# Thread, multi-thread, synchronization in programming using Java: Part 1

This series is to discuss about thread, multi-thread, and synchronization of programing using Java language. In this part 1 we will explore about thread and multi-threads. But before we delve detail into the matter we need to have a little concept or restore our concepts a little bit on processes and threads, which we will cover in short before we go deep into the topic.

Both process and thread are quite similar and associated, yet they are not same. An execution of program is known as process where as a thread is driven in the environment of the process, a lightweight process. Both processes and threads are similar that they are independent set of executions.

**Process in software:**

* An instance of a program is called a process. (e.g. MS Word and MS Paint are two different processes)
* A process is stored in the RAM
* Processes are isolated and does not share memory among themselves.
* A process can contain multiple threads
* Multiple processes can be executed in a true multiple processor system, whereas in uni-processor system a process scheduling algorithm is used to achieved to maintain different processes
* One Java application runs in one thread

**Thread in software:**

* A thread is a lightweight subset of process. (Editing and auto-saving of data in MS Word(single process) are done by two separate threads.)
* Threads are part of processes and remains in them.
* Multiple threads can share memory among themselves.
* Every process contains minimum one thread.
* In multiple processor true multi-threading can be achieved. In case of uni-processor thread scheduler maintains the execution of different threads.
* One Java application can have multiple of threads.

**Thread/multi-thread and its requirements:**

If an application (process) contains single thread, every application occurs sequentially one after another. But in many cases this might leads to some problems. Like one may want to see the current share prices of a particular company while developing the historical data of it. In single thread while the wait for the historical data to download, which might take some time, the current prices may vary a lot. Similarly while waiting for the current prices the data cannot be downloaded. Thus we need concurrency of jobs and that’s where multi-threading comes to help and we use it..

**Basics of thread:**

Thread can be defined in Java in two ways.

1. An instance of the class java.lang.Thread.
2. A thread of execution

An instance of thread is basically a simple java object like any other objects having the inherited properties from the Thread class. It has variables, methods and stays in the heap.

Whereas a thread of execution is a lightweight process having its own call stack. Each thread have their own personal call stack or individual call stack per thread.

One interesting fact is whether or not a developer creates thread, at least single thread runs in the background always when a Java program runs. The main() method is Java which initiates the program creates a call stack by itself and of course the main() method is the first method in the stack.

Whenever a new thread is generated a new ‘call stack’ gets created. All the methods of the new thread stays in the new call stack. All the call stacks created runs parallel making he program to perform multiple tasks concurrently. JVM is responsible for scheduling the running of multiple threads. JVM differs from one to another. In some cases the JVM hands over the scheduling to the underlying native –OS. *So when it is regarding thread, very few things can be guaranteed. Same program can gives different results in when runs on different machines*. So it is recommended that when a program is written with thread handling it should not be coded dependent on one particular JVM. Different JVMs can run threads in profoundly different ways resulting in various output. Some may offer each thread equal chances, some may wait till one of them ends then only any one of the other thread will get chances to run. Developers must be careful to write a good, safe multi thread application. Also *‘daemon thread’* and ‘*user thread’* are not the same.

**Creation of Thread:**

To create a thread first and foremost and instance of thread object is required. The Thread class is responsible for managing threads which includes creation, start, pause, re-start and termination. The Thread class has various methods, the most important of them being the run() method – where all the actions of separate thread, starts and happens. The new call stack and the concurrency happens from the run() method.

So, to start a new user thread run() method needs to be implemented and it can be done in 2 ways.

1. By extending the class java.lang.Thread
2. Implementing the interface Runnable (Basically java.lang.Thread internally implements Runnable)

Let’s have a look at the below code for the two different types of implementatiion.

*The first onewill be like this:*

class MyThread extends Thread{

public void run(){

System.out.println(“Inside new thread”);

}

*second approach will look like this:*

Class MyThread implements Runnable*{*

public void run(){

System.out.println(“Inside new thread”);

}

When both the run method will be invoked properly for Thread specific behave our they will give the same output in separate thread as expected. But by following the OOPS principles it is recommended to use the interface Runnable rather than the inheritance for the following reasons mainly:

* Inheritance or sub classing should be reserved for the specialized version of more generalized super class
* If a class does not extensively use specialized specific version of Thread implementing Runnable interface allows the class to extend or implement other classes.
* Extending Thread class is recommended when a user Thread class is needed for some specific particular behavior.

run() method is free to overload, but that will act as a normal java method, without initializing a new thread when invoked.

