

3.3 Connectionless Transport: UDP

In this section, we'll take a close look at UDP, how it works, and what it does. We encourage you to refer back to [Section 2.1](#), which includes an overview of the UDP service model, and to [Section 2.7.1](#), which discusses socket programming using UDP.

To motivate our discussion about UDP, suppose you were interested in designing a no-frills, bare-bones transport protocol. How might you go about doing this? You might first consider using a vacuum transport protocol. In particular, on the sending side, you might consider taking the messages from the application process and passing them directly to the network layer; and on the receiving side, you might consider taking the messages arriving from the network layer and passing them directly to the application process. But as we learned in the previous section, we have to do a little more than nothing! At the very least, the transport layer has to provide a multiplexing/demultiplexing service in order to pass data between the network layer and the correct application-level process.

UDP, defined in [\[RFC 768\]](#), does just about as little as a transport protocol can do. Aside from the multiplexing/demultiplexing function and some light error checking, it adds nothing to IP. In fact, if the application developer chooses UDP instead of TCP, then the application is almost directly talking with IP. UDP takes messages from the application process, attaches source and destination port number fields for the multiplexing/demultiplexing service, adds two other small fields, and passes the resulting segment to the network layer. The network layer encapsulates the transport-layer segment into an IP datagram and then makes a best-effort attempt to deliver the segment to the receiving host. If the segment arrives at the receiving host, UDP uses the destination port number to deliver the segment's data to the correct application process. Note that with UDP there is no handshaking between sending and receiving transport-layer entities before sending a segment. For this reason, UDP is said to be *connectionless*.

DNS is an example of an application-layer protocol that typically uses UDP. When the DNS application in a host wants to make a query, it constructs a DNS query message and passes the message to UDP. Without performing any handshaking with the UDP entity running on the destination end system, the host-side UDP adds header fields to the message and passes the resulting segment to the network layer. The network layer encapsulates the UDP segment into a datagram and sends the datagram to a name server. The DNS application at the querying host then waits for a reply to its query. If it doesn't receive a reply (possibly because the underlying network lost the query or the reply), it might try resending the query, try sending the query to another name server, or inform the invoking application that it can't get a reply.

Now you might be wondering why an application developer would ever choose to build an application over UDP rather than over TCP. Isn't TCP always preferable, since TCP provides a reliable data transfer service, while UDP does not? The answer is no, as some applications are better suited for UDP for the following reasons:

- **Finer application-level control over what data is sent, and when.** Under UDP, as soon as an application process passes data to UDP, UDP will package the data inside a UDP segment and immediately pass the segment to the network layer. TCP, on the other hand, has a congestion-control mechanism that throttles the transport-layer TCP sender when one or more links between the source and destination hosts become excessively congested. TCP will also continue to resend a segment until the receipt of the segment has been acknowledged by the destination, regardless of how long reliable delivery takes. Since real-time applications often require a minimum sending rate, do not want to overly delay segment transmission, and can tolerate some data loss, TCP's service model is not particularly well matched to these applications' needs. As discussed below, these applications can use UDP and implement, as part of the application, any additional functionality that is needed beyond UDP's no-frills segment-delivery service.
- **No connection establishment.** As we'll discuss later, TCP uses a three-way handshake before it starts to transfer data. UDP just blasts away without any formal preliminaries. Thus UDP does not introduce any delay to establish a connection. This is probably the principal reason why DNS runs over UDP rather than TCP—DNS would be much slower if it ran over TCP. HTTP uses TCP rather than UDP, since reliability is critical for Web pages with text. But, as we briefly discussed in [Section 2.2](#), the TCP connection-establishment delay in HTTP is an important contributor to the delays associated with downloading Web documents. Indeed, the QUIC protocol (Quick UDP Internet Connection, [\[Iyengar 2015\]](#)), used in Google's Chrome browser, uses UDP as its underlying transport protocol and implements reliability in an application-layer protocol on top of UDP.
- **No connection state.** TCP maintains connection state in the end systems. This connection state includes receive and send buffers, congestion-control parameters, and sequence and acknowledgment number parameters. We will see in [Section 3.5](#) that this state information is needed to implement TCP's reliable data transfer service and to provide congestion control. UDP, on the other hand, does not maintain connection state and does not track any of these parameters. For this reason, a server devoted to a particular application can typically support many more active clients when the application runs over UDP rather than TCP.
- **Small packet header overhead.** The TCP segment has 20 bytes of header overhead in every segment, whereas UDP has only 8 bytes of overhead.

