Beej's Quick Guide to GDB

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This is a very quick-and-dirty guide meant to get you started with the GNU Debugger, **gdb**, from the command line in a terminal. Often times **gdb** is run via an IDE, but many people out there shun IDEs for a variety of reasons, and this tutorial is for you!

Again, this is only a getting-started guide. There's much much MUCH more to learn about what the debugger does than is written in these few short paragraphs. Check out your "man" pages or the online resources listed below for more info.

This tutorial is meant to be read in order, up to, but not including, the "Misc" section.

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Compiling

You have to tell your compiler to compile your code with symbolic debugging information included. Here's how to do it with **gcc**, with the **-g** switch:

```
$ gcc -g hello.c -o hello
$ g++ -g hello.cpp -o hello
```

Once you've done that, you should be able to view program listings in the debugger.

More Information

Check out the Official GDB Documentation for more information than you can shake a stick at!

Also, a good GNU GDB front-end is DDD, the DataDisplayDebugger.

License

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Starting The Debugger

First things first: you can enter **help** at any **gdb** prompt and get more information. Also, you can enter **quit** to quit the debugger. Finally, just hitting **RETURN** will repeat the last command entered. Now let's fire it up!

There are several ways to start the debugger (e.g. if you were an IDE you might start it with a particular mode that's not so human-friendly) but I'll mention two of them here: vanilla console mode and curses GUI mode. The GUI is better, but let's quickly cover the simple one, and launch a program called **hello** in the debugger:

```
$ gdb hello
GNU gdb 6.8
Copyright (C) 2008 Free Software Foundation, Inc.
License GPLv3+: GNU GPL version 3 or later <a href="http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html">http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html</a>
This is free software: you are free to change and redistribute it.
There is NO WARRANTY, to the extent permitted by law. Type "show copying" and "show warranty" for details.
This GDB was configured as "i486-slackware-linux"...
(gdb) run
Starting program: /home/beej/hello
Hello, world!

Program exited normally.
(gdb)
```

The last line is the **gdb** prompt, waiting for you to tell it what to do. Type **r** or **run** to run the program. (**gdb** allows you to abbreviate commands until they become ambiguous.)

To start in neato and highly-recommended GUI mode, start the debugger with **gdb - tui**. (For many of the examples, below, I show the output of **gdb**'s dumb terminal mode, but in real life I use TUI mode exclusively.)

And here is a screenshot of what you'll see, approximately:

```
hello.c
            #include <stdio.h>
            int main(void)
B+>
                    printf("Hello, world!\n");
                    return 0;
    10
    11
    12
child process 9054 In: main
                                                        Line: 5
                                                                    PC: 0x8048395
This GDB was configured as "i486-slackware-linux"...
(gdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048395: file hello.c, line 5.
(gdb) r
Starting program: /home/beej/hello
Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:5
(gdb)
```

All the normal **gdb** commands will work in GUI mode, and additionally the arrow keys and pgup/pgdown keys will scroll the source window (when it has focus, which it does by default). Also, you can change which file or function is displayed in the source window by giving the command **list** with a location as an argument, for example, "**list hello.c:5** to bring up the file hello.c on line 5. (See "Breakpoints", below, for sample locations—the same locations that work with breakpoints will work with the **list** command.) As a side note, **list** also works in dumb terminal mode.

Now, notice that we passed the name of the executable on the command line. Another option you have is to just start **gdb** with nothing else on the command line, then give it the command **file hello**, and that will cause the executable "hello" to be loaded up.

Command line arguments! What if you have to get something into argv in your program? Pass them as arguments to the **run** command when you start execution:

```
$ gdb hello
GNU gdb 6.8
Copyright (C) 2008 Free Software Foundation, Inc.
License GPLv3+: GNU GPL version 3 or later <a href="http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html">http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html</a>
This is free software: you are free to change and redistribute it.
There is NO WARRANTY, to the extent permitted by law. Type "show copying" and "show warranty" for details.
This GDB was configured as "i486-slackware-linux"...
(gdb) run argl arg2
Starting program: /home/beej/hello argl arg2
Hello, world!

Program exited normally.
(gdb)
```

Notice where it says "Starting Program", above, it shows the arguments "arg1" and "arg2" being passed to "hello".

