

Constrained vs Unconstrained

By default, we have unconstrained template parameter, where the compiler checks only, at the point when function/class method is actually invoked, the validity of the function template's body: whether the statements/expressions inside the function body are valid for a given concrete type - when template instantiation happens.

With constrained template parameter, we introduce additional requirements on a type, that compiler needs to consider upfront as well (apart of the function body) - in order to reduce the overloading set.

The **reason** behind is to have more specialized/correct code, that better communicates the intention - requirements on a type to

- the clients: callers of the generic code,
- but also to compiler: for producing better error messages

Before Concepts

In order to express the constraints on the template parameters - and therefore impose more rigid rules for the template parameters substitution, in Pre-Concepts era, we used some nonintuitive language construct that involves

- `std::enable_if_t`
- and a **compile-time expression** that yields the true on success, or false on failure

Let's demonstrate this on the function template example - sum of arbitrary number of arguments, by introducing the requirement that all arguments are of the same type

```
// boolean variable template - as compile-time expression
template <typename T, typename...Ts>
static constexpr bool all = std::conjunction_v<std::is_same<T, Ts>...>;

// Trailing constrain on the variadic template parameters, that affects result as well
template <typename T, typename...Ts>
auto add(Ts...ts) -> std::enable_if_t<all<T, Ts...>, T>
{
    return (... + ts);
}
```

If we compare this with unconstrained function template variant - we get less flexible code, that behaves more in line with our expectations - preventing compiler interventions (like type promotion): as the way to enforce the correctness of the code.

We can apply `std::enable_if_t`:

- As trailing syntax (above example)
 - Direct on the resulting type
 - It can be placed in the template header itself.
- In this example, as part of the c-tor overloading

```
// C-tors overloading
template <typename U = T, typename = std::enable_if_t<not std::is_reference_v<U>>>
constexpr explicit StrongType(T&& val) noexcept(std::is_nothrow_move_constructible_v<T>)
    :value_(std::move(val))
{}

constexpr explicit StrongType(const T& val) noexcept(std::is_nothrow_copy_constructible_v<T>)
    :value_(val)
{}

```

- Eventually, it can constraint the template parameter inside the class definition/function template body as well: as part of the `static_assert()`

I guess, by now you've got the picture - what are the major flaws of this approach:

it's tedious to write, difficult to read and it's not reusable: "ad hoc" rules.

Well, the latter is not completely true - after all, we can define the **alias template** for naming the rule (condition inside the `std::enable_if_t`) that eventually deduces the type

```
// We can create the alias template on the rule that deduce the type - to make it reusable after all
template <typename T, typename...Ts>
using all_same_t = std::enable_if_t<all<T, Ts...>, T>;

```

Now we can reuse it - in all places where `std::enable_if_t` would be used

```
template <typename T, typename...Ts>
auto add(Ts...ts) -> all_same_t<T, Ts...>
{
    return (... + ts);
}
```

Complete code: <https://godbolt.org/z/hGar9e79z>

Concepts in rescue

Concepts are **compile-time predicates** that specify constraints on types that have to be satisfied, so that concrete types are eligible to participate in template parameters substitution.

Generally, the Concept definition looks like

```
template <typename...T>
concept name = expression<T...>;
```

It consists of the *template header* that can have a variadic template parameters that participate in the compile-time expression.

The compile-time expression yields boolean value: whether the types related requirements are fulfilled or not.

The important property of the Concept is its **name** - naming the concepts has two important benefits.

One is readability - having more expressive code, and the other is reusability of the same.

The Concepts are introduced with C++20, as part of the `<concepts>` header file.

It comes with the already predefined (named) Concepts that we can use - out of box.

Requirements

We can express requirements on types in C++20 with **requires-clause** that will evaluate any compile-time expression to true or false.

```
template <typename T>
requires condition<T>
auto f(T&& a) {}
```

where *condition* can be any compile-time expression (unnamed, or named - Concept).

Our StrongType c-tor overloading becomes now

```
// C-tors overloading
template <typename U>
requires std::convertible_to<U, T> && not std::is_reference_v<U>
constexpr explicit StrongValue(U&& val) noexcept(std::is_nothrow_move_constructible_v<U>):
value_(std::move(val))
{}

template <typename U>
requires std::convertible_to<U, T>
constexpr explicit StrongValue(const U& val) noexcept(std::is_nothrow_copy_constructible_v<U>):
value_(val)
{}

```

We can also specify the **trailing requires-clause**.

