

# 15-213

*“The course that gives CMU its Zip!”*

## Dynamic Memory Allocation I

### Nov 5, 2002

#### Topics

- Simple explicit allocators
  - Data structures
  - Mechanisms
  - Policies

# Harsh Reality

## *Memory Matters*

### Memory is not unbounded

- It must be allocated and managed
- Many applications are memory dominated
  - Especially those based on complex, graph algorithms

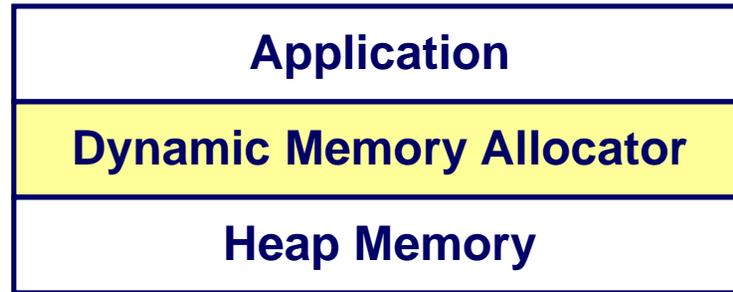
### Memory referencing bugs especially pernicious

- Effects are distant in both time and space

### Memory performance is not uniform

- Cache and virtual memory effects can greatly affect program performance
- Adapting program to characteristics of memory system can lead to major speed improvements

# Dynamic Memory Allocation



## Explicit vs. Implicit Memory Allocator

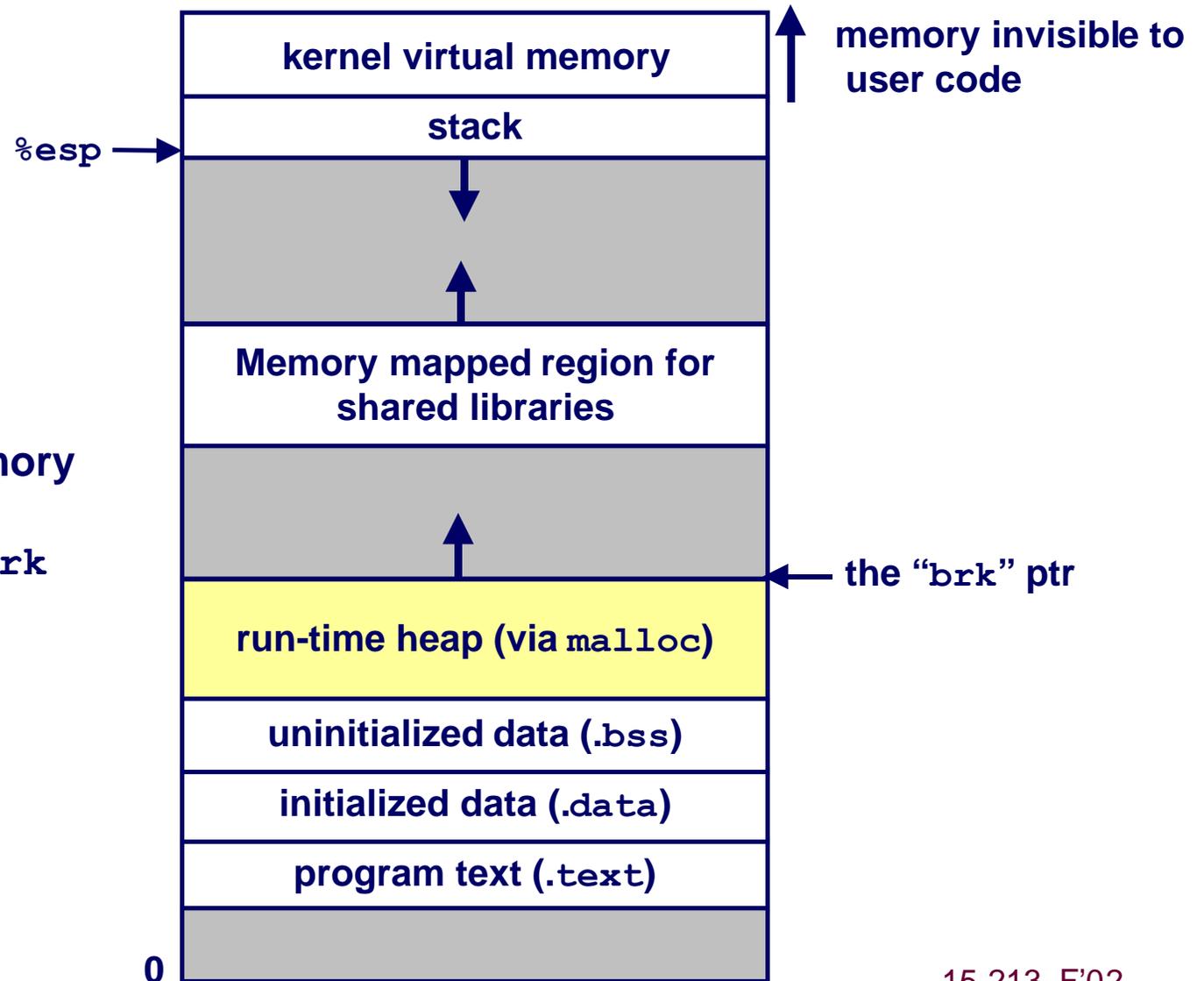
- **Explicit:** application allocates and frees space
  - E.g., `malloc` and `free` in C
- **Implicit:** application allocates, but does not free space
  - E.g. garbage collection in Java, ML or Lisp

