

# Programming Linux sockets, Part 2: Using UDP

## Writing UDP sockets applications in C and in Python

Skill Level: Introductory

[David Mertz \(mertz@gnosis.cx\)](mailto:mertz@gnosis.cx)

Developer  
Gnosis Software

25 Jan 2004

This intermediate-level tutorial extends the basics covered in [Part 1](#) on programming using sockets. Part 2 focuses on the User Datagram Protocol (UDP) and demonstrates how to write UDP sockets applications in C and in Python. Although the code examples in this tutorial are in Python and C, they translate well to other languages.

## Section 1. Before you start

### About this tutorial

IP sockets are the lowest-level layer upon which high-level Internet protocols are built: everything from HTTP to SSL to POP3 to Kerberos to UDP-Time. To implement custom protocols, or to customize implementation of well-known protocols, a programmer needs a working knowledge of the basic socket infrastructure. A similar API is available in many languages; this tutorial uses C programming as a ubiquitous low-level language, and Python as a representative higher-level language for examples.

In [Part 1](#) of this tutorial series, David introduced readers to the basics of programming custom network tools using the widespread and cross-platform Berkeley Sockets Interface. In this tutorial, he picks up with further explanation of

User Datagram Protocol (UDP), and continues with a discussion of writing scalable socket servers.

## Prerequisites

This tutorial is best suited for readers with at least a basic knowledge of C and Python. However, readers who are not familiar with either programming language should be able to make it through with a bit of extra effort; most of the underlying concepts will apply equally to other programming languages, and calls will be quite similar in most high-level scripting languages like Ruby, Perl, TCL, etc.

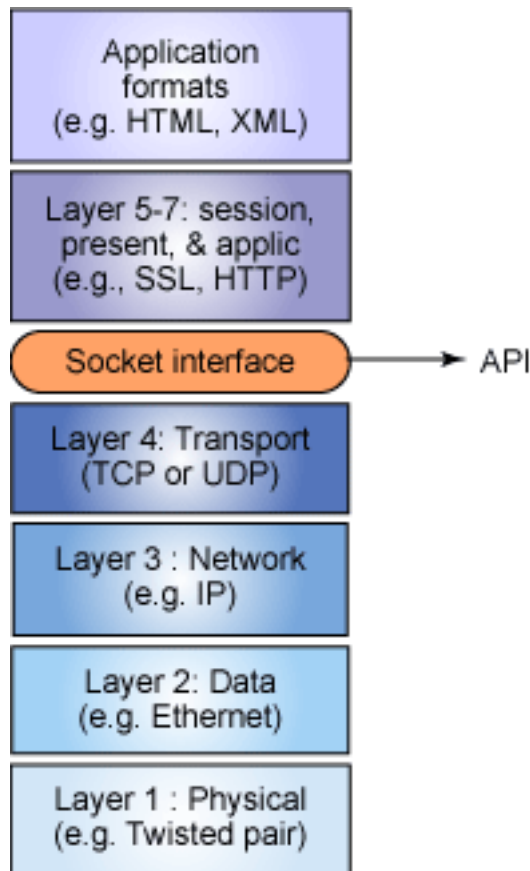
Although this tutorial introduces the basic concepts behind IP (Internet Protocol) networks, some prior acquaintance with the concept of network protocols and layers will be helpful (see the [Resources](#) at the end of this tutorial for background documents).

---

## Section 2. Understanding network layers and protocols

### What is a network?

#### Figure 1. Network layers



This section recaps the discussion in [Part 1](#) of this tutorial -- if you've already read it, you can skip forward to [Writing UDP applications \(in Python\)](#) .

A computer network is composed of a number of "network layers," each providing a different restriction and/or guarantee about the data at that layer. The protocols at each network layer generally have their own packet formats, headers, and layout.

The seven traditional layers of a network (please see the [Resources](#) section for a link to a discussion of these) are divided into two groups: upper layers and lower layers. The sockets interface provides a uniform API to the lower layers of a network, and allows you to implement upper layers within your sockets application. And application data formats may themselves constitute further layers.

