

Chapter 3

Introduction to CUDA C

If you read Chapter 1, we hope we have convinced you of both the immense computational power of graphics processors and that you are just the programmer to harness it. And if you continued through Chapter 2, you should have a functioning environment set up in order to compile and run the code you'll be writing in CUDA C. If you skipped the first chapters, perhaps you're just skimming for code samples, perhaps you randomly opened to this page while browsing at a bookstore, or maybe you're just **dying to get started**; that's OK, too (we won't tell). Either way, you're ready to get started with the first code examples, so let's go.

3.1 Chapter Objectives

Through the course of this chapter, you will accomplish the following:

- You will write your first lines of code in CUDA C.
- You will learn the difference between code written for the *host* and code written for a *device*.
- You will learn how to run device code from the host.
- You will learn about the ways device memory can be used on CUDA-capable devices.
- You will learn how to query your system for information on its CUDA-capable devices.

3.2 A First Program

Since we intend to learn CUDA C by example, let's take a look at our first example of CUDA C. In accordance with the laws governing written works of computer programming, we begin by examining a "Hello, World!" example.

3.2.1 HELLO, WORLD!

```
#include "../common/book.h"

int main( void ) {
    printf( "Hello, World!\n" );
    return 0;
}
```

At this point, no doubt you're wondering whether this book is a scam. Is this just C? Does CUDA C even exist? The answers to these questions are both in the affirmative; this book is not an **elaborate ruse**. This simple "Hello, World!" example is

meant to illustrate that, at its most basic, there is no difference between CUDA C and the standard C to which you have grown accustomed.

The simplicity of this example stems from the fact that it runs entirely on the *host*. This will be one of the important distinctions made in this book; we refer to the CPU and the system's memory as the *host* and refer to the GPU and its memory as the *device*. This example resembles almost all the code you have ever written because it simply ignores any computing devices outside the host.

To remedy that sinking feeling that you've invested in nothing more than an expensive collection of trivialities, we will gradually build upon this simple example. Let's look at something that uses the GPU (a *device*) to execute code. A function that executes on the device is typically called a *kernel*.

3.2.2 A KERNEL CALL

Now we will build upon our example with some code that should look more foreign than our plain-vanilla "Hello, World!" program.

```
#include <iostream>

__global__ void kernel( void ) {
}

int main( void ) {
    kernel<<<1,1>>>();
    printf( "Hello, World!\n" );
    return 0;
}
```

This program makes two notable additions to the original "Hello, World!" example:

- An empty function named `kernel()` qualified with `__global__`
- A call to the empty function, embellished with `<<<1,1>>>`

As we saw in the previous section, code is compiled by your system's standard C compiler by default. For example, `GNU gcc` might compile your host code

on Linux operating systems, while Microsoft Visual C compiles it on Windows systems. The NVIDIA tools simply feed this host compiler your code, and everything behaves as it would in a world without CUDA.

Now we see that CUDA C adds the `__global__` qualifier to standard C. This mechanism alerts the compiler that a function should be compiled to run on a device instead of the host. In this simple example, `nvcc` gives the function `kernel()` to the compiler that handles device code, and it feeds `main()` to the host compiler as it did in the previous example.

So, what is the mysterious call to `kernel()`, and why must we vandalize our standard C with angle brackets and a numeric tuple? Brace yourself, because this is where the magic happens.

We have seen that CUDA C needed a linguistic method for marking a function as device code. There is nothing special about this; it is shorthand to send host code to one compiler and device code to another compiler. The trick is actually in calling the device code from the host code. One of the benefits of CUDA C is that it provides this language integration so that device function calls look very much like host function calls. Later we will discuss what actually happens behind the scenes, but suffice to say that the CUDA compiler and runtime take care of the messy business of invoking device code from the host.

So, the mysterious-looking call invokes device code, but why the angle brackets and numbers? The angle brackets denote arguments we plan to pass to the runtime system. These are not arguments to the device code but are parameters that will influence how the runtime will launch our device code. We will learn about these parameters to the runtime in the next chapter. Arguments to the device code itself get passed within the parentheses, just like any other function invocation.

