

# Format String Vulnerability Lab

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## 1 Lab Overview

The learning objective of this lab is for students to gain the first-hand experience on format-string vulnerability by putting what they have learned about the vulnerability from class into actions. The format-string vulnerability is caused by code like `printf(user_input)`, where the contents of variable of `user_input` is provided by users. This `printf` statement can become dangerous, because it can lead to one of the following consequences: (1) crash the program, (2) read from an arbitrary memory place, and (3) modify the values of an arbitrary memory location. The last consequence is very dangerous because it can allow users to modify internal variables of the program, and thus change the behavior of the program.

In this lab, students will be given a program with a format-string vulnerability; their task is to develop a scheme to exploit the vulnerability. In addition to the attacks, students will be guided to walk through a protection scheme that can be used to defeat this type of attacks. Students need to evaluate whether the scheme work or not and explain why.

### 1.1 Getting Started

The lab is started from the Labtainer working directory on your Docker-enabled host, e.g., a Linux VM. From there, issue the command:

```
labtainer formatstring
```

The resulting virtual terminal will include a bash shell. The `vuln_prog.c` described below be in your home directory.

## 2 Lab Tasks

### 2.1 Task 1: Exploit the vulnerability

Before beginning this task, nsure that Address Space Layout Randomization (ASLR) is enabled:

```
sudo sysctl -w kernel.randomize_va_space=2
```

In the following program, you will be asked to provide an input, which will be saved in a buffer called `user_input`. The program then prints out the buffer using `printf`. Unfortunately, there is a format-string vulnerability in the way the `printf` is called on the user inputs. We want to exploit this vulnerability and see what we can achieve.

The program has two secret values stored in its memory, and you are interested in these secret values. However, the secret values are unknown to you, nor can you find them from reading the binary code (for

the sake of simplicity, we hardcode the secrets using constants 0x44 and 0x55). Although you do not know the secret values, in practice, it is not so difficult to find out the memory address (the range or the exact value) of them (they are in consecutive addresses), because for many operating systems, the addresses are exactly the same anytime you run the program. In this lab, we just assume that you have already known the exact addresses. To achieve this, the program “intentionally” prints out the addresses for you. With such knowledge, your goal is to achieve the followings (not necessarily at the same time):

- Crash the program.
- Print out the secret[1] value.
- Modify the secret[1] value.
- Modify the secret[1] value to equal 0xa.

For this lab task, you are not to modify the code. Namely, you need to achieve the above objectives without modifying the vulnerable code. However, you do have a copy of the source code, which can help you design your attacks.

---

```
/* vul_prog.c */
#include<stdio.h>
#include<stdlib.h>

#define SECRET1 0x44
#define SECRET2 0x55

int main(int argc, char *argv[])
{
    char user_input[100];
    int *secret;
    int int_input;
    int a, b, c, d; /* other variables, not used here.*/

    /* The secret value is stored on the heap */
    secret = (int *) malloc(2*sizeof(int));

    /* getting the secret */
    secret[0] = SECRET1; secret[1] = SECRET2;

    printf("The variable secret's address is 0x%8x (on stack)\n",
           (unsigned int)&secret);
    printf("The variable secret's value is 0x%8x (on heap)\n",
           (unsigned int)secret);
    printf("secret[0]'s address is 0x%8x (on heap)\n",
           (unsigned int)&secret[0]);
    printf("secret[1]'s address is 0x%8x (on heap)\n",
           (unsigned int)&secret[1]);

    printf("Please enter a decimal integer\n");
    scanf("%d", &int_input); /* getting an input from user */
    printf("Please enter a string\n");
    scanf("%s", user_input); /* getting a string from user */

    /* Vulnerable place */
```

```
printf(user_input);
printf("\n");

/* Verify whether your attack is successful */
printf("The original secrets: 0x%x -- 0x%x\n", SECRET1, SECRET2);
printf("The new secrets: 0x%x -- 0x%x\n", secret[0], secret[1]);
return 0;
}
```

---

**Hints:** From the printout, you will find out that `secret[0]` and `secret[1]` are located on the heap, i.e., the actual secrets are stored on the heap. We also know that the address of the first secret (i.e., the value of the variable `secret`) can be found on the stack, because the variable `secret` is allocated on the stack. In other words, if you want to overwrite `secret[0]`, its address is already on the stack; your format string can take advantage of this information. However, although `secret[1]` is just right after `secret[0]`, its address is not available on the stack. This poses a major challenge for your format-string exploit, which needs to have the exact address right on the stack in order to read or write to that address.