## What do sockets do?

While the sockets interface theoretically allows access to *protocol families* other than IP, in practice, every network layer you use in your sockets application will use IP. For this tutorial we only look at IPv4; in the future IPv6 will become important also, but the principles are the same. At the transport layer, sockets support two specific protocols: TCP (Transmission Control Protocol) and UDP (User Datagram Protocol).

Sockets cannot be used to access lower (or higher) network layers; for example, a socket application does not know whether it is running over ethernet, token ring, 802.11b, or a dial-up connection. Nor does the sockets pseudo-layer know anything about higher-level protocols like NFS, HTTP, FTP, and the like (except in the sense that you might yourself write a sockets application that implements those higher-level protocols).

At times, the sockets interface is not your best choice for a network programming API. Many excellent libraries exist (in various languages) to use higher-level protocols directly, without your having to worry about the details of sockets. While there is nothing wrong with writing your own SSH client, for example, there is no need to do so simply to let an application transfer data securely. Lower-level layers than those sockets address fall pretty much in the domain of device driver programming.

## IP, TCP, and UDP

As mentioned, when you program a sockets application, you have a choice between using TCP and using UDP. Each has its own benefits and disadvantages.

TCP is a stream protocol, while UDP is a datagram protocol. In other words, TCP establishes a continuous open connection between a client and a server, over which bytes may be written (and correct order guaranteed) for the life of the connection. However, bytes written over TCP have no built-in structure, so higher-level protocols are required to delimit any data records and fields within the transmitted bytestream.

UDP, on the other hand, does not require that any connection be established between client and server; it simply transmits a message between addresses. A nice feature of UDP is that its packets are self-delimiting; that is, each datagram indicates exactly where it begins and ends. A possible disadvantage of UDP, however, is that it provides no guarantee that packets will arrive in order, or even at all. Higher-level protocols built on top of UDP may, of course, provide handshaking and acknowledgments.

A useful analogy for understanding the difference between TCP and UDP is the difference between a telephone call and posted letters. The telephone call is not active until the caller "rings" the receiver and the receiver picks up. On the other hand, when you send a letter, the post office starts delivery without any assurance the recipient exists, nor any strong guarantee about how long delivery will take. The recipient may receive various letters in a different order than they were sent, and the sender may receive mail interspersed in time with those she sends. Unlike with the postal service (ideally, anyway), undeliverable mail always goes to the dead letter office, and is not returned to sender.

## Peers, ports, names, and addresses

Beyond the protocol, TCP or UDP, there are two things a peer (a client or server) needs to know about the machine it communicates with: an IP address and a port. An IP address is a 32-bit data value, usually represented for humans in "dotted quad" notation, such as 64.41.64.172. A port is a 16-bit data value, usually simply represented as a number less than 65536, most often one in the tens or hundreds range. An IP address gets a packet *to* a machine; a port lets the machine decide which process or service (if any) to direct it to. That is a slight simplification, but the idea is correct.

The above description is almost right, but it misses something. Most of the time when humans think about an Internet host (peer), we do not remember a number like 64.41.64.172, but instead a name like `gnosis.cx`. [Part 1](#) of this tutorial demonstrated the use of DNS and local lookups to find IP addresses from domain names.

---

## Section 3. Writing UDP applications (in Python)

### The steps in writing a socket application

As in [Part 1](#) of this tutorial, the examples for both clients and servers will use one of the simplest possible applications: one that sends data and receives the exact same thing back. In fact, many machines run an "echo server" for debugging purposes; this is convenient for our initial client, since it can be used before we get to the server portion (assuming you have a machine with `echod` running).

I would like to acknowledge the book *TCP/IP Sockets in C* by Donahoo and Calvert (see [Resources](#)). I have adapted several examples that they present. I recommend the book -- but admittedly, echo servers and clients will come early in most presentations of sockets programming.

Readers of the first part of the tutorial have already seen a TCP echo client in detail. So let's jump into a similar client based on UDP instead.