3.2.3 PASSING PARAMETERS

We've promised the ability to pass parameters to our kernel, and the time has come for us to make good on that promise. Consider the following enhancement to our "Hello, World!" application:

```

#include <iostream>
#include "book.h"

__global__ void add( int a, int b, int *c ) {
    *c = a + b;
}

int main( void ) {
    int c;
    int *dev_c;
    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaMalloc( (void**)&dev_c, sizeof(int) ) );

    add<<<1,1>>>>( 2, 7, dev_c );

    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaMemcpy( &c,
                               dev_c,
                               sizeof(int),
                               cudaMemcpyDeviceToHost ) );

    printf( "2 + 7 = %d\n", c );
    cudaFree( dev_c );

    return 0;
}

```

You will notice a handful of new lines here, but these changes introduce only two concepts:

- We can pass parameters to a kernel as we would with any C function.
- We need to allocate memory to do anything useful on a device, such as return values to the host.

There is nothing special about passing parameters to a kernel. The angle-bracket syntax notwithstanding, a kernel call looks and acts exactly like any function call in standard C. The runtime system takes care of any complexity introduced by the fact that these parameters need to get from the host to the device.

The more interesting addition is the allocation of memory using `cudaMalloc()`. This call behaves very similarly to the standard C call `malloc()`, but it tells the CUDA runtime to allocate the memory on the device. The first argument is a pointer to the pointer you want to hold the address of the newly allocated memory, and the second parameter is the size of the allocation you want to make. Besides that your allocated memory pointer is not the function's return value, this is identical behavior to `malloc()`, right down to the `void*` return type. The `HANDLE_ERROR()` that surrounds these calls is a utility macro that we have provided as part of this book's support code. It simply detects that the call has returned an error, prints the associated error message, and exits the application with an `EXIT_FAILURE` code. Although you are free to use this code in your own applications, it is highly likely that this error-handling code will be insufficient in production code.

This raises a subtle but important point. Much of the simplicity and power of CUDA C derives from the ability to blur the line between host and device code. However, it is the responsibility of the programmer not to dereference the pointer returned by `cudaMalloc()` from code that executes on the host. Host code may pass this pointer around, perform arithmetic on it, or even cast it to a different type. But you cannot use it to read or write from memory.

Unfortunately, the compiler cannot protect you from this mistake, either. It will be perfectly happy to allow dereferences of device pointers in your host code because it looks like any other pointer in the application. We can summarize the restrictions on the usage of device pointer as follows:

You *can* pass pointers allocated with `cudaMalloc()` to functions that execute on the device.

You *can* use pointers allocated with `cudaMalloc()` to read or write memory from code that executes on the device.

You *can* pass pointers allocated with `cudaMalloc()` to functions that execute on the host.

You *cannot* use pointers allocated with `cudaMalloc()` to read or write memory from code that executes on the host.

If you've been reading carefully, you might have anticipated the next lesson: We can't use standard C's `free()` function to release memory we've allocated with `cudaMalloc()`. To free memory we've allocated with `cudaMalloc()`, we need to use a call to `cudaFree()`, which behaves exactly like `free()` does.

We've seen how to use the host to allocate and free memory on the device, but we've also made it painfully clear that you cannot modify this memory from the host. The remaining two lines of the sample program illustrate two of the most common methods for accessing device memory—by using device pointers from within device code and by using calls to `cudaMemcpy()`.

We use pointers from within device code exactly the same way we use them in standard C that runs on the host code. The statement `*c = a + b` is as simple as it looks. It adds the parameters `a` and `b` together and stores the result in the memory pointed to by `c`. We hope this is almost too easy to even be interesting.

We listed the ways in which we can and cannot use device pointers from within device and host code. These caveats translate exactly as one might imagine when considering host pointers. Although we are free to pass host pointers around in device code, we run into trouble when we attempt to use a host pointer to access memory from within device code. To summarize, host pointers can access memory from host code, and device pointers can access memory from device code.

