# Debugging C API extensions and CPython Internals with GDB

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This document explains how the Python GDB extension, python-gdb.py, can be used with the GDB debugger to debug CPython extensions and the CPython interpreter itself.

When debugging low-level problems such as crashes or deadlocks, a low-level debugger, such as GDB, is useful to diagnose and correct the issue. By default, GDB (or any of its front-ends) doesn't support high-level information specific to the CPython interpreter.

The python-gdb.py extension adds CPython interpreter information to GDB. The extension helps introspect the stack of currently executing Python functions. Given a Python object represented by a PyObject\* pointer, the extension surfaces the type and value of the object.

Developers who are working on CPython extensions or tinkering with parts of CPython that are written in C can use this document to learn how to use the python-gdb.py extension with GDB.

**Note:** This document assumes that you are familiar with the basics of GDB and the CPython C API. It consolidates guidance from the devguide and the Python wiki.

# 1 Prerequisites

You need to have:

- GDB 7 or later. (For earlier versions of GDB, see Misc/gdbinit in the sources of Python 3.11 or earlier.)
- GDB-compatible debugging information for Python and any extension you are debugging.
- The python-gdb.py extension.

The extension is built with Python, but might be distributed separately or not at all. Below, we include tips for a few common systems as examples. Note that even if the instructions match your system, they might be outdated.

## 1.1 Setup with Python built from source

When you build CPython from source, debugging information should be available, and the build should add a python-gdb.py file to the root directory of your repository.

To activate support, you must add the directory containing python-gdb.py to GDB's "auto-load-safe-path". If you haven't done this, recent versions of GDB will print out a warning with instructions on how to do this.

**Note:** If you do not see instructions for your version of GDB, put this in your configuration file (~/.gdbinit or ~/.config/gdb/gdbinit):

```
add-auto-load-safe-path /path/to/cpython
```

You can also add multiple paths, separated by :.

# 1.2 Setup for Python from a Linux distro

Most Linux systems provide debug information for the system Python in a package called python-debuginfo, python-dbg or similar. For example:

• Fedora:

```
sudo dnf install gdb
sudo dnf debuginfo-install python3
```

• Ubuntu:

```
sudo apt install gdb python3-dbg
```

On several recent Linux systems, GDB can download debugging symbols automatically using *debuginfod*. However, this will not install the python-gdb.py extension; you generally do need to install the debug info package separately.

# 2 Using the Debug build and Development mode

For easier debugging, you might want to:

- Use a debug build of Python. (When building from source, use configure —with-pydebug. On Linux distros, install and run a package like python-debug or python-dbg, if available.)
- Use the runtime development mode (-X dev).

Both enable extra assertions and disable some optimizations. Sometimes this hides the bug you are trying to find, but in most cases they make the process easier.

# 3 Using the python-gdb extension

When the extension is loaded, it provides two main features: pretty printers for Python values, and additional commands.

## 3.1 Pretty-printers

This is what a GDB backtrace looks like (truncated) when this extension is enabled:

```
#0 0x00000000041a6b1 in PyObject_Malloc (nbytes=Cannot access memory at address_
→0x7ffffff7fefe8
) at Objects/obmalloc.c:748
#1 0x00000000041b7c0 in PyObject_DebugMallocApi (id=111 'o', nbytes=24) at Objects/
→obmalloc.c:1445
#2 0x00000000041b717 in _PyObject_DebugMalloc (nbytes=24) at Objects/obmalloc.c:1412
#3 0x00000000044060a in _PyUnicode_New (length=11) at Objects/unicodeobject.c:346
#4 0x0000000004466aa in PyUnicodeUCS2_DecodeUTF8Stateful (s=0x5c2b8d "__1ltrace__",_
⇒size=11, errors=0x0, consumed=
   0x0) at Objects/unicodeobject.c:2531
#5 0x000000000446647 in PyUnicodeUCS2_DecodeUTF8 (s=0x5c2b8d "__1ltrace___", size=11,
\rightarrow errors=0x0)
   at Objects/unicodeobject.c:2495
#6 0x00000000440d1b in PyUnicodeUCS2_FromStringAndSize (u=0x5c2b8d "__lltrace__",_
⇒size=11)
   at Objects/unicodeobject.c:551
   0x000000000440d94 in PyUnicodeUCS2_FromString (u=0x5c2b8d "__1ltrace__") at_
→Objects/unicodeobject.c:569
#8 0x000000000584abd in PyDict_GetItemString (v=
    {'Yuck': <type at remote 0xad4730>, '__builtins___': <module at remote_
→0x7fffff7fd5ee8>, '__file__': 'Lib/test/crashers/nasty_eq_vs_dict.py', '__package_
→': None, 'y': <Yuck(i=0) at remote 0xaacd80>, 'dict': {0: 0, 1: 1, 2: 2, 3: 3}, '_
→cached_': None, '__name__': '__main__', 'z': <Yuck(i=0) at remote 0xaace60>, '_
→doc__': None}, key=
    0x5c2b8d "__lltrace__") at Objects/dictobject.c:2171
```

