

# Dynamic Memory Allocation: Advanced Concepts

CSE4100: System Programming

Youngjae Kim (PhD)

<https://sites.google.com/site/youkim/home>

Distributed Computing and Operating Systems Laboratory (DISCOS)

<https://discos.sogang.ac.kr>

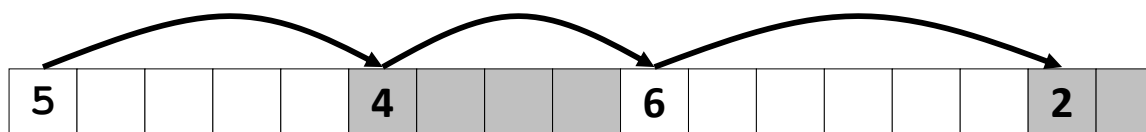
Office: R911, E-mail: [youkim@sogang.ac.kr](mailto:youkim@sogang.ac.kr)

# Today

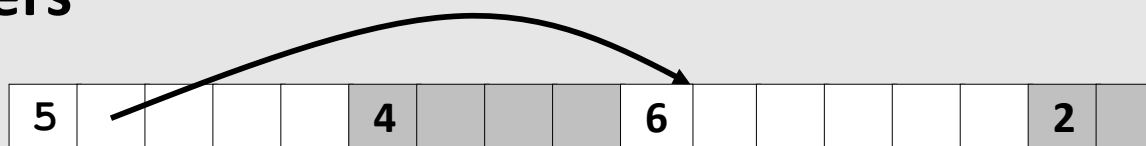
- **Explicit free lists**
- Segregated free lists
- Garbage collection
- Memory-related perils and pitfalls

# Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- Method 1: *Implicit free list* using length—links all blocks



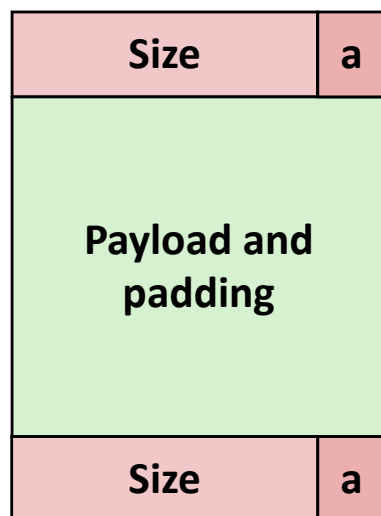
- Method 2: *Explicit free list* among the free blocks using pointers



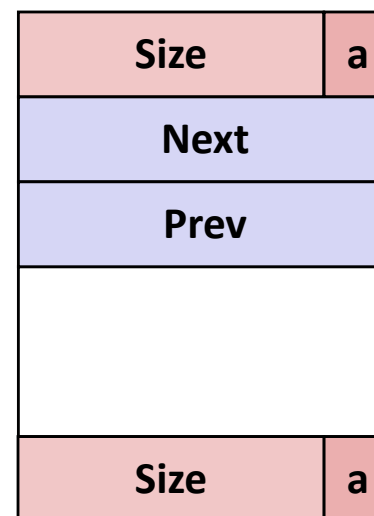
- Method 3: *Segregated free list*
  - Different free lists for different size classes
- Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size*
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

# Explicit Free Lists

Allocated (as before)



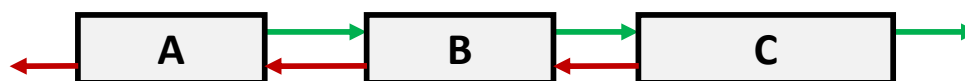
Free



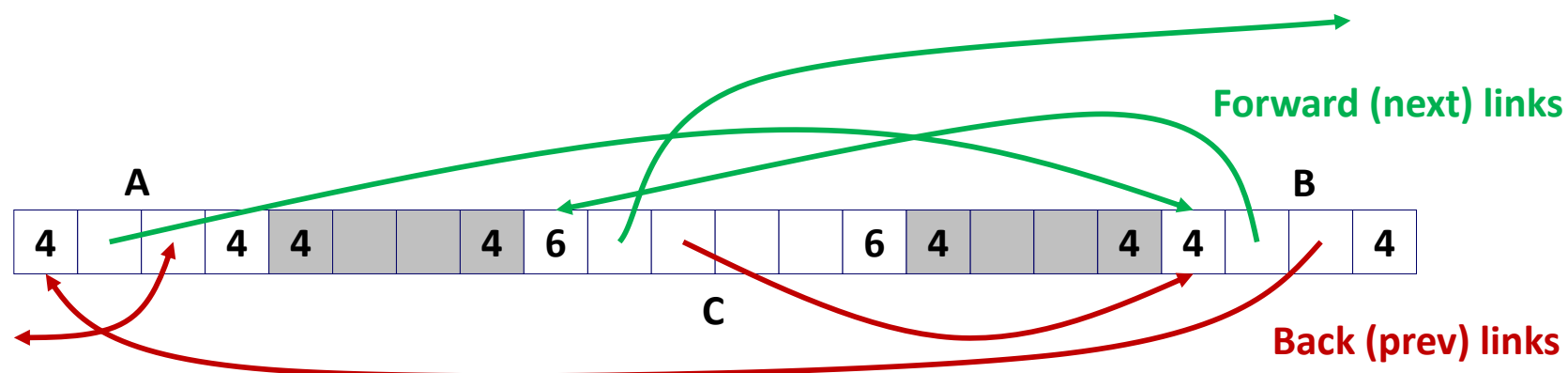
- Maintain list(s) of *free* blocks, not *all* blocks
  - The “next” free block could be anywhere
    - So we need to store forward/back pointers, not just sizes
  - Still need boundary tags for coalescing
  - Luckily we track only free blocks, so we can use payload area

