**What are iterators in Python?**

Iterators are everywhere in Python. They are elegantly implemented within for loops, comprehensions, generators etc. but hidden in plain sight.

Iterator in Python is simply an [object](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/class) that can be iterated upon. An object which will return data, one element at a time.

Technically speaking, Python **iterator object** must implement two special methods, \_\_iter\_\_()and \_\_next\_\_(), collectively called the **iterator protocol**.

An object is called **iterable** if we can get an iterator from it. Most of built-in containers in Python like: [list](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/list), [tuple](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/tuple" \o "Python Tuple), [string](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/string) etc. are iterables.

The iter() function (which in turn calls the \_\_iter\_\_() method) returns an iterator from them.

**Iterating Through an Iterator in Python**

We use the next() function to manually iterate through all the items of an iterator. When we reach the end and there is no more data to be returned, it will raise StopIteration. Following is an example.

# define a list

my\_list = [4, 7, 0, 3]

# get an iterator using iter()

my\_iter = iter(my\_list)

## iterate through it using next()

#prints 4

print(next(my\_iter))

#prints 7

print(next(my\_iter))

## next(obj) is same as obj.\_\_next\_\_()

#prints 0

print(my\_iter.\_\_next\_\_())

#prints 3

print(my\_iter.\_\_next\_\_())

## This will raise error, no items left

next(my\_iter)

A more elegant way of automatically iterating is by using the [for loop](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/for-loop). Using this, we can iterate over any object that can return an iterator, for example list, string, file etc.

>>> for element in my\_list:

... print(element)

...

4

7

0

3

**How for loop actually works?**

As we see in the above example, the for loop was able to iterate automatically through the list.

In fact the for loop can iterate over any iterable. Let's take a closer look at how the forloop is actually implemented in Python.

for element in iterable:

# do something with element

Is actually implemented as.

# create an iterator object from that iterable

iter\_obj = iter(iterable)

# infinite loop

while True:

try:

# get the next item

element = next(iter\_obj)

# do something with element

except StopIteration:

# if StopIteration is raised, break from loop

break

So internally, the for loop creates an iterator object, iter\_obj by calling iter() on the iterable.

Ironically, this for loop is actually an infinite [while loop](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/while-loop).

Inside the loop, it calls next() to get the next element and executes the body of the forloop with this value. After all the items exhaust, StopIteration is raised which is internally caught and the loop ends. Note that any other kind of exception will pass through.

**Building Your Own Iterator in Python**

Building an iterator from scratch is easy in Python. We just have to implement the methods \_\_iter\_\_() and \_\_next\_\_().

The \_\_iter\_\_() method returns the iterator object itself. If required, some initialization can be performed.

The \_\_next\_\_() method must return the next item in the sequence. On reaching the end, and in subsequent calls, it must raise StopIteration.

Here, we show an example that will give us next power of 2 in each iteration. Power exponent starts from zero up to a user set number.

class PowTwo:

"""Class to implement an iterator

of powers of two"""

def \_\_init\_\_(self, max = 0):

self.max = max

def \_\_iter\_\_(self):

self.n = 0

return self

def \_\_next\_\_(self):

if self.n <= self.max:

result = 2 \*\* self.n

self.n += 1

return result

else:

raise StopIteration

Now we can create an iterator and iterate through it as follows.

>>> a = PowTwo(4)

>>> i = iter(a)

>>> next(i)

1

>>> next(i)

2

>>> next(i)

4

>>> next(i)

8

>>> next(i)

16

>>> next(i)

Traceback (most recent call last):

...

StopIteration

We can also use a for loop to iterate over our iterator class.

>>> for i in PowTwo(5):

... print(i)

...

1

2

4

8

16

32

**Python Infinite Iterators**

It is not necessary that the item in an iterator object has to exhaust. There can be infinite iterators (which never ends). We must be careful when handling such iterator.

Here is a simple example to demonstrate infinite iterators.

The [built-in function](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/built-in-function) iter() can be called with two arguments where the first argument must be a callable object (function) and second is the sentinel. The iterator calls this function until the returned value is equal to the sentinel.

>>> int()

0

>>> inf = iter(int,1)

>>> next(inf)

0

>>> next(inf)

0

We can see that the int() function always returns 0. So passing it as iter(int,1) will return an iterator that calls int() until the returned value equals 1. This never happens and we get an infinite iterator.

We can also built our own infinite iterators. The following iterator will, theoretically, return all the odd numbers.

class InfIter:

"""Infinite iterator to return all

odd numbers"""

def \_\_iter\_\_(self):

self.num = 1

return self

def \_\_next\_\_(self):

num = self.num

self.num += 2

return num

A sample run would be as follows.

>>> a = iter(InfIter())

>>> next(a)

1

>>> next(a)

3

>>> next(a)

5

>>> next(a)

7

And so on...

Be careful to include a terminating condition, when iterating over these type of infinite iterators.

The advantage of using iterators is that they save resources. Like shown above, we could get all the odd numbers without storing the entire number system in memory. We can have infinite items (theoretically) in finite memory.

Iterator also makes our code look cool.

There's an easier way to create iterators in Python. To learn more visit: [Python generators using yield](https://www.programiz.com/python-programming/generator).