
The Need for Escape Hatches

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Abstract

“C++ should make the safe thing easy, and the unsafe thing possible.”

Revision History

R0: February 2026 (post-Croydon mailing)

- Initial version.

1. The Need for Escape Hatches

Safe interfaces should be the default. They should validate input, maintain invariants, and protect users from misuse. However, C++ also needs an explicit path for trusted data - when the precondition is already satisfied at a boundary and re-validation is pure overhead.

This pattern appears in the standard library, in production Boost libraries, and in the current `cstring_view` proposal. Three independent examples follow.

2. Standard Precedent

The standard library provides `std::condition_variable` ^[1], which requires `std::unique_lock<std::mutex>`. This constraint enables optimizations. When the constraint is too narrow - when the user holds a different lock type - `std::condition_variable_any` ^[2] provides the explicit broader path:

```
std::mutex mtx;
std::shared_mutex smtx;

// Safe default: constrained to unique_lock<mutex>.
std::condition_variable cv;
std::unique_lock<std::mutex> lk(mtx);
cv.wait(lk);

// Escape hatch: works with any lockable.
std::condition_variable_any cv_any;
std::shared_lock<std::shared_mutex> slk(smtx);
cv_any.wait(slk);
```

The constrained interface is the default. The broader interface is explicit and named. Both exist in the standard.

3. Established Practice

`Boost.URL` ^[3] provides `pct_string_view`, a non-owning reference to a valid percent-encoded string.

Construction from untrusted input validates the encoding and throws on failure:

```
// Safe default: validates percent-encoding.
pct_string_view s("Program%20Files");    // OK
pct_string_view bad("100%pure");          // throws
```

Internally, the library's own parser has already validated the encoding before extracting URL components. Repeating that validation would be redundant. A separate function bypasses it at the trusted boundary:

```
// Escape hatch: precondition already satisfied by the parser.
pct_string_view s = make_pct_string_view_unsafe(data, size, decoded_size);
```

This pattern was adopted independently by three Boost libraries: Boost.URL

(`make_pct_string_view_unsafe` ^[4]), Boost.Process (`basic_cstring_ref` ^[5]), and Boost.SQLite (`cstring_ref` ^[6]). Three independent libraries arriving at the same design is not coincidence. It is convergence on a structural need.

4. Application Level

On BSD-derived systems, directory iteration exposes a filename pointer and a filename length via `dirent` (`d_name` and `d_namlen`) `FreeBSD readdir(3)` ^[7] and `FreeBSD dirent.h` ^[8]. POSIX requires that path components are null-terminated and contain no embedded null bytes `POSIX Base Definitions` ^[9]. Rescanning each name in a validating constructor repeats work the operating system already did.

```
void visit_directory(DIR* dir)
{
    while (dirent* de = ::readdir(dir))
    {
        const char* p = de->d_name;
        std::size_t n = de->d_namlen;

        // Trusted boundary: OS already satisfied the precondition.
        cstring_view name = cstring_view::unsafe(p, n);
        consume(name);
    }
}
```

The safe path remains the default for untrusted input. The unsafe path exists for proven preconditions and zero additional runtime cost.

5. Conclusion

The standard library already provides constrained defaults with explicit broader counterparts. Production libraries independently converge on the same pattern for trusted boundaries. This paper asks for no wording and no poll. It asks the committee to recognize a design value: safe by default, with explicit escape hatches where zero-cost composition requires them.

How explicit escape hatches interact with Hardening, Contracts, and Erroneous Behavior is a related question that deserves separate treatment.

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References

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