

using ESS with Emacs Org Mode

part of the ESS intro series

Greg Minshall

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Introduction to Org Mode

basics: document structuring, tables, math/L^AT_EX, exporting

Emacs (wikipedia) Org Mode ¹ sometimes exhorts one to do something like "Organize Your Life In Plain Text!"; the Org Mode manual, on the other hand, starts off by saying, "Org is an outliner". The philosophy of Org Mode (indeed, of Emacs, and maybe, to some extent, of any of the *nix operating systems) is that using non-proprietary file formats and software provides the most "liberating" and "horizon-free" way of taking advantage of modern information technology. And, to some extent, that a mostly-command line interface, rather than a graphical user interface, is also "the way to go".

I think Org Mode started off as a way of simplifying the creation of formatted documents, with tables, etc., for taking notes, creating agendas (items with date elements), and evolved into a much larger system of utilities for, for example, converting ("exporting", in org mode parlance) between the Org Mode syntax to .html, .pdf, etc., documents, with good support for doing mathematical (L^AT_EX) formatting.

Org Mode does a good job exporting to L^AT_EX, html. (Some people primarily use Org Mode as a more "user friendly" interface to L^AT_EX, though for serious documents, in the final analysis they probably spend a lot of time tweaking L^AT_EX, and org-to-L^AT_EX, configuration.)

Though I have used Org Mode for more than a decade, I know very little of most of its capabilities, as I mostly use it to centralize the source code within a project, as well as to produce the random document, especially documents with embedded code segments (known, in Org Mode, as "source blocks").

Org Mode is bundled into the main Emacs distribution, but a more-than-casual user might like to use the more-than-likely up-to-date package available via melpa (`[M-x package-list-packages]`, and regexp-search for `/^..org /`).

The official Quick Start guide provides a very good introduction to Org Mode. The main Org Mode web page is another good source for further information, as is the Org Mode worg site. (You may find it useful to take a linear stroll through the worg site map.) Also, once installed on your system, the Org Mode info pages are available in Emacs (or, using `info(1)`).

Blocks of various sizes, shapes, colors

Various sorts of "blocks" are supported in Org Mode files. These start with `#begin_...`, and end with a corresponding `#end_...`, where the ... are something like `src`, `example`, `quote`. A skeleton

¹a.k.a., "org-mode", Org Mode, orgmode – the proliferation of notation makes googling somewhat of a challenge.

for one of these can conveniently be created by, in column 1 of an otherwise empty line, typing [`<X`] followed by [`tab`], where `X` is one of

- `e` for an example block (line wrapping does not apply) (`#+begin_example`)
- `q` for a quote block (line wrapping applies) (`#+begin_quote`)
- `s` for a source block (`#+begin_src`)

there are various other blocks; you can experiment by typing (in column one, of an otherwise empty line) [`<`] and then one of the following, and hitting [`tab`]:

`a, c, C, E, h, l, v`

seeing what you get, looking in the manual. (Of course, one can always search the manual for `#[+]begin_.`)

In addition to the source blocks mentioned above (and elaborated on below), Org Mode allows short bits of "verbatim" code to be introduced by a colon as the first non-blank column of a line

```
: this is verbatim
```

One can have longer runs of verbatim ("example") data (which is not word wrapped, etc.):

```
#+name: ex
#+begin_example
this is a block
that
holds more verbatim text
#+end_example
```

As well as longer bits of text that **will** be wrapped ("quote"):

```
#+begin_quote
this is a bit of
text that should
show up, eventually, strung out in a smaller
number
of
lines when "filled"
(e.g., [M-x org-fill-paragraph], [M-q])
#+end_quote
```

Blocks can optionally have names. These names can be used as noweb references, or to use the value of a block (or, if a source block, of the block's results) as input (a variable) to another block in the file.²

Babel – programming language support in org files

Babel is one name for talking about programming language support in Org Mode. You are able to embed source code inside of Org Mode buffers, edit these code blocks in a language-specific way, evaluate code blocks, pass the results of the evaluation of one code block to another code block, and include code blocks and/or the results of their evaluation in the document produced by exporting the org buffer.