Breakpoints

Just starting the debugger to run the program straight through isn't very useful—we need to stop execution and get into stepping mode.

First, before you issue the **run** command, you need to set a breakpoint someplace you'd like to stop. You use the **break** or **b** command, and specify a location, which can be a function name, a line number, or a source file and line number. These are examples of locations, which are used by various other commands as well as **break**:

break main Break at the beginning of the main() function

break 5 Break at line 5 of the current file

break hello.c:5 Break at line 5 of hello.c

So for this test, let's set a breakpoint at main(), and start the program:

```
$ gdb hello
GNU gdb 6.8
Copyright (C) 2008 Free Software Foundation, Inc.
License GPLv3+: GNU GPL version 3 or later <a href="http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html">http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html</a>
This is free software: you are free to change and redistribute it.
There is NO WARRANTY, to the extent permitted by law. Type "show copying"
and "show warranty" for details.
This GDB was configured as "i486-slackware-linux"...
(qdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048395: file hello.c, line 5.
(qdb) r
Starting program: /home/beej/hello
Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:5
5
                 printf("Hello, world!\n");
(gdb)
```

As you see, we've arrived at main() and execution has stopped at the breakpoint we set there. If you're running in dumb terminal mode, **gdb** will print the line it will execute next. If you're running in cool GUI mode, the line it will execute next will be highlighted in the source window.

To list the current breakpoints, use the **info** command, like so: **"info breakpoints"** (or the shorter **"i b"**):

```
(gdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048395: file hello.c, line 5.
(gdb) i b
Num Type Disp Enb Address What
1 breakpoint keep y 0x08048395 in main at hello.c:5
```

To clear a breakpoint, use the **clear** command with the breakpoint location. You can also clear a breakpoint by number with the **delete** command.

Additionally, you can **enable** or **disable** breakpoints, though these two commands take a breakpoint number as an argument, not a location! The enabled/disabled status of a breakpoint is visible under the "Enb" column in the breakpoint listing.

```
(gdb) i bNumTypeDisp Enb AddressWhat1breakpointkeep y 0x08048395 in main at hello.c:5
```

```
(gdb) disable 1
(gdb) i b

Num Type Disp Enb Address What

1 breakpoint keep n 0x08048395 in main at hello.c:5
(gdb) clear main

Deleted breakpoint 1
(gdb) i b

No breakpoints or watchpoints.
```

Stepping Around

Once execution stops at a breakpoint, you can tell the debugger to do a few things. Let's start with the **next** command (or **n**). This command moves you to the next statement in the current function (or returns to the function's caller if you've stepped off the end of the function.) Here's a sample run; remember that **gdb** is printing the line *it* will execute next just before the "(gdb)" prompt. Also notice that when we run **next** on the printf() line, we see the output appear.

```
(gdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048395: file hello.c, line 5.
(gdb) r
Starting program: /home/beej/hello
Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:5
             printf("Hello, world!\n");
(qdb) next
Hello, world!
              return 0;
(gdb) next
(qdb) next
0xb7d6c6a5 in libc start main () from /lib/libc.so.6
(qdb) next
Single stepping until exit from function libc start main,
which has no line number information.
Program exited normally.
(gdb)
```

(That weird stuff at the end about __libc_start_main() shows you that there was another function that called your main() function! It wasn't compiled with debugging information so we can't see the source, but we can still step through it—which we do—and the program exits normally.)

Now, notice that **next** steps over function calls. This doesn't mean that function doesn't get called; it means that **next** will execute the function until it's done, and then return you to the next line in your current function.

What if you have a function you want to *step into* from your current function, and trace through that function line-by-line? Use the **step** (or **s**) command to do this. It works just like **next**, except it steps into functions.

Let's say you're tired of single stepping, and just want the program to run again. Use the **continue** (or **c**) command to continue execution.