# Explicit Free Lists

## ■ Logically:



## ■ Physically: blocks can be in any order



# Allocating From Explicit Free Lists

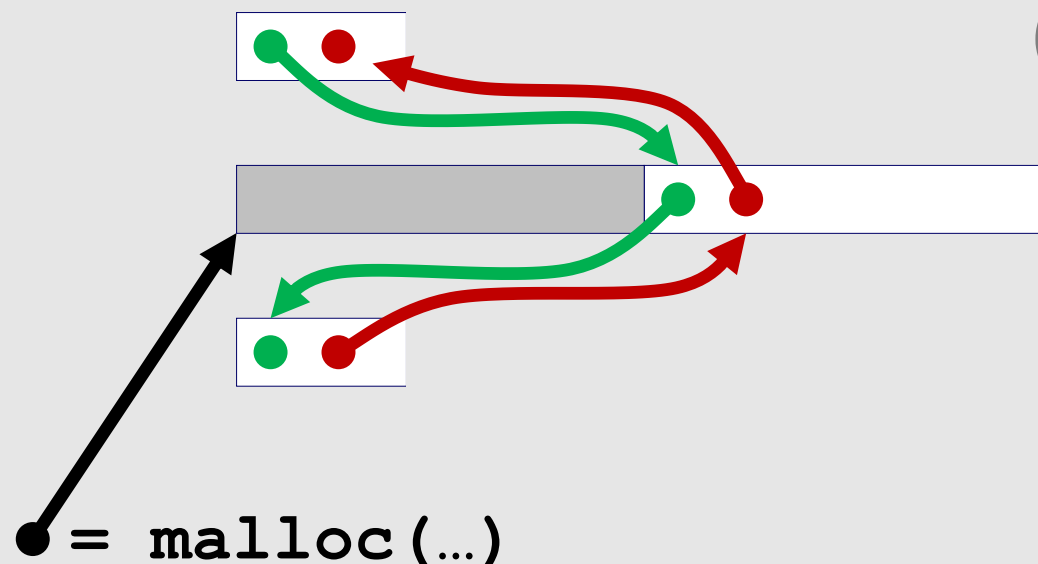
conceptual graphic

*Before*



*After*

*(with splitting)*

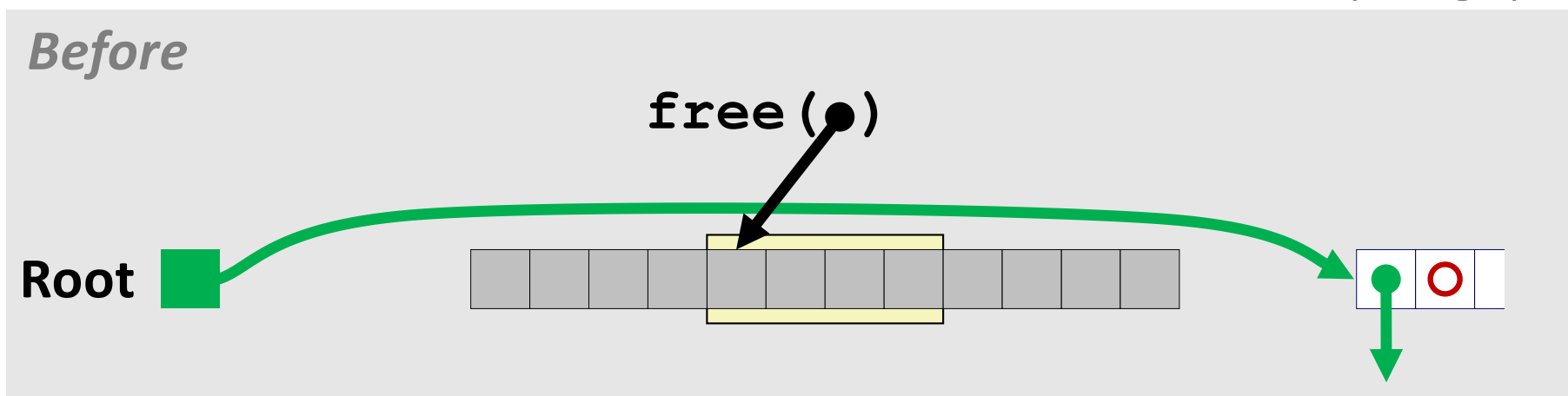


# Freeing With Explicit Free Lists

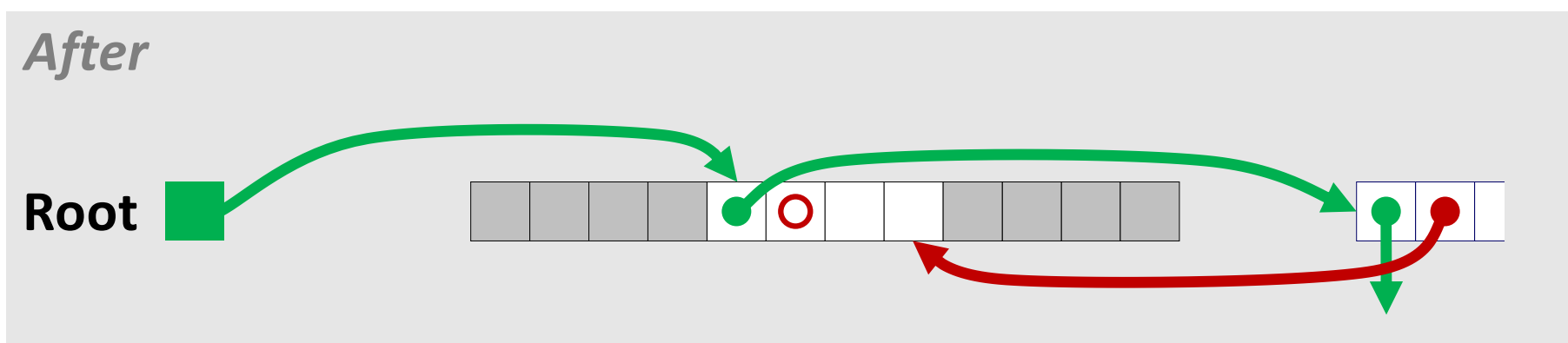
- ***Insertion policy:*** Where in the free list do you put a newly freed block?
- **LIFO (last-in-first-out) policy**
  - Insert freed block at the beginning of the free list
  - ***Pro:*** simple and constant time
  - ***Con:*** studies suggest fragmentation is worse than address ordered
- **Address-ordered policy**
  - Insert freed blocks so that free list blocks are always in address order:
$$addr(prev) < addr(curr) < addr(next)$$
  - ***Con:*** requires search
  - ***Pro:*** studies suggest fragmentation is lower than LIFO

# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 1)

conceptual graphic



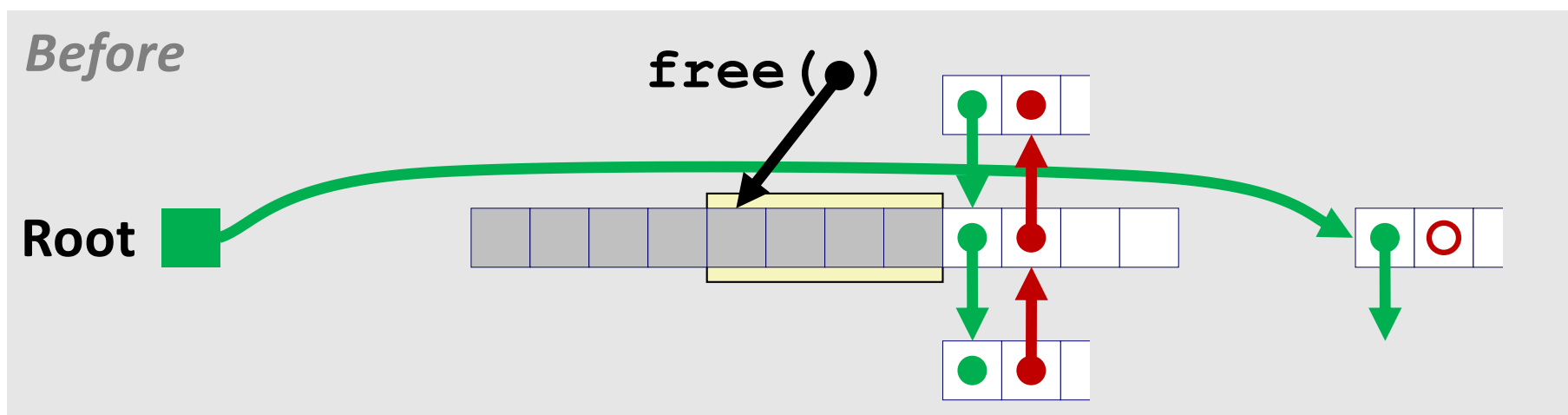
- Insert the freed block at the root of the list



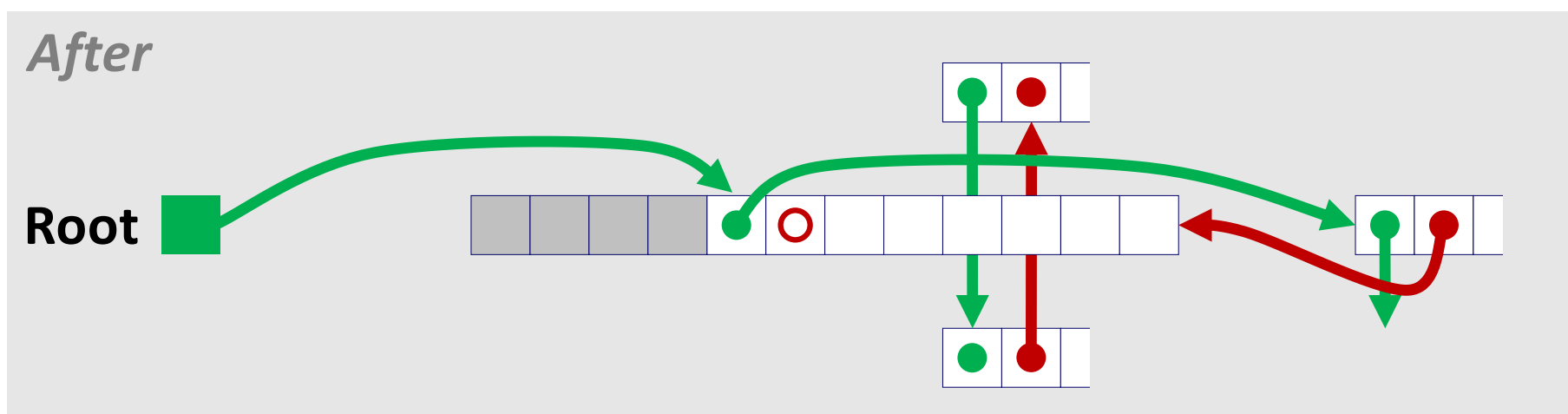


# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 2)