## Allocation

- In both cases the memory allocator provides an abstraction of memory as a set of blocks
- Doles out free memory blocks to application

**Will discuss simple explicit memory allocation today**

# Process Memory Image



Allocators request additional heap memory from the operating system using the `sbrk` function.

# Malloc Package

```
#include <stdlib.h>
```

```
void *malloc(size_t size)
```

- If successful:
  - Returns a pointer to a memory block of at least `size` bytes, (typically) aligned to 8-byte boundary.
  - If `size == 0`, returns `NULL`
- If unsuccessful: returns `NULL`

```
void free(void *p)
```

- Returns the block pointed at by `p` to pool of available memory
- `p` must come from a previous call to `malloc` or `realloc`.

```
void *realloc(void *p, size_t size)
```

- Changes size of block `p` and returns pointer to new block.
- Contents of new block unchanged up to min of old and new size.

# Malloc Example

```
void foo(int n, int m) {
    int i, *p;

    /* allocate a block of n ints */
    if ((p = (int *) malloc(n * sizeof(int))) == NULL) {
        perror("malloc");
        exit(0);
    }
    for (i=0; i<n; i++)
        p[i] = i;

    /* add m bytes to end of p block */
    if ((p = (int *) realloc(p, (n+m) * sizeof(int))) == NULL)
    {
        perror("realloc");
        exit(0);
    }
    for (i=n; i < n+m; i++)
        p[i] = i;

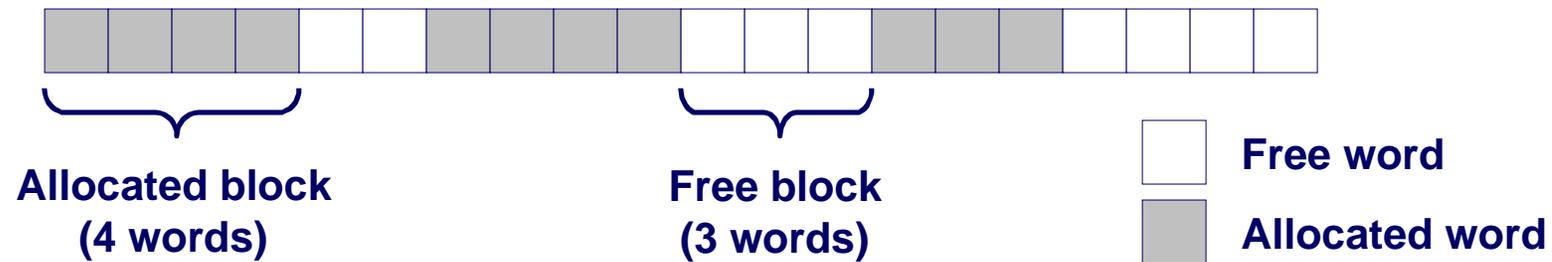
    /* print new array */
    for (i=0; i<n+m; i++)
        printf("%d\n", p[i]);

    free(p); /* return p to available memory pool */
}
```

# Assumptions

## Assumptions made in this lecture

- Memory is word addressed (each word can hold a pointer)

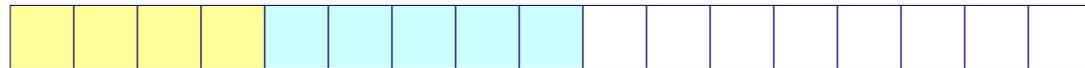


# Allocation Examples

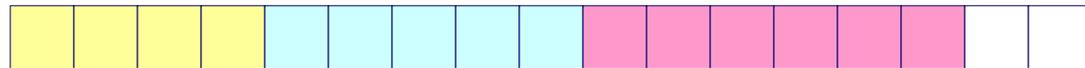
`p1 = malloc(4)`



`p2 = malloc(5)`



`p3 = malloc(6)`



`free(p2)`



`p4 = malloc(2)`



# Constraints

## Applications:

- Can issue arbitrary sequence of allocation and free requests
- Free requests must correspond to an allocated block

