

The Snail Tutorial

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Introduction	1.	6	Path Crossing	7.
1 First Snail Diagram	2.	7	Path Annotation	7.
2 Node Declaration	2.	8	Irregular Nodes	9.
3 Creating Nodes	3.	9	Module Parameters	10.
4 Anchors	3.		Afterword	11.
5 Regular Paths	5.			

Introduction

Maybe everyone knows MetaPost is great at drawing accurate science diagrams. But that's not the whole story! Think of it this way, it's actually a programming language for drawing vector graphics with simple syntax. You can write code to create the same great things as in those industry software (e.g., Adobe Illustrator, CorelDraw or Inkscape).

Don't believe the above claim I made. Let's be real. I've never worked as a graphic designer. Visual tools are much faster and easier for design work than coding with MetaPost. Exactly like how most people prefer movies over books these days for storytelling.

However, in this technological era, I wrote a compact MetaPost module for drawing flow-chart and diagrammatic illustrations. Is this somehow a lamentable act? Certainly not. I have never intended to resist technological progress. Our era pursues its trajectory; I pursue mine. The primary driver for writing this module was the absence of satisfactory flowchart software on my Linux desktop.

This module is named `†snail`. True to its name, it's slow at drawing diagrams.

Its development has been even slower. Around 2018, while properly learning MetaPost for the first time, I wrote the version 1 as practice work. It did not work well. In fact, after finishing it, I showed it off to a few friends then never used it again. In 2023, I relearned MetaPost and created the version 2. This one actually worked—I'd say it worked well. But I discovered MetaPost supports Chinese variable and macro names, so I built this version as a Chinese diagramming language. Both the variables and macros got quirky Chinese names. That's why I've never showed it to anyone since finishing it.

Now we've reached 2025. These past seven years? Honestly I've achieved nothing remarkable. Feeling low, I revisited MetaPost and wrote some documentation. This finally fulfilled my wish. Two years ago, after finishing ConTeXt notes¹, I'd wanted to write

¹ Please see [†https://github.com/liyanrui/ConTeXt-notes](https://github.com/liyanrui/ConTeXt-notes).

similar guides for MetaPost language. Along the way, third version of snail took shape. Maybe this is all I'm capable of, simple tools for simple needs.

1 First Snail Diagram

This is the smallest possible snail drawing environment. All that's left is to write some MetaPost code inside the `MPpage` environment.

```

\usemodule[snail]
\startMPpage
% put metapost code here!
\stopMPpage

```

To compile a \TeX source file `foo.tex` into `foo.pdf`, use

```

$ context foo.tex

```

or

```

$ context foo

```


Then you can get the `foo.pdf` file in the same directory. The above process can be expressed as the following snail code.

```

\usemodule[snail]
\startMPpage
snailfam_t a[];
slug(a1, "foo.tex");
snail(a2, "context") at (2.5cm, 0);
slug(a3, "foo.pdf") at (5cm, 0);
showsnails a1, a2, a3;

showflow a1 xto a2;
showflow a2 xto a3;
\stopMPpage

```



```

graph LR
    A[foo.tex] --> B[context]
    B --> C[foo.pdf]

```

Example 1 Your first diagram

2 Node Declaration

All snail objects, i.e. nodes, must be declared before defining them. There are two declaration methods. The first one declares a group of nodes with the macro `snail_t`. The other one declares a group node sequence (or array) with the macro `snailfam_t`.

For example, to declare the nodes `foo` and `bar`, use

```

snail_t foo, bar;

```

To create multiple sequence of nodes, use MetaPost's array syntax. The following declares two node array A and B:

```
snailfam_t A, B;
```

The elements of a node array are accessible with indices, for example, A[1], A[2], ... or A1, A2,

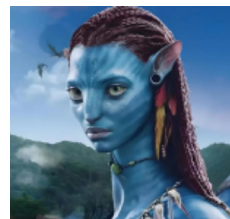
3 Creating Nodes

Snail provides three node types constructed via the macros **snail**, **slug** and **avatar**. **snail** creates nodes with visible frames, while **slug** creates frameless nodes. For specialized requirements, **avatar** import external figures as nodes. By default, the centers of newly created nodes are at the origin (0, 0). The **at** macro can set a node's center when creating it. The **showsnails** macro draws all nodes that it accept.