For example, when we have a member method of a class template, where the method is (full) specialization for the particular type that can appear in template parameter substitution:

In this example, the special handling for the byte-like types

```
template <typename T>
class A {
public:
    template <typename Byte>
    static constexpr bool is_byte = std::is_same_v<Byte, unsigned char> ||
std::is_same_v<Byte, std::uint8_t> ||
std::is_same_v<Byte, std::byte>;

    bool read_bytes(T* ptr, std::size_t& size) requires is_byte<T>
    {}
};

```

⇒ More on that: <https://godbolt.org/z/zs1Ks4Pq>

Another way to express requirements on a type is with **requires-expression**

The requires-expression has following form

```
template <typename...Ts>
requires(Ts...ts) // optional argument list
{ // body
    // one or more expressions that define requirements on the type(s)
    ...
}
```

The compiler will evaluate the entire set of requirements specified inside the **requires-expression body**.

If any of these requirements is not satisfied - the compiler will raise an error

The expression definitions inside the requires body can be:

- simple requirements
- type requirements
- nested requirements
- compound requirements

Now, we can define the Concept in terms of the requirements - in **more convenient way**, without needing to implement custom specific type-traits (like "has a method"), that we would use with `std::enable_if_t`

```
// We define our own type-traits to inspect the type on
// the method membership

template <typename T, class V = void>
struct has_a_method : std::false_type {};

template <typename T>
struct has_a_method<T, std::void_t<decltype(std::declval<T&>().foo())>> : std::true_type {};

template <typename T>
static constexpr bool has_a_method_v = has_a_method<T>::value;
```

Let's demonstrate this on a simple example: defining the Concept for containers - as iterable collections

```
namespace details
{
    template <typename Collection>
    concept Container = requires(Collection coll)
    {
        typename Collection::value_type; // type requirement
        requires std::is_same_v<typename Collection::value_type,
std::remove_cvref_t<decltype(*std::declval<Collection&>().begin())>>; // nested requirement
        {coll.begin()} -> std::same_as<typename Collection::iterator>; //compound requirement
        {coll.end()} -> std::same_as<typename Collection::iterator>; //compound requirement
    };
}
```

With *type requirement*, we specified the dependency on certain type definition, in this case underlying type - usually, when we want to use it at client code as an argument for some other class/function template instantiation.

With *nested requirement* we usually define a subset of the logically related - grouped requirements.

Compound requirements are typically used to express behavioral aspect of the type that has to be met - the "has a method" relationship. [\(more on that later\)](#)

At the client side, where we rely on these requirements, we can apply the Concept constraints - which narrow the overloading set of the possible types that can participate in the template parameter substitution

```
template <details::Container T> // Concept as constrained template parameter
std::string containerToString(const T& coll)
{
    std::stringstream ss;
    ss << "[";
    const auto last = std::prev(coll.cend());
    std::copy(coll.cbegin(), last, std::ostream_iterator<typename T::value_type>(ss, ", "));
    ss << *last << "]" << "\n";

    return ss.str();
}
```

We could apply the Concept restrictions also directly on the function argument - as part of the **abbreviated function template signature**. This is known as **constrained placeholder** (whereby `auto` alone - is unconstrained placeholder)

```
std::string containerToString(const details::Container auto& coll)
{...}
```

<Example_2>: <https://godbolt.org/z/f71388ea>

Static Polymorphism

The Concepts really shine as a new way of writing the **Static Polymorphism** - as a more straightforward way that can be used instead of tedious to write CRTP approach.

```
// Pre-Concepts way, with CRTP pattern
template <typename Derived>
class Base
{
    Base() {} // to prevent somehow the wrong usage: class Derived_1 : public Base<Derived_2> {};
    friend Derived;

    static_assert(std::enable_if_t<std::is_base_of_v<Base, Derived>>::value, "Invalid template argument");

    public:
```

```

void foo()
{
    impl().fooImpl();
}
private:
Derived& impl() { return static_cast<Derived&>(*this); }
const Derived& impl() const { return static_cast<const Derived&>(*this); }
};

```

Basically, instead of define the base class - as a gateway for calling derived class specific implementation behind the common interface of a base class - we can use the Concepts.

Namely, we can specify - using the already mentioned compound requirements, the behavioral aspect - for the non-polymorphic types, that have the polymorphic behavior - implement the very same **interface**.

One practical example for that would be (re)writing the design patterns, like the Factory Method, or Dependency Injection - translating them from dynamic (runtime) - to the static (compile-time) polymorphism.

⇒ More on that: https://github.com/damirli/modern_cpp_tutorials/blob/main/docs/desing%20patterns/Factory%20method.pdf

Summary

The Concepts are beneficial for writing generic code in various way - in compare what we had before:

- Improved syntax:

- having meaningful name for the Concepts that is informative enough for the code to be well documented (without writing additional comments)
- that is intuitive enough to understand, and therefore to maintain
- that produces more readable Compiler errors - easier up to certain extend to debug
- more convenient way to write - with a plenty already predefined Concepts

- Simplified *Static Polymorphism* modeling, in terms of defining compile-time *Interface*: zero-costs abstraction (no virtuality and run-time binding)

Links

Andreas Fertig: <https://andreasfertig.com/books/programming-with-cpp20/>

Rainer Grimm: <https://leanpub.com/c20>