Notice how the dictionary argument to PyDict\_GetItemString is displayed as its repr(), rather than an opaque PyObject \* pointer.

The extension works by supplying a custom printing routine for values of type PyObject \*. If you need to access lower-level details of an object, then cast the value to a pointer of the appropriate type. For example:

```
'__main__', 'ctypes': <module at remote 0x7ffff7f14360>, '__doc__': None,
'__package__': None}

(gdb) p *(PyDictObject*)globals
$2 = {ob_refcnt = 3, ob_type = 0x3dbdf85820, ma_fill = 5, ma_used = 5,
ma_mask = 7, ma_table = 0x63d0f8, ma_lookup = 0x3dbdc7ea70
<lookdict_string>, ma_smalltable = {{me_hash = 7065186196740147912,
me_key = '__builtins__', me_value = <module at remote 0x7ffff7fb1868>},
{me_hash = -368181376027291943, me_key = '__name__',
me_value = '__main__'}, {me_hash = 0, me_key = 0x0, me_value = 0x0},
{me_hash = 0, me_key = 0x0, me_value = 0x0},
{me_hash = -9177857982131165996, me_key = 'ctypes',
me_value = <module at remote 0x7ffff7f14360>},
{me_hash = -8518757509529533123, me_key = '__doc__', me_value = None},
{me_hash = 0, me_key = 0x0, me_value = 0x0}, {
me_hash = 6614918939584953775, me_key = '__package__', me_value = None}}}
```

Note that the pretty-printers do not actually call  ${\tt repr}$  (). For basic types, they try to match its result closely.

An area that can be confusing is that the custom printer for some types look a lot like GDB's built-in printer for standard types. For example, the pretty-printer for a Python int (PyLongObject\*) gives a representation that is not distinguishable from one of a regular machine-level integer:

```
(gdb) p some_machine_integer
$3 = 42

(gdb) p some_python_integer
$4 = 42
```

The internal structure can be revealed with a cast to PyLongObject\*:

```
(gdb) p (PyLongObject)some_python_integer $5 = {ob_base = {ob_base = {ob_refent = 8, ob_type = 0x3dad39f5e0}, ob_size = 1}, ob_digit = {42}}
```

A similar confusion can arise with the str type, where the output looks a lot like gdb's built-in printer for char \*:

```
(gdb) p ptr_to_python_str
$6 = '__builtins__'
```

The pretty-printer for str instances defaults to using single-quotes (as does Python's repr for strings) whereas the standard printer for char \* values uses double-quotes and contains a hexadecimal address:

```
(gdb) p ptr_to_char_star
$7 = 0x6d72c0 "hello world"
```

Again, the implementation details can be revealed with a cast to PyUnicodeObject\*:

```
(gdb) p *(PyUnicodeObject*)$6
$8 = {ob_base = {ob_refcnt = 33, ob_type = 0x3dad3a95a0}, length = 12,
str = 0x7ffff2128500, hash = 7065186196740147912, state = 1, defenc = 0x0}
```

#### 3.2 py-list

The extension adds a py-list command, which lists the Python source code (if any) for the current frame in the selected thread. The current line is marked with a ">":

```
(gdb) py-list
           if options.profile:
901
902
               options.profile = False
903
                profile_me()
904
                return
905
>906
           u = UI()
907
           if not u.quit:
908
               try:
909
                    gtk.main()
910
                except KeyboardInterrupt:
911
                    # properly quit on a keyboard interrupt...
```

Use py-list START to list at a different line number within the Python source, and py-list START, END to list a specific range of lines within the Python source.

### 3.3 py-up and py-down

The py-up and py-down commands are analogous to GDB's regular up and down commands, but try to move at the level of CPython frames, rather than C frames.

GDB is not always able to read the relevant frame information, depending on the optimization level with which CPython was compiled. Internally, the commands look for C frames that are executing the default frame evaluation function (that is, the core bytecode interpreter loop within CPython) and look up the value of the related PyFrameObject \*.

