C Pointers

Pointers in C are easy and fun to learn. Some C programming tasks are performed more easily with pointers, and other tasks, such as dynamic memory allocation, cannot be performed without using pointers. So it becomes necessary to learn pointers to become a perfect C programmer. Let's start learning them in simple and easy steps.

As you know, every variable is a memory location and every memory location has its address defined which can be accessed using **ampersand (&)** operator, which denotes an address in memory.

Consider the following example, which will print the address of the variables defined:

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main ()
{
   int  var1;
   char var2[10];

   printf("Address of var1 variable: %x\n", &var1  );
   printf("Address of var2 variable: %x\n", &var2  );

   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces result something as follows:

```
Address of var1 variable: bff5a400

Address of var2 variable: bff5a3f6
```

So you understood what is memory address and how to access it, so base of the concept is over. Now let us see what is a pointer.

What Are Pointers?

A pointer is a variable whose value is the address of another variable, i.e., direct address of the memory location. Like any variable or constant, you must declare a pointer before you can use it to store any variable address. The general form of a pointer variable declaration is:

```
type *var-name;
```

Here, type is the pointer's base type; it must be a valid C data type and var-name is the name of the pointer variable. The asterisk * you used to declare a pointer is the same asterisk that you use for multiplication. However, in this statement the asterisk is being used to designate a variable as a pointer. Following are the valid pointer declaration:

```
int    *ip;    /* pointer to an integer */
double *dp;    /* pointer to a double */
float  *fp;    /* pointer to a float */
char   *ch     /* pointer to a character */
```

The actual data type of the value of all pointers, whether integer, float, character, or otherwise, is the same, a long hexadecimal number that represents a memory address. The only difference between pointers of different data types is the data type of the variable or constant that the pointer points to.

How to use Pointers?

There are few important operations, which we will do with the help of pointers very frequently. **(a)** we define a pointer variable **(b)** assign the address of a variable to a pointer and **(c)** finally access the value at the address available in the pointer variable. This is done by using unary operator * that returns the value of the variable located at the address specified by its operand. Following example makes use of these operations:

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main ()
{
   int  var = 20;   /* actual variable declaration */
   int  *ip;        /* pointer variable declaration */
```

How to use Pointers?

There are few important operations, which we will do with the help of pointers very frequently. **(a)** we define a pointer variable **(b)** assign the address of a variable to a pointer and **(c)** finally access the value at the address available in the pointer variable. This is done by using unary operator * that returns the value of the variable located at the address specified by its operand. Following example makes use of these operations:

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main ()
{
   int  var = 20;   /* actual variable declaration */
   int  *ip;        /* pointer variable declaration */

   ip = &var;  /* store address of var in pointer variable*/

   printf("Address of var variable: %x\n", &var  );

   /* address stored in pointer variable */
   printf("Address stored in ip variable: %x\n", ip );

   /* access the value using the pointer */
   printf("Value of *ip variable: %d\n", *ip );

   return 0;
}
```

```
Address of var variable: bffd8b3c

Address stored in ip variable: bffd8b3c

Value of *ip variable: 20
```

NULL Pointers in C

It is always a good practice to assign a **NULL** value to a pointer variable in case you do not have exact address to be assigned. This is done at the time of variable declaration. A pointer that is assigned **NULL** is called a **null** pointer.

The **NULL** pointer is a constant with a value of zero defined in several standard libraries. Consider the following program:

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main ()
{
   int  *ptr = NULL;

   printf("The value of ptr is : %x\n", &ptr  );

   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces the following result:

```
The value of ptr is 0
```

On most of the operating systems, programs are not permitted to access memory at address 0 because that memory is reserved by the operating system. However, the memory address 0 has special significance; it signals that the pointer is not intended to point to an accessible memory location. But by convention, if a pointer contains the null (zero) value, it is assumed to point to nothing.

To check for a null pointer you can use an if statement as follows:

```
if(ptr)     /* succeeds if p is not null */
if(!ptr)    /* succeeds if p is null */
```

To check for a null pointer you can use an if statement as follows:

```
if(ptr)     /* succeeds if p is not null */
if(!ptr)    /* succeeds if p is null */
```

Pointer arithmetic

As explained in main chapter, C pointer is an address, which is a numeric value. Therefore, you can perform arithmetic operations on a pointer just as you can a numeric value. There are four arithmetic operators that can be used on pointers: ++, --, +, and -

To understand pointer arithmetic, let us consider that **ptr** is an integer pointer which points to the address 1000. Assuming 32-bit integers, let us perform the following arithmetic operation on the pointer:

```
ptr++
```

Now, after the above operation, the **ptr** will point to the location 1004 because each time **ptr** is incremented, it will point to the next integer location which is 4 bytes next to the current location. This operation will move the pointer to next memory location without impacting actual value at the memory location. If **ptr** points to a character whose address is 1000, then above operation will point to the location 1001 because next character will be available at 1001.

