Figure 3.28 ♦ TCP send and receive buffers

transmission unit, **MTU**), and then setting the MSS to ensure that a TCP segment (when encapsulated in an IP datagram) plus the TCP/IP header length (typically 40 bytes) will fit into a single link-layer frame. Both Ethernet and PPP link-layer protocols have an MSS of 1,500 bytes. Approaches have also been proposed for discovering the path MTU—the largest link-layer frame that can be sent on all links from source to destination [RFC 1191]—and setting the MSS based on the path MTU value. Note that the MSS is the maximum amount of application-layer data in the segment, not the maximum size of the TCP segment including headers. (This terminology is confusing, but we have to live with it, as it is well entrenched.)

TCP pairs each chunk of client data with a TCP header, thereby forming **TCP segments**. The segments are passed down to the network layer, where they are separately encapsulated within network-layer IP datagrams. The IP datagrams are then sent into the network. When TCP receives a segment at the other end, the segment's data is placed in the TCP connection's receive buffer, as shown in Figure 3.28. The application reads the stream of data from this buffer. Each side of the connection has its own send buffer and its own receive buffer. (You can see the online flow-control applet at http://www.awl.com/kurose-ross, which provides an animation of the send and receive buffers.)

We see from this discussion that a TCP connection consists of buffers, variables, and a socket connection to a process in one host, and another set of buffers, variables, and a socket connection to a process in another host. As mentioned earlier, no buffers or variables are allocated to the connection in the network elements (routers, switches, and repeaters) between the hosts.

3.5.2 TCP Segment Structure

Having taken a brief look at the TCP connection, let's examine the TCP segment structure. The TCP segment consists of header fields and a data field. The data field contains a chunk of application data. As mentioned above, the MSS limits the
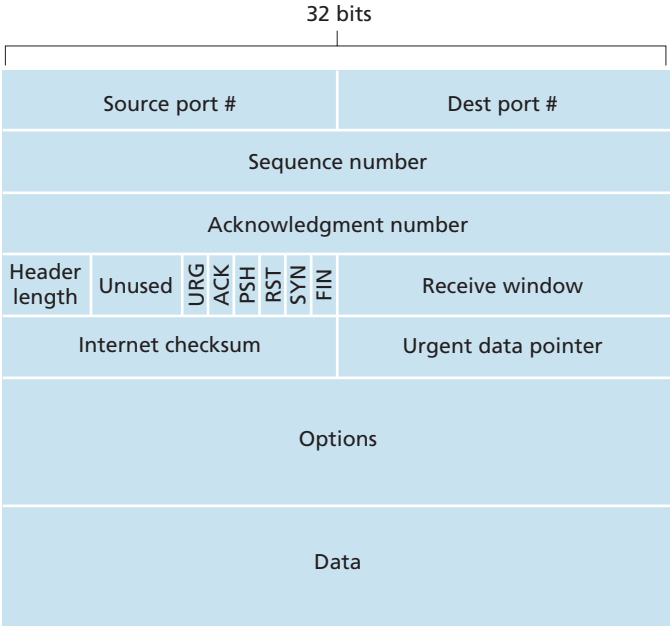
32 bits

Source port #	Dest port #
Sequence number	
Acknowledgment number	

Header length	Unused	URG ACK PSH RST SYN FIN	Receive window

Internet checksum	Urgent data pointer

Options

Data

Figure 3.29 ♦ TCP segment structure

maximum size of a segment's data field. When TCP sends a large file, such as an image as part of a Web page, it typically breaks the file into chunks of size MSS (except for the last chunk, which will often be less than the MSS). Interactive applications, however, often transmit data chunks that are smaller than the MSS; for example, with remote login applications like Telnet, the data field in the TCP segment is often only one byte. Because the TCP header is typically 20 bytes (12 bytes more than the UDP header), segments sent by Telnet may be only 21 bytes in length.

Figure 3.29 shows the structure of the TCP segment. As with UDP, the header includes **source and destination port numbers**, which are used for multiplexing/demultiplexing data from/to upper-layer applications. Also, as with UDP, the header includes a **checksum field**. A TCP segment header also contains the following fields:

- The 32-bit **sequence number field** and the 32-bit **acknowledgment number field** are used by the TCP sender and receiver in implementing a reliable data transfer service, as discussed below.

