Java: Collections Framework

Quick summary

- elements that contain multiple values but are stored as one, such as a map, list, set, etc.

What are collections

A collection — sometimes called a container — is simply an object that groups multiple elements into a single unit. Collections are used to store, retrieve, manipulate, and communicate aggregate data. Typically, they represent data items that form a natural group, such as a poker hand (a collection of cards), a mail folder (a collection of letters), or a telephone directory (a mapping of names to phone numbers).

Introduction to Collections

A *collection* — sometimes called a container — is simply an object that groups multiple elements into a single unit. Collections are used to store, retrieve, manipulate, and communicate aggregate data. Typically, they represent data items that form a natural group, such as a poker hand (a collection of cards), a mail folder (a collection of letters), or a telephone directory (a mapping of names to phone numbers). If you have used the Java programming language — or just about any other programming language — you are already familiar with collections.

What Is a Collections Framework?

A *collections framework* is a unified architecture for representing and manipulating collections. All collections frameworks contain the following:

- **Interfaces:** These are abstract data types that represent collections. Interfaces allow collections to be manipulated independently of the details of their representation. In object-oriented languages, interfaces generally form a hierarchy.
- **Implementations:** These are the concrete implementations of the collection interfaces. In essence, they are reusable data structures.
- **Algorithms:** These are the methods that perform useful computations, such as searching and sorting, on objects that implement collection interfaces. The algorithms are said to be *polymorphic*: that is, the same method can be used on many different implementations of the appropriate collection interface. In essence, algorithms are reusable functionality.

Apart from the Java Collections Framework, the best-known examples of collections frameworks are the C++ Standard Template Library (STL) and Smalltalk's collection hierarchy. Historically, collections frameworks have been quite complex, which gave them a reputation for having a steep learning curve. We believe that the Java Collections Framework breaks with this tradition, as you will learn for yourself in this chapter.

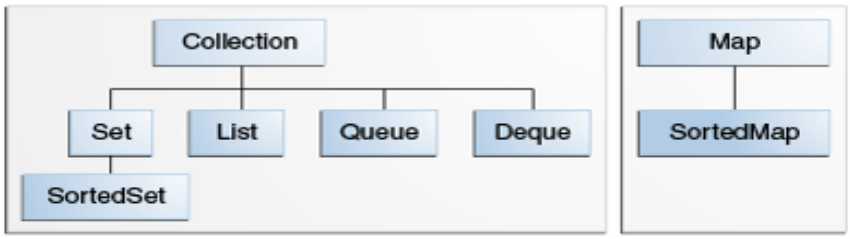
Benefits of the Java Collections Framework

The Java Collections Framework provides the following benefits:

- **Reduces programming effort:** By providing useful data structures and algorithms, the Collections Framework frees you to concentrate on the important parts of your program rather than on the low-level "plumbing" required to make it work. By facilitating interoperability among unrelated APIs, the Java Collections Framework frees you from writing adapter objects or conversion code to connect APIs.
- **Increases program speed and quality:** This Collections Framework provides high-performance, high-quality implementations of useful data structures and algorithms. The various implementations of each interface are interchangeable, so programs can be easily tuned by switching collection implementations. Because you're freed from the drudgery of writing your own data structures, you'll have more time to devote to improving programs' quality and performance.
- **Allows interoperability among unrelated APIs:** The collection interfaces are the vernacular by which APIs pass collections back and forth. If my network administration API furnishes a collection of node names and if your GUI toolkit expects a collection of column headings, our APIs will interoperate seamlessly, even though they were written independently.
- **Reduces effort to learn and to use new APIs:** Many APIs naturally take collections on input and furnish them as output. In the past, each such API had a small sub-API devoted to manipulating its collections. There was little consistency among these ad hoc collections sub-APIs, so you had to learn each one from scratch, and it was easy to make mistakes when using them. With the advent of standard collection interfaces, the problem went away.
- **Reduces effort to design new APIs:** This is the flip side of the previous advantage. Designers and implementers don't have to reinvent the wheel each time they create an API that relies on collections; instead, they can use standard collection interfaces.
- **Fosters software reuse:** New data structures that conform to the standard collection interfaces are by nature reusable. The same goes for new algorithms that operate on objects that implement these interfaces.

