, so 2**1+1 is 3, not 4, and 3*1**3 is 3, not 27.

- **M**ultiplication and **D**ivision have the same precedence, which is higher than **A**ddition and **S**ubtraction, which also have the same precedence. So 2*3-1 is 5, not 4, and 6+4/2 is 8, not 5.

- Operators with the same precedence are evaluated from left to right. So in the expression degrees / 2 * pi, the division happens first and the result is multiplied by pi. To divide by 2π, you can reorder the operands or use parentheses.

2.8   Modulus operator

The **modulus operator** works on integers and yields the remainder when the first operand is divided by the second. In Python, the modulus operator is a percent sign (%). The syntax is the same as for other operators:

```
>>> quotient = 7 / 3
>>> print quotient
2
>>> remainder = 7 % 3
>>> print remainder
1
```

So 7 divided by 3 is 2 with 1 left over.

The modulus operator turns out to be surprisingly useful. For example, you can check whether one number is divisible by another—if x % y is zero, then x is divisible by y.

Also, you can extract the right-most digit or digits from a number. For example, x % 10 yields the right-most digit of x (in base 10). Similarly x % 100 yields the last two digits.

2.9   String operations

In general, you cannot perform mathematical operations on strings, even if the strings look like numbers, so the following are illegal:

```
'2'-'1'      'eggs'/'easy'      'third'*'a charm'
```

The + operator works with strings, but it might not do what you expect: it performs **concatenation**, which means joining the strings by linking them end-to-end. For example:

```
first = 'throat'
second = 'warbler'
print first + second
```

The output of this program is throatwarbler.

The * operator also works on strings; it performs repetition. For example, 'Spam'*3 is 'SpamSpamSpam'. If one of the operands is a string, the other has to be an integer.

This use of + and * makes sense by analogy with addition and multiplication. Just as 4*3 is equivalent to 4+4+4, we expect 'Spam'*3 to be the same as 'Spam'+'Spam'+'Spam', and it is. On the other hand, there is a significant way in which string concatenation and repetition are different from integer addition and multiplication. Can you think of a property that addition has that string concatenation does not?

2.10   Keyboard input

Sometimes we would like to take the value for a variable from the user via their keyboard. Python provides a built-in function called raw_input that gets input from the keyboard[3]. When this function is called, the program stops and waits for the user to type something. When the user presses Return or Enter, the program resumes and raw_input returns what the user typed as a string.

---

[3]In Python 3.0, this function is named input.

```
>>> input = raw_input()
What are you waiting for?
>>> print input
What are you waiting for?
```

Before getting input from the user, it is a good idea to print a prompt telling the user what to input. `raw_input` can take a prompt as an argument:

```
>>> name = raw_input('What...is your name?\n')
What...is your name?
Arthur, King of the Britons!
>>> print name
Arthur, King of the Britons!
```

The sequence \n at the end of the prompt represents a **newline**, which is a special character that causes a line break. That's why the user's input appears below the prompt.

If you expect the user to type an integer, you can try to convert the return value to `int` using the `int()` function:

```
>>> prompt = 'What...is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?\n'
>>> speed = raw_input(prompt)
What...is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?
17
>>> int(speed)
17
```

But if the user types something other than a string of digits, you get an error:

```
>>> speed = raw_input(prompt)
What...is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?
What do you mean, an African or a European swallow?
>>> int(speed)
ValueError: invalid literal for int()
```

We will see how to handle this kind of error later.

2.11 Comments

As programs get bigger and more complicated, they get more difficult to read. Formal languages are dense, and it is often difficult to look at a piece of code and figure out what it is doing, or why.

For this reason, it is a good idea to add notes to your programs to explain in natural language what the program is doing. These notes are called **comments**, and they start with the # symbol:

```
# compute the percentage of the hour that has elapsed
percentage = (minute * 100) / 60
```

In this case, the comment appears on a line by itself. You can also put comments at the end of a line:

```
percentage = (minute * 100) / 60     # percentage of an hour
```

Everything from the # to the end of the line is ignored—it has no effect on the program.

Comments are most useful when they document non-obvious features of the code. It is reasonable to assume that the reader can figure out *what* the code does; it is much more useful to explain *why*.

This comment is redundant with the code and useless:

```
v = 5      # assign 5 to v
```

This comment contains useful information that is not in the code:

```
v = 5      # velocity in meters/second.
```

Good mnemonic variable names can reduce the need for comments, but long names can make complex expressions hard to read, so there is a tradeoff.

2.12 Choosing mnemonic variable names

As long as you follow the simple rules of variable naming, and avoid reserved words, you have a lot of choice when you name your variables. In the beginning, this choice can be confusing both when you read a program and when you write your own programs. For example, the following three programs are identical in terms of what they accomplish, but very different when you read them and try to understand them.

```
a = 35.0
b = 12.50
c = a * b
print c

hours = 35.0
rate = 12.50
pay = hours * rate
print pay

xlq3z9ahd = 35.0
xlq3z9afd = 12.50
xlq3p9afd = xlq3z9ahd * xlq3z9afd
print xlq3p9afd
```

The Python interpreter sees all three of these programs as *exactly the same* but humans see and understand these programs quite differently. Humans will most quickly understand the **intent** of the second program because the programmer has chosen variable names that reflect the intent of the programmer regarding what data will be stored in each variable.

We call these wisely-chosen variable names "menmonic variable names". The word *menmonic*[4] means "memory aid". We choose mnemonic variable names to help us remember why we created the variable in the first place.

While this all sounds great, and it is a very good idea to use mnemonic variable names, mnemonic variable names can get in the way of a beginning programmer's ability to parse and understand code. This is because beginning programmers have not yet memorized the reserved words (there is only

---

[4]See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mnemonic for an extended description of the word "mnemonic".

31 of them) and sometimes variables which have names that are too descriptive start to look like part of the language and not just well-chosen variable names.

Take a quick look at the following Python sample code which loops through some data. We will cover loops soon, but for now try to just puzzle through what this means:

```
for word in words:
    print word
```

What is happening here? Which of the tokens (for, word, in, etc.) are reserved words and which are just variable names? Does Python understand at a fundamental level the notion of words? Beginning programmers have trouble separating what parts of the code *must* be the same as this example and what parts of the code are simply choices made by the programmer.

The following code is equivalent to the above code:

```
for slice in pizza:
    print slice
```

It is easier for the beginning programmer to look at this code and know which parts are reserved words defined by Python and which parts are simply variable names chosen by the programmer. It is pretty clear that Python has no fundamental understanding of pizza and slices and the fact that a pizza consists of a set of one or more slices.

But if our program is truly about reading data and looking for words in the data, `pizza` and `slice` are very un-mnemonic variable names choosing them as variable names distracts from the meaning of the program.

After a pretty short period of time, you will know the most common reserved words and you will start to see the reserved words jumping out at you:

```
for word in words:
    print word
```

The parts of the code that are defined by Python (`for`, `in`, `print`, and `:`) are in bold and the programmer chosen variables (`word` and `words`) are not in bold. Many text editors are aware of Python syntax and will color reserved words differently to give you clues to keep your variables and reserved words separate. After a while you will begin to read Python and quickly determine what is a variable and what is a reserved word.

2.13 Debugging

At this point the syntax error you are most likely to make is an illegal variable name, like `class` and `yield`, which are keywords, or `odd~job` and `US$`, which contain illegal characters.

If you put a space in a variable name, Python thinks it is two operands without an operator:

```
>>> bad name = 5
SyntaxError: invalid syntax
```

For syntax errors, the error messages don't help much. The most common messages are `SyntaxError: invalid syntax` and `SyntaxError: invalid token`, neither of which is very informative.

The runtime error you are most likely to make is a "use before def;" that is, trying to use a variable before you have assigned a value. This can happen if you spell a variable name wrong:

```
>>> principal = 327.68
>>> interest = principle * rate
NameError: name 'principle' is not defined
```

Variables names are case sensitive, so LaTeX is not the same as latex.

At this point the most likely cause of a semantic error is the order of operations. For example, to evaluate $\frac{1}{2\pi}$, you might be tempted to write

```
>>> 1.0 / 2.0 * pi
```

But the division happens first, so you would get $\pi/2$, which is not the same thing! There is no way for Python to know what you meant to write, so in this case you don't get an error message; you just get the wrong answer.

2.14   Glossary

value: One of the basic units of data, like a number or string, that a program manipulates.

type: A category of values. The types we have seen so far are integers (type int), floating-point numbers (type float), and strings (type str).

integer: A type that represents whole numbers.

floating-point: A type that represents numbers with fractional parts.

string: A type that represents sequences of characters.

variable: A name that refers to a value.

mnemonic: A memory aid. We often give variables mnemonic names to help us remember what is stored in the variable.

statement: A section of code that represents a command or action. So far, the statements we have seen are assignments and print statements.

assignment: A statement that assigns a value to a variable.

state diagram: A graphical representation of a set of variables and the values they refer to.

keyword: A reserved word that is used by the compiler to parse a program; you cannot use key-words like if, def, and while as variable names.

operator: A special symbol that represents a simple computation like addition, multiplication, or string concatenation.

operand: One of the values on which an operator operates.

floor division: The operation that divides two numbers and chops off the fraction part.

modulus operator: An operator, denoted with a percent sign (%), that works on integers and yields the remainder when one number is divided by another.

expression: A combination of variables, operators, and values that represents a single result value.

evaluate: To simplify an expression by performing the operations in order to yield a single value.

rules of precedence: The set of rules governing the order in which expressions involving multiple operators and operands are evaluated.

concatenate: To join two operands end-to-end.

comment: Information in a program that is meant for other programmers (or anyone reading the source code) and has no effect on the execution of the program.

2.15   Exercises

Exercise 2.3 Assume that we execute the following assignment statements:

```
width = 17
height = 12.0
delimiter = '.'
```

For each of the following expressions, write the value of the expression and the type (of the value of the expression).

1. `width/2`

2. `width/2.0`

3. `height/3`

4. `1 + 2 * 5`

5. `delimiter * 5`

Use the Python interpreter to check your answers.

Exercise 2.4 Practice using the Python interpreter as a calculator:

1. The volume of a sphere with radius r is $\frac{4}{3}\pi r^3$. What is the volume of a sphere with radius 5? Hint: 392.6 is wrong!

2. Suppose the cover price of a book is $24.95, but bookstores get a 40% discount. Shipping costs $3 for the first copy and 75 cents for each additional copy. What is the total wholesale cost for 60 copies?

3. If I leave my house at 6:52 am and run 1 mile at an easy pace (8:15 per mile), then 3 miles at tempo (7:12 per mile) and 1 mile at easy pace again, what time do I get home for breakfast?

Chapter 3

Conditional execution

3.1 Boolean expressions

A **boolean expression** is an expression that is either true or false. The following examples use the operator ==, which compares two operands and produces `True` if they are equal and `False` otherwise:

```
>>> 5 == 5
True
>>> 5 == 6
False
```

`True` and `False` are special values that belong to the type `bool`; they are not strings:

```
>>> type(True)
<type 'bool'>
>>> type(False)
<type 'bool'>
```

The == operator is one of the **comparison operators**; the others are:

```
    x != y               # x is not equal to y
    x > y                # x is greater than y
    x < y                # x is less than y
    x >= y               # x is greater than or equal to y
    x <= y               # x is less than or equal to y
```

Although these operations are probably familiar to you, the Python symbols are different from the mathematical symbols. A common error is to use a single equal sign (=) instead of a double equal sign (==). Remember that = is an assignment operator and == is a comparison operator. There is no such thing as =< or =>.

3.2 Logical operators

There are three **logical operators**: and, or, and not. The semantics (meaning) of these operators is similar to their meaning in English. For example, x > 0 and x < 10 is true only if x is greater than 0 *and* less than 10.

`n%2 == 0 or n%3 == 0` is true if *either* of the conditions is true, that is, if the number is divisible by 2 *or* 3.

Finally, the `not` operator negates a boolean expression, so `not (x > y)` is true if `x > y` is false, that is, if `x` is less than or equal to `y`.

Strictly speaking, the operands of the logical operators should be boolean expressions, but Python is not very strict. Any nonzero number is interpreted as "true."

```
>>> 17 and True
True
```

This flexibility can be useful, but there are some subtleties to it that might be confusing. You might want to avoid it (unless you know what you are doing).

3.3   Conditional execution

In order to write useful programs, we almost always need the ability to check conditions and change the behavior of the program accordingly. **Conditional statements** give us this ability. The simplest form is the `if` statement:

```
if x > 0:
    print 'x is positive'
```

The boolean expression after the `if` statement is called the **condition**. If it is true, then the indented statement gets executed. If not, nothing happens.

`if` statements have the same structure as function definitions: a header followed by an indented block. Statements like this are called **compound statements**.

There is no limit on the number of statements that can appear in the body, but there has to be at least one. Occasionally, it is useful to have a body with no statements (usually as a place keeper for code you haven't written yet). In that case, you can use the `pass` statement, which does nothing.

```
if x < 0:
    pass           # need to handle negative values!
```

3.4   Alternative execution

A second form of the `if` statement is **alternative execution**, in which there are two possibilities and the condition determines which one gets executed. The syntax looks like this:

```
if x%2 == 0:
    print 'x is even'
else:
    print 'x is odd'
```

If the remainder when `x` is divided by 2 is 0, then we know that `x` is even, and the program displays a message to that effect. If the condition is false, the second set of statements is executed. Since the condition must be true or false, exactly one of the alternatives will be executed. The alternatives are called **branches**, because they are branches in the flow of execution.

3.5   Chained conditionals

Sometimes there are more than two possibilities and we need more than two branches. One way to express a computation like that is a **chained conditional**:

```
if x < y:
    print 'x is less than y'
elif x > y:
    print 'x is greater than y'
else:
    print 'x and y are equal'
```

`elif` is an abbreviation of "else if." Again, exactly one branch will be executed. There is no limit on the number of `elif` statements. If there is an `else` clause, it has to be at the end, but there doesn't have to be one.

```
if choice == 'a':
    print "Bad guess"
elif choice == 'b':
    print "Good guess"
elif choice == 'c':
    print "Close, but not correct"
```

Each condition is checked in order. If the first is false, the next is checked, and so on. If one of them is true, the corresponding branch executes, and the statement ends. Even if more than one condition is true, only the first true branch executes.

3.6   Nested conditionals

One conditional can also be nested within another. We could have written the trichotomy example like this:

```
if x == y:
    print 'x and y are equal'
else:
    if x < y:
        print 'x is less than y'
    else:
        print 'x is greater than y'
```

The outer conditional contains two branches. The first branch contains a simple statement. The second branch contains another `if` statement, which has two branches of its own. Those two branches are both simple statements, although they could have been conditional statements as well.

Although the indentation of the statements makes the structure apparent, **nested conditionals** become difficult to read very quickly. In general, it is a good idea to avoid them when you can.

Logical operators often provide a way to simplify nested conditional statements. For example, we can rewrite the following code using a single conditional:

```
if 0 < x:
    if x < 10:
        print 'x is a positive single-digit number.'
```

The print statement is executed only if we make it past both conditionals, so we can get the same effect with the and operator:

```
if 0 < x and x < 10:
    print 'x is a positive single-digit number.'
```

3.7 Catching exceptions

Earlier we saw a code segment where we used the raw_input and int functions to read and parse an integer number entered by the user. We also saw how treacherous doing this could be:

```
>>> speed = raw_input(prompt)
What...is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?
What do you mean, an African or a European swallow?
>>> int(speed)
ValueError: invalid literal for int()
>>>
```

When we are executing these statements in the Python interpreter, we get a new prompt from the interpreter, think "oops" and move on to our next statement.

However if this code is placed in a Python script and this error occurs, your script immediately stops in its tracks with a traceback. It does not execute the following statement.

Here is a sample program to convert a Fahrenheit temperature to a Celius temperature:

```
inp = raw_input("Enter Fahrenheit Temperature:")
fahr = float(inp)
cel = (fahr - 32.0) * 5.0 / 9.0
print cel
```

If we execute this code and give it invalid input, it simply fails with an unfriendly error message:

```
python fahren.py
Enter Fahrenheit Temperature:72
22.2222222222

python fahren.py
Enter Fahrenheit Temperature:fred
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "fahren.py", line 2, in <module>
    fahr = float(inp)
ValueError: invalid literal for float(): fred
```

There is a conditional execution structure built into Python to handle these types of expected and unexpected errors called "try / except". The idea of try and except is that you know that some sequence of instruction(s) may have a problem and you want to add some statements to be executed if an error occurs. These extra statements (the except block) is ignored if there is no error.

You can think of the try and except feature in Python as an "insurance policy" on a sequence of statements.

We can rewrite our temperature converter as follows:

```
inp = raw_input("Enter Fahrenheit Temperature:")
try:
    fahr = float(inp)
    cel = (fahr - 32.0) * 5.0 / 9.0
    print cel
except:
    print "Please enter a number"
```

Python starts by executing the sequence of statements in the `try` block. If all goes well, it skips the `except` block and proceeds. If an exception occurs in the `try` block, Python jumps out of the `try` block and executes the sequence of statements in the `except` block.

Handling an exception with a `try` statement is called **catching** an exception. In this example, the `except` clause prints an error message. In general, catching an exception gives you a chance to fix the problem, or try again, or at least end the program gracefully.

3.8   Short circuit evaluation of logical expressions

When Python is processing a logical expression such as `x >= 2 and (x/y) > 2`, it evaluates the expression from left-to-right. Because of the definition of `and`, if `x` is less than 2, the expression `x >= 2` is `False` and so the whole expression is `False` regardless of whether `(x/y) > 2` evaluates to `True` or `False`.

When Python detects that there is nothing to be gained by evaluating the rest of a logical expression, it stops its evaluation and does not do the computations in the rest of the logical expression. When the evaulation of a logical expression stops because the overall value is already known, it is called **short-circuiting** the evaluation.

While this may seem like a fine point, the short curcuit behavior leads to a clever technique called the **guardian pattern**. Consider the following code sequence in the Python interpreter:

```
>>> x = 6
>>> y = 2
>>> x >= 2 and (x/y) > 2
True
>>> x = 1
>>> y = 0
>>> x >= 2 and (x/y) > 2
False
>>> x = 6
>>> y = 0
>>> x >= 2 and (x/y) > 2
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "<stdin>", line 1, in <module>
ZeroDivisionError: integer division or modulo by zero
>>>
```

The third calculation failed because Python was evaluating `(x/y)` and `y` was zero - which causes a run-time error. But the second example did *not* fail because the first part of the expression `x >= 2` evaluated to `False` so the `(x/y)` was not ever executed due to the **short circuit** rule and there was no error.

We can construct the logical expression to strategically place a **guard** evaluation just before the evaluation that might cause an error as follows:

```
>>> x = 1
>>> y = 0
>>> x >= 2 and y != 0 and (x/y) > 2
False
>>> x = 6
>>> y = 0
>>> x >= 2 and y != 0 and (x/y) > 2
False
>>> x >= 2 and (x/y) > 2 and y != 0
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "<stdin>", line 1, in <module>
ZeroDivisionError: integer division or modulo by zero
>>>
```

In the first logical expression, `x >= 2` is `False` so the evaluation stops at the `and`. In the second logical expression `x >= 2` is `True` but `y != 0` is `False` so we never reach `(x/y)`.

In the third logical expression, the `y != 0` is *after* the `(x/y)`   calculation so the expression fails with an error.

In the second expression, we say that `y != 0` acts as a **guard** to insure that we only execute `(x/y)` if `y` is non-zero.

3.9   Debugging

The traceback Python displays when an error occurs contains a lot of information, but it can be overwhelming, especially when there are many frames on the stack. The most useful parts are usually:

- What kind of error it was, and

- Where it occurred.

