

# Coupling

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Lecture #6 out of 24

80 minutes

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WAYNE P. STEVENS,  
GLENFORD J. MYERS, AND  
LARRY L. CONSTANTINE

“The fewer and simpler the connections between modules, the easier it is to understand each module without reference to other modules.”

— Wayne P. Stevens, Glenford J. Myers, and Larry L. Constantine. Structured Design. *IBM Systems Journal*, 13(2):115–139, 1974. doi:[10.1147/sj.132.0115](https://doi.org/10.1147/sj.132.0115)



**Tight coupling:**

1. More Interdependency
2. More coordination
3. More information flow



**Loose coupling:**

1. Less Interdependency
2. Less coordination
3. Less information flow

Source: <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/coupling-in-java/>



GLENFORD MYERS

“Coupling is the measure of the strength of association established by a connection from one module to another. Strong coupling complicates a system since a module is harder to understand, change, or correct by itself if it is highly interrelated with other modules. Complexity can be reduced by designing systems with the weakest possible coupling between modules.”

— Wayne P. Stevens, Glenford J. Myers, and Larry L. Constantine. Structured Design. *IBM Systems Journal*, 13(2):115–139, 1974. doi:[10.1147/sj.132.0115](https://doi.org/10.1147/sj.132.0115)



Source: <https://www.javatpoint.com/software-engineering-coupling-and-cohesion>



WAYNE P. STEVENS

“The degree of coupling established by a particular connection is a function of several factors, and thus it is difficult to establish a simple index of coupling. Coupling depends (1) on how complicated the connection is, (2) on whether the connection refers to the module itself or something inside it, and (3) on what is being sent or received.”

— Wayne P. Stevens, Glenford J. Myers, and Larry L. Constantine. Structured Design. *IBM Systems Journal*, 13(2):115–139, 1974. doi:[10.1147/sj.132.0115](https://doi.org/10.1147/sj.132.0115)



Source: <https://nordicapis.com/the-difference-between-tight-coupling-and-loose-coupling/>



“Coupling Between Objects (CBO) — for a class is a count of the number of other classes to which it is coupled.”

— Shyam R. Chidamber and Chris F. Kemerer. A Metrics Suite for Object Oriented Design. *IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering*, 20(6):476–493, 1994. doi:10.1109/32.295895



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A Hierarchical Model for Object-Oriented Design Quality Assessment

Jagdish Bansiya, Member, IEEE, and Carl G. Davis, Fellow, IEEE

**Abstract**—This paper describes an improved hierarchical model for the assessment of high-level design quality attributes in object-oriented designs. In this model, structural and behavioral design properties of classes, objects, and their relationships are evaluated using a suite of object-oriented design metrics. This model relates design properties such as encapsulation, modularity, coupling, and cohesion to high-level quality attributes such as reusability, flexibility, and complexity using empirical and anecdotal information. The relationship, or links, from design properties to quality attributes are weighted in accordance with their influence and importance. The model is validated by using empirical and expert opinion to compare with the model results on several large commercial object-oriented systems. A key attribute of the model is that it can be easily modified to include different relationships and weights, thus providing a practical quality assessment tool adaptable to a variety of demands.

**Index Terms**—Quality model, quality attributes, design metrics, product metrics, object-oriented metrics.

1 INTRODUCTION

THE demand for quality software continues to intensify due to our society's increasing dependence on software and the often devastating effect that a software error can have in terms of life, financial loss, or time delays. Today's software systems must ensure consistent and error free operation every time they are used. This demand for increased software quality has resulted in quality being more of a differentiator between products than it ever has been before. In a marketplace of highly competitive products, the importance of delivering quality is no longer an advantage but a necessary factor for companies to be successful. While there is uniform agreement that we need quality software, the question of how, when, and where you measure and assure quality are far from settled issues.

The switch to the object-oriented paradigm has changed the elements that we use to assess software quality. Traditional software product metrics that evaluate product characteristics such as size, complexity, performance, and quality must be changed to rely on some fundamentally different notions such as encapsulation, inheritance, and polymorphism which are inherent in object-orientation. This has led to the definition of many new metrics [6], [15], [20] to measure the products of the object-oriented approach.