What if the program is running but you forgot to set breakpoints? You can hit **CTRL-C** and that'll stop the program wherever it happens to be and return you to a "(gdb)" prompt. At that point, you could set up a proper breakpoint somewhere and **continue** to that breakpoint.

One final shortcut is that just hitting **RETURN** will repeat the last command entered; this will save you typing **next** over and over again.

Examining Variables

If you have some variables you wish to inspect over the course of the run, you can **display** them, but only if the variable is currently in scope. Each time you step the code, the value of the variable will be displayed (if it's in scope).

(The following output is missing source code output between lines for clarity—it's what you'd see in GUI mode. Imagine you're seeing the highlight bar bouncing around the source code while you're running this:)

```
(gdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048365: file hello.c, line 5.
(gdb) r
Starting program: /home/beej/hello
Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:5
(gdb) disp i
1: i = -1207447872
(gdb) next
1: i = 1
(gdb) next
1: i = 1
(gdb) next
1: i = 2
(gdb) next
1: i = 2
(gdb) next
1: i = 4
(gdb) next
1: i = 4
(gdb) next
1: i = 4
(gdb)
```

The number to the left of "i", above, is the display number of the variable. Use this number to **undisplay** the variable. If you forget the display numbers, you can type **info display** to get them:

```
(gdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048365: file hello.c, line 5.
(gdb) r
Starting program: /home/beej/hello

Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:5
(gdb) display i
1: i = -1207447872
(gdb) info display
Auto-display expressions now in effect:
Num Enb Expression
1: y i
(gdb) undisplay 1
(gdb)
```

If you just want to one-off know the value of a variable, you can **print** it. Here we see the value of "i" is 40:

```
(gdb) print i
$1 = 40
(gdb)
```

(The "\$" with the number after it means something, but it's not important for beginners.)

There's also a handy **printf** command that you can use to better format your output if you want to:

```
(gdb) printf "%d\n", i
40
(gdb) printf "%08X\n", i
00000028
(gdb)
```

Misc Stuff

This is stuff that doesn't really fit in the earlier sections, but it fun enough to list somewhere.

Stack Manipulation

The command **backtrace** (or **bt**) will show you the current function call stack, with the current function at the top, and the callers in order beneath it:

```
(gdb) backtrace
#0 subsubfunction () at hello.c:5
#1 0x080483a7 in subfunction () at hello.c:10
#2 0x080483cf in main () at hello.c:16
(gdb)
```

Type **help stack** for more info on what you can do with this.

Additional Stepping Methods

To exit the current function and return to the calling function, use the **finish** command.

To step for a single assembly instruction, use the **stepi** command.

To continue to a specific location, use the **advance** command, specifying a location like those shown in the "Breakpoints" section, above. Here's an example which advances from the current location until the function subsubfunction() is called:

advance is just shorthand for "continue to this temporary breakpoint."

Jumping to an Arbitrary Section of Code

The **jump** command works exactly like **continue**, except it takes a location to jump to as an argument. (See the the "Breakpoints" section, above, for more information on locations.)

If you need to stop at the jump destination, set a breakpoint there first.

Changing Variables and Values at Runtime

You can use the **set variable** command with an expression to evaluate, and this allows you to change the value of a variable during the run. You can also shorthand this by just using **set** with a parenthesized expression after it:

```
$1 = -1208234304
(gdb) set (i = 20)
(gdb) print i
$2 = 20
(gdb) set variable i = 40
(gdb) print i
$3 = 40
(gdb)
```

This, along with the **jump** command, can help you repeat sections of code without restarting the program.

Hardware Watchpoints

Hardware watchpoints are special breakpoints that will trigger whenever an expression changes. Often you just want to know when a variable changes (is written to), and for that you can use the **watch** command:

```
Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:5
               int i = 1;
(qdb) watch i
Hardware watchpoint 2: i
(gdb) continue
Continuing.
Hardware watchpoint 2: i
Old value = -1208361280
New value = 2
main () at hello.c:7
               while (i < 100) {
(qdb) continue
Continuing.
Hardware watchpoint 2: i
Old\ value = 2
New value = 3
main () at hello.c:7
                while (i < 100) {
(gdb)
```

Note that **watch** takes an expression as an argument, so you can put a variable name in there, or something more complex like *(p+5) or a[15]. I've even tried it with conditional expressions like i > 10, but have had mixed results.