- The 16-bit **receive window** field is used for flow control. We will see shortly that it is used to indicate the number of bytes that a receiver is willing to accept.

- The 4-bit **header length field** specifies the length of the TCP header in 32-bit words. The TCP header can be of variable length due to the TCP options field.

(Typically, the options field is empty, so that the length of the typical TCP header is 20 bytes.)

- The optional and variable-length **options field** is used when a sender and receiver negotiate the maximum segment size (MSS) or as a window scaling factor for use in high-speed networks. A time-stamping option is also defined. See RFC 854 and RFC 1323 for additional details.

- The **flag field** contains 6 bits. The **ACK bit** is used to indicate that the value carried in the acknowledgment field is valid; that is, the segment contains an acknowledgment for a segment that has been successfully received. The **RST**, **SYN**, and **FIN** bits are used for connection setup and teardown, as we will discuss at the end of this section. Setting the **PSH** bit indicates that the receiver should pass the data to the upper layer immediately. Finally, the **URG** bit is used to indicate that there is data in this segment that the sending-side upper-layer entity has marked as "urgent." The location of the last byte of this urgent data is indicated by the 16-bit **urgent data pointer field**. TCP must inform the receiving-side upper-layer entity when urgent data exists and pass it a pointer to the end of the urgent data. (In practice, the PSH, URG, and the urgent data pointer are not used. However, we mention these fields for completeness.)

Sequence Numbers and Acknowledgment Numbers

Two of the most important fields in the TCP segment header are the sequence number field and the acknowledgment number field. These fields are a critical part of TCP's reliable data transfer service. But before discussing how these fields are used to provide reliable data transfer, let us first explain what exactly TCP puts in these fields.

TCP views data as an unstructured, but ordered, stream of bytes. TCP's use of sequence numbers reflects this view in that sequence numbers are over the stream of transmitted bytes and *not* over the series of transmitted segments. The **sequence number for a segment** is therefore the byte-stream number of the first byte in the segment. Let's look at an example. Suppose that a process in Host A wants to send a stream of data to a process in Host B over a TCP connection. The TCP in Host A will implicitly number each byte in the data stream. Suppose that the data stream consists of a file consisting of 500,000 bytes, that the MSS is 1,000 bytes, and that the first byte of the data stream is numbered 0. As shown in Figure 3.30, TCP constructs 500 segments out of the data stream. The first segment gets assigned sequence number 0, the second segment gets assigned sequence number 1,000, the third segment gets assigned sequence number 2,000, and so on. Each sequence number is inserted in the sequence number field in the header of the appropriate TCP segment.

Now let's consider acknowledgment numbers. These are a little trickier than sequence numbers. Recall that TCP is full-duplex, so that Host A may be receiving data from Host B while it sends data to Host B (as part of the same TCP connection). Each of the segments that arrive from Host B has a sequence number for the data
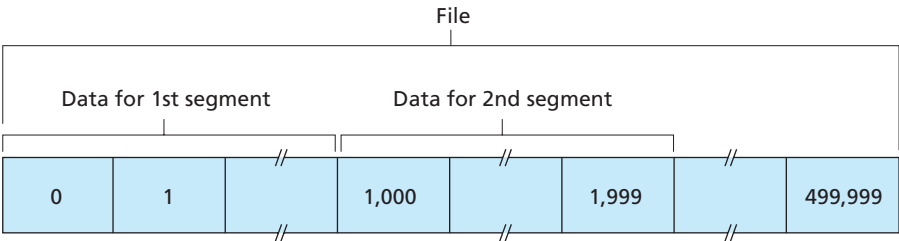
File

0	1	//	1,000	//	1,999	//	499,999

Data for 1st segment   Data for 2nd segment

Figure 3.30 ♦ Dividing file data into TCP segments

flowing from B to A. *The acknowledgment number that Host A puts in its segment is the sequence number of the next byte Host A is expecting from Host B.* It is good to look at a few examples to understand what is going on here. Suppose that Host A has received all bytes numbered 0 through 535 from B and suppose that it is about to send a segment to Host B. Host A is waiting for byte 536 and all the subsequent bytes in Host B's data stream. So Host A puts 536 in the acknowledgment number field of the segment it sends to B.