## Allocators

- Can't control number or size of allocated blocks
- Must respond immediately to all allocation requests
  - *i.e.*, can't reorder or buffer requests
- Must allocate blocks from free memory
  - *i.e.*, can only place allocated blocks in free memory
- Must align blocks so they satisfy all alignment requirements
  - 8 byte alignment for GNU malloc (`libc malloc`) on Linux boxes
- Can only manipulate and modify free memory
- Can't move the allocated blocks once they are allocated
  - *i.e.*, compaction is not allowed

# Goals of Good malloc/free

## Primary goals

- Good time performance for `malloc` and `free`
  - Ideally should take constant time (not always possible)
  - Should certainly not take linear time in the number of blocks
- Good space utilization
  - User allocated structures should be large fraction of the heap.
  - Want to minimize “fragmentation”.

## Some other goals

- Good locality properties
  - Structures allocated close in time should be close in space
  - “Similar” objects should be allocated close in space
- Robust
  - Can check that `free(p1)` is on a valid allocated object `p1`
  - Can check that memory references are to allocated space

# Performance Goals: Throughput

Given some sequence of malloc and free requests:

- $R_0, R_1, \dots, R_k, \dots, R_{n-1}$

Want to maximize throughput and peak memory utilization.

- These goals are often conflicting

**Throughput:**

- Number of completed requests per unit time
- Example:
  - 5,000 malloc calls and 5,000 free calls in 10 seconds
  - Throughput is 1,000 operations/second.

# Performance Goals: Peak Memory Utilization

Given some sequence of malloc and free requests:

- $R_0, R_1, \dots, R_k, \dots, R_{n-1}$

**Def: Aggregate payload  $P_k$ :**

- `malloc(p)` results in a block with a *payload* of  $p$  bytes..
- After request  $R_k$  has completed, the *aggregate payload*  $P_k$  is the sum of currently allocated payloads.

**Def: Current heap size is denoted by  $H_k$**

- Assume that  $H_k$  is monotonically nondecreasing

**Def: Peak memory utilization:**

- After  $k$  requests, *peak memory utilization* is:
  - $U_k = (\max_{i < k} P_i) / H_k$

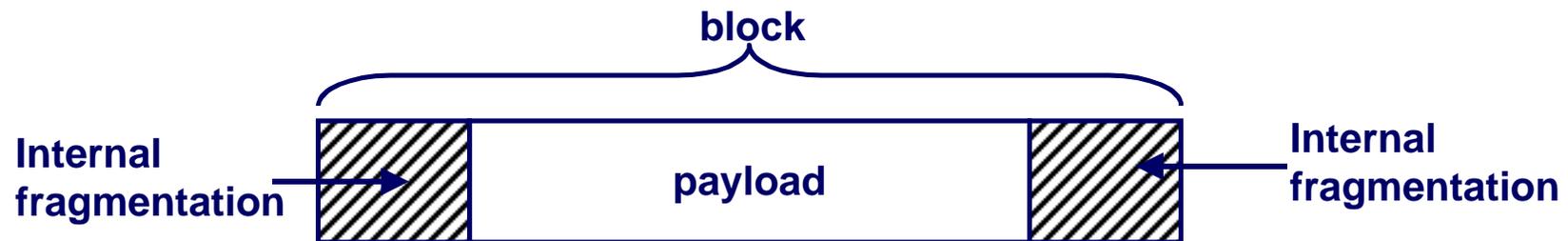
# Internal Fragmentation

Poor memory utilization caused by *fragmentation*.

- Comes in two forms: internal and external fragmentation

## Internal fragmentation

- For some block, internal fragmentation is the difference between the block size and the payload size.



- Caused by overhead of maintaining heap data structures, padding for alignment purposes, or explicit policy decisions (e.g., not to split the block).
- Depends only on the pattern of *previous* requests, and thus is easy to measure.

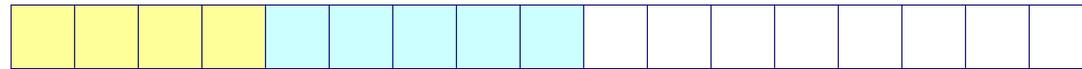
# External Fragmentation

Occurs when there is enough aggregate heap memory, but no single free block is large enough

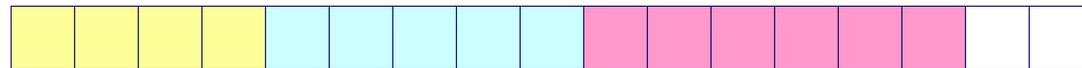
```
p1 = malloc(4)
```



```
p2 = malloc(5)
```



```
p3 = malloc(6)
```



```
free(p2)
```