Syntax errors are usually easy to find, but there are a few gotchas. Whitespace errors can be tricky because spaces and tabs are invisible and we are used to ignoring them.

```
>>> x = 5
>>>  y = 6
  File "<stdin>", line 1
    y = 6
    ^
SyntaxError: invalid syntax
```

In this example, the problem is that the second line is indented by one space. But the error message points to `y`, which is misleading. In general, error messages indicate where the problem was discovered, but the actual error might be earlier in the code, sometimes on a previous line.

The same is true of runtime errors. Suppose you are trying to compute a signal-to-noise ratio in decibels. The formula is $SNR_{db} = 10\log_{10}(P_{signal}/P_{noise})$. In Python, you might write something like this:

```
import math
signal_power = 9
noise_power = 10
ratio = signal_power / noise_power
decibels = 10 * math.log10(ratio)
print decibels
```

But when you run it, you get an error message[1]:

```
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "snr.py", line 5, in ?
    decibels = 10 * math.log10(ratio)
OverflowError: math range error
```

The error message indicates line 5, but there is nothing wrong with that line. To find the real error, it might be useful to print the value of `ratio`, which turns out to be 0. The problem is in line 4, because dividing two integers does floor division. The solution is to represent signal power and noise power with floating-point values.

In general, error messages tell you where the problem was discovered, but that is often not where it was caused.

3.10 Glossary

boolean expression: An expression whose value is either `True` or `False`.

comparison operator: One of the operators that compares its operands: `==`, `!=`, `>`, `<`, `>=`, and `<=`.

logical operator: One of the operators that combines boolean expressions: `and`, `or`, and `not`.

conditional statement: A statement that controls the flow of execution depending on some condition.

condition: The boolean expression in a conditional statement that determines which branch is executed.

compound statement: A statement that consists of a header and a body. The header ends with a colon (:). The body is indented relative to the header.

body: The sequence of statements within a compound statement.

branch: One of the alternative sequences of statements in a conditional statement.

chained conditional: A conditional statement with a series of alternative branches.

nested conditional: A conditional statement that appears in one of the branches of another conditional statement.

traceback: A list of the functions that are executing, printed when an exception occurs.

short circuit: When Python is part-way through evaluating a logical expression and stops the evaluation because Python knows the final value for the expression without needing to evaluate the rest of the expression.

guardian pattern: Where we construct a logical expression with additional comparisons to take advantage of the short circuit behavior.

---

[1]In Python 3.0, you no longer get an error message; the division operator performs floating-point division even with integer operands.

3.11   Exercises

Exercise 3.1 Write a program which prompts the user for a Celsius temperature, convert the temperature to Fahrenheit and print out the converted temperature.

Exercise 3.2 Fermat's Last Theorem says that there are no integers a, b, and c such that

$$a^n + b^n = c^n$$

for any values of n greater than 2.

1. Write a function named `check_fermat` that takes four parameters—a, b, c and n—and that checks to see if Fermat's theorem holds. If n is greater than 2 and it turns out to be true that

$$a^n + b^n = c^n$$

   the program should print, "Holy smokes, Fermat was wrong!" Otherwise the program should print, "No, that doesn't work."

2. Write a function that prompts the user to input values for a, b, c and n, converts them to integers, and uses `check_fermat` to check whether they violate Fermat's theorem.

Exercise 3.3 If you are given three sticks, you may or may not be able to arrange them in a triangle. For example, if one of the sticks is 12 inches long and the other two are one inch long, it is clear that you will not be able to get the short sticks to meet in the middle. For any three lengths, there is a simple test to see if it is possible to form a triangle:

> "If any of the three lengths is greater than the sum of the other two, then you cannot form a triangle. Otherwise, you can[2]."

1. Write a function named `is_triangle` that takes three integers as arguments, and that prints either "Yes" or "No," depending on whether you can or cannot form a triangle from sticks with the given lengths.

2. Write a function that prompts the user to input three stick lengths, converts them to integers, and uses `is_triangle` to check whether sticks with the given lengths can form a triangle.

---

[2]If the sum of two lengths equals the third, they form what is called a "degenerate" triangle.

Chapter 4

Functions

4.1 Function calls

In the context of programming, a **function** is a named sequence of statements that performs a computation. When you define a function, you specify the name and the sequence of statements. Later, you can "call" the function by name. We have already seen one example of a **function call**:

```
>>> type(32)
<type 'int'>
```

The name of the function is `type`. The expression in parentheses is called the **argument** of the function. The result, for this function, is the type of the argument.

It is common to say that a function "takes" an argument and "returns" a result. The result is called the **return value**.

4.2 Built-in functions

Python provides a number of important built-in functions that we can use without needing to provide the function definition. In a sense, the creators or Python wrote a set of functions to solve common problems and included them in Python for us to use.

The `max` and `min` functions give us the largest and smallest values in a list, respectively:

```
>>> max('Hello world')
'w'
>>> min('Hello world')
' '
>>>
```

The `max` function tells us the "largest character" in the string (which turns out to be the letter "w") and the `min` function shows us the smallest character which turns out to be a space.

Another very common built-in function is the `len` function which tells us how many items are in its argument:

```
>>> len('Hello world')
11
>>>
```

These functions are not limited to looking at strings, they can operate on any set of values as we will see in later chapters.

4.3   Type conversion functions

Python also provides built-in functions that convert values from one type to another. The int function takes any value and converts it to an integer, if it can, or complains otherwise:

```
>>> int('32')
32
>>> int('Hello')
ValueError: invalid literal for int(): Hello
```

int can convert floating-point values to integers, but it doesn't round off; it chops off the fraction part:

```
>>> int(3.99999)
3
>>> int(-2.3)
-2
```

float converts integers and strings to floating-point numbers:

```
>>> float(32)
32.0
>>> float('3.14159')
3.14159
```

Finally, str converts its argument to a string:

```
>>> str(32)
'32'
>>> str(3.14159)
'3.14159'
```

4.4   Math functions

Python has a math module that provides most of the familiar mathematical functions. A **module** is a file that contains a collection of related functions.

Before we can use the module, we have to import it:

```
>>> import math
```

This statement creates a **module object** named math. If you print the module object, you get some information about it:

```
>>> print math
<module 'math' from '/usr/lib/python2.5/lib-dynload/math.so'>
```

The module object contains the functions and variables defined in the module. To access one of the functions, you have to specify the name of the module and the name of the function, separated by a dot (also known as a period). This format is called **dot notation**.

```
>>> ratio = signal_power / noise_power
>>> decibels = 10 * math.log10(ratio)

>>> radians = 0.7
>>> height = math.sin(radians)
```

The first example computes the logarithm base 10 of the signal-to-noise ratio. The math module also provides a function called `log` that computes logarithms base e.

The second example finds the sine of `radians`. The name of the variable is a hint that `sin` and the other trigonometric functions (`cos`, `tan`, etc.) take arguments in radians. To convert from degrees to radians, divide by 360 and multiply by 2π:

```
>>> degrees = 45
>>> radians = degrees / 360.0 * 2 * math.pi
>>> math.sin(radians)
0.707106781187
```

The expression `math.pi` gets the variable `pi` from the math module. The value of this variable is an approximation of π, accurate to about 15 digits.

If you know your trigonometry, you can check the previous result by comparing it to the square root of two divided by two:

```
>>> math.sqrt(2) / 2.0
0.707106781187
```

4.5   Adding new functions

So far, we have only been using the functions that come with Python, but it is also possible to add new functions. A **function definition** specifies the name of a new function and the sequence of statements that execute when the function is called. Once we define a function, we can reuse the function over and over throughout our program.

Here is an example:

```
def print_lyrics():
    print "I'm a lumberjack, and I'm okay."
    print "I sleep all night and I work all day."
```

`def` is a keyword that indicates that this is a function definition. The name of the function is `print_lyrics`. The rules for function names are the same as for variable names: letters, numbers and some punctuation marks are legal, but the first character can't be a number. You can't use a keyword as the name of a function, and you should avoid having a variable and a function with the same name.

The empty parentheses after the name indicate that this function doesn't take any arguments.

The first line of the function definition is called the **header**; the rest is called the **body**. The header has to end with a colon and the body has to be indented. By convention, the indentation is always four spaces (see Section 4.11). The body can contain any number of statements.

The strings in the print statements are enclosed in double quotes. Single quotes and double quotes do the same thing; most people use single quotes except in cases like this where a single quote (which is also an apostrophe) appears in the string.

If you type a function definition in interactive mode, the interpreter prints ellipses (...) to let you know that the definition isn't complete:

```
>>> def print_lyrics():
...     print "I'm a lumberjack, and I'm okay."
...     print "I sleep all night and I work all day."
...
```

To end the function, you have to enter an empty line (this is not necessary in a script).

Defining a function creates a variable with the same name.

```
>>> print print_lyrics
<function print_lyrics at 0xb7e99e9c>
>>> print type(print_lyrics)
<type 'function'>
```

The value of print_lyrics is a **function object**, which has type 'function'.

The syntax for calling the new function is the same as for built-in functions:

```
>>> print_lyrics()
I'm a lumberjack, and I'm okay.
I sleep all night and I work all day.
```

Once you have defined a function, you can use it inside another function. For example, to repeat the previous refrain, we could write a function called repeat_lyrics:

```
def repeat_lyrics():
    print_lyrics()
    print_lyrics()
```

And then call repeat_lyrics:

```
>>> repeat_lyrics()
I'm a lumberjack, and I'm okay.
I sleep all night and I work all day.
I'm a lumberjack, and I'm okay.
I sleep all night and I work all day.
```

But that's not really how the song goes.

4.6   Definitions and uses

Pulling together the code fragments from the previous section, the whole program looks like this:

```
def print_lyrics():
    print "I'm a lumberjack, and I'm okay."
    print "I sleep all night and I work all day."

def repeat_lyrics():
    print_lyrics()
    print_lyrics()

repeat_lyrics()
```

This program contains two function definitions: `print_lyrics` and `repeat_lyrics`. Function definitions get executed just like other statements, but the effect is to create function objects. The statements inside the function do not get executed until the function is called, and the function definition generates no output.

As you might expect, you have to create a function before you can execute it. In other words, the function definition has to be executed before the first time it is called.

Exercise 4.1 Move the last line of this program to the top, so the function call appears before the definitions. Run the program and see what error message you get.

Exercise 4.2 Move the function call back to the bottom and move the definition of `print_lyrics` after the definition of `repeat_lyrics`. What happens when you run this program?

4.7   Flow of execution

In order to ensure that a function is defined before its first use, you have to know the order in which statements are executed, which is called the **flow of execution**.

Execution always begins at the first statement of the program. Statements are executed one at a time, in order from top to bottom.

Function *definitions* do not alter the flow of execution of the program, but remember that statements inside the function are not executed until the function is called.

A function call is like a detour in the flow of execution. Instead of going to the next statement, the flow jumps to the body of the function, executes all the statements there, and then comes back to pick up where it left off.

That sounds simple enough, until you remember that one function can call another. While in the middle of one function, the program might have to execute the statements in another function. But while executing that new function, the program might have to execute yet another function!

Fortunately, Python is good at keeping track of where it is, so each time a function completes, the program picks up where it left off in the function that called it. When it gets to the end of the program, it terminates.

What's the moral of this sordid tale? When you read a program, you don't always want to read from top to bottom. Sometimes it makes more sense if you follow the flow of execution.

4.8   Parameters and arguments

Some of the built-in functions we have seen require arguments. For example, when you call `math.sin` you pass a number as an argument. Some functions take more than one argument: `math.pow` takes two, the base and the exponent.

Inside the function, the arguments are assigned to variables called **parameters**. Here is an example of a user-defined function that takes an argument:

```
def print_twice(bruce):
    print bruce
    print bruce
```

This function assigns the argument to a parameter named `bruce`. When the function is called, it prints the value of the parameter (whatever it is) twice.

This function works with any value that can be printed.

```
>>> print_twice('Spam')
Spam
Spam
>>> print_twice(17)
17
17
>>> print_twice(math.pi)
3.14159265359
3.14159265359
```

The same rules of composition that apply to built-in functions also apply to user-defined functions, so we can use any kind of expression as an argument for `print_twice`:

```
>>> print_twice('Spam '*4)
Spam Spam Spam Spam
Spam Spam Spam Spam
>>> print_twice(math.cos(math.pi))
-1.0
-1.0
```

The argument is evaluated before the function is called, so in the examples the expressions `'Spam '*4` and `math.cos(math.pi)` are only evaluated once.

You can also use a variable as an argument:

```
>>> michael = 'Eric, the half a bee.'
>>> print_twice(michael)
Eric, the half a bee.
Eric, the half a bee.
```

The name of the variable we pass as an argument (`michael`) has nothing to do with the name of the parameter (`bruce`). It doesn't matter what the value was called back home (in the caller); here in `print_twice`, we call everybody `bruce`.

4.9 Fruitful functions and void functions

Some of the functions we are using, such as the math functions, yield results; for lack of a better name, I call them **fruitful functions**. Other functions, like `print_twice`, perform an action but don't return a value. They are called **void functions**.

When you call a fruitful function, you almost always want to do something with the result; for example, you might assign it to a variable or use it as part of an expression:

```
x = math.cos(radians)
golden = (math.sqrt(5) + 1) / 2
```

When you call a function in interactive mode, Python displays the result:

```
>>> math.sqrt(5)
2.2360679774997898
```

But in a script, if you call a fruitful function all by itself, the return value is lost forever!

```
math.sqrt(5)
```

This script computes the square root of 5, but since it doesn't store or display the result, it is not very useful.

Void functions might display something on the screen or have some other effect, but they don't have a return value. If you try to assign the result to a variable, you get a special value called `None`.

```
>>> result = print_twice('Bing')
Bing
Bing
>>> print result
None
```

The value `None` is not the same as the string `'None'`. It is a special value that has its own type:

```
>>> print type(None)
<type 'NoneType'>
```

To return a result from a function, we use the `return` statement in our function. For example, we could make a very simple function called `addtwo` that adds two numbers together and return a result.

```
def addtwo(a, b):
    added = a + b
    return added

x = addtwo(3, 5)
print x
```

When this script executes, the `print` statement will print out "8" because the `addtwo` function was called with 3 and 5 as arguments. Within the function the parameters a and b were 3 and 5 respectively. The function computed the sum of the two numbers and placed it in the local function variable named `added` and used the `return` statement to send the computed value back to the calling code as the function result which was assigned to the variable x and printed out.

4.10   Why functions?

It may not be clear why it is worth the trouble to divide a program into functions. There are several reasons:

- Creating a new function gives you an opportunity to name a group of statements, which makes your program easier to read, understand and debug.

- Functions can make a program smaller by eliminating repetitive code. Later, if you make a change, you only have to make it in one place.

- Dividing a long program into functions allows you to debug the parts one at a time and then assemble them into a working whole.

- Well-designed functions are often useful for many programs. Once you write and debug one, you can reuse it.

Throughout the rest of the book, we often will use a function definition to explain a concept. Part of the skill of creating and using functions is to have a function properly capture an idea such as "find the smallest value in a list of values". Later we will show you code that finds the smallest in a list of values and we will present it to you as a function named min which takes a list of values as its argument and returns the smallest value in the list.

4.11   Debugging

If you are using a text editor to write your scripts, you might run into problems with spaces and tabs. The best way to avoid these problems is to use spaces exclusively (no tabs). Most text editors that know about Python do this by default, but some don't.

Tabs and spaces are usually invisible, which makes them hard to debug, so try to find an editor that manages indentation for you.

Also, don't forget to save your program before you run it. Some development environments do this automatically, but some don't. In that case the program you are looking at in the text editor is not the same as the program you are running.

Debugging can take a long time if you keep running the same, incorrect, program over and over!

Make sure that the code you are looking at is the code you are running. If you're not sure, put something like `print 'hello'` at the beginning of the program and run it again. If you don't see `hello`, you're not running the right program!

4.12   Glossary

function: A named sequence of statements that performs some useful operation. Functions may or may not take arguments and may or may not produce a result.

function definition: A statement that creates a new function, specifying its name, parameters, and the statements it executes.

function object: A value created by a function definition. The name of the function is a variable that refers to a function object.

header: The first line of a function definition.

body: The sequence of statements inside a function definition.

parameter: A name used inside a function to refer to the value passed as an argument.

function call: A statement that executes a function. It consists of the function name followed by an argument list.

argument: A value provided to a function when the function is called. This value is assigned to the corresponding parameter in the function.

return value: The result of a function. If a function call is used as an expression, the return value is the value of the expression.

fruitful function: A function that returns a value.

void function: A function that doesn't return a value.

import statement: A statement that reads a module file and creates a module object.

module object: A value created by an `import` statement that provides access to the data and code defined in a module.

dot notation: The syntax for calling a function in another module by specifying the module name followed by a dot (period) and the function name.

composition: Using an expression as part of a larger expression, or a statement as part of a larger statement.

flow of execution: The order in which statements are executed during a program run.

4.13   Exercises

Exercise 4.3 Python provides a built-in function called `len` that returns the length of a string, so the value of `len('allen')` is 5.

Write a function named `right_justify` that takes a string named `s` as a parameter and prints the string with enough leading spaces so that the last letter of the string is in column 70 of the display.

```
>>> right_justify('allen')
                                                                 allen
```

Exercise 4.4 A function object is a value you can assign to a variable or pass as an argument. For example, `do_twice` is a function that takes a function object as an argument and calls it twice:

```
def do_twice(f):
    f()
    f()
```

Here's an example that uses `do_twice` to call a function named `print_spam` twice.

```
def print_spam():
    print 'spam'

do_twice(print_spam)
```

1. Type this example into a script and test it.

2. Modify `do_twice` so that it takes two arguments, a function object and a value, and calls the function twice, passing the value as an argument.

3. Write a more general version of `print_spam`, called `print_twice`, that takes a string as a parameter and prints it twice.

4. Use the modified version of `do_twice` to call `print_twice` twice, passing `'spam'` as an argument.

5. Define a new function called `do_four` that takes a function object and a value and calls the function four times, passing the value as a parameter. There should be only two statements in the body of this function, not four.

You can see my solution at `thinkpython.com/code/do_four.py`.

Exercise 4.5 This exercise[1] can be done using only the statements and other features we have learned so far.

1. Write a function that draws a grid like the following:

```
+ - - - - + - - - - +
|         |         |
|         |         |
|         |         |
|         |         |
|         |         |
+ - - - - + - - - - +
|         |         |
|         |         |
|         |         |
|         |         |
|         |         |
+ - - - - + - - - - +
```

   Hint: to print more than one value on a line, you can print a comma-separated sequence:

   ```
   print '+', '-'
   ```

   If the sequence ends with a comma, Python leaves the line unfinished, so the value printed next appears on the same line.

   ```
   print '+',
   print '-'
   ```

   The output of these statements is `'+ -'`.

   A `print` statement all by itself ends the current line and goes to the next line.

2. Use the previous function to draw a similar grid with four rows and four columns.

You can see my solution at `thinkpython.com/code/grid.py`.

---

[1] Based on an exercise in Oualline, *Practical C Programming, Third Edition*, O'Reilly (1997)

Chapter 5

Iteration

5.1 Updating variables

One of the most common forms of multiple assignment is an **update**, where the new value of the variable depends on the old.

```
x = x+1
```

This means "get the current value of x, add one, and then update x with the new value."

If you try to update a variable that doesn't exist, you get an error, because Python evaluates the right side before it assigns a value to x:

```
>>> x = x+1
NameError: name 'x' is not defined
```

Before you can update a variable, you have to **initialize** it, usually with a simple assignment:

```
>>> x = 0
>>> x = x+1
```

Updating a variable by adding 1 is called an **increment**; subtracting 1 is called a **decrement**.

5.2 The `while` statement

Computers are often used to automate repetitive tasks. Repeating identical or similar tasks without making errors is something that computers do well and people do poorly. Because iteration is so common, Python provides several language features to make it easier.