### A high-level Python server

We will get to clients and servers in C a bit later. But it is easier to start with far less

verbose versions in Python, so we can see the overall structure. The first thing we need before we can test a client UDPecho application is to get a server running, for the client to talk to. Python, in fact, gives us the high-level `SocketServer` module that lets us write socket servers with minimal customization needed:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
"USAGE: %s <port>"
from SocketServer import DatagramRequestHandler, UDPServer
from sys import argv

class EchoHandler(DatagramRequestHandler):
    def handle(self):
        print "Client connected:", self.client_address
        message = self.rfile.read()
        self.wfile.write(message)

if len(argv) != 2:
    print __doc__ % argv[0]
else:
    UDPServer(('',int(argv[1])), EchoHandler).serve_forever()
```

The various specialized `SocketServer` classes all require you to provide an appropriate `.handle()` method. But in the case of `DatagramRequestHandler`, you get convenient pseudo-files `self.rfile` and `self.wfile` to read and write, respectively, from the connecting client.

## A Python UDP echo client

Writing a Python client generally involves starting with the basic `socket` module. Fortunately, it is so easy to write the client that there would hardly be any purpose in using a higher-level starting point. Note, however, that frameworks like Twisted include base classes for these sorts of tasks, almost as a passing thought. Let's look at a `socket`-based UDP echo client:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
"USAGE: %s <server> <word> <port>"
from socket import *      # import *, but we'll avoid name conflict
from sys import argv, exit
if len(argv) != 4:
    print __doc__ % argv[0]
    exit(0)
sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM)
messout = argv[2]
sock.sendto(messout, (argv[1], int(argv[3])))
messin, server = sock.recvfrom(255)
if messin != messout:
    print "Failed to receive identical message"
print "Received:", messin
sock.close()
```

If you happen to recall the TCP echo client from [Part 1](#), you will notice a few

differences here. The socket created in this case is of type `SOCK_DGRAM` rather than `SOCK_STREAM`. But more interesting is the connectionless nature of UDP. Rather than make a connection and call the `.send()` and `.recv()` methods repeatedly until the transmission is complete, for UDP we use just one `.sendto()` and one `.recvfrom()` to send and fetch a message (a datagram).

Since there is no connection involved, you need to pass the destination address as part of the `.sendto()` call. In Python, the socket object keeps track of the temporary socket number over which the message actually passes. We will see later that in C you will need to use this number from a variable returned by `sendto()`.

## The client and server in action

Running the server and the client are straightforward. The server is launched with a port number:

```
$ ./UDPechoServer.py 7 &
[1] 23369
```

The client gets three arguments: server address, string to echo, and the port. Because Python wraps up more in its standard modules than do roughly equivalent C libraries, you can specify a named address just as well as an IP address. In C you would need to perform a lookup yourself, perhaps first testing whether the argument looked like a dotted quad or a domain name:

```
$ ./UDPechoClient.py
USAGE: ./UDPechoClient.py <server> <word> <port>
$ ./UDPechoClient.py 127.0.0.1 foobar 7
Client connected: ('127.0.0.1', 51776)
Received: foobar
$ ./UDPechoClient.py localhost foobar 7
Client connected: ('127.0.0.1', 51777)
Received: foobar
```

There is something else interesting to notice in this client session. Of course, since I launched the server and client in the same terminal, the output of both are interspersed. But more interesting is the `client_address` that is echo'd. Each new connection establishes a new socket number (they could be reused, but the point is you do not know in advance). Port 7 is merely used to recognize the request to send a message, a new *ad hoc* socket is used for the actual data.

## A lower-level Python server

It does not take any more lines of code to write a Python UDP server using the `socket` module than it did with `SocketServer`, but the coding style is much more imperative (and C-like, actually):

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
"USAGE: %s <server> <word> <port>"
from socket import *      # import *, but we'll avoid name conflict
from sys import argv

if len(argv) != 2:
    print __doc__ % argv[0]
else:
    sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM)
    sock.bind(('',int(argv[1])))
    while 1:      # Run until cancelled
        message, client = sock.recvfrom(256) # <=256 byte datagram
        print "Client connected:", client
        sock.sendto(message, client)
```

Usage and behavior are exactly the same as the prior `UDPEchoServer.py`, but we manage the loop and the client connections ourselves rather than having a class take care of it for us. As before, *ad hoc* ports are used to transmit the actual message -- the `client` returned from `sock.recvfrom()` contains the temporary port number:

