

Introduction to **Information Retrieval**

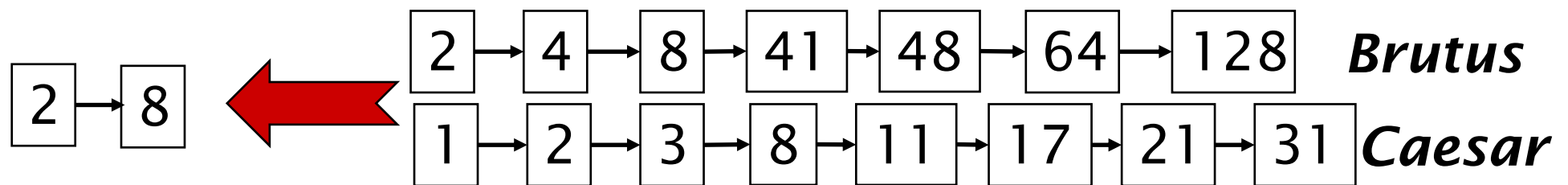
Lectures 4: Skip Pointers, Phrase Queries,
Positional Indexing

Introduction to **Information Retrieval**

Faster postings merges:
Skip pointers/Skip lists

Recall basic merge

- Walk through the two postings simultaneously, in time linear in the total number of postings entries

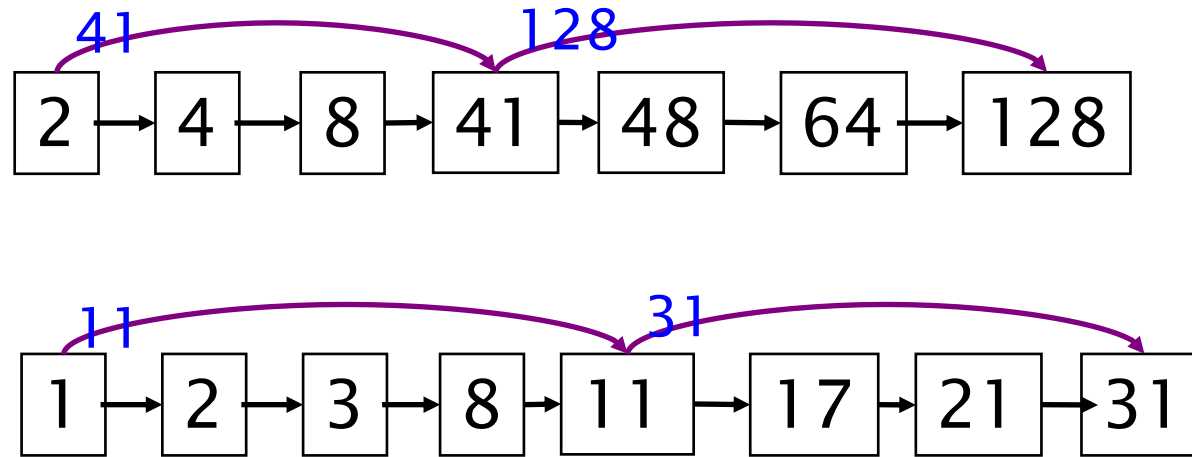


If the list lengths are m and n , the merge takes $O(m+n)$ operations.

Can we do better?

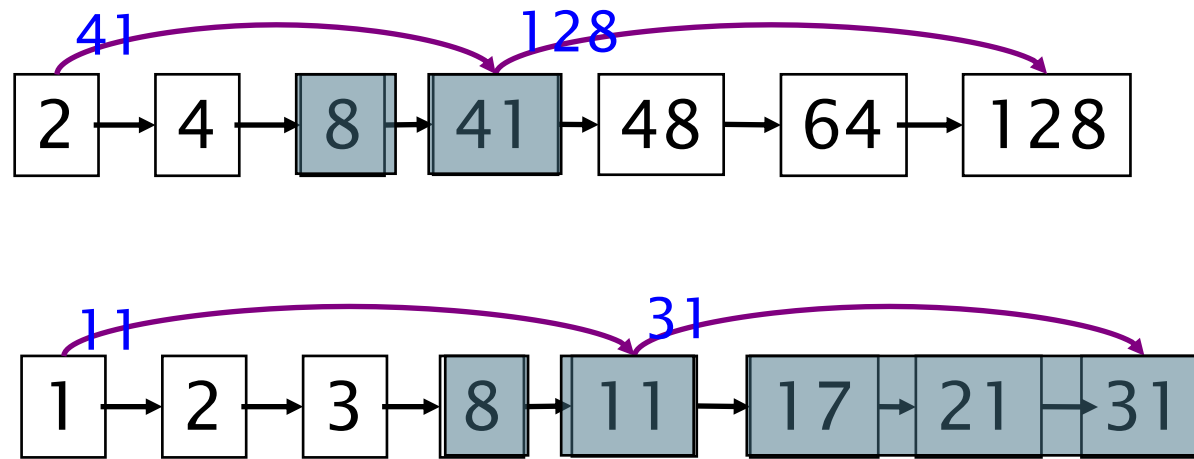
Yes (if the index isn't changing too fast).

Augment postings with skip pointers (at indexing time)



- Why? To skip postings that will not figure in the search results.
- How?
- Where do we place skip pointers?