The following example creates three nodes of different types.

```
snailfam_t a;
snail(a1, "I am $a_1$") at (4cm, 0);
slug(a2, "I am $a_2$") at (3cm, 1.5cm);
avatar(a3, "demo.png", 3cm, "auto");

showsnails a1, a2, a3;
```



I am a_2

I am a_1

Example 2 Three kinds of nodes

The second argument of **avatar** is the image file or path name. The third and fourth arguments are the width and height of the figure respectively. You can set just one of them; put "auto" for the other and the snail module will calculate it from the figure's aspect ratio.

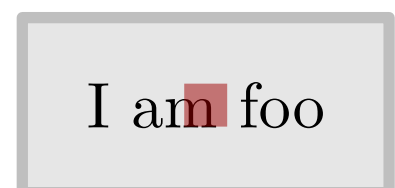
4 Anchors

Every snail node has 25 anchor points. For the node **foo**, they are stored in **foo.anchors**, a two-dimensional array.

The center of **foo** is **foo.anchors[0][0]**; see Example 3.

```
snail_t foo;
snail(foo, "I am foo");
showsnails foo;

% draw foo.anchors[0][0]
pickup pensquare scaled 8pt;
draw foo.anchors[0][0]
withcolor transparent(1, .5, darkred);
```



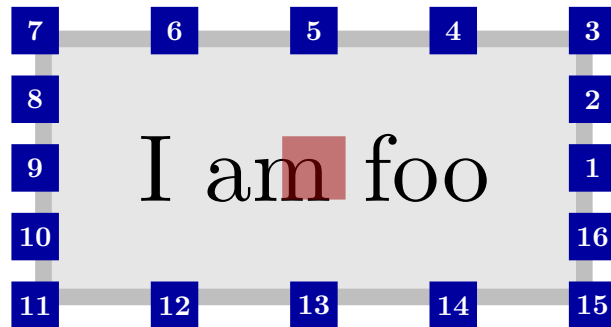
Example 3 Center anchor

If `foo.anchors[0][0]` is taken as the single anchor at level 0, then `foo.anchors[1][1]` through `foo.anchors[1][16]` are the 16 anchors at level 1. Example 4 labels the indices of these anchors at this level.

```

for i = 1 upto 16:
  draw foo.anchors[1][i] withcolor darkblue;
  draw texttext(decimal i) shifted foo.anchors[1][i] withcolor white;
endfor;

```



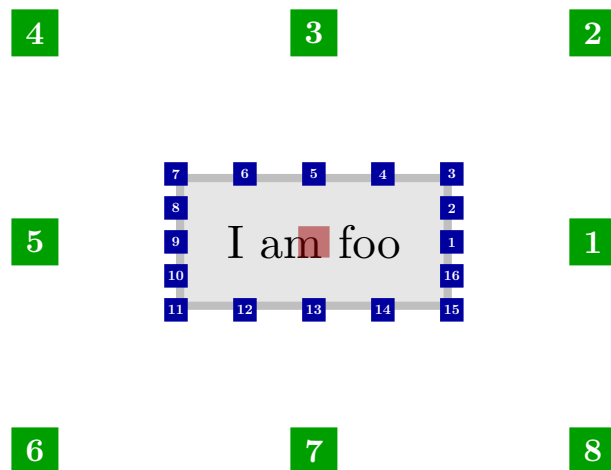
Example 4 First anchor level

From `foo.anchors[2][1]` to `foo.anchors[2][8]` constitute the second level of the anchor points of the node `foo`. Example 5 shows the indices of these anchors at this level.

```

for i = 1 upto 8:
  draw foo.anchors[2][i] withcolor darkgray;
  draw texttext(decimal i) shifted foo.anchors[2][i] withcolor white;
endfor;

