

CSE 332 Winter 2026

Lecture 17: ForkJoin

Michael Whitmeyer

<http://www.cs.uw.edu/332>

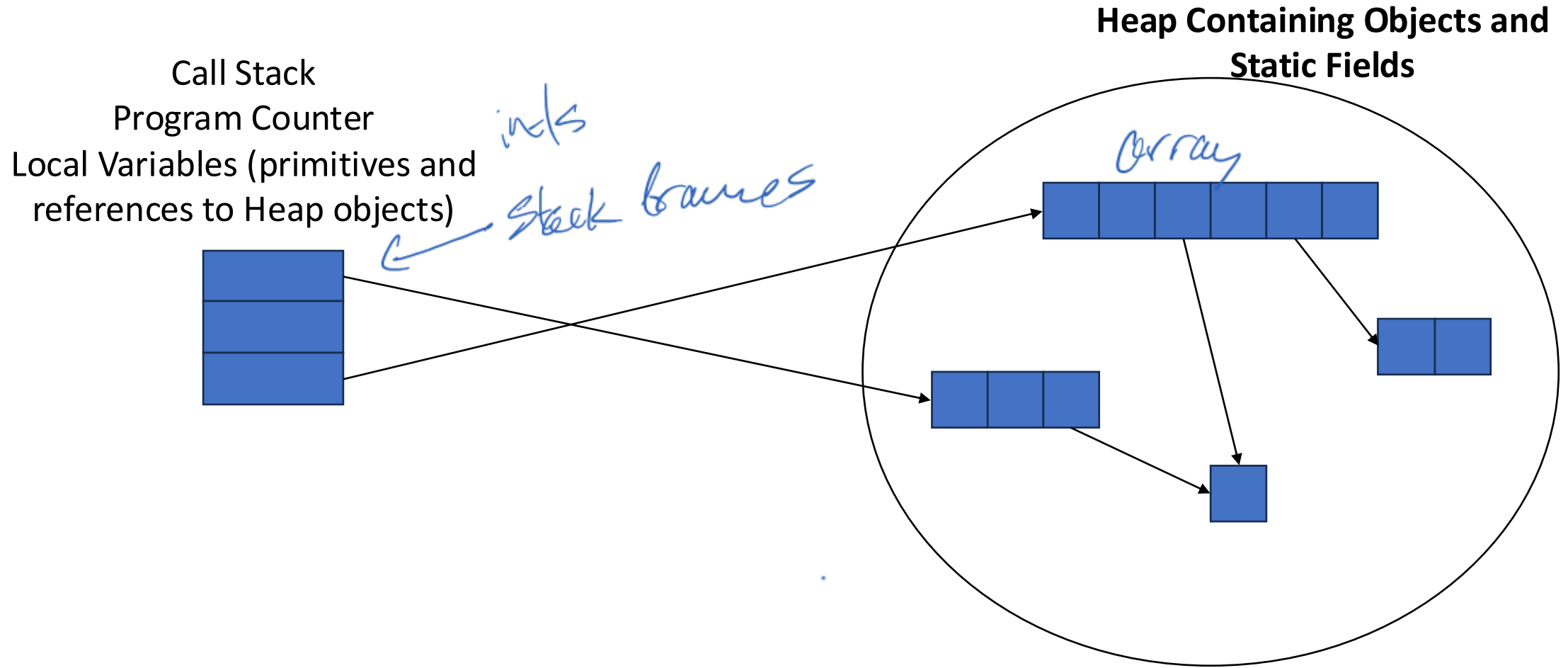
Parallelism Vs. Concurrency (with Potatoes)

- Sequential:
 - The task is completed by just **one processor** doing one thing at a time
 - There is one cook who peels all the potatoes
- Parallelism:
 - One task being completed by **many threads/processors**
 - Recruit several cooks to peel a lot of potatoes faster
- Concurrency:
 - Parallel tasks using a **shared resource**
 - Several cooks are making their own recipes, but there is only 1 oven

New Story of Code Execution

- Old Story:
 - One **program counter** (current line of code)
 - One **call stack** (with each stack frame holding local variables)
 - **Objects in the heap** created by memory allocation (i.e., **new ____**)
 - (nothing to do with data structure called a heap)
- New Story:
 - Collection of threads each with its own:
 - Program Counter
 - Call Stack
 - Local Variables
 - References to objects in a shared heap

