9.2a — Overloading operators using normal functions

BY ALEX ON MAY 23RD, 2016 | LAST MODIFIED BY ALEX ON AUGUST 6TH, 2017

In the previous lesson, we overloaded operator+ as a friend function:

```
#include <iostream>

class Cents
{
private:
    int m_cents;

public:
    Cents(int cents) { m_cents = cents; }

    // add Cents + Cents using a friend function
    friend Cents operator+(const Cents &c1, const Cents &c2);

    int getCents() const { return m_cents; }
};

// note: this function is not a member function!
Cents operator+(const Cents &c1, const Cents &c2)
{
    // use the Cents constructor and operator+(int, int)
    // we can access m_cents directly because this is a friend function
    return Cents(c1.m_cents + c2.m_cents);
}

int main()
{
    Cents cents1(6);
    Cents cents2(8);
    Cents centsSum = cents1 + cents2;
    std::cout << "I have " << centsSum.getCents() << " cents." << std::endl;

    return 0;
}
```

Using a friend function to overload an operator is convenient because it gives you direct access to the internal members of the classes you're operating on. In the initial Cents example above, our friend function version of operator+ accessed member variable m_cents directly.

However, if you don't need that access, you can write your overloaded operators as normal functions. Note that the Cents class above contains an access function (getCents()) that allows us to get at m_cents without having to have direct access to private members. Because of this, we can write our overloaded operator+ as a non-friend:

```
#include <iostream>

class Cents
{
private:
    int m_cents;

public:
    Cents(int cents) { m_cents = cents; }

    int getCents() const { return m_cents; }
};

// note: this function is not a member function nor a friend function!
Cents operator+(const Cents &c1, const Cents &c2)
{
```

```
    // use the Cents constructor and operator+(int, int)
        // we don't need direct access to private members here
    return Cents(c1.getCents() + c2.getCents());
}

int main()
{
    Cents cents1(6);
    Cents cents2(8);
    Cents centsSum = cents1 + cents2;
    std::cout << "I have " << centsSum.getCents() << " cents." << std::endl;

    return 0;
}
```

Because the normal and friend functions work almost identically (they just have different levels of access to private members), we generally won't differentiate them. The one difference is that the friend function declaration inside the class serves as a prototype as well. With the normal function version, you'll have to provide your own function prototype.

Cents.h:

```
class Cents
{
private:
    int m_cents;

public:
    Cents(int cents) { m_cents = cents; }

    int getCents() const { return m_cents; }
};

// Need to explicitly provide prototype for operator+ so uses of operator+ in other files know this ove
rload exists
Cents operator+(const Cents &c1, const Cents &c2);
```

Cents.cpp:

```
#include "Cents.h"

// note: this function is not a member function nor a friend function!
Cents operator+(const Cents &c1, const Cents &c2)
{
    // use the Cents constructor and operator+(int, int)
        // we don't need direct access to private members here
    return Cents(c1.getCents() + c2.getCents());
}
```

main.cpp:

```
#include <iostream>
#include "Cents.h"

int main()
{
    Cents cents1(6);
    Cents cents2(8);
    Cents centsSum = cents1 + cents2; // without the prototype in Cents.h, this would fail to compile
    std::cout << "I have " << centsSum.getCents() << " cents." << std::endl;

    return 0;
}
```

In general, a normal function should be preferred over a friend function if it's possible to do so with the existing member functions available (the less functions touching your classes's internals, the better). However, don't add additional access functions just to overload an operator as a normal function instead of a friend function!

Rule: Prefer overloading operators as normal functions instead of friends if it's possible to do so without adding additional functions.

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19 comments to 9.2a — Overloading operators using normal functions

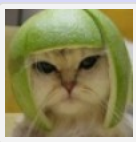
CrazyL
August 4, 2017 at 6:23 am · Reply

@Alex,
guess here's a typo:
- we'll generally won't differentiate them. --> we generally won't differentiate them

The following sentence I had to reread a few times before I understood:
- The one difference is that with the friend function, the friend function declaration inside the class also serves as a prototype.

Perhaps an easier sentence structure is in order, like
--> The one difference is that the friend function declaration inside the class serves as a prototype as well.

Apart from that, the the lesson was great!



Alex
August 6, 2017 at 11:36 am · Reply

Updated as per your suggestions. Thanks!