```



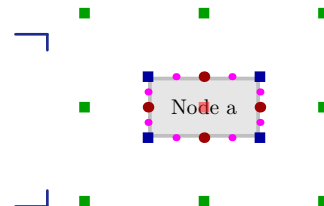
Example 5 Second anchor level

To display all anchor points of a node, you can use the `snailenv.set` macro to set the snail module parameter `debug` to `true` before the `showsnails` macro statement; see the Example 6.

```

┌ snail_t a;
  snail(a, "Node a");
  snailenv.set("debug", true);
└ showsnails a;

```



Example 6 Node debug mode

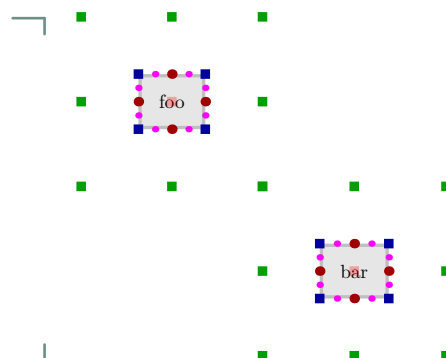
With help of anchor points, you can position a node by relative displacement with the snail syntax `put node at a from b`. Example 7 aligns the anchor point `bar.anchors[2][4]` with the anchor point `foo.anchors[2][8]`.

```

┌ snail_t foo, bar;
  snail(foo, "foo");
  snail(bar, "bar");
  put bar at foo.anchors[2][8]
    from bar.anchors[2][4];

  snailenv.set("debug", true);
└ showsnails foo, bar;

```



Example 7 Node relative displacement

5 Regular Paths

The snail module provides a set of macros that construct paths composed solely of horizontal and vertical segments; such paths are called regular paths.

The simplest regular paths are built with the `xto` or `yto` macros. Example 8 creates a horizontal path `p` and a vertical path `q` using `xto` and `yto` respectively. The syntax `put a xto b` is equivalent to `put a -- (xpart b, ypart a)`, and `put a yto b` is equivalent to `put a -- (xpart a, ypart b)`.

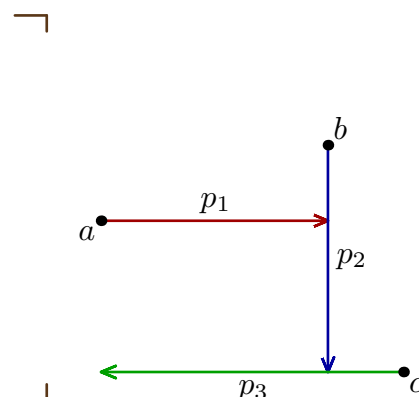
Note that `xto` and `yto` can be applied directly to nodes; the resulting paths are called flows. A flow can be displayed with the `showflow` macro. Example 1 already demonstrates how to create and display flows.

```

┌ pair a, b, c;
  a := (1cm, 2cm);
  b := (4cm, 3cm);
  c := (5cm, 0);

  path p[];
  p1 := a xto b;
  p2 := b yto c;
└ p3 := c xto a;

```



Example 8 Simplest regular paths

The `xyto` and `yxto` macros create regular paths with a single turn. The `xyto` macro indicates the single turn is from horizontal to vertical direction; `yxto` does the reverse. Their usage is shown in Example 9. These two macros can be combined to build more complex paths; see Example 10.