```
$ ./UDPEchoServer2.py 8 &
[2] 23428
$ ./UDPEchoClient.py localhost foobar 8
Client connected: ('127.0.0.1', 51779)
Received: foobar
```

---

## Section 4. A UDP echo client in C

### Client setup

The first few lines of our UDP client are identical to those for the TCP client. Mostly we just use some includes for socket functions, or other basic I/O functions.

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <sys/socket.h>
#include <arpa/inet.h>
#include <stdlib.h>
#include <string.h>
#include <unistd.h>
```



```
#include <netinet/in.h>

#define BUFFSIZE 255
void Die(char *mess) { perror(mess); exit(1); }
```

There is not too much to the setup. It is worth noticing that the buffer size we allocate is much larger than it was in the TCP version (but still finite in size). TCP can loop through the pending data, sending a bit more over an open socket on each loop. For this UDP version, we want a buffer that is large enough to hold the entire message, which we send in a single datagram (it can be smaller than 255, but not any larger). A small error function is also defined.

## Declarations and usage message

At the very start of the `main()` function, we allocate two `sockaddr_in` structures, a few integers to hold string sizes, another `int` for the socket handle, and a buffer to hold the returned string. After that, we check that the command-line arguments look mostly correct.

```
int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
    int sock;
    struct sockaddr_in echoserver;
    struct sockaddr_in echoclient;
    char buffer[BUFFSIZE];
    unsigned int echolen, clientlen;
    int received = 0;

    if (argc != 4) {
        fprintf(stderr, "USAGE: %s <server_ip> <word> <port>\n", argv[0]);
        exit(1);
    }
}
```

A contrast with the Python code comes up already here. For this C client, you *must* use a dotted-quad IP address. In Python, all the `socket` module functions handle name resolution behind the scenes. If you wanted to do a lookup in the C client, you would need to program a DNS function -- such as the one presented in the first part of this tutorial.

In fact, it would not be a terrible idea to check that the IP address passed in as the server IP address really looks like a dotted-quad address. If you forgetfully pass in a named address, you will probably receive the somewhat misleading error: "Mismatch in number of sent bytes: No route to host". Any named address amounts to the same thing as an unused or reserved IP address (which a simple pattern check could not rule out, of course).

## Create the socket and configure the server structure

The arguments to the `socket()` call decide the type of socket: `PF_INET` just means it uses IP (which you always will); `SOCK_DGRAM` and `IPPROTO_UDP` go together for a UDP socket. In preparation for sending the message to echo, we populate the intended server's structure using command-line arguments.

```
/* Create the UDP socket */
if ((sock = socket(PF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM, IPPROTO_UDP)) < 0) {
    Die("Failed to create socket");
}
/* Construct the server sockaddr_in structure */
memset(&echoserver, 0, sizeof(echoserver));           /* Clear struct */
echoserver.sin_family = AF_INET;                       /* Internet/IP */
echoserver.sin_addr.s_addr = inet_addr(argv[1]);       /* IP address */
echoserver.sin_port = htons(atoi(argv[3]));           /* server port */
```

The value returned in the call to `socket()` is a socket handle and is similar to a file handle; specifically, if the socket creation fails, it will return -1 rather than a positive numbered handle. Support functions `inet_addr()` and `htons()` (and `atoi()`) are used to convert the string arguments into appropriate data structures.

## Send the message to the server

For what it does, this UDP client is a bit simpler than was the similar TCP echo client presented in [Part 1](#) of this tutorial series. As we saw with the Python versions, sending a message is not based on first establishing a connection. You simply send it to a specified address using `sendto()`, rather than with `send()` on an established connection. Of course, this requires an extra couple of arguments to indicate the intended server address.

```
/* Send the word to the server */
echolen = strlen(argv[2]);
if (sendto(sock, argv[2], echolen, 0,
           (struct sockaddr *) &echoserver,
           sizeof(echoserver)) != echolen) {
    Die("Mismatch in number of sent bytes");
}
```

The error checking in this call usually establishes that a route to the server exists. This is the message raised if a named address is used by mistake, but it also occurs for valid-looking but unreachable IP addresses.