One form of iteration in Python is the `while` statement. Here is a simple program that counts down from five and then says "Blastoff!".

```
n = 5
while n > 0:
    print n
    n = n-1
print 'Blastoff!'
```

You can almost read the `while` statement as if it were English. It means, "While `n` is greater than 0, display the value of `n` and then reduce the value of `n` by 1. When you get to 0, exit the while statement and display the word `Blastoff!`"

More formally, here is the flow of execution for a `while` statement:

1. Evaluate the condition, yielding `True` or `False`.

2. If the condition is false, exit the `while` statement and continue execution at the next statement.

3. If the condition is true, execute the body and then go back to step 1.

This type of flow is called a **loop** because the third step loops back around to the top. Each time we execute the body of the loop, we call it an **iteration**. For the above loop, we would say, "It had five iterations" which means that the body of of the loop was executed five times.

The body of the loop should change the value of one or more variables so that eventually the condition becomes false and the loop terminates. We call the variable that changes each time the loop executes and controls when the loop finishes the **iteration variable**. Id there is no iteration variable, the loop will repeat forever, resulting in an **infinite loop**.

5.3   Infinite loops

An endless source of amusement for programmers is the observation that the directions on shampoo, "Lather, rinse, repeat," are an infinite loop because there is no **iteration variable** telling you how many times to execute the loop.

In the case of `countdown`, we can prove that the loop terminates because we know that the value of `n` is finite, and we can see that the value of `n` gets smaller each time through the loop, so eventually we have to get to 0. Other times a loop is obviously infinite because it has no iteration variable at all.

In other cases, it is not so easy to tell. The code below defines a function that takes an positive number as its parameter and computes a different kind of sequence. Remember that the percent sign is the **modulo** operator which gives us the remainder if a division were performed.

```
def sequence(n):
    while n != 1:
        print n,
        if n%2 == 0:        # n is even
            n = n/2
        else:               # n is odd
            n = n*3+1
```

The condition for this loop is `n != 1`, so the loop will continue until `n` is 1, which makes the condition false.

Each time through the loop, the program outputs the value of `n` and then checks whether it is even or odd. If it is even, `n` is divided by 2. If it is odd, the value of `n` is replaced with `n*3+1`. For example, if the argument passed to `sequence` is 3, the resulting sequence is 3, 10, 5, 16, 8, 4, 2, 1.

Since `n` sometimes increases and sometimes decreases, there is no obvious proof that `n` will ever reach 1, or that the program terminates. For some particular values of `n`, we can prove termination.

For example, if the starting value is a power of two, then the value of n will be even each time through the loop until it reaches 1. The previous example ends with such a sequence, starting with 16.

```
>>> def sequence(n):
...     while n != 1:
...         print n,
...         if n%2 == 0:        # n is even
...             n = n/2
...         else:               # n is odd
...             n = n*3+1
...
>>> sequence(3)
3 10 5 16 8 4 2
>>> sequence(16)
16 8 4 2
>>> sequence(50)
50 25 76 38 19 58 29 88 44 22 11 34 17 52 26 13 40 20 10 5 16 8 4 2
```

You can try this sequence with a variety of integer or floating point numbers as the argument. Since the main loop repeatedly divides a number by two, an argument in the billions converges to one in relatively few steps. It is more fun to try floating point arguments such as 12.45 as it takes more iterations before the sequence converges to one.

The hard question is whether we can prove that this program terminates for *all positive values* of n. So far[1], no one has been able to prove it *or* disprove it!

5.4   "Infinite loops" and `break`

Sometimes you don't know it's time to end a loop until you get half way through the body. In that case you can write an infinite loop on purpose and then use the `break` statement to jump out of the loop.

This loop is obviously an **infinite loop** because the logical expression on the `while` statement is simply the logical constant `True`:

```
n = 10
while True:
    print n,
    n = n - 1
print 'Done!'
```

If you make the mistake and run this code, you will learn quickly how to stop a runaway Python process on your system or find where the power-off button is on your computer. This program will run forever or until your battery runs out because the logical expression at the top of the loop is always true by virtue of the fact that the expression is the constant value `True`.

While this is a dysfunctional infinite loop, we can still use this pattern to build useful loops as long as we carefully add code to the body of the loop to explicitly exit the loop using `break` when we have reached the exit condition.

---

[1]See `wikipedia.org/wiki/Collatz_conjecture`.

For example, suppose you want to take input from the user until they type `done`. You could write:

```
while True:
    line = raw_input('> ')
    if line == 'done':
        break
    print line
print 'Done!'
```

The loop condition is `True`, which is always true, so the loop runs repeatedly until it hits the break statement.

Each time through, it prompts the user with an angle bracket. If the user types `done`, the `break` statement exits the loop. Otherwise the program echoes whatever the user types and goes back to the top of the loop. Here's a sample run:

```
> hello there
hello there
> finished
finished
> done
Done!
```

This way of writing `while` loops is common because you can check the condition anywhere in the loop (not just at the top) and you can express the stop condition affirmatively ("stop when this happens") rather than negatively ("keep going until that happens.").

5.5   Finishing iterations with `continue`

Sometimes you are in an iteration of a loop and want to finish the current iteration and immediately jump to the next iteration. In that case you can use the `continue` statement to skip to the next iteration without finishing the body of the loop for the current iteration.

Here is an example of a loop that copies its input until the user types "done", but treats lines that start with the hash character as lines not to be printed (kind of like Python comments).

```
while True:
    line = raw_input('> ')
    if line[0] == '#' :
        continue
    if line == 'done':
        break
    print line
print 'Done!'
```

Here is a sample run of this new program with `continue` added.

```
> hello there
hello there
> # don't print this
> print this!
print this!
```

```
> done
Done!
```

All the lines are printed except the one that starts with the hash sign because when the `continue` is executed, it ends the current iteration and jumps back to the `while` statement to start the next iteration, thus skipping the `print` statement.

5.6 Definite loops using `for`

Sometimes we want to loop through a **set** of things such as a list of words, the lines in a file or a list of numbers. When we have a list of things to loop through, we can construct a *definite* loop using a `for` statement. We call the `while` statement an *indefinite* loop because it simply loops until some condition becomes `False` whereas the `for` loop is looping through a known set of items so it runs through as many iterations as there are items in the set.

The syntax of a `for` loop is similar to the `while` loop in that there is a `for` statement and a loop body:

```
friends = ['Joseph', 'Glenn', 'Sally']
for friend in friends:
    print 'Happy New Year:', friend
print "Done!"
```

Translating this `for` loop to English is not as direct as the `while`, but if you think of friends as a **set**, it goes like this: "Run the statements in the body of the for loop once for each friend *in* the set named friends.".

In Python terms, the variable `friends` is a list[2] of three strings and the `for` loop goes through the list and executes the body once for each of the three strings in the list resulting in this output:

```
Happy New Year: Joseph
Happy New Year: Glenn
Happy New Year: Sally
Done!
```

Looking at the `for` loop, **for** and **in** are reserved Python keywords, and `friend` and `friends` are variables.

for friend **in** friends**:**
    print 'Happy New Year', friend

In particular, `friend` is the **iteration variable** for the for loop. The variable `friend` changes for each iteration of the loop and controls when the `for` loop completes. The **iteration variable** steps successively through the three strings stored in the `friends` variable.

5.7 Loop patterns

Often we use a for or while loop to go through a list of items or the contents of a file and we are looking for something such as the largest or smallest value of the data we scan through.

These loops are generally constructed by:

---

[2]We will examine lists in more detail in a later chapter

- Initialize one or more variables them before the loop starts.

- Perform some computation on each item in the loop body, possibly changing the variables in the body of the loop

- At the end of the loop, the variables contain the information we are looking for

We will use a list of numbers to demonstrate the concepts and construction of these loop patterns.

5.7.1   Counting and summing loops

For example, to count the number of items in a list, we would write the following for loop:

```
count = 0
for iterval in [3, 41, 12, 9, 74, 15]:
    count = count + 1
print "Count: ", count
```

We set the variable count to zero before the loop starts, then we write a for loop to run through the list of numbers. Our **iteration** variable is named itervar and while we do not use itervar in the loop, it does control the loop and cause the loop body to be executed once for each of the values in the list.

In the body of the loop, we add one to the current value of count for each of the values in the list. While the loop is executing, the value of count is the number of values we have seen "so far".

Once the loop completes, the value of count is the total number of items. The total number "falls in our lap" at the end of the loop. We construct the loop so that we have what we want when the loop finishes.

Another similar loop that computes the total of a set of numbers is as follows:

```
total = 0
for iterval in [3, 41, 12, 9, 74, 15]:
    total = total + iterval
print "Total: ", total
```

In this loop we *do* use the **iteration variable**. Instead of simply adding one to the count as in the previous loop, we add the actual number (3, 41, 12, etc.) to the running total during each loop iteration. If you think about the variable total, it contains the "running total of the values so far". So before the loop starts total is zero because we have not yet seen any values, during the loop total is the running total, and at the end of the loop total is the overal total of all the values in the list.

As the loop executes, total accumulates the sum of the elements; a variable used this way is sometimes called an **accumulator**.

Neither the counting loop nor the summing loop are particularly useful in practice because there are built-in functions len() and sum() that compute the number of items in a list and the total of the items in the list respectively.

5.7.2   Maximum and minimum loops

To find the largest value in a list or sequence, we construct the following loop:

```
largest = None
print 'Before:', largest
for iterval in [3, 41, 12, 9, 74, 15]:
    if largest == None or largest < iterval:
        largest = iterval
    print 'Loop:', iterval, largest
print 'Largest:', largest
```

When the program executes, the output is as follows:

```
Before: None
Loop: 3 3
Loop: 41 41
Loop: 12 41
Loop: 9 41
Loop: 74 74
Loop: 15 74
Largest: 74
```

The variable `largest` is best thought of as the "largest value we have seen so far". Before the loop, we set `largest` to the contstant `None`. `None` is a special constant value which we can store in a variable to mark the variable as "empty".

Before the loop starts, the largest value we have seen so far is `None` since we have not yet seen any values. While the loop is executing, if `largest` is `None` then we take the first value we see as the largest so far. You can see in the first iteration when the value of `iterval` is three, since `largest` is `None`, we immediately set `largest` to be three.

After the first iteration, `largest` is no longer `None`, so the second part of the compound logical expression that checks `largest < iterval` triggers only when we see a value that is larger than the "largest so far". When we see a new "even larger" value we take that new value for `largest`. You can see in the program output that `largest` progresses from 3 to 41 to 74.

At the end of the loop, we have scanned all of the values and the variable `largest` now does contain the largest value in the list.

To compute the smallest number, the code is very similar with one small change:

```
smallest = None
print 'Before:', smallest
for iterval in [3, 41, 12, 9, 74, 15]:
    if smallest == None or iterval < smallest:
        smallest = iterval
    print 'Loop:', iterval, smallest
print 'Smallest:', smallest
```

Again, `smallest` is the "smallest so far" before, during, and after the loop executes. When the loop has completed, `smallest` contains the minimum value in the list.

Again as in counting and summing, the built-in functions `max()` and `min()` make writing these exact loops unnecessary.

The following is a simple version of the Python built-in `min()` function:

```
def min(values):
    smallest = None
    for value in values:
        if smallest == None or value < smallest:
            smallest = iterval
    return smallest
```

In the function version of the smallest code, we removed all of the `print` statements so as to be equivalent to the `min` function which is already built-in to Python.

5.8   Debugging

As you start writing bigger programs, you might find yourself spending more time debugging. More code means more chances to make an error and more place for bugs to hide.

One way to cut your debugging time is "debugging by bisection." For example, if there are 100 lines in your program and you check them one at a time, it would take 100 steps.

Instead, try to break the problem in half. Look at the middle of the program, or near it, for an intermediate value you can check. Add a `print` statement (or something else that has a verifiable effect) and run the program.

If the mid-point check is incorrect, the problem must be in the first half of the program. If it is correct, the problem is in the second half.

Every time you perform a check like this, you halve the number of lines you have to search. After six steps (which is much less than 100), you would be down to one or two lines of code, at least in theory.

In practice it is not always clear what the "middle of the program" is and not always possible to check it. It doesn't make sense to count lines and find the exact midpoint. Instead, think about places in the program where there might be errors and places where it is easy to put a check. Then choose a spot where you think the chances are about the same that the bug is before or after the check.

5.9   Glossary

multiple assignment: Making more than one assignment to the same variable during the execution of a program.

update: An assignment where the new value of the variable depends on the old.

initialize: An assignment that gives an initial value to a variable that will be updated.

increment: An update that increases the value of a variable (often by one).

decrement: An update that decreases the value of a variable.

iteration: Repeated execution of a set of statements using either a recursive function call or a loop.

counter: A variable used in a loop to count the number of times something happenned. We initialize a counter to zero and then increment the counter each time we want to "count" something.

accumulator: A variable used in a loop to add up or accumulate a result.

infinite loop: A loop in which the terminating condition is never satisfied.

5.10 Exercises

Exercise 5.1 Need some exercises here.

Chapter 6

Strings

6.1 A string is a sequence

A string is a **sequence** of characters. You can access the characters one at a time with the bracket operator:

```
>>> fruit = 'banana'
>>> letter = fruit[1]
```

The second statement selects character number 1 from `fruit` and assigns it to `letter`.

The expression in brackets is called an **index**. The index indicates which character in the sequence you want (hence the name).

But you might not get what you expect:

```
>>> print letter
a
```

For most people, the first letter of `'banana'` is b, not a. But in Python, the index is an offset from the beginning of the string, and the offset of the first letter is zero.

```
>>> letter = fruit[0]
>>> print letter
b
```

So `b` is the 0th letter ("zero-eth") of `'banana'`, a is the 1th letter ("one-eth"), and n is the 2th ("two-eth") letter.

You can use any expression, including variables and operators, as an index, but the value of the index has to be an integer. Otherwise you get:

```
>>> letter = fruit[1.5]
TypeError: string indices must be integers
```

6.2 `len`

`len` is a built-in function that returns the number of characters in a string:

```
>>> fruit = 'banana'
>>> len(fruit)
6
```

To get the last letter of a string, you might be tempted to try something like this:

```
>>> length = len(fruit)
>>> last = fruit[length]
IndexError: string index out of range
```

The reason for the `IndexError` is that there is no letter in `'banana'` with the index 6. Since we started counting at zero, the six letters are numbered 0 to 5. To get the last character, you have to subtract 1 from `length`:

```
>>> last = fruit[length-1]
>>> print last
a
```

Alternatively, you can use negative indices, which count backward from the end of the string. The expression `fruit[-1]` yields the last letter, `fruit[-2]` yields the second to last, and so on.

6.3 Traversal with a `for` loop

A lot of computations involve processing a string one character at a time. Often they start at the beginning, select each character in turn, do something to it, and continue until the end. This pattern of processing is called a **traversal**. One way to write a traversal is with a `while` loop:

```
index = 0
while index < len(fruit):
    letter = fruit[index]
    print letter
    index = index + 1
```

This loop traverses the string and displays each letter on a line by itself. The loop condition is `index < len(fruit)`, so when `index` is equal to the length of the string, the condition is false, and the body of the loop is not executed. The last character accessed is the one with the index `len(fruit)-1`, which is the last character in the string.

Exercise 6.1 Write a function that takes a string as an argument and displays the letters backward, one per line.

Another way to write a traversal is with a `for` loop:

```
for char in fruit:
    print char
```

Each time through the loop, the next character in the string is assigned to the variable `char`. The loop continues until no characters are left.

The following example shows how to use concatenation (string addition) and a `for` loop to generate an abecedarian series (that is, in alphabetical order). In Robert McCloskey's book *Make Way for Ducklings*, the names of the ducklings are Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack, and Quack. This loop outputs these names in order:

```
prefixes = 'JKLMNOPQ'
suffix = 'ack'

for letter in prefixes:
    print letter + suffix
```

The output is:

```
Jack
Kack
Lack
Mack
Nack
Oack
Pack
Qack
```

Of course, that's not quite right because "Ouack" and "Quack" are misspelled.

Exercise 6.2 Modify the program to fix this error.

6.4 String slices

A segment of a string is called a **slice**. Selecting a slice is similar to selecting a character:

```
>>> s = 'Monty Python'
>>> print s[0:5]
Monty
>>> print s[6:13]
Python
```

The operator `[n:m]` returns the part of the string from the "n-eth" character to the "m-eth" character, including the first but excluding the last. This behavior is counterintuitive, but it might help to imagine the indices pointing *between* the characters, as in the following diagram:
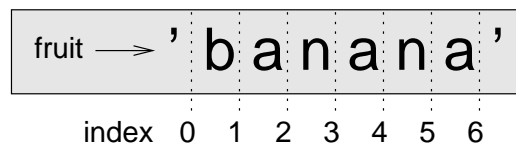
If you omit the first index (before the colon), the slice starts at the beginning of the string. If you omit the second index, the slice goes to the end of the string:

```
>>> fruit = 'banana'
>>> fruit[:3]
'ban'
>>> fruit[3:]
'ana'
```

If the first index is greater than or equal to the second the result is an **empty string**, represented by two quotation marks:

```
>>> fruit = 'banana'
>>> fruit[3:3]
''
```

An empty string contains no characters and has length 0, but other than that, it is the same as any other string.

Exercise 6.3 Given that `fruit` is a string, what does `fruit[:]` mean?

6.5   Strings are immutable

It is tempting to use the `[]` operator on the left side of an assignment, with the intention of changing a character in a string. For example:

```
>>> greeting = 'Hello, world!'
>>> greeting[0] = 'J'
TypeError: object does not support item assignment
```

The "object" in this case is the string and the "item" is the character you tried to assign. For now, an **object** is the same thing as a value, but we will refine that definition later. An **item** is one of the values in a sequence.

The reason for the error is that strings are **immutable**, which means you can't change an existing string. The best you can do is create a new string that is a variation on the original:

```
>>> greeting = 'Hello, world!'
>>> new_greeting = 'J' + greeting[1:]
>>> print new_greeting
Jello, world!
```

This example concatenates a new first letter onto a slice of `greeting`. It has no effect on the original string.

6.6   Searching

What does the following function do?

```
def find(word, letter):
    index = 0
    while index < len(word):
        if word[index] == letter:
            return index
        index = index + 1
    return -1
```

In a sense, `find` is the opposite of the `[]` operator. Instead of taking an index and extracting the corresponding character, it takes a character and finds the index where that character appears. If the character is not found, the function returns `-1`.

This is the first example we have seen of a `return` statement inside a loop. If `word[index] ==` `letter`, the function breaks out of the loop and returns immediately.

If the character doesn't appear in the string, the loop exits normally at the bottom and returns -1.

This pattern of computation—traversing a sequence and returning when we find what we are looking for—is a called a **search**.

Exercise 6.4 Modify find so that it has a third parameter, the index in word where it should start looking.

6.7   Looping and counting

The following program counts the number of times the letter a appears in a string:

```
word = 'banana'
count = 0
for letter in word:
    if letter == 'a':
        count = count + 1
print count
```

This program demonstrates another pattern of computation called a **counter**. The variable count is initialized to 0 and then incremented each time an a is found. When the loop exits, count contains the result—the total number of a's.

Exercise 6.5 Encapsulate this code in a function named count, and generalize it so that it accepts the string and the letter as arguments.

Exercise 6.6 Rewrite this function so that instead of traversing the string, it uses the three-parameter version of find from the previous section.

6.8   The in operator

The word in is a boolean operator that takes two strings and returns True if the first appears as a substring in the second:

```
>>> 'a' in 'banana'
True
>>> 'seed' in 'banana'
False
```

For example, the following function prints all the letters from word1 that also appear in word2:

```
def in_both(word1, word2):
    for letter in word1:
        if letter in word2:
            print letter
```

With well-chosen variable names, Python sometimes reads like English. You could read this loop, "for (each) letter in (the first) word, if (the) letter (appears) in (the second) word, print (the) letter."

