

Introduction to the R Language

Functions

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Functions

Functions are created using the `function()` directive and are stored as R objects just like anything else. In particular, they are R objects of class “function”.

```
f <- function(<arguments>) {  
  ## Do something interesting  
}
```

Functions in R are “first class objects”, which means that they can be treated much like any other R object. Importantly,

- Functions can be passed as arguments to other functions
- Functions can be nested, so that you can define a function inside of another function

The return value of a function is the last expression in the function body to be evaluated.

Function Arguments

Functions have *named arguments* which potentially have *default values*.

- The *formal arguments* are the arguments included in the function definition
- The `formals` function returns a list of all the formal arguments of a function
- Not every function call in R makes use of all the formal arguments
- Function arguments can be *missing* or might have default values

Argument Matching

R functions arguments can be matched positionally or by name. So the following calls to `sd` are all equivalent

```
> mydata <- rnorm(100)
> sd(mydata)
> sd(x = mydata)
> sd(x = mydata, na.rm = FALSE)
> sd(na.rm = FALSE, x = mydata)
> sd(na.rm = FALSE, mydata)
```

Even though it's legal, I don't recommend messing around with the order of the arguments too much, since it can lead to some confusion.

Argument Matching

You can mix positional matching with matching by name. When an argument is matched by name, it is “taken out” of the argument list and the remaining unnamed arguments are matched in the order that they are listed in the function definition.

```
> args(lm)
function (formula, data, subset, weights, na.action,
         method = "qr", model = TRUE, x = FALSE,
         y = FALSE, qr = TRUE, singular.ok = TRUE,
         contrasts = NULL, offset, ...)
```

The following two calls are equivalent.

```
lm(data = mydata, y ~ x, model = FALSE, 1:100)
lm(y ~ x, mydata, 1:100, model = FALSE)
```

Argument Matching

- Most of the time, named arguments are useful on the command line when you have a long argument list and you want to use the defaults for everything except for an argument near the end of the list
- Named arguments also help if you can remember the name of the argument and not its position on the argument list (plotting is a good example).

Argument Matching

Function arguments can also be *partially* matched, which is useful for interactive work. The order of operations when given an argument is

- 1 Check for exact match for a named argument
- 2 Check for a partial match
- 3 Check for a positional match

Defining a Function

```
f <- function(a, b = 1, c = 2, d = NULL) {  
  
}
```

In addition to not specifying a default value, you can also set an argument value to `NULL`.

Lazy Evaluation

Arguments to functions are evaluated *lazily*, so they are evaluated only as needed.

```
f <- function(a, b) {  
  a^2  
}  
f(2)
```

This function never actually uses the argument `b`, so calling `f(2)` will not produce an error because the `2` gets positionally matched to `a`.

Lazy Evaluation

Another example

```
f <- function(a, b) {  
  print(a)  
  print(b)  
}
```

```
> f(45)
```

```
[1] 45
```

```
Error in print(b) : argument "b" is missing, with no default
```

```
>
```

Notice that “45” got printed first before the error was triggered. This is because `b` did not have to be evaluated until after `print(a)`. Once the function tried to evaluate `print(b)` it had to throw an error.

The “...” Argument

The ... argument indicate a variable number of arguments that are usually passed on to other functions.

- ... is often used when extending another function and you don't want to copy the entire argument list of the original function

```
myplot <- function(x, y, type = "l", ...) {  
  plot(x, y, type = type, ...)  
}
```

- Generic functions use ... so that extra arguments can be passed to methods (more on this later).

```
> mean  
function (x, ...)  
UseMethod("mean")
```

The “...” Argument

The ... argument is also necessary when the number of arguments passed to the function cannot be known in advance.

```
> args(paste)
function (... , sep = " ", collapse = NULL)
```

```
> args(cat)
function (... , file = "", sep = " ", fill = FALSE,
          labels = NULL, append = FALSE)
```

Arguments Coming After the “...” Argument

One catch with ... is that any arguments that appear *after* ... on the argument list must be named explicitly and cannot be partially matched.

```
> args(paste)
function (..., sep = " ", collapse = NULL)
```

```
> paste("a", "b", sep = ":")
[1] "a:b"
```

```
> paste("a", "b", se = ":")
[1] "a b :"
```

A Diversion on Binding Values to Symbol

How does R know which value to assign to which symbol? When I type

```
> lm <- function(x) { x * x }  
> lm  
function(x) { x * x }
```

how does R know what value to assign to the symbol `lm`? Why doesn't it give it the value of `lm` that is in the **stats** package?