Collection Interfaces

The *core collection interfaces* encapsulate different types of collections, which are shown in the figure below. These interfaces allow collections to be manipulated independently of the details of their representation. Core collection interfaces are the foundation of the Java Collections Framework. As you can see in the following figure, the core collection interfaces form a hierarchy.



The core collection interfaces.

A `Set` is a special kind of `Collection`, a `SortedSet` is a special kind of `Set`, and so forth. Note also that the hierarchy consists of two distinct trees — a `Map` is not a true `Collection`.

Note that all the core collection interfaces are generic. For example, this is the declaration of the `Collection` interface.

```
public interface Collection<E>...
```

The `<E>` syntax tells you that the interface is generic. When you declare a `Collection` instance you can *and should* specify the type of object contained in the collection. Specifying the type allows the compiler to verify (at compile-time) that the type of object you put into the collection is correct, thus reducing errors at runtime. For information on generic types, see the Generics (Updated) lesson.

When you understand how to use these interfaces, you will know most of what there is to know about the Java Collections Framework. This chapter discusses general guidelines for effective use of the interfaces, including when to use which interface. You'll also learn programming idioms for each interface to help you get the most out of it.

To keep the number of core collection interfaces manageable, the Java platform doesn't provide separate interfaces for each variant of each collection type. (Such variants might include immutable, fixed-size, and append-only.) Instead, the modification operations in each interface are designated *optional* — a given implementation may elect not to support all operations. If an unsupported operation is invoked, a collection throws an `UnsupportedOperationException`. Implementations are responsible for documenting which of the optional operations they support. All of the Java platform's general-purpose implementations support all of the optional operations.

The following list describes the core collection interfaces:

- `Collection` — the root of the collection hierarchy. A collection represents a group of objects known as its *elements*. The `Collection` interface is the least common denominator that all collections implement and is used to pass collections around and to manipulate them when maximum generality is desired. Some types of collections allow duplicate elements, and others do not. Some are ordered and others are unordered. The Java platform doesn't provide any direct implementations of this interface but provides implementations of more specific subinterfaces, such as `Set` and `List`. Also see The Collection Interface section.
- `Set` — a collection that cannot contain duplicate elements. This interface models the mathematical set abstraction and is used to represent sets, such as the cards comprising a poker hand, the courses making up a student's schedule, or the processes running on a machine. See also The Set Interface section.
- `List` — an ordered collection (sometimes called a *sequence*). `List`s can contain duplicate elements. The user of a `List` generally has precise control over where in the list each element is inserted and can access elements by their integer index (position). If you've used `Vector`, you're familiar with the general flavor of `List`. Also see The List Interface section.
- `Queue` — a collection used to hold multiple elements prior to processing. Besides basic `Collection` operations, a `Queue` provides additional insertion, extraction, and inspection operations.

  Queues typically, but do not necessarily, order elements in a FIFO (first-in, first-out) manner. Among the exceptions are priority queues, which order elements according to a supplied comparator or the elements' natural ordering. Whatever the ordering used, the head of the queue is the element that would be removed by a call to `remove` or `poll`. In a FIFO queue, all new elements are inserted at the tail of the queue. Other kinds of queues may use different placement rules. Every `Queue` implementation must specify its ordering properties. Also see The Queue Interface section.

- `Deque` — a collection used to hold multiple elements prior to processing. Besides basic `Collection` operations, a `Deque` provides additional insertion, extraction, and inspection operations.

  Deques can be used both as FIFO (first-in, first-out) and LIFO (last-in, first-out). In a deque all new elements can be inserted, retrieved and removed at both ends. Also see The Deque Interface section.

- `Map` — an object that maps keys to values. A `Map` cannot contain duplicate keys; each key can map to at most one value. If you've used `Hashtable`, you're already familiar with the basics of `Map`. Also see The Map Interface section.

The last two core collection interfaces are merely sorted versions of `Set` and `Map`:

- `SortedSet` — a `Set` that maintains its elements in ascending order. Several additional operations are provided to take advantage of the ordering. Sorted sets are used for naturally ordered sets, such as word lists and membership rolls. Also see The SortedSet Interface section.
- `SortedMap` — a `Map` that maintains its mappings in ascending key order. This is the `Map` analog of `SortedSet`. Sorted maps are used for naturally ordered collections of key/value pairs, such as dictionaries and telephone directories. Also see The SortedMap Interface section.