However, the new object-oriented metrics are varied in what they measure, how they are used in measuring, and when they are applicable. Many of the newer metrics have only been validated with small, and sometimes nonrealistic

data sets and, therefore, the practical applicability and effectiveness of the metrics on large complex projects such as those encountered in an industrial environment is not known. Finally, if the goal is assessing the external quality attributes of the product rather than simply collecting individual metrics, then there must be a well defined way of connecting the two.

Many of the metrics and quality models currently available for object-oriented software analyses can be applied only after a product is complete, or nearly complete. They rely upon information extracted from the implementation of the product. This provides information too late to help in improving internal product characteristics prior to the completion of the product. Thus, there is a need for metrics and models that can be applied in the early stages of development (requirements and design) to ensure that the analysis and design have favorable internal properties that will lead to the development of a quality end product. This would give developers an opportunity to fix problems, remove irregularities and nonconformance to standards, and eliminate unwanted complexity early in the development cycle. This should significantly help in reducing rework during and after implementation, as well as designing effective test plans and better project and resource planning.

Fortunately, the object-oriented approach naturally lends itself to an early assessment and evaluation. Object-oriented methodologies require significant effort early in the development cycle to identify objects and classes, attributes and operations, and relationships. Encapsulation, inheritance, and polymorphism require designers to carefully structure the design and consider the interaction between objects. The result of this early analysis and design process is a blueprint for implementation. Therefore, the approach provides the information needed to assess the quality of a design's classes, structure, and relationships before they are committed to an implementation.

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“Direct Class Coupling (DCC) — this metric is a count of the different number of classes that a class is directly related to. The metric includes classes that are directly related by attribute declarations and message passing (parameters) in methods.”

— J. Bansiya and C.G. Davis. A Hierarchical Model for Object-Oriented Design Quality Assessment. *IEEE Transactions on Software Engineering*, 2002.  
doi:10.1109/32.979986

JAGDISH BANSIYA AND CARL G. DAVIS

Coupling

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MARTIN FOWLER

“The biggest problems come from uncontrolled coupling at the upper levels. I don’t worry about the number of modules coupled together, but I look at the pattern of dependency relationship between the modules.”

— M. Fowler. Reducing Coupling. *IEEE Software*, 2001.  
[doi:10.1109/ms.2001.936226](https://doi.org/10.1109/ms.2001.936226)



STEVE McCONNELL

“Low-to-medium fan-out means having a given class use a low-to-medium number of other classes. High fan-out (more than about seven) indicates that a class uses a large number of other classes and may therefore be overly complex. High fan-in refers to having a high number of classes that use a given class. High fan-in implies that a system has been designed to make good use of utility classes at the lower levels in the system.”

— Steve McConnell. *Code Complete*. Pearson Education, 2004.  
[doi:10.5555/1096143](https://doi.org/10.5555/1096143)

**Fan-in** = number of ingoing dependencies  
**Fan-out** = number of outgoing dependencies



**Heuristic:** a high fan-in/fan-out indicates a high complexity

(c) Natalia Kokash, Leiden Institute of Advanced Computer Science



A. MUBARAK ET AL.

“We also found evidence of certain ‘key’ classes (with both high fan-in and fan-out) and ‘client’ and ‘server’-type classes with just high fan-out and fan-in, respectively.”

— A. Mubarak, S. Counsell, and R.M. Hierons. An Evolutionary Study of Fan-In and Fan-Out Metrics in OSS. In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Research Challenges in Information Science (RCIS)*, 2010. doi:[10.1109/rcis.2010.5507329](https://doi.org/10.1109/rcis.2010.5507329)

Fan-out, as a metric, is supported by a few tools:

- Checkstyle for Java
- CCCC for C++, C, and Java
- module-coupling-metrics for Python



DEREK COMARTIN

“Afferent coupling (denoted by **Ca**) is a metric that indicates the total number of other projects/boundaries that are dependent upon it. Efferent coupling (denoted by **Ce**) is another metric that is the verse of Afferent Coupling. It is the total number of projects that a given project depends on. Instability another metric that is a ratio:  $I = Ce / (Ce + Ca)$ . This metric is a ratio between 0 and 1. With 0 meaning it's totally stable and 1 meaning it's unstable.”