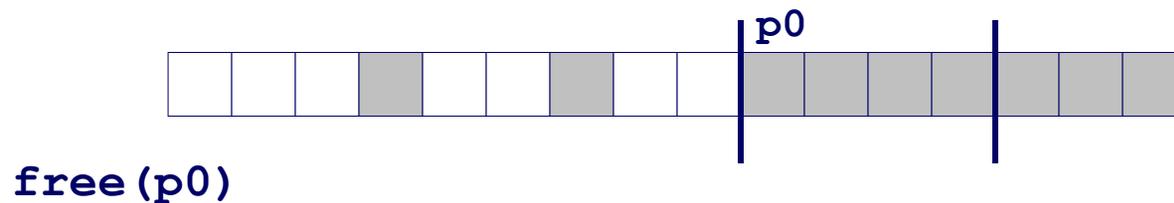
```
p4 = malloc(6)
```

**oops!**

External fragmentation depends on the pattern of *future* requests, and thus is difficult to measure.

# Implementation Issues

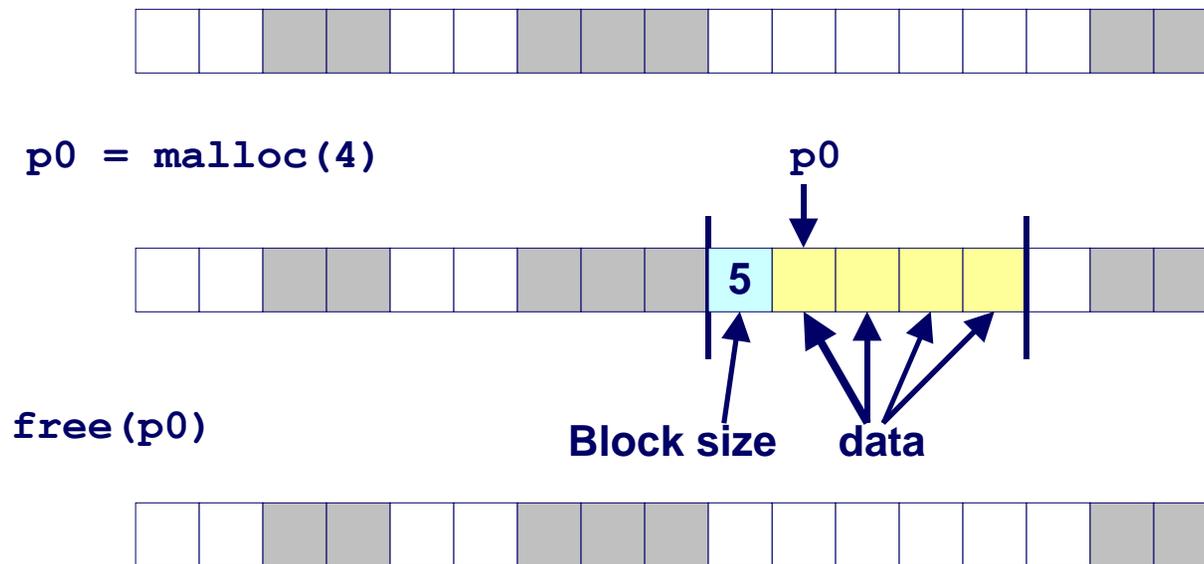
- How do we know how much memory to free just given a pointer?
- How do we keep track of the free blocks?
- What do we do with the extra space when allocating a structure that is smaller than the free block it is placed in?
- How do we pick a block to use for allocation -- many might fit?
- How do we reinsert freed block?



# Knowing How Much to Free

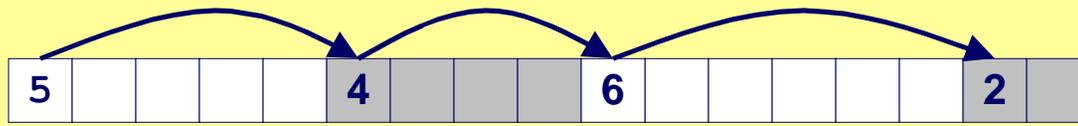
## Standard method

- Keep the length of a block in the word preceding the block.
  - This word is often called the *header field* or *header*
- Requires an extra word for every allocated block