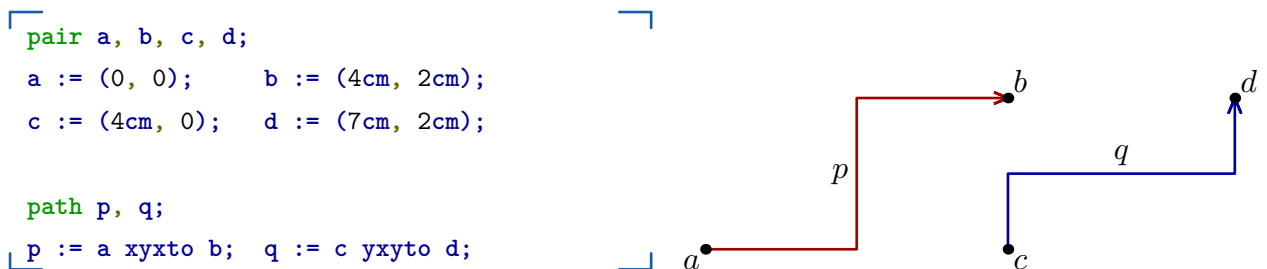


Example 9 Regular paths with single turn



Example 10 Regular paths with single turn

If you want a path with two single turns, you can use the `xyxto` and `yxyto` macros. `xyx` indicates turns from horizontal to vertical and back to horizontal. `yxy` indicates turns from vertical to horizontal and back to vertical direction. Their usage is shown in Example 11. These two macros can also be combined to build more complex paths.



Example 11 Regular paths with two turns

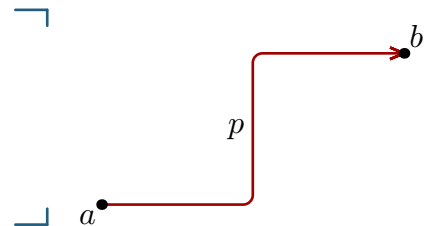
The regular paths produced by the `xyto`, `yxto`, `xyxto` and `yxyto` macros can be smoothed with the `road` macro; all turns in paths are rendered as fillets. The `road` macro takes two arguments: the first is a path variable, and the second is a regular path. After smoothing, the resulting path is assigned to the first argument. Example 12 shows the usage of the `road` macro.

```

pair a, b;
a := (0, 0); b := (4cm, 3cm);

path p;
road(p, a xycto b);

```



Example 12 Smoothed paths

6 Path Crossing

Regular paths and the smoothed paths produced by `road`, are all ordinary path objects. Because they carry no special metadata, they can only be drawn one by one with MetaPost's `drawarrow` macro. Consequently, when paths intersect, it is difficult to add crossing indicators.

The snail module provides the macro `showroads`, which draws all paths as arguments in a single pass. Internally, it detects any intersections and renders them with short gaps in the lines to indicate that one path passes over another. Example 13 illustrates the effect for paths crossing.

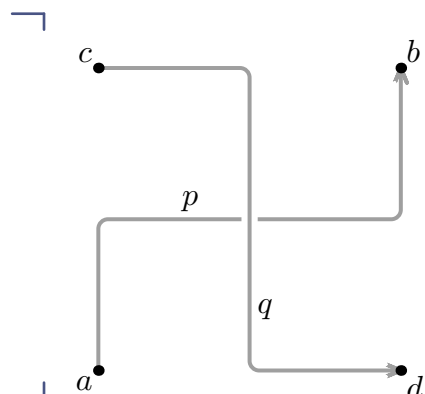
```

pair a, b, c, d;
a := (0, 0); b := (4cm, 4cm);
c := (0, 4cm); d := (4cm, 0);

path p, q;
road(p, a yxycto b);
road(q, c xycto d);

showroads p, q;