Here's what you get if you compare apples and oranges:

```
>>> in_both('apples', 'oranges')
a
e
s
```

6.9   String comparison

The comparison operators work on strings. To see if two strings are equal:

```
if word == 'banana':
    print  'All right, bananas.'
```

Other comparison operations are useful for putting words in alphabetical order:

```
if word < 'banana':
    print 'Your word,' + word + ', comes before banana.'
elif word > 'banana':
    print 'Your word,' + word + ', comes after banana.'
else:
    print 'All right, bananas.'
```

Python does not handle uppercase and lowercase letters the same way that people do. All the uppercase letters come before all the lowercase letters, so:

```
Your word, Pineapple, comes before banana.
```

A common way to address this problem is to convert strings to a standard format, such as all lowercase, before performing the comparison. Keep that in mind in case you have to defend yourself against a man armed with a Pineapple.

6.10   `string` methods

Strings are an example of Python **objects**. An object contains both data (the actual string itself) as well as **methods** which are effectively functions which are built into the object and available to any **instance** of the object.

Python has a function called `dir` that lists the methods available for an object. The `type` function shows the type of an object and the `dir` function shows the available methods.

```
>>> stuff = 'Hello world'
>>> type(stuff)
<type 'str'>
>>> dir(stuff)
['capitalize', 'center', 'count', 'decode', 'encode',
'endswith', 'expandtabs', 'find', 'format', 'index',
'isalnum', 'isalpha', 'isdigit', 'islower', 'isspace',
'istitle', 'isupper', 'join', 'ljust', 'lower', 'lstrip',
'partition', 'replace', 'rfind', 'rindex', 'rjust',
'rpartition', 'rsplit', 'rstrip', 'split', 'splitlines',
'startswith', 'strip', 'swapcase', 'title', 'translate',
```

```
'upper', 'zfill']
>>> help(str.capitalize)
Help on method_descriptor:

capitalize(...)
    S.capitalize() -> string

    Return a copy of the string S with only its first character
    capitalized.
>>>
```

While the `dir` function lists the methods, and you can use `help` to get some simple documentation on a method, a better source of documentation for string methods would be `docs.python.org/library/string.html`.

Calling a **method** is similar to calling a function—it takes arguments and returns a value—but the syntax is different. We call a method by appending the method name to the variable name using the period as a delimiter.

For example, the method `upper` takes a string and returns a new string with all uppercase letters:

Instead of the function syntax `upper(word)`, it uses the method syntax `word.upper()`.

```
>>> word = 'banana'
>>> new_word = word.upper()
>>> print new_word
BANANA
```

This form of dot notation specifies the name of the method, `upper`, and the name of the string to apply the method to, `word`. The empty parentheses indicate that this method takes no argument.

A method call is called an **invocation**; in this case, we would say that we are invoking `upper` on the `word`.

As it turns out, there is a string method named `find` that is remarkably similar to the function we wrote:

```
>>> word = 'banana'
>>> index = word.find('a')
>>> print index
1
```

In this example, we invoke `find` on `word` and pass the letter we are looking for as a parameter.

Actually, the `find` method is more general than our function; it can find substrings, not just characters:

```
>>> word.find('na')
2
```

It can take as a second argument the index where it should start:

```
>>> word.find('na', 3)
4
```

One common task is to remove white space (spaces, tabs, or newlines) from the beginning and end of a string using the `strip` method:

```
>>> line = '  Here we go  '
>>> line.strip()
'Here we go'
```

Some methods such as **startswith** return boolean values.

```
>>> line = 'Please have a nice day'
>>> line.startswith('Please')
True
>>> line.startswith('p')
False
```

You will note that `startswith` requres case to match so sometimes we take a line ane map it all to lower case before we do any checking using the `lower` method.

```
>>> line = 'Please have a nice day'
>>> line.startswith('p')
False
>>> line.lower()
'please have a nice day'
>>> line.lower().startswith('p')
True
```

In the last example, then method `lower` is called and then we use `startswith` check to see if the resulting lower case string starts with the letter "p". As long as we are careful with the order, we can make multiple method calls in a single expression.

Exercise 6.7 There is a string method called `count` that is similar to the function in the previous exercise. Read the documentation of this method at `docs.python.org/library/string.html` and write an invocation that counts the number of times the letter a occurs in `'banana'`.

6.11   Format operator

The **format operator**, `%` allows us to construct strings, replacing parts of the strings with the data stored in variables. When applied to integers, `%` is the modulus operator. But when the first operand is a string, `%` is the format operator.

The first operand is the **format string**, which contains one or more **format sequences**, which specify how the second operand is formatted. The result is a string.

For example, the format sequence `'%d'` means that the second operand should be formatted as an integer (`d` stands for "decimal"):

```
>>> camels = 42
>>> '%d' % camels
'42'
```

The result is the string `'42'`, which is not to be confused with the integer value `42`.

A format sequence can appear anywhere in the string, so you can embed a value in a sentence:

```
>>> camels = 42
>>> 'I have spotted %d camels.' % camels
'I have spotted 42 camels.'
```

If there is more than one format sequence in the string, the second argument has to be a tuple. Each format sequence is matched with an element of the tuple, in order.

The following example uses `'%d'` to format an integer, `'%g'` to format a floating-point number (don't ask why), and `'%s'` to format a string:

```
>>> 'In %d years I have spotted %g %s.' % (3, 0.1, 'camels')
'In 3 years I have spotted 0.1 camels.'
```

The number of elements in the tuple has to match the number of format sequences in the string. Also, the types of the elements have to match the format sequences:

```
>>> '%d %d %d' % (1, 2)
TypeError: not enough arguments for format string
>>> '%d' % 'dollars'
TypeError: illegal argument type for built-in operation
```

In the first example, there aren't enough elements; in the second, the element is the wrong type.

The format operator is powerful, but it can be difficult to use. You can read more about it at `docs.python.org/lib/typesseq-strings.html`.

6.12 Debugging

A skill that you should cultivate as you program is always asking yourself, "What could go wrong here?" or alternatively, "What crazy thing might our user do to crash our (seemingly) perfect program?".

For example, look at the program which we used to demonstrate the `while` loop in the chapter on iteration:

```
while True:
    line = raw_input('> ')
    if line[0] == '#' :
        continue
    if line == 'done':
        break
    print line

print 'Done!'
```

Look what happens when the user enters an empty line of input:

```
> hello there
hello there
> # don't print this
> print this!
print this!
>
```

```
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "copytildone.py", line 3, in <module>
    if line[0] == '#' :
```

The code works fine until it is presented an empty line. Then there is no zeroth character so we get a traceback. There are two solutions to this to make line three "safe" even if the line is empty.

One possibility is to simply use the `startswith` method which returns `False` if the string is empty.

```
    if line.startswith('#') :
```

Another way to safely write the if statment using the **guardian** pattern and make sure the second logical expression is evaluated only where there is at least one character in the string.:

```
    if len(line) > 0 and line[0] == '#' :
```

Another common source of problems is when you hand-construct index values to move through a sequence. It can be quite tricky to get the beginning and end of the traversal right.

Here is a function that is supposed to compare two words and return `True` if one of the words is the reverse of the other, but it contains two errors:

```
def is_reverse(word1, word2):
    if len(word1) != len(word2):
        return False

    i = 0
    j = len(word2)

    while j > 0:
        if word1[i] != word2[j]:
            return False
        i = i+1
        j = j-1

    return True
```

The first `if` statement checks whether the words are the same length. If not, we can return `False` immediately and then, for the rest of the function, we can assume that the words are the same length. This is another example of the guardian pattern.

`i` and `j` are indices: `i` traverses `word1` forward while `j` traverses `word2` backward. If we find two letters that don't match, we can return `False` immediately. If we get through the whole loop and all the letters match, we return `True`.

If we test this function with the words "pots" and "stop", we expect the return value `True`, but we get an IndexError:

```
>>> is_reverse('pots', 'stop')
...
  File "reverse.py", line 15, in is_reverse
    if word1[i] != word2[j]:
IndexError: string index out of range
```

For debugging this kind of error, my first move is to print the values of the indices immediately before the line where the error appears.

```
    while j > 0:
        print i, j        # print here

        if word1[i] != word2[j]:
            return False
        i = i+1
        j = j-1
```

Now when I run the program again, I get more information:

```
>>> is_reverse('pots', 'stop')
0 4
...
IndexError: string index out of range
```

The first time through the loop, the value of j is 4, which is out of range for the string 'pots'. The
index of the last character is 3, so the initial value for j should be len(word2)-1.

If I fix that error and run the program again, I get:

```
>>> is_reverse('pots', 'stop')
0 3
1 2
2 1
True
```

This time we get the right answer, but it looks like the loop only ran three times, which is suspicious.
To get a better idea of what is happening, it is useful to draw a state diagram. During the first
iteration, the frame for is_reverse looks like this:
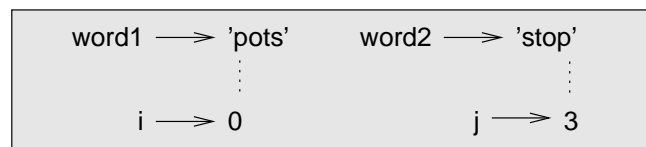
I took a little license by arranging the variables in the frame and adding dotted lines to show that the
values of i and j indicate characters in word1 and word2.

Exercise 6.8 Starting with this diagram, execute the program on paper, changing the values of i
and j during each iteration. Find and fix the second error in this function.

6.13   Glossary

object: Something a variable can refer to. For now, you can use "object" and "value" interchange-
ably.

sequence: An ordered set; that is, a set of values where each value is identified by an integer index.

item: One of the values in a sequence.

index: An integer value used to select an item in a sequence, such as a character in a string.

slice: A part of a string specified by a range of indices.

empty string: A string with no characters and length 0, represented by two quotation marks.

immutable: The property of a sequence whose items cannot be assigned.

traverse: To iterate through the items in a sequence, performing a similar operation on each.

search: A pattern of traversal that stops when it finds what it is looking for.

counter: A variable used to count something, usually initialized to zero and then incremented.

method: A function that is associated with an object and called using dot notation.

invocation: A statement that calls a method.

format operator: An operator, %, that takes a format string and a tuple and generates a string that includes the elements of the tuple formatted as specified by the format string.

format string: A string, used with the format operator, that contains format sequences.

format sequence: A sequence of characters in a format string, like %d, that specifies how a value should be formatted.

flag: A boolean variable used to indicate whether a condition is true.

6.14 Exercises

Exercise 6.9 A string slice can take a third index that specifies the "step size;" that is, the number of spaces between successive characters. A step size of 2 means every other character; 3 means every third, etc.

```
>>> fruit = 'banana'
>>> fruit[0:5:2]
'bnn'
```

A step size of -1 goes through the word backwards, so the slice [::-1] generates a reversed string.

Use this idiom to write a one-line version of is_palindrome from Exercise **??**.

Exercise 6.10 Read the documentation of the string methods at docs.python.org/lib/ string-methods.html. You might want to experiment with some of them to make sure you understand how they work. strip and replace are particularly useful.

The documentation uses a syntax that might be confusing.   For example, in find(sub[, start[, end]]), the brackets indicate optional arguments. So sub is required, but start is optional, and if you include start, then end is optional.

Exercise 6.11 The following functions are all *intended* to check whether a string contains any lowercase letters, but at least some of them are wrong. For each function, describe what the function actually does (assuming that the parameter is a string).

```
def any_lowercase1(s):
    for c in s:
        if c.islower():
            return True
        else:
            return False

def any_lowercase2(s):
    for c in s:
        if 'c'.islower():
            return 'True'
        else:
            return 'False'

def any_lowercase3(s):
    for c in s:
        flag = c.islower()
    return flag

def any_lowercase4(s):
    flag = False
    for c in s:
        flag = flag or c.islower()
    return flag

def any_lowercase5(s):
    for c in s:
        if not c.islower():
            return False
    return True
```

Exercise 6.12 ROT13 is a weak form of encryption that involves "rotating" each letter in a word by 13 places[1]. To rotate a letter means to shift it through the alphabet, wrapping around to the beginning if necessary, so 'A' shifted by 3 is 'D' and 'Z' shifted by 1 is 'A'.

Write a function called `rotate_word` that takes a string and an integer as parameters, and that returns a new string that contains the letters from the original string "rotated" by the given amount.

For example, "cheer" rotated by 7 is "jolly" and "melon" rotated by -10 is "cubed".

You might want to use the built-in functions `ord`, which converts a character to a numeric code, and `chr`, which converts numeric codes to characters.

Potentially offensive jokes on the Internet are sometimes encoded in ROT13. If you are not easily offended, find and decode some of them.

---

[1] See `wikipedia.org/wiki/ROT13`

Chapter 7

Files

7.1 Persistence

So far, we have learned how to write programs and communicate our intentions to the **Central Processing Unit** using conditional execution, functions, and iterations. We have learned how to create and use data structures in the **Main Memory**. The CPU and memory are where our software works and runs. It is where all of the "thinking" happens.

But if you recall from our hardware architecture discussions, once the power is turned off, anything stored in either the CPU or main memory is erased. So up to now, our programs have just been transient fun exercises to learn Python.
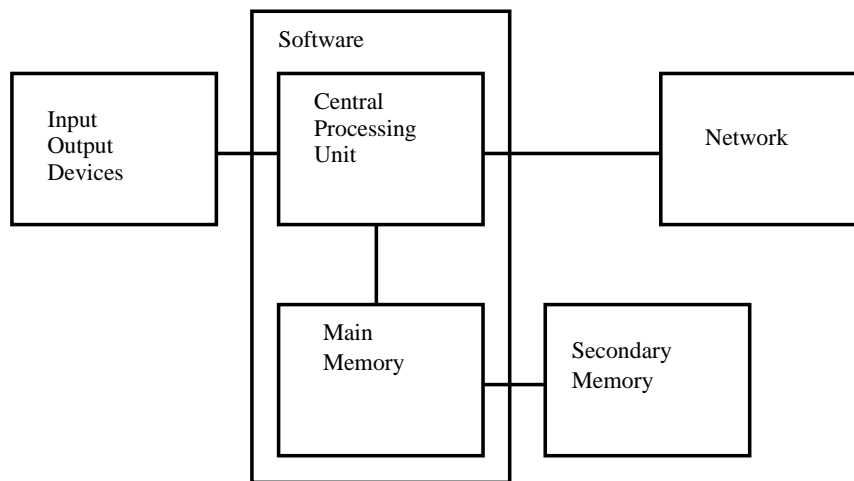
In this chapter, we start to work with **Secondary Memory** (or files). Secondary memory not erased even when the power is turned off. Or in the case of a USB memory drive, the data can we write from our programs can be removed from the system and transported to another system.

We will primarily focus on reading and writing text files such as those we create in a text editor. Later we will see how to work with database files which are binary files, specifically designed to be read and written through database software.

7.2   Opening files

When we want to read or write a file (say on your hard drive), we first must **open** the file. Opening the file communicates with your operating system which knows where the data for each file is stored. When you open a file, you are asking the operating system to find the file by name and make sure the file exists.

```
>>> fhand = open('mbox.txt')
>>> print fhand
<open file 'mbox.txt', mode 'r' at 0x1005088b0>
```

If the open is successful, the operating system returns us a **file handle**. The file handle is not the actual data contained in the file, but instead it is a "handle" that we can use to read the data. You are given a handle if the requested file exists and you have the proper permissions to read the file.

If the file does not exist, open will fail with a traceback and you will not get a handle to access the contents of the file:

```
>>> fhand = open("stuff.txt")
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "<stdin>", line 1, in <module>
IOError: [Errno 2] No such file or directory: 'stuff.txt'
```

Later we will use try and except to deal more gracefully with the situation where we attempt to open a file that does not exist.

7.3   Text files and lines

A text file can be thought of as a sequence of lines, much like a Python string can be through of as a sequence of characters. For example, this is an example of a text file which records mail activity from various individuals in an open source project development team:

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008
Return-Path: <postmaster@collab.sakaiproject.org>
Date: Sat, 5 Jan 2008 09:12:18 -0500
To: source@collab.sakaiproject.org
From: stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za
Subject: [sakai] svn commit: r39772 - content/branches/
Details: http://source.sakaiproject.org/viewsvn/?view=rev&rev=39772
...
```

The entire file is of mail interactions is available from www.py4inf.com/code/mbox.txt and a shortened version of the file is available from www.py4inf.com/code/mbox-short.txt. These files are in a standard format for a file containing multiple mail messages. The lines which start with "From " separate the messages and the lines which start with "From:" are part of the messages. For more information, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mbox.

To break the file into lines, there is a special character that represents the "end of the line" called the **newline** character.

In Python, we represent the **newline** character as a backslash-n in string constants. Even though this looks like two characters, it is actually a single character. When we look at the varible by entering "stuff" in the interpreter, it shows us the \n in the string, but when we use print to show the string, we see the string broken into two lines by the newline character.

```
>>> stuff = 'Hello\nWorld!'
>>> stuff
'Hello\nWorld!'
>>> print stuff
Hello
World!
>>> stuff = 'X\nY'
>>> print stuff
X
Y
>>> len(stuff)
3
```

You can also see that the length of the string `'X\nY'` is *three* characters because the newline character is a single character.

So when we look at the lines in a file, we need to *imagine* that there is a special invisible character at the end of each line that marks the end of the line called the newline.

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008\n
Return-Path: <postmaster@collab.sakaiproject.org>\n
Date: Sat, 5 Jan 2008 09:12:18 -0500\n
To: source@collab.sakaiproject.org\n
From: stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za\n
Subject: [sakai] svn commit: r39772 - content/branches/\n
Details: http://source.sakaiproject.org/viewsvn/?view=rev&rev=39772\n
...
```

So the newline character separates the characters in in the file into lines.

7.4   Reading files

While the **file handle** does not contain the data for the file, it is quite easy to construct a `for` loop to read through and count each of the lines in a file:

```
fhand = open("mbox.txt")
count = 0
for line in fhand:
    count = count + 1
print "Line Count:", count

python open.py
Line Count: 132045
```

We can use the file handle as the sequence in our `for` loop. Our `for` loop simply counts the number of lines in the file and prints them out. The rough translation of the `for` loop into English is, "for each line in the file represented by the file handle, add one to the `count` variable."

The reason that the `open` function does not read the entire file is that the file might be quite large with many gigabytes of data. The `open` statement takes the same amount of time regardless of the size of the file. The `for` loop actually causes the data to be read from the file.

When the file is read using a `for` loop in this manner, Python takes care of splitting the data in the file into separate lines using the newline character. Python reads each line through the newline and includes the newline as the last character in the `line` variable for each iteration of the `for` loop.

Because the for loop reads the data one line at a time, it can efficiently read and count the lines in very large files without running out of main memory to store the data. The above program can count the lines in any sized file using very little memory since each line is read, counted, and then discarded.

If you know the file is relatively small compared to the size of your main memory, you can read the whole file into one string using the `read` method on the file handle.

```
>>> fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
>>> inp = fhand.read()
>>> print len(inp)
94626
>>> print inp[:20]
From stephen.marquar
```

In this example, the entire contents (all 94,626 characters) of the file `mbox-short.txt` are read directly into the variable `inp`. We use string slicing to print out the first 20 characters of the string data stored in `inp`.

When the file is read in this manner, all the characters including all of the lines and newline characters are one big string in the variable **inp**. Remember that this form of the `open` function should only be used if the file data will fit comfortably in the main memory of your computer.

If the file is too large to fit in main memory, you should write your program to read the file in chunks using a `for` or `while` loop.

7.5   Searching through a file

It is a very common pattern to read through a file, ignoring most of the lines and processing lines which meet a particular criteria. We can combine the pattern for reading a file with string **methods** to build simple search mechanisms.