As promised, we can also access memory on a device through calls to `cudaMemcpy()` from host code. These calls behave exactly like standard C `memcpy()` with an additional parameter to specify which of the source and destination pointers point to device memory. In the example, notice that the last parameter to `cudaMemcpy()` is `cudaMemcpyDeviceToHost`, instructing the runtime that the source pointer is a device pointer and the destination pointer is a host pointer.

Unsurprisingly, `cudaMemcpyHostToDevice` would indicate the opposite situation, where the source data is on the host and the destination is an address on the device. Finally, we can even specify that *both* pointers are on the device by passing `cudaMemcpyDeviceToDevice`. If the source and destination pointers are both on the host, we would simply use standard C's `memcpy()` routine to copy between them.

3.3 Querying Devices

Since we would like to be allocating memory and executing code on our device, it would be useful if our program had a way of knowing how much memory and what types of capabilities the device had. Furthermore, it is relatively common for

people to have more than one CUDA-capable device per computer. In situations like this, we will definitely want a way to determine which processor is which.

For example, many motherboards ship with integrated NVIDIA graphics processors. When a manufacturer or user adds a discrete graphics processor to this computer, it then possesses two CUDA-capable processors. Some NVIDIA products, like the GeForce GTX 295, ship with two GPUs on a single card. Computers that contain products such as this will also show two CUDA-capable processors.

Before we get too deep into writing device code, we would love to have a mechanism for determining which devices (if any) are present and what capabilities each device supports. Fortunately, there is a very easy interface to determine this information. First, we will want to know how many devices in the system were built on the CUDA Architecture. These devices will be capable of executing kernels written in CUDA C. To get the count of CUDA devices, we call `cudaGetDeviceCount()`. Needless to say, we anticipate receiving an award for Most Creative Function Name.

```
int count;
HANDLE_ERROR( cudaGetDeviceCount( &count ) );
```

After calling `cudaGetDeviceCount()`, we can then iterate through the devices and query relevant information about each. The CUDA runtime returns us these properties in a structure of type `cudaDeviceProp`. What kind of properties can we retrieve? As of CUDA 3.0, the `cudaDeviceProp` structure contains the following:

```
struct cudaDeviceProp {
    char name[256];
    size_t totalGlobalMem;
    size_t sharedMemPerBlock;
    int regsPerBlock;
    int warpSize;
    size_t memPitch;
    int maxThreadsPerBlock;
    int maxThreadsDim[3];
    int maxGridSize[3];
    size_t totalConstMem;
    int major;
```



```

    int minor;
    int clockRate;
    size_t textureAlignment;
    int deviceOverlap;
    int multiProcessorCount;
    int kernelExecTimeoutEnabled;
    int integrated;
    int canMapHostMemory;
    int computeMode;
    int maxTexture1D;
    int maxTexture2D[2];
    int maxTexture3D[3];
    int maxTexture2DArray[3];
    int concurrentKernels;
}

```

Some of these are self-explanatory; others bear some additional description (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 CUDA Device Properties

DEVICE PROPERTY	DESCRIPTION
<code>char name[256];</code>	An ASCII string identifying the device (e.g., "GeForce GTX 280")
<code>size_t totalGlobalMem</code>	The amount of global memory on the device in bytes
<code>size_t sharedMemPerBlock</code>	The maximum amount of shared memory a single block may use in bytes
<code>int regsPerBlock</code>	The number of 32-bit registers available per block
<code>int warpSize</code>	The number of threads in a warp
<code>size_t memPitch</code>	The maximum pitch allowed for memory copies in bytes

Continued

Table 3.1 Caption needed (Continued)