They emit the frame number (at the C level) within the thread.

For example:

so we're at the top of the Python stack.

The frame numbers correspond to those displayed by GDB's standard backtrace command. The command skips C frames which are not executing Python code.

Going back down:

```
(gdb) py-down
#37 Frame 0x9420b04, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
→main.py, line 906, in start_game ()
```

```
u = UI()
(qdb) py-down
#34 (unable to read python frame information)
(gdb) py-down
#23 (unable to read python frame information)
(gdb) py-down
#19 (unable to read python frame information)
(gdb) py-down
#14 Frame 0x99262ac, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
→game_selector.py, line 201, in run_swallowed_dialog (self=
→<NewOrSavedGameSelector(new_game_model=<gtk.ListStore at remote 0x98fab44>,
→ puzzle=None, saved_games=[{'gsd.auto_fills': 0, 'tracking': {}, 'trackers
→': {}, 'notes': [], 'saved_at': 1270084485, 'game': '7 8 0 0 0 0 0 5 6 0 0 □
 -9 \ 0 \ 8 \ 0 \ 1 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 4 \ 6 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 7 \ 0 \ 6 \ 5 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 4 \ 7 \ 9 \ 2 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 9 \ 0 \ 1 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 3 \ 9 \ 7_{ \bot} 
-6 0 0 0 1 8 0 6 0 0 0 0 2 8 0 0 0 5 0 4 0 6 0 0 2 1 0 0 0 0 4 5\n7 8 0 0
-0 0 0 5 6 0 0 9 0 8 0 1 0 0 0 4 6 0 0 0 0 7 0 6 5 1 8 3 4 7 9 2 0 0 0 9 0<sub>-</sub>
→0 4 5', 'gsd.impossible_hints': 0, 'timer.__absolute_start_time__': <float_
→at remote 0x984b474>, 'gsd.hints': 0, 'timer.active_time': <float at_
→remote 0x984b494>, 'timer.total_time': <float at remote 0x984b464>}],
→dialog=<gtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>, saved_game_model=<gtk.ListStore_
→at remote 0x98fad24>, sudoku_maker=<SudokuMaker(terminated=False, __
→played=[], batch_siz...(truncated)
           swallower.run_dialog(self.dialog)
(gdb) py-down
#11 Frame 0x9aead74, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
dialog_swallower.py, line 48, in run_dialog (self=<SwappableArea(running=</pre>
→<gtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>, main_page=0) at remote 0x98fa6e4>, d=
gtk.main()
(gdb) py-down
#8 (unable to read python frame information)
(gdb) py-down
Unable to find a newer python frame
```

and we're at the bottom of the Python stack.

Note that in Python 3.12 and newer, the same C stack frame can be used for multiple Python stack frames. This means that py-up and py-down may move multiple Python frames at once. For example:

#### 3.4 py-bt

The py-bt command attempts to display a Python-level backtrace of the current thread.

#### For example:

```
(qdb) py-bt
#8 (unable to read python frame information)
#11 Frame 0x9aead74, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
→dialog_swallower.py, line 48, in run_dialog (self=<SwappableArea(running=
→<qtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>, main_page=0) at remote 0x98fa6e4>, d=
gtk.main()
#14 Frame 0x99262ac, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
→game_selector.py, line 201, in run_swallowed_dialog (self=
→<NewOrSavedGameSelector(new_game_model=<gtk.ListStore at remote 0x98fab44>,
→ puzzle=None, saved_games=[{'gsd.auto_fills': 0, 'tracking': {}, 'trackers
→': {}, 'notes': [], 'saved_at': 1270084485, 'game': '7 8 0 0 0 0 0 5 6 0 0 ∪
-9 0 8 0 1 0 0 0 4 6 0 0 0 0 7 0 6 5 0 0 0 4 7 9 2 0 0 0 9 0 1 0 0 0 3 9 7<sub>-</sub>
-6 0 0 0 1 8 0 6 0 0 0 0 2 8 0 0 0 5 0 4 0 6 0 0 2 1 0 0 0 0 4 5\n7 8 0 0
-0 0 0 5 6 0 0 9 0 8 0 1 0 0 0 4 6 0 0 0 0 7 0 6 5 1 8 3 4 7 9 2 0 0 0 9 0<sub>-</sub>
→0 4 5', 'gsd.impossible_hints': 0, 'timer.__absolute_start_time__': <float_
→at remote 0x984b474>, 'gsd.hints': 0, 'timer.active_time': <float at_
→remote 0x984b494>, 'timer.total_time': <float at remote 0x984b464>}],
→dialog=<gtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>, saved_game_model=<gtk.ListStore_
→at remote 0x98fad24>, sudoku_maker=<SudokuMaker(terminated=False, __
→played=[], batch_siz...(truncated)
           swallower.run_dialog(self.dialog)
#19 (unable to read python frame information)
#23 (unable to read python frame information)
#34 (unable to read python frame information)
#37 Frame 0x9420b04, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
→main.py, line 906, in start_game ()
   u = UI()
#40 Frame 0x948e82c, for file /usr/lib/python2.6/site-packages/gnome_sudoku/
→gnome_sudoku.py, line 22, in start_game (main=<module at remote 0xb771b7f4>
→)
   main.start_game()
```

