

# A Quick QDL Tutorial

## Introduction

QDL is a general purpose, interpreted programming language that also may be used for scripting – or interactively as a calculator. The big draw is that it is mostly a notation rather than structured like most other languages (e.g. Java or C). Essentially you specify the things that ought to happen to your data and it gets done. You can do a lot in a just a few commands and because of this, a lot of control structures (which it does have, rest assured) are usually not needed. As it were, certain common control structures are embedded in the data.

A common use is to start it and just use it for all manner of algorithmic calculating. For instance, I had two databases with similar sets of columns to compare. Doing it by hand would have take quite some time, but it was relatively easy to do some basic simplification of the information then compare which were substrings. This would have taken writing several pages of custom code in another language. It is also useful for exploring data structures (e.g. you get a JSON object and have to make sense of it), hashes for quick pass word management and the list goes on. It is one of the most useful pieces of code I routinely run. This is in addition to using it for its original purpose which was server-side scripting.

It also has a workspace model, meaning that you start the interpreter, type in commands interactively creating variables, functions etc. and can save your current state and resume where you left off. This lets you develop specialized sets of tools to do tasks that are complex and really don't fit in with other language paradigms. QDL is very useful at taking up the slack where a lot of other languages don't quite work, or would require a large investment (such as designing and implementing a set of objects) to do anything reasonable. It is largely a functional programming language.

The language description is quite short and you should be able to be productive in it within a few minutes. The full reference [QDL reference](#) is a great next step after this tutorial.

## Running QDL

QDL runs in a java virtual machine. Be sure you have at least Java 11.

## Installing QDL

Get the latest installer at <https://github.com/qdl/releases/latest>. This is the file `qdl_installer.jar`. Run it as

```
java -jar qdl_installer.jar
```

and follow the instructions. Assuming you installed in a directory called `$QDL_HOME`. Invoke it as

```
$QDL_HOME/bin/qdl
```

You should see a splash screen and banner like this

```
-- . - - / - . - - / . - - .  
( _ ) ( _ \ ( \  
| ( ) | | ( \ ) | (  
| | | | | | | | | |  
| ^ | | | | | | | |  
| ( \ \ | | ( / ) | ( _ ^  
( _ \ \ ) ( _ / ) ( _ ^  
-- . - - / - . - - / . - - .  
*****  
Welcome to the QDL Workspace  
Version 1.4.7  
Type )help for help.  
*****
```

Of course, you may customize startup to do any number of things and the reference for that is here: [qdl configuration](#).

## Navigating the workspace

The basic unit of work is the *workspace* or *session*. This keeps track of everything you've entered and its job is to help manage using the language. It is, in effect, QDL's built in IDE (integrated development environment). The workspace has many built in operations and generally they all start with a right parenthesis. For instance, to display all of the built in functions

```
)funcs system  
abs()      date_ms()      has_keys()  
(Lots more of these, omitted to save space.)
```

Of course, there is a complete reference for the workspace [here](#).

## Help!

To get help on a workspace command, either invoke

```
)help  
This is the QDL (pronounced 'quiddle') workspace.  
You may enter commands and execute them much like any other interpreter.  
... lots of help
```

And a list of available commands. Generally if you are not sure what to do, invoke a command with the flag `--help` (note the double hyphen): E.g.,

```
)ws --help  
Workspace commands  
  load file - load a saved workspace.  
  save [file] - save the current workspace to the given file. If the current  
workspace
```

```
has been loaded or saved, you may omit the file.
clear - removes all user defined variables and functions
get - get a workspace value.
lib - list the entries in a library.
memory - give the amount of memory available to the workspace.
name - give the file name of the currently loaded workspace.
      If no workspace has been loaded, no name is returned.
set - set a workspace value.
```

There is a complete set of documentation available and you should read it. The aim of the tutorial is to bootstrap your understanding of QDL. If you need to exit QDL, the way to bail on everything (rather than saving your session) is to issue

```
)off y
```

Which tells the workspace to turn itself off and the parameter *y* tells it you really don't want to save anything.

## Expressions

### Basics

The prompt is simple an indent of 3 or 4 spaces. Try your first expression

```
  2+2
4
```

This means to evaluate  $2+2$  and the answer is printed without indent.