Query processing with skip pointers



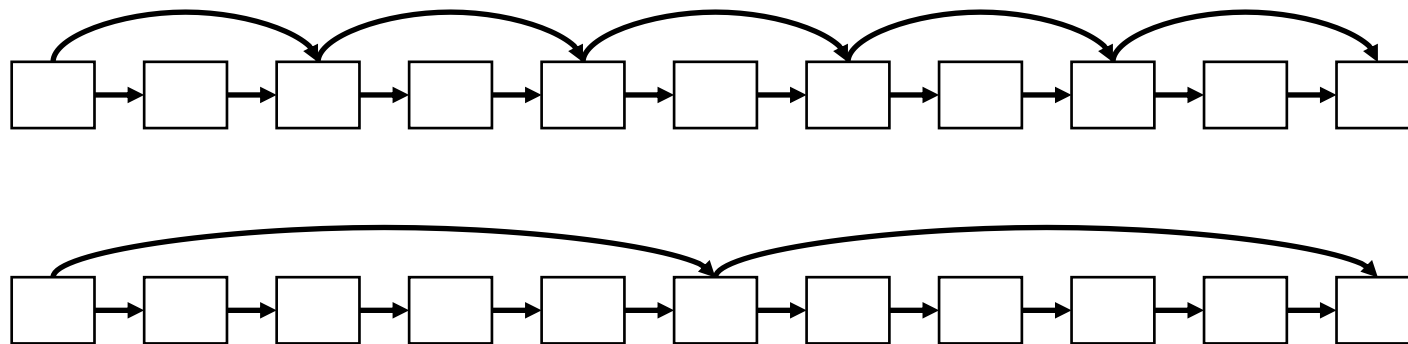
Suppose we've stepped through the lists until we process 8 on each list. We match it and advance.

We then have 41 and 11 on the lower. 11 is smaller.

But the skip successor of 11 on the lower list is 31, so we can skip ahead past the intervening postings.

Where do we place skips?

- Tradeoff:
 - More skips \rightarrow shorter skip spans \Rightarrow more likely to skip.
But lots of comparisons to skip pointers.
 - Fewer skips \rightarrow few pointer comparison, but then long skip spans \Rightarrow few successful skips



Placing skips

- Simple heuristic: for postings of length L , use \sqrt{L} evenly-spaced skip pointers [Moffat and Zobel 1996]
- Easy if the index is relatively static; harder if L keeps changing because of updates.
- This definitely used to help; with modern hardware it may not unless you're memory-based [Bahle et al. 2002]
 - The I/O cost of loading a bigger postings list can outweigh the gains from quicker in memory merging!

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Handling phrase queries

Phrase queries

- We want to answer a query such as [stanford university] – as a phrase.
- Thus *The inventor Stanford Ovshinsky never went to university* should **not** be a match.
- The concept of phrase query has proven easily understood by users.
- About 10% of web queries are phrase queries.
- Consequence for inverted index: **it no longer suffices to store docIDs in postings lists for terms.**
- Two ways of extending the inverted index:
 - biword index
 - positional index

Biword indexes

- Index every **consecutive pair of terms** in the text as a phrase.
- For example, *Friends, Romans, Countrymen* would generate two biwords: “*friends romans*” and “*romans countrymen*”
- Each of these biwords is now a vocabulary term.
- Two-word phrases can now easily be answered.

Longer phrase queries

- A long phrase like “*stanford university palo alto*” can be represented as the Boolean query “STANFORD UNIVERSITY” AND “UNIVERSITY PALO” AND “PALO ALTO”
- Does this always guarantee the correct match? -- We need to do post-filtering of hits to identify subset that actually contains the 4-word phrase.
- What about phrases like, “*abolition of slavery*”?

Extended biwords

- Parse each document and perform part-of-speech tagging
- Bucket the terms into (say) nouns (N) and articles/prepositions (X)
- Now deem any string of terms of the form NX^*N to be an *extended biword*
- Examples: catcher in the rye

N X X N

king of Denmark

N X N

- Include extended biwords in the term vocabulary
- Queries are processed accordingly

Issues with biword indexes

- Why are biword indexes rarely used?
- False positives, as noted above
- Index blowup due to very large term vocabulary
- *What can be an alternative?*

Positional indexes

- Positional indexes are a more efficient alternative to biword indexes.
- Postings lists in a nonpositional index: each posting is just a docID
- Postings lists in a positional index: each posting is a docID and a list of positions

Positional indexes: Example

Query: “to₁ be₂ or₃ not₄ to₅ be₆”

TO, 993427:

1: <7, 18, 33, 72, 86, 231>;

2: <1, 17, 74, 222, 255>;

4: <8, 16, 190, 429, 433>;

5: <363, 367>;

7: <13, 23, 191>; ... >

Postings list in
positional index

BE, 178239:

1: <17, 25>;

4: <17, 191, 291, 430, 434>;

5: <14, 19, 101>; ... >

Proximity search

- We just saw how to use a positional index for phrase searches.
- *Can we also use it for proximity search?*
- For example: employment /4 place
- Find all documents that contain EMPLOYMENT and PLACE within 4 words of each other.
- *Employment agencies that place healthcare workers are seeing growth* is a hit.
- *Employment agencies that have learned to adapt now place healthcare workers* is not a hit.

Proximity search

- Use the positional index
- Simplest algorithm: look at cross-product of positions of (i) EMPLOYMENT in document and (ii) PLACE in document
- Very inefficient for frequent words, especially stop words
- Note that we want to return the actual matching positions, not just a list of documents.

Combination scheme

- Biword indexes and positional indexes can be profitably combined.
- Many biwords are extremely frequent: Michael Jackson etc
- For these biwords, increased speed compared to positional postings intersection is substantial.
- Combination scheme: Include frequent biwords as vocabulary terms in the index. Do all other phrases by positional intersection.