

10.3 — Aggregation

BY ALEX ON DECEMBER 7TH, 2007 | LAST MODIFIED BY ALEX ON JANUARY 23RD, 2020

In the previous lesson on **Composition**, we noted that object composition is the process of creating complex objects from simpler one. We also talked about one type of object composition, called composition. In a composition relationship, the whole object is responsible for the existence of the part.

In this lesson, we'll take a look at the other subtype of object composition, called aggregation.

Aggregation

To qualify as an **aggregation**, a whole object and its parts must have the following relationship:

- The part (member) is part of the object (class)
- The part (member) can belong to more than one object (class) at a time
- The part (member) does *not* have its existence managed by the object (class)
- The part (member) does not know about the existence of the object (class)

Like a composition, an aggregation is still a part-whole relationship, where the parts are contained within the whole, and it is a unidirectional relationship. However, unlike a composition, parts can belong to more than one object at a time, and the whole object is not responsible for the existence and lifespan of the parts. When an aggregation is created, the aggregation is not responsible for creating the parts. When an aggregation is destroyed, the aggregation is not responsible for destroying the parts.

For example, consider the relationship between a person and their home address. In this example, for simplicity, we'll say every person has an address. However, that address can belong to more than one person at a time: for example, to both you and your roommate or significant other. However, that address isn't managed by the person -- the address probably existed before the person got there, and will exist after the person is gone. Additionally, a person knows what address they live at, but the addresses don't know what people live there. Therefore, this is an aggregate relationship.

Alternatively, consider a car and an engine. A car engine is part of the car. And although the engine belongs to the car, it can belong to other things as well, like the person who owns the car. The car is not responsible for the creation or destruction of the engine. And while the car knows it has an engine (it has to in order to get anywhere) the engine doesn't know it's part of the car.

When it comes to modeling physical objects, the use of the term "destroyed" can be a little dicey. One might argue, "If a meteor fell out of the sky and crushed the car, wouldn't the car parts all be destroyed too?" Yes, of course. But that's the fault of the meteor. The important point is that the car is not responsible for destruction of its parts (but an external force might be).

We can say that aggregation models "has-a" relationships (a department has teachers, the car has an engine).

Similar to a composition, the parts of an aggregation can be singular or multiplicative.

Implementing aggregations

Because aggregations are similar to compositions in that they are both part-whole relationships, they are implemented almost identically, and the difference between them is mostly semantic. In a composition, we typically add our parts to the composition using normal member variables (or pointers where the allocation and deallocation process is handled by the composition class).

In an aggregation, we also add parts as member variables. However, these member variables are typically either references or pointers that are used to point at objects that have been created outside the scope of the class. Consequently, an aggregation usually either takes the objects it is going to point to as constructor parameters, or it begins empty and the subobjects are added later via access functions or operators.

Because these parts exist outside of the scope of the class, when the class is destroyed, the pointer or reference member variable will be destroyed (but not deleted). Consequently, the parts themselves will still exist.

Let's take a look at a Teacher and Department example in more detail. In this example, we're going to make a couple of simplifications: First, the department will only hold one teacher. Second, the teacher will be unaware of what department they're part of.

```
1  #include <string>
2  #include <iostream>
3
4  class Teacher
5  {
6  private:
7      std::string m_name;
8
9  public:
10     Teacher(std::string name)
11         : m_name(name)
12     {
13     }
14
15     std::string getName() { return m_name; }
16 };
17
18 class Department
19 {
20 private:
21     Teacher *m_teacher; // This dept holds only one teacher for simplicity, but it could hold
22
23 public:
24     Department(Teacher *teacher = nullptr)
25         : m_teacher(teacher)
26     {
27     }
28 };
29
30 int main()
31 {
32     // Create a teacher outside the scope of the Department
33     Teacher *teacher = new Teacher("Bob"); // create a teacher
34     {
35         // Create a department and use the constructor parameter to pass
36         // the teacher to it.
37         Department dept(teacher);
38
39     } // dept goes out of scope here and is destroyed
40
41     // Teacher still exists here because dept did not delete m_teacher
42
43     std::cout << teacher->getName() << " still exists!";
44
45     delete teacher;
46
47     return 0;
48 }
```

In this case, teacher is created independently of dept, and then passed into dept's constructor. When dept is destroyed, the m_teacher pointer is destroyed, but the teacher itself is not deleted, so it still exists until it is independently destroyed later in main().