## 2.2 Task 2: Memory randomization

If the first `scanf` statement (`scanf("%d", int_input)`) does not exist, i.e., the program does not ask you to enter an integer, the attack in Task 1 become more difficult for those operating systems that have implemented address randomization. Pay attention to the address of `secret[0]` (or `secret[1]`). When you run the program once again, will you get the same address?

Address randomization is introduced to make a number of attacks difficult, such as buffer overflow, format string, etc. To appreciate the idea of address randomization, we will turn off the address randomization in this task, and see whether the format string attack on the previous vulnerable program (without the first `scanf` statement) is still difficult. You can use the following command to turn off the address randomization:

```
sudo sysctl -w kernel.randomize_va_space=0
```

After turning off the address randomization, your task is to repeat the same task described in Task 1, but you have to remove the first `scanf` statement (`scanf("%d", int_input)`) from the vulnerable program, and recompile it using:

```
gcc -m32 -fno-stack-protector -g -o vul_prog vul_prog.c
```

**How to let `scanf` accept an arbitrary number?** Usually, `scanf` is going to pause for you to type inputs. Sometimes, you want the program to take a number `0x05` (not the character ‘5’). Unfortunately, when you type ‘5’ at the input, `scanf` actually takes in the ASCII value of ‘5’, which is `0x35`, rather than `0x05`. The challenge is that in ASCII, `0x05` is not a typable character, so there is no way we can type in this value. One way to solve this problem is to use a file. We can easily write a C program that stores `0x05` (again, not ‘5’) to a file (let us call it `mystring`), then we can run the vulnerable program (let us call it `a.out`) with its input being redirected to `mystring`; namely, we run `"a.out < mystring"`. This way, `scanf` will take its input from the file `mystring`, instead of from the keyboard.

You need to pay attention to some special numbers, such as `0x0A` (newline), `0x0C` (form feed), `0x0D` (return), and `0x20` (space). `scanf` considers them as separator, and will stop reading anything after these special characters if we have only one `"%s"` in `scanf`. If one of these special numbers are in the address, you have to find ways to get around this. To simplify your task, if you are unlucky and the secret’s address

happen to have those special numbers in it, we allow you to add another `malloc` statement before you allocate memory for `secret[2]`. This extra `malloc` can cause the address of secret values to change. If you give the `malloc` an appropriate value, you can create a “lucky” situation, where the addresses of secret do not contain those special numbers.

The following program writes a format string into a file called `mystring`. The first four bytes consist of an arbitrary number that you want to put in this format string, followed by the rest of format string that you typed in from your keyboard.

---

```
/* write_string.c */

#include <sys/types.h>
#include <stdio.h>
#include <string.h>
#include <sys/stat.h>
#include <fcntl.h>

int main()
{
    char buf[1000];
    int fp, size;
    unsigned int *address;

    /* Putting any number you like at the beginning of the format string */
    address = (unsigned int *) buf;
    *address = 0x804b01c;

    /* Getting the rest of the format string */
    scanf("%s", buf+4);
    size = strlen(buf+4) + 4;
    printf("The string length is %d\n", size);

    /* Writing buf to "mystring" */
    fp = open("mystring", O_RDWR | O_CREAT | O_TRUNC, S_IRUSR | S_IWUSR);
    if (fp != -1) {
        write(fp, buf, size);
        close(fp);
    } else {
        printf("Open failed!\n");
    }
}
```

