

SECOND EDITION

THE

C



PROGRAMMING
LANGUAGE

BRIAN W. KERNIGHAN
DENNIS M. RITCHIE

PRENTICE HALL SOFTWARE SERIES

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LANGUAGE

Second Edition

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Brian W. Kernighan • Dennis M. Ritchie

AT&T Bell Laboratories
Murray Hill, New Jersey



PRENTICE HALL, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kernighan, Brian W.

The C programming language.

Includes index.

1. C (Computer program language) I. Ritchie,
Dennis M. II. Title.

QA76.73.C15K47 1988 005.13'3 88-5934

ISBN 0-13-110370-9

ISBN 0-13-110362-8 (pbk.)

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This book was typeset (pic|tbl|eqn|troff -ms) in Times Roman and Courier by the authors, using an Autologic APS-5 phototypesetter and a DEC VAX 8550 running the 9th Edition of the UNIX® operating system.

Prentice Hall Software Series

Brian Kernighan, Advisor

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7

ISBN 0-13-110362-8 {PBK}

ISBN 0-13-110370-9

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*

Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*

Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*

Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*

Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*

Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*

Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*

Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

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Preface

The computing world has undergone a revolution since the publication of *The C Programming Language* in 1978. Big computers are much bigger, and personal computers have capabilities that rival the mainframes of a decade ago. During this time, C has changed too, although only modestly, and it has spread far beyond its origins as the language of the UNIX operating system.

The growing popularity of C, the changes in the language over the years, and the creation of compilers by groups not involved in its design, combined to demonstrate a need for a more precise and more contemporary definition of the language than the first edition of this book provided. In 1983, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) established a committee whose goal was to produce “an unambiguous and machine-independent definition of the language C,” while still retaining its spirit. The result is the ANSI standard for C.

The standard formalizes constructions that were hinted at but not described in the first edition, particularly structure assignment and enumerations. It provides a new form of function declaration that permits cross-checking of definition with use. It specifies a standard library, with an extensive set of functions for performing input and output, memory management, string manipulation, and similar tasks. It makes precise the behavior of features that were not spelled out in the original definition, and at the same time states explicitly which aspects of the language remain machine-dependent.

This second edition of *The C Programming Language* describes C as defined by the ANSI standard. Although we have noted the places where the language has evolved, we have chosen to write exclusively in the new form. For the most part, this makes no significant difference; the most visible change is the new form of function declaration and definition. Modern compilers already support most features of the standard.

We have tried to retain the brevity of the first edition. C is not a big language, and it is not well served by a big book. We have improved the exposition of critical features, such as pointers, that are central to C programming. We have refined the original examples, and have added new examples in several chapters. For instance, the treatment of complicated declarations is augmented by programs that convert declarations into words and vice versa. As before, all

examples have been tested directly from the text, which is in machine-readable form.

Appendix A, the reference manual, is not the standard, but our attempt to convey the essentials of the standard in a smaller space. It is meant for easy comprehension by programmers, but not as a definition for compiler writers—that role properly belongs to the standard itself. Appendix B is a summary of the facilities of the standard library. It too is meant for reference by programmers, not implementers. Appendix C is a concise summary of the changes from the original version.

As we said in the preface to the first edition, C “wears well as one’s experience with it grows.” With a decade more experience, we still feel that way. We hope that this book will help you to learn C and to use it well.

We are deeply indebted to friends who helped us to produce this second edition. Jon Bentley, Doug Gwyn, Doug McIlroy, Peter Nelson, and Rob Pike gave us perceptive comments on almost every page of draft manuscripts. We are grateful for careful reading by Al Aho, Dennis Allison, Joe Campbell, G. R. Emlin, Karen Fortgang, Allen Holub, Andrew Hume, Dave Kristol, John Linderman, Dave Prosser, Gene Spafford, and Chris Van Wyk. We also received helpful suggestions from Bill Cheswick, Mark Kernighan, Andy Koenig, Robin Lake, Tom London, Jim Reeds, Clovis Tondo, and Peter Weinberger. Dave Prosser answered many detailed questions about the ANSI standard. We used Bjarne Stroustrup’s C++ translator extensively for local testing of our programs, and Dave Kristol provided us with an ANSI C compiler for final testing. Rich Drechsler helped greatly with typesetting.

Our sincere thanks to all.

