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| Ryan’s Encyclopedia of Computer Science |
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# Binary

Binary is the way that all computers store and manipulate information. It is a number system, like denary (what we all use for counting. 1, 2, 3, etc), but instead of using tens, binary only has two numbers – 0 or 1. Technically, two of anything will work – on/off, true/false, red/purple – so long as there are two states. Computers use binary because they use electricity -and electricity can be on/off, making it ideal for binary. While using different voltages to have a more complex number system is possible, it tends to be impractical.

Binary works just like denary, but instead of increasing in orders of ten, binary increases in orders of two.  
For example, with denary there are units (1-10), 10’s (10-100), hundreds (100-1000), thousands (1000-10000), tens of thousands (10000-100000) and so on. With binary, the ‘units’ are 0-1, and then because it uses a system of two, the next order of magnitude doubles and becomes 1-2, then 2-4, 4-16, 16-32, and so on.  
When written in binary, these would be 0-1, 1-01, 01-001, 001-0001, 0001-00001 and so on.

In computer science, each 0 or 1 is called a ‘bit’. Eight bits make a byte, and 1000 bytes make a kilobyte, 1000 kilobytes make a megabyte, 1000 megabytes make a gigabyte, and so on. Technically, it’s 1024 of the previous unit to make the next one, but it is usually rounded to 1000 for simplicity. This is also the standard when measuring the storage capacity of a device.

## Binary/denary conversion

Converting between binary and denary is very easy – it just uses addition. Say you needed to convert the byte 00101101 into denary.  
First, label each column with its order of magnitude, like so;

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 256 | 128 | 64 | 32 | 16 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |

As you can see, the order of magnitude doubles each time. This makes it easy to convert longer binary numbers – just keep doubling as you move further left.  
Next, add up the columns that have a 1 in them – in this case 1 + 4 + 16 + 64 = 85. Ignore the columns with a 0.  
85 is the answer. 00101101 = 85.

This works for any number system – increase the order of magnitude of each column according to the name of the number system (binary is two, trinary is 3, denary is 10, hexadecimal is 16, etc) and then multiply the order of magnitude in each column by the number in that column, then add all the results.  
With binary, you can skip the multiplication step because the number is always 1, and 1 \* =

Here’s an example with denary.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1000 | 100 | 10 | 1 |
| 3 | 0 | 5 | 7 |

1 \* 7 = 7  
10 \* 5 = 50  
100 \* 0 = 0  
1000 \* 3 = 3000  
3000 + 0 + 50 + 7 = 3057

To convert the other way, take any denary number, and then split into units of 1,2,4,8,16,32, etc.  
For smaller numbers, you can do this in your head. For example, working out that 12 is equal to 8 + 4 is trivial.  
For larger numbers, find the closest binary order of magnitude that is *smaller* than your number. For example, to convert 1345, start with 1024. Take that away from your target number (1345 – 1024) and then you are left with a much smaller number – 321. The closest to 321 is 256, so you know you need 1024 and 256 in your number. So far the binary number is 10100000000. Next is to convert 65 (321 – 256). The closest to 65 is 64, leaving us with 1 – which is just 1. That gives us 1024 + 256 + 64 + 1, or 101001000001.

## Binary arithmetic

There are two methods for multiplying, adding and subtracting binary numbers.  
The ‘cheat’ method is to convert the binary into denary, perform the calculation, and then convert the result into binary. For very small numbers, this may be quicker.  
For larger numbers, the conversion process takes longer than just doing the maths in binary.

### Addition

When adding bits together, there are four rules;  
0 + 0 = 0  
1 + 0 = 1 *or* 0 + 1 = 1  
1 + 1 = 0 carry 1  
1 + 1 + 1 = 1 carry 1

carry 1 means ‘write in this column and add 1 to the next column’. Binary addition is done right-to-left, starting with the smallest bit.  
0110 + 0101. Going column by column, 0 + 1 = 1, 1 + 0 = 1, 1 + 1 = 0 carry 1, 0 + 1 = 1, giving a final answer of 1101.  
When writing out the calculation, use the ‘column method’, which is writing each number below the previous one, like so;  
 0110  
+ 0101  
+ 1  
----------  
 1011

### Multiplication

There is simple step-by-step method for binary multiplication.

0110 \* 0101

1. Write the smaller number (0101) vertically, like so;

0  
1

0

1

1. Multiply each number by the larger number, and then by an order of ten descending from the top.  
   0 \* 0110 \* 1000

1 \* 0110 \* 100  
0 \* 0110 \* 10  
1 \* 0110 \* 0

Multiplication by 10 works the same way as denary – add the corresponding number of zero’s to the end.  
Ignore any row starting with 0 and the last row – they will just be 0.

1. Add the results. The columns may not line up in the working below, due to the use of a non-monospaced font. The row for carrying is not shown.  
    0110000

+ 01100

= 111100