Old Story



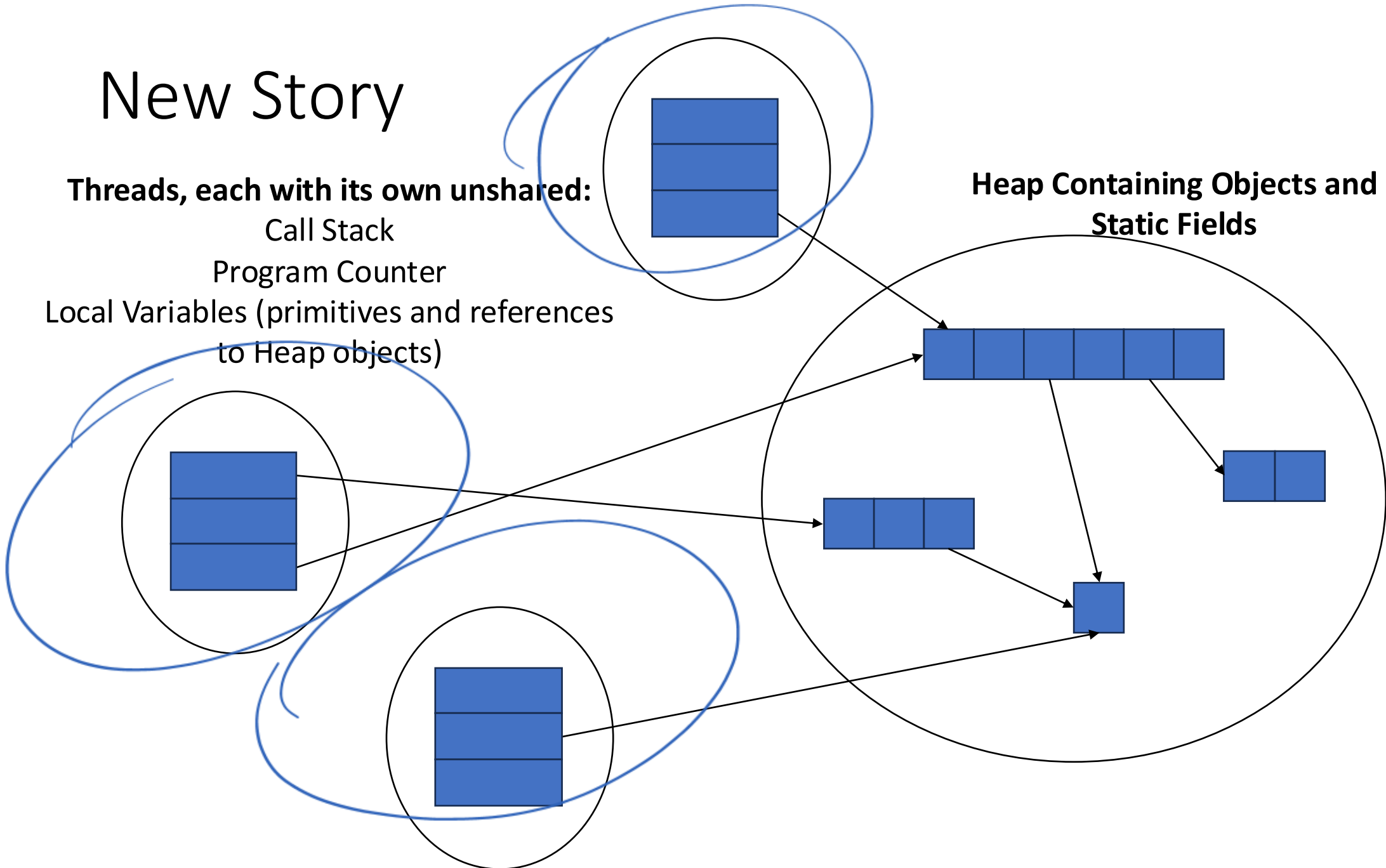
New Story

Threads, each with its own unshared:

Call Stack

Program Counter

Local Variables (primitives and references
to Heap objects)



Running Example: Summing an Array

- **Goal:** Find the sum of an array
- **Idea:** Split array into 4 pieces, sum those pieces in parallel, and then sum the results.