conceptual graphic

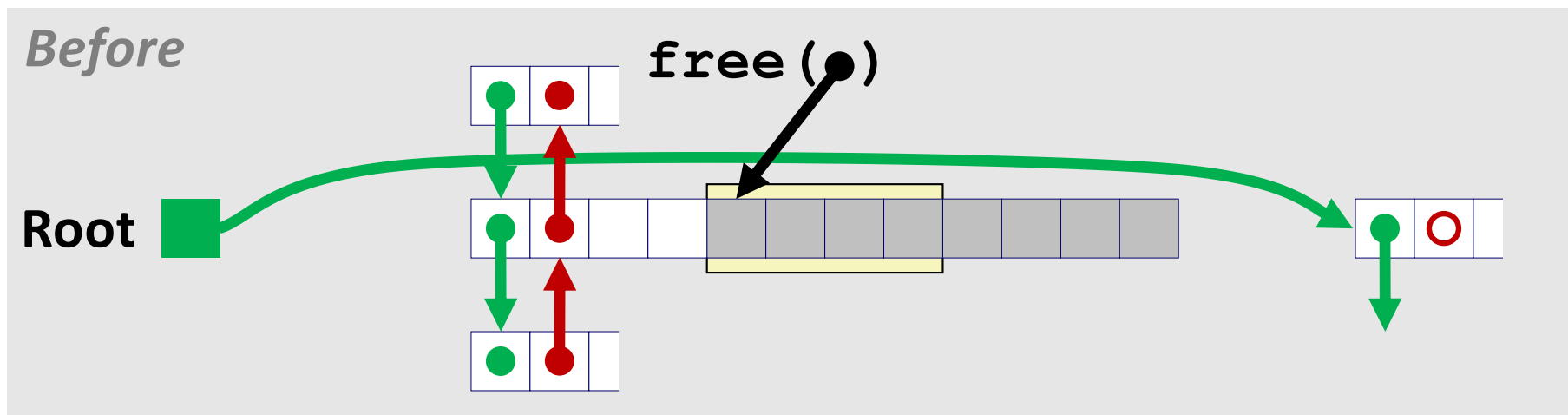


- Splice out successor block, coalesce both memory blocks and insert the new block at the root of the list

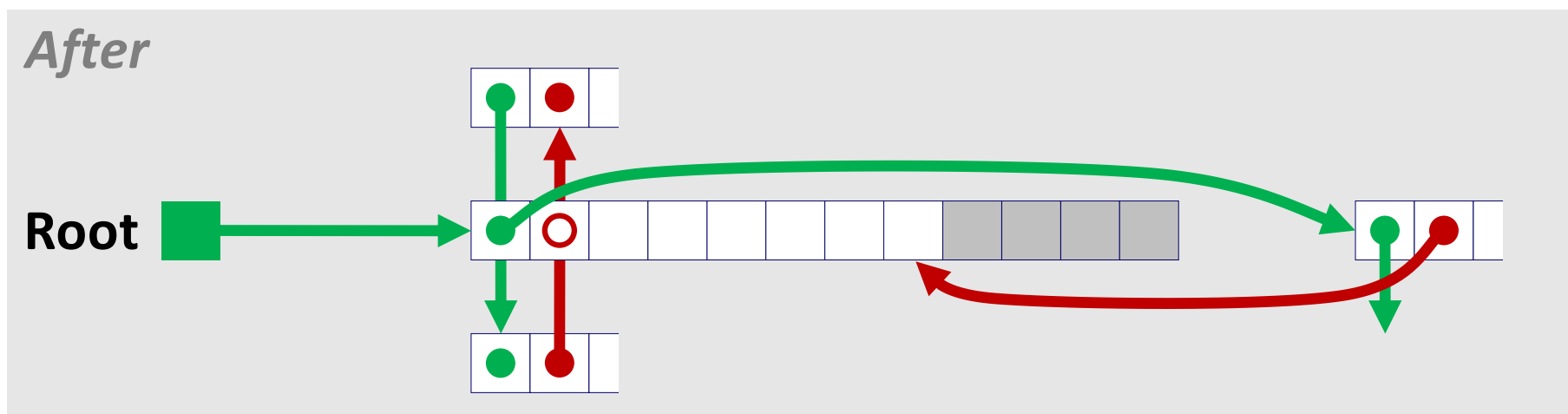


## Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 3)

conceptual graphic

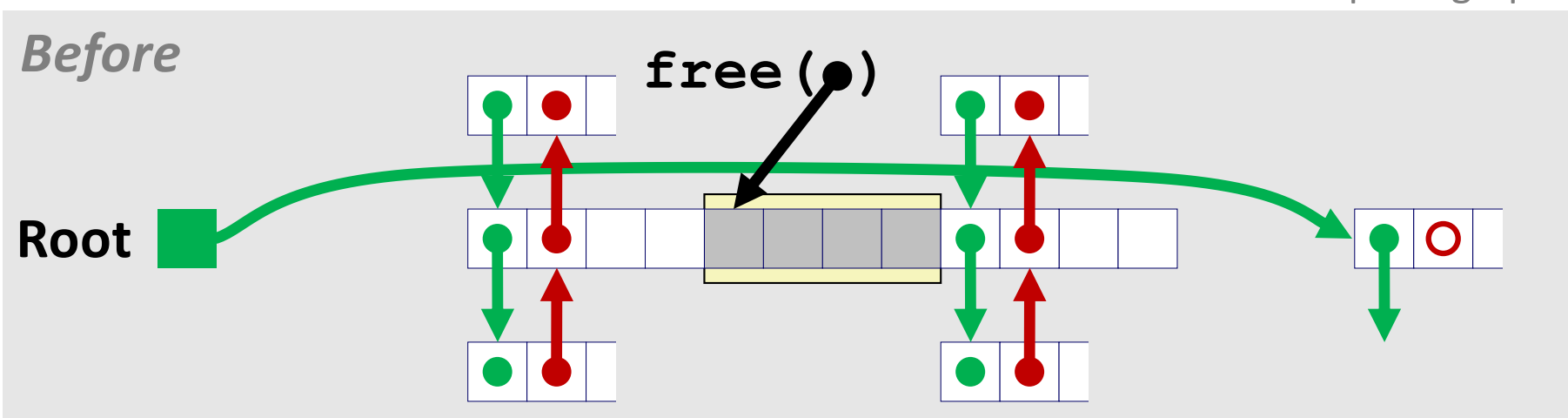


- **Splice out predecessor block, coalesce both memory blocks, and insert the new block at the root of the list**