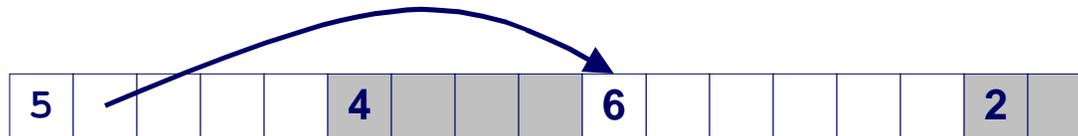


# Keeping Track of Free Blocks

**Method 1: Implicit list** using lengths -- links all blocks



**Method 2: Explicit list** among the free blocks using pointers within the free blocks



**Method 3: Segregated free list**

- Different free lists for different size classes

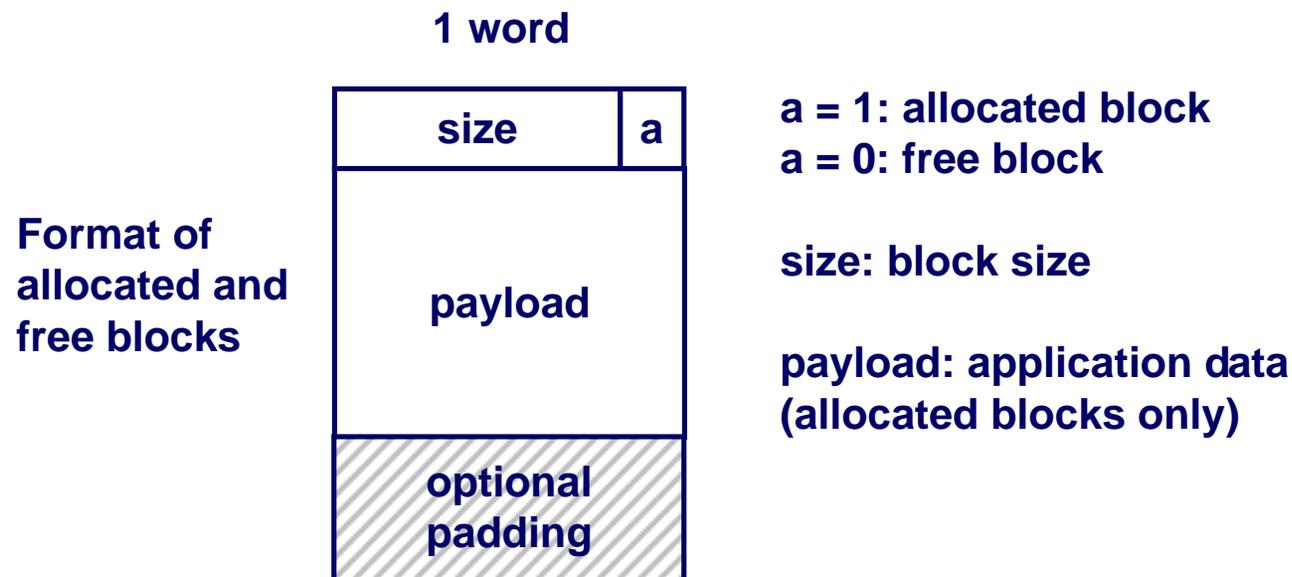
**Method 4: Blocks sorted by size**

- Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

# Method 1: Implicit List

**Need to identify whether each block is free or allocated**

- Can use extra bit
- Bit can be put in the same word as the size if block sizes are always multiples of two (mask out low order bit when reading size).



# Implicit List: Finding a Free Block

## *First fit:*

- Search list from beginning, choose first free block that fits

```
p = start;
while ((p < end) ||      \\ not passed end
      (*p & 1) ||      \\ already allocated
      (*p <= len));    \\ too small
```

- Can take linear time in total number of blocks (allocated and free)
- In practice it can cause “splinters” at beginning of list

## *Next fit:*

- Like first-fit, but search list from location of end of previous search
- Research suggests that fragmentation is worse

## *Best fit:*

- Search the list, choose the free block with the closest size that fits
- Keeps fragments small --- usually helps fragmentation
- Will typically run slower than first-fit