Pick the right relationship for what you're modeling

Although it might seem a little silly in the above example that the Teacher's don't know what Department they're working for, that may be totally fine in the context of a given program. When you're determining what kind of relationship to implement, implement the simplest relationship that meets your needs, not the one that seems like it would fit best in a real-life context.

For example, if you're writing a body shop simulator, you may want to implement a car and engine as an aggregation, so the engine can be removed and put on a shelf somewhere for later. However, if you're writing a racing simulation, you may want to implement a car and an engine as a composition, since the engine will never exist outside of the car in that context.

Rule: Implement the simplest relationship type that meets the needs of your program, not what seems right in real-life.

Summarizing composition and aggregation

Compositions:

- Typically use normal member variables
- Can use pointer members if the class handles object allocation/deallocation itself
- Responsible for creation/destruction of parts

Aggregations:

- Typically use pointer or reference members that point to or reference objects that live outside the scope of the aggregate class
- Not responsible for creating/destroying parts

It is worth noting that the concepts of composition and aggregation are not mutually exclusive, and can be mixed freely within the same class. It is entirely possible to write a class that is responsible for the creation/destruction of some parts but not others. For example, our Department class could have a name and a Teacher. The name would probably be added to the Department by composition, and would be created and destroyed with the Department. On the other hand, the Teacher would be added to the department by aggregation, and created/destroyed independently.

While aggregations can be extremely useful, they are also potentially more dangerous. Because aggregations do not handle deallocation of their parts, that is left up to an external party to do so. If the external party no longer has a pointer or reference to the abandoned parts, or if it simply forgets to do the cleanup (assuming the class will handle that), then memory will be leaked.

For this reason, compositions should be favored over aggregations.

A few warnings/errata

For a variety of historical and contextual reasons, unlike a composition, the definition of an aggregation is not precise -- so you may see other reference material define it differently from the way we do. That's fine, just be aware.

One final note: In the lesson **Structs**, we defined aggregate data types (such as structs and classes) as data types that groups multiple variables together. You may also run across the term **aggregate class** in your C++ journeys, which is defined as a struct or class that has no provided constructors, destructors, or overloaded assignment, has all public members, and does not use inheritance -- essentially a plain-old-data struct. Despite the similarities in naming, aggregates and aggregation are different and should not be confused.

Quiz time

- 1) Would you be more likely to implement the following as a composition or an aggregation?
 - 1a) A ball that has a color
 - 1b) An employer that is employing multiple people
 - 1c) The departments in a university

- 1d) Your age
- 1e) A bag of marbles

Show Solution

2) Update the Teacher/Dept example so the Dept can handle multiple Teachers. The following code should execute:

```
1  #include <iostream>
2
3  int main()
4  {
5      // Create a teacher outside the scope of the Department
6      Teacher *t1 = new Teacher("Bob"); // create a teacher
7      Teacher *t2 = new Teacher("Frank");
8      Teacher *t3 = new Teacher("Beth");
9
10     {
11         // Create a department and use the constructor parameter to pass
12         // the teacher to it.
13         Department dept; // create an empty Department
14         dept.add(t1);
15         dept.add(t2);
16         dept.add(t3);
17
18         std::cout << dept;
19
20     } // dept goes out of scope here and is destroyed
21
22     std::cout << t1->getName() << " still exists!\n";
23     std::cout << t2->getName() << " still exists!\n";
24     std::cout << t3->getName() << " still exists!\n";
25
26     delete t1;
27     delete t2;
28     delete t3;
29
30     return 0;
31 }
```

This should print:

```
Department: Bob Frank Beth
Bob still exists!
Frank still exists!
Beth still exists!
```

Hint: Use a `std::vector` to hold the Teachers, and `std::vector::push_back()` to add Teachers.

Show Solution



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Habiba

[October 29, 2019 at 4:39 pm · Reply](#)