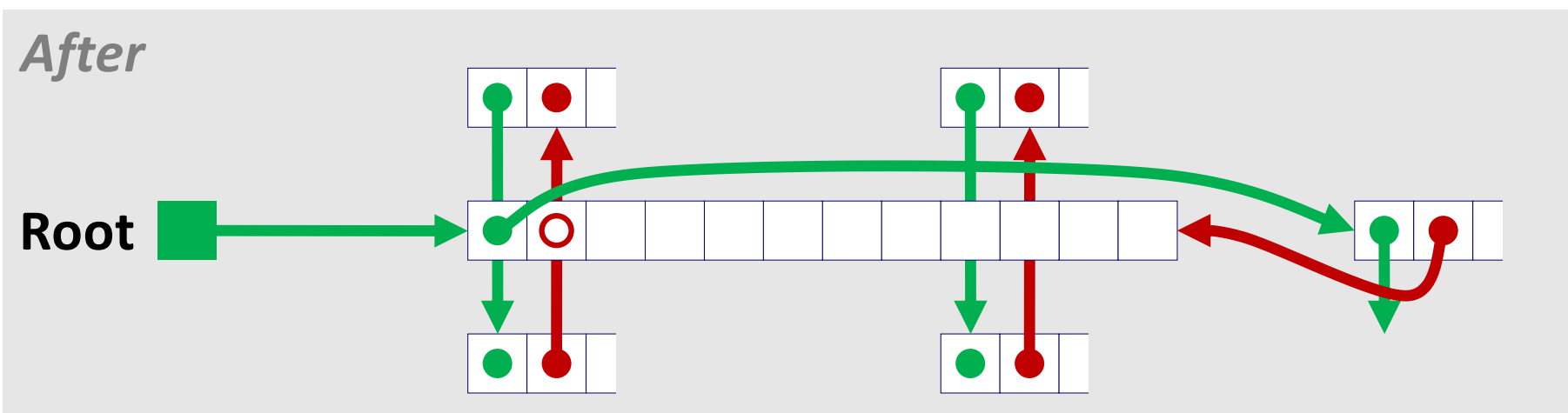


# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 4)

conceptual graphic



- Splice out predecessor and successor blocks, coalesce all 3 memory blocks and insert the new block at the root of the list



# Explicit List Summary

## ■ Comparison to implicit list:

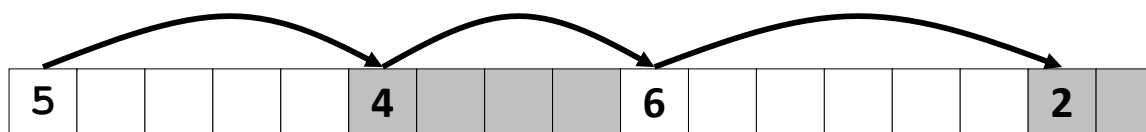
- Allocate is linear time in number of *free* blocks instead of *all* blocks
  - *Much faster* when most of the memory is full
- Slightly more complicated allocate and free since needs to splice blocks in and out of the list
- Some extra space for the links (2 extra words needed for each block)
  - Does this increase internal fragmentation?

## ■ Most common use of linked lists is in conjunction with segregated free lists

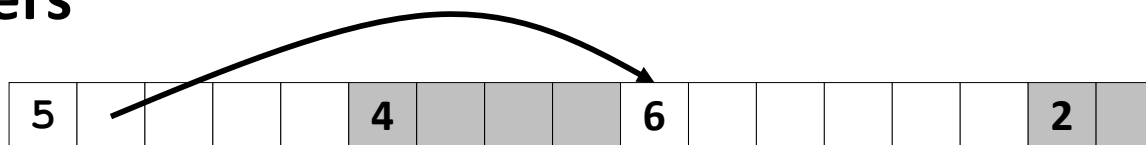
- Keep multiple linked lists of different size classes, or possibly for different types of objects

# Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- Method 1: *Implicit list* using length—links all blocks



- Method 2: *Explicit list* among the free blocks using pointers



- Method 3: *Segregated free list*
  - Different free lists for different size classes

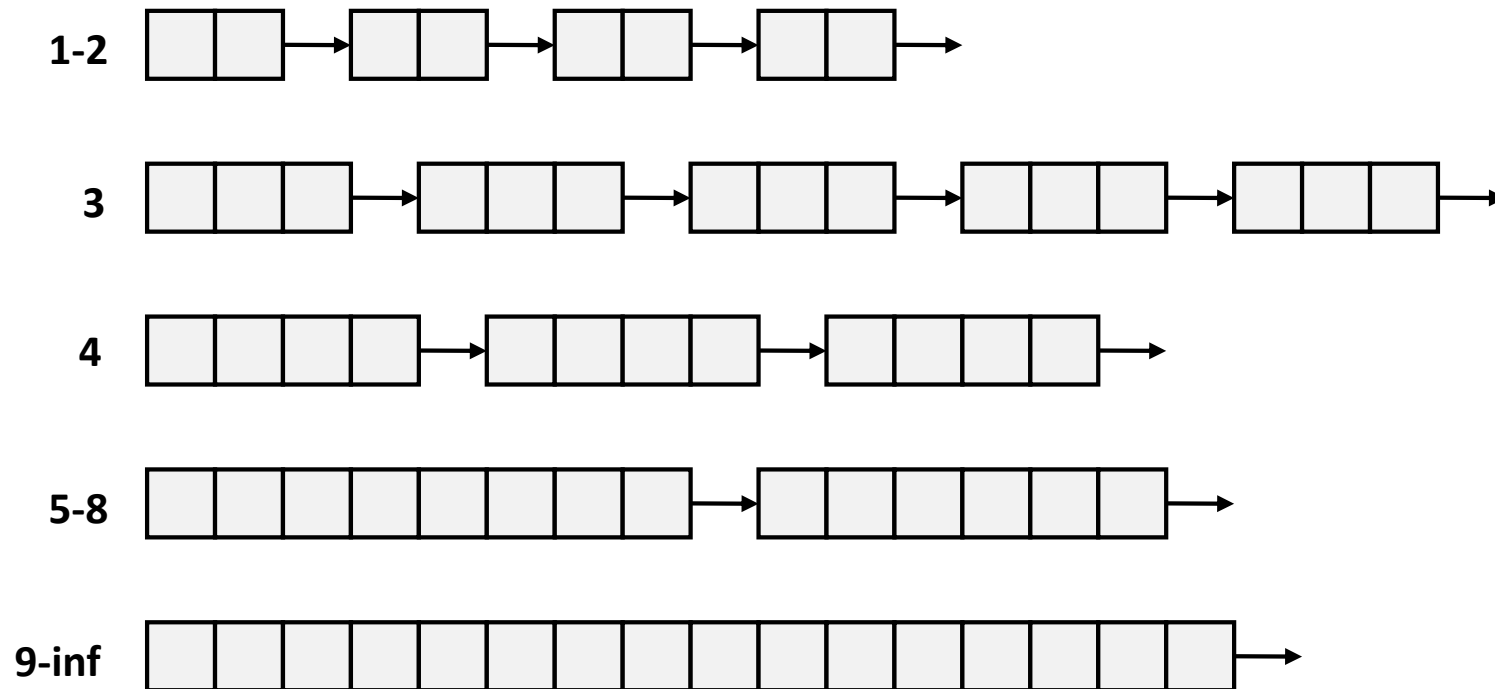
- Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size*
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

