

CS 61, Fall 2011

Assignment 4: Malloc: Writing a Dynamic Storage Allocator

Assigned: Tuesday, October 4

Design Checkpoint Deadline: **Thursday, October 13, 10:00PM**

Assignment due: **Thursday, October 20, 11:59PM**

1 Introduction

In this assignment you will write a dynamic storage allocator for C programs, that is, your own version of the `malloc`, `free`, and `realloc` routines. You are encouraged to explore the design space creatively and implement an allocator that is correct, efficient, and fast.

Please read this document in its entirety. It contains important information about the assignment and how you will be assessed, and provides hints for you to succeed at this assignment.

Any clarifications or revisions to this assignment will be posted on the course website.

2 Getting started

You can do this homework in groups of one or two students. Please go to the form at

<http://tinyurl.com/CS61-Fall-malloc-groups>

and let us know your group. (This form is also linked to from the CS 61 web page.)

Please fill out the form even if you are working on this assignment by yourself—simply leave the “Partner 2” fields blank.

Please fill in this form by **11:59pm, Sunday October 9**.

In your home directory on your CS 61 VM, you should have a directory called `malloc`. Please contact course staff if you do not have this directory. The directory `malloc` contains several files. **The only file that you will modify and submit is the file `mm.c`.**

The file `mm.c` contains a C structure `team`. Please edit this structure to add identifying information about your group. **Do this right away so you don’t forget.**

3 Implementing your dynamic storage allocator

Your dynamic storage allocator will consist of the following four functions, which are declared in `mm.h` and defined in `mm.c`.

```
int    mm_init(void);
void *mm_malloc(size_t size);
void   mm_free(void *ptr);
void *mm_realloc(void *ptr, size_t size);
```

The `mm.c` file we have given you implements the simplest but still functionally correct malloc package that we could think of. Using this as a starting place, modify these functions (and possibly define other private `static` functions), so that they obey the following semantics:

- `int mm_init(void)`: Before calling `mm_malloc`, `mm_realloc`, or `mm_free`, the application program calls `mm_init` to perform any necessary initializations, such as allocating the initial heap area. The return value should be -1 if there was a problem in performing the initialization, 0 otherwise.
- `void *mm_malloc(size_t size)`: The `mm_malloc` routine returns a pointer to an allocated block payload of at least `size` bytes. The entire allocated block should lie within the heap region and should not overlap with any other allocated chunk.

We will be comparing your implementation to the version of `malloc` supplied in the standard C library (`libc`). Since the `libc` `malloc` always returns payload pointers that are aligned to 8 bytes, your `malloc` implementation should do likewise and always return 8-byte aligned pointers.

- `void mm_free(void *ptr)`: The `mm_free` routine frees the block pointed to by `ptr`. It returns nothing. This routine is only guaranteed to work when the passed pointer (`ptr`) was returned by an earlier call to `mm_malloc` or `mm_realloc` and has not yet been freed.
- `void *mm_realloc(void *ptr, size_t size)`: The `mm_realloc` routine returns a pointer to an allocated region of at least `size` bytes with the following constraints.

- if `ptr` is `NULL`, the call is equivalent to `mm_malloc(size)`;
- if `size` is equal to zero, the call is equivalent to `mm_free(ptr)`;
- if `ptr` is not `NULL`, it must have been returned by an earlier call to `mm_malloc` or `mm_realloc`. The call to `mm_realloc` changes the size of the memory block pointed to by `ptr` (the *old block*) to `size` bytes and returns the address of the new block. Notice that the address of the new block might be the same as the old block, or it might be different, depending on your implementation, the amount of internal fragmentation in the old block, and the size of the `realloc` request.

The contents of the new block are the same as those of the old `ptr` block, up to the minimum of the old and new sizes. Everything else is uninitialized. For example, if the

old block is 8 bytes and the new block is 12 bytes, then the first 8 bytes of the new block are identical to the first 8 bytes of the old block and the last 4 bytes are uninitialized. Similarly, if the old block is 8 bytes and the new block is 4 bytes, then the contents of the new block are identical to the first 4 bytes of the old block.

These semantics match the semantics of the corresponding libc `malloc`, `realloc`, and `free` routines. Run “`man malloc`” for complete documentation.