For example, if we wanted to read a file and only print out lines which started with the prefis "From:", we could use the string method **startswith** to select only those lines with the desired prefix:

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
for line in fhand:
    if line.startswith('From:') :
        print line
```

When this program runs, we get the following output:

```
From: stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za

From: louis@media.berkeley.edu

From: zqian@umich.edu

From: rjlowe@iupui.edu
...
```

The output looks great since the only lines we are seeing are those which start with "From:", but why are we seeing the extra blank lines? This is due to that invisible **newline** character. Each of the lines ends with a newline and so the print statement prints the string in the variable **line** which includes a newline and then print adds *another* newline, resulting in the double spacing effect we see.

We could use line slicing to print all but the last character, but a simpler approach is to use the **rstrip** method which strips whitespace from the right side of a string as follows:

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
for line in fhand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    if line.startswith('From:') :
        print line
```

When this program runs, we get the following output:

```
From: stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za
From: louis@media.berkeley.edu
From: zqian@umich.edu
From: rjlowe@iupui.edu
From: zqian@umich.edu
From: rjlowe@iupui.edu
From: cwen@iupui.edu
...
```

As your file processing programs get more complicated, you may want to structure your search loops using continue. The basic idea of the search loop is that you are looking for "interesting" lines and effectively skipping "uninteresting" lines. And then when we find an interesting line, we do something with that line.

We can structure the loop to follow the pattern of skipping uninteresting lines as follows:

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
for line in fhand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    # Skip 'uninteresting lines'
    if not line.startswith('From:') :
        continue
    # Process our 'interesting' line
    print line
```

The output of the program is the same. In English, the uninteresting lines are those which do not start with "From:", which we skip using continue. For the "interesting" lines (i.e. those that start with "From:") we perform the processing on those lines.

We can use the find string method to simiulate a text editor search which finds lines where the search string is anywhere in the line. Since find looks for an occurance of a string within another string and either returns the position of the string or -1 if the string was not found, we can write the following loop to show lines which contain the string "@uct.ac.za" (i.e. they come from the University of Capetown in South Africa):

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
for line in fhand:
```

```
    line = line.rstrip()
    if line.find('@uct.ac.za') == -1 :
        continue
    print line
```

Which produces the following output:

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
X-Authentication-Warning: set sender to stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za using -f
From: stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za
Author: stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za
From david.horwitz@uct.ac.za Fri Jan  4 07:02:32 2008
X-Authentication-Warning: set sender to david.horwitz@uct.ac.za using -f
From: david.horwitz@uct.ac.za
Author: david.horwitz@uct.ac.za
...
```

7.6   Parsing lines

Usually we want to do something to the lines other than just printing the whole line. Often we want to find the "interesting lines" and then **parse** the line to find some interesting *part* of the line. What if we wanted to print out the day of the week from those lines that start with "From ".

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008
```

Python provides a very useful string method called `split` which breaks a string into parts based on whitespace:

```
>>> line = "Have a nice day"
>>> words = line.split()
>>> print words
['Have', 'a', 'nice', 'day']
>>> print len(words)
4
>>> print words[2]
nice
```

The `split` method reads through the string and returns a list of strings representing each **token** in the string. We store this list of words in a mnemonically-named variable called `words`. Using the `len` function, we see that splitting the string yeilded four words and the third word (`word[2]`) is "nice".

So we can write a small program that looks for lines where the line starts with "From " and then print out the third word in the line:

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
for line in fhand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    if not line.startswith('From ') : continue
    words = line.split()
    print words[2]
```

We also use the contracted form of the `if` statement where we put the `continue` on the same line as the `if`. This contracted form of the `if` functions the same as if the `continue` were on the next line and intended.

The program produces the following output:

```
Sat
Fri
Fri
Fri
    ...
```

Later, we will learn increasingly sophisticated techniques for picking the lines to work on and how we pull those lines apart to find the exact bit of information we are looking for.

7.7   Letting the user choose the file name

We really do not want to have to edit our Python code every time we want to process a different file. It would be more usable to ask the user to enter the file name string each time the program runs so they can use our program on different files without changing the Python code.

This is quite simple to do by reading the file name from the user using `raw_input` as follows:

```
fname = raw_input("Enter the file name: ")
fhand = open(fname)
count = 0
for line in fhand:
    if line.startswith('Subject:') :
        count = count + 1
print 'There were', count, 'subject lines in', fname
```

We read the file name from the user and place it in a variable named `fname` and open that file. Now we can run the program repeatedly on different files.

```
python search6.py
Enter the file name: mbox.txt
There were 1797 subject lines in mbox.txt

python search6.py
Enter the file name: mbox-short.txt
There were 27 subject lines in mbox-short.txt
```

Before peeking at the next section, take a look at the above program and ask yourself, "What could go possibly wrong here?" or "What might our friendly user do that would cause our nice little program to ungracefully exit with a trace back, making us look not-so-cool in the eyes of our users?".

7.8   Using `try`, `catch`, **and** `open`

I told you not to peek - this is your last chance.

What if our user types something that is not a file name?

```
python search6.py
Enter the file name: missing.txt
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "search6.py", line 2, in <module>
    fhand = open(fname)
IOError: [Errno 2] No such file or directory: 'missing.txt'

python search6.py
Enter the file name: na na boo boo
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "search6.py", line 2, in <module>
    fhand = open(fname)
IOError: [Errno 2] No such file or directory: 'na na boo boo'
```

Do not laugh, users will eventually do every possible thing they can do to break your programs - either on purpose or with mailcious intent. As a matter of fact, an important part of any software development team is a person or group called **Quality Assurance** (or QA for short) whose very job it is to do the craziest things possible in an attempt to break the software that the programmer has created.

The QA team is responsible for finding the flaws in programs before we have delivered the program to the end-users who may be purchasing the software or paying our salary to write the software. So the QA team is the programmer's best friend.

So now that we see the flaw in the program, we can elegantly fix it using the try/except structure. We need to assume that the open call might fail and add recovery code when the open fails as follows:

```
fname = raw_input("Enter the file name: ")
try:
    fhand = open(fname)
except:
    print 'File cannot be opened:', fname
    exit()

count = 0
for line in fhand:
    if line.startswith('Subject:') :
        count = count + 1
print 'There were', count, 'subject lines in', fname
```

The exit function terminates the program. It is a function that we call that never returns. Now when our user (or QA team) types in silliness or bad file names, we "catch" then and recover gracefully:

```
python search7.py
Enter the file name: mbox.txt
There were 1797 subject lines in mbox.txt

python search7.py
Enter the file name: na na boo boo
File cannot be opened: na na boo boo
```

Protecting the open call is a good example of the proper use of **try** and except in a Python program. We use the term "Pythonic" when we are doing something the "Python way". We might say that the above example is the Pythonic way to open a file.

Once you become more skilled in Python, you can engage in reparte' with other Python programmers to decide which of two equivalent solutions to a problem is "more Pythonic". The goal to be "more Pythonic" captures the notion that programming is part engineering and part art. We are not always interested in just making something work - we also want our solution to be elegant.

7.9 Writing files

To write a file, you have to open it with mode `'w'` as a second parameter:

```
>>> fout = open('output.txt', 'w')
>>> print fout
<open file 'output.txt', mode 'w' at 0xb7eb2410>
```

If the file already exists, opening it in write mode clears out the old data and starts fresh, so be careful! If the file doesn't exist, a new one is created.

The write method of the file handle object puts data into the file.

```
>>> line1 = "This here's the wattle,\n"
>>> fout.write(line1)
```

Again, the file object keeps track of where it is, so if you call write again, it adds the new data to the end.

We must make sure to manage the ends of lines as we write to the file by explicitly inserting the newline character when we want to end a line. The print statement automatically appends a newline, but the write method does not add the newline automatically.

```
>>> line2 = "the emblem of our land.\n"
>>> fout.write(line2)
```

When you are done writing, you have to close the file to make sure that the last bit of data is physically written to the disk so it will not be lost if the power goes off.

```
>>> fout.close()
```

We could close the files which we open for read as well, but we can be a little sloppy if we are only opening a few files since Python makes sure that all open files are closed when the program ends. When we are writing files, we want to explicitly close the files so as to leave nothing to chance.

7.10 Debugging

When you are reading and writing files, you might run into problems with whitespace. These errors can be hard to debug because spaces, tabs and newlines are normally invisible:

```
>>> s = '1 2\t 3\n 4'
>>> print s
1 2  3
 4
```

The built-in function `repr` can help. It takes any object as an argument and returns a string representation of the object. For strings, it represents whitespace characters with backslash sequences:

```
>>> print repr(s)
'1 2\t 3\n 4'
```

This can be helpful for debugging.

One other problem you might run into is that different systems use different characters to indicate the end of a line. Some systems use a newline, represented \n. Others use a return character, represented \r. Some use both. If you move files between different systems, these inconsistencies might cause problems.

For most systems, there are applications to convert from one format to another. You can find them (and read more about this issue) at `wikipedia.org/wiki/Newline`. Or, of course, you could write one yourself.

When we read and parse files, there are many opportunities to encounter input that can crash our program so it is a good idea to revisit the **guardian** pattern when it comes writing programs that read through a file and look for a "needle in the haystack".

Lets revisit our program that is looking for the day of the week on the from lines of our file.:

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008
```

Since we are breaking this line into words, we could dispense with the use of `startswith` and simply look at the first word of the line to determine if we are interested in the line at all. We can use `continue` to skip lines that don't have "From" as the first word as follows:

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
for line in fhand:
    words = line.split()
    if words[0] != 'From' : continue
    print words[2]
```

This looks much simpler and we don't even need to do the `rstrip` to remove the newline at the end of the file. But is it better?

```
python search8.py
Sat
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "search8.py", line 5, in <module>
    if words[0] != 'From' : continue
IndexError: list index out of range
```

It kind of works - we see the day from the first from line (Sat) but then the program fails with a traceback error. What went wrong? What messed-up data caused our elegant, clever and very Pythonic program to fail?

You could stare at it for a long time and puzzle through it or ask someone for help, but the quicker and smarter approach is to add a `print statement`. And the best place to add the print statement is right before the line where the program failed and print out the data that seems to be causing the failure.

Now this approach may generate a lot of lines of output - but at least you will immediately have some clue as to the problem at hand. So we add a print of the variable `words` right before line five.

We even add a prefix "Debug:" to the line so we can keep our regular output separate from our debug output.

```
for line in fhand:
    words = line.split()
    print 'Debug:', words
    if words[0] != 'From' : continue
    print words[2
```

When we run the program, a lot of output scrolls off the screen but at the end, we see our debug output and the traceback so we know what happenned just before the traceback.

```
Debug: ['X-DSPAM-Confidence:', '0.8475']
Debug: ['X-DSPAM-Probability:', '0.0000']
Debug: []
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "search9.py", line 6, in <module>
    if words[0] != 'From' : continue
IndexError: list index out of range
```

Each debug line is printing the list of words which we get when we `split` the line into words. When the program fails the list of words is empty `[]`. If we open the file in a text editor and look at the file, at that point it looks as follows:

```
X-DSPAM-Result: Innocent
X-DSPAM-Processed: Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
X-DSPAM-Confidence: 0.8475
X-DSPAM-Probability: 0.0000

Details: http://source.sakaiproject.org/viewsvn/?view=rev&rev=39772
```

The error occurs when our program encounters a blank line! Of course there are "zero words" on a blank line - why didn't we think of that when we were writing the code. When the code looks for the first word (`word[0]`) to check to see if it matches "From", we get an "index out of range" error.

This of course is the perfect place to add some **guardian** code to avoid checking the first word if the first word is not there. There are many ways to protect this code, we will choose to check the number of words we have before we look at the first word:

```
fhand = open("mbox-short.txt")
count = 0
for line in fhand:
    words = line.split()
    # print 'Debug:', words
    if len(words) == 0 : continue
    if words[0] != 'From' : continue
    print words[2]
```

First we commented out the debug print statement instead of removing it in case our modification fails and we need to debug again. Then we added a guardian statement that checks to see if we have zero words, and if so, we use `continue` to skip to the next line in the file.

We can think of the two `continue` statements as helping us refine the set of lines which are "interesting" to us and which we want to process some more. A line which has no words is uninteresting

to us so we skip to the next line. A line which does not have "From" as its first word is uninteresting to us so we skip it.

The program as modified runs successfully so perhaps it is correct. Our guardian statement does make sure that the `words[0]` will never fail, but perhaps it is not enough. When we are programming, we must always be thinking, "What might go wrong?".

Exercise 7.1 Figure out which line of the above program is still not properly guarded. See if you can construct a text file which causes the program to fail and then modify the program so that the line is properly guarded and test it to make sure it handles your new text file.

Exercise 7.2 Rewrite the guardian code in the above example without two `if` statements. Instead use a compound logical expression using the `and` logical operator with a single `if` statement.

7.11 Glossary

text file: A sequence of characters stored in permanent storage like a hard drive.

newline: A special character used in files and strings to indicate the end of a line.

catch: To prevent an exception from terminating a program using the `try` and `except` statements.

Quality Assurance: A person or team focused on insuring the overall quality of a software product. QA is often involved in testing a product and identifying ptoblems before the product is released.

Pythonic: A techinque that works elegantly in Python. "Using try and except is the *Pythonic* way to recover from missing files.".

7.12 Exercises

Exercise 7.3 Write a program to will read through a file and print the contents of the file (line by line) all in upper case. Executing the program will look as follows:

```
python shout.py
Enter a file name: mbox-short.txt
FROM STEPHEN.MARQUARD@UCT.AC.ZA SAT JAN  5 09:14:16 2008
RETURN-PATH: <POSTMASTER@COLLAB.SAKAIPROJECT.ORG>
RECEIVED: FROM MURDER (MAIL.UMICH.EDU [141.211.14.90])
 BY FRANKENSTEIN.MAIL.UMICH.EDU (CYRUS V2.3.8) WITH LMTPA;
 SAT, 05 JAN 2008 09:14:16 -0500
```

Exercise 7.4 Write a program to read through the mail box data and when you find line that starts with "From", you will split the line into words using the `split` function. We are interested in who sent the message which is the second word on the From line.

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008
```

You will parse the From line and print out the second word for each From line and then you will also count the number of From (not From:) lines and print out a count at the end.

This is a sample good output with a few lines removed:

```
python fromcount.py
Enter a file name: mbox-short.txt
stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za
louis@media.berkeley.edu
zqian@umich.edu

[...some output removed...]

ray@media.berkeley.edu
cwen@iupui.edu
cwen@iupui.edu
cwen@iupui.edu
There were 27 lines in the file with From as the first word
```

Exercise 7.5 Sometimes when programmers get bored or want to have a bit of fun, they add a harmless **Easter Egg** to their program (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easter_egg_(media)). Modify the program that prompts the user for the file name so that it prints a funny message when the user types in the exact file name 'na na boo boo'. The program should behave normally for all other files which exist and don't exist. Here is a sample execution of the program:

```
python egg.py
Enter the file name: mbox.txt
There were 1797 subject lines in mbox.txt

python egg.py
Enter the file name: missing.tyxt
File cannot be opened: missing.tyxt

python egg.py
Enter the file name: na na boo boo
NA NA BOO BOO TO YOU - You have been punk'd!
```

We are not encouraging you to put Easter Eggs in your programs - this is just an exercise.

Chapter 8

Lists

8.1 A list is a sequence

Like a string, a **list** is a sequence of values. In a string, the values are characters; in a list, they can be any type. The values in list are called **elements** or sometimes **items**.

There are several ways to create a new list; the simplest is to enclose the elements in square brackets ([and]):

```
[10, 20, 30, 40]
['crunchy frog', 'ram bladder', 'lark vomit']
```

The first example is a list of four integers. The second is a list of three strings. The elements of a list don't have to be the same type. The following list contains a string, a float, an integer, and (lo!) another list:

```
['spam', 2.0, 5, [10, 20]]
```

A list within another list is **nested**.

A list that contains no elements is called an empty list; you can create one with empty brackets, [].

As you might expect, you can assign list values to variables:

```
>>> cheeses = ['Cheddar', 'Edam', 'Gouda']
>>> numbers = [17, 123]
>>> empty = []
>>> print cheeses, numbers, empty
['Cheddar', 'Edam', 'Gouda'] [17, 123] []
```

8.2 Lists are mutable

The syntax for accessing the elements of a list is the same as for accessing the characters of a string—the bracket operator. The expression inside the brackets specifies the index. Remember that the indices start at 0:

```
>>> print cheeses[0]
Cheddar
```

Unlike strings, lists are mutable. When the bracket operator appears on the left side of an assignment, it identifies the element of the list that will be assigned.

```
>>> numbers = [17, 123]
>>> numbers[1] = 5
>>> print numbers
[17, 5]
```

The one-eth element of `numbers`, which used to be 123, is now 5.

You can think of a list as a relationship between indices and elements. This relationship is called a **mapping**; each index "maps to" one of the elements. Here is a state diagram showing `cheeses`, `numbers` and `empty`:
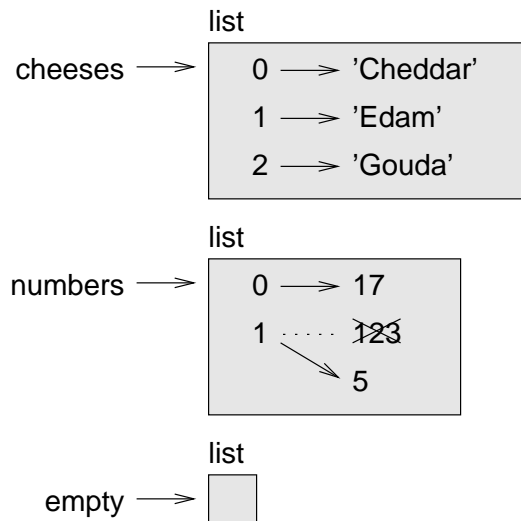
Lists are represented by boxes with the word "list" outside and the elements of the list inside. `cheeses` refers to a list with three elements indexed 0, 1 and 2. `numbers` contains two elements; the diagram shows that the value of the second element has been reassigned from 123 to 5. `empty` refers to a list with no elements.

List indices work the same way as string indices:

- Any integer expression can be used as an index.

- If you try to read or write an element that does not exist, you get an `IndexError`.

- If an index has a negative value, it counts backward from the end of the list.

The `in` operator also works on lists.

```
>>> cheeses = ['Cheddar', 'Edam', 'Gouda']
>>> 'Edam' in cheeses
True
>>> 'Brie' in cheeses
False
```

8.3   Traversing a list

The most common way to traverse the elements of a list is with a `for` loop. The syntax is the same as for strings:

```
for cheese in cheeses:
    print cheese
```

This works well if you only need to read the elements of the list. But if you want to write or update the elements, you need the indices. A common way to do that is to combine the functions `range` and `len`:

```
for i in range(len(numbers)):
    numbers[i] = numbers[i] * 2
```

This loop traverses the list and updates each element. `len` returns the number of elements in the list. `range` returns a list of indices from 0 to $n-1$, where n is the length of the list. Each time through the loop `i` gets the index of the next element. The assignment statement in the body uses `i` to read the old value of the element and to assign the new value.

A `for` loop over an empty list never executes the body:

```
for x in empty:
    print 'This never happens.'
```

Although a list can contain another list, the nested list still counts as a single element. The length of this list is four:

```
['spam', 1, ['Brie', 'Roquefort', 'Pol le Veq'], [1, 2, 3]]
```

8.4   List operations

The + operator concatenates lists:

```
>>> a = [1, 2, 3]
>>> b = [4, 5, 6]
>>> c = a + b
>>> print c
[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]
```

Similarly, the * operator repeats a list a given number of times:

```
>>> [0] * 4
[0, 0, 0, 0]
>>> [1, 2, 3] * 3
[1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3]
```

The first example repeats `[0]` four times. The second example repeats the list `[1, 2, 3]` three times.

8.5   List slices

The slice operator also works on lists:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f']
>>> t[1:3]
['b', 'c']
>>> t[:4]
['a', 'b', 'c', 'd']
>>> t[3:]
['d', 'e', 'f']
```

If you omit the first index, the slice starts at the beginning. If you omit the second, the slice goes to the end. So if you omit both, the slice is a copy of the whole list.