# Today

- Explicit free lists
- **Segregated free lists**
- Garbage collection
- Memory-related perils and pitfalls

# Segregated List (Seglist) Allocators

- Each *size class* of blocks has its own free list



- Often have separate classes for each small size
- For larger sizes: One class for each two-power size

# Seglist Allocator

- Given an array of free lists, each one for some size class
- To allocate a block of size  $n$ :
  - Search appropriate free list for block of size  $m > n$
  - If an appropriate block is found:
    - Split block and place fragment on appropriate list (optional)
  - If no block is found, try next larger class
  - Repeat until block is found
- If no block is found:
  - Request additional heap memory from OS (using `sbrk()`)
  - Allocate block of  $n$  bytes from this new memory
  - Place remainder as a single free block in largest size class.



# Seglist Allocator (cont.)

## ■ To free a block:

- Coalesce and place on appropriate list

## ■ Advantages of seglist allocators

- Higher throughput
  - log time for power-of-two size classes
- Better memory utilization
  - First-fit search of segregated free list approximates a best-fit search of entire heap.
  - Extreme case: Giving each block its own size class is equivalent to best-fit.

# More Info on Allocators

- **D. Knuth, “*The Art of Computer Programming*”, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Addison Wesley, 1973**
  - The classic reference on dynamic storage allocation
  
- **Wilson et al, “*Dynamic Storage Allocation: A Survey and Critical Review*”, Proc. 1995 Int’l Workshop on Memory Management, Kinross, Scotland, Sept, 1995.**
  - Comprehensive survey

# Today

- Explicit free lists
- Segregated free lists
- **Garbage collection**
- Memory-related perils and pitfalls

# Implicit Memory Management: Garbage Collection

- ***Garbage collection***: automatic reclamation of heap-allocated storage—application never has to free

```
void foo() {  
    int *p = malloc(128);  
    return; /* p block is now garbage */  
}
```

- **Common in many dynamic languages:**
  - Python, Ruby, Java, Perl, ML, Lisp, Mathematica
- **Variants (“conservative” garbage collectors) exist for C and C++**
  - However, cannot necessarily collect all garbage

# Garbage Collection

- **How does the memory manager know when memory can be freed?**
  - In general we cannot know what is going to be used in the future since it depends on conditionals
  - But we can tell that certain blocks cannot be used if there are no pointers to them
  
- **Must make certain assumptions about pointers**
  - Memory manager can distinguish pointers from non-pointers
  - All pointers point to the start of a block
  - Cannot hide pointers  
(e.g., by coercing them to an `int`, and then back again)