3.1 Heap Consistency Checker

Dynamic memory allocators are notoriously tricky beasts to program correctly and efficiently. They are difficult to program correctly because they involve a lot of untyped pointer manipulation. You will find it *very helpful* to write a heap checker that scans the heap and checks it for consistency.

Some examples of what a heap checker might check are:

- Is every block in the free list marked as free?
- Are there any contiguous free blocks that somehow escaped coalescing?
- Is every free block actually in the free list?
- Do the pointers in the free list point to valid free blocks?
- Do any allocated blocks overlap?
- Do the pointers in a heap block point to valid heap addresses?

Your heap checker will consist of the function `int mm_check(void)` in `mm.c`. It will check any invariants or consistency conditions you consider prudent. It returns a nonzero value if and only if your heap is consistent. You are not limited to the listed suggestions nor are you required to check all of them. You are encouraged to print out error messages when `mm_check` fails.

This consistency checker is for your own debugging during development. When you submit `mm.c`, make sure to remove any calls to `mm_check` as they will slow down your throughput. Points will be given for your `mm_check` function. Make sure to put in comments and document what you are checking.

3.2 Support Routines

The `memlib.c` file contains support routines you will need for your implementation. These routines simulate the memory system for your dynamic memory allocator. You can invoke the following functions in `memlib.c`:

- `void *mem_sbrk(int incr)`: Expands the heap by `incr` bytes, where `incr` is a positive non-zero integer and returns a generic pointer to the first byte of the newly allocated heap area. The semantics are identical to the Unix `sbrk` function, except that `mem_sbrk` accepts only a positive non-zero integer argument.

- `void *mem_heap_lo(void)`: Returns a generic pointer to the first byte in the heap.
- `void *mem_heap_hi(void)`: Returns a generic pointer to the last byte in the heap.
- `size_t mem_heapsize(void)`: Returns the current size of the heap in bytes.
- `size_t mem_pagesize(void)`: Returns the system's page size in bytes (4K on Linux systems).

3.3 The Trace-driven Driver Program

The driver program `mdriver.c` tests your `mm.c` package for correctness, space utilization, and throughput. The driver program is controlled by a set of *trace files*. Each trace file contains a sequence of `allocate`, `realloc`, and `free` directions that instruct the driver to call your `mm_malloc`, `mm_realloc`, and `mm_free` routines in some sequence. The driver is the same one that we will use to grade your submitted `mm.c`, although we may use additional traces.

You can compile the driver program by executing the command `make`. This will create an executable file `mdriver`. You will need to re-compile `mdriver` every time you modify `mm.c`. The driver program accepts the following command line arguments:

- `-t <tracedir>`: Look for the default trace files in directory `tracedir` instead of the default directory defined in `config.h`. The default directory points to the trace files located in the shared directory `/home/shared/cs61/malloclab/traces`.
- `-f <tracefile>`: Use one particular `tracefile` for testing instead of the default set of tracefiles. You have two simple trace files in your `malloc` directory.
- `-h`: Print a summary of the command line arguments.
- `-l`: Run and measure `libc` `malloc` in addition to the student's `malloc` package.
- `-v`: Verbose output. Print a performance breakdown for each tracefile in a compact table.
- `-V`: More verbose output. Prints additional diagnostic information as each trace file is processed. Useful during debugging for determining which trace file is causing your `malloc` package to fail.

3.4 Programming Rules

Your implementation must adhere to the following rules.

- You should not change any of the interfaces in `mm.c`.
- You should not invoke any memory-management related library calls or system calls. This excludes the use of `malloc`, `calloc`, `free`, `realloc`, `sbrk`, `brk` or any variants of these calls in your code.

- All data structures required to implement the interface must reside in the heap; that is, in the memory area you are managing. You may *not* define any global or `static` compound data structures such as arrays, structs, trees, or lists as global variables or on the stack in your `mm.c` program. However, you *are* allowed to declare global scalar variables, for example of type `int`, `float`, or `T *` for any type `T`.
- For consistency with the `libc malloc` package, which returns blocks aligned on 8-byte boundaries, your allocator must always return pointers that are aligned to 8-byte boundaries.