```
>>> t[:]
['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f']
```

Since lists are mutable, it is often useful to make a copy before performing operations that fold, spindle or mutilate lists.

A slice operator on the left side of an assignment can update multiple elements:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f']
>>> t[1:3] = ['x', 'y']
>>> print t
['a', 'x', 'y', 'd', 'e', 'f']
```

8.6   List methods

Python provides methods that operate on lists. For example, append adds a new element to the end of a list:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> t.append('d')
>>> print t
['a', 'b', 'c', 'd']
```

extend takes a list as an argument and appends all of the elements:

```
>>> t1 = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> t2 = ['d', 'e']
>>> t1.extend(t2)
>>> print t1
['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e']
```

This example leaves t2 unmodified.

sort arranges the elements of the list from low to high:

```
>>> t = ['d', 'c', 'e', 'b', 'a']
>>> t.sort()
>>> print t
['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e']
```

List methods are all void; they modify the list and return `None`. If you accidentally write `t = t.sort()`, you will be disappointed with the result.

8.7 Deleting elements

There are several ways to delete elements from a list. If you know the index of the element you want, you can use `pop`:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> x = t.pop(1)
>>> print t
['a', 'c']
>>> print x
b
```

`pop` modifies the list and returns the element that was removed. If you don't provide an index, it deletes and returns the last element.

If you don't need the removed value, you can use the `del` operator:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> del t[1]
>>> print t
['a', 'c']
```

If you know the element you want to remove (but not the index), you can use `remove`:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> t.remove('b')
>>> print t
['a', 'c']
```

The return value from `remove` is `None`.

To remove more than one element, you can use `del` with a slice index:

```
>>> t = ['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f']
>>> del t[1:5]
>>> print t
['a', 'f']
```

As usual, the slice selects all the elements up to, but not including, the second index.

8.8 Lists and strings

A string is a sequence of characters and a list is a sequence of values, but a list of characters is not the same as a string. To convert from a string to a list of characters, you can use `list`:

```
>>> s = 'spam'
>>> t = list(s)
>>> print t
['s', 'p', 'a', 'm']
```

Because `list` is the name of a built-in function, you should avoid using it as a variable name. I also avoid `l` because it looks too much like `1`. So that's why I use `t`.

The `list` function breaks a string into individual letters. If you want to break a string into words, you can use the `split` method:

```
>>> s = 'pining for the fjords'
>>> t = s.split()
>>> print t
['pining', 'for', 'the', 'fjords']
```

An optional argument called a **delimiter** specifies which characters to use as word boundaries. The following example uses a hyphen as a delimiter:

```
>>> s = 'spam-spam-spam'
>>> delimiter = '-'
>>> s.split(delimiter)
['spam', 'spam', 'spam']
```

`join` is the inverse of `split`. It takes a list of strings and concatenates the elements. `join` is a string method, so you have to invoke it on the delimiter and pass the list as a parameter:

```
>>> t = ['pining', 'for', 'the', 'fjords']
>>> delimiter = ' '
>>> delimiter.join(t)
'pining for the fjords'
```

In this case the delimiter is a space character, so `join` puts a space between words. To concatenate strings without spaces, you can use the empty string, `''`, as a delimiter.

8.9   Objects and values

If we execute these assignment statements:

```
a = 'banana'
b = 'banana'
```

We know that `a` and `b` both refer to a string, but we don't know whether they refer to the *same* string. There are two possible states:
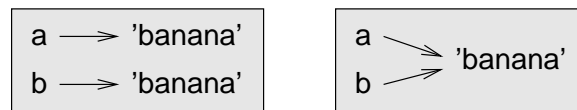
In one case, `a` and `b` refer to two different objects that have the same value. In the second case, they refer to the same object.

To check whether two variables refer to the same object, you can use the `is` operator.

```
>>> a = 'banana'
>>> b = 'banana'
>>> a is b
True
```

In this example, Python only created one string object, and both a and b refer to it.

But when you create two lists, you get two objects:

```
>>> a = [1, 2, 3]
>>> b = [1, 2, 3]
>>> a is b
False
```

So the state diagram looks like this:

In this case we would say that the two lists are **equivalent**, because they have the same elements, but not **identical**, because they are not the same object. If two objects are identical, they are also equivalent, but if they are equivalent, they are not necessarily identical.

Until now, we have been using "object" and "value" interchangeably, but it is more precise to say that an object has a value. If you execute a = [1,2,3], a refers to a list object whose value is a particular sequence of elements. If another list has the same elements, we would say it has the same value.
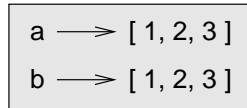
8.10 Aliasing

If a refers to an object and you assign b = a, then both variables refer to the same object:

```
>>> a = [1, 2, 3]
>>> b = a
>>> b is a
True
```

The state diagram looks like this:
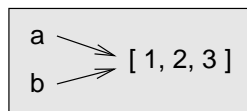
The association of a variable with an object is called a **reference**. In this example, there are two references to the same object.

An object with more than one reference has more than one name, so we say that the object is **aliased**.

If the aliased object is mutable, changes made with one alias affect the other:

```
>>> b[0] = 17
>>> print a
[17, 2, 3]
```

Although this behavior can be useful, it is error-prone. In general, it is safer to avoid aliasing when you are working with mutable objects.

For immutable objects like strings, aliasing is not as much of a problem. In this example:

```
a = 'banana'
b = 'banana'
```

It almost never makes a difference whether `a` and `b` refer to the same string or not.

8.11   List arguments

When you pass a list to a function, the function gets a reference to the list. If the function modifies a list parameter, the caller sees the change. For example, `delete_head` removes the first element from a list:

```
def delete_head(t):
    del t[0]
```

Here's how it is used:

```
>>> letters = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> delete_head(letters)
>>> print letters
['b', 'c']
```

The parameter `t` and the variable `letters` are aliases for the same object. The stack diagram looks like this:
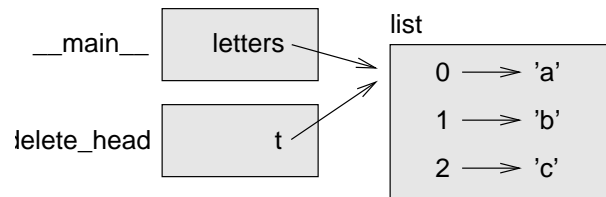
Since the list is shared by two frames, I drew it between them.

It is important to distinguish between operations that modify lists and operations that create new lists. For example, the `append` method modifies a list, but the + operator creates a new list:

```
>>> t1 = [1, 2]
>>> t2 = t1.append(3)
>>> print t1
[1, 2, 3]
>>> print t2
None

>>> t3 = t1 + [3]
>>> print t3
[1, 2, 3]
>>> t2 is t3
False
```

This difference is important when you write functions that are supposed to modify lists. For example, this function *does not* delete the head of a list:

```
def bad_delete_head(t):
    t = t[1:]                # WRONG!
```

The slice operator creates a new list and the assignment makes t refer to it, but none of that has any effect on the list that was passed as an argument.

An alternative is to write a function that creates and returns a new list. For example, tail returns all but the first element of a list:

```
def tail(t):
    return t[1:]
```

This function leaves the original list unmodified. Here's how it is used:

```
>>> letters = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> rest = tail(letters)
>>> print rest
['b', 'c']
```

Exercise 8.1 Write a function called chop that takes a list and modifies it, removing the first and last elements, and returns None.

Then write a function called middle that takes a list and returns a new list that contains all but the first and last elements.

8.12   Debugging

Careless use of lists (and other mutable objects) can lead to long hours of debugging. Here are some common pitfalls and ways to avoid them:

1. Don't forget that most list methods modify the argument and return None. This is the opposite of the string methods, which return a new string and leave the original alone.

    If you are used to writing string code like this:

    ```
    word = word.strip()
    ```

    It is tempting to write list code like this:

    ```
    t = t.sort()              # WRONG!
    ```

    Because sort returns None, the next operation you perform with t is likely to fail.

    Before using list methods and operators, you should read the documentation carefully and then test them in interactive mode. The methods and operators that lists share with other sequences (like strings) are documented at docs.python.org/lib/typesseq.html. The methods and operators that only apply to mutable sequences are documented at docs.python.org/lib/typesseq-mutable.html.

2. Pick an idiom and stick with it.

    Part of the problem with lists is that there are too many ways to do things. For example, to remove an element from a list, you can use pop, remove, del, or even a slice assignment.

    To add an element, you can use the append method or the + operator. But don't forget that these are right:

```
t.append(x)
t = t + [x]
```

And these are wrong:

```
t.append([x])          # WRONG!
t = t.append(x)        # WRONG!
t + [x]                # WRONG!
t = t + x              # WRONG!
```

Try out each of these examples in interactive mode to make sure you understand what they do. Notice that only the last one causes a runtime error; the other three are legal, but they do the wrong thing.

3. Make copies to avoid aliasing.

   If you want to use a method like `sort` that modifies the argument, but you need to keep the original list as well, you can make a copy.

```
orig = t[:]
t.sort()
```

   In this example you could also use the built-in function `sorted`, which returns a new, sorted list and leaves the original alone. But in that case you should avoid using `sorted` as a variable name!

8.13   Glossary

list: A sequence of values.

element: One of the values in a list (or other sequence), also called items.

index: An integer value that indicates an element in a list.

nested list: A list that is an element of another list.

list traversal: The sequential accessing of each element in a list.

object: Something a variable can refer to. An object has a type and a value.

equivalent: Having the same value.

identical: Being the same object (which implies equivalence).

reference: The association between a variable and its value.

aliasing: A circumstance where two or more variables refer to the same object.

delimiter: A character or string used to indicate where a string should be split.

8.14 Exercises

Exercise 8.2 Write a function called `is_sorted` that takes a list as a parameter and returns `True` if the list is sorted in ascending order and `False` otherwise. You can assume (as a precondition) that the elements of the list can be compared with the comparison operators `<`, `>`, etc.

For example, `is_sorted([1,2,2])` should return `True` and `is_sorted(['b','a'])` should return `False`.

Exercise 8.3 Two words are anagrams if you can rearrange the letters from one to spell the other. Write a function called `is_anagram` that takes two strings and returns `True` if they are anagrams.

Exercise 8.4 The (so-called) Birthday Paradox:

1. Write a function called `has_duplicates` that takes a list and returns `True` if there is any element that appears more than once. It should not modify the original list.

2. If there are 23 students in your class, what are the chances that two of you have the same birthday? You can estimate this probability by generating random samples of 23 birthdays and checking for matches. Hint: you can generate random birthdays with the `randint` function in the `random` module.

You can read about this problem at `wikipedia.org/wiki/Birthday_paradox`, and you can see my solution at `thinkpython.com/code/birthday.py`.

Exercise 8.5 Write a function called `remove_duplicates` that takes a list and returns a new list with only the unique elements from the original. Hint: they don't have to be in the same order.

Exercise 8.6 Write a function that reads the file `words.txt` and builds a list with one element per word. Write two versions of this function, one using the `append` method and the other using the idiom `t = t + [x]`. Which one takes longer to run? Why?

You can see my solution at `thinkpython.com/code/wordlist.py`.

Exercise 8.7 To check whether a word is in the word list, you could use the `in` operator, but it would be slow because it searches through the words in order.

Because the words are in alphabetical order, we can speed things up with a bisection search, which is similar to what you do when you look a word up in the dictionary. You start in the middle and check to see whether the word you are looking for comes before the word in the middle of the list. If so, then you search the first half of the list the same way. Otherwise you search the second half.

Either way, you cut the remaining search space in half. If the word list has 113,809 words, it will take about 17 steps to find the word or conclude that it's not there.

Write a function called `bisect` that takes a sorted list and a target value and returns the index of the value in the list, if it's there, or `None` if it's not.

Or you could read the documentation of the `bisect` module and use that!

Exercise 8.8 Two words are a "reverse pair" if each is the reverse of the other. Write a program that finds all the reverse pairs in the word list.

Exercise 8.9 Two words "interlock" if taking alternating letters from each forms a new word[1]. For example, "shoe" and "cold" interlock to form "schooled."

---

[1]This exercise is inspired by an example at `puzzlers.org`.

1. Write a program that finds all pairs of words that interlock. Hint: don't enumerate all pairs!

2. Can you find any words that are three-way interlocked; that is, every third letter forms a word, starting from the first, second or third?

Chapter 9

Dictionaries

A **dictionary** is like a list, but more general. In a list, the indices have to be integers; in a dictionary they can be (almost) any type.

You can think of a dictionary as a mapping between a set of indices (which are called **keys**) and a set of values. Each key maps to a value. The association of a key and a value is called a **key-value pair** or sometimes an **item**.

As an example, we'll build a dictionary that maps from English to Spanish words, so the keys and the values are all strings.

The function `dict` creates a new dictionary with no items. Because `dict` is the name of a built-in function, you should avoid using it as a variable name.

```
>>> eng2sp = dict()
>>> print eng2sp
{}
```

The squiggly-brackets, {}, represent an empty dictionary. To add items to the dictionary, you can use square brackets:

```
>>> eng2sp['one'] = 'uno'
```

This line creates an item that maps from the key 'one' to the value 'uno'. If we print the dictionary again, we see a key-value pair with a colon between the key and value:

```
>>> print eng2sp
{'one': 'uno'}
```

This output format is also an input format. For example, you can create a new dictionary with three items:

```
>>> eng2sp = {'one': 'uno', 'two': 'dos', 'three': 'tres'}
```

But if you print eng2sp, you might be surprised:

```
>>> print eng2sp
{'one': 'uno', 'three': 'tres', 'two': 'dos'}
```

The order of the key-value pairs is not the same. In fact, if you type the same example on your computer, you might get a different result. In general, the order of items in a dictionary is unpredictable.

But that's not a problem because the elements of a dictionary are never indexed with integer indices. Instead, you use the keys to look up the corresponding values:

```
>>> print eng2sp['two']
'dos'
```

The key 'two' always maps to the value 'dos' so the order of the items doesn't matter.

If the key isn't in the dictionary, you get an exception:

```
>>> print eng2sp['four']
KeyError: 'four'
```

The len function works on dictionaries; it returns the number of key-value pairs:

```
>>> len(eng2sp)
3
```

The in operator works on dictionaries; it tells you whether something appears as a *key* in the dictionary (appearing as a value is not good enough).

```
>>> 'one' in eng2sp
True
>>> 'uno' in eng2sp
False
```

To see whether something appears as a value in a dictionary, you can use the method values, which returns the values as a list, and then use the in operator:

```
>>> vals = eng2sp.values()
>>> 'uno' in vals
True
```

The in operator uses different algorithms for lists and dictionaries. For lists, it uses a search algorithm, as in Section 6.6. As the list gets longer, the search time gets longer in direct proportion. For dictionaries, Python uses an algorithm called a **hashtable** that has a remarkable property: the in operator takes about the same amount of time no matter how many items there are in a dictionary. I won't explain how that's possible, but you can read more about it at wikipedia.org/wiki/Hash_table.

Exercise 9.1 Write a function that reads the words in words.txt and stores them as keys in a dictionary. It doesn't matter what the values are. Then you can use the in operator as a fast way to check whether a string is in the dictionary.

If you did Exercise 8.7, you can compare the speed of this implementation with the list in operator and the bisection search.

9.1   Dictionary as a set of counters

Suppose you are given a string and you want to count how many times each letter appears. There are several ways you could do it:

1. You could create 26 variables, one for each letter of the alphabet. Then you could traverse the string and, for each character, increment the corresponding counter, probably using a chained conditional.

2. You could create a list with 26 elements. Then you could convert each character to a number (using the built-in function ord), use the number as an index into the list, and increment the appropriate counter.

3. You could create a dictionary with characters as keys and counters as the corresponding values. The first time you see a character, you would add an item to the dictionary. After that you would increment the value of an existing item.

Each of these options performs the same computation, but each of them implements that computation in a different way.

An **implementation** is a way of performing a computation; some implementations are better than others. For example, an advantage of the dictionary implementation is that we don't have to know ahead of time which letters appear in the string and we only have to make room for the letters that do appear.

Here is what the code might look like:

```
def histogram(s):
    d = dict()
    for c in s:
        if c not in d:
            d[c] = 1
        else:
            d[c] += 1
    return d
```

The name of the function is **histogram**, which is a statistical term for a set of counters (or frequencies).

The first line of the function creates an empty dictionary. The for loop traverses the string. Each time through the loop, if the character c is not in the dictionary, we create a new item with key c and the initial value 1 (since we have seen this letter once). If c is already in the dictionary we increment d[c].

Here's how it works:

```
>>> h = histogram('brontosaurus')
>>> print h
{'a': 1, 'b': 1, 'o': 2, 'n': 1, 's': 2, 'r': 2, 'u': 2, 't': 1}
```

The histogram indicates that the letters 'a' and 'b' appear once; 'o' appears twice, and so on.

Exercise 9.2 Dictionaries have a method called get that takes a key and a default value. If the key appears in the dictionary, get returns the corresponding value; otherwise it returns the default value. For example:

```
>>> h = histogram('a')
>>> print h
{'a': 1}
>>> h.get('a', 0)
```

```
1
>>> h.get('b', 0)
0
```

Use `get` to write `histogram` more concisely. You should be able to eliminate the `if` statement.

9.2   Dictionaries and files

One of the common uses of a dictionary is to count the occurance of words in a file with some written text. Lets start with a very simple file of words taken from the text of *Romeo and Juliet* thanks to `http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Tragedy/romeoandjuliet/romeo_juliet.2.2.html`.

For the first set of examples, we will use a shortened and simplified version of the text with no punctuation. Later we will work with the text of the scene with punctuation included.

```
But soft what light through yonder window breaks
It is the east and Juliet is the sun
Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon
Who is already sick and pale with grief
```

We will write a Python program to read through the lines of the file, break each line into a list of words, and then loop through each of the words in the line, and count each word using a dictionary.

You will see that we have two `for` loops. The outer loop is reading the lines of the file and the inner loop is iterating through each of the words on that particular line. This is an example of a pattern called **nested loops** because one of the loops is the *outer* loop and the other loop is the *inner* loop.

Because the inner loop executes all of its iterations each time the outer loop makes a single iteration, we think of the inner loop as iterating "more quickly" and the outer loop as iterating more slowly.

The combination of the two nested loops insures that we will count every word on every line of the input file.

```
fname = raw_input("Enter the file name: ")
try:
    fhand = open(fname)
except:
    print 'File cannot be opened:', fname
    exit()

counts = dict()
for line in fhand:
    words = line.split()
    for word in words:
        if word not in counts:
            counts[word] = 1
        else:
            counts[word] += 1

print counts
```

When we run the program, we see a raw dump of all of the counts in unsorted hash order. (the `romeo.txt` file is available at `www.py4inf.com/code/romeo.txt`)

```
python count1.py
Enter the file name: romeo.txt
{'and': 3, 'envious': 1, 'already': 1, 'fair': 1,
'is': 3, 'through': 1, 'pale': 1, 'yonder': 1,
'what': 1, 'sun': 2, 'Who': 1, 'But': 1, 'moon': 1,
'window': 1, 'sick': 1, 'east': 1, 'breaks': 1,
'grief': 1, 'with': 1, 'light': 1, 'It': 1, 'Arise': 1,
'kill': 1, 'the': 3, 'soft': 1, 'Juliet': 1}
```

It is a bit inconvienent to look through the dictionary to find the most common words and their counts, so we need to add some more Python code to get us the output that will be more helpful.

9.3   Looping and dictionaries

If you use a dictionary as the sequence in a `for` statement, it traverses the keys of the dictionary. For example, `print_hist` prints each key and the corresponding value:

```
def print_hist(h):
    for c in h:
        print c, h[c]
```

Here's what the output looks like:

```
>>> h = histogram('parrot')
>>> print_hist(h)
a 1
p 1
r 2
t 1
o 1
```

Again, the keys are in no particular order.