```



Example 13 Crossing paths

7 Path Annotation

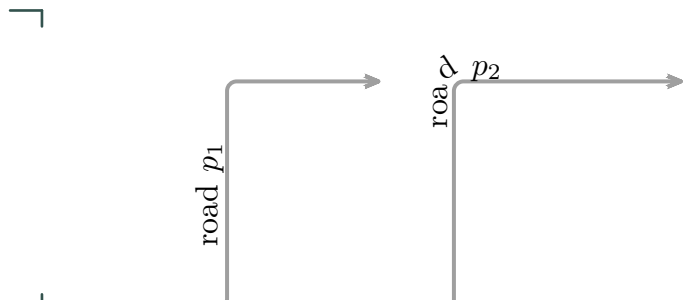
The snail module provides the `annotate` macro for labeling paths. This macro places some text based on the middle point of a path. Example 14 gives the usage of `annotate` and its side effect.

```

path p[];
road(p1, (0, 0) xycto (4cm, 3cm));
road(p2, (5cm, 0) yxcto (8cm, 3cm));
showroads p1, p2;

annotate(p1, "road $p_1$", 1);
annotate(p2, "road $p_2$", 1);

```



Example 14 Path annotations

The label of p2 appears distorted because its center is aligned with the bend in p2. If you want to correct it, you need to use the `section` macro which can take a part of a path as the labeling target instead of the origin path.

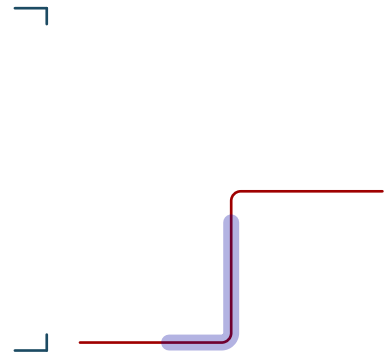
In MetaPost language, a path is parametrized over the interval $[0, 1]$, so every point on it is obtained by evaluating the path at some t in $[0, 1]$. The `section` macro exploits this to extract a desired section from a path. Example 15 shows the part $[0.2, 0.6]$ of the path `p`. By taking a section of the path as the labeling target, we can place a label at any position along this path.

```

path p, q;
road(p, (0, 0) xycto (4cm, 2cm));
q := section(p, .2, .6);

pickup pencircle scaled 1pt;
draw p withcolor darkred;
draw q withpen pencircle scaled 6pt
      withcolor transparent(1, .3, darkblue);

```



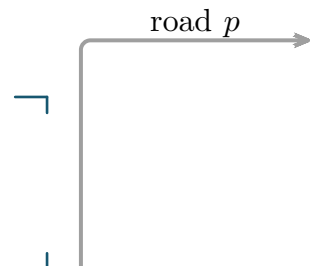
Example 15 Path section

Example 16 demonstrates how to place a label at a section of a path.

```

path p;
road(p, (0, 0) yxcto (3cm, 3cm));
showroads p;
annotate(section(p, .5, 1), "road $p$", 1);

```



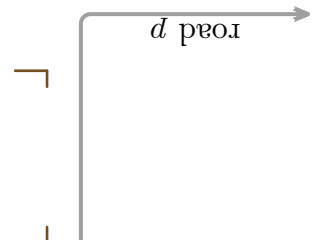
Example 16 Placing label on section

The third argument of the `annotate` macro specifies the orientation of the label text: a positive value aligns the text with the path's direction, while a negative value reverses it. Example 17 illustrates the case where this argument is negative.

```

path p;
road(p, (0, 0) yxcto (3cm, 3cm));
showroads p;
annotate(section(p, .5, 1), "road $p$", -1);

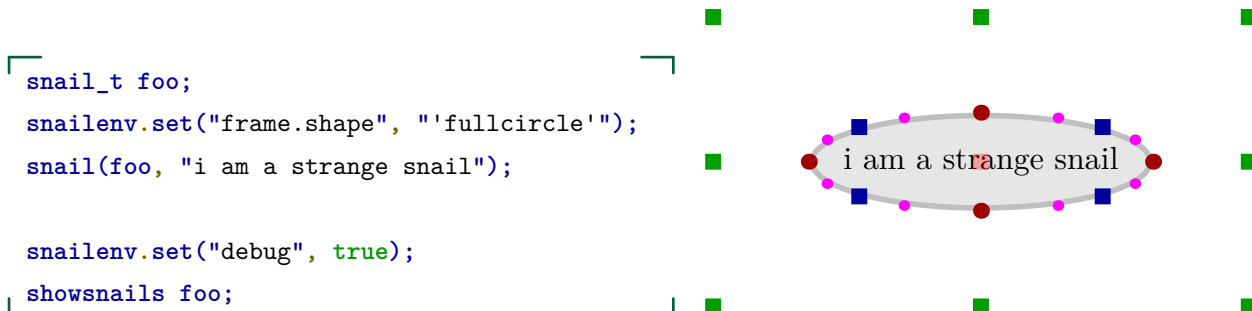
```