DEVICE PROPERTY	DESCRIPTION
<code>int</code> <code>maxThreadsPerBlock</code>	The maximum number of threads that a block may contain
<code>int</code> <code>maxThreadsDim[3]</code>	The maximum number of threads allowed along each dimension of a block
<code>int</code> <code>maxGridSize[3]</code>	The number of blocks allowed along each dimension of a grid
<code>size_t</code> <code>totalConstMem</code>	The amount of available constant memory
<code>int</code> <code>major</code>	The major revision of the device's compute capability
<code>int</code> <code>minor</code>	The minor revision of the device's compute capability
<code>size_t</code> <code>textureAlignment</code>	The device's requirement for texture alignment
<code>int</code> <code>deviceOverlap</code>	A boolean value representing whether the device can simultaneously perform a <code>cudaMemcpy()</code> and kernel execution
<code>int</code> <code>multiProcessorCount</code>	The number of multiprocessors on the device
<code>int</code> <code>kernelExecTimeoutEnabled</code>	A boolean value representing whether there is a runtime limit for kernels executed on this device
<code>int</code> <code>integrated</code>	A boolean value representing whether the device is an integrated GPU (i.e., part of the chipset and not a discrete GPU)
<code>int</code> <code>canMapHostMemory</code>	A boolean value representing whether the device can map host memory into the CUDA device address space
<code>int</code> <code>computeMode</code>	A value representing the device's computing mode: default, exclusive, or prohibited
<code>int</code> <code>maxTexture1D</code>	The maximum size supported for 1D textures

Table 3.1 CUDA Device Properties (Continued)

DEVICE PROPERTY	DESCRIPTION
<code>int maxTexture2D[2]</code>	The maximum dimensions supported for 2D textures
<code>int maxTexture3D[3]</code>	The maximum dimensions supported for 3D textures
<code>int maxTexture2DArray[3]</code>	The maximum dimensions supported for 2D texture arrays
<code>int concurrentKernels</code>	A boolean value representing whether the device supports executing multiple kernels within the same context simultaneously

We'd like to avoid going too far, too fast down our rabbit hole, so we will not go into extensive detail about these properties now. In fact, the previous list is missing some important details about some of these properties, so you will want to consult the *NVIDIA CUDA Programming Guide* for more information. When you move on to write your own applications, these properties will prove extremely useful. However, for now we will simply show how to query each device and report the properties of each. So far, our device query looks something like this:

```
#include "../common/book.h"

int main( void ) {
    cudaDeviceProp prop;

    int count;
    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaGetDeviceCount( &count ) );
    for (int i=0; i< count; i++) {
        HANDLE_ERROR( cudaGetDeviceProperties( &prop, i ) );

        //Do something with our device's properties
    }
}
```

Now that we know each of the fields available to us, we can expand on the ambiguous “Do something...” section and implement something marginally less trivial:

```
#include "../common/book.h"

int main( void ) {
    cudaDeviceProp prop;

    int count;
    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaGetDeviceCount( &count ) );
    for (int i=0; i< count; i++) {
        HANDLE_ERROR( cudaGetDeviceProperties( &prop, i ) );
        printf( "    --- General Information for device %d ---\n", i );
        printf( "Name: %s\n", prop.name );
        printf( "Compute capability: %d.%d\n", prop.major, prop.minor );
        printf( "Clock rate: %d\n", prop.clockRate );
        printf( "Device copy overlap: " );
        if (prop.deviceOverlap)
            printf( "Enabled\n" );
        else
            printf( "Disabled\n" );
        printf( "Kernel execution timeout : " );
        if (prop.kernelExecTimeoutEnabled)
            printf( "Enabled\n" );
        else
            printf( "Disabled\n" );

        printf( "    --- Memory Information for device %d ---\n", i );
        printf( "Total global mem: %ld\n", prop.totalGlobalMem );
        printf( "Total constant Mem: %ld\n", prop.totalConstMem );
        printf( "Max mem pitch: %ld\n", prop.memPitch );
        printf( "Texture Alignment: %ld\n", prop.textureAlignment );
    }
}
```

```

printf( "    --- MP Information for device %d ---\n", i );
printf( "Multiprocessor count:  %d\n",
        prop.multiProcessorCount );
printf( "Shared mem per mp:  %ld\n", prop.sharedMemPerBlock );
printf( "Registers per mp:  %d\n", prop.regsPerBlock );
printf( "Threads in warp:  %d\n", prop.warpSize );
printf( "Max threads per block:  %d\n",
        prop.maxThreadsPerBlock );
printf( "Max thread dimensions:  (%d, %d, %d)\n",
        prop.maxThreadsDim[0], prop.maxThreadsDim[1],
        prop.maxThreadsDim[2] );
printf( "Max grid dimensions:  (%d, %d, %d)\n",
        prop.maxGridSize[0], prop.maxGridSize[1],
        prop.maxGridSize[2] );
printf( "\n" );
}
}

```

3.4 Using Device Properties

Other than writing an application that handily prints every detail of every CUDA-capable card, why might we be interested in the properties of each device in our system? Since we as software developers want everyone to think our software is fast, we might be interested in choosing the GPU with the most multiprocessors on which to run our code. Or if the kernel needs close interaction with the CPU, we might be interested in running our code on the integrated GPU that shares system memory with the CPU. These are both properties we can query with `cudaGetDeviceProperties()`.

Suppose that we are writing an application that depends on having double-precision floating-point support. After a quick consultation with Appendix A of the *NVIDIA CUDA Programming Guide*, we know that cards that have compute capability 1.3 or higher support double-precision floating-point math. So to successfully run the double-precision application that we've written, we need to find at least one device of compute capability 1.3 or higher.

Based on what we have seen with `cudaGetDeviceCount()` and `cudaGetDeviceProperties()`, we could iterate through each device and look for one that either has a major version greater than 1 or has a major version of 1 and minor version greater than or equal to 3. But since this relatively common procedure is also relatively annoying to perform, the CUDA runtime offers us an automated way to do this. We first fill a `cudaDeviceProp` structure with the properties we need our device to have.

```
cudaDeviceProp prop;
memset( &prop, 0, sizeof( cudaDeviceProp ) );
prop.major = 1;
prop.minor = 3;
```

After filling a `cudaDeviceProp` structure, we pass it to `cudaChooseDevice()` to have the CUDA runtime find a device that satisfies this constraint. The call to `cudaChooseDevice()` returns a device ID that we can then pass to `cudaSetDevice()`. From this point forward, all device operations will take place on the device we found in `cudaChooseDevice()`.

```
#include "../common/book.h"

int main( void ) {
    cudaDeviceProp prop;
    int dev;

    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaGetDevice( &dev ) );
    printf( "ID of current CUDA device: %d\n", dev );

    memset( &prop, 0, sizeof( cudaDeviceProp ) );
    prop.major = 1;
    prop.minor = 3;
    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaChooseDevice( &dev, &prop ) );
    printf( "ID of CUDA device closest to revision 1.3: %d\n", dev );
    HANDLE_ERROR( cudaSetDevice( dev ) );
}
```

Systems with multiple GPUs are becoming more and more common. For example, many of NVIDIA's motherboard chipsets contain integrated, CUDA-capable GPUs. When a discrete GPU is added to one of these systems, you suddenly have a multi-GPU platform. Moreover, NVIDIA's SLI technology allows multiple discrete GPUs to be installed side by side. In either of these cases, your application may have a preference of one GPU over another. If your application depends on certain features of the GPU or depends on having the fastest GPU in the system, you should familiarize yourself with this API because there is no guarantee that the CUDA runtime will choose the best or most appropriate GPU for your application.

3.5 Chapter Review

We've finally gotten our hands dirty writing CUDA C, and ideally it has been less painful than you might have suspected. Fundamentally, CUDA C is standard C with some ornamentation to allow us to specify which code should run on the device and which should run on the host. By adding the keyword `__global__` before a function, we indicated to the compiler that we intend to run the function on the GPU. To use the GPU's dedicated memory, we also learned a CUDA API similar to C's `malloc()`, `memcpy()`, and `free()` APIs. The CUDA versions of these functions, `cudaMalloc()`, `cudaMemcpy()`, and `cudaFree()`, allow us to allocate device memory, copy data between the device and host, and free the device memory when we've finished with it.

As we progress through this book, we will see more interesting examples of how we can effectively use the device as a massively parallel coprocessor. For now, you should know how easy it is to get started with CUDA C, and in the next chapter we will see how easy it is to execute parallel code on the GPU.