8.2.1.16 ORDER BY Optimization

This section describes when MySQL can use an index to satisfy an `ORDER BY` clause, the `filesort` operation used when an index cannot be used, and execution plan information available from the optimizer about `ORDER BY`.

An `ORDER BY` with and without `LIMIT` may return rows in different orders, as discussed in Section 8.2.1.19, “LIMIT Query Optimization”.

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Use of Indexes to Satisfy ORDER BY

In some cases, MySQL may use an index to satisfy an `ORDER BY` clause and avoid the extra sorting involved in performing a `filesort` operation.

The index may also be used even if the `ORDER BY` does not match the index exactly, as long as all unused portions of the index and all extra `ORDER BY` columns are constants in the `WHERE` clause. If the index does not contain all columns accessed by the query, the index is used only if index access is cheaper than other access methods.

Assuming that there is an index on `(`***`key_part1, key_part2`***`)`, the following queries may use the index to resolve the `ORDER BY` part. Whether the optimizer actually does so depends on whether reading the index is more efficient than a table scan if columns not in the index must also be read.

- In this query, the index on `(`***`key_part1, key_part2`***`)` enables the optimizer to avoid sorting:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1
    ORDER BY key_part1, key_part2;
  ```

  However, the query uses `SELECT *`, which may select more columns than ***`key_part1`*** and ***`key_part2`***. In that case, scanning an entire index and looking up table rows to find columns not in the index may be more expensive than scanning the table and sorting the results. If so, the optimizer probably does not use the index. If `SELECT *` selects only the index columns, the index is used and sorting avoided.

  If `t1` is an `InnoDB` table, the table primary key is implicitly part of the index, and the index can be used to resolve the `ORDER BY` for this query:

  ```
  SELECT pk, key_part1, key_part2 FROM t1
    ORDER BY key_part1, key_part2;
  ```

- In this query, ***`key_part1`*** is constant, so all rows accessed through the index are in ***`key_part2`*** order, and an index on `(`***`key_part1, key_part2`***`)` avoids sorting if the `WHERE` clause is selective enough to make an index range scan cheaper than a table scan:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1
    WHERE key_part1 = constant
    ORDER BY key_part2;
  ```

- In the next two queries, whether the index is used is similar to the same queries without `DESC` shown previously:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1
    ORDER BY key_part1 DESC, key_part2 DESC;

  SELECT * FROM t1
    WHERE key_part1 = constant
    ORDER BY key_part2 DESC;
  ```

- Two columns in an `ORDER BY` can sort in the same direction (both `ASC`, or both `DESC`) or in opposite directions (one `ASC`, one `DESC`). A condition for index use is that the index must have the same homogeneity, but need not have the same actual direction.

  If a query mixes `ASC` and `DESC`, the optimizer can use an index on the columns if the index also uses corresponding mixed ascending and descending columns:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1
    ORDER BY key_part1 DESC, key_part2 ASC;
  ```

  The optimizer can use an index on (***`key_part1`***, ***`key_part2`***) if ***`key_part1`*** is descending and ***`key_part2`*** is ascending. It can also use an index on those columns (with a backward scan) if ***`key_part1`*** is ascending and ***`key_part2`*** is descending. See Section 8.3.13, “Descending Indexes”.

- In the next two queries, ***`key_part1`*** is compared to a constant. The index is used if the `WHERE` clause is selective enough to make an index range scan cheaper than a table scan:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1
    WHERE key_part1 > constant
    ORDER BY key_part1 ASC;

  SELECT * FROM t1
    WHERE key_part1 < constant
    ORDER BY key_part1 DESC;
  ```

- In the next query, the `ORDER BY` does not name ***`key_part1`***, but all rows selected have a constant ***`key_part1`*** value, so the index can still be used:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1
    WHERE key_part1 = constant1 AND key_part2 > constant2
    ORDER BY key_part2;
  ```

In some cases, MySQL *cannot* use indexes to resolve the `ORDER BY`, although it may still use indexes to find the rows that match the `WHERE` clause. Examples:

- The query uses `ORDER BY` on different indexes:

  ```
  SELECT * FROM t1 ORDER BY key1, key2;
  ```

- The query uses `ORDER BY` on nonconsecutive parts of an index:

```
SELECT * FROM t1 WHERE key2=constant ORDER BY key1_part1, key1_part3;
```

- The index used to fetch the rows differs from the one used in the `ORDER BY`:

```
SELECT * FROM t1 WHERE key2=constant ORDER BY key1;
```

- The query uses `ORDER BY` with an expression that includes terms other than the index column name:

```
SELECT * FROM t1 ORDER BY ABS(key);
SELECT * FROM t1 ORDER BY -key;
```

- The query joins many tables, and the columns in the `ORDER BY` are not all from the first nonconstant table that is used to retrieve rows. (This is the first table in the `EXPLAIN` output that does not have a `const` join type.)
- The query has different `ORDER BY` and `GROUP BY` expressions.
- There is an index on only a prefix of a column named in the `ORDER BY` clause. In this case, the index cannot be used to fully resolve the sort order. For example, if only the first 10 bytes of a `CHAR(20)` column are indexed, the index cannot distinguish values past the 10th byte and a `filesort` is needed.
- The index does not store rows in order. For example, this is true for a `HASH` index in a `MEMORY` table.

Availability of an index for sorting may be affected by the use of column aliases. Suppose that the column `t1.a` is indexed. In this statement, the name of the column in the select list is `a`. It refers to `t1.a`, as does the reference to `a` in the `ORDER BY`, so the index on `t1.a` can be used:

```
SELECT a FROM t1 ORDER BY a;
```

In this statement, the name of the column in the select list is also `a`, but it is the alias name. It refers to `ABS(a)`, as does the reference to `a` in the `ORDER BY`, so the index on `t1.a` cannot be used:

```
SELECT ABS(a) AS a FROM t1 ORDER BY a;
```

In the following statement, the `ORDER BY` refers to a name that is not the name of a column in the select list. But there is a column in `t1` named `a`, so the `ORDER BY` refers to `t1.a` and the index on `t1.a` can be used. (The resulting sort order may be completely different from the order for `ABS(a)`, of course.)

```
SELECT ABS(a) AS b FROM t1 ORDER BY a;
```

Previously (MySQL 5.7 and lower), `GROUP BY` sorted implicitly under certain conditions. In MySQL 8.0, that no longer occurs, so specifying `ORDER BY NULL` at the end to suppress implicit sorting (as was done previously) is no longer necessary. However, query results may differ from previous MySQL versions. To produce a given sort order, provide an `ORDER BY` clause.

Use of filesort to Satisfy ORDER BY

If an index cannot be used to satisfy an `ORDER BY` clause, MySQL performs a `filesort` operation that reads table rows and sorts them. A `filesort` constitutes an extra sorting phase in query execution.

To obtain memory for `filesort` operations, as of MySQL 8.0.12, the optimizer allocates memory buffers incrementally as needed, up to the size indicated by the `sort_buffer_size` system variable, rather than allocating a fixed amount of `sort_buffer_size` bytes up front, as was done prior to MySQL 8.0.12. This enables users to set `sort_buffer_size` to larger values to speed up larger sorts, without concern for excessive memory use for small sorts. (This benefit may not occur for multiple concurrent sorts on Windows, which has a weak multithreaded `malloc`.)