A Diversion on Binding Values to Symbol

When R tries to bind a value to a symbol, it searches through a series of `environments` to find the appropriate value. When you are working on the command line and need to retrieve the value of an R object, the order is roughly

- 1 Search the global environment for a symbol name matching the one requested.
- 2 Search the namespaces of each of the packages on the search list

The search list can be found by using the `search` function.

```
> search()
```

```
[1] ".GlobalEnv"          "package:stats"       "package:graphics"
[4] "package:grDevices"   "package:utils"       "package:datasets"
[7] "package:methods"     "Autoloads"           "package:base"
```

Binding Values to Symbol

- The *global environment* or the user's workspace is always the first element of the search list and the **base** package is always the last.
- The order of the packages on the search list matters!
- User's can configure which packages get loaded on startup so you cannot assume that there will be a set list of packages available.
- When a user loads a package with `library` the namespace of that package gets put in position 2 of the search list (by default) and everything else gets shifted down the list.
- Note that R has separate namespaces for functions and non-functions so it's possible to have an object named `c` and a function named `c`.

Scoping Rules

The scoping rules for R are the main feature that make it different from the original S language.

- The scoping rules determine how a value is associated with a free variable in a function
- R uses *lexical scoping* or *static scoping*. A common alternative is *dynamic scoping*.
- Related to the scoping rules is how R uses the *search list* to bind a value to a symbol
- Lexical scoping turns out to be particularly useful for simplifying statistical computations

Lexical Scoping

Consider the following function.

```
f <- function(x, y) {  
  x^2 + y / z  
}
```

This function has 2 formal arguments `x` and `y`. In the body of the function there is another symbol `z`. In this case `z` is called a *free variable*.

The scoping rules of a language determine how values are assigned to free variables. Free variables are not formal arguments and are not local variables (assigned inside the function body).

Lexical Scoping

Lexical scoping in R means that

the values of free variables are searched for in the environment in which the function was defined.

What is an environment?

- An *environment* is a collection of (symbol, value) pairs, i.e. `x` is a symbol and `3.14` might be its value.
- Every environment has a parent environment; it is possible for an environment to have multiple “children”
- the only environment without a parent is the empty environment
- A function + an environment = a *closure* or *function closure*.

Searching for the value for a free variable:

- If the value of a symbol is not found in the environment in which a function was defined, then the search is continued in the *parent environment*.
- The search continues down the sequence of parent environments until we hit the *top-level environment*; this usually the global environment (workspace) or the namespace of a package.
- After the top-level environment, the search continues down the search list until we hit the *empty environment*.
- If a value for a given symbol cannot be found once the empty environment is arrived at, then an error is thrown.

Why does all this matter?

- Typically, a function is defined in the global environment, so that the values of free variables are just found in the user's workspace
- This behavior is logical for most people and is usually the “right thing” to do
- However, in R you can have functions defined *inside other functions*
 - Languages like C don't let you do this
- Now things get interesting — In this case the environment in which a function is defined is the body of another function!

Lexical Scoping

```
make.power <- function(n) {  
  pow <- function(x) {  
    x^n  
  }  
  pow  
}
```

This function returns another function as its value.

```
> cube <- make.power(3)  
> square <- make.power(2)  
> cube(3)  
[1] 27  
> square(3)  
[1] 9
```

Exploring a Function Closure

What's in a function's environment?

```
> ls(environment(cube))  
[1] "n"    "pow"  
> get("n", environment(cube))  
[1] 3
```

```
> ls(environment(square))  
[1] "n"    "pow"  
> get("n", environment(square))  
[1] 2
```

Lexical vs. Dynamic Scoping

```
y <- 10
```

```
f <- function(x) {  
  y <- 2  
  y^2 + g(x)  
}
```

```
g <- function(x) {  
  x * y  
}
```

What is the value of

`f(3)`

Lexical vs. Dynamic Scoping

- With lexical scoping the value of `y` in the function `g` is looked up in the environment in which the function was defined, in this case the global environment, so the value of `y` is 10.
- With dynamic scoping, the value of `y` is looked up in the environment from which the function was *called* (sometimes referred to as the *calling environment*).
 - In R the calling environment is known as the *parent frame*
So the value of `y` would be 2.

Lexical vs. Dynamic Scoping

When a function is *defined* in the global environment and is subsequently *called* from the global environment, then the defining environment and the calling environment are the same. This can sometimes give the appearance of dynamic scoping.

```
> g <- function(x) {  
+       a <- 3  
+       x + a + y  
+ }  
> g(2)  
Error in g(2) : object "y" not found  
> y <- 3  
> g(2)  
[1] 8
```

Other languages that support lexical scoping

- Scheme
- Perl
- Python
- Common Lisp (all languages converge to Lisp)

Consequences of Lexical Scoping

- In R, all objects must be stored in memory
- All functions must carry a pointer to their respective defining environments, which could be anywhere
- In S-PLUS, free variables are always looked up in the global workspace, so everything can be stored on the disk because the “defining environment” of all functions is the same.