4 Evaluation

This assignment has **two** deadlines: a *design checkpoint* deadline, and a *final submission* deadline.

4.1 Design Checkpoint

A dynamic memory allocator is sufficiently complicated that we require you to do some initial planning. As such, you (and your partner) are required to submit a document describing the design of your malloc implementation, and your progress towards completing it. This document must contain (in addition to each partner's name):

- A description of the algorithm you plan to implement and why.
- What data structures you will use, and why.
- The code you have written so far. It need not compile, or run, but it should contain:
 1. The definitions of all structured data you plan to use.
 2. Pseudocode (comments) describing how you plan to implement each function required by the interface.
 3. Declarations of any functions you plan to define.

The purpose of the design checkpoint is to ensure that you are putting yourself in a position to succeed with this assignment (read: starting early).

Grading for the design checkpoint will be S/U: you either have prepared satisfactory documentation or you have not. If your design document indicates that you haven't thought carefully about the assignment, we will require a follow-up meeting with a TF.

The deadline for submitting your design checkpoint is **Thursday, October 13, 10:00PM. You may not use late days for the design checkpoint.**

You will submit your design checkpoint via the course iSites page, which you can access at <http://isites.harvard.edu>. On the COMPSCI 61 HOME page, you will see the **Assignment Submission Box**. You will submit your document under **Malloc Design Checkpoint**. Only one submission per group is required (i.e., only one group member should submit). You may submit multiple times and only the most recent submission will be used.

4.2 Submission

The deadline for final submission is **Thursday, October 20 at 11:59PM**. Remember that if you want to use a late day, you need to email the course staff *before* the deadline.

All submissions will take place via a submission script on your CS 61 VM. To submit your final code, log into your CS 61 VM, create a temporary directory, and copy `mm.c` into this directory. Then type in `cs61submit malloc $YOUR_TEMP_DIR_PATH`, where `$YOUR_TEMP_DIR_PATH` is the name of the temporary directory you just created.

You may submit multiple times and only the most recent submission will be used. Only one submission per group is required (i.e., only one group member should submit).

4.3 Grading

You will receive **zero points** if you break any of the programming rules (Section 3.4). Otherwise, your grade will be calculated as follows:

- *Design Checkpoint (5 points)*. You will get full points if you submit your design checkpoint on time.
- *Correctness (30 points)*. You will receive full points if your solution passes the correctness tests performed by the driver program. You will receive partial credit if your solution passes some but not all traces. The traces we gave you are a subset of the grading traces.
- *Performance (15 points)*. If your code passes all the correctness tests, you will also get performance points. Two performance metrics will be used to evaluate your solution:
 - *Space utilization*: The peak ratio between the aggregate amount of memory used by the driver (i.e., allocated via `mm_malloc` or `mm_realloc` but not yet freed via `mm_free`) and the size of the heap used by your allocator. The optimal ratio equals to 1. You should find good policies to minimize fragmentation in order to make this ratio as close as possible to the optimal.
 - *Throughput*: The average number of operations completed per second.

The driver program summarizes the performance of your allocator by computing a *performance index*, P , which is a weighted sum of the space utilization and throughput

$$P = wU + (1 - w) \min\left(1, \frac{T}{T_{libc}}\right)$$

where U is your space utilization, T is your throughput, and T_{libc} is the estimated throughput of `libc` malloc on your system on the default traces.¹ The performance index favors space utilization over throughput, with a default of $w = 0.8$.

Observing that both memory and CPU cycles are expensive system resources, we adopt this formula to encourage balanced optimization of both memory utilization and throughput.

¹The value for T_{libc} is a constant in the driver (4,500 Kops/s) established when we configured the program.

Ideally, the performance index will reach $P = w + (1 - w) = 1$ or 100%. Since each metric will contribute at most w and $1 - w$ to the performance index, respectively, you should not go to extremes to optimize either the memory utilization or the throughput only. To receive a good score, you must achieve a balance between utilization and throughput.