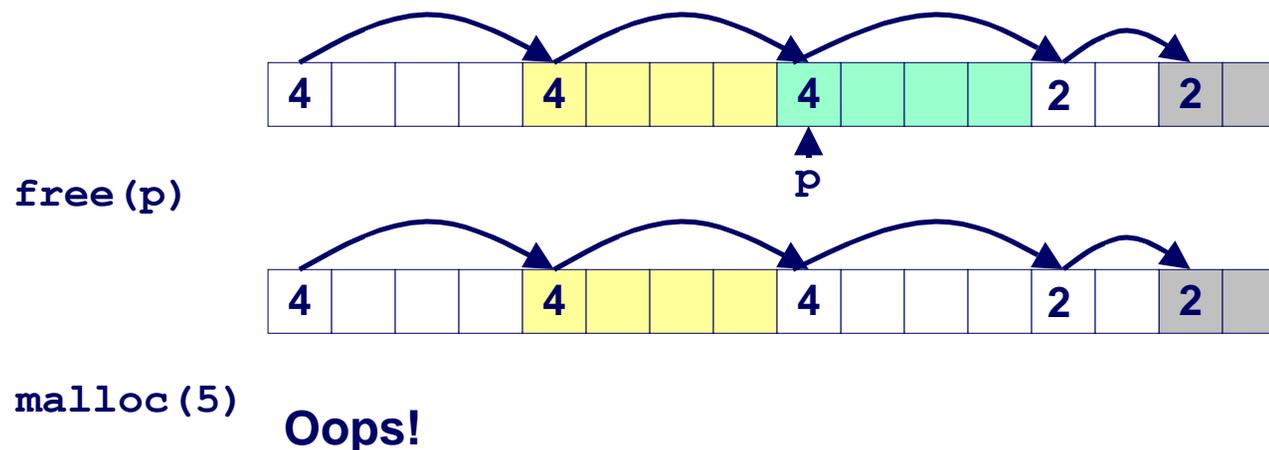
# Implicit List: Freeing a Block

## Simplest implementation:

- Only need to clear allocated flag

```
void free_block(ptr p) { *p = *p & -2 }
```

- But can lead to “false fragmentation”



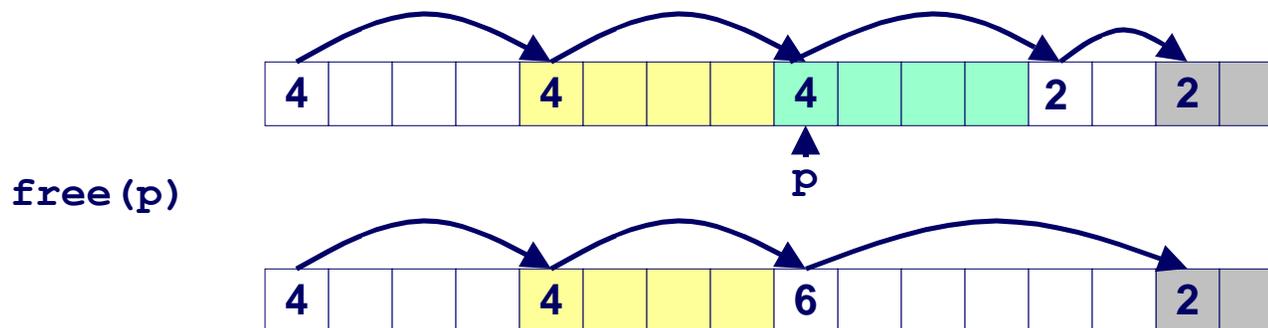
*There is enough free space, but the allocator won't be able to find it*

# Implicit List: Coalescing

Join (*coalesce*) with next and/or previous block if they are free

## ■ Coalescing with next block

```
void free_block(ptr p) {
    *p = *p & -2;           // clear allocated flag
    next = p + *p;         // find next block
    if ((*next & 1) == 0)
        *p = *p + *next;   // add to this block if
                           // not allocated
}
```

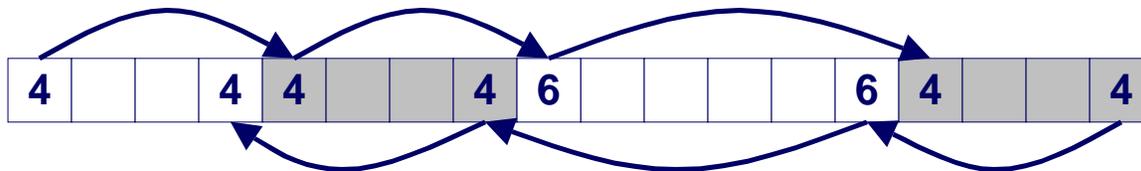
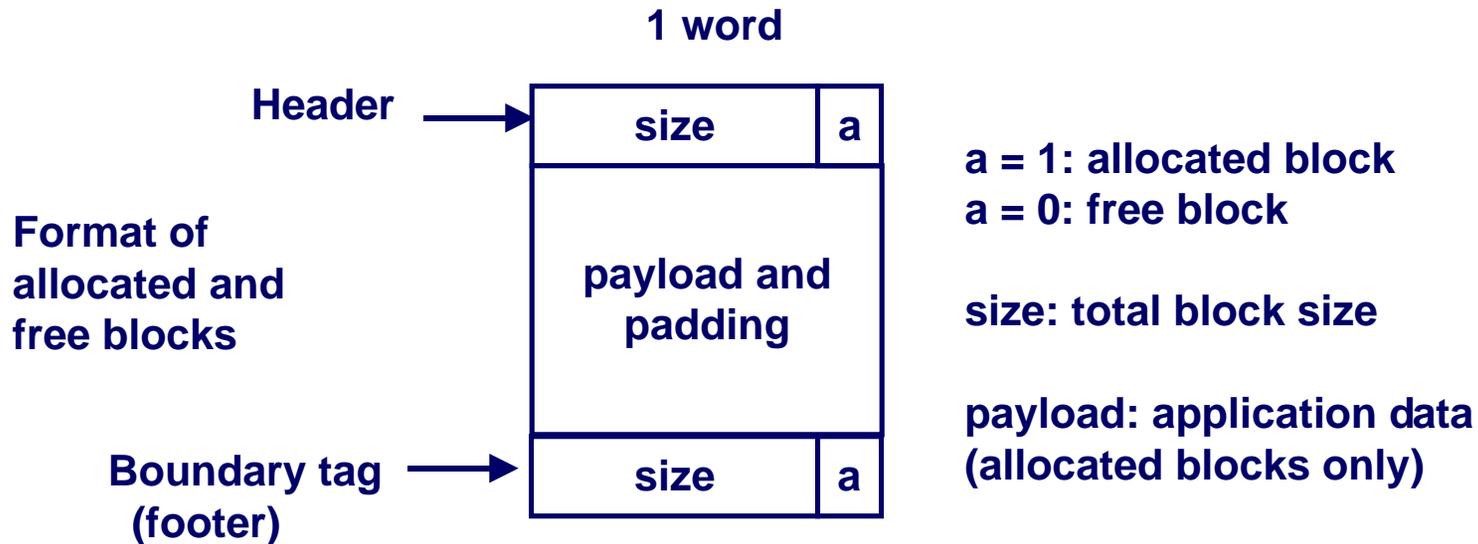