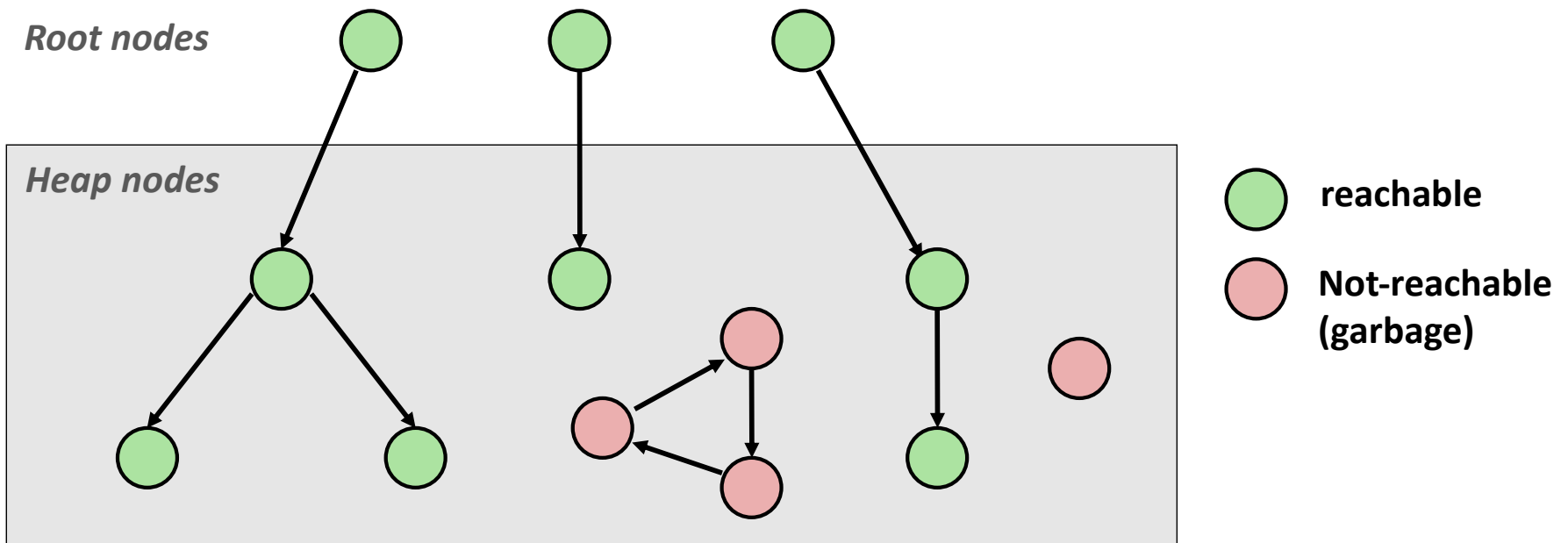
# Classical GC Algorithms

- **Mark-and-sweep collection (McCarthy, 1960)**
  - Does not move blocks (unless you also “compact”)
- **Reference counting (Collins, 1960)**
  - Does not move blocks (not discussed)
- **Copying collection (Minsky, 1963)**
  - Moves blocks (not discussed)
- **Generational Collectors (Lieberman and Hewitt, 1983)**
  - Collection based on lifetimes
    - Most allocations become garbage very soon
    - So focus reclamation work on zones of memory recently allocated
- **For more information:**  
**Jones and Lin, “*Garbage Collection: Algorithms for Automatic Dynamic Memory*”, John Wiley & Sons, 1996.**

# Memory as a Graph

## ■ We view memory as a directed graph

- Each block is a node in the graph
- Each pointer is an edge in the graph
- Locations not in the heap that contain pointers into the heap are called **root** nodes (e.g. registers, locations on the stack, global variables)

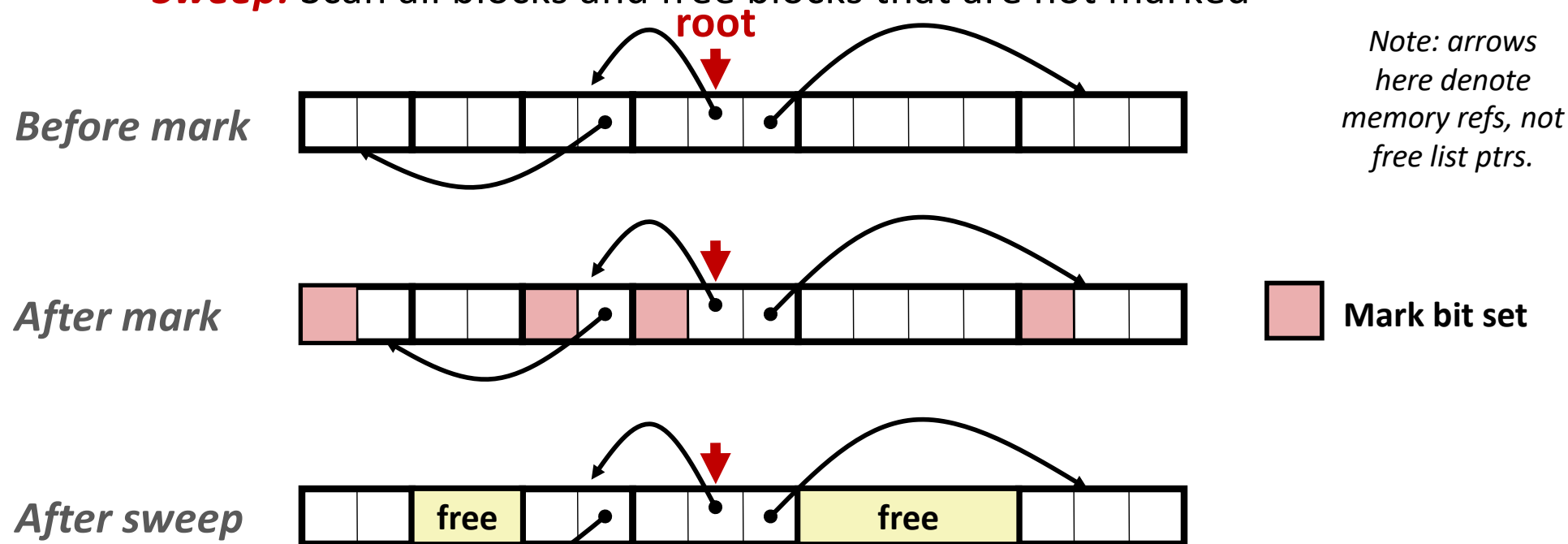


A node (block) is **reachable** if there is a path from any root to that node.

Non-reachable nodes are **garbage** (cannot be needed by the application)

# Mark and Sweep Collecting

- Can build on top of malloc/free package
  - Allocate using `malloc` until you “run out of space”
- When out of space:
  - Use extra **mark bit** in the head of each block
  - **Mark:** Start at roots and set mark bit on each reachable block
  - **Sweep:** Scan all blocks and free blocks that are not marked





# Assumptions For a Simple Implementation

## ■ Application

- `new(n)`: returns pointer to new block with all locations cleared
- `read(b, i)`: read location `i` of block `b` into register
- `write(b, i, v)`: write `v` into location `i` of block `b`

## ■ Each block will have a header word

- addressed as `b[-1]`, for a block `b`
- Used for different purposes in different collectors

## ■ Instructions used by the Garbage Collector

- `is_ptr(p)`: determines whether `p` is a pointer
- `length(b)`: returns the length of block `b`, not including the header
- `get_roots()`: returns all the roots

# Mark and Sweep (cont.)

## Mark using depth-first traversal of the memory graph

```
ptr mark(ptr p) {  
    if (!is_ptr(p)) return;           // do nothing if not pointer  
    if (markBitSet(p)) return;       // check if already marked  
    setMarkBit(p);                   // set the mark bit  
    for (i=0; i < length(p); i++)    // call mark on all words  
        mark(p[i]);                  // in the block  
    return;  
}
```