Brian W. Kernighan
Dennis M. Ritchie

Preface to the First Edition

C is a general-purpose programming language which features economy of expression, modern control flow and data structures, and a rich set of operators. C is not a “very high level” language, nor a “big” one, and is not specialized to any particular area of application. But its absence of restrictions and its generality make it more convenient and effective for many tasks than supposedly more powerful languages.

C was originally designed for and implemented on the UNIX operating system on the DEC PDP-11, by Dennis Ritchie. The operating system, the C compiler, and essentially all UNIX applications programs (including all of the software used to prepare this book) are written in C. Production compilers also exist for several other machines, including the IBM System/370, the Honeywell 6000, and the Interdata 8/32. C is not tied to any particular hardware or system, however, and it is easy to write programs that will run without change on any machine that supports C.

This book is meant to help the reader learn how to program in C. It contains a tutorial introduction to get new users started as soon as possible, separate chapters on each major feature, and a reference manual. Most of the treatment is based on reading, writing and revising examples, rather than on mere statements of rules. For the most part, the examples are complete, real programs, rather than isolated fragments. All examples have been tested directly from the text, which is in machine-readable form. Besides showing how to make effective use of the language, we have also tried where possible to illustrate useful algorithms and principles of good style and sound design.

The book is not an introductory programming manual; it assumes some familiarity with basic programming concepts like variables, assignment statements, loops, and functions. Nonetheless, a novice programmer should be able to read along and pick up the language, although access to a more knowledgeable colleague will help.

In our experience, C has proven to be a pleasant, expressive, and versatile language for a wide variety of programs. It is easy to learn, and it wears well as one's experience with it grows. We hope that this book will help you to use it well.

The thoughtful criticisms and suggestions of many friends and colleagues have added greatly to this book and to our pleasure in writing it. In particular, Mike Bianchi, Jim Blue, Stu Feldman, Doug McIlroy, Bill Roome, Bob Rosin, and Larry Rosler all read multiple versions with care. We are also indebted to Al Aho, Steve Bourne, Dan Dvorak, Chuck Haley, Debbie Haley, Marion Harris, Rick Holt, Steve Johnson, John Mashey, Bob Mitze, Ralph Muha, Peter Nelson, Elliot Pinson, Bill Plauger, Jerry Spivack, Ken Thompson, and Peter Weinberger for helpful comments at various stages, and to Mike Lesk and Joe Ossanna for invaluable assistance with typesetting.

Brian W. Kernighan
Dennis M. Ritchie

Introduction

C is a general-purpose programming language. It has been closely associated with the UNIX system where it was developed, since both the system and most of the programs that run on it are written in C. The language, however, is not tied to any one operating system or machine; and although it has been called a “system programming language” because it is useful for writing compilers and operating systems, it has been used equally well to write major programs in many different domains.

Many of the important ideas of C stem from the language BCPL, developed by Martin Richards. The influence of BCPL on C proceeded indirectly through the language B, which was written by Ken Thompson in 1970 for the first UNIX system on the DEC PDP-7.

BCPL and B are “typeless” languages. By contrast, C provides a variety of data types. The fundamental types are characters, and integers and floating-point numbers of several sizes. In addition, there is a hierarchy of derived data types created with pointers, arrays, structures, and unions. Expressions are formed from operators and operands; any expression, including an assignment or a function call, can be a statement. Pointers provide for machine-independent address arithmetic.

C provides the fundamental control-flow constructions required for well-structured programs: statement grouping, decision making (*if-else*), selecting one of a set of possible cases (*switch*), looping with the termination test at the top (*while*, *for*) or at the bottom (*do*), and early loop exit (*break*).

Functions may return values of basic types, structures, unions, or pointers. Any function may be called recursively. Local variables are typically “automatic,” or created anew with each invocation. Function definitions may not be nested but variables may be declared in a block-structured fashion. The functions of a C program may exist in separate source files that are compiled separately. Variables may be internal to a function, external but known only within a single source file, or visible to the entire program.

A preprocessing step performs macro substitution on program text, inclusion of other source files, and conditional compilation.

C is a relatively “low level” language. This characterization is not

pejorative; it simply means that C deals with the same sort of objects that most computers do, namely characters, numbers, and addresses. These may be combined and moved about with the arithmetic and logical operators implemented by real machines.