Input: array (arr) of integers

1. In parallel: split array into 4 equal pieces, sum up those four pieces.

1. $\text{res}[i] = \text{sum arr}[i * \text{len}/4, (i+1) * \text{len}/4]$

2. Return $\text{res}[0] + \text{res}[1] + \text{res}[2] + \text{res}[3]$

- **Needs from Programming language**

- Way to **create threads**, and run them in parallel
- Way to access shared memory (refs to common objects)
- Way to **synchronize** threads (**wait** until finished)
 - Cannot sum $\text{res}[0] + \dots + \text{res}[3]$ until each thread has finished!

Accomplishing this in Java (**Java.lang.Thread**)

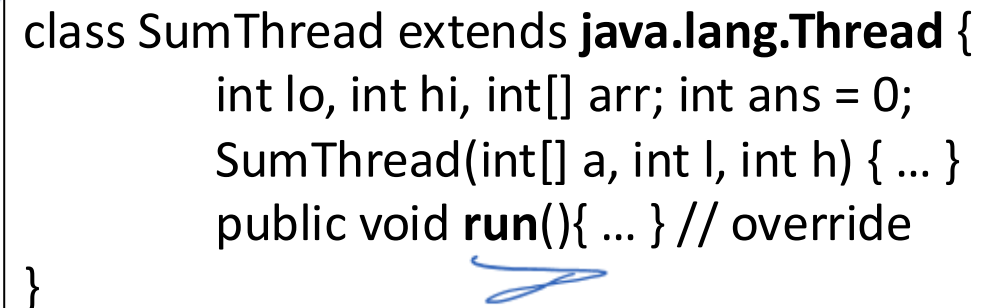
1. Create class C extending **java.lang.Thread**
 1. C must have a **run** method (acts as **main**)
 2. Call C's **start** method to
 1. create a new thread (i.e. parallel task, not Thread object in java)
 2. execute **run** in that separate, parallel thread
- Calling "**run**" directly causes the program to execute "**run**" sequentially

First Attempt (part 1, Defining Thread Object)

```
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {  
    int lo; int hi; int[] arr; int ans = 0;  
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) {  
        lo=l; hi=h; arr=a;  
    }  
    public void run() { //override, must have this signature  
        // no arguments and no return allowed  
        // must use the object's fields for input/output  
        for(int i=lo; i < hi; i++)  
            ans += arr[i];  
    }  
}
```


First Attempt (part 2, Creating Thread Objects)

```
static int parallelSum(int[] arr){ // this method could be anywhere  
    int len = arr.length;  
    int ans = 0;  
    SumThread[] threads = new SumThread[4];  
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) // create threads  
        threads[i] = new SumThread(arr, i*len/4, (i+1)*len/4);  
    // more stuff to follow  
}
```



```
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {  
    int lo, int hi, int[] arr; int ans = 0;  
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }  
    public void run() { ... } // override  
}
```

First Attempt (part 3, Running Thread Objects)

```
static int parallelSum(int[] arr){ // this method could be anywhere
```

```
    int len = arr.length;
```

```
    int ans = 0;
```

```
    SumThread[] threads = new SumThread[4];
```

```
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++){ // create threads, do parallel computations
```

```
        threads[i] = new SumThread(arr,i*len/4,(i+1)*len/4);
```

```
        threads[i].start(); // start not run
```

```
    }
```

```
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) // combine results
```

```
        ans += threads[i].ans;
```

```
    return ans;
```

```
}
```

*threads
may not
be done!*

```
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {  
    int lo, int hi, int[] arr; int ans = 0;  
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }  
    public void run(){ ... } // override  
}
```

First Attempt (part 4, Synchronizing)

```
static int parallelSum(int[] arr){ // this method could be anywhere
```

```
    int len = arr.length;
```

```
    int ans = 0;
```

```
    SumThread[] threads = new SumThread[4];
```

```
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++){ // do parallel computations
```

```
        threads[i] = new SumThread(arr,i*len/4,(i+1)*len/4);
```

```
        threads[i].start(); // start not run
```

```
        threads[i].join();
```

```
    }  
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++){ // combine results
```

```
        threads[i].join(); // wait for thread to finish!
```

```
        ans += threads[i].ans;
```

```
    }
```

```
    return ans;
```

```
}
```

```
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {  
    int lo, int hi, int[] arr; int ans = 0;  
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }  
    public void run(){ ... } // override  
}
```

Join

- Causes program to pause until the other thread completes its **run** method
- Avoids a **race condition**
 - Without join the other thread's **ans** field may not have its final answer yet

Recap so far

- Way to **create threads**, and run them in parallel
 - C extends `java.lang.Thread`
 - `C.start()`
- Way to **wait for threads to finish**
 - `C.join()`

More Threads?