---

## 3 Guidelines

### 3.1 What is a format string?

```
printf ("The magic number is: %d\n", 1911);
```

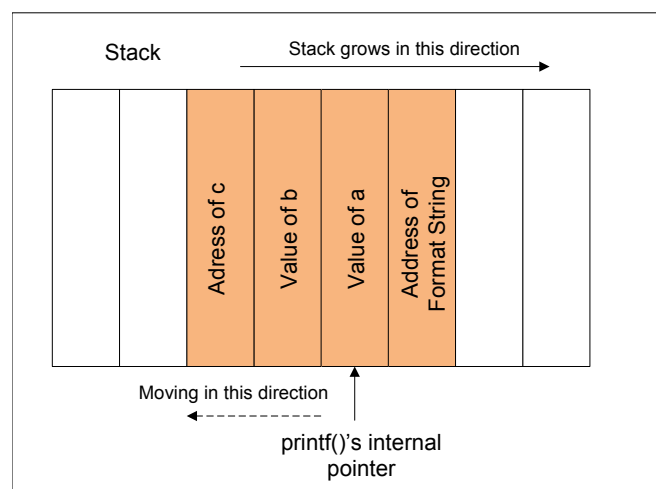
The text to be printed is “The magic number is:”, followed by a format parameter ‘`%d`’, which is replaced with the parameter (1911) in the output. Therefore the output looks like: The magic number is: 1911. In addition to `%d`, there are several other format parameters, each having different meaning. The following table summarizes these format parameters:

| Parameter | Meaning                                 | Passed as |
|-----------|---|-----------|
| %d        | decimal (int)                           | value     |
| %u        | unsigned decimal (unsigned int)         | value     |
| %x        | hexadecimal (unsigned int)              | value     |
| %s        | string ((const) (unsigned) char *)      | reference |
| %n        | number of bytes written so far, (* int) | reference |

### 3.2 The Stack and Format Strings

The behavior of the format function is controlled by the format string. The function retrieves the parameters requested by the format string from the stack.

```
printf ("a has value %d, b has value %d, c is at address: %08x\n",
        a, b, &c);
```



### 3.3 What if there is a miss-match

What if there is a miss-match between the format string and the actual arguments?

```
printf ("a has value %d, b has value %d, c is at address: %08x\n",
        a, b);
```

- In the above example, the format string asks for 3 arguments, but the program actually provides only two (i.e. *a* and *b*).
- Can this program pass the compiler?
  - The function `printf()` is defined as function with variable length of arguments. Therefore, by looking at the number of arguments, everything looks fine.

- To find the miss-match, compilers needs to understand how `printf()` works and what the meaning of the format string is. However, compilers usually do not do this kind of analysis.
- Sometimes, the format string is not a constant string, it is generated during the execution of the program. Therefore, there is no way for the compiler to find the miss-match in this case.
- Can `printf()` detect the miss-match?
  - The function `printf()` fetches the arguments from the stack. If the format string needs 3 arguments, it will fetch 3 data items from the stack. Unless the stack is marked with a boundary, `printf()` does not know that it runs out of the arguments that are provided to it.
  - Since there is no such a marking, `printf()` will continue fetching data from the stack. In a miss-match case, it will fetch some data that do not belong to this function call.
- What trouble can be caused by `printf()` when it starts to fetch data that is meant for it?

### 3.4 Viewing Memory at Any Location

- We have to supply an address of the memory. However, we cannot change the code; we can only supply the format string.
- If we use `printf(%s)` without specifying a memory address, the target address will be obtained from the stack anyway by the `printf()` function. The function maintains an initial stack pointer, so it knows the location of the parameters in the stack.
- Observation: the format string is usually located on the stack. If we can encode the target address in the format string, the target address will be in the stack. In the following example, the format string is stored in a buffer, which is located on the stack.

---

```
int main(int argc, char *argv[])
{
    char user_input[100];
    ... /* other variable definitions and statements */

    scanf("%s", user_input); /* getting a string from user */
    printf(user_input); /* Vulnerable place */

    return 0;
}
```