— Derek Comartin. Write Stable Code Using Coupling Metrics. <https://codeopinion.com/write-stable-code-using-coupling-metrics/>, 2021. [Online; accessed 15-03-2024]

## Types of Coupling (some of them)

- Content Coupling is when one module modifies or relies on the internal workings of another module (e.g., accessing local data of another module).
- Global Coupling is when two modules share the same global data (e.g., a global variable).
- External Coupling occurs when two modules share an externally imposed data format, communication protocol, or device interface.
- Control Coupling is one module controlling the flow of another, by passing it information on what to do (e.g., passing a what-to-do flag).
- Stamp Coupling is when modules share a composite data structure and use only a part of it, possibly a different part (e.g., passing a whole record to a function that only needs one field of it).
- Data Coupling is when modules share data through, for example, parameters. Each datum is an elementary piece, and these are the only data shared (e.g., passing an integer to a function that computes a square root).
- Message Coupling can be achieved by state decentralization (as in objects) and component communication is done via parameters or message passing (see Message passing).
- Subclass Coupling describes the relationship between a child and its parent. The child is connected to its parent, but the parent isn't connected to the child.
- Temporal Coupling is when two actions are bundled together into one module just because they happen to occur at the same time.

Source:

[https://wiki.edunitas.com/IT/en/114-10/Coupling-\(computer-programming\)\\_1430\\_eduNitas.html](https://wiki.edunitas.com/IT/en/114-10/Coupling-(computer-programming)_1430_eduNitas.html)



## Fear of Decoupling

```
1 interface Money {
2     double cents();
3 }
4
5 void send(Money m) {
6     double c = m.cents();
7     // Send them over via the API...
8 }
9
10 class OneDollar implements Money {
11     @Override
12     double cents() {
13         return 100.0d;
14     }
15 }
```

```
1 class EmployeeHourlyRate
2     implements Money {
3     @Override
4     double cents() {
5         // Fetch the exchange rate;
6         // Update the database;
7         // Calculate the hourly rate;
8         // Return the value.
9     }
10 }
```

“Polymorphism makes software more fragile ... to make it more robust!”

## Temporal Coupling

Tight coupling (**not good**):

```
1 List<String> list =  
2   new LinkedList<>();  
3 Foo.append(list, "Jeff");  
4 Foo.append(list, "Walter");  
5 return list;
```

Loose coupling (**good**):

```
1 return Foo.with(  
2   Foo.with(  
3     new LinkedList<>(),  
4     "Jeff"  
5   ),  
6   "Walter"  
7 );
```

<https://www.yegor256.com/2015/12/08/temporal-coupling-between-method-calls.html>

## Distance of Coupling

```
1 class Temperature {  
2     private int t;  
3     public String toString() {  
4         return String.format("%d F", this.t);  
5     }  
6 }  
7  
8 Temperature x = new Temperature();  
9 String txt = x.toString();  
10 String[] parts = txt.split(" ");  
11 int t = Integer.parseInt(parts[0]);
```

“The larger the number (or the mean of all numbers), the worse the design: in good design we are not supposed to take something out of a method and then do some complex processing. The distance metric will tell us exactly that: how many times, and by how much, we violated the principle of loose coupling.”

<https://www.yegor256.com/2020/10/27/distance-of-coupling.html>

## Read this:

New Metric: the Distance of Coupling (2020)

Fear of Decoupling (2018)

Reflection Means Hidden Coupling (2022)

# References

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M. Fowler. Reducing Coupling. *IEEE Software*, 2001. doi:[10.1109/ms.2001.936226](https://doi.org/10.1109/ms.2001.936226).

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