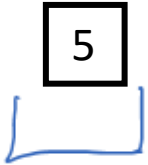
- **Issue:** our parallel algorithm is not that parallel! Each thread takes $O\left(\frac{n}{4}\right) = O(n)$ time.
- **Idea 1:** make # of threads (# of array chunks) a parameter. Each thread runs in $O\left(\frac{n}{k}\right)$ time, combining takes $O(k)$ time.
 - **Pros:** Different machines have different # processors. More efficient/reusable across machines
 - **Cons:** OS ultimately in charge of how processors get used, and perhaps not all subproblems take same amount of time
 - **Runtime barrier:** cannot do better than $O(\sqrt{n})$

A Better Solution: Divide and Conquer!

- **Idea:** Each thread checks its input size. If smaller than ℓ , sum sequentially. Otherwise, split the problem in half across two separate threads.
 - ℓ is the “sequential cutoff” (typical range: 500 to 5000)
 - Creating threads takes some time, at some point it’s more efficient to do things sequentially!

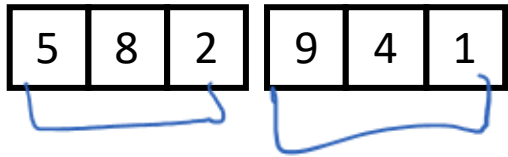
Merge Sort

5	8	2	9	4	1
---	---	---	---	---	---



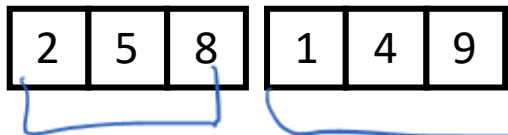
- **Base Case:**

- If the list is of length 1 or 0, it's already sorted, so just return it



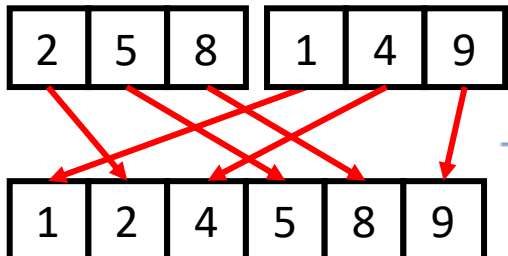
- **Divide:**

- Split the list into two “sublists” of (roughly) equal length



- **Conquer:**

- Sort both lists recursively



- **Combine:**

- **Merge** sorted sublists into one sorted list

Parallel Sum

5	8	2	9	4	1
---	---	---	---	---	---

5

- **Base Case:**

- If the list's length is smaller than the Sequential Cutoff, find the sum sequentially

- **Divide:**

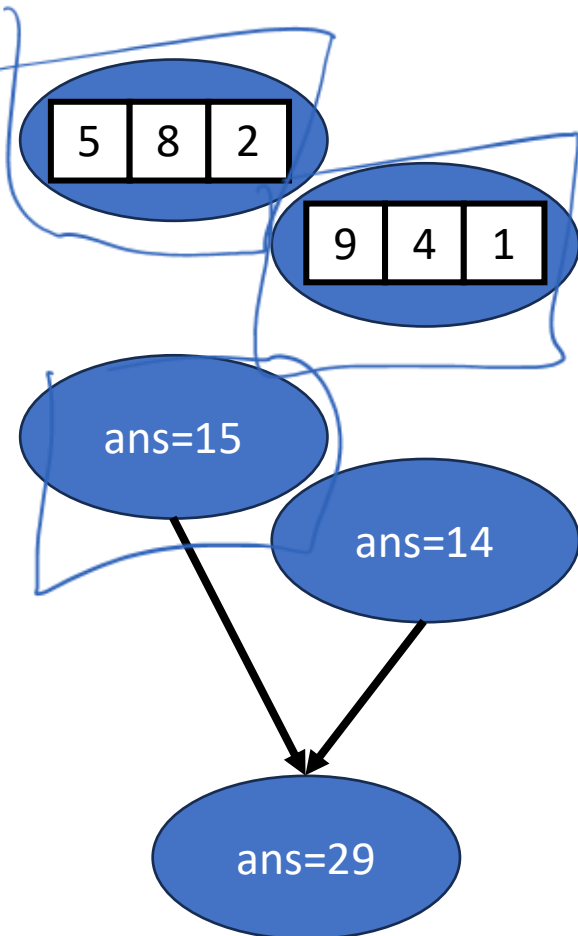
- Split the list into two “sublists” of (roughly) equal length, create a thread to sum each sublist.