---

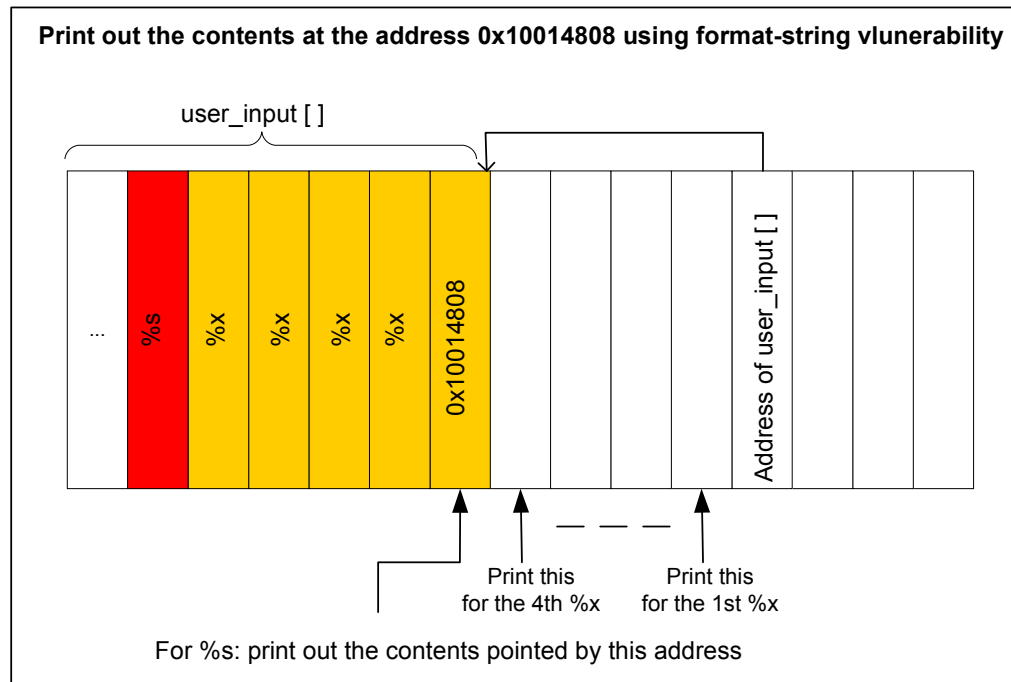
- If we can force the `printf` to obtain the address from the format string (also on the stack), we can control the address.

```
printf ("\x10\x01\x48\x08  %x %x %x %x %s");
```

- `\x10\x01\x48\x08` are the four bytes of the target address. In C language, `\x10` in a string tells the compiler to put a hexadecimal value `0x10` in the current position. The value will take up just one byte. Without using `\x`, if we directly put `"10"` in a string, the ASCII values of the characters `'1'` and `'0'` will be stored. Their ASCII values are 49 and 48, respectively.
- `%x` causes the stack pointer to move towards the format string.

- Here is how the attack works if `user_input []` contains the following format string:

```
"\x10\x01\x48\x08  %x %x %x %x %s".
```



- Basically, we use four `%x` to move the `printf()`'s pointer towards the address that we stored in the format string. Once we reach the destination, we will give `%s` to `print()`, causing it to print out the contents in the memory address `0x10014808`. The function `printf()` will treat the contents as a string, and print out the string until reaching the end of the string (i.e. 0).
- The stack space between `user_input []` and the address passed to the `printf()` function is not for `printf()`. However, because of the format-string vulnerability in the program, `printf()` considers them as the arguments to match with the `%x` in the format string.
- The key challenge in this attack is to figure out the distance between the `user_input []` and the address passed to the `printf()` function. This distance decides how many `%x` you need to insert into the format string, before giving `%s`.

### 3.5 Writing an Integer to Memory

- `%n`: The number of characters written so far is stored into the integer indicated by the corresponding argument.

```
int i;
printf ("12345%n", &i);
```

- It causes `printf()` to write 5 into variable `i`.

- Using the same approach as that for viewing memory at any location, we can cause `printf()` to write an integer into any location. Just replace the `%s` in the above example with `%n`, and the contents at the address `0x10014808` will be overwritten.
- Using this attack, attackers can do the following:
  - Overwrite important program flags that control access privileges
  - Overwrite return addresses on the stack, function pointers, etc.
- However, the value written is determined by the number of characters printed before the `%n` is reached. Is it really possible to write arbitrary integer values?
  - Use dummy output characters. To write a value of 1000, a simple padding of 1000 dummy characters would do.
  - To avoid long format strings, we can use a width specification of the format indicators.

## 4 Submission

When the lab is completed, or you'd like to stop working for a while, run

```
stoplab formatstring
```

from the host Labtainer working directory. You can always restart the Labtainer to continue your work. When the Labtainer is stopped, a zip file is created and copied to a location displayed by the `stoplab` command. When the lab is completed, send that zip file to the instructor.

You need to submit a detailed lab report to describe what you have done and what you have observed; you also need to provide explanation to the observations that are interesting or surprising.