## Receive the message back from the server

Receiving the data back works pretty much the same way as it did in the TCP echo client. The only real change is a substitute call to `recvfrom()` for the TCP call to

```
recv( ).
```

```

/* Receive the word back from the server */
fprintf(stdout, "Received: ");
clientlen = sizeof(echoclient);
if ((received = recvfrom(sock, buffer, BUFFSIZE, 0,
                        (struct sockaddr *) &echoclient,
                        &clientlen)) != echolen) {
    Die("Mismatch in number of received bytes");
}
/* Check that client and server are using same socket */
if (echoserver.sin_addr.s_addr != echoclient.sin_addr.s_addr) {
    Die("Received a packet from an unexpected server");
}
buffer[received] = '\0';          /* Assure null-terminated string */
fprintf(stdout, buffer);
fprintf(stdout, "\n");
close(sock);
exit(0);
}

```

The structure `echoserver` had been configured with an *ad hoc* port during the call to `sendto()`; in turn, the `echoclient` structure gets similarly filled in with the call to `recvfrom()`. This lets us compare the two addresses -- if some other server or port sends a datagram while we are waiting to receive the echo. We guard at least minimally against stray datagrams that do not interest us (we might have checked the `.sin_port` members also, to be completely certain).

At the end of the process, we print out the datagram that came back, and close the socket.

## Section 5. A UDP echo server in C

### Server setup

Even more than with TCP applications, UDP clients and servers are quite similar to each other. In essence, each consists mainly of some `sendto()` and `recvfrom()` calls mixed together. The main difference for a server is simply that it usually puts its main body in an indefinite loop to keep serving.

Let's start out with the usual includes and error function:

```

#include <stdio.h>
#include <sys/socket.h>
#include <arpa/inet.h>

```

```

#include <stdlib.h>
#include <string.h>
#include <unistd.h>
#include <netinet/in.h>

#define BUFFSIZE 255
void Die(char *mess) { perror(mess);
exit(1); }

```

## Declarations and usage message

Again, not much is new in the UDP echo server's declarations and usage message. We need a socket structure for the server and client, a few variables that will be used to verify transmission sizes, and, of course, the buffer to read and write the message.

```

int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
    int sock;
    struct sockaddr_in echoserver;
    struct sockaddr_in echoclient;
    char buffer[BUFFSIZE];
    unsigned int echolen, clientlen, serverlen;
    int received = 0;

    if (argc != 2) {
        fprintf(stderr, "USAGE: %s <port>\n", argv[0]);
        exit(1);
    }
}

```

## Create, configure, and bind the server socket

The first real difference between UDP client and server comes in the need to bind the socket on the server side. We saw this already with the Python example, and the situation is the same here. The server socket is not the actual socket the message is transmitted over; rather, it acts as a factory for an *ad hoc* socket that is configured in the `recvfrom()` call we will see soon.

```

/* Create the UDP socket */
if ((sock = socket(PF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM, IPPROTO_UDP)) < 0) {
    Die("Failed to create socket");
}
/* Construct the server sockaddr_in structure */
memset(&echoserver, 0, sizeof(echoserver)); /* Clear struct */
echoserver.sin_family = AF_INET; /* Internet/IP */
echoserver.sin_addr.s_addr = htonl(INADDR_ANY); /* Any IP address */
echoserver.sin_port = htons(atoi(argv[1])); /* server port */

/* Bind the socket */
serverlen = sizeof(echoserver);
if (bind(sock, (struct sockaddr *) &echoserver, serverlen) < 0) {
    Die("Failed to bind server socket");
}

```

```
}
```

Readers will also notice that the `echoserver` structure is configured a bit differently. In order to allow connection on any IP address the server hosts, we use the special constant `INADDR_ANY` for the member `.s_addr`.