As another example, suppose that Host A has received one segment from Host B containing bytes 0 through 535 and another segment containing bytes 900 through 1,000. For some reason Host A has not yet received bytes 536 through 899. In this example, Host A is still waiting for byte 536 (and beyond) in order to re-create B's data stream. Thus, A's next segment to B will contain 536 in the acknowledgment number field. Because TCP only acknowledges bytes up to the first missing byte in the stream, TCP is said to provide **cumulative acknowledgments**.

This last example also brings up an important but subtle issue. Host A received the third segment (bytes 900 through 1,000) before receiving the second segment (bytes 536 through 899). Thus, the third segment arrived out of order. The subtle issue is: What does a host do when it receives out-of-order segments in a TCP connection? Interestingly, the TCP RFCs do not impose any rules here and leave the decision up to the people programming a TCP implementation. There are basically two choices: either (1) the receiver immediately discards out-of-order segments (which, as we discussed earlier, can simplify receiver design), or (2) the receiver keeps the out-of-order bytes and waits for the missing bytes to fill in the gaps. Clearly, the latter choice is more efficient in terms of network bandwidth, and is the approach taken in practice.

In Figure 3.30, we assumed that the initial sequence number was zero. In truth, both sides of a TCP connection randomly choose an initial sequence number. This is done to minimize the possibility that a segment that is still present in the network from an earlier, already-terminated connection between two hosts is mistaken for a valid segment in a later connection between these same two hosts (which also happen to be using the same port numbers as the old connection) [Sunshine 1978].

Telnet: A Case Study for Sequence and Acknowledgment Numbers

Telnet, defined in RFC 854, is a popular application-layer protocol used for remote login. It runs over TCP and is designed to work between any pair of hosts. Unlike the bulk data transfer applications discussed in Chapter 2, Telnet is an interactive application. We discuss a Telnet example here, as it nicely illustrates TCP sequence and acknowledgment numbers. We note that many users now prefer to use the SSH protocol rather than Telnet, since data sent in a Telnet connection (including passwords!) is not encrypted, making Telnet vulnerable to eavesdropping attacks (as discussed in Section 8.7).

Suppose Host A initiates a Telnet session with Host B. Because Host A initiates the session, it is labeled the client, and Host B is labeled the server. Each character typed by the user (at the client) will be sent to the remote host; the remote host will send back a copy of each character, which will be displayed on the Telnet user's screen. This "echo back" is used to ensure that characters seen by the Telnet user have already been received and processed at the remote site. Each character thus traverses the network twice between the time the user hits the key and the time the character is displayed on the user's monitor.

Now suppose the user types a single letter, 'C,' and then grabs a coffee. Let's examine the TCP segments that are sent between the client and server. As shown in Figure 3.31, we suppose the starting sequence numbers are 42 and 79 for the client and server, respectively. Recall that the sequence number of a segment is the sequence number of the first byte in the data field. Thus, the first segment sent from the client will have sequence number 42; the first segment sent from the server will have sequence number 79. Recall that the acknowledgment number is the sequence number of the next byte of data that the host is waiting for. After the TCP connection is established but before any data is sent, the client is waiting for byte 79 and the server is waiting for byte 42.

As shown in Figure 3.31, three segments are sent. The first segment is sent from the client to the server, containing the 1-byte ASCII representation of the letter 'C' in its data field. This first segment also has 42 in its sequence number field, as we just described. Also, because the client has not yet received any data from the server, this first segment will have 79 in its acknowledgment number field.

The second segment is sent from the server to the client. It serves a dual purpose. First it provides an acknowledgment of the data the server has received. By putting 43 in the acknowledgment field, the server is telling the client that it has successfully received everything up through byte 42 and is now waiting for bytes 43 onward. The second purpose of this segment is to echo back the letter 'C.' Thus, the second segment has the ASCII representation of 'C' in its data field. This second segment has the sequence number 79, the initial sequence number of the server-to-client data flow of this TCP connection, as this is the very first byte of data that the server is sending. Note that the acknowledgment for client-to-server data is carried in a segment carrying server-to-client data; this acknowledgment is said to be **piggybacked** on the server-to-client data segment.