Note that statements in QDL end in a semi-colon, `;`. In the workspace, the usual mode, however, is called *echo mode* and this just means the semi-colon is added and if there is a result (echoed to the screen), it is printed. If this is not working, tell the workspace to turn it on

```
)ws set echo on
echo is now on
```

Parentheses are used to group things together. There are a few reserved keywords in QDL. Here is a short list of the essentials to start off:

```
true      if      define  assert  try      module
false     then    while   switch  catch
null      else    body   block  do
```

### Numbers

There are basic operators, such as `+` `-` `*` `/` `%` `^`. There are many other built in functions, such as computing the modulus, standard trigonometric functions and such. Standard order of operations is in

effect, so  $5+4*3^2$  evaluates to **41** as expected. Unlike many languages, QDL has no effective no limits on the size of numbers. For instances

```
5^0.5
2.23606797749979
2^3^4^5^7^8^9^10^11^12
1.16267946647039E6008077
```

The first computes the square root of 5 and displays it. The second does multiple exponentiations and note that engineering notation is supported too.

Simple values of a string, boolean or number are called *scalars*. There are also *aggregates* aka *stems*. There is a full compliment of functions for numbers such as the basic trigonometric functions, gcd, lcm, logarithms and such. (Look for transcendental functions in the reference manual).

## Strings

Strings are anything between single quotes. Since QDL is UTF-8 aware:

```
s := 'წიანვის ცრემლები'
```

is a perfectly fine String in QDL. (Georgian for “tears of the crocodile” which looks really cool. No I have no ability or background in this language, I just like calligraphy.) You may do various operations such as as get the size

```
size(s)
16
```

Strings may be concatenated with the + and have elements removed with the - operators:

```
'abcd' + 'efgh'
abcdefgh
'abcabcdabce' - 'abc'
de
```

which also allows for multiplication with integers:

```
'abcd' + 10*','
abcd,,,,,,,,,
```

and you can compare strings with the equals operators

```
'abcd' == 'abcd'
true
```

and the operators <, <=, >, >= which test for substrings:

```
'cd' < 'abcd'
true
```

and finally there is even a regex test, =~

```
regex=~ target
```

where the regex is a string. Here we test if a string is nothing but digits:

```
'[0-9]+' =~ '321465'
true
```

Not surprising, there are many other operations:

```
contains()  head()      replace()  to_upper()  trim()
detokenize() index_of()  substring() to_uri()    vdecode()
from_uri()  insert()    to_lower() tokenize()  vencode()
```

You can access information with examples using `)help`, e.g.

```
)help replace

replace(source, old, new) - replaces all occurrences of old with new in the
                           source. These may be various combinations of stems
                           and strings.

E.g
  replace('abcde', 'cd', '23');
ab23e
```

## Booleans

The final scalar type is a *boolean* which has reserved values of either **true** or **false**. There are the operations you expect such as `==`, `&&` and `||` (resp. equality, logical and and logical or). Boolean expressions do *short-circuit* evaluation, so if the result is returned once it can be determined rather than evaluating everything first (which would be closer to algebraic use, but does not work well on computers).

```
false && (true || true)
```

for instance stops evaluation after the first `false` is evaluated, since the rest of the expression can never alter the value.

## Variables

A *variable* holds a value. To assign a value, you must use `:=`

```
x := 2+3
x
5
```

When variables are assigned, their values are not shown. To see what is in a variable, type it and hit return. The names of variables are restricted to upper and lower case letters, numbers, `$` and `_` (the underscore). Note that while you can use UTF-8 in most places, QDL is restrictive in its allowed set of characters for variable names.

If a variable is not assigned, it can be tested. For instance, if `foo` is not defined

```
is_defined(foo)
false
```

## Scalars vs. stems

Scalars are simple values, such as a number, boolean or string (the three major type of scalar). This is in contrast to *stem* or aggregate variables. The basic idea is that there is the variable name + one or more periods followed by an index reference. For instance, to create a variable, x, and set three values

```
x.0 := 2; x.1:= 3; x.2 := 5;
x.
[2,3,5]
```

A list is just a stem whose keys are integers. As I said, QDL statements end in a semicolon – always, even if the workspace is adding it for you at times – and the first line above just shows using that to stack multiple assignments on a single line. More generally, you can use pretty much any keys you like:

```
y.foo:='bar'; y.fnord:='baz';
y.
{
foo:bar,
fnord:baz
}
```

This shows what the keys are (left-hand elements) and their values. It is also possible to enter a stem directly:

```
y. := {'foo':'bar', 'fnord':'baz'}
```

Stems may also refer to other stems. So adding another key of x that has a value leads to the following

```
y.x.0 := 2
y.
{
foo:bar,
fnord:baz,
x: [2]
}
```

Stems are actually extremely powerful data structures (known technically as *associative arrays*) with a very convenient syntax for accessing elements. the operations available make them actually more akin to mini-databases.

