**Structures**

"Structures help to organize complicated data, particularly in large programs, because they   
permit a group of related variables to be treated as a unit instead of as separate entities"   
(Kernighan and Ritchie, 1988)

The most commonly used data structure in C language programs aside from the array is the *struct* or structure.  A structure type is a collection of not necessarily identical types.  We use the structure type to define a group of variables as a single object.

This chapter reviews the primitive types and presents the syntax for declaring a structure type, defining an object of structure type, and accessing the data values within that object.  This chapter includes an example of how to walkthrough a program that includes structure types.

Types

A type describes how to interpret the information stored in a region of memory.  In the C language, a type may be a primitive type or a derived type.  A derived type is a collection of other types.

Primitive Types

The core language defines the primitive types.  We cannot redefine these types or introduce new primitive types.  The C language primitive types include:

* char
* int
* float
* double

Each type defines how a value of that type is stored in a region of memory.  Consider the int type.  A value of int type is stored in equivalent binary representation in 4 bytes on a 32-bit platform:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| int (32-bit platform) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 Byte | | | | | | | | 1 Byte | | | | | | | | 1 Byte | | | | | | | | 1 Byte | | | | | | | |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

To define an object of int type called noSubjects, we write

|  |
| --- |
| int noSubjects; |

Derived Types

The declaration of a derived type in the C language takes the form

struct *Tag* {

//... declarations here

};

where the keyword struct identifies a derived type or structure.  *Tag* is the name by which we call the structure (just like int above).  The declaration concludes with a semi-colon.

We list the types that belong to the structure along with their identifiers within the curly braces.

struct *Tag* {

*type identifier*;

//... other types

};

*type* is the member's type.  *identifier* is the name by which we access the member's value.

Example

Consider a structure type that consists of two pieces of information:

* the student's number
* the student's grades (up to 4 individual grades)

Let us call this structure type Student.  To declare the type, we write

|  |
| --- |
| struct Student {  int no; // student number  float grade[4]; // grades  }; |

The members occupy memory in the order in which we have listed them in the declaration of our structure:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| struct | Student | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| member | int  no | | | | float  grade[] | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| bytes |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Note that this declaration does not allocate any memory for any object; it only defines the structure and the rules for objects of that type.

Declaration

We declare our structure globally and may store its declaration in a separate file called a header file (say, with the name Student.h):

|  |
| --- |
| // Student.h  struct Student {  int no; // student number  float grade[4]; // grades  }; |

When we place source code in a header file, we insert that header file's code into the source file that requires that information, as shown below.  In such cases, our complete source code is stored in more than one file.  When compiling multi-file source code, we only pass the .c file(s) to the compiler.  The code in a header file is duplicated inside each C file in which it is included, which allows us to write code, like a struct, in one spot and edit it in that one spot alone.

Allocating Memory

When we define an object of a structure, we allocate memory for that object.  Our definition takes the form

struct *Tag identifier*;

where *Tag* is the name of the structure and *identifier* is the name of the object.

Example

To allocate memory for a Student named harry, we write:

|  |
| --- |
| // main.c  #include "Student.h" // includes the description of a Student  int main(void)  {  struct Student harry; // allocates memory for harry  // ...  return 0;  } |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| struct | Student  harry | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| address | 2ff2b8c4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| member | int  no | | | | float  grade[] | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| address | 2ff2b8c4 | | | | 2ff2b8c8 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| bytes |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

The object name harry refers to the collection of members in Student harry taken together.

Initialization

To initialize an object of a structure we add a braces-enclosed, comma-separated list of values.  We organize the initial values in the same order as the member listing in the declaration of the structure.  The initialization takes the form

|  |
| --- |
| struct *Tag identifier* = { *value*, *...* , *value* }; |

Note the similarity to the initialization of an array.

Example

To initialize harry with student number 975 and grades of 75.6, 82.3 and 68.9, we write

|  |
| --- |
| struct Student harry = { 975, {75.6f, 82.3f, 68.9f}}; |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| struct | Student  harry | | | | |
| address | 2ff2b8c4 | | | | |
| member | int  no | float  grade[] | | | |
| address | 2ff2b8c4 | 2ff2b8c8 | | | |
| value | 975 | 75.6f | 82.3f | 68.9f | 0.0f |

Member Access

To access a member of an object of a structure, we use the dot operator.  Dot notation takes the form

|  |
| --- |
| object.member |

To access harry's student number, we write

|  |
| --- |
| harry.no |

To retrieve the address of a non-array member of an object, we use the address of operator (&)

|  |
| --- |
| &instance.member |

To access the address of harry's student number, we write

|  |
| --- |
| &harry.no |

We may omit the parentheses here - &(harry.no) - they are unnecessary because the dot operator binds tighter than the address of operator (see the [precedence](Precedence.html) table).

To access an array member, we refer to its name without brackets.  For example, to access the address of harry's grades, we write

|  |
| --- |
| harry.grade |

To access an element of an array member, we use subscript notation

|  |
| --- |
| object.member[index] |

To access harry's third grade, we write

|  |
| --- |
| harry.grade[2] |

To retrieve the address of an element of an array member, we use the address of operator (&)

|  |
| --- |
| &object.member[index] |

To access the address of harry's third grade, we write

|  |
| --- |
| &harry.grade[2] |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| struct | Student  harry | | | | |
| address | &harry | | | | |
| member | int  no | float  grade[] | | | |
| address | &harry.no | harry.grade | | | |
| value | 975 | 75.6f | 82.3f | 68.9f | 0.0f |

Example

A convenient alternative to parallel arrays for storing tabular information is an array of structures.  One member holds the key, while the other member holds the data.

In the following example, the sku member holds the stock keeping unit (sku) for a product, while price holds its unit price.  The header file with the declaration of the Product structure contains:

|  |
| --- |
| // Structure Example  // product.h  struct Product {  int sku;  double price;  }; |

The program that uses the Product structure is listed below.  The output produced is shown on the right:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| // Structure Example  // structure.c  #include <stdio.h>  #include "product.h"  int main(void)  {  int i;  struct Product product[] = {  {2156, 2.34}, {4633, 7.89},  {3122, 6.56}, {5611, 9.32}};  const int n = 4;  printf(" SKU Price\n");  for (i = 0; i < n; i++)  printf("%5d $%.2lf\n",  product[i].sku, product[i].price);  return 0;  } | SKU Price  2156 $2.34  4633 $7.89  3122 $6.56  5611 $9.32 |