Why is any of this information useful?

- Optimization routines in R like `optim`, `nlm`, and `optimize` require you to pass a function whose argument is a vector of parameters (e.g. a log-likelihood)
- However, an object function might depend on a host of other things besides its parameters (like *data*)
- When writing software which does optimization, it may be desirable to allow the user to hold certain parameters fixed

Maximizing a Normal Likelihood

Write a “constructor” function

```
make.NegLogLik <- function(data, fixed=c(FALSE,FALSE)) {  
  params <- fixed  
  function(p) {  
    params[!fixed] <- p  
    mu <- params[1]  
    sigma <- params[2]  
    a <- -0.5*length(data)*log(2*pi*sigma^2)  
    b <- -0.5*sum((data-mu)^2) / (sigma^2)  
    -(a + b)  
  }  
}
```

Note: Optimization functions in R *minimize* functions, so you need to use the negative log-likelihood.

Maximizing a Normal Likelihood

```
> set.seed(1); normals <- rnorm(100, 1, 2)
> nLL <- make.NegLogLik(normals)
> nLL
function(p) {
  params[!fixed] <- p
  mu <- params[1]
  sigma <- params[2]
  a <- -0.5*length(data)*log(2*pi*sigma^2)
  b <- -0.5*sum((data-mu)^2) / (sigma^2)
  -(a + b)
}
<environment: 0x165b1a4>
> ls(environment(nLL))
[1] "data"    "fixed"   "params"
```

Estimating Parameters

```
> optim(c(mu = 0, sigma = 1), nLL)$par  
      mu      sigma  
1.218239 1.787343
```

Fixing $\sigma = 2$

```
> nLL <- make.NegLogLik(normals, c(FALSE, 2))  
> optimize(nLL, c(-1, 3))$minimum  
[1] 1.217775
```

Fixing $\mu = 1$

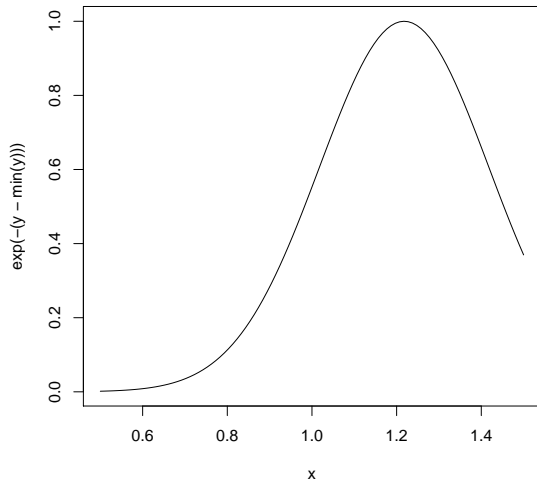
```
> nLL <- make.NegLogLik(normals, c(1, FALSE))  
> optimize(nLL, c(1e-6, 10))$minimum  
[1] 1.800596
```


Plotting the Likelihood

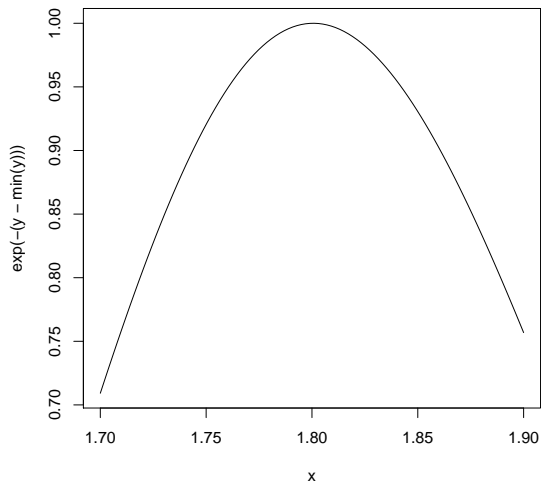
```
nLL <- make.NegLogLik(normals, c(1, FALSE))  
x <- seq(1.7, 1.9, len = 100)  
y <- sapply(x, nLL)  
plot(x, exp(-(y - min(y)))), type = "l")
```

```
nLL <- make.NegLogLik(normals, c(FALSE, 2))  
x <- seq(0.5, 1.5, len = 100)  
y <- sapply(x, nLL)  
plot(x, exp(-(y - min(y)))), type = "l")
```

Plotting the Likelihood



Plotting the Likelihood



Lexical Scoping Summary

- Objective functions can be “built” which contain all of the necessary data for evaluating the function
- No need to carry around long argument lists — useful for interactive and exploratory work.
- Code can be simplified and cleaned up
- Reference: Robert Gentleman and Ross Ihaka (2000). “Lexical Scope and Statistical Computing,” *JCGS*, 9, 491–508.