The frame numbers correspond to those displayed by GDB's standard backtrace command.

## 3.5 py-print

The py-print command looks up a Python name and tries to print it. It looks in locals within the current thread, then globals, then finally builtins:

```
(gdb) py-print self
local 'self' = <SwappableArea(running=<gtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>,
main_page=0) at remote 0x98fa6e4>
(gdb) py-print __name__
global '__name__' = 'gnome_sudoku.dialog_swallower'
(gdb) py-print len
builtin 'len' = <built-in function len>
(gdb) py-print scarlet_pimpernel
'scarlet_pimpernel' not found
```

If the current C frame corresponds to multiple Python frames, py-print only considers the first one.

#### 3.6 py-locals

The py-locals command looks up all Python locals within the current Python frame in the selected thread, and prints their representations:

```
(gdb) py-locals
self = <SwappableArea(running=<gtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>,
main_page=0) at remote 0x98fa6e4>
d = <gtk.Dialog at remote 0x98faaa4>
```

If the current C frame corresponds to multiple Python frames, locals from all of them will be shown:

```
(gdb) py-locals
Locals for recursive_function
n = 0
Locals for recursive_function
n = 1
Locals for recursive_function
n = 2
Locals for recursive_function
n = 3
Locals for recursive_function
n = 4
Locals for recursive_function
n = 5
Locals for <module>
```

## 4 Use with GDB commands

The extension commands complement GDB's built-in commands. For example, you can use a frame numbers shown by py-bt with the frame command to go a specific frame within the selected thread, like this:

```
(gdb) frame 68
#68 0x0000000004cd1e6 in PyEval_EvalFrameEx (f=Frame 0xaa4560, for file Lib/test/
→regrtest.py, line 1548, in <module> (), throwflag=0) at Python/ceval.c:2665
                                x = call_function(&sp, oparg);
(gdb) py-list
1543
            \# Run the tests in a context manager that temporary changes the CWD to a
1544
            # temporary and writable directory. If it's not possible to create or
1545
            # change the CWD, the original CWD will be used. The original CWD is
1546
            # available from test_support.SAVEDCWD.
1547
            with test_support.temp_cwd(TESTCWD, quiet=True):
>1548
                main()
```

The info threads command will give you a list of the threads within the process, and you can use the thread command to select a different one:

```
(qdb) info threads
 105 Thread 0x7fffefa18710 (LWP 10260) sem_wait () at ../nptl/sysdeps/unix/sysv/
→linux/x86_64/sem_wait.S:86
 104 Thread 0x7fffdf5fe710 (LWP 10259) sem_wait () at ../nptl/sysdeps/unix/sysv/
→linux/x86_64/sem_wait.S:86
* 1 Thread 0x7fffff7fe2700 (LWP 10145) 0x00000038e46d73e3 in select () at ../sysdeps/
→unix/syscall-template.S:82
```