You can get a list of watch points with **info break** or **info watch**, and you can delete them by number with the **delete** command.

Finally, you can use **rwatch** to detect when a variable is read, and you can use **awatch** to detect when a variable is either read or written.

Attach to a Running Process

If your program is already going and you want to stop it and debug, first you'll need the process ID (PID), which will be a number. (Get it from Unix's **ps** command.) Then you'll use the **attach** command with the PID to attach to (and break) the running program.

For this, you can just start **gdb** with no arguments.

In the following complete run, you'll notice a few things. First I attach to the running process, and it tells me it's in some function deep down called __nanosleep_nocancel(), which isn't too surprising since I called sleep() in my code. Indeed, asking for a

backtrace shows exactly this call stack. So I say **finish** a couple times to get back up to main().

```
$ qdb
GNU qdb 6.8
Copyright (C) 2008 Free Software Foundation, Inc.
License GPLv3+: GNU GPL version 3 or later <a href="http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html">http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html</a>
This is free software: you are free to change and redistribute it.
There is NO WARRANTY, to the extent permitted by law. Type "show copying"
and "show warranty" for details.
This GDB was configured as "i486-slackware-linux".
(gdb) attach 3490
Attaching to process 3490
Reading symbols from /home/beej/hello...done.
Reading symbols from /lib/libsafe.so.2...done.
Loaded symbols for /lib/libsafe.so.2
Reading symbols from /lib/libc.so.6...done.
Loaded symbols for /lib/libc.so.6
Reading symbols from /lib/libdl.so.2...done.
Loaded symbols for /lib/libdl.so.2
Reading symbols from /lib/ld-linux.so.2...done.
Loaded symbols for /lib/ld-linux.so.2
0xb7eab21b in __nanosleep_nocancel () from /lib/libc.so.6
(qdb) backtrace
#0 0xb7eab21b in
                   nanosleep nocancel () from /lib/libc.so.6
#1 0xb7eab05f in sleep () from /lib/libc.so.6
#2 0x080483ab in main () at hello.c:10
(qdb) finish
Run till exit from #0 0xb7eab21b in nanosleep nocancel ()
  from /lib/libc.so.6
0xb7eab05f in sleep () from /lib/libc.so.6
(qdb) finish
Run till exit from #0 0xb7eab05f in sleep () from /lib/libc.so.6
0x080483ab in main () at hello.c:10
                         sleep(1);
(gdb) list
      {
6
                int i = 1;
                while (i < 60) {
8
9
                        i++;
10
                         sleep(1);
11
12
13
                return 0;
(gdb) print i
(gdb) quit
The program is running. Quit anyway (and detach it)? (y or n) y
Detaching from program: /home/beej/hello, process 3490
```

Notice that when I get back to main(), I print the value of i and it's 19—because in this case the program has been running for 19 seconds, and i gets incremented once per second.

Once we've quit the debugger and detached from the program, the program returns to running normally.

Mix this with **set variable**, above, and you've got some power!

Using Coredumps for Postmortem Analysis

Let's say you build and run a program, and it dumps core on you for some reason or another:

```
$ cc -g -o foo foo.c
$ ./foo
Segmentation fault (core dumped)
```

This means that a core file (with a memory snapshot from the time of the crash) has been created with the name "core". If you're not getting a core file (that is, it only says "Segmentation fault" and no core file is created), you might have your ulimit set too low; try typing **ulimit -c unlimited** at your shell prompt.

You can fire up **gdb** with the **-c** option to specify a core file:

```
$ gdb -tui -c core foo
```

And, if in TUI mode, you'll be greeted with a screen of information, telling you why the program exited ("signal 11, Segmentation fault"), and the highlight will be on the offending line. (In dumb terminal mode, the offending line is printed out.)

