9. The S4 Object System

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S4 (Wickam 2019, Chapter 15)

- A more formal approach to functional OOP
- Underlying ideas similar to S3, but implementation is much stricter
- Makes use of specialised functions for:
  - Creating classes **setClass()**
  - Generics **setGeneric()**
  - Methods **setMethod()**
- Provides multiple inheritance and multiple dispatch
- A new component of S4 is the slot, a named component of an object that can be accessed using @ (pronounced at)
- Include **library(methods)** when using S4

Basics

```
setClass("Person",
         slots = c(
           name = "character",
           age  = "numeric"
         )
)

john <- new("Person", name = "John Smith", age=35)
```

Given an S4 object, you can see its class with **is()** and access its slots with **@** and **slot()**

Calling S4 functions

```
is(john)
```

```
## [1] "Person"
```

```
john@name
```

```
## [1] "John Smith"
```

```
john@age
```

```
## [1] 35
```

```
slot(john,"age")
```

```
## [1] 35
```

```
slot(john,"name")
```

```
## [1] "John Smith"
```

Accessing slots: Guidelines

- Generally, onlyuse @ in your methods
- Look for accessor functions that allow you to safely set and get slot values
- When you develop a class, provide your own access functions
- Creating a setter and getter for the age slot by
  - Creating getter and setter generics usiing **setGeneric()**
  - Defining methods with **setMethod()**

getter for slot age

```
setGeneric("age", function(x)standardGeneric("age")) # getter
```

```
## [1] "age"
```

```
setMethod("age", "Person", function(x) x@age)

age(john)
```

```
## [1] 35
```

setter for slot age

```
setGeneric("age<-", function(x, value)standardGeneric("age<-")
```

```
## [1] "age<-"
```

```
setMethod("age<-", "Person", function(x, value){
  x@age <- value
  x
})
age(john) <- 29
age(john)
```

```
## [1] 29
```

Creating S4 Classes

- To define an S4 class, call setClass() with three arguments
  - The class **name**. By convention S4 class names use UpperCamelCase
  - A named character vector that describes the names and classes of the **slots** (fields). The pseudo-class ANY allows a slot to accept objects of any type
  - A **prototype**, a list of default values for each type (optional but should be provided)

S4 class with 3 arguments

```
setClass("Person",
         slots = c(
           name = "character",
           age  = "numeric"
         ),
         prototype=list(
           name = NA_character_,
           age  = NA_real_
         )
)

test <- new("Person", name = "A.N. Other")
str(test)
```

```
## Formal class 'Person' [package ".GlobalEnv"] with 2 slots
##   ..@ name: chr "A.N. Other"
##   ..@ age : num NA
```

S4 class with inheritance

```
setClass("Employee",
         contains = "Person",
         slots = c(
           boss = "Person"
         ),
         prototype=list(
           boss = new("Person")
         )
)
str(new("Employee"))
```

```
## Formal class 'Employee' [package ".GlobalEnv"] with 3 slots
##   ..@ boss:Formal class 'Person' [package ".GlobalEnv"] wit
##   .. .. ..@ name: chr NA
##   .. .. ..@ age : num NA
##   ..@ name: chr NA
```

Helper

User facing classes should always be paired with a user-friendly helper. A helper should always:

- Have the same name as the class
- Have a thoughtfully crafted user interface with carefully chosen default values
- Create error messages tailored towards an end user
- Finish by calling **methods::new()**

Example

```
Person <- function(name, age=NA){
  age <- as.double(age)
  new("Person", name=name, age=age)
}

Person("A.N. Other")
```

```
## An object of class "Person"
## Slot "name":
## [1] "A.N. Other"
##
## Slot "age":
## [1] NA
```

S4 Summary