- 22 - ■ But how do we coalesce with previous block? 15-213, F'02

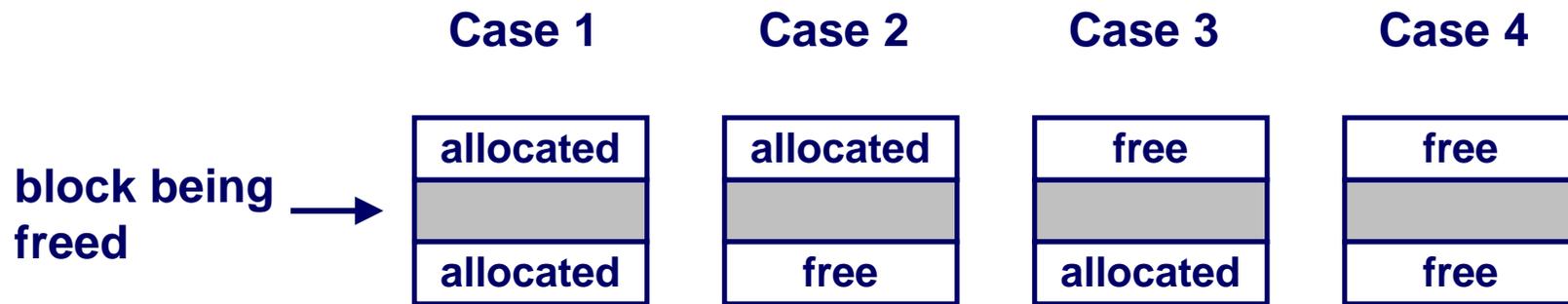
# Implicit List: Bidirectional Coalescing

## Boundary tags [Knuth73]

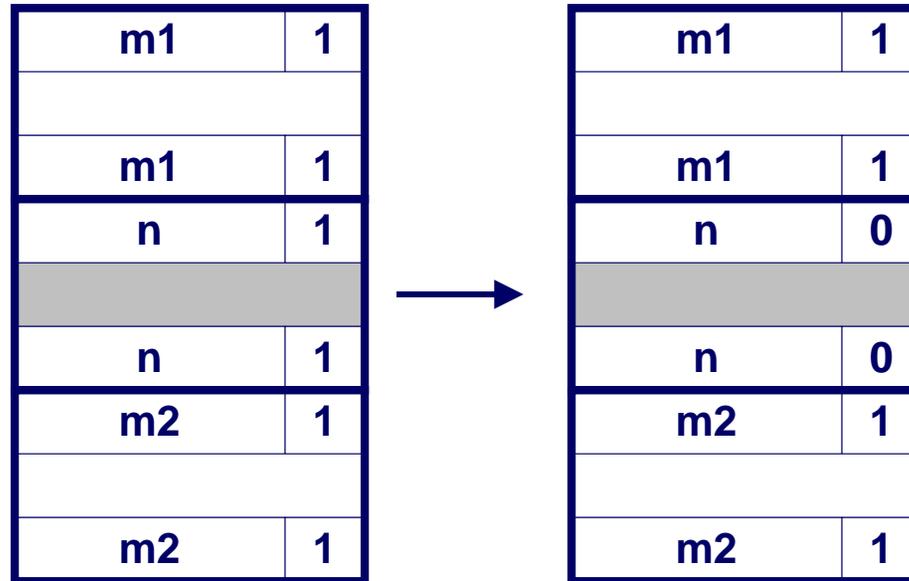
- Replicate size/allocated word at bottom of free blocks
- Allows us to traverse the “list” backwards, but requires extra space
- Important and general technique!