Incrementing a Pointer

We prefer using a pointer in our program instead of an array because the variable pointer can be incremented, unlike the array name which cannot be incremented because it is a constant pointer. The following program increments the variable pointer to access each succeeding element of the array:

```
#include <stdio.h>

const int MAX = 3;

int main ()
{
   int  var[] = {10, 100, 200};
   int  i, *ptr;

   /* let us have array address in pointer */
   ptr = var;
   for ( i = 0; i < MAX; i++)
   {

      printf("Address of var[%d] = %x\n", i, ptr );
      printf("Value of var[%d] = %d\n", i, *ptr );

      /* move to the next location */
      ptr++;
   }
   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces result something as follows:

```
Address of var[0] = bf882b30

Value of var[0] = 10

Address of var[1] = bf882b34

Value of var[1] = 100
```

Decrementing a Pointer

The same considerations apply to decrementing a pointer, which decreases its value by the number of bytes of its data type as shown below:

```
#include <stdio.h>

const int MAX = 3;

int main ()
{
   int  var[] = {10, 100, 200};
   int  i, *ptr;

   /* let us have array address in pointer */
   ptr = &var[MAX-1];
   for ( i = MAX; i > 0; i--)
   {

      printf("Address of var[%d] = %x\n", i, ptr );
      printf("Value of var[%d] = %d\n", i, *ptr );

      /* move to the previous location */
      ptr--;
   }
   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces result something as follows:

```
Address of var[3] = bfedbcd8

Value of var[3] = 200

Address of var[2] = bfedbcd4

Value of var[2] = 100

Address of var[1] = bfedbcd0

Value of var[1] = 10
```

Pointer Comparisons

Pointers may be compared by using relational operators, such as ==, <, and >. If p1 and p2 point to variables that are related to each other, such as elements of the same array, then p1 and p2 can be meaningfully compared.

```
const int MAX = 3;

int main ()
{
   int  var[] = {10, 100, 200};
   int  i, *ptr;

   /* let us have address of the first element in pointer */
   ptr = var;
   i = 0;
   while ( ptr <= &var[MAX - 1] )
   {

      printf("Address of var[%d] = %x\n", i, ptr );
      printf("Value of var[%d] = %d\n", i, *ptr );

      /* point to the previous location */
      ptr++;
      i++;
   }
   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces result something as follows:

```
Address of var[0] = bfdbcb20
Value of var[0] = 10
Address of var[1] = bfdbcb24
Value of var[1] = 100
Address of var[2] = bfdbcb28
Value of var[2] = 200
```

Array of pointers

Before we understand the concept of **arrays of pointers**, let us consider the following example, which makes use of an array of 3 integers:

There may be a situation when we want to maintain an array, which can store pointers to an int or char or any other data type available. Following is the declaration of an array of pointers to an integer:

```
int *ptr[MAX];
```

This declares ptr as an array of MAX integer pointers. Thus, each element in ptr, now holds a pointer to an int value. Following example makes use of three integers, which will be stored in an array of pointers as follows:

```
#include <stdio.h>

const int MAX = 3;

int main ()
{
   int  var[] = {10, 100, 200};
   int i, *ptr[MAX];

   for ( i = 0; i < MAX; i++)
   {
      ptr[i] = &var[i]; /* assign the address of integer. */
   }
   for ( i = 0; i < MAX; i++)
   {
      printf("Value of var[%d] = %d\n", i, *ptr[i] );
   }
   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces the following result:

```
Value of var[0] = 10
Value of var[1] = 100
Value of var[2] = 200
```

You can also use an array of pointers to character to store a list of strings as follows:

```
#include <stdio.h>

const int MAX = 4;

int main ()
{
   char *names[] = {
```

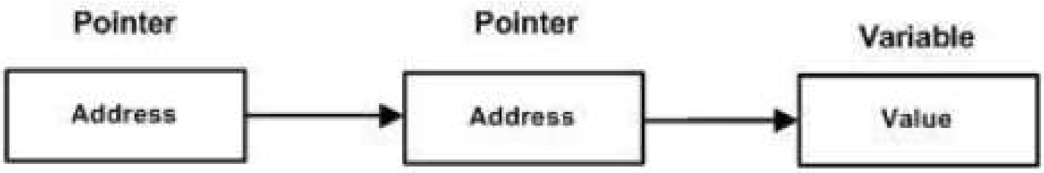
```
                        "Zara Ali",
                        "Hina Ali",
                        "Nuha Ali",
                        "Sara Ali",
   };
   int i = 0;

   for ( i = 0; i < MAX; i++)
   {
      printf("Value of names[%d] = %s\n", i, names[i] );
   }
   return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces the following result:

```
Value of names[0] = Zara Ali
Value of names[1] = Hina Ali
Value of names[2] = Nuha Ali
Value of names[3] = Sara Ali
```

Pointer to Pointer

A pointer to a pointer is a form of **multiple indirection**, or a chain of pointers. Normally, a pointer contains the address of a variable. When we define a pointer to a pointer, the first pointer contains the address of the second pointer, which points to the location that contains the actual value as shown below.



A variable that is a pointer to a pointer must be declared as such. This is done by placing an additional asterisk in front of its name. For example, following is the declaration to declare a pointer to a pointer of type int:

```
int **var;
```

When a target value is indirectly pointed to by a pointer to a pointer, accessing that value requires that the asterisk operator be applied twice, as is shown below in the example:

```
#include <stdio.h>
```

```
int **var;
```

When a target value is indirectly pointed to by a pointer to a pointer, accessing that value requires that the asterisk operator be applied twice, as is shown below in the example:

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main ()
{
   int  var;
   int  *ptr;
   int  **pptr;

   var = 3000;
```

```
    /* take the address of var */
    ptr = &var;

    /* take the address of ptr using address of operator & */
    pptr = &ptr;

    /* take the value using pptr */
    printf("Value of var = %d\n", var );
    printf("Value available at *ptr = %d\n", *ptr );
    printf("Value available at **pptr = %d\n", **pptr);

    return 0;
}
```

When the above code is compiled and executed, it produces the following result:

```
Value of var = 3000

Value available at *ptr = 3000

Value available at **pptr = 3000
```