A *list* is a special case of a stem whose indices are all integers and are enclosed in square brackets. A very, very useful and important idea in QDL is *extension* meaning that all basic operations are extended to every element of a stem. This means that control structure like loops to access elements are not needed. For instance to add 10 to all elements of a list

```
[2,4,6,8] + 10
[12,14,16,18]
```

To raise every number in a list to its square then would be

```
[1, 2, 3, 4, 5]^2  
[1, 4, 9, 16, 25]
```

A much more complex example is computing the hyperbolic sine of several values

```
sinh([1, 2, 3, 4, 5]/12)  
[  
  0.083429817445953,  
  0.167439343987515,  
  0.252612316808168,  
  0.33954055725615,  
  0.428828083093884  
]
```

**Note especially:** Stems are accessed with a period (the index operator) and the rule is that

1. The left most term is the stem, everything to its right is some form of index.
2. If an index is undefined, the string value of the index is used.
3. If an index refers to a variable, that value is substituted
4. Multiple indices are substituted from the right.
5. If a list is used as the index (after every other way to resolve it), then it is interpreted as follows:  
$$a.p.q. \dots r == a.[p, q, \dots, r]$$

So for instance using the above value of  $x$ .

```
j := 0  
x.j  
2
```

Here,  $x$ . is the stem,  $j$  is the index. Since  $j$  is 0,  $x.j$  resolves to  $x.0$  which is the value 2. If you are used to other programming languages, you are probably used to an expression like (e.g. in C)

$x[0] = 2$

The index operator is much more flexible and allows for a great simplification. You could have a stem like

```
orders.time.manner.place
```

That tracks an entire inventory system. You can populate it for various values of time, manner and place and then apply operations to see, e.g. the latest date, or all things from a specific place. See the reference manual for more details on stems and their uses. They are surprisingly addictive and you'll probably start wishing other languages supported them the way QDL does<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> They are called *associative arrays*, *dictionaries*, or *maps* in other languages, but none of these other languages really have such convenient ways of accessing them. Check out the QDL function **query** which lets you search a stem.

Note that expressions can be used for indexing, quick example is the function **i(k)** that simply returns **k**. Then this is a fine way to access the stem **[;5]**

```
[;5].i(2)  
2
```

(meaning, create a list from 0 to 5 (exclusive), grab the second element.) This makes stems enormously flexible and powerful.

## The major paradigm shift for most people

When starting to use QDL, the one paradigm shift that is hardest to wrap their heads around is the implicit looping and aggregate nature. So if a naive programmer wanted to fill up a stem with the values of the polynomial  $x^2 - 3x + 5$  over the interval  $[-1,1]$  in increments of 0.2, they would quite reasonably write

```
a. := null;  
while[  
  for_next(i, 11)  
][  
  x := i*0.2 - 1; // increment to the next element starting at -1  
  a.i := x^2 - 3*x + 5;  
];
```

*à la* C or Java, which certainly does it. The native QDL way is just

```
x. := [-1;1;11]; // fills up stem with correct values  
a. := x.^2 - 3*x. + 5;
```

which is a lot more readable and can be digested at a glance. It is possible to simply and clearly write extremely complex expression in QDL that would be close to nightmarish in other languages on this account. If you can write a single term of the expression, then all the bookkeeping, looping etc is just done for you.

Moreover, QDL is almost a picture language for working with data. Let us say that you had a pair of stems to compare using a function,  $f$ . So **f(x,y)** returns true or false for the arguments. In QDL, this would mean that **f(x.,y.)** operating on stems would return another stem of boolean values. How would you check that every element of **f(x.,y.)** is true? Well, since it may look like

```
f(x.,y.)  
[true, true, false, true, true,true,true,true]
```

the most intuitive way to deal with it would be to slap logical and **&&** between each element. QDL has an operator (plus many more of other sorts) to do that:

```
reduce(@&&, f(x.,y.))  
false
```



All **reduce** does is take the first argument (@&& means to take the operator && and use that as a thing itself) and distribute it to everything so conceptually it is

```
&& && && && && && &&
[true, true, false, true, true, true, true, true]
```

There are many more such operators in QDL that can make your programming quite simple and intuitive.

## A few more quick examples for stems

```
a := 3;           // assigns 3 to a
b := 4;           // " 4 to b
c := 'last';      // " 'last' to c
a.b := 2;         // " 2 to a.4
a.c := 5;         // " 5 to a.'last'
x.a.b := 'cv3d';  // " 'cv3d' to x.3.4
```

Note that there are two variables, **a** (a scalar) and **a.** (a stem).

## Example of counting words

In this example, we will prompt the user for a sentence and count the words in it. This uses a stem in an unexpected way, as an accumulator for values.

```
count. := {*:0};
words. := tokenize(scan('enter sentence: '), ' ');
while[for_next(j, words.)][count.j := count.j+1;];
say(count.);
```

You can put this in a script and run it. How it works. By each line

1. Set the default for the stem count. to 0. This effectively sets every possible value to 0.
2. Prompts the user for a sentence from the command line, read it and tokenizes it by blank. The result is a list of words stored in words.
3. loops over elements in words. Note that the index in count. is just the word itself. adds one to the current word count
4. Prints the resulting stem.

