

RECURSION 6

DATA C88C

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1 Recursion

1.1 Introduction

A **recursive function** is a function that is defined in terms of itself. A good example is the `factorial` function. Consider this example:

```
def factorial(n):  
    if n == 0 or n == 1:  
        return 1  
    else:  
        return n * factorial(n - 1)
```

Although we haven't finished defining `factorial`, we are still able to call it in the second `return` statement since the function body is not evaluated until the function is called.

Note that when `n` is 0 or 1, we just return 1. This is known as the **base case**, and it prevents the function from infinitely recursing. Otherwise, we would continue calling `factorial(n - 1)` forever on smaller and smaller values of `n`. This would not be the desired behavior since factorial is not defined for negative numbers.

Now we can compute `factorial(2)` in terms of `factorial(1)`, and `factorial(3)` in terms of `factorial(2)`, and `factorial(4)` – well, you get the idea.

1.2 Writing Recursive Functions

There are three common steps in a recursive definition:

1. **Figure out your base case:** The base case is usually the simplest input possible to the function. For example, `factorial(0)` is 1 by definition. You can also think of a base case as a stopping condition for the recursion. If you can't figure this out right away, move on to the recursive case and try to figure out the point at which we can't reduce the problem any further.
2. **Make a recursive call with a simpler argument:** Simplify your problem, and assume that a recursive call for this new problem will simply work. We call this the "recursive leap of faith". For `factorial`, we reduce the problem by calling `factorial(n-1)`.
3. **Use your recursive call to solve the full problem:** Remember that we are assuming the recursive call works. With the result of the recursive call, how can you solve the original problem you were asked? For `factorial`, we just multiply $(n - 1)!$ by n .

1.3 Correctness

One way to go understand recursion is to separate out two things: *internal correctness* and not running forever (known as *halting*).

A recursive function is *internally correct* if it is always does the right thing assuming that every recursive call does the right thing. For example, the same `factorial` function from above but with no base case is internally correct, but does not halt.

A recursive function is correct if and only if it is both internally correct and halts; but you can check each property separately. The "recursive leap of faith" is temporarily placing yourself in a mindset where you only check internal correctness.

1.4 Questions

1. Write a recursive function that takes in an integer n and prints out a countdown from n to 1.

Problem 1a First, think about a base case for the `countdown` function. What is the simplest input the problem could be given?

Solution: When n equals 0

Problem 1b After you've thought of a base case, think about a recursive call with a smaller argument that approaches the base case. What happens if you call `countdown(n - 1)`?

Solution: A countdown starting from $n - 1$ is printed.

Problem 1c Then, put the base case and the recursive call together, and think about where a print statement would be needed.

```
def countdown(n):  
    """  
    >>> countdown(3)  
    3  
    2  
    1  
    """
```

Solution:

```
if n <= 0:  
    return  
print(n)  
countdown(n - 1)
```

[Video walkthrough](#)

Problem 1d How can we change `countdown` to count up instead without modifying a lot of the code?

Solution: Move the `print` statement to after the recursive call.

[Video walkthrough](#)

2. Write a function `expt(base, power)`, which implements the exponent function. For example, `expt(3, 2)` returns 9, and `expt(2, 3)` returns 8. Assume power is always a non-negative integer. Use recursion, not `pow`!

```
def expt(base, power):
```

Solution:

```
    if power == 0:
        return 1
    else:
        return expt(base, power - 1) * base
```

3. Write a recursive function that takes a number `n` and returns the sum of every other digit, starting from the rightmost digit. Assume `n` is non-negative.

You might find the operators `//` and `%` useful.

```
def sum_every_other_digit(n):
    """
    >>> sum_every_other_digit(7)
    7
    >>> sum_every_other_digit(30)
    0
    >>> sum_every_other_digit(228)
    10
    >>> sum_every_other_digit(123456)
    12
    >>> sum_every_other_digit(1234567) # 1 + 3 + 5 + 7
    16
    """
```

Solution:

```
    if n == 0:
        return 0
    else:
        return n % 10 + sum_every_other_digit(n // 10)
```

4. Remember `map`? Given a list of elements `seq` and a function `fn`, we want to return a list with the function applied to each element. Let's write it recursively!

```
def map(fn, seq):
```

Solution:

```
    if seq == []:  
        return []  
    return [fn(seq[0])] + map(fn, seq[1:])
```

Extra Challenge: Try to write a mutation version! (i.e. Don't return a new list. Instead, apply `map` by altering the original list.)

Solution:

```
def map(fn, lst):  
    if lst: # True when lst != []  
        temp = lst.pop(0)  
        map(fn, lst)  
        lst.insert(0, fn(temp))
```

5. Below is the iterative version of `is_prime`, which returns `True` if positive integer `n` is a prime number and `False` otherwise:

```
def is_prime(n):
    if n == 1:
        return False
    k = 2
    while k < n:
        if n % k == 0:
            return False
        k += 1
    return True
```

Implement the recursive `is_prime` function. Do not use a while loop, use recursion. As a reminder, an integer is considered prime if it has exactly two unique factors: 1 and itself.

```
def is_prime(n):
    """
    >>> is_prime(7)
    True
    >>> is_prime(10)
    False
    >>> is_prime(1)
    False
    """
    def prime_helper(_____):

        if _____:

            _____

        elif _____:

            _____

        else:

            _____

    return _____
```

Solution:

```
def prime_helper(index):  
    if index == n:  
        return True  
    elif n % index == 0 or n == 1:  
        return False  
    else:  
        return prime_helper(index + 1)  
return prime_helper(2)
```

Note: The goal of this question was to demonstrate how to use a helper function, as well as how to translate between iteration and recursion.