If you want to print the keys in alphabetical order, you first make a list of the keys in the dictionary using the `keys` method available in dictionary objects, and then sort that list and loop through the sorted list, looking up each key printing out key/value pairs in sorted order as follows as follows:

```
def print_sorted_hist(h):
    lst = h.keys()
    lst.sort()
    for c in lst:
        print c, h[c]
```

Here's what the output looks like:

```
>>> h = histogram('parrot')
>>> print_sorted_hist(h)
a 1
o 1
p 1
r 2
t 1
```

So now the keys are in alphabetical order.

9.4   Advanced text parsing

In the above example using the file romeo.txt, we made the file as simple as possible by removing any and all punctuation by hand. The real text has lots of punctuation as shown below:

```
But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
```

Since the Python split function looks for spaces and treats words as tokens separated by spaces, we would treat the words "soft!" and "soft" as *different* words and create a separate dictionary entry for each word.

Also since the file has capitalization, we will treat "who" and "Who" as different words with different counts.

We can solve both these problems by using the string methods lower, punctuation, and translate. The translate is the most subtle of the methods. Here is the documentation for translate:

```
string.translate(s, table[, deletechars])
```

Delete all characters from s that are in deletechars (if present), and then translate the characters using table, which must be a 256-character string giving the translation for each character value, indexed by its ordinal. If table is None, then only the character deletion step is performed.

We will not specify the table but we will use the deletechars parameter to delete all of the punctuation. We will even let Python tell us the list of characters that it considers "punctuation":

```
>>> import string
>>> string.punctuation
'!"#$%&\'()*+,-./:;<=>?@[\\]^_`{|}~'
```

We make the following modifications to our program:

```
import string                                      # New Code

fname = raw_input("Enter the file name: ")
try:
    fhand = open(fname)
except:
    print 'File cannot be opened:', fname
    exit()

counts = dict()
for line in fhand:
    line = line.translate(None, string.punctuation)   # New Code
    line = line.lower()                               # New Code
    words = line.split()
    for word in words:
        if word not in counts:
            counts[word] = 1
        else:
```

```
        counts[word] += 1

print counts
```

We use `translate` to remove all punctuation and `lower` to force the line to lower case. Otherwise the program is unchanged.

Part of learning the "Art of Python" or "Thinking Pythonically" is realizing that Python often has built-in capabilities for many common data-analysis problems. Over time, you will see enough example code and read enough of the documentation to know where to look to see if someone has already written something that makes your job much easier.

The following is an abbreviated version of the output:

```
Enter the file name: romeo-full.txt
{'swearst': 1, 'all': 6, 'afeard': 1, 'leave': 2, 'these': 2,
'kinsmen': 2, 'what': 11, 'thinkst': 1, 'love': 24, 'cloak': 1,
a': 24, 'orchard': 2, 'light': 5, 'lovers': 2, 'romeo': 40,
'maiden': 1, 'whiteupturned': 1, 'juliet': 32, 'gentleman': 1,
'it': 22, 'leans': 1, 'canst': 1, 'having': 1, ...}
```

Looking through this output is still unweildy and we can use Python to gives us exactly what we are looking for, but to do so, we need to learn about Python **tuples**. We will pick up this example once we learn about tuples.

9.5   Debugging

As you work with bigger datasets it can become unwieldy to debug by printing and checking data by hand. Here are some suggestions for debugging large datasets:

Scale down the input: If possible, reduce the size of the dataset. For example if the program reads a text file, start with just the first 10 lines, or with the smallest example you can find. You can either edit the files themselves, or (better) modify the program so it reads only the first n lines.

If there is an error, you can reduce n to the smallest value that manifests the error, and then increase it gradually as you find and correct errors.

Check summaries and types: Instead of printing and checking the entire dataset, consider printing summaries of the data: for example, the number of items in a dictionary or the total of a list of numbers.

A common cause of runtime errors is a value that is not the right type. For debugging this kind of error, it is often enough to print the type of a value.

Write self-checks: Sometimes you can write code to check for errors automatically. For example, if you are computing the average of a list of numbers, you could check that the result is not greater than the largest element in the list or less than the smallest. This is called a "sanity check" because it detects results that are "insane."

Another kind of check compares the results of two different computations to see if they are consistent. This is called a "consistency check."

Pretty print the output: Formatting debugging output can make it easier to spot an error.

Again, time you spend building scaffolding can reduce the time you spend debugging.

9.6   Glossary

dictionary: A mapping from a set of keys to their corresponding values.

key: An object that appears in a dictionary as the first part of a key-value pair.

value: An object that appears in a dictionary as the second part of a key-value pair. This is more specific than our previous use of the word "value."

key-value pair: The representation of the mapping from a key to a value.

item: Another name for a key-value pair.

implementation: A way of performing a computation.

hashtable: The algorithm used to implement Python dictionaries.

hash function: A function used by a hashtable to compute the location for a key.

lookup: A dictionary operation that takes a key and finds the corresponding value.

histogram: A set of counters.

nested loops: When there is one or more loops "inside" of another loop. The inner loop runs to completion each time the outer loop runs once.

9.7   Exercises

Exercise 9.3 Write a program that categorizes each mail message by which day of the week the commit was done. To do this look for lines which start with "From " and then look for the third word and then keep a running count of each of the days of the week. At the end of the program print out the contents of your dictionary. (order does not matter)

```
Sample Line:
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008

Sample Execution:
python dow.py
Enter a file name: mbox-short.txt
{'Fri': 20, 'Thu': 6, 'Sat': 1}
```

Exercise 9.4 Write a program to read through a mail log, and figure out who had the most messages in the file. The program looks for From lines and takes the second parameter on those lines as the person who sent the mail.

The program creates a Python dictionary that maps E-Mail address to the total number of messages for that person.

After all the data has been read - the program looks through the dictionary to find who has the most Mail messages and how many messages the person has.

```
$ python whomost.py
Enter a file name: mbox-short.txt
cwen@iupui.edu 5
$ python whomost.py
Enter a file name: mbox.txt
zqian@umich.edu 195
```

Exercise 9.5 This program records the domain name (instead of the e-Mail address) where the message was sent from insead of who the mail came from (i.e. the whole e-mail address). At the end of the program print out the contents of your dictionary.

```
python schoolcount.py
Enter a file name: mbox-short.txt
{'media.berkeley.edu': 4, 'uct.ac.za': 6, 'umich.edu': 7,
'gmail.com': 1, 'caret.cam.ac.uk': 1, 'iupui.edu': 8}
```

Chapter 10

Tuples

10.1 Tuples are immutable

A tuple is a sequence of values. The values can be any type, and they are indexed by integers, so in that respect tuples are a lot like lists. The important difference is that tuples are **immutable**. Tuples are also **comparable** and **hashable** so we can sort lists of them and use tuples as key values in Python dictionaries.

Syntactically, a tuple is a comma-separated list of values:

```
>>> t = 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e'
```

Although it is not necessary, it is common to enclose tuples in parentheses to help use quickly identify tuples when we look at Python code:

```
>>> t = ('a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e')
```

To create a tuple with a single element, you have to include the final comma:

```
>>> t1 = ('a',)
>>> type(t1)
<type 'tuple'>
```

Without the comma, Python treats (`'a'`) as a string in parentheses:

```
>>> t2 = ('a')
>>> type(t2)
<type 'str'>
```

Another way to construct a tuple is the built-in function `tuple`. With no argument, it creates an empty tuple:

```
>>> t = tuple()
>>> print t
()
```

If the argument is a sequence (string, list or tuple), the result of the call to `tuple` is a tuple with the elements of the sequence:

```
>>> t = tuple('lupins')
>>> print t
('l', 'u', 'p', 'i', 'n', 's')
```

Because `tuple` is the name of a constructor, you should avoid using it as a variable name.

Most list operators also work on tuples. The bracket operator indexes an element:

```
>>> t = ('a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e')
>>> print t[0]
'a'
```

And the slice operator selects a range of elements.

```
>>> print t[1:3]
('b', 'c')
```

But if you try to modify one of the elements of the tuple, you get an error:

```
>>> t[0] = 'A'
TypeError: object doesn't support item assignment
```

You can't modify the elements of a tuple, but you can replace one tuple with another:

```
>>> t = ('A',) + t[1:]
>>> print t
('A', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e')
```

10.2   Comparing tuples

The comparison operators work with tuples and other sequences; Python starts by comparing the first element from each sequence. If they are equal, it goes on to the next element, and so on, until it finds elements that differ. Subsequent elements are not considered (even if they are really big).

```
>>> (0, 1, 2) < (0, 3, 4)
True
>>> (0, 1, 2000000) < (0, 3, 4)
True
```

The `sort` function works the same way. It sorts primarily by first element, but in the case of a tie, it sorts by second element, and so on.

This feature lends itself to a pattern called **DSU** for

Decorate a sequence by building a list of tuples with one or more sort keys preceding the elements from the sequence,

Sort the list of tuples, and

Undecorate by extracting the sorted elements of the sequence.

For example, suppose you have a list of words and you want to sort them from longest to shortest:

```
def sort_by_length(words):
    t = []
    for word in words:
        t.append((len(word), word))

    t.sort(reverse=True)

    res = list()                # Create an empty list
    for length, word in t:
        res.append(word)
    return res
```

The first loop builds a list of tuples, where each tuple is a word preceded by its length.

`sort` compares the first element, length, first, and only considers the second element to break ties. The keyword argument `reverse=True` tells `sort` to go in decreasing order.

The second loop traverses the list of tuples and builds a list of words in descending order of length.

10.3   Tuple assignment

One of the unique syntactic features of the Python language is the ability to have a tuple on the left hand side of an assignment statement. This allows you to assign more than one variable at a time when the left hand side is a sequence.

In this example we have a two element list (which is a sequence) and assign the first and second elements of the sequence to the variables x and y in a single statement.

```
>>> m = [ 'have', 'fun' ]
>>> x, y = m
>>> x
'have'
>>> y
'fun'
>>>
```

It is not magic, Python *roughly* translates the tuple assignment syntax to be the following:[1]

```
>>> m = [ 'have', 'fun' ]
>>> x = m[0]
>>> y = m[1]
>>> x
'have'
>>> y
'fun'
>>>
```

Stylistically when we use a tuple on the left hand side of the assignment statement, we omit the prarenthesis, but the following is equally valid syntax:

---

[1]Python does not translate the syntax literally - for example if you try this with a dictionary it will not work as might expect.

```
>>> m = [ 'have', 'fun' ]
>>> (x, y) = m
>>> x
'have'
>>> y
'fun'
>>>
```

A particularly clever application of tuple assignment allows us to **swap** the values of two variables in a single statement:

```
>>> a, b = b, a
```

Both sides of this statement are tuples, but the left side is a tuple of variables; the right side is a tuple of expressions. Each value on the right side is assigned to its respective variable on the left side. All the expressions on the right side are evaluated before any of the assignments.

The number of variables on the left and the number of values on the right have to be the same:

```
>>> a, b = 1, 2, 3
ValueError: too many values to unpack
```

More generally, the right side can be any kind of sequence (string, list or tuple). For example, to split an email address into a user name and a domain, you could write:

```
>>> addr = 'monty@python.org'
>>> uname, domain = addr.split('@')
```

The return value from `split` is a list with two elements; the first element is assigned to `uname`, the second to `domain`.

```
>>> print uname
monty
>>> print domain
python.org
```

10.4   Dictionaries and tuples

Dictionaries have a method called `items` that returns a list of tuples, where each tuple is a key-value pair[2].

```
>>> d = {'a':10, 'b':1, 'c':22}
>>> t = d.items()
>>> print t
[('a', 10), ('c', 22), ('b', 1)]
```

As you should expect from a dictionary, the items are in no particular order.

However, since the list of tuples is a list, and tuples are comparable, we can now sort the list of tuples. Converting a dictionary to a list of tuples is a way for us to output the contents of a dictionary sorted by key:

---

[2]This behavior is slightly different in Python 3.0.

```
>>> d = {'a':10, 'b':1, 'c':22}
>>> t = d.items()
>>> t
[('a', 10), ('c', 22), ('b', 1)]
>>> t.sort()
>>> t
[('a', 10), ('b', 1), ('c', 22)]
```

The new list is sorted in ascending order by the key value.

10.5   Multiple assignment with dictionaries

Combining `items`, tuple assignment and `for`, you get the idiom for traversing the keys and values of a dictionary in a single loop:

```
for key, val in d.items():
    print val, key
```

This loop has two **iteration variables** because `items` returns a list of tuples and `key, val` is a tuple assignment that successively iterates through each of the key/value pairs in the dictionary.

For each iteration through the loop, both `key` and `value` are advanced to the next key/value pair in the dictionary (still in hash order).

The output of this loop is:

```
0 a
2 c
1 b
```

Again in hash key order (i.e. no particular order).

If we combine these two techniques, we can print out the contents of a dictionary sorted by the *value* stored in each key/value pair.

To do this, we first make a list of tuples where each tuple is `(value, key)`. The `items` method would give us a list of `(key, value)` tuples–but this time we want to sort by value not key. Once we have constructed the list with the value/key tuples, it is a simple matter to sort the list in reverse order and print out the new, sorted list.

```
>>> d = {'a':10, 'b':1, 'c':22}
>>> l = list()
>>> for key, val in d.items() :
...     l.append( (val, key) )
...
>>> l
[(10, 'a'), (22, 'c'), (1, 'b')]
>>> l.sort(reverse=True)
>>> l
[(22, 'c'), (10, 'a'), (1, 'b')]
>>>
```

By hand-constructing the list of tuples to have the value as the first element of each tuple, we can sort the list of tuples and get our dictionary contents sorted by value.

10.6   The most common words

Coming back to our running example of the text from *Romeo and Juliet* Act 2, Scene 2, we can augment our program to use this technique to print the ten most common words in the text as follows:

```
import string
fhand = open('romeo-full.txt')
counts = dict()
for line in fhand:
    line = line.translate(None, string.punctuation)
    line = line.lower()
    words = line.split()
    for word in words:
        if word not in counts:
            counts[word] = 1
        else:
            counts[word] += 1

# Sort the dictionary by value
lst = list()
for key, val in counts.items():
    lst.append( (val, key) )

lst.sort(reverse=True)

for key, val in lst[:10] :
    print key, val
```

The first part of the program which reads the file and computes the dictionary which maps each word to the count of words in the document is unchanged. But instead of simply printing out `counts` and ending the program, we construct a list of `(val, key)` tuples and then sort the list in reverse order.

Since the value is first, it will be used for the comparisons and if there is more than one tuple with the same value, it will look at the second element (the key) and so tuples where the value is the same will be further sorted by the alphabetical order of the key.

And at the end we write a nice for loop which does a multiple assignment iteration and prints out the ten most common words by iterating through a slice of the list (`lst[:10]`).

So now the output finally looks like what we want for our word frequency analysis.

```
61 i
42 and
40 romeo
34 to
34 the
32 thou
32 juliet
30 that
29 my
24 thee
```

The fact that this relatively complex data parsing and analysis can be done with a relatively easy-to-understand 19 line Python program is one reason why Python is a good choice as a language for exploring information.

10.7 Using tuples as keys in dictionaries

Because tuples are **hashable** and lists are not hashable, if we want to create a **composite** key to use in a dictionary we must use a tuple as the key.

We would enounter a composite key if we wanted to create a telephone directory that maps from last-name, first-name pairs to telephone numbers. Assuming that we have defined the variables `last`, `first` and `number`, we could write a dictionary assignment statement as follows:

```
directory[last,first] = number
```

The expression in brackets is a tuple. We could use tuple assignment in a for loop to traverse this dictionary.

```
for last, first in directory:
    print first, last, directory[last,first]
```

This loop traverses the keys in `directory`, which are tuples. It assigns the elements of each tuple to `last` and `first`, then prints the name and corresponding telephone number.

There are two ways to represent tuples in a state diagram. The more detailed version shows the indices and elements just as they appear in a list. For example, the tuple (`'Cleese'`, `'John'`) would appear:

tuple

```
0 ──▶ 'Cleese'
1 ──▶ 'John'
```

But in a larger diagram you might want to leave out the details. For example, a diagram of the telephone directory might appear:

dict

```
('Cleese', 'John')    ──▶  '08700 100 222'
('Chapman', 'Graham') ──▶  '08700 100 222'
('Idle', 'Eric')      ──▶  '08700 100 222'
('Gilliam', 'Terry')  ──▶  '08700 100 222'
('Jones', 'Terry')    ──▶  '08700 100 222'
('Palin', 'Michael')  ──▶  '08700 100 222'
```

Here the tuples are shown using Python syntax as a graphical shorthand.

The telephone number in the diagram is the complaints line for the BBC, so please don't call it.

10.8   Sequences: strings, lists, and tuples–Oh My!

I have focused on lists of tuples, but almost all of the examples in this chapter also work with lists of lists, tuples of tuples, and tuples of lists. To avoid enumerating the possible combinations, it is sometimes easier to talk about sequences of sequences.

In many contexts, the different kinds of sequences (strings, lists and tuples) can be used interchangeably. So how and why do you choose one over the others?

To start with the obvious, strings are more limited than other sequences because the elements have to be characters. They are also immutable. If you need the ability to change the characters in a string (as opposed to creating a new string), you might want to use a list of characters instead.

Lists are more common than tuples, mostly because they are mutable. But there are a few cases where you might prefer tuples:

1. In some contexts, like a `return` statement, it is syntactically simpler to create a tuple than a list. In other contexts, you might prefer a list.

2. If you want to use a sequence as a dictionary key, you have to use an immutable type like a tuple or string.

3. If you are passing a sequence as an argument to a function, using tuples reduces the potential for unexpected behavior due to aliasing.

Because tuples are immutable, they don't provide methods like `sort` and `reverse`, which modify existing lists. But Python provides the built-in functions `sorted` and `reversed`, which take any sequence as a parameter and return a new list with the same elements in a different order.

10.9   Debugging

Lists, dictionaries and tuples are known generically as **data structures**; in this chapter we are starting to see compound data structures, like lists of tuples, and dictionaries that contain tuples as keys and lists as values. Compound data structures are useful, but they are prone to what I call **shape errors**; that is, errors caused when a data structure has the wrong type, size or composition or perhaps you write some code and forget the shape of your data and introduce an error.

For example, if you are expecting a list with one integer and I give you a plain old integer (not in a list), it won't work.

When you are debugging a program, and especially if you are working on a hard bug, there are four things to try:

reading: Examine your code, read it back to yourself, and check that it says what you meant to say.

running: Experiment by making changes and running different versions. Often if you display the right thing at the right place in the program, the problem becomes obvious, but sometimes you have to spend some time to build scaffolding.

ruminating: Take some time to think! What kind of error is it: syntax, runtime, semantic? What information can you get from the error messages, or from the output of the program? What kind of error could cause the problem you're seeing? What did you change last, before the problem appeared?

retreating: At some point, the best thing to do is back off, undoing recent changes, until you get back to a program that works and that you understand. Then you can starting rebuilding.

Beginning programmers sometimes get stuck on one of these activities and forget the others. Each activity comes with its own failure mode.

For example, reading your code might help if the problem is a typographical error, but not if the problem is a conceptual misunderstanding. If you don't understand what your program does, you can read it 100 times and never see the error, because the error is in your head.

Running experiments can help, especially if you run small, simple tests. But if you run experiments without thinking or reading your code, you might fall into a pattern I call "random walk programming," which is the process of making random changes until the program does the right thing. Needless to say, random walk programming can take a long time.

You have to take time to think. Debugging is like an experimental science. You should have at least one hypothesis about what the problem is. If there are two or more possibilities, try to think of a test that would eliminate one of them.

Taking a break helps with the thinking. So does talking. If you explain the problem to someone else (or even yourself), you will sometimes find the answer before you finish asking the question.