You can use thread apply all COMMAND or (t a a COMMAND for short) to run a command on all threads. With py-bt, this lets you see what every thread is doing at the Python level:

```
(gdb) t a a py-bt
Thread 105 (Thread 0x7fffefa18710 (LWP 10260)):
#5 Frame 0x7fffd00019d0, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/threading.py,
→line 155, in _acquire_restore (self=<_RLock(_Verbose__verbose=False, _RLock__
→owner=140737354016512, _RLock__block=<thread.lock at remote 0x858770>, _RLock__
\rightarrowcount=1) at remote 0xd7ff40>, count_owner=(1, 140737213728528), count=1,\Box
→owner=140737213728528)
        self.__block.acquire()
#8 Frame 0x7fffac001640, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/threading.py,__
→line 269, in wait (self=<_Condition(_Condition__lock=<_RLock(_Verbose__
→verbose=False, _RLock__owner=140737354016512, _RLock__block=<thread.lock at remote_
→0x858770>, _RLock__count=1) at remote 0xd7ff40>, acquire=<instancemethod at remote_
→0xd80260>, _is_owned=<instancemethod at remote 0xd80160>, _release_save=
\rightarrow<instancemethod at remote 0xd803e0>, release=<instancemethod at remote 0xd802e0>, _
→acquire_restore=<instancemethod at remote 0xd7ee60>, _Verbose__verbose=False, _
→Condition_waiters=[]) at remote 0xd7fd10>, timeout=None, waiter=<thread.lock at_
\rightarrowremote 0x858a90>, saved_state=(1, 140737213728528))
            self._acquire_restore(saved_state)
#12 Frame 0x7fffb8001a10, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/test/lock_tests.
\rightarrowpy, line 348, in f ()
            cond.wait()
#16 Frame 0x7fffb8001c40, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/test/lock_tests.
\rightarrowpy, line 37, in task (tid=140737213728528)
Thread 104 (Thread 0x7fffdf5fe710 (LWP 10259)):
#5 Frame 0x7fffe4001580, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/threading.py, _
→line 155, in _acquire_restore (self=<_RLock(_Verbose__verbose=False, _RLock__
→owner=140737354016512, _RLock__block=<thread.lock at remote 0x858770>, _RLock__
```

```
\rightarrowcount=1) at remote 0xd7ff40>, count_owner=(1, 140736940992272), count=1,\downarrow
→owner=140736940992272)
        self.__block.acquire()
#8 Frame 0x7fffc8002090, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/threading.py,_
→line 269, in wait (self=<_Condition(_Condition__lock=<_RLock(_Verbose_
→verbose=False, _RLock__owner=140737354016512, _RLock__block=<thread.lock at remote_
→0x858770>, _RLock__count=1) at remote 0xd7ff40>, acquire=<instancemethod at remote_
→0xd80260>, _is_owned=<instancemethod at remote 0xd80160>, _release_save=
\rightarrow<instancemethod at remote 0xd803e0>, release=<instancemethod at remote 0xd802e0>, _
→acquire_restore=<instancemethod at remote 0xd7ee60>, _Verbose__verbose=False, _
→Condition_waiters=[]) at remote 0xd7fd10>, timeout=None, waiter=<thread.lock at_
\rightarrowremote 0x858860>, saved_state=(1, 140736940992272))
            self._acquire_restore(saved_state)
#12 Frame 0x7fffac001c90, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/test/lock_tests.
\rightarrowpy, line 348, in f ()
            cond.wait()
#16 Frame 0x7fffac0011c0, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/test/lock_tests.
\rightarrowpy, line 37, in task (tid=140736940992272)
                f()
Thread 1 (Thread 0x7fffff7fe2700 (LWP 10145)):
#5 Frame 0xcb5380, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/test/lock_tests.py,__
\rightarrowline 16, in _wait ()
    time.sleep(0.01)
#8 Frame 0x7fffd00024a0, for file /home/david/coding/python-svn/Lib/test/lock_tests.
→py, line 378, in _check_notify (self=<ConditionTests(_testMethodName='test_notify',__
→_resultForDoCleanups=<TestResult(_original_stdout=<cStringIO.StringO at remote_
→0xc191e0>, skipped=[], _mirrorOutput=False, testsRun=39, buffer=False, _original_
→stderr=<file at remote 0x7ffff7fc6340>, _stdout_buffer=<cStringIO.StringO at remote_
→0xc9c7f8>, _stderr_buffer=<cStringIO.StringO at remote 0xc9c790>, _
→moduleSetUpFailed=False, expectedFailures=[], errors=[], _previousTestClass=<type_
→at remote 0x928310>, unexpectedSuccesses=[], failures=[], shouldStop=False,
→failfast=False) at remote 0xc185a0>, _threads=(0,), _cleanups=[], _type_equality_
→funcs={<type at remote 0x7eba00>: <instancemethod at remote 0xd750e0>, <type at_
→remote 0x7e7820>: <instancemethod at remote 0xd75160>, <type at remote 0x7e30e0>:
\rightarrow<instancemethod at remote 0xd75060>, <type at remote 0x7e7d20>: <instancemethod at
→remote 0xd751e0>, <type at remote 0x7f19e0...(truncated)</pre>
        _wait()
```