- **Conquer:**

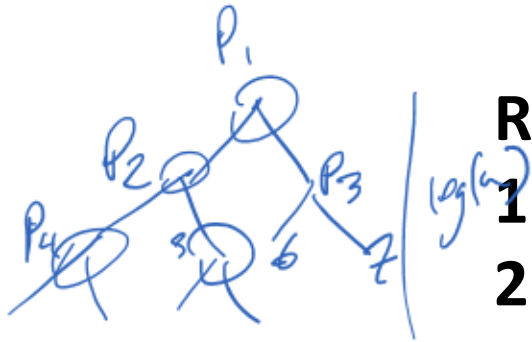
- Call **start()** for each thread

- **Combine:**

- Sum together the answers from each thread



Parallel Divide and Conquer Pseudocode



RecursiveSum(arr)

1. If $\text{len}(\text{arr}) < \ell$: return sum of elements in arr
2. **Else:**
 1. Divide arr in half into arr1 and arr2
 2. Conquer in parallel: call **RecursiveSum(arr1)** and **RecursiveSum(arr2)** in new threads
3. Wait for the recursive calls/threads to finish
4. Combine the sum of the two recursive calls (and return)

join()

if you have $O(n)$ processors $\Rightarrow O(\lg n)$
runtime

Divide and Conquer with Java Threads

```
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {  
    public void run(){ // override  
        if(hi - lo < SEQUENTIAL_CUTOFF) // "base case"  
            for(int i=lo; i < hi; i++) ans += arr[i];  
        else {  
            SumThread left = new SumThread(arr,lo,(hi+lo)/2); // divide  
            SumThread right= new SumThread(arr,(hi+lo)/2,hi); // divide  
            left.start(); right.start(); // conquer  
            left.join(); right.join(); // wait  
            ans = left.ans + right.ans; // combine  
        }  
    }  
}  
  
int sum(int[] arr){ // just make one thread!  
    SumThread t = new SumThread(arr,0,arr.length);  
    t.run();  
    return t.ans; }
```

Small optimization

- Instead of calling two separate threads for the two subproblems, create one parallel thread (using **start**) and one sequential thread (using **run**)

Divide and Conquer with Threads (optimized)

```
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {  
    public void run(){ // override  
        if(hi - lo < SEQUENTIAL_CUTOFF) // "base case"  
            for(int i=lo; i < hi; i++) ans += arr[i];  
        else {  
            SumThread left = new SumThread(arr,lo,(hi+lo)/2); // divide  
            SumThread right= new SumThread(arr,(hi+lo)/2,hi); // divide  
            left.start(); // conquer in parallel in new thread  
            right.run(); // conquer in this thread  
            left.join(); // don't move this up a line – why?  
            //right.join();  
            ans = left.ans + right.ans; // combine  
        }  
    }  
}  
  
int sum(int[] arr){ // just make one thread!  
    SumThread t = new SumThread(arr,0,arr.length);  
    t.run();  
    return t.ans; }
```

ForkJoin Framework

- This strategy is common enough that Java (and C++, and C#, and...) provides a library to do it for you!


What you would do in Threads	What to instead in ForkJoin
Subclass Thread ←	Subclass RecursiveTask<V>
Override run ←	Override compute ←
Store the answer in a field	Return a V from compute
Call start ←	Call fork
join synchronizes only ←	join synchronizes and returns the answer
Call run to execute sequentially	Call compute to execute sequentially
Have a topmost thread and call run	Create a pool and call invoke