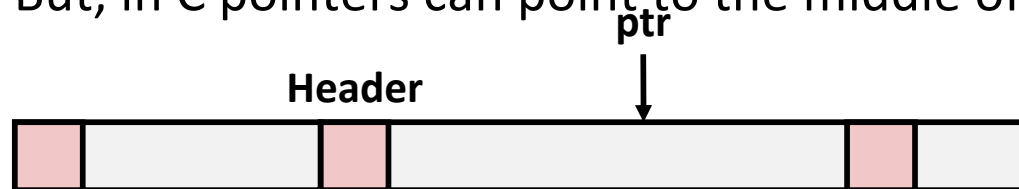
## Sweep using lengths to find next block

```
ptr sweep(ptr p, ptr end) {  
    while (p < end) {  
        if markBitSet(p)  
            clearMarkBit();  
        else if (allocateBitSet(p))  
            free(p);  
        p += length(p);  
    }  
}
```

# Conservative Mark & Sweep in C

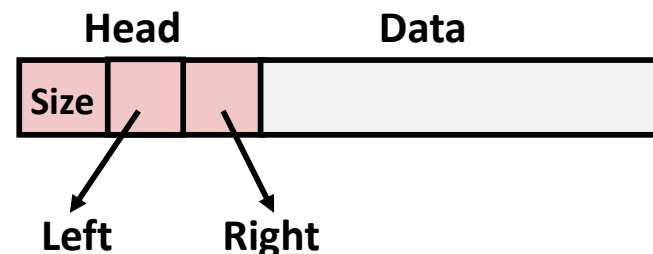
## ■ A “conservative garbage collector” for C programs

- `is_ptr()` determines if a word is a pointer by checking if it points to an allocated block of memory
- But, in C pointers can point to the middle of a block



## ■ So how to find the beginning of the block?

- Can use a balanced binary tree to keep track of all allocated blocks (key is start-of-block)
- Balanced-tree pointers can be stored in header (use two additional words)



**Left:** smaller addresses  
**Right:** larger addresses

# Today

- Explicit free lists
- Segregated free lists
- Garbage collection
- **Memory-related perils and pitfalls**

# Memory-Related Perils and Pitfalls

- Dereferencing bad pointers
- Reading uninitialized memory
- Overwriting memory
- Referencing nonexistent variables
- Freeing blocks multiple times
- Referencing freed blocks
- Failing to free blocks

# Dereferencing Bad Pointers

## ■ The classic `scanf` bug

```
int val;  
  
...  
  
scanf("%d", val);
```

# Reading Uninitialized Memory

- Assuming that heap data is initialized to zero

```
/* return y = Ax */
int *matvec(int **A, int *x) {
    int *y = malloc(N*sizeof(int));
    int i, j;

    for (i=0; i<N; i++)
        for (j=0; j<N; j++)
            y[i] += A[i][j]*x[j];
    return y;
}
```

# Overwriting Memory

- Allocating the (possibly) wrong sized object

```
int **p;  
  
p = malloc(N*sizeof(int));  
  
for (i=0; i<N; i++) {  
    p[i] = malloc(M*sizeof(int));  
}
```



# Overwriting Memory

## ■ Off-by-one error

```
int **p;  
  
p = malloc(N*sizeof(int *));  
  
for (i=0; i<=N; i++) {  
    p[i] = malloc(M*sizeof(int));  
}
```

# Overwriting Memory

- Not checking the max string size

```
char s[8];  
int i;  
  
gets(s);  /* reads "123456789" from stdin */
```

- Basis for classic buffer overflow attacks

# Overwriting Memory

- Misunderstanding pointer arithmetic

```
int *search(int *p, int val) {  
    while (*p && *p != val)  
        p += sizeof(int);  
  
    return p;  
}
```

# Overwriting Memory

- Referencing a pointer instead of the object it points to

```
int *BinheapDelete(int **binheap, int *size) {  
    int *packet;  
    packet = binheap[0];  
    binheap[0] = binheap[*size - 1];  
    *size--;  
    Heapify(binheap, *size, 0);  
    return(packet);  
}
```

# Referencing Nonexistent Variables

- Forgetting that local variables disappear when a function returns

```
int *foo () {  
    int val;  
  
    return &val;  
}
```

# Freeing Blocks Multiple Times

## ■ Nasty!

```
x = malloc(N*sizeof(int));  
    <manipulate x>  
free(x);  
  
y = malloc(M*sizeof(int));  
    <manipulate y>  
free(x);
```

# Referencing Freed Blocks

## ■ Evil!

```
x = malloc(N*sizeof(int));  
  <manipulate x>  
free(x);  
  ...  
y = malloc(M*sizeof(int));  
for (i=0; i<M; i++)  
    y[i] = x[i]++;
```

# Failing to Free Blocks (Memory Leaks)

- Slow, long-term killer!

```
foo() {  
    int *x = malloc(N*sizeof(int));  
    ...  
    return;  
}
```



# Failing to Free Blocks (Memory Leaks)

## ■ Freeing only part of a data structure

```
struct list {
    int val;
    struct list *next;
};

foo() {
    struct list *head = malloc(sizeof(struct list));
    head->val = 0;
    head->next = NULL;
    <create and manipulate the rest of the list>
    ...
    free(head);
    return;
}
```

# Dealing With Memory Bugs

## ■ Debugger: `gdb`

- Good for finding bad pointer dereferences
- Hard to detect the other memory bugs

## ■ Data structure consistency checker

- Runs silently, prints message only on error
- Use as a probe to zero in on error

## ■ Binary translator: `valgrind`

- Powerful debugging and analysis technique
- Rewrites text section of executable object file
- Checks each individual reference at runtime
  - Bad pointers, overwrites, refs outside of allocated block

## ■ `glibc malloc` contains checking code

- `setenv MALLOC_CHECK_ 3`