[Figure 3.6](#) lists popular Internet applications and the transport protocols that they use. As we expect, e-mail, remote terminal access, the Web, and file transfer run over TCP—all these applications need the reliable data transfer service of TCP. Nevertheless, many important applications run over UDP rather than TCP. For example, UDP is used to carry network management (SNMP; see [Section 5.7](#)) data. UDP is preferred to TCP in this case, since network management applications must often run when the

network is in a stressed state—precisely when reliable, congestion-controlled data transfer is difficult to achieve. Also, as we mentioned earlier, DNS runs over UDP, thereby avoiding TCP’s connection-establishment delays.

As shown in [Figure 3.6](#), both UDP and TCP are sometimes used today with multimedia applications, such as Internet phone, real-time video conferencing, and streaming of stored audio and video. We’ll take a close look at these applications in [Chapter 9](#). We just mention now that all of these applications can tolerate a small amount of packet loss, so that reliable data transfer is not absolutely critical for the application’s success. Furthermore, real-time applications, like Internet phone and video conferencing, react very poorly to TCP’s congestion control. For these reasons, developers of multimedia applications may choose to run their applications over UDP instead of TCP. When packet loss rates are low, and with some organizations blocking UDP traffic for security reasons (see [Chapter 8](#)), TCP becomes an increasingly attractive protocol for streaming media transport.

Application	Application-Layer Protocol	Underlying Transport Protocol
Electronic mail	SMTP	TCP
Remote terminal access	Telnet	TCP
Web	HTTP	TCP
File transfer	FTP	TCP
Remote file server	NFS	Typically UDP
Streaming multimedia	typically proprietary	UDP or TCP
Internet telephony	typically proprietary	UDP or TCP
Network management	SNMP	Typically UDP
Name translation	DNS	Typically UDP

Figure 3.6 Popular Internet applications and their underlying transport protocols

Although commonly done today, running multimedia applications over UDP is controversial. As we mentioned above, UDP has no congestion control. But congestion control is needed to prevent the network from entering a congested state in which very little useful work is done. If everyone were to start streaming high-bit-rate video without using any congestion control, there would be so much packet overflow at routers that very few UDP packets would successfully traverse the source-to-destination path. Moreover, the high loss rates induced by the uncontrolled UDP senders would cause the TCP senders (which, as we’ll see, *do* decrease their sending rates in the face of congestion) to dramatically decrease their rates. Thus, the lack of congestion control in UDP can result in high loss rates between a UDP sender and receiver, and the crowding out of TCP sessions—a potentially serious problem [\[Floyd](#)

1999]. Many researchers have proposed new mechanisms to force all sources, including UDP sources, to perform adaptive congestion control **[Mahdavi 1997; Floyd 2000; Kohler 2006: RFC 4340]**.

Before discussing the UDP segment structure, we mention that it *is* possible for an application to have reliable data transfer when using UDP. This can be done if reliability is built into the application itself (for example, by adding acknowledgment and retransmission mechanisms, such as those we'll study in the next section). We mentioned earlier that the QUIC protocol **[Iyengar 2015]** used in Google's Chrome browser implements reliability in an application-layer protocol on top of UDP. But this is a nontrivial task that would keep an application developer busy debugging for a long time. Nevertheless, building reliability directly into the application allows the application to "have its cake and eat it too. That is, application processes can communicate reliably without being subjected to the transmission-rate constraints imposed by TCP's congestion-control mechanism.

3.3.1 UDP Segment Structure

The UDP segment structure, shown in **Figure 3.7**, is defined in RFC 768. The application data occupies the data field of the UDP segment. For example, for DNS, the data field contains either a query message or a response message. For a streaming audio application, audio samples fill the data field. The UDP header has only four fields, each consisting of two bytes. As discussed in the previous section, the port numbers allow the destination host to pass the application data to the correct process running on the destination end system (that is, to perform the demultiplexing function). The length field specifies the number of bytes in the UDP segment (header plus data). An explicit length value is needed since the size of the data field may differ from one UDP segment to the next. The checksum is used by the receiving host to check whether errors have been introduced into the segment. In truth, the checksum is also calculated over a few of the fields in the IP header in addition to the UDP segment. But we ignore this detail in order to see the forest through the trees. We'll discuss the checksum calculation below. Basic principles of error detection are described in **Section 6.2**. The length field specifies the length of the UDP segment, including the header, in bytes.

3.3.2 UDP Checksum

The UDP checksum provides for error detection. That is, the checksum is used to determine whether bits within the UDP segment have been altered (for example, by noise in the links or while stored in a router) as it moved from source to destination.