## The receive/send loop

The heavy lifting -- such as it is -- in the UDP sever is its main loop. Basically, we perpetually wait to receive a message in a `recvfrom()` call. When this happens, the `echoclient` structure is populated with relevant members for the connecting socket. We then use that structure in the subsequent `sendto()` call.

```
/* Run until cancelled */
while (1) {
    /* Receive a message from the client */
    clientlen = sizeof(echoclient);
    if ((received = recvfrom(sock, buffer, BUFSIZE, 0,
                            (struct sockaddr *) &echoclient,
                            &clientlen)) < 0) {
        Die("Failed to receive message");
    }
    fprintf(stderr,
            "Client connected: %s\n", inet_ntoa(echoclient.sin_addr));
    /* Send the message back to client */
    if (sendto(sock, buffer, received, 0,
              (struct sockaddr *) &echoclient,
              sizeof(echoclient)) != received) {
        Die("Mismatch in number of echo'd bytes");
    }
}
```

And that's it! We can receive and send messages forever, reporting connections to the console as we go along. Of course, as we will see in the next section, this arrangement does only one thing at a time, which might be a problem for a server handling many clients (probably not for this simple echo server, but something more complicated might introduce poor latencies).

---

## Section 6. Servers that scale

### Complexity in the server's job

The servers we have looked at -- that do nothing but echo a message -- can handle each client request extremely quickly. But more generally, we might expect servers to perform potentially lengthy actions like database lookups, accessing remote resources, or complex computations in order to determine the response for a client. Our "one thing at a time" model does not scale well to multiple clients.

To demonstrate the point, let's look at a slightly modified Python server, one that takes some time to do its job. And just to make the point that it is processing the request, we (trivially) modify the message string along the way too:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
from sys import argv

def lengthy_action(sock, message,
client_addr):
    from time import sleep
    print "Client connected:", client_addr
    sleep(5)
    sock.sendto(message.upper(),
client_addr)

sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM)
sock.bind(('',int(argv[1])))
while 1:    # Run until cancelled
    message, client_addr = sock.recvfrom(256)
    lengthy_action(sock, message,
client_addr)
```

## Stressing the server

To give the server some work to do, we can modify the client to make multiple requests (one per thread) that would like to be serviced as quickly as possible:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
import sys, time
from thread import start_new_thread, get_ident

start = time.time()
threads = {}
sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM)

def request(n):
    sock.sendto("%s [%d]" % (sys.argv[2],n),
                (sys.argv[1], int(sys.argv[3])))
    messin, server = sock.recvfrom(255)
    print "Received:", messin
    del threads[get_ident()]

for n in range(20):
    id = start_new_thread(request, (n,))
    threads[id] = None
    #print id,
while threads: time.sleep(.1)
```

```
sock.close()
print "%.2f seconds" % (time.time()-start)
```

Run against our new "lengthy action" server, the threaded client gets something like the following (abridged) output; note the time it takes, in particular:

```
$ ./UDPechoclient2.py localhost "Hello world" 7
Received: HELLO WORLD [7]
Received: HELLO WORLD [0]
...
Received: HELLO WORLD [18]
Received: HELLO WORLD [2]
103.96 seconds
```

Against one of the earlier servers, this client will run in a few seconds (but will not capitalize the returned string, of course); a version without the threading overhead will be even faster against the earlier servers. Assuming our hypothetical server process is not purely CPU-bound, we should be able to be much more responsive than 100+ seconds. Notice also that the threads are not generally serviced in the same order they are created in.

## A threading server

The way we have set up the "lengthy action" server, we guarantee that it takes at least five seconds to service any given client request. But there is no reason that multiple threads cannot be running during those same five seconds. Again, clearly a CPU-bound process is not going to be faster through threading, but more often in a real server, those five seconds are spent doing something like a database query against another machine. In other words, we should be able to parallelize serving the several client threads.

An obvious approach here is to thread the server, just as the client is threaded:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
from sys import argv
from thread import start_new_thread
# ...definition of 'lengthy_action()' unchanged...
sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM)
sock.bind(('',int(argv[1])))
while 1:      # Run until cancelled
    message, client_addr = sock.recvfrom(256)
    start_new_thread(lengthy_action, (sock, message, client_addr))
```

On my test system (using localhost, as before), this brings the client runtime down to about 9 seconds -- 5 of those spent in the call to `sleep()`, the rest with threading

and connection overhead (roughly).

## A forking server

On UNIX-like systems, forking is even easier than threading. Processes are nominally "heavier" than threads, but on popular Posix systems like Linux, FreeBSD, and Darwin, process creation is still quite efficient.

In Python, a forking version of our "lengthy action" server can be as simple as:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
from sys import argv, exit
from os import fork

def lengthy_action(sock, message, client_addr):
    from time import sleep
    print "Client connected:", client_addr
    sleep(5)
    sock.sendto(message.upper(), client_addr)
    exit()

sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_DGRAM)
sock.bind(('',int(argv[1])))
while 1:
    # Run until cancelled
    message, client_addr = sock.recvfrom(256)
    if fork():
        lengthy_action(sock, message, client_addr)
```