Example 17 Reverse label

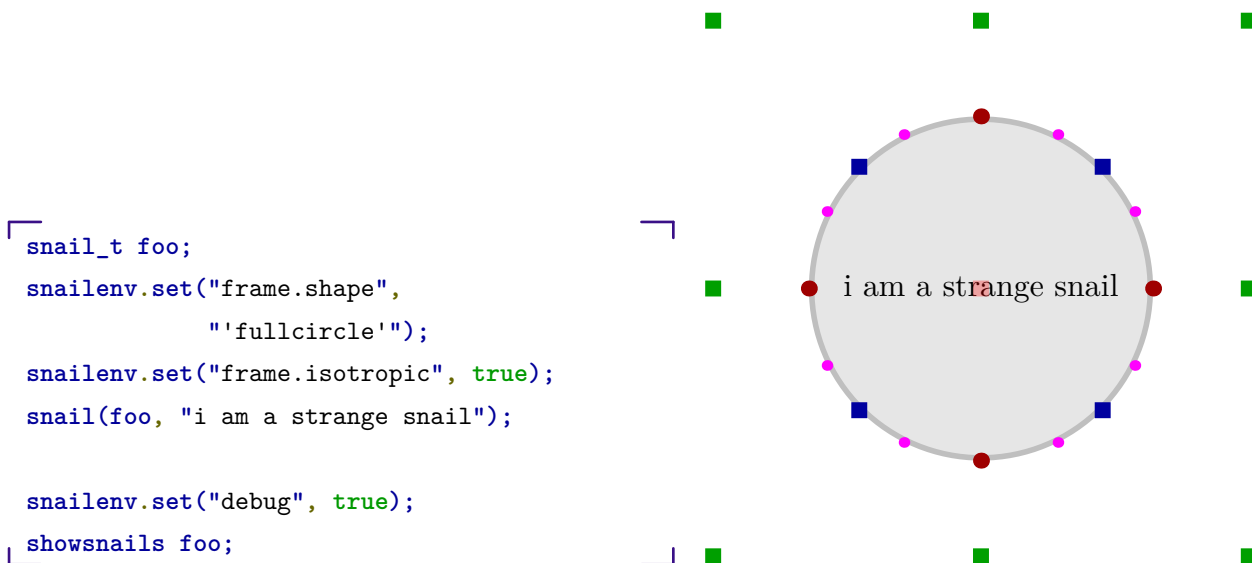
8 Irregular Nodes

Although the snail module provides only one build-in node type with a visible frame, you can create your own shapes to serve as the node's frame by setting the module parameter `frame.shape`. Example 18 creates a node with an ellipse frame.



Example 18 Ellipse node

If you need a circle node, you need to set the module's parameter `frame.isotropic` to `true`; see Example 19.



Example 19 Circle node

Example 20 applies the same technique to generate more irregular node types. The `snailresize` macro is used to resize any node; for irregular nodes, it can adjust their frames to fit the enclosed text. The `fulldiamond` and `tensecircle` macros are defined in `MetaFun`. The path `datum` is scaled and sheared `fullsquare` object. Note the path assigned to the module parameter `frame.shpae` must be enclosed in single quotation marks, so that the result is wrapped into a `MetaPost`'s string object.