C provides no operations to deal directly with composite objects such as character strings, sets, lists, or arrays. There are no operations that manipulate an entire array or string, although structures may be copied as a unit. The language does not define any storage allocation facility other than static definition and the stack discipline provided by the local variables of functions; there is no heap or garbage collection. Finally, C itself provides no input/output facilities; there are no READ or WRITE statements, and no built-in file access methods. All of these higher-level mechanisms must be provided by explicitly-called functions. Most C implementations have included a reasonably standard collection of such functions.

Similarly, C offers only straightforward, single-thread control flow: tests, loops, grouping, and subprograms, but not multiprogramming, parallel operations, synchronization, or coroutines.

Although the absence of some of these features may seem like a grave deficiency ("You mean I have to call a function to compare two character strings?"), keeping the language down to modest size has real benefits. Since C is relatively small, it can be described in a small space, and learned quickly. A programmer can reasonably expect to know and understand and indeed regularly use the entire language.

For many years, the definition of C was the reference manual in the first edition of *The C Programming Language*. In 1983, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) established a committee to provide a modern, comprehensive definition of C. The resulting definition, the ANSI standard, or "ANSI C," was completed late in 1988. Most of the features of the standard are already supported by modern compilers.

The standard is based on the original reference manual. The language is relatively little changed; one of the goals of the standard was to make sure that most existing programs would remain valid, or, failing that, that compilers could produce warnings of new behavior.

For most programmers, the most important change is a new syntax for declaring and defining functions. A function declaration can now include a description of the arguments of the function; the definition syntax changes to match. This extra information makes it much easier for compilers to detect errors caused by mismatched arguments; in our experience, it is a very useful addition to the language.

There are other small-scale language changes. Structure assignment and enumerations, which had been widely available, are now officially part of the language. Floating-point computations may now be done in single precision. The properties of arithmetic, especially for unsigned types, are clarified. The preprocessor is more elaborate. Most of these changes will have only minor

effects on most programmers.

A second significant contribution of the standard is the definition of a library to accompany C. It specifies functions for accessing the operating system (for instance, to read and write files), formatted input and output, memory allocation, string manipulation, and the like. A collection of standard headers provides uniform access to declarations of functions and data types. Programs that use this library to interact with a host system are assured of compatible behavior. Most of the library is closely modeled on the “standard I/O library” of the UNIX system. This library was described in the first edition, and has been widely used on other systems as well. Again, most programmers will not see much change.

Because the data types and control structures provided by C are supported directly by most computers, the run-time library required to implement self-contained programs is tiny. The standard library functions are only called explicitly, so they can be avoided if they are not needed. Most can be written in C, and except for the operating system details they conceal, are themselves portable.

Although C matches the capabilities of many computers, it is independent of any particular machine architecture. With a little care it is easy to write portable programs, that is, programs that can be run without change on a variety of hardware. The standard makes portability issues explicit, and prescribes a set of constants that characterize the machine on which the program is run.

C is not a strongly-typed language, but as it has evolved, its type-checking has been strengthened. The original definition of C frowned on, but permitted, the interchange of pointers and integers; this has long since been eliminated, and the standard now requires the proper declarations and explicit conversions that had already been enforced by good compilers. The new function declarations are another step in this direction. Compilers will warn of most type errors, and there is no automatic conversion of incompatible data types. Nevertheless, C retains the basic philosophy that programmers know what they are doing; it only requires that they state their intentions explicitly.

C, like any other language, has its blemishes. Some of the operators have the wrong precedence; some parts of the syntax could be better. Nonetheless, C has proven to be an extremely effective and expressive language for a wide variety of programming applications.

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 is a tutorial on the central part of C. The purpose is to get the reader started as quickly as possible, since we believe strongly that the way to learn a new language is to write programs in it. The tutorial does assume a working knowledge of the basic elements of programming; there is no explanation of computers, of compilation, nor of the meaning of an expression like $n=n+1$. Although we have tried where possible to show useful programming techniques, the book is not intended to be a reference work on data structures and algorithms; when forced to make a choice, we have concentrated on the language.