On my test system, I actually found this forking version a couple of seconds *faster* than the threaded server. As a slight difference in behavior, after servicing a collection of client threads, the main process in the `while` loop winds up as a background process, even if the server was launched in the foreground. In the usual case where you launch the server in the background, the difference is irrelevant, though.

## An asynchronous server

Another technique called *asynchronous* or *non-blocking* sockets is potentially even more efficient than are threading or forking approaches. The concept behind asynchronous programming is to keep execution within a single thread, but poll each open socket to see if it has more data waiting to be read or written. However, non-blocking sockets are really only useful for I/O-bound processes. The simulation of a CPU-bound server that we created using `sleep()` sort of misses the point. Moreover, non-blocking sockets make a bit more sense for TCP connections than for UDP ones, since the former retain an open connection that may still have pending data.



In overview, the structure of an asynchronous peer (client or server) is a polling loop -- usually using the function `select()` or some higher-level wrapper to it such as Python's `asyncore`. At each pass through the loop, you check all the open sockets to see which ones are currently readable and which ones are currently writeable. This is quick to check, and you can simply ignore any sockets that are not currently ready for I/O actions. This style of socket programming avoids any overhead associated with threads or processes.

## A client with slow socket connections

To simulate a low-bandwidth connection, we can create a client that introduces artificial delays in sending data, and dribbles out its message byte by byte. To simulate many such connections, we thread multiple connections (each slow). Generally, this client is similar to the `UDPEchoClient2.py` we saw above, but in a TCP version:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
import sys, time
from thread import start_new_thread, get_ident

threads = {}
start = time.time()

def request(n, mess):
    sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_STREAM)
    sock.connect((sys.argv[1], int(sys.argv[3])))
    messlen, received = len(mess), 0
    for c in mess:
        sock.send(c)
        time.sleep(.1)
    data = ""
    while received < messlen:
        data += sock.recv(1)
        time.sleep(.1)
        received += 1
    sock.close()
    print "Received:", data
    del threads[get_ident()]

for n in range(20):
    message = "%s [%d]" % (sys.argv[2], n)
    id = start_new_thread(request, (n, message))
    threads[id] = None
while threads:
    time.sleep(.2)
print "%.2f seconds" % (time.time()-start)
```

We need a "traditional" TCP server to test our slow client against. In essence, the following is identical to the second (low-level) Python server presented in [Part 1](#) of this tutorial. The only real difference is that the maximum connections are increased to 20.

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
import sys

def handleClient(sock):
    data = sock.recv(32)
    while data:
        sock.sendall(data)
        data = sock.recv(32)
    newsock.close()

if __name__ == '__main__':
    sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_STREAM)
    sock.bind(('', int(sys.argv[1])))
    sock.listen(20)
    while 1:      # Run until cancelled
        newsock, client_addr = sock.accept()
        print "Client connected:", client_addr
        handleClient(newsock)
```

## A client with slow socket connections, concluded

Let's try running the "slow connection" client against the "one thing at a time" server (abridged output, as before):

```
$ ./echoclient2.py localhost "Hello world" 7
Received: Hello world [0]
Received: Hello world [1]
Received: Hello world [5]
...
Received: Hello world [16]
37.07 seconds
```

As with the UDP stress-test client, the threads do not necessarily connect in the order they are launched. Most significantly, however, is to notice that the time it takes to serve all 20 threads is basically the same as the sum of all the introduced delays in writing bytes over the sockets. Nothing is parallelized here, since we need to wait for each individual socket connection to complete.