A `filesort` operation uses temporary disk files as necessary if the result set is too large to fit in memory. Some types of queries are particularly suited to completely in-memory `filesort` operations. For example, the optimizer can use `filesort` to efficiently handle in memory, without temporary files, the `ORDER BY` operation for queries (and subqueries) of the following form:

```
SELECT ... FROM single_table ... ORDER BY non_index_column [DESC] LIMIT [M,]N;
```

Such queries are common in web applications that display only a few rows from a larger result set. Examples:

```
SELECT col1, ... FROM t1 ... ORDER BY name LIMIT 10;
SELECT col1, ... FROM t1 ... ORDER BY RAND() LIMIT 15;
```

Influencing ORDER BY Optimization

For slow `ORDER BY` queries for which `filesort` is not used, try lowering the `max_length_for_sort_data` system variable to a value that is appropriate to trigger a `filesort`. (A symptom of setting the value of this variable too high is a combination of high disk activity and low CPU activity.) This technique applies only before MySQL 8.0.20. As of 8.0.20, `max_length_for_sort_data` is deprecated due to optimizer changes that make it obsolete and of no effect.

To increase `ORDER BY` speed, check whether you can get MySQL to use indexes rather than an extra sorting phase. If this is not possible, try the following strategies:

- Increase the `sort_buffer_size` variable value. Ideally, the value should be large enough for the entire result set to fit in the sort buffer (to avoid writes to disk and merge passes).

  Take into account that the size of column values stored in the sort buffer is affected by the `max_sort_length` system variable value. For example, if tuples store values of long string columns and you increase the value of `max_sort_length`, the size of sort buffer tuples increases as well and may require you to increase `sort_buffer_size`.

  To monitor the number of merge passes (to merge temporary files), check the `Sort_merge_passes` status variable.

- Increase the `read_rnd_buffer_size` variable value so that more rows are read at a time.
- Change the `tmpdir` system variable to point to a dedicated file system with large amounts of free space. The variable value can list several paths that are used in round-robin fashion; you can use this feature to spread the load across several directories. Separate the paths by colon characters (`:`) on Unix and semicolon characters (`;`) on Windows. The paths should name directories in file systems located on different *physical* disks, not different partitions on the same disk.

ORDER BY Execution Plan Information Available

With `EXPLAIN` (see Section 8.8.1, “Optimizing Queries with EXPLAIN”), you can check whether MySQL can use indexes to resolve an `ORDER BY` clause:

- If the `Extra` column of `EXPLAIN` output does not contain `Using filesort`, the index is used and a `filesort` is not performed.
- If the `Extra` column of `EXPLAIN` output contains `Using filesort`, the index is not used and a `filesort` is performed.

In addition, if a `filesort` is performed, optimizer trace output includes a `filesort_summary` block. For example:

```
"filesort_summary": {
  "rows": 100,
  "examined_rows": 100,
```

```
  "number_of_tmp_files": 0,
  "peak_memory_used": 25192,
  "sort_mode": "<sort_key, packed_additional_fields>"
}
```

`peak_memory_used` indicates the maximum memory used at any one time during the sort. This is a value up to but not necessarily as large as the value of the `sort_buffer_size` system variable. Prior to MySQL 8.0.12, the output shows `sort_buffer_size` instead, indicating the value of `sort_buffer_size`. (Prior to MySQL 8.0.12, the optimizer always allocates `sort_buffer_size` bytes for the sort buffer. As of 8.0.12, the optimizer allocates sort-buffer memory incrementally, beginning with a small amount and adding more as necessary, up to `sort_buffer_size` bytes.)

The `sort_mode` value provides information about the contents of tuples in the sort buffer:

- `<sort_key, rowid>`: This indicates that sort buffer tuples are pairs that contain the sort key value and row ID of the original table row. Tuples are sorted by sort key value and the row ID is used to read the row from the table.
- `<sort_key, additional_fields>`: This indicates that sort buffer tuples contain the sort key value and columns referenced by the query. Tuples are sorted by sort key value and column values are read directly from the tuple.
- `<sort_key, packed_additional_fields>`: Like the previous variant, but the additional columns are packed tightly together instead of using a fixed-length encoding.

`EXPLAIN` does not distinguish whether the optimizer does or does not perform a `filesort` in memory. Use of an in-memory `filesort` can be seen in optimizer trace output. Look for `filesort_priority_queue_optimization`. For information about the optimizer trace, see MySQL Internals: Tracing the Optimizer.