E.g. of running this (in the script /tmp/wc.qdl)

```
script_run('/tmp/wc.qdl');
enter sentence: mairzy doats and dozey doats and liddle lambsie divey
{*:0, doats:2, lambsie:1, mairzy:1, liddle:1, and:2, divey:1, dozey:1}
```

So the words “doats” and “and” are repeated twice each.

## Subsetting

There are many languages over time that have used the sorts of operations QDL supports. One problem they have is conformability of the arguments. Extending every operation to stems is great, but what if one has 5 elements and the other has 4? A common fix is to have some agreement on supplying missing values with default values – like zero for numbers or blanks for strings. The problem with this is that if you are missing data, the system is creating information. Convenient in formatting business reports, a nightmare in scientific computing. QDL's solution is minimalist: **subsetting**. This means that only the common indices are processed and you will get back a subset generally of your arguments. For instance, multiplying two lists together where one has 6 elements and the other has 3, returns the three element list where the operation can be reasonably applied.

```
[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6] * [3, 2, 1]  
[3, 4, 3]
```

This also tells you up front that if you are missing results, you are missing data and it is much, much better in practice to know this as early in any processing as possible, especially if you are doing numeric processing, you do not want the system to introduce systematic errors as a matter of course. Sometimes it confuses people (“where did my answer go?”) but is a useful idea. If you are “missing” some of the answers you expected, this means point blank you were missing data to start with and now know where to track down the problem.

## Functions

A *function* is a self-contained unit of code that does a specific thing. Generally they relate inputs to outputs. There are several of them that are built in. This includes most standard Math functions (logarithms, sines and such) as well as a wealth of string and other commands.

```
sin(pi()/4)  
0.707106781186547
```

computes the trigonometric sine of pi divided by 4. Note that in QDL pi() is a function. No argument means compute pi at the current precision, otherwise, compute pi raised to the power of the argument:

```
pi(0.5)  
1.77245385090552
```

computed the square root of pi.

## Defining your own function.

The easiest way to define a function is using the so-called lambda notation

```
def -> statement
```

which will evaluate the statement and return the result. This works for single statement functions. You can create much more complex functions using the define[] statement.

## Example

```
f(x)-> x^2
f(3)
9
```

QDL is what is termed a *functional language* which means it is very, very easy to define and use functions.

## Help!

All functions have help available in the workspace. For instance, to get help for the function `substr` issue

```
)help random
random() - return a random number
random(n) - return n (an integer) random numbers as a stem list.
```

This tells you the syntax and has a basic description.

```
)help *
```

prints out a quick summary of all user defined and loaded functions.

## Writing your own function

There are a couple of ways to do this. For instance, the most basic program is of the form

```
name(args)-> expression
```

where the `args` is a list of arguments and the `expression` is a single expression which is returned by the function. The standard Hello World would be

```
hw()->'Hello World!'
```

```
hw()
Hello World!
```

There is a much more comprehensive way to define functions (which includes making them self-documenting) which is in the reference manual.

You may also pass anonymous functions as arguments for instance to the built-in **for\_each** function. Another example is the `plot` function in the standard extensions. This takes a function and list of arguments and returns a set of `x` and `y` coordinates suitable for plotting with, e.g., `gnuplot`.

```
plot((x)-> sinh(x)*cosh(x), [-1;1;10])
[
  [-1, -1.813430203923503],
  [-0.7777777777777778, -1.131661442963],
  [-0.5555555555555556, -0.677134697427398],
```

```
[ -0.3333333333333334, -0.358579230505522],  
[ -0.1111111111111112, -0.11202786652122],  
[ 0.1111111111111111, 0.112027866521218],  
[ 0.3333333333333332, 0.35857923050552],  
[ 0.5555555555555554, 0.677134697427389],  
[ 0.7777777777777776, 1.131661442962996],  
[ 0.9999999999999998, 1.813430203923503]  
]
```

(So the input values are the 10 element list (called a closed slice) of decimals from -1 to 1 and the output values is the product of the hyperbolic sine and cosine.)

Because of this, functions are processed in the order they are found and you must define a function before you use it. Some other programming languages are “Platonic” in the sense that functions just exist. For instance, in Java functions are defined in a class and you make instances of the class. Java tries to support lambda functions (as these are called) but the result is a very clunky mix of interfaces and special cases. In QDL (which is a functional programming language) they may be used and created any place and even passed around as arguments to functions. This makes them behave more or less like variables.