- *Code examination (30 points).* We will read your code and look for a logical design, good testing code, and good coding style. We will also assess the technical correctness of the solution.
 - Your code should make sense from a technical standpoint. Even if the details of the implementation have bugs, you'll get points if your design and general code structure are correct for a reasonable memory allocator.
 - Your code should be decomposed into functions and use as few global variables as possible.
 - Your code should begin with a header comment that describes the structure of your free and allocated blocks, the organization of the free list, and how your allocator manipulates the free list. Each function should be preceded by a header comment that describes what the function does.
 - Your heap consistency checker `mm_check` should be thorough and well-documented. You will want to have it call a number of sub-functions that check various things about your data structures.
 - You should have a function that prints out your data structures in human readable form.

You will be awarded up to 10 points for a good heap consistency checker and other debugging functionality, and up to 20 points for good program structure, comments, and readability.

5 Hints

- *Use the `mdriver -f` option.* During initial development, using tiny trace files will simplify debugging and testing. We have included two such trace files (`short{1,2}-bal.rep`) that you can use for initial debugging. You can write additional trace files.
- *Use the `mdriver -v` and `-V` options.* The `-v` option will give you a detailed summary for each trace file. The `-V` will also indicate when each trace file is read, which will help you isolate errors.
- *Use a debugger.* A debugger will help you isolate and identify out of bounds memory references. You can build a version of `mdriver` that contains debugging information by executing `make mdriver-debug`. This passes an additional flag (`-g`) to the compiler telling it to include debugging information.
- *Understand every line of the `malloc` implementation in the textbook.* The textbook has a detailed example of a simple allocator based on an implicit free list. Use this as a point of departure. Don't start working on your allocator until you understand everything about the simple implicit list allocator.

- *Encapsulate your pointer arithmetic in C preprocessor macros.* Pointer arithmetic in memory managers is confusing and error prone because of all the casting that is necessary. You can reduce the complexity significantly by writing macros for your pointer operations. See the textbook for examples.
- *Maybe implement a simple algorithm first.* You may find it useful to first implement a simple version of malloc, say, using implicit free lists with boundary tags. This will help you figure out headers and footers, and coalescing and splitting. Once you are comfortable with a simpler implementation, you can try a more complex one.
- *Use structs to simplify accessing your data structures.* Accessing fields in a block using pointer arithmetic is confusing and error prone. You can declare structs, and cast your blocks to these structs. For example, if you are using a doubly-linked explicit free list, you can declare a structure `struct block_node { int size; void *next; void *prev; }`, and cast a pointer to a free block (i.e., `void * value`) to a pointer to `struct block_node`, allowing you to easily access the `next` and `prev` fields without pointer arithmetic.
- *Do your implementation in stages.* The first 9 traces contain requests to `malloc` and `free`. The last 2 traces contain requests for `realloc`, `malloc`, and `free`. We recommend that you start by getting your `malloc` and `free` routines working correctly and efficiently on the first 9 traces. Only then should you turn your attention to the `realloc` implementation. For starters, build `realloc` on top of your existing `malloc` and `free` implementations. But to get really good performance, you will need to build a stand-alone `realloc`.
- *Write good debugging code!* It's hard to overemphasize how much happier you will be if you have good debugging and testing code. Write some kind of a `print_heap` function that prints your data structures in human readable form. Write consistency checkers that check all your assumptions/invariants. Call them all the time: Until your code works, performance doesn't matter! Any time you find and fix a bug, try to add a check that would have found it.

We recommend defining your data structures and then writing the consistency checking functions before doing any of the implementation. This will help you find any problems with the design before you actually invest a lot of effort implementing it, and once you have the tests, you can work on implementation until all the errors go away.

Remember to update your testing code if you change your design!

- *Use a profiler.* You may find the `gprof` tool helpful for optimizing performance.
- *Use version control.* You have the opportunity to use GIT, a version control system which allows you to keep a history of revisions you have made to your files. One of the key benefits of using a version control system is the freedom to try out a new idea for improving your solution, without worrying about losing a “working” version. If you are working with a partner, it is also a significant help for managing your collaboration. More information about version control is on the CS 61 website, including instructions on how to use it.
- *Start early!* It is possible to write an efficient malloc package with a few pages of code. However, we can guarantee that it will be some of the most difficult and sophisticated code you have written so far in your career. So start early, and good luck!