In this example, I print the variable that's causing the problem. Indeed it is NULL:

```
foo.c
                    int *p = NULL;
                    *p = 3490;
                    return 0;
    10
            }
    11
    12
    13
    14
    15
    16
                                                         Line: 7
                                                                    PC: 0x804836f
core process 20894 In: main
Loaded symbols for /lib/ld-linux.so.2
Core was generated by `./foo',
Program terminated with signal 11, Segmentation fault.
[New process 20894]
#0 0x0804836f in main () at foo.c:7
(gdb) print p
$1 = (int *) 0x0
(gdb)
```

Even if you don't have all the source code, it's often useful to get a **backtrace** from the point the program crashed.

Window Functions

In TUI mode, you can get a list of existing windows with the **info win** command. You can then change which window has focus with the **focus** (or **fs**) command. **focus** takes either a window name, or "prev" or "next" as an argument. Valid window names are "SRC" (source window), "CMD" (command window), "REGS" (registers window), and "ASM" (assembly window). See the next section for how to use these other windows.

Note that when the SRC window has focus, the arrow keys will move the source code, but when the CMD window has focus, the arrow keys will select the previous and next commands in the command history. (For the record, the commands to move the SRC window single lines and single pages are +, -, <, and >.)

(Window names are case in-sensitive.)

The **winheight** (or **wh**) command sets the height of a particular window, but I've had bad luck with this working well.

Display Registers and Assembly

In TUI mode, the **layout** command controls which windows you see. Additionally, the **tui reg** allows control of the register window, and will open it if it's not already open.

The commands are:

layout src	Standard layout—source on top, command window on the bottom
layout asm	Just like the "src" layout, except it's an assembly window on top
layout split	Three windows: source on top, assembly in the middle, and command at the bottom
layout reg	Opens the register window on top of either source or assembly, whichever was opened last
tui reg general	Show the general registers
tui reg float	Show the floating point registers
tui reg system	Show the "system" registers
tui reg next	Show the next page of registers—this is important because there might be pages of registers that aren't in the "general", "float", or "system" sets

Here's a nifty screenshot to whet your appetite, showing source and assembly in "split" mode:

```
hello.c-
             #include <stdio.h>
            #include <unistd.h>
            int main(void)
B+>
                     int i = 1;
                     while (i < 60) {
                              1++;
    10
                              sleep(1);
    11
    12
    13
                     return 0;
    14
    15
    16
                                     0x4(%esp), %ecx
    0x8048384 <main>
                              lea
    0x8048388 <main+4>
                              and
                                     $0xffffffff0, %esp
    0x804838b <main+7>
                              pushl
                                     -0x4(%ecx)
    0x804838e <main+10>
                              push
                                     %ebp
    0x804838f <main+11>
                                     %esp, %ebp
                              mov
    0x8048391 <main+13>
                                     %ecx
                              push
    0x8048392 <main+14>
                                     $0x14,%esp
                              sub
B+> 0x8048395 <main+17>
                                     $0x1, -0x8(%ebp)
                              movl
    0x804839c <main+24>
                                     0x80483ae <main+42>
                              jmp
    0x804839e <main+26>
                                     -0x8(%ebp)
                              incl
    0x80483a1 <main+29>
                                     $0xc, %esp
                              sub
                                     $0x1
    0x80483a4 <main+32>
                              push
    0x80483a6 <main+34>
                                     0x80482b8 <sleep@plt>
                              call
    0x80483ab <main+39>
                              add
                                     $0x10, %esp
                                     $0x3b,-0x8(%ebp)
    0x80483ae <main+42>
                              cmpl
                                     0x804839e <main+26>
    0x80483b2 <main+46>
                              ile
    0x80483b4 <main+48>
                              mov
                                     $0x0, %eax
                                                                      PC: 0x8048395
child process 9865 In: main
                                                           Line: 6
Copyright (C) 2008 Free Software Foundation, Inc.
License GPLv3+: GNU GPL version 3 or later <a href="http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html">http://gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html</a>
This is free software: you are free to change and redistribute it.
There is NO WARRANTY, to the extent permitted by law. Type "show copying"
and "show warranty" for details.
This GDB was configured as "i486-slackware-linux"...
(gdb) b main
Breakpoint 1 at 0x8048395: file hello.c, line 6.
(gdb) r
Starting program: /home/beej/hello
Breakpoint 1, main () at hello.c:6
(gdb)
```