**Instantiating a Thread:**

Simple words, to execute a thread a instance of Thread class is required. Irrespective of whether the user Thread class is created by extending java.lang.Thread or by implementing Runnable interface a Thread object(work) is required to invoke the run() method (the job to be done).

*When the user Thread class is created by extending a Thread class it is relatively simple to get the Thread object. For example*,

MyThread t = new MyThread

With this reference variable t we can now invoke the run() method, which will create a new thread and call stack.

*When the user Thread class is created by implementing Runnable interface the instantiation is slightly different.*

To run a separate Thread an instance of Thread (*worker*) is still required. But in this case the run() method(the job to be done) is not the Thread class but the class implementing the Runnable interface. In this case we still need to create a Thread instance but by passing the Runnable interface object to the constructor, so that the Thread knows which run() method to call. (*The worker must know the job to be done*). The Runnable passed to the Thread constructor is known as the ‘*target*’ or ‘*target*’ Runnable. The code to execute this will be as below.

MyRunnable r = new MyRunnable();

Thread t = new Thread(r)

Now the Thread instance t knows that it has to execute the run() method implemented in the Runnable interface. If no target is passed, the Thread will execute it’s own run() method.

We can also pass same or single target Runnable objects to multiple Threads so that all the thread instances perform the same work.

Besides the Thread constructors with no constructors and constructors with target Runnbale there are also other constructors of thread class which takes different values. Below are some of the commonly used.

* Thread()
* Thread(Runnable target)
* Thread(Runnable target, String name)
* Thread(String name)

As we understood, the last two constructors takes String objects which gives user defined names to the Threads created. The main thread by default has it’s name as ‘*main’.* If not name is given Java automatically gives names to threads as Thread-serial-*integer-of-thread-creation*

**Starting a Thread:**

So far things are pretty like other Java stuffs. But to create a thread we need a new call stack and as discussed earlier invoking the run() method does that. But suppose, we have Thread instance t which has its target r in it, i.e. the run() method is available.

We can simply invoke the run method by calling t.run() right, just like any other Java code. But it won’t do anything about creating and running a new thread. *It will surely execute the run command, but in the same thread, not in a new thread.* To make a new thread with its own call stack we need to execute the following command.

My Runnable r = new MyRunnable();

MyThread t = new MyThread(r);

t.start(); // 🡪 **Here happens the magic of new thread creation**

t.run(); 🡪 **Legal but, doesn’t create a new thread**

When we call start() on a Thread object, the thread object creates a new thread and its own call stack by invoking the run() method. Prior to calling the start() method on the Thread object, it is just another simple Java object and not a new thread of execution. When the start() method is invoked on the thread object following stuffs happens.

* A new thread of execution started i.e. new call stack gets created.
* The thread moves from NEW to RUNNABLE state. (states of thread is discussed later)
* When the thread gets the chance to execute the target run() method it will run.

Below is a pictorial description of how thread and call stack works.

Figure 1: When the Java program initiates.



Figure 2: When start() method is called on a thread object



**Starting and running multiple Threads:**

*Before we delve into this topic we must remember, in Thread not everything is guaranteed.*

Whenever we start a Java program the main thread gets created. So far whenever we created a new thread two threads are already handled. But there can be multiple or any number of threads. Few things to point in in case of multiple threads.

* Behavior of multiple threads are not guaranteed if they have same priorities.
* Thread doesn’t follow the orders in which they are coded.
* There is no guarantee that after invoking start() method it will continue till its job is done.
* A single multi thread program can give different outputs when run multiple time in single machine or in different machines.
* Once the run() method is completed a thread is considered in DEAD state its call stack is dissolved.
* The Thread object might still remain in DEAD state but the thread of execution doesn’t.
* Once a Thread has terminated start() cannot be called over it again. It till throw exception.
* Multiple start() call on a Thread object throws exception. A Thread object can only call start() once.
* Only a thread in NEW state can invoke the start() method.
* A thread which is already in RUNNABLE state or DEAD state cannot be re-started.
* Each thread is guaranteed to execute till it is completed.
* Within a single thread actions are guaranteed to perform as per the code. But in between different threads they can mix in unpredictable ways.

The uncontrollable behavior of threads are handled by Thread Scheduler and developers have no control on the scheduler. The Thread Scheduler itself gives no guarantee on the order of execution of thread nor does it give any promises to the duration a thread will run.

However one thing can be made *guaranteed.* We can invoke start() to a Thread object and tell it not to run until some other thread has finished i.e. the run() method has completed its job, using the join() method.