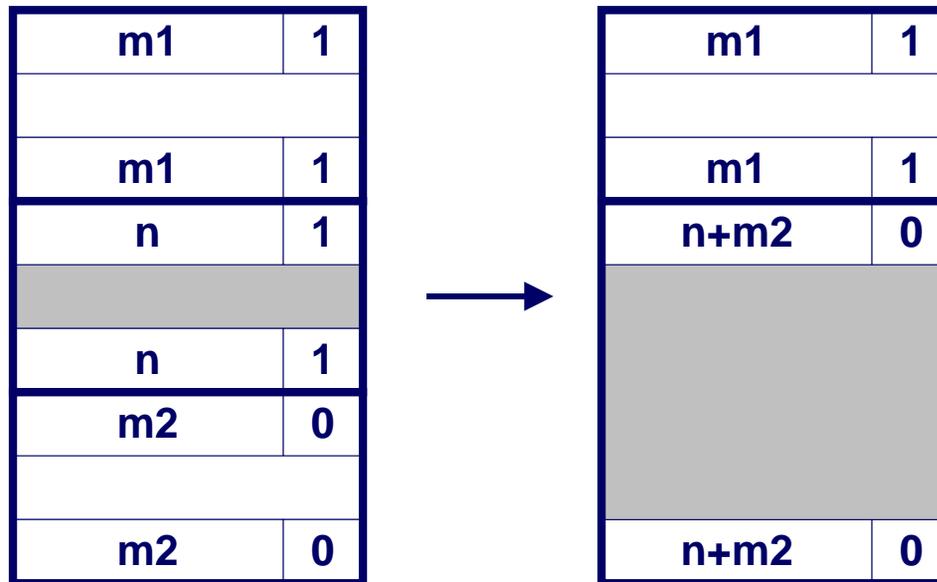
# Constant Time Coalescing



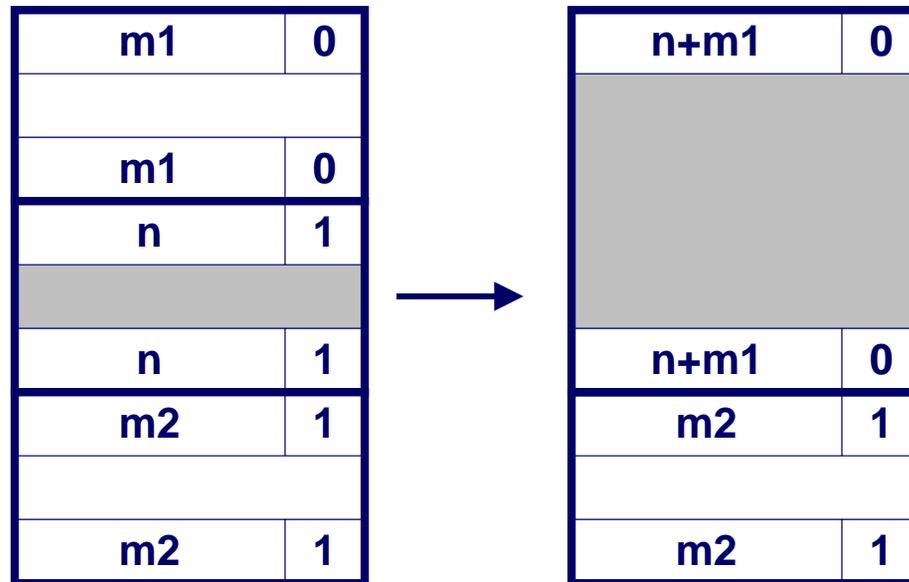
# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 1)



# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 2)



# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 3)





# Summary of Key Allocator Policies

## Placement policy:

- First fit, next fit, best fit, etc.
- Trades off lower throughput for less fragmentation
  - Interesting observation: segregated free lists (next lecture) approximate a best fit placement policy without having the search entire free list.

## Splitting policy:

- When do we go ahead and split free blocks?
- How much internal fragmentation are we willing to tolerate?

## Coalescing policy:

- Immediate coalescing: coalesce adjacent blocks each time free is called
- Deferred coalescing: try to improve performance of free by deferring coalescing until needed. e.g.,
  - Coalesce as you scan the free list for malloc.
  - Coalesce when the amount of external fragmentