

# Strings

Optional Textbook Readings: CP:AMA 13

The primary goal of this section is to be able to use strings.

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

1

## Strings

There is no built-in C *string* type. The “**convention**” is that a C string is an **array of characters**, terminated by a **null character**.

```
char my_string[4] = {'c', 'a', 't', '\0'};
```

The *null character*, also known as a null **terminator**, is a char with a value of zero. It is often written as `'\0'` instead of just `0` to improve communication and indicate that a null character is intended.

`'\0'` is equivalent to `0`. That is different from `'0'`, which is equivalent to 48 (the ASCII character for the symbol zero).

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

2

## String initialization

The following definitions create equivalent 4-character arrays:

```
char a[4] = {'c', 'a', 't', '\0'};
char b[4] = {'c', 'a', 't', 0};
char c[4] = {'c', 'a', 't'};
char d[4] = { 99, 97, 116, 0};
char e[4] = "cat";
char f[4] = "cat\0";
```

Because they all have a null terminator, they are also strings.

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

3

C supports an *automatic* length declaration (`[]`), where the length is determined by the initialization.

```
int a[] = {4, 8, 15, 16, 23, 42}; // length is 6
```

If you combine the automatic length declaration with double quote(""), initialization, it adds the null terminator for you.

```
// these are equivalent
char a[4] = {'c', 'a', 't', '\0'};
char b[] = "cat";
```

As we will explain later, the double quotes used in array **initialization** is **different** than the quotes used in expressions (e.g., in `printf("string")`).

## Null termination

With null terminated strings, we do not need to pass the *length* to functions. It is determined by the location of the `'\0'`.

```
// e_count(s) counts the # of e's and E's in string s
```

```
int e_count(const char s[]) {
    int count = 0;
    int i = 0;
    while (s[i]) { // not the null terminator
        if ((s[i] == 'e') || (s[i] == 'E')) {
            ++count;
        }
        ++i;
    }
    return count;
}
```

It is good style to have `const` parameters to communicate that no changes (mutation) occurs to the string.

## strlen

The `string` library (`#include <string.h>`) provides many useful functions for processing strings (more on this library later).

The `strlen` function returns the length of the *string*, **not** necessarily the length of the *array*. It does **not include** the null character.

```
// time: O(n)
int my_strlen(const char s[]) {
    int len = 0;
    while (s[len]) {
        ++len;
    }
    return len;
}
```

Here is an alternative implementation of `my_strlen` that uses pointer arithmetic.

```
int my_strlen(const char *s) {
    const char *p = s;
    while (*p) {
        ++p;
    }
    return (p - s);
}
```

Traditionally, string functions often used pointer notation. It is slightly faster than array index notation (`s[i]`), which requires an extra addition per iteration. In modern environments, the speedup is negligible.

Do **NOT** put the `strlen` function within a loop unnecessarily.

```
int char_count(char c, char *s) {
    int count = 0;
    for (int i = 0; i < strlen(s); ++i) { // BAD !!!!
        if (s[i] == c) ++count;
    }
    return count;
}
```

By using an  $O(n)$  function (`strlen`) inside of the loop, the function becomes  $O(n^2)$  instead of  $O(n)$ .

Unfortunately, this mistake is common amongst beginners.

This will be harshly penalized on assignments & exams.

## Lexicographical order

Characters can be easily compared (`c1 < c2`) as they are numbers, so the character **order** is determined by the ASCII table.

If we try to compare two strings (`s1 < s2`), C compares their *addresses* (pointers), which is not helpful.

To compare strings we are typically interested in using a **lexicographical order**.

Strings require us to be more careful with our terminology, as “smaller than” and “greater than” are ambiguous: are we considering just the **length** of the string? To avoid this problem we use **precedes** (“before”) and **follows** (“after”).

To compare two strings using a **lexicographical order**, we first compare the first character of each string. If they are different, the string with the smaller first character *precedes* the other string. Otherwise (the first characters are the same), the second characters are compared, and so on.

If the end of one string is encountered, it *precedes* the other string. Two strings are equal (the same) if they are the same length and all of their characters are identical.

The following strings are in lexicographical order:

```
" " "a" "az" "c" "cab" "cabin" "cat" "catastrophe"
```

The `<string.h>` library function `strcmp` uses lexicographical ordering.

`strcmp(s1, s2)` returns zero if the strings are identical. If `s1` precedes `s2`, it returns a negative integer. Otherwise (`s1` follows `s2`) it returns a positive integer.

```
// time: O(n), n is min of the lengths of s1, s2

int my_strcmp(const char s1[], const char s2[]) {
    int i = 0;
    while (s1[i] == s2[i] && s1[i]) {
        ++i;
    }
    return s1[i] - s2[i];
}
```

To compare if two strings are *equal* (identical), use the `strcmp` function and check for **zero (false)**.

```
char a[] = "the same?";
char b[] = "the same?";
char c[] = "different";

trace_bool(strcmp(a, b) == 0);
trace_bool(!strcmp(a, b));
trace_bool(!strcmp(a, c));

strcmp(a, b) == 0 => true
!strcmp(a, b) => true
!strcmp(a, c) => false
```

Never use the equality operator (`==`) to compare strings. It compares the *addresses* of the strings, not their contents.

# String I/O

The `printf` format specifier for strings is `%s`.

```
char a[] = "cat";  
printf("the %s in the hat\n", a);
```

`printf` prints out characters until the null character is encountered.

`printf` does not print out the null character.

When using `%s` with `scanf`, it stops reading the string when a whitespace character is encountered (e.g., a space or `\n`).

`scanf("%s", ...)` is useful for reading in one “word” at a time.

```
char name[81];  
printf("What is your first name?\n");  
scanf("%s", name);
```

Be very careful to reserve enough space for the string to be read in.

**Do not forget the null character.**

`scanf("%s", ...)` automatically adds the null character.

The running time of `printf` and `scanf` with `"%s"` is  $O(n)$ .

## example: understanding scanf

```
char name[10] = {0};  
while (scanf("%s", name) == 1) {  
    printf("Hello, %s!\n", name);  
}
```

The input:

Samantha Bob [EOF]

Produces the following output:

```
Hello, Samantha!  
Hello, Bob!
```

Afterward, what is stored in the name array?

B	o	b	\0	n	t	h	a	\0	\0
---	---	---	----	---	---	---	---	----	----

In the following example, the name array is 81 characters and can accommodate first names with a length of up to 80 characters.

```
char name[81];
printf("What is your first name?\n");
scanf("%s", name);
```

What if someone has a *really* long first name?

### example 1: scanf and buffers

```
int main(void) {
    char name[8];
    char message[] = "Hello.";
    char prompt[] = "What is your name?";
    while (1) {
        printf("message: %s\n", message);
        printf("prompt: %s\n", prompt);
        if (scanf("%s", name) != 1) break;
        printf("Welcome, %s!\n", name);
    }
}
```

In this example, entering a long name causes C to write characters beyond the length of the name array. Eventually, it overwrites the memory where message is stored, and if long enough, where prompt is stored.

This is known as a **buffer overrun** (or *buffer overflow*). The C language is especially susceptible to *buffer overruns*, which can cause serious stability and security problems.

In this introductory course, having an array with an appropriate length and using `scanf` is “good enough”.

In practice you would **never** use this insecure method for reading in a string.

## example 2: scanf and buffers

```
int main(void) {
    char command[8];
    int balance = 0;
    while (1) {
        printf("Command? ('balance', 'deposit', or 'q' to quit): ");
        scanf("%s", command);
        if (!strcmp(command, "balance")) {
            printf("Your balance is: %d\n", balance);
        } else if (!strcmp(command, "deposit")) {
            printf("Enter your deposit amount: ");
            int dep;
            scanf("%d", &dep);
            balance += dep;
        } else if (!strcmp(command, "q")) {
            printf("Bye!\n"); break;
        } else {
            printf("Invalid command. Please try again.\n");
        }
    }
}
```

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

19

In this banking example, entering a long command causes C to write characters beyond the length of the command array. Eventually, it overwrites the memory where balance is stored.

It writes four chars into the four bytes where balance is stored.

The value of balance is a “re-interpretation” of those four bytes as an int, instead of four chars.

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

20

To read in a string that includes whitespace, the gets function reads until a newline (\n) is encountered (CP:AMA 13.3).

It is also very susceptible to overruns.

```
char name[81];
printf("What is your full name?\n");
char *result = gets(name);
if (result == NULL) {
    // handle the error
}
```

The return value is either the address of the string (success) or NULL (failure).

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

21

There are C library functions that are more secure than `scanf` and `gets`.

One popular strategy to avoid overruns is to only read in one character at a time (e.g., with `scanf("%c")` or `getchar`). For an example of using `getchar` to avoid overruns, see CP:AMA 13.3.

While *writing* to a buffer can cause dangerous buffer overruns, *reading from* an improperly terminated string can also cause problems.

```
char c[3] = "cat"; // NOT properly terminated!
printf("%s\n", c);
printf("The length of c is: %d\n", strlen(c));
cat????????????????????
The length of c is: ??
```

The string library has “safer” versions of many of the functions that stop when a maximum number of characters is reached.

For example, `strnlen`, `strncmp`, `strncpy` and `strncat`.

## strcpy

The `strcpy(dest, src)` function (part of `<string.h>`) overwrites the contents of `dest` with the contents of `src`.

```
// time: O(n), n is length of src
char *my_strcpy(char *dest, const char *src) {
    char *d = dest;
    while (*src) {
        *d = *src;
        ++d;
        ++src;
    }
    *d = '\0';
    return dest;
}
```

For historical reasons, the return value of `strcpy` is the address of `dest`. This is not useful and typically ignored.



`strcpy` can be a source of buffer overrun: always ensure that the `dest` array is large enough (and don't forget the null terminator).

`strcpy` can also cause problems if the `dest` and `src` regions overlap.

Consider this dangerous call:

```
char s[9] = "spam";
my_strcpy(s + 4, s);
```

The null terminator of `src` is overwritten, so it will continue to fill up memory with `spamspams pam . . .` until a crash occurs.

## strcat

`strcat(dest, src)` is similar to `strcpy`, except it copies (appends or concatenates) `src` **to the end** of `dest`.

```
// time: O(n + m) n,m are lengths of src,dest
char *my_strcat(char *dest, const char *src) {
    strcpy(dest + strlen(dest), src);
    return dest;
}
```

Again, ensure that the `dest` array is large enough.

## String literals

C strings in quotations (*e.g.*, `"string"`) that are in an **expression** (*i.e.*, *not* part of an *array initialization*) are known as ***string literals***.

```
printf("literal\n");
printf("literal %s\n", "another literal");
if (!strcmp(s, "literal")) ...
strcpy(dest, "literal");
int i = strlen("literal");
scanf("%d", &i);
```

# String literal storage

Where are string literals stored?

For each *string literal*, a null-terminated `const char` array is created in the **read-only data** section.

In the code, the occurrence of the *string literal* is replaced with the address of the corresponding array.

The “*read-only*” section is also known as the “*literal pool*”.

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

28

## example: string literals

```
void foo(int i, int j) {
    printf("i = %d\n", i);
    printf("the value of j is %d\n", j);
}
```

Although no name is actually given to each literal, it is helpful to imagine that one is:

```
const char string_literal_1[] = "i = %d\n";
const char string_literal_2[] = "the value of j is %d\n";

void foo(int i, int j) {
    printf(string_literal_1, i);
    printf(string_literal_2, j);
}
```

Do not try to modify a string literal. The behaviour is undefined, and it causes an error in `Seashell`.

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

29

Note the subtle difference between the following two definitions:

```
int main(void) {
    char a[] = "mutable char array";
    char *p = "constant string literal";
    //...
}
```

Once again, it is helpful to think of the string literal as a separately defined `const char` array.

```
const char string_literal_1[] = "constant string literal";

int main(void) {
    char a[] = "mutable char array";
    char *p = string_literal_1;
    //...
}
```

CS 136 Winter 2021

09: Strings

30

# Arrays vs. pointers

Earlier, we said arrays and pointers are *similar* but **different**.

Consider again two similar string definitions:

```
void f(void) {
    char a[] = "pointers are not arrays";
    char *p = "pointers are not arrays";
    ...
}
```

- The first reserves space for an initialized 24 character array (a) in the stack frame (24 bytes).
- The second reserves space for a char pointer (p) in the stack frame (8 bytes), *initialized* to point at a string literal (const char array) created in the read-only data section.

## example: more arrays vs. pointers

```
char a[] = "pointers are not arrays";
char *p = "pointers are not arrays";
char d[] = "different string";
```

a is a char array. The *identifier* a has a constant value (the address of the array), but the elements of a can be changed.

```
a = d;           // INVALID
a[0] = 'P';      // VALID
```

p is a char pointer. p is initialized to point at a string literal, but p can be changed to point at any char.

```
p[0] = 'P';      // INVALID (p points at a const literal)
p = d;          // VALID
p[0] = 'D';      // NOW VALID (p points at d)
```

An array is more similar to a **constant** pointer (that cannot change what it “points at”).

```
int a[6] = {4, 8, 15, 16, 23, 42};
int * const p = a;
```

In most practical expressions a and p would be equivalent. The only significant differences between them are:

- a has the same value as &a, while p and &p have different values
- The size of a is 24 bytes, while sizeof(p) is 8

# Arrays of Strings

An array of strings can be defined as a 2D array of chars, but this approach is awkward and rarely used.

Instead, an **array of pointers** is more common.

```
char *aos[] = {"my awesome array", "of string", "literals"};
```

In the above example, `aos` is an array of pointers, with each pointer pointing to a string literal.

Even though it is not a “proper” 2D array, any char can be accessed as if it was in a 2D array of chars.

For example, `aos[0][1]` is `(aos[0])[1]`, which is 'y'.

```
// equivalent definition
const char str_lit_0[] = "my awesome array";
const char str_lit_1[] = "of string";
const char str_lit_2[] = "literals";

char *aos[] = {str_lit_0, str_lit_1, str_lit_2};
```

This array of pointers can be passed to a function, but as with all arrays, also pass the array length:

```
void aos_function(char *aos[], int num_strings) { ... }
// OR
void aos_function(char **aos, int num_strings) { ... }
```

For complicated technical reasons, do not worry about adding `const` to parameters/definitions that are arrays of pointers.

Until we learn how to use dynamic memory, defining an array of *mutable* strings is a little more awkward.

Define each mutable string separately.

```
char s0[] = "my mutable array";
char s1[] = "of strings";
char *aos[] = {s0, s1};
```

A 2D array of chars requires that each string is allocated the same fixed number of chars (regardless of the actual string length).

```
char aos2d[3][21] = {"my", "two dimensional", "char array"};
```

This is awkward because a function would need to know the fixed length in advance.

```
void aos_function(char aos2d[][21], int num_strings) { ... }
```

If necessary, the array could be “re-interpreted” (cast) as a 1D array, and the fixed lengths could be passed as parameters.

## Goals of this Section

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- define and initialize strings
- explain and demonstrate the use of the null termination convention for strings
- explain string literals and the difference between defining a string array and a string pointer
- sort a string or sequence lexicographically

- use I/O with strings and explain the consequences of buffer overruns
- use `<string.h>` library functions (when provided with a well documented interface)