i am combining the two codes above i.e. the one for single Teacher type pointer and the one with updation in Department class due to addition of add(Teacher *teacher) functon

```
#include <string>
using namespace std;
#include <iostream>

class Teacher
{
private:
    string m_name;

public:
    Teacher(string name)
        : m_name(name)
    {
    }

    string getName() { return m_name; }
};

class Department
{
private:
    Teacher *m_teacher;// This dept holds only one teacher for simplicity, but it could hold many teachers
```

```

public:
    Department()
    {
        cout<<"Hello"<<endl;
    }
    int add(Teacher *teacher)
    {
        m_teacher=teacher<<endl;
    }
};

int main()
{
    // Create a teacher outside the scope of the Department
    Teacher *teacher1 = new Teacher("Bob"); // create a teacher
    Teacher *teacher2 = new Teacher("Henry"); // create a teacher
    Teacher *teacher3 = new Teacher("Sara"); // create a teacher

    // Create a department and use the constructor parameter to pass
    // the teacher to it.
    Department dept;
    dept.add(teacher1);
    dept.add(teacher2);
    dept.add(teacher3);

    // dept goes out of scope here and is destroyed

    // Teacher still exists here because dept did not delete m_teacher

    cout << teacher1->getName() <<teacher2->getName() <<teacher3->getName() << " still exists!";
    delete teacher1;
    delete teacher2;
    delete teacher3;

    return 0;
}

```



Imran

October 13, 2019 at 9:13 am · Reply.

Can u plz Make a program in which object of class employee and object of class students are attributes of class Manager and class scientist and object of class employee is an attribute of class

labourer



Anastasia

September 6, 2019 at 2:15 pm · Reply.

Thanks for the lesson, I think it's very well explained, but I have hard time grasping abstract concepts :/

I'm writing a card game and there are 2 classes: 'Card' and 'Deck'. Which kind of relationship they have? It seems somewhat similar to the 1e question of the quiz (a bag of marbles), so I'd think it's aggregation, but then again there are some composition-like points too...

Aggregation:

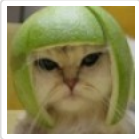
- a card(s) can exist independently of a deck

Composition:

- a deck can't exist without cards (intrinsic property?)
- a card can't belong to more than one deck at a time

I don't know whether a deck should be responsible for destroying cards... I'd say yes, but only because it seems easier to manage memory this way (allocate memory for the deck (eg. Card array) and then 'delete' it as a whole, rather than manage each card separately). Abstract thinking is not at all my thing...(better don't ask me whether a card is aware of being part of a deck lol)

Is it very important to grasp the difference between composition and aggregation?



Alex

September 6, 2019 at 4:33 pm · Reply

One thing that's maybe not as clear as it could be is that some relationships can be implemented using more than one technique. A Deck could be implemented as a composition or an aggregation, depending on whether Cards do or don't need to exist independently of the Deck itself. I'd favor composition over aggregation if it meets your requirements.

If this stuff doesn't gel with you, I'd move on.



Anastasia

September 7, 2019 at 2:39 am · Reply

Implementing it as a composition seemed like a better choice to me too, but I wasn't sure (esp. after getting to the question with bag of marbles). Thank you for the reply!



noobmaster

August 19, 2019 at 9:17 pm · Reply

I still don't really get it.

```

1  #include <string>
2  #include <iostream>
3
4  class Teacher
5  {
6  private:
7      std::string m_name;
8
9  public:
10     Teacher(std::string name)
11         : m_name(name)
12     {
13     }
14
15     std::string getName() { return m_name; }
16 };
17
18 class Department
19 {
20 private:
21     Teacher m_teacher; // This dept holds only one teacher for simplicity, but it could hol
22
23 public:
24     Department(Teacher teacher)
25         : m_teacher(teacher)
26     {

```

```

27     }
28 };
29
30 int main()
31 {
32     // Create a teacher outside the scope of the Department
33     Teacher teacher{"Bob"}; // create a teacher
34     {
35         // Create a department and use the constructor parameter to pass
36         // the teacher to it.
37         Department dept(teacher);
38
39     } // dept goes out of scope here and is destroyed
40
41     // Teacher still exists here because dept did not delete m_teacher
42
43     std::cout << teacher.getName() << " still exists!";
44
45     // delete teacher;
46
47     return 0;
48 }

```

we can just use normal member variable here and ofc Bob still exist because we declared it outside the scope of the Department. So what is the benefit of using reference/pointer? For scope things? So we can use them in multiple functions (bcs they don't get destroyed until we explicitly delete them)?



nascardriver

August 20, 2019 at 1:52 am · Reply

You're creating copies, that's slow.

Modifying one instance doesn't affect the others. If a teacher changes their name, the department still has the old name.



noobmaster

August 20, 2019 at 6:27 am · Reply

So aggregation typically using reference or pointer member just for performance reason?



nascardriver

August 20, 2019 at 6:31 am · Reply

No. Aggregation uses pointer/references because if you store the member directly, that's composition.

The performance is thanks to using a pointer, but it's unrelated to aggregation.



noobmaster

August 20, 2019 at 7:02 am · Reply

Hmm okay then. Thanks