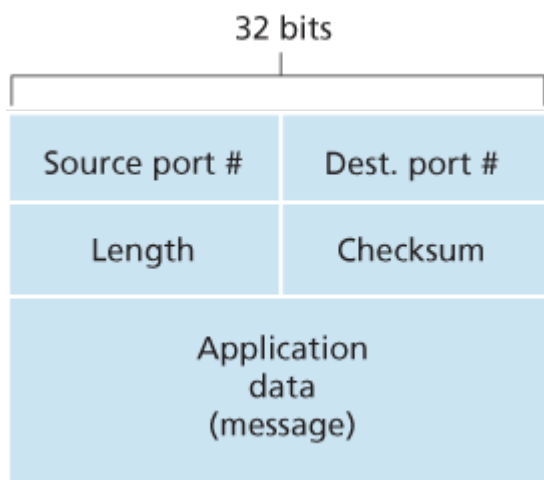


Figure 3.7 UDP segment structure

UDP at the sender side performs the 1s complement of the sum of all the 16-bit words in the segment, with any overflow encountered during the sum being wrapped around. This result is put in the checksum field of the UDP segment. Here we give a simple example of the checksum calculation. You can find details about efficient implementation of the calculation in RFC 1071 and performance over real data in [\[Stone 1998; Stone 2000\]](#). As an example, suppose that we have the following three 16-bit words:

0110011001100000

0101010101010101

1000111100001100

The sum of first two of these 16-bit words is

0110011001100000

0101010101010101

1011101110110101

Adding the third word to the above sum gives

1011101110110101

1000111100001100

0100101011000010

Note that this last addition had overflow, which was wrapped around. The 1s complement is obtained by converting all the 0s to 1s and converting all the 1s to 0s. Thus the 1s complement of the sum 0100101011000010 is 1011010100111101, which becomes the checksum. At the receiver, all four 16-

bit words are added, including the checksum. If no errors are introduced into the packet, then clearly the sum at the receiver will be 1111111111111111. If one of the bits is a 0, then we know that errors have been introduced into the packet.

You may wonder why UDP provides a checksum in the first place, as many link-layer protocols (including the popular Ethernet protocol) also provide error checking. The reason is that there is no guarantee that all the links between source and destination provide error checking; that is, one of the links may use a link-layer protocol that does not provide error checking. Furthermore, even if segments are correctly transferred across a link, it's possible that bit errors could be introduced when a segment is stored in a router's memory. Given that neither link-by-link reliability nor in-memory error detection is guaranteed, UDP must provide error detection at the transport layer, *on an end-end basis*, if the end-end data transfer service is to provide error detection. This is an example of the celebrated **end-end principle** in system design [Saltzer 1984], which states that since certain functionality (error detection, in this case) must be implemented on an end-end basis: "functions placed at the lower levels may be redundant or of little value when compared to the cost of providing them at the higher level."

Because IP is supposed to run over just about any layer-2 protocol, it is useful for the transport layer to provide error checking as a safety measure. Although UDP provides error checking, it does not do anything to recover from an error. Some implementations of UDP simply discard the damaged segment; others pass the damaged segment to the application with a warning.

That wraps up our discussion of UDP. We will soon see that TCP offers reliable data transfer to its applications as well as other services that UDP doesn't offer. Naturally, TCP is also more complex than UDP. Before discussing TCP, however, it will be useful to step back and first discuss the underlying principles of reliable data transfer.

3.4 Principles of Reliable Data Transfer

In this section, we consider the problem of reliable data transfer in a general context. This is appropriate since the problem of implementing reliable data transfer occurs not only at the transport layer, but also at the link layer and the application layer as well. The general problem is thus of central importance to networking. Indeed, if one had to identify a “top-ten” list of fundamentally important problems in all of networking, this would be a candidate to lead the list. In the next section we’ll examine TCP and show, in particular, that TCP exploits many of the principles that we are about to describe.

Figure 3.8 illustrates the framework for our study of reliable data transfer. The service abstraction provided to the upper-layer entities is that of a reliable channel through which data can be transferred. With a reliable channel, no transferred data bits are corrupted (flipped from 0 to 1, or vice versa) or lost, and all are delivered in the order in which they were sent. This is precisely the service model offered by TCP to the Internet applications that invoke it.

It is the responsibility of a **reliable data transfer protocol** to implement this service abstraction. This task is made difficult by the fact that the layer *below* the reliable data transfer protocol may be unreliable. For example, TCP is a reliable data transfer protocol that is implemented on top of an unreliable (IP) end-to-end network layer. More generally, the layer beneath the two reliably communicating end points might consist of a single physical link (as in the case of a link-level data transfer protocol) or a global internetwork (as in the case of a transport-level protocol). For our purposes, however, we can view this lower layer simply as an unreliable point-to-point channel.

In this section, we will incrementally develop the sender and receiver sides of a reliable data transfer protocol, considering increasingly complex models of the underlying channel. For example, we’ll consider what protocol mechanisms are