## Using select() to multiplex sockets

Now we are ready to see how the function `select()` can be used to bypass I/O delays of the sort we just introduced (or of the kind that arise "in the wild" because of genuinely slow connections). Previously, the general concept was discussed; let's look at the specific code:

```
#!/usr/bin/env python
from socket import *
import sys, time
```

```

from select import select

if __name__ == '__main__':
    while 1:
        sock = socket(AF_INET, SOCK_STREAM)
        sock.bind(('', int(sys.argv[1])))
        print "Ready..."
        data = {}
        sock.listen(20)
        for _ in range(20):
            newsock, client_addr = sock.accept()
            print "Client connected:", client_addr
            data[newsock] = ""
        last_activity = time.time()
        while 1:
            read, write, err = select(data.keys(), data.keys(), [])
            if time.time() - last_activity > 5:
                for s in read: s.shutdown(2)
                break
            for s in read:
                data[s] = s.recv(32)
            for s in write:
                if data[s]:
                    last_activity = time.time()
                    s.send(data[s])
                    data[s] = ""

```

This server is fragile in that it always waits for exactly 20 client connections before it `select()`'s among them. But we still demonstrate the basic concept of using a tight polling loop, and reading/writing only when data is available on a particular socket. The return value of `select()` is a tuple of lists of sockets that are readable, writeable, and in error, respectively. Each of these types is handled within the loop, as needed.

Using this asynchronous server, by the way, lets the "slow connection" client complete all 20 connections in about 6 seconds, rather than 37 seconds (at least on my test system).

## Scalable servers in C

The examples presented for more scalable servers have all used Python. In truth, the quality of Python's libraries mean that these will not be significantly slower than analogous servers written in C. And for this tutorial, relative brevity of presentation is important.

In presenting the above Python servers, I have stuck to relatively low-level facilities within Python. Some of the higher-level modules like `asyncore` or `SocketServer` -- or even `threading` rather than `thread` -- might provide more "Pythonic" techniques. These low-level facilities I used, however, remain quite close in structure to the ways you would program the same things in C. Python's dynamic typing and concise syntax still save quite a few lines, but a C programmer should be able to use my examples as outlines for similar C servers.

---

## Section 7. Summary

The server and client presented in this tutorial are simple, but they show everything essential to writing UDP sockets applications in C and in Python. A more sophisticated client or server is, at heart, just one that transmits more interesting data back and forth; the sockets-level code is not much different for these.

The general outlines of performing threading, forking, and asynchronous socket handling are similarly applicable to more advanced servers. Your servers and clients themselves are likely to do more, but your strategies towards scalability will always be one of these three approaches (or a combination of them).

# Resources

## Learn

- [Programming Linux sockets, Part 1: Using TCP/IP](#), the previous tutorial in this series, shows you how to begin programming with sockets by guiding you through the creation of an echo server and client, which connect over TCP/IP.
- A good introduction to sockets programming in C is [TCP/IP Sockets in C](#), by Michael J. Donahoo and Kenneth L. Calvert (Morgan-Kaufmann, 2001). Examples and more information are available on the book's [Author pages](#).
- The UNIX Systems Support Group document [Network Layers](#) explains the functions of the lower network layers.
- Learn more about [Berkeley sockets](#) and the [TCP/IP protocol suite](#) at Wikipedia.
- Code examples in this tutorial are in [Python](#) and [C](#) but translate well to other languages.
- In this tutorial we are working with IPv4, but [IPv6](#) will eventually replace it. Learn more about it, again at Wikipedia.
- Python frameworks like [Twisted](#) offer base classes for things like socket programming.
- David has also written a series on "[Network programming with Twisted](#)" (developerWorks, June 2003).
- Find more [tutorials for Linux developers](#) in the [developerWorks Linux one](#).
- Stay current with [developerWorks technical events and Webcasts](#).

## Get products and technologies

- Download [IBM trial software](#) directly from developerWorks.

## Discuss

- Read [developerWorks blogs](#), and get involved in the developerWorks community.

# About the author

David Mertz



David Mertz has been writing the developerWorks columns *Charming Python* and *XML Matters* since 2000. Check out his book [Text Processing in Python](#). For more on David, see his [personal Web page](#).