Divide and Conquer with ForkJoin

```
java.lang.Thread
class SumTask extends RecursiveTask<Integer> {
    int lo; int hi; int[] arr; // fields to know what to do
    SumTask(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... } // constructor
    protected Integer compute() { // return answer
        if (hi - lo < SEQUENTIAL_CUTOFF) { // base case
            int ans = 0; // local var, not a field
            for (int i = lo; i < hi; i++) {
                ans += arr[i]; return ans; }
        } else {
            SumTask left = new SumTask(arr, lo, (hi + lo) / 2); // divide
            SumTask right = new SumTask(arr, (hi + lo) / 2, hi); // divide
            start() → left.fork(); // conquer in parallel
            int rightAns = right.compute(); // conquer in this thread
            int leftAns = left.join(); // wait
            return leftAns + rightAns; // combine
        }
    }
}
```

Divide and Conquer with ForkJoin (continued)

```
static final ForkJoinPool POOL = new ForkJoinPool();  
static int parallelSum(int[] arr){  
    SumTask task = new SumTask(arr,0,arr.length)  
    return POOL.invoke(task); // invoke returns the value  
compute returns  
}
```



Find Max with ForkJoin

```
class MaxTask extends RecursiveTask<Integer> {  
    int lo; int hi; int[] arr; // fields to know what to do  
    SumTask(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }  
    protected Integer compute(){// return answer  
        if(hi - lo < SEQUENTIAL_CUTOFF) { // base case  
            int ans = Integer.MIN_VALUE; // local var, not a field  
            for(int i=lo; i < hi; i++) {  
                ans = Math.max(ans, arr[i]);  
            }  
            return ans;  
        }  
        else {  
            MaxTask left = new MaxTask(arr,lo,(hi+lo)/2); // divide  
            MaxTask right= new MaxTask(arr,(hi+lo)/2,hi); // divide  
            left.fork(); // fork a thread and calls compute (conquer)  
            int rightAns = right.compute(); //call compute directly (conquer)  
            int leftAns = left.join(); // get result from left  
            return Math.max(rightAns, leftAns); // combine  
        }  
    }  
}
```

Other Problems that can be solved similarly

- Element Search
 - Is the value 17 in the array?
- Counting items with a certain property
 - How many elements of the array are divisible by 5?
- Checking if the array is sorted
- Find the smallest rectangle that covers all points in the array (x, y)
- Find the first thing that satisfies a property
 - What is the leftmost item that is divisible by 20?

Reductions/Folds

- All examples of a category of computation called a reduction
 - We “reduce” all elements in an array to a single item
 - Requires operation done among elements is **associative**
 - $(x + y) + z = x + (y + z)$
 - $\min(\min(x, y), z) = \min(x, \min(y, z))$
 - The “single item” can itself be complex
 - E.g. create a histogram of results from an array of trials

Map

- **New task:** Apply a function (map) to each element of an array
- Examples:
 - Vector addition:
 - $\text{sum}[i] = \text{arr1}[i] + \text{arr2}[i]$
 - Function application:
 - $\text{out}[i] = f(\text{arr}[i]);$
- **Observation:** maps also parallelizable in the same way!
 - No need for combination step

Map with ForkJoin

```
class AddVecs extends RecursiveAction {  
    int lo; int hi; int[] arr; // fields to know what to do  
    AddVecs(int[] a, int[] b, int[] sum, int l, int h) { ... }  
    protected void compute() { // return answer  
        if (hi - lo < SEQUENTIAL_CUTOFF) { // base case  
            for (int i = lo; i < hi; i++) {  
                sum[i] = a[i] + b[i];  
            }  
        } else {  
            AddTask left = new AddVecs(a, b, sum, lo, (hi + lo) / 2); // divide  
            AddTask right = new AddVecs(a, b, sum, (hi + lo) / 2, hi); // divide  
            left.fork(); // fork a thread and calls compute (conquer)  
            right.compute(); // call compute directly (conquer)  
            left.join(); // wait for thread to finish  
            return; // combine  
        }  
    }  
}
```

Map with ForkJoin (continued)

```
static final ForkJoinPool POOL = new ForkJoinPool();  
int[] add(int[] a, int[] b){  
    int[] ans = new int[a.length];  
    AddVecs task = new AddVecs(a, b, ans, 0, a.length)  
    POOL.invoke(task);  
    return ans;  
}
```

Maps and Reductions

- “Workhorse” constructs in parallel programming
- Many problems can be written in terms of maps and reductions
- With practice, writing them will become second nature
 - Like how over time for loops and if statements have gotten easier

Section

- Working with examples of ForkJoin
- Make sure to bring your laptops!
 - And charge it!