Consider a class Animal, with subclasses Cat and Dog. All animals have an age, so class Animal has method age(), which returns the animal’s age. Cats are said to have nine lives, so class Cat has a method livesLeft(), which returns the number of lives left. Different kinds of animals have an adjective that is another way of identifying the kind. Dogs are *canine*, cats are *feline*, and animals are *zoic*. Therefore, all three classes have a method adjective() that returns the adjective (return type String).   
Methods adjective in Cat and Dog override method adjective in Animal.

Animal

Cat

age()  
adjective()

adjective()  
livesLeft()

Cat@2

Animal

Dog

age()  
adjective()

adjective()

Dog@3

Animal

age()  
adjective()

Animal@1

It would be nice to have an array of different animals —cats, dogs, and any other kinds of animal we might have implemented. But does the following declaration do it? (We also draw the array to the right.)

Animal[] an= **new** Animal[5];

an

0 1 2 3 4

It looks like the array elements can contain only pointers to objects of class Animal, since each array element has type Animal. What if we wanted a list of a family’s pets? We would need an array for the dogs, another array for the cats, and later, as the family got more pets, separate arrays for the fish, the minnows, the parrots, the iguanas, …. This would be extremely awkward and cumbersome.

But *subtype polymorphism* saves the day. Here are two rules about Java:

* Subclasses are subtypes. For example, Cat and Dog are subtypes of type Animal.
* Suppose S is a subtype of T. Anywhere a value of type T is required, a value of type S may be used.

Thus, at runtime, execution of the following assignments changes the array as shown to the right below:

an

0 1 2 3 4

an[0]= **new** Cat(…);

an[1]= **new** Animal(…);

an[2]= **new** Dog(…);

Animal object

Dog object

Cat object

Why is this polymorphism? Type Animal comes in different forms: type Animal itself, subtype Dog, and subtype Cat, and perhaps others. All of them are treated the same way, as Animals, but they exhibit differences.

This polymorphisms brings up two questions for us. First, at compile-time, what method calls should be allowed? Second, at runtime, which methods are actually called?

**A problem with missing methods at runtime**

Consider the method calls shown to the right, given array an as shown above, with pointers to objects in an[0], an[1], and an[2]. The first call appears to be OK; since the Cat object contains method livesLeft(). But the second call is not OK, since the Animal object doesn’t have a method   
livesLeft() to call. If this were allowed at runtime, an exception would be thrown.

an[0].livesLeft() —seems OK  
an[1].livesLeft() —not OK

The designers of Java decided that checking at runtime whether a method existed was not a good idea. Instead a program will be compiled —it is syntactically legal— only if it is *guaranteed* that a method exists at runtime for every method call. Thus, the call an[1].livesLeft() —in fact any call an[k].livesLeft(), will not compile.

Below, we will use the term *static* type for *type*, to stress the fact that the type of a variable or expression is a property of the program text; *static type* has nothing to do with runtime. We will then use the term *dynamic type* for the type of the value of an expression at runtime; *dynamic type* has nothing to do with compile-time. The dynamic type of an expression can change as values are assigned to variables.

**Compile-time: guaranteeing that a method exists**

The static type of each element of array an is Animal. The simplest way to guarantee that a method exists at runtime for each call an[i].m(…) is to require that m be declared in or are inherited by class Animal. That is what Java does:

**Compile-time reference rule.** For a variable p declared as

C p;

(where C is a class or interface), the method call p.m(...) (or variable reference p.v )   
is syntactically correct and can be compiled only if m (or variable v) is declared in P or   
is inherited by P.

**Casting about**

An expression that yields (a pointer to) an object, like **new** Cat() , can be cast to other classes, e.g.

(Animal) (**new** Cat()) and (Cat) an[i]

At this point, look at the entry for casts in JavaHyperText and read the pdf file found at item 3, *Casting with classes*. Stop on the second page, before the section on testing whether a downward class will work.

**Runtime: which method is called**

Suppose an[0] contains a pointer to the Cat object shown to the right. The object contains two adjective methods. Which one is called when an[0].adjective() is executed? This depends on the *dynamic type* of the expression an[0].

Animal

Cat

age()  
adjective()

adjective()  
livesLeft()

Cat@2

The *dynamic type* of the expression is the type of the value of the expression. At this point, the dynamic type of expression an[0] is Cat. Therefore, method adjective in partition Cat is called. There are actually three possibilities, using our Animal-Cat-Dog classes:

If an[0] points at an object with dynamic type Animal, an[0].adjective() returns "zoic".

If an[0] points at an object with dynamic type Cat, an[0].adjective() returns "feline".

If an[0] points at an object with dynamic type Dog, an[0].adjective() returns "canine".

You may have already known this because we discussed it in terms of the *overriding rule*. Because of the way we draw objects, to find the method to call, start at the bottom of the object —the partition for the dynamic type— and search upward until the method is found.

**Defining feature of OOP**

At runtime, the method to call is determined by the dynamic type of the object being pointed to, and of course the object being pointed to can change often during execution, as variables are assigned different values. This is a most important feature of OOP. Without it, OOP would not be as effective and would not be so widespread today.

**Instanceof and getClass()**

At this point, look at the entry for instanceof in JavaHyperText and read the pdf file found in item 1. *Full explanation*.