Passing Smart Pointers

In this lesson, we will discuss the rules regarding passing smart pointers.

WE'LL COVER THE FOLLOWING

Passing smart pointers is an important topic that is seldom addressed. This chapter ends with the C++ core guidelines since they have six rules for passing `std::shared_ptr` and `std::unique_ptr`.

The Six Rules

The following six rules violate the important DRY (don't repeat yourself) principle for software development. In the end, we only have six rules, which makes life as a software developer a lot easier. Here are the rules:

1. **R.32**: Take a `unique_ptr<widget>` parameter to express that a function assumes ownership of a widget.
2. **R.33**: Take a `unique_ptr<widget>&` parameter to express that a function reseats the widget.
3. **R.34**: Take a `shared_ptr<widget>` parameter to express that a function is part owner.
4. **R.35**: Take a `shared_ptr<widget>&` parameter to express that a function might reseat the shared pointer.
5. **R.36**: Take a const `shared_ptr<widget>&` parameter to express that it might

retain a reference count to the object.

6. **R.37**: Do not pass a pointer or reference obtained from an aliased smart pointer.

Let’s start with the first two rules for `std::unique_ptr`.

R.32

If a function should take ownership of a Widget, take the `std::unique_ptr<Widget>` by copy. The consequence is that the caller has to move the `std::unique_ptr<Widget>` to make the code run.

```
#include <memory>
#include <utility>

struct Widget{
    Widget(int){}
};

void sink(std::unique_ptr<Widget> uniqPtr){
    // do something with uniqPtr
}

int main(){
    auto uniqPtr = std::make_unique<Widget>(1998);

    sink(std::move(uniqPtr));      // (1)
    sink(uniqPtr);                 // (2) ERROR
}
```

The call in line 15 is fine but the call line 16 breaks because we cannot copy an `std::unique_ptr`. If the function only wants to use the `Widget`, it should take its parameter by pointer or by reference. A pointer can be a null pointer, but a reference cannot.

```
void useWidget(Widget* wid);
void useWidget(Widget& wid);
```

R.33

Sometimes a function wants to reseat a `Widget`. In this case, pass the `std::unique_ptr<Widget>` by a non-const reference.

`std::unique_ptr<Widget>` by a non-const reference.

```
#include <memory>
#include <utility>

struct Widget{
    Widget(int){}
};

void reseat(std::unique_ptr<Widget>& uniqPtr){
    uniqPtr.reset(new Widget(2003));   // (0)
    // do something with uniqPtr
}

int main(){
    auto uniqPtr = std::make_unique<Widget>(1998);

    reseat(std::move(uniqPtr));       // (1) ERROR
    reseat(uniqPtr);                  // (2)
}
```

Now, the call in line 16 fails because we cannot bind an rvalue to a non-const lvalue reference. This will not hold for the copy in line 17. An lvalue can be bound to an lvalue reference. The call in line 9 will not only construct a new `Widget(2003)`, but it will also destruct the old `Widget(1998)`.

The next three rules of `std::shared_ptr` repeat each other, so we will only discuss one.

R.34, R.35, and R.36

Here are the three function signatures that we have to address.

```
void share(std::shared_ptr<Widget> shaWid);
void reseat(std::shard_ptr<Widget>& shadWid);
void mayShare(const std::shared_ptr<Widget>& shaWid);
```

We will take a look at each function signature in isolation, but what does this mean from the function perspective? Let's find out!

- **void share(std::shared_ptr shaWid)**:For the lifetime of the function body, this method is a shared owner of the `Widget`. At the start of the function body, we will increase the reference counter; at the end of the function, we will decrease the reference counter; therefore, the `Widget` function, we will decrease the reference counter; therefore, the `Widget` will stay alive, as long as we use it.

- **void reseat(std::shared_ptr& shaWid)**: This function isn't a shared owner of the `Widget` because we will not change the reference counter. We have not guaranteed that the `Widget` will stay alive during the execution of the function, but we can reseat the resource. A non-const lvalue reference is more like borrowing the resource with the ability to reseat it.

- **void mayShare(const std::shared_ptr& shaWid)**: This function only borrows the resource. Neither can we extend the lifetime of the resource nor can we reseat the resource. To be honest, we should use a pointer (`Widget*`) or a reference (`Widget&`) as a parameter instead, because there is no added value in using an `std::shared_ptr`.

R.37

Let's take a look at a short code snippet to make the rule clearer.

```
void oldFunc(Widget* wid){
  // do something with wid
}

void shared(std::shared_ptr<Widget>& shaPtr){       // (2)

   oldFunc(*shaPtr);                                // (3)

   // do something with shaPtr

 }

auto globShared = std::make_shared<Widget>(2011);   // (1)


...

shared(globShared);
```

In line 13, `globShared` is a globally shared pointer. The function `shared` takes its argument by reference in line 5. Therefore, the reference counter of `shaPtr` will not be increased and the function `shared` will not extend the lifetime of `Widget(2011)`. The issue begins on line 7. `oldFunc` accepts a pointer to the `Widget`; therefore, `oldFunc` has no guarantee that the `Widget` will stay alive during its execution. `oldFunc` only borrows the `Widget`.

The solution is quite simple. We must ensure that the reference count of `globShared` is increased before the call to the function `oldFunc`, meaning that we must make a copy of `std::shared_ptr`:

- Pass the `std::shared_ptr` by copy to the function `shared`:

```
void shared(std::shared_ptr<Widget> shaPtr){
   oldFunc(*shaPtr);
   // do something with shaPtr
  }
```

- Make a copy of the `shaPtr` in the function `shared`:

```
void shared(std::shared_ptr<Widget>& shaPtr){
   auto keepAlive = shaPtr;
   oldFunc(*shaPtr);
   // do something with keepAlive or shaPtr
  }
```

The same reasoning also applies to `std::unique_ptr`, but there isn't a simple solution since we cannot copy an `std::unique_ptr`. Rather, we can clone the `std::unique_ptr` and make a new `std::unique_ptr`.

Further information

- don't repeat yourself
- R.32
- R.33
- R.34
- R.35
- R.36
- R.37

Now that we have gone over **Smart Pointers** in C++, we will discuss **Containers** in the next chapter.