But even the best debugging techniques will fail if there are too many errors, or if the code you are trying to fix is too big and complicated. Sometimes the best option is to retreat, simplifying the program until you get to something that works and that you understand.

Beginning programmers are often reluctant to retreat because they can't stand to delete a line of code (even if it's wrong). If it makes you feel better, copy your program into another file before you start stripping it down. Then you can paste the pieces back in a little bit at a time.

Finding a hard bug requires reading, running, ruminating, and sometimes retreating. If you get stuck on one of these activities, try the others.

10.10 Glossary

tuple: An immutable sequence of elements.

hashable: A type that has a hash function. Immutable types like integers, floats and strings are hashable; mutable types like lists and dictionaries are not.

comparable: A type where one value can be checked to see if it is greater than, less than or equal to another value of the same type. Types which are comparable can be put in a list and sorted.

tuple assignment: An assignment with a sequence on the right side and a tuple of variables on the left. The right side is evaluated and then its elements are assigned to the variables on the left.

singleton: A list (or other sequence) with a single element.

gather: The operation of assembling a variable-length argument tuple.

scatter: The operation of treating a sequence as a list of arguments.

DSU: Abbreviation of "decorate-sort-undecorate," a pattern that involves building a list of tuples, sorting, and extracting part of the result.

data structure: A collection of related values, often organized in lists, dictionaries, tuples, etc.

shape (of a data structure): A summary of the type, size and composition of a data structure.

10.11   Exercises

Exercise 10.1 This program counts the distribution of the hour of the day for each of the messages. You can pull the hour from the "From " line by finding the time string and then splitting that string into parts using the colon character. Once you have accumulated the counts for each hour, print out the counts, one per line, sorted by hour as shown below.

```
Sample Line:
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008

Sample Execution:
python timeofday.py
Enter a file name: mbox-short.txt
04 3
06 1
07 1
09 2
10 3
11 6
14 1
15 2
16 4
17 2
18 1
19 1
```

Exercise 10.2 Write a function called `most_frequent` that takes a string and prints the letters in decreasing order of frequency. Find text samples from several different languages and see how letter frequency varies between languages. Compare your results with the tables at `wikipedia.org/ wiki/Letter_frequencies`.

Exercise 10.3 More anagrams!

1. Write a program that reads a word list from a file and prints all the sets of words that are anagrams.

    Here is an example of what the output might look like:

    ```
    ['deltas', 'desalt', 'lasted', 'salted', 'slated', 'staled']
    ['retainers', 'ternaries']
    ['generating', 'greatening']
    ['resmelts', 'smelters', 'termless']
    ```

    Hint: you might want to build a dictionary that maps from a set of letters to a list of words that can be spelled with those letters. The question is, how can you represent the set of letters in a way that can be used as a key?

2. Modify the previous program so that it prints the largest set of anagrams first, followed by the second largest set, and so on.

3. In Scrabble a "bingo" is when you play all seven tiles in your rack, along with a letter on the board, to form an eight-letter word. What set of 8 letters forms the most possible bingos? Hint: there are seven.

4. Two words form a "metathesis pair" if you can transform one into the other by swapping two letters[3]; for example, "converse" and "conserve." Write a program that finds all of the metathesis pairs in the dictionary. Hint: don't test all pairs of words, and don't test all possible swaps.

   You can download a solution from `thinkpython.com/code/anagram_sets.py`.

Exercise 10.4 Here's another Car Talk Puzzler[4]:

> What is the longest English word, that remains a valid English word, as you remove its letters one at a time?
>
> Now, letters can be removed from either end, or the middle, but you can't rearrange any of the letters. Every time you drop a letter, you wind up with another English word. If you do that, you're eventually going to wind up with one letter and that too is going to be an English word—one that's found in the dictionary. I want to know what's the longest word and how many letters does it have?
>
> I'm going to give you a little modest example: Sprite. Ok? You start off with sprite, you take a letter off, one from the interior of the word, take the r away, and we're left with the word spite, then we take the e off the end, we're left with spit, we take the s off, we're left with pit, it, and I.

Write a program to find all words that can be reduced in this way, and then find the longest one.

This exercise is a little more challenging than most, so here are some suggestions:

1. You might want to write a function that takes a word and computes a list of all the words that can be formed by removing one letter. These are the "children" of the word.

2. Recursively, a word is reducible if any of its children are reducible. As a base case, you can consider the empty string reducible.

3. The wordlist I provided, `words.txt`, doesn't contain single letter words. So you might want to add "I", "a", and the empty string.

4. To improve the performance of your program, you might want to memoize the words that are known to be reducible.

You can see my solution at `thinkpython.com/code/reducible.py`.

---

[3]This exercise is inspired by an example at `puzzlers.org`.
[4]`www.cartalk.com/content/puzzler/transcripts/200651`

Appendix A

Debugging

Different kinds of errors can occur in a program, and it is useful to distinguish among them in order to track them down more quickly:

- Syntax errors are produced by Python when it is translating the source code into byte code. They usually indicate that there is something wrong with the syntax of the program. Example: Omitting the colon at the end of a `def` statement yields the somewhat redundant message `SyntaxError:  invalid syntax`.

- Runtime errors are produced by the interpreter if something goes wrong while the program is running. Most runtime error messages include information about where the error occurred and what functions were executing.

- Semantic errors are problems with a program that runs without producing error messages but doesn't do the right thing. Example: An expression may not be evaluated in the order you expect, yielding an incorrect result.

The first step in debugging is to figure out which kind of error you are dealing with. Although the following sections are organized by error type, some techniques are applicable in more than one situation.

A.1   Syntax errors

Syntax errors are usually easy to fix once you figure out what they are. Unfortunately, the error messages are often not helpful. The most common messages are `SyntaxError:  invalid syntax` and `SyntaxError:  invalid token`, neither of which is very informative.

On the other hand, the message does tell you where in the program the problem occurred. Actually, it tells you where Python noticed a problem, which is not necessarily where the error is. Sometimes the error is prior to the location of the error message, often on the preceding line.

If you are building the program incrementally, you should have a good idea about where the error is. It will be in the last line you added.

If you are copying code from a book, start by comparing your code to the book's code very carefully. Check every character. At the same time, remember that the book might be wrong, so if you see something that looks like a syntax error, it might be.

Here are some ways to avoid the most common syntax errors:

1. Make sure you are not using a Python keyword for a variable name.

2. Check that you have a colon at the end of the header of every compound statement, including `for`, `while`, `if`, and `def` statements.

3. Make sure that any strings in the code have matching quotation marks.

4. If you have multiline strings with triple quotes (single or double), make sure you have terminated the string properly. An unterminated string may cause an `invalid token` error at the end of your program, or it may treat the following part of the program as a string until it comes to the next string. In the second case, it might not produce an error message at all!

5. An unclosed opening operator—(, {, or [—makes Python continue with the next line as part of the current statement. Generally, an error occurs almost immediately in the next line.

6. Check for the classic = instead of == inside a conditional.

7. Check the indentation to make sure it lines up the way it is supposed to. Python can handle space and tabs, but if you mix them it can cause problems. The best way to avoid this problem is to use a text editor that knows about Python and generates consistent indentation.

If nothing works, move on to the next section...

A.1.1   I keep making changes and it makes no difference.

If the interpreter says there is an error and you don't see it, that might be because you and the interpreter are not looking at the same code. Check your programming environment to make sure that the program you are editing is the one Python is trying to run.

If you are not sure, try putting an obvious and deliberate syntax error at the beginning of the program. Now run it again. If the interpreter doesn't find the new error, you are not running the new code.

There are a few likely culprits:

• You edited the file and forgot to save the changes before running it again. Some programming environments do this for you, but some don't.

• You changed the name of the file, but you are still running the old name.

• Something in your development environment is configured incorrectly.

• If you are writing a module and using `import`, make sure you don't give your module the same name as one of the standard Python modules.

• If you are using `import` to read a module, remember that you have to restart the interpreter or use `reload` to read a modified file. If you import the module again, it doesn't do anything.

If you get stuck and you can't figure out what is going on, one approach is to start again with a new program like "Hello, World!," and make sure you can get a known program to run. Then gradually add the pieces of the original program to the new one.

A.2 Runtime errors

Once your program is syntactically correct, Python can compile it and at least start running it. What could possibly go wrong?

A.2.1 My program does absolutely nothing.

This problem is most common when your file consists of functions and classes but does not actually invoke anything to start execution. This may be intentional if you only plan to import this module to supply classes and functions.

If it is not intentional, make sure that you are invoking a function to start execution, or execute one from the interactive prompt. Also see the "Flow of Execution" section below.

A.2.2 My program hangs.

If a program stops and seems to be doing nothing, it is "hanging." Often that means that it is caught in an infinite loop. If there is a particular loop that you suspect is the problem, add a `print` statement immediately before the loop that says "entering the loop" and another immediately after that says "exiting the loop."

Run the program. If you get the first message and not the second, you've got an infinite loop. If you think you have an infinite loop and you think you know what loop is causing the problem, add a `print` statement inside the loop as the last statement in the loop loop that prints the values of the variables in the condition and the value of the condition.

For example:

```
while x > 0 and y < 0 :
    # do something to x
    # do something to y

    print  "x: ", x
    print  "y: ", y
    print  "condition: ", (x > 0 and y < 0)
```

Now when you run the program, you will see three lines of output for each time through the loop. The last time through the loop, the condition should be `false`. If the loop keeps going, you will be able to see the values of x and y, and you might figure out why they are not being updated correctly.

Flow of Execution

If you are not sure how the flow of execution is moving through your program, add `print` statements to the beginning of each function with a message like "entering function `foo`," where `foo` is the name of the function.

Now when you run the program, it will print a trace of each function as it is invoked.

A.2.3   When I run the program I get an exception.

If something goes wrong during runtime, Python prints a message that includes the name of the exception, the line of the program where the problem occurred, and a traceback.

The traceback identifies the function that is currently running, and then the function that invoked it, and then the function that invoked *that*, and so on. In other words, it traces the sequence of function invocations that got you to where you are. It also includes the line number in your file where each of these calls occurs.

The first step is to examine the place in the program where the error occurred and see if you can figure out what happened. These are some of the most common runtime errors:

NameError: You are trying to use a variable that doesn't exist in the current environment. Remember that local variables are local. You cannot refer to them from outside the function where they are defined.

TypeError: There are several possible causes:

- You are trying to use a value improperly. Example: indexing a string, list, or tuple with something other than an integer.

- There is a mismatch between the items in a format string and the items passed for conversion. This can happen if either the number of items does not match or an invalid conversion is called for.

- You are passing the wrong number of arguments to a function or method. For methods, look at the method definition and check that the first parameter is `self`. Then look at the method invocation; make sure you are invoking the method on an object with the right type and providing the other arguments correctly.

KeyError: You are trying to access an element of a dictionary using a key that the dictionary does not contain.

AttributeError: You are trying to access an attribute or method that does not exist. Check the spelling! You can use `dir` to list the attributes that do exist.

If an AttributeError indicates that an object has `NoneType`, that means that it is `None`. One common cause is forgetting to return a value from a function; if you get to the end of a function without hitting a `return` statement, it returns `None`. Another common cause is using the result from a list method, like `sort`, that returns `None`.

IndexError: The index you are using to access a list, string, or tuple is greater than its length minus one. Immediately before the site of the error, add a `print` statement to display the value of the index and the length of the array. Is the array the right size? Is the index the right value?

The Python debugger (`pdb`) is useful for tracking down Exceptions because it allows you to examine the state of the program immediately before the error. You can read about `pdb` at `docs.python.org/lib/module-pdb.html`.

A.2.4   I added so many `print` statements I get inundated with output.

One of the problems with using `print` statements for debugging is that you can end up buried in output. There are two ways to proceed: simplify the output or simplify the program.

To simplify the output, you can remove or comment out `print` statements that aren't helping, or combine them, or format the output so it is easier to understand.

To simplify the program, there are several things you can do. First, scale down the problem the program is working on. For example, if you are searching a list, search a *small* list. If the program takes input from the user, give it the simplest input that causes the problem.

Second, clean up the program. Remove dead code and reorganize the program to make it as easy to read as possible. For example, if you suspect that the problem is in a deeply nested part of the program, try rewriting that part with simpler structure. If you suspect a large function, try splitting it into smaller functions and testing them separately.

Often the process of finding the minimal test case leads you to the bug. If you find that a program works in one situation but not in another, that gives you a clue about what is going on.

Similarly, rewriting a piece of code can help you find subtle bugs. If you make a change that you think shouldn't affect the program, and it does, that can tip you off.

A.3 Semantic errors

In some ways, semantic errors are the hardest to debug, because the interpreter provides no information about what is wrong. Only you know what the program is supposed to do.

The first step is to make a connection between the program text and the behavior you are seeing. You need a hypothesis about what the program is actually doing. One of the things that makes that hard is that computers run so fast.

You will often wish that you could slow the program down to human speed, and with some debuggers you can. But the time it takes to insert a few well-placed `print` statements is often short compared to setting up the debugger, inserting and removing breakpoints, and "stepping" the program to where the error is occurring.

A.3.1 My program doesn't work.

You should ask yourself these questions:

- Is there something the program was supposed to do but which doesn't seem to be happening? Find the section of the code that performs that function and make sure it is executing when you think it should.

- Is something happening that shouldn't? Find code in your program that performs that function and see if it is executing when it shouldn't.

- Is a section of code producing an effect that is not what you expected? Make sure that you understand the code in question, especially if it involves invocations to functions or methods in other Python modules. Read the documentation for the functions you invoke. Try them out by writing simple test cases and checking the results.

In order to program, you need to have a mental model of how programs work. If you write a program that doesn't do what you expect, very often the problem is not in the program; it's in your mental model.

The best way to correct your mental model is to break the program into its components (usually the functions and methods) and test each component independently. Once you find the discrepancy between your model and reality, you can solve the problem.

Of course, you should be building and testing components as you develop the program. If you encounter a problem, there should be only a small amount of new code that is not known to be correct.

A.3.2   I've got a big hairy expression and it doesn't do what I expect.

Writing complex expressions is fine as long as they are readable, but they can be hard to debug. It is often a good idea to break a complex expression into a series of assignments to temporary variables.

For example:

```
self.hands[i].addCard(self.hands[self.findNeighbor(i)].popCard())
```

This can be rewritten as:

```
neighbor = self.findNeighbor(i)
pickedCard = self.hands[neighbor].popCard()
self.hands[i].addCard(pickedCard)
```

The explicit version is easier to read because the variable names provide additional documentation, and it is easier to debug because you can check the types of the intermediate variables and display their values.

Another problem that can occur with big expressions is that the order of evaluation may not be what you expect. For example, if you are translating the expression $\frac{x}{2\pi}$ into Python, you might write:

```
y = x / 2 * math.pi
```

That is not correct because multiplication and division have the same precedence and are evaluated from left to right. So this expression computes $x\pi/2$.

A good way to debug expressions is to add parentheses to make the order of evaluation explicit:

```
 y = x / (2 * math.pi)
```

Whenever you are not sure of the order of evaluation, use parentheses. Not only will the program be correct (in the sense of doing what you intended), it will also be more readable for other people who haven't memorized the rules of precedence.

A.3.3   I've got a function or method that doesn't return what I expect.

If you have a `return` statement with a complex expression, you don't have a chance to print the `return` value before returning. Again, you can use a temporary variable. For example, instead of:

```
return self.hands[i].removeMatches()
```

you could write:

```
count = self.hands[i].removeMatches()
return count
```

Now you have the opportunity to display the value of `count` before returning.

A.3.4   I'm really, really stuck and I need help.

First, try getting away from the computer for a few minutes. Computers emit waves that affect the brain, causing these symptoms:

  • Frustration and rage.

- Superstitious beliefs ("the computer hates me") and magical thinking ("the program only works when I wear my hat backward").

- Random walk programming (the attempt to program by writing every possible program and choosing the one that does the right thing).

If you find yourself suffering from any of these symptoms, get up and go for a walk. When you are calm, think about the program. What is it doing? What are some possible causes of that behavior? When was the last time you had a working program, and what did you do next?

Sometimes it just takes time to find a bug. I often find bugs when I am away from the computer and let my mind wander. Some of the best places to find bugs are trains, showers, and in bed, just before you fall asleep.

A.3.5 No, I really need help.

It happens. Even the best programmers occasionally get stuck. Sometimes you work on a program so long that you can't see the error. A fresh pair of eyes is just the thing.

Before you bring someone else in, make sure you are prepared. Your program should be as simple as possible, and you should be working on the smallest input that causes the error. You should have `print` statements in the appropriate places (and the output they produce should be comprehensible). You should understand the problem well enough to describe it concisely.

When you bring someone in to help, be sure to give them the information they need:

- If there is an error message, what is it and what part of the program does it indicate?

- What was the last thing you did before this error occurred? What were the last lines of code that you wrote, or what is the new test case that fails?

- What have you tried so far, and what have you learned?

When you find the bug, take a second to think about what you could have done to find it faster. Next time you see something similar, you will be able to find the bug more quickly.

Remember, the goal is not just to make the program work. The goal is to learn how to make the program work.

Appendix B

Contributor List

Contributor List for "Python for Informatics"

Bruce Shields for copy editing early drafts,

Contributor List for "Think Python"

(Allen B. Downey)

More than 100 sharp-eyed and thoughtful readers have sent in suggestions and corrections over the past few years. Their contributions, and enthusiasm for this project, have been a huge help.

For the detail on the nature of each of the contributions from these individuals, see the "Think Python" text.

Lloyd Hugh Allen, Yvon Boulianne, Fred Bremmer, Jonah Cohen, Michael Conlon, Benoit Girard, Courtney Gleason and Katherine Smith, Lee Harr, James Kaylin, David Kershaw, Eddie Lam, Man-Yong Lee, David Mayo, Chris McAloon, Matthew J. Moelter, Simon Dicon Montford, John Ouzts, Kevin Parks, David Pool, Michael Schmitt, Robin Shaw, Paul Sleigh, Craig T. Snydal, Ian Thomas, Keith Verheyden, Peter Winstanley, Chris Wrobel, Moshe Zadka, Christoph Zwerschke, James Mayer, Hayden McAfee, Angel Arnal, Tauhidul Hoque and Lex Berezhny, Dr. Michele Alzetta, Andy Mitchell, Kalin Harvey, Christopher P. Smith, David Hutchins, Gregor Lingl, Julie Peters, Florin Oprina, D. J. Webre, Ken, Ivo Wever, Curtis Yanko, Ben Logan, Jason Armstrong, Louis Cordier, Brian Cain, Rob Black, Jean-Philippe Rey at Ecole Centrale Paris, Jason Mader at George Washington University made a number Jan Gundtofte-Bruun, Abel David and Alexis Dinno, Charles Thayer, Roger Sperberg, Sam Bull, Andrew Cheung, C. Corey Capel, Alessandra, Wim Champagne, Douglas Wright, Jared Spindor, Lin Peiheng, Ray Hagtvedt, Torsten Hübsch, Inga Petuhhov, Arne Babenhauserheide, Mark E. Casida, Scott Tyler, Gordon Shephard, Andrew Turner, Adam Hobart, Daryl Hammond and Sarah Zimmerman, George Sass, Brian Bingham, Leah Engelbert-Fenton, Joe Funke, Chao-chao Chen, Jeff Paine, Lubos Pintes, Gregg Lind and Abigail Heithoff, Max Hailperin, Chotipat Pornavalai, Stanislaw Antol, Eric Pashman, Miguel Azevedo, Jianhua Liu, Nick King, Martin Zuther, Adam Zimmerman, Ratnakar Tiwari, Anurag Goel, Kelli Kratzer, Mark Griffiths, Roydan Ongie, Patryk Wolowiec, Mark Chonofsky, Russell Coleman, Wei Huang, Karen Barber, Nam Nguyen, Stéphane Morin, and Paul Stoop.