Assembly code comes in two flavors on Intel machines: Intel and AT&T. You can set which one appears in the disassembly window with **set disassembly-flavor**. Valid values are "intel" and "att". If you already have the assembly window open, you'll have to close it and reopen it (**layout src** followed by **layout split**, for example.)

To display registers in dumb terminal mode, type **info registers** for the integer registers, or **info all-registers** for everything.

Writing a Front-End

You're thinking, "Wow, this is pretty cool, but I could write a killer front-end for this thing that worked so much better! How do I do it?"

GDB supports what it calls the "machine interface interpreter", or GDB/MI. The interpreter is selected on the **gdb** command line with the **--interpreter** switch.

Basically you'll launch **gdb** and read commands and results to and from it (probably using pipes). Pretty straightforward.

See the GDB documentation for all the details.

Quick Reference

Command parameters are in italics. Optional parameters are in square brackets. All commands can be abbreviated until they become ambiguous.

This list is very very incomplete, and only shows things talked about in this tutorial!

Help Commands

help commandGet help on a certain commandapropos keywordSearch help for a particular keyword

Starting and Quitting

(Unix Command) Start gdb on an executable or standalone; specify "-

gdb [-tui] [-c core] [exename] tui" to start the TUI GUI; specify "-c"

with a corefile name to see where a

crash occurred

run [arg1] [arg2] [...]

Run the currently loaded program with

the given command line arguments

quit Exit the debugger

file exename Load an executable file by name

Breakpoints and Watchpoints

Set a breakpoint at a location, line break *location* number, or file (e.g. "main", "5", or

"hello.c:23")

watch expressionBreak when a variable is written torwatch expressionBreak when a variable is read from

awatch expression

Break when a variable is written to or

read from

info break

Display breakpoint and watchpoint

information and numbers

info watch Same as info break

clear locationClear a breakpoint from a locationDelete a breakpoint or watchpoint by

delete *num* number

Stepping and Running

next Run to the next line of this function

step Step into the function on this line, if

possible

stepi Step a single assembly instruction

continue Keep running from here

CTRL-C Stop running, wherever you are
Run until the end of the current

finish Tail the end of the cur

function

advance location Advance to a location, line number, or

file (e.g. "somefunction", "5", or

"hello.c:23")

jump location

Just like continue, except jump to a

particular location first.

Examining and Modifying Variables

display expression

Display the value of a variable or expression every step of the program—the expression must make sense in

the current scope

info display

Show a list of expressions currently

being displayed and their numbers

undisplay *num*Stop showing an expression identified by its number (see info display)

by its number (see **info display**)

print expression Print the value of a variable or

expression

Do some formatted output with

printf "i = %d, p = %sn", i, p

Set a variable to value, e.g.

set variable x=20

set (expression) Works like set variable

Window Commands

focus winname

set variable expression

info win Shows current window info

Set focus to a particular window bby name ("SRC", "CMD", "ASM", or

"REG") or by position ("next" or

"prev")

fs Alias for focus

layout *type*Set the window layout ("src", "asm", "aplit" or "rog")

"split", or "reg")

tui reg type

Set the register window layout

("general", "float", "system", or "next")

Set the window height (either an

winheight val absolute value, or a relative value

prefaced with "+" or "-")

wh Alias for winheight

Set the look-and-feel of the

set disassembly-flavor flavor disassembly. On Intel machines, valid

flavors are intel and att

Misc Commands

RETURN Hit RETURN to repeat the last

command

backtrace Show the current stack

bt Alias for backtrace

attach pid

Attach to an already-running process

by its PID

info registers Dump integer registers to screen

info all-registers

Dump all registers to screen

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