

Implement a queue with 2 stacks. Your queue should have an enqueue and a dequeue method and it should be "first in first out" (FIFO).

Optimize for the time cost of m calls on your queue. These can be any mix of enqueue and dequeue calls.

Assume you already have a stack implementation and it gives $O(1)$ time push and pop.

Gotchas

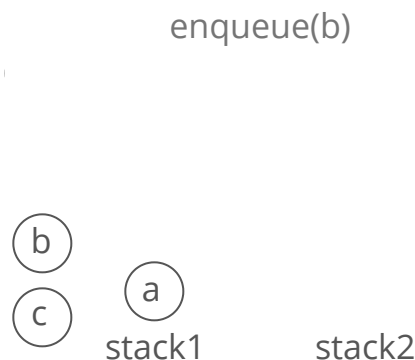
We can get $O(m)$ runtime for m calls. Crazy, right?

Breakdown

Let's call our stacks stack1 and stack2.

To start, we could just push items onto stack1 as they are enqueued. So if our first 3 calls are enqueues of a, b, and c (in that order) we push them onto stack1 as they come in.

But recall that stacks are last in, first out. If our next call was a Dequeue() we would need to return a, but it would be on the bottom of the stack.



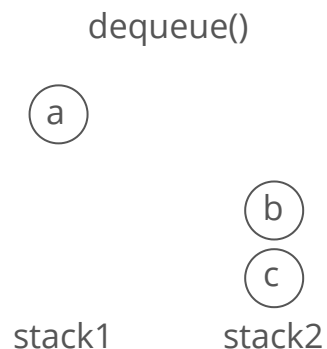
Look at what happens when we pop c, b, and a one-by-one from stack1 to stack2.



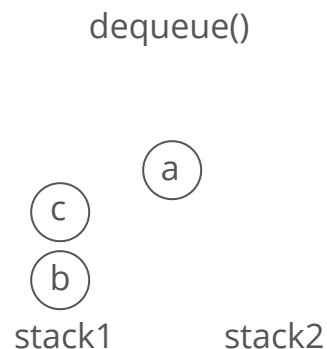
Notice how their order is reversed.

We can pop each item 1-by-1 from stack1 to stack2 until we get to a.

We could return a immediately, but what if our next operation was to enqueue a new item d? Where would we put d? d should get dequeued after c, so it makes sense to put them next to each-other . . . but c is at the bottom of stack2.



Let's try moving the other items back onto stack1 before returning. This will restore the ordering from before the dequeue, with a now gone. So if we enqueue d next, it ends up on top of c, which seems right.



So we're basically storing everything in `stack1`, using `stack2` only for temporarily "flipping" all of our items during a dequeue to get the bottom (oldest) element.

This is a complete solution. But we can do better.

What's our time complexity for m operations? At any given point we have $O(m)$ items inside our data structure, and if we dequeue we have to move all of them from `stack1` to `stack2` and back again. One dequeue operation thus costs $O(m)$. The number of dequeues is $O(m)$, so our worst-case runtime for these m operations is $O(m^2)$.

Not convinced we can have $O(m)$ dequeues and also have each one deal with $O(m)$ items in the data structure? What if our first $.5m$ operations are enqueues, and the second $.5m$ are alternating enqueues and dequeues. For each of our $.25m$ dequeues, we have $.5m$ items in the data structure.

We can do better than this $O(m^2)$ runtime.

What if we didn't move things back to `stack1` after putting them on `stack2`?

Solution

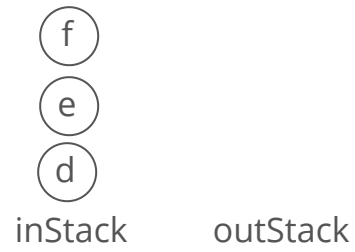
Let's call our stacks `inStack` and `outStack`.

For enqueue, we simply push the enqueued item onto `inStack`.

For dequeue on an empty outStack, the oldest item is at the bottom of `inStack`. So we dig to the bottom of `inStack` by pushing each item one-by-one onto `outStack` until we reach the bottom item, which we return.

After moving everything from `inStack` to `outStack`, the item that was enqueued the 2nd longest ago (after the item we just returned) is at the top of `outStack`, the item enqueued 3rd longest ago is just below it, etc. **So to dequeue on a non-empty outStack**, we simply return the top item from `outStack`.

dequeue()



With that description in mind, let's write some code!

```
using System;
using System.Collections.Generic;

public class QueueTwoStacks
{
    private Stack<int> _inStack = new Stack<int>();
    private Stack<int> _outStack = new Stack<int>();

    public void Enqueue(int item)
    {
        _inStack.Push(item);
    }

    public int Dequeue()
    {
        if (_outStack.Count == 0)
        {
            // Move items from inStack to outStack, reversing order
            while (_inStack.Count > 0)
            {
                int newestInStackItem = _inStack.Pop();
                _outStack.Push(newestInStackItem);
            }

            // If outStack is still empty, raise an error
            if (_outStack.Count == 0)
            {
                throw new InvalidOperationException("Can't dequeue from empty queue!");
            }
        }

        return _outStack.Pop();
    }
}
```

Complexity

Each enqueue is clearly $O(1)$ time, and so is each dequeue when `_outStack` has items. Dequeue on an empty `_outStack` is order of the number of items in `_inStack` at that moment, which can vary significantly.

Notice that the more expensive a dequeue on an empty `_outStack` is (that is, the more items we have to move from `_inStack` to `_outStack`), **the more $O(1)$ -time dequeues off of a non-empty `_outStack` it wins us in the future.** Once items are moved from `_inStack` to `_outStack` they just sit there, ready to be dequeued in $O(1)$ time. An item never moves "backwards" in our data structure.

We might guess that this "averages out" so that in a set of m enqueues and dequeues the total cost of all dequeues is actually just $O(m)$. To check this rigorously, we can use the accounting method, **counting the time cost *per item* instead of per enqueue or dequeue.**

So let's look at the worst case for a single item, which is the case where it is enqueued and then later dequeued. In this case, the item enters `_inStack` (costing 1 push), then later moves to `_outStack` (costing 1 pop and 1 push), then later comes off `_outStack` to get returned (costing 1 pop).

Each of these 4 pushes and pops is $O(1)$ time. **So our total cost *per item* is $O(1)$.** Our m enqueue and dequeue operations put m or fewer items into the system, giving a total runtime of $O(m)$.

What We Learned

People often struggle with the runtime analysis for this one. The trick is to think of the cost *per item passing through our queue*, rather than the cost per `enqueue()` and `dequeue()`.

This trick generally comes in handy when you're looking at the time cost of not just one call, but " m " calls.

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