²I believe there are facilities for "naming" bits of information in other .org files, but I don't know the details and I don't know if it works with source code blocks.

Source blocks

The Org Mode Compact Guide has a section on source blocks. A separate "worg" page gives information on using R with Org Mode. The list of languages supported by Org Mode is documented [here](#).

An Org Mode source block includes source code (in one language, per source block), an optional name, and optional *header arguments*.

Org Mode source blocks look like this

```
#+name: ex
#+begin_example
this is a block
that
holds more verbatim text
#+end_example

#+begin_src R :var foo=ex :exports both
foo
#+end_src

#+RESULTS:
| this is a block      |
| that                 |
| holds more verbatim |
| text                 |

#+begin_src R :var foo=ex :exports code
foo
#+end_src

#+RESULTS:
| this is a block      |
| that                 |
| holds more verbatim |
| text                 |
```

(As mentioned above, a source block skeleton can be created by typing, in column 1, <s, and hitting tab.)

Source blocks can also be expressed using a `src_LANG` construct; a `#+name:` line can be used to name the `src_LANG` block.

```
#+name: whyo
src_R{"42"} {{{results(=42=)}}}

#+begin_src R :var x=whyo :exports results
x
#+end_src

#+RESULTS:
| 42 |
|    |
```

`src_LANG` constructs also have a syntax for defining `header arguments`.

Evaluating source blocks

Once written, a source block can be evaluated³, returning results, either the output of the code, or some terminating "value" of the code, as an element of the .org file. And, the blocks can be evaluated manually, or – and optionally, block by block – while exporting a .org file to a different format.

A source block can be evaluated in one of two sorts of contexts, within a "session", or outside of a "session". A "session" here means some process that retains state between evaluations of (possibly different, but using the same programming language) source blocks. On the other hand, a "non-session" starts up with no internal state from prior runs⁴.

Finally, and of particular interest in these tutorials, is the fact that Org Mode uses ESS to provide R language support.

Naming blocks

Org Mode source blocks can be named. The name can be used to include the **source** of one block in another block via noweb, or to include the **results** of the evaluation of one block as an input variable to another block.

Org Mode source blocks are named with a `#+name:` line:

```
#+name: somecode
#+begin_src R :results output
  cat("this is *some* code!\n")
#+end_src

#+RESULTS: somecode
: this is *some* code!

#+name: someothercode
#+begin_src R :results value
  whynot <- "this is some *other* code!"
#+end_src

#+RESULTS: someothercode
: this is some *other* code!
```

Header arguments

Tangling

While often we are content to evaluate code blocks inside the .org file, equally often we might want to export some or all of the code blocks for evaluation (or inspection) outside of the .org file. For example, we might want to use some of the code in the .org file to create an R package.

In the world of literate programming, *tangling* is the process of extracting source code from a (theoretically primarily text) document. In Org Mode, one uses `org-babel-tangle` (normally bound to `[C-c C-v t]`) to tangle the source code blocks in a file. The file to which a source block will be tangled is specified in the `:tangle` attribute, placed on the `#+src_block` line or in a `:header-args` line (in a properties drawer, to apply to a subtree of the .org file, or stand-alone as above to apply to the entire .org file).

³for security reasons, you will need to set or customize the Emacs variable `org-babel-load-languages`, via `org-babel-do-load-languages` if you are doing this to in a current Emacs session, and you will be prompted each time before a code block is evaluated.

⁴obviously, prior runs may have, e.g., changed the state of the file system on which all these evaluations are running; that is, the **external** state may be influenced by what has previously been evaluated.

To actually *tangle* a file, use `]M-x org-babel-tangle`, often bound to `[C-c C-v t]`.

The name of the file to which a given source block is tangled is given by the `:tangle` header argument. Like other header arguments, the `:tangle` header argument can be specified by one of several ways. The first way is by specifying it adjoining the source block, either on the `#+begin_src` line, or on an immediately preceding `#+header` line (basically, an overflow of the `#+begin_src` line):

```
#+begin_src R :tangle ./nosuchdirectory/foofile
"this is some R code"
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
: this is some R code
```

```
#+header: :tangle ./nosuchdirectory/anotherfile
#+begin_src R
"this is some more R code"
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
: this is some more R code
```

Second, the destination file to tangle a subtree's worth of source blocks can be specified in a PROPERTIES drawer on the headline for that tree using the `header-args` property's `tangle` attribute to name the code blocks in that branch that don't have a "more local" `:tangle` specification.

Alternatively, using a `#+property` tag at the top of a file, you can define a default tangle destination for all the code blocks in the file that don't have a "more local" `:tangle` specification.

```
#+property: header-args :tangle ./nosuchdirectory/bigfile
```

```
** this is somewhere in this file
:PROPERTIES:
:header-args+: :tangle very/important/code.R
:header-args+: :noweb-ref nowcode
:END:
```

now, code blocks will carry that name

```
#+begin_src R
x <- "we want some code, and we want it now!"
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
: we want some code, and we want it now!
```

```
** somewhere else
#+begin_src R :results output
```

```
cat(x, "\n")
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
```

As you can see, the properties drawer can carry many of properties, including the name of a destination file for tangling. The very odd `«nowcode»` is our next topic: `noweb`.

noweb

noweb is a literate programming syntax to allow referencing blocks of code within some larger (.org file, say) context. It allows a programmer to re-use bits of code (sort of `#include` like).

noweb syntax is **disabled** by default. To enable noweb syntax, one can either enable it on the header line of each source code block, enable it in a properties drawer, or, as in the following, enable it once at the beginning of an org file:

```
#+property: header-args :noweb yes
```

Once enabled, references of the kind `«NAME»` will incorporate the contents of a previous source code block.

```
#+property: header-args :noweb yes
```

```
#+name: fubar
#+begin_src R
"this is an example"
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS: fubar
: this is an example
```

```
#+begin_src R
```

```
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
: this is an example
```

Evaluating

- [C-c C-c] on a source block
- [C-c C-c] on an inline source block
- [C-c C-c] on a `#+call`
- [C-c C-c] on an inline-call

```
#+name: find-orgs
#+begin_src R
1
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS: find-orgs
: 1
```

```
call_find-orgs() {{{results(=1=)}}}
```

```
#+call: find-orgs()
```

```
#+RESULTS:
: 1
```

```
call_find-orgs() {{{results(=1=)}}}
```

Results

```
#+name: somecode
#+begin_src R :results output
  cat("this is *some* code!\n")
#+end_src

#+RESULTS: somecode
: this is *some* code!

#+name: someothercode
#+begin_src R :results value
  whynot <- "this is some *other* code!"
#+end_src

#+RESULTS: someothercode
: this is some *other* code!
```

- :colnames and :rownames

When processing a table result of a previous source block to be used as an input variable to another code block, the `:colnames` header argument instructs Org Mode how to interpret the first row: should it be assumed to be a row of column names, a row of data, or should Org Mode use a heuristic to make that determination.

Similarly, Org Mode uses `:rownames` to determine whether the first column of each row should be considered as a name for that row, or simply as the data of the first column of that row.

Also, when processing the **results** of a code block, these header arguments tell some Org Mode language support routines how to deal with column and row names of the returned result. If left off, the Org Mode result of evaluation will drop any language-specific column and row names. However, if these header arguments are set to **yes**, language-specific column and row names will be included in the results placed in the Org Mode buffer.

```
#+BEGIN_SRC R
mtcars[1:3,]
#+END_SRC
```

```
#+RESULTS:
| 21 | 6 | 160 | 110 | 3.9 | 2.62 | 16.46 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| 21 | 6 | 160 | 110 | 3.9 | 2.875 | 17.02 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| 22.8 | 4 | 108 | 93 | 3.85 | 2.32 | 18.61 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
```

```
#+begin_src R :colnames yes :rownames yes
mtcars[1:3,]
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
|           | mpg | cyl | disp | hp | drat |   wt |  qsec | vs | am | gear | carb |
|-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----|
| Mazda RX4 | 21  |  6  | 160  | 110 |  3.9 | 2.62 | 16.46 |  0 |  1 |   4 |    4 |
```

Mazda RX4 Wag	21	6	160	110	3.9	2.875	17.02	0	1	4	4
Datsun 710	22.8	4	108	93	3.85	2.32	18.61	1	1	4	1

Variables

– in and out entire document or a subtree of the document

Life in Org Src buffers

Exporting

Org Mode community

mailing lists

Other tutorials, etc.

The Org Mode quickstart is a nice way to start with Org Mode.

Rainer’s screencasts about Org Mode (now a course on Udemy)

tutorial on R and Org Mode

From: Erik Iverson <erikriverson@gmail.com>
 Date: Tue, 23 Feb 2021 12:30:03 -0800
 Subject: Re: org-in-org
 To: Greg Minshall <minshall@umich.edu>
 Cc: emacs-orgmode <emacs-orgmode@gnu.org>

<https://raw.githubusercontent.com/vikasrawal/orgpaper/master/orgpapers.org> or <https://github.com/vikasrawal/orgpaper/blob/master/orgpapers.org> or, more recently:

From: Jeremie Juste <jeremiejuste@gmail.com>
 To: Greg Minshall <minshall@umich.edu>
 Subject: Re: org-in-org
 Date: Tue, 23 Feb 2021 22:38:06 +0100
 Cc: emacs-orgmode@gnu.org

code blocks

there are a few pieces of information Org Mode needs to define a block of code

- (optionally) a **name** for the block (to use to include the block’s code in another block with `noweb`, or to use the block’s results as input to another block with `:var`.)
- the language of the code in the block
- various arguments (**header arguments** and **switches**) that define how the code interacts with its environment
- the source code itself

there are at least two ways of encoding the needed information:

a source block

the most "normal" way of defining source code is with a *source block*.

```
#+begin_src R
  "hello, world"
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS:
: hello, world
```

we use this form below in discussing the structure of a code block.

an *inline* code block

in a second form, known as an *inline code block*, the entire block can fit on one line (though multiple lines are possible).

```
src_R{"hello, world"} {{{results(=hello\, world=)}}}
```

i don't use this form. for this tutorial i looked at it briefly. it appears its semantics are different from that of source blocks. other than that, i will not discuss it further.

the anatomy of a source block

```
#+name: refid
#+begin_example
this is a test
#+end_example
```

```
#+name: anatomy
#+begin_src R :var varname=refid :results output
cat(varname)
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS: anatomy
: this is a test
```

```
#+header: :var anothername=anatomy
#+header: :exports results
#+header: :results value
#+name: second
#+begin_src R
anothername
#+end_src
```

```
#+RESULTS: second
| this is a test |
|                |
```

the block named *refid* is not a code block, but shows how the contents of another block (verbatim, in this case) can be used as input to a code block.

we set *anatomy* as the name of the first code block, using the **#+name** line.

then, we declare *anatomy*'s source block with the **#+begin_src** line, which has

- the language (R, of course)

- a header argument specifying an input variable named *varname*, using the value of *refid* block
- another header argument specifying that the result of this block will be taken from whatever it prints on stdout

the code for *anatomy* just consists of printing the (input) variable *varname* to stdout.

we continue by defining yet another source block, which we name *second*. it shows a different way of specifying the header arguments, via **#+header** lines, each of which can define one or more header arguments. one can put some header arguments on the **#+begin_src** line, some on one or more **#+header** lines.

- `:exports code`
- `:results table`
- `:colnames yes`
- `:exports none`
- `:tangle no`
- `:results none`
- `:var csvsedtable=csvsedtable`
- `:results output verbatim`
- `:cache`