Chapters 2 through 6 discuss various aspects of C in more detail, and rather more formally, than does Chapter 1, although the emphasis is still on examples of complete programs, rather than isolated fragments. Chapter 2 deals with the basic data types, operators and expressions. Chapter 3 treats control flow: `if-else`, `switch`, `while`, `for`, etc. Chapter 4 covers functions and program structure—external variables, scope rules, multiple source files, and so on—and also touches on the preprocessor. Chapter 5 discusses pointers and address arithmetic. Chapter 6 covers structures and unions.

Chapter 7 describes the standard library, which provides a common interface to the operating system. This library is defined by the ANSI standard and is meant to be supported on all machines that support C, so programs that use it for input, output, and other operating system access can be moved from one system to another without change.

Chapter 8 describes an interface between C programs and the UNIX operating system, concentrating on input/output, the file system, and storage allocation. Although some of this chapter is specific to UNIX systems, programmers who use other systems should still find useful material here, including some insight into how one version of the standard library is implemented, and suggestions on portability.

Appendix A contains a language reference manual. The official statement of the syntax and semantics of C is the ANSI standard itself. That document, however, is intended foremost for compiler writers. The reference manual here conveys the definition of the language more concisely and without the same legalistic style. Appendix B is a summary of the standard library, again for users rather than implementers. Appendix C is a short summary of changes from the original language. In cases of doubt, however, the standard and one's own compiler remain the final authorities on the language.

CHAPTER 1: **A Tutorial Introduction**

Let us begin with a quick introduction to C. Our aim is to show the essential elements of the language in real programs, but without getting bogged down in details, rules, and exceptions. At this point, we are not trying to be complete or even precise (save that the examples are meant to be correct). We want to get you as quickly as possible to the point where you can write useful programs, and to do that we have to concentrate on the basics: variables and constants, arithmetic, control flow, functions, and the rudiments of input and output. We are intentionally leaving out of this chapter features of C that are important for writing bigger programs. These include pointers, structures, most of C's rich set of operators, several control-flow statements, and the standard library.

This approach has its drawbacks. Most notable is that the complete story on any particular language feature is not found here, and the tutorial, by being brief, may also be misleading. And because the examples do not use the full power of C, they are not as concise and elegant as they might be. We have tried to minimize these effects, but be warned. Another drawback is that later chapters will necessarily repeat some of this chapter. We hope that the repetition will help you more than it annoys.

In any case, experienced programmers should be able to extrapolate from the material in this chapter to their own programming needs. Beginners should supplement it by writing small, similar programs of their own. Both groups can use it as a framework on which to hang the more detailed descriptions that begin in Chapter 2.

1.1 Getting Started

The only way to learn a new programming language is by writing programs in it. The first program to write is the same for all languages:

```
Print the words  
hello, world
```

This is the big hurdle; to leap over it you have to be able to create the program

text somewhere, compile it successfully, load it, run it, and find out where your output went. With these mechanical details mastered, everything else is comparatively easy.

In C, the program to print “hello, world” is

```
#include <stdio.h>

main()
{
    printf("hello, world\n");
}
```

Just how to run this program depends on the system you are using. As a specific example, on the UNIX operating system you must create the program in a file whose name ends in “.c”, such as `hello.c`, then compile it with the command

```
cc hello.c
```

If you haven’t botched anything, such as omitting a character or misspelling something, the compilation will proceed silently, and make an executable file called `a.out`. If you run `a.out` by typing the command

```
a.out
```

it will print

```
hello, world
```

On other systems, the rules will be different; check with a local expert.

Now for some explanations about the program itself. A C program, whatever its size, consists of *functions* and *variables*. A function contains *statements* that specify the computing operations to be done, and variables store values used during the computation. C functions are like the subroutines and functions of Fortran or the procedures and functions of Pascal. Our example is a function named `main`. Normally you are at liberty to give functions whatever names you like, but “`main`” is special—your program begins executing at the beginning of `main`. This means that every program must have a `main` somewhere.

`main` will usually call other functions to help perform its job, some that you wrote, and others from libraries that are provided for you. The first line of the program,

```
#include <stdio.h>
```

tells the compiler to include information about the standard input/output library; this line appears at the beginning of many C source files. The standard library is described in Chapter 7 and Appendix B.