In fact, node's frame can be any closed path. In short, you can turn virtually any shape into a node, letting you draw diagrams that match your exact needs.

```

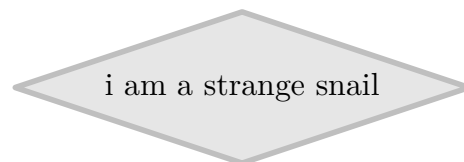
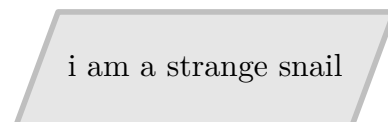
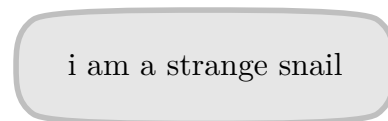
snailfam_t a;
snailenv.set("frame.shape", "'fulldiamond'");
snail(a1, "i am a strange snail");
snailresize(a1, 6cm, 2cm);

path datum;
datum := fullsquare xyscaled (1, .25) slanted .5;
snailenv.set("frame.shape", "'datum'");
snail(a2, "i am a strange snail") at (0, 3cm);
snailresize(a2, 5cm, 1.5cm);

snailenv.set("frame.shape",
             "'tensecircle(2, 1, .1)'");
snail(a3, "i am a strange snail") at (0, 6cm);
snailresize(a3, 5cm, 1.5cm);

showsnaills a1, a2, a3;

```



Example 20 More irregular nodes

After using irregular nodes, you can revert to snail's default node style with the `snailshapereset` macro, as shown below:

```
snailshapereset;
```

9 Module Parameters

By now you've seen several examples where the `snailenv.set` macro is used to tweak the module parameters and thereby alter the diagram style. For example, to set the stroke thickness of a path to `1pt`, assign the parameter `path.thickness` as follows:

```
snailenv.set("path.thickness", 1pt);
```

If you want to change the default color of the path to `darkred`, simply

```
snailenv.set("path.color", darkred);
```

Note that the first argument to `snailenv.set` is always a string denoting the name of a module parameter, while the second argument may be any value or variable allowed in MetaPost except those of type `path` or `picture`.

Among the parameters, only `frame.shape` is of MetaPost's `path` type. To modify this parameter, refer to the previous examples: to pass such variables to the parameter table, you must enclosed them in single quotes then as MetaPost's string objects.

Some frequently-used parameters of the snail module are listed in the table below. This table is a Lua table because, within the ConT_EXt environment, MetaPost and Lua have

become practically inseparable. While drawing, experiment freely—use `snailenv.set` to push the parameters in the table to exaggerated extremes and watch what each one actually does.

```
snailenv = {  
  text = {  
    fontsize = 'BodyFontSize',  
    color = 'black',  
    offset = '.125BodyFontSize'  
  },  
  frame = {  
    shape = 'fullsquare',  
    background = {color = '.9white'},  
    offset = 'BodyFontSize',  
    thickness = '.175BodyFontSize',  
    color = '.75white',  
    isotropic = 'false',  
    margin = '3BodyFontSize',  
  },  
  path = {  
    thickness = '.125BodyFontSize',  
    color = 'darkgray',  
    directed = 'true',  
    smooth = 'true',  
    labeloffset = '.5BodyFontSize',  
    fillet = '.3BodyFontSize',  
    ahvariant = 1,  
    ahdimple = 1,  
    ahlenght = '.5BodyFontSize',  
  },  
  debug = 'false'  
}
```

Afterword

Everything the snail module can do has now been laid out. The tour was intentionally made of tiny vignettes; I never produced one genuinely useful flowchart—such a grand scene is meant for you.

If you actually plan to draw with snail, start on paper. A rough sketch is enough: mark the nodes and their approximate positions. From that sketch, create the nodes and place them, then switch the module's debug parameter to true so every node and its anchors are drawn. Once the nodes and anchors are on the page, building and annotating the paths becomes nothing more than a game of Snake.