One method of communicating data between functions is for the calling function to provide a list of values, called *arguments*, to the function it calls. The parentheses after the function name surround the argument list. In this

<code>#include <stdio.h></code>	<i>include information about standard library</i>
<code>main()</code>	<i>define a function named main that receives no argument values</i>
<code>{</code>	<i>statements of main are enclosed in braces</i>
<code>printf("hello, world\n");</code>	<i>main calls library function printf to print this sequence of characters; \n represents the newline character</i>
<code>}</code>	

The first C program.

example, `main` is defined to be a function that expects no arguments, which is indicated by the empty list `()`.

The statements of a function are enclosed in braces `{}`. The function `main` contains only one statement,

```
printf("hello, world\n");
```

A function is called by naming it, followed by a parenthesized list of arguments, so this calls the function `printf` with the argument `"hello, world\n"`. `printf` is a library function that prints output, in this case the string of characters between the quotes.

A sequence of characters in double quotes, like `"hello, world\n"`, is called a *character string* or *string constant*. For the moment our only use of character strings will be as arguments for `printf` and other functions.

The sequence `\n` in the string is C notation for the *newline character*, which when printed advances the output to the left margin on the next line. If you leave out the `\n` (a worthwhile experiment), you will find that there is no line advance after the output is printed. You must use `\n` to include a newline character in the `printf` argument; if you try something like

```
printf("hello, world
");
```

the C compiler will produce an error message.

`printf` never supplies a newline automatically, so several calls may be used to build up an output line in stages. Our first program could just as well have been written

```
#include <stdio.h>

main()
{
    printf("hello, ");
    printf("world");
    printf("\n");
}
```

to produce identical output.

Notice that `\n` represents only a single character. An *escape sequence* like `\n` provides a general and extensible mechanism for representing hard-to-type or invisible characters. Among the others that C provides are `\t` for tab, `\b` for backspace, `\"` for the double quote, and `\\` for the backslash itself. There is a complete list in Section 2.3.

Exercise 1-1. Run the “hello, world” program on your system. Experiment with leaving out parts of the program, to see what error messages you get. □

Exercise 1-2. Experiment to find out what happens when `printf`’s argument string contains `\c`, where `c` is some character not listed above. □

1.2 Variables and Arithmetic Expressions

The next program uses the formula $^{\circ}C = (5/9)(^{\circ}F - 32)$ to print the following table of Fahrenheit temperatures and their centigrade or Celsius equivalents:

0	-17
20	-6
40	4
60	15
80	26
100	37
120	48
140	60
160	71
180	82
200	93
220	104
240	115
260	126
280	137
300	148

The program itself still consists of the definition of a single function named `main`. It is longer than the one that printed “hello, world”, but not complicated. It introduces several new ideas, including comments, declarations, variables, arithmetic expressions, loops, and formatted output.

```

#include <stdio.h>

/* print Fahrenheit-Celsius table
   for fahr = 0, 20, ..., 300 */
main()
{
    int fahr, celsius;
    int lower, upper, step;

    lower = 0;        /* lower limit of temperature table */
    upper = 300;       /* upper limit */
    step = 20;        /* step size */

    fahr = lower;
    while (fahr <= upper) {
        celsius = 5 * (fahr-32) / 9;
        printf("%d\t%d\n", fahr, celsius);
        fahr = fahr + step;
    }
}

```

The two lines

```

/* print Fahrenheit-Celsius table
   for fahr = 0, 20, ..., 300 */

```

are a *comment*, which in this case explains briefly what the program does. Any characters between `/*` and `*/` are ignored by the compiler; they may be used freely to make a program easier to understand. Comments may appear anywhere a blank or tab or newline can.

In C, all variables must be declared before they are used, usually at the beginning of the function before any executable statements. A *declaration* announces the properties of variables; it consists of a type name and a list of variables, such as

```

int fahr, celsius;
int lower, upper, step;

```

The type `int` means that the variables listed are integers, by contrast with `float`, which means floating point, i.e., numbers that may have a fractional part. The range of both `int` and `float` depends on the machine you are using; 16-bit ints, which lie between -32768 and $+32767$, are common, as are 32-bit ints. A `float` number is typically a 32-bit quantity, with at least six significant digits and magnitude generally between about 10^{-38} and 10^{+38} .

C provides several other basic data types besides `int` and `float`, including:

<code>char</code>	character—a single byte
<code>short</code>	short integer
<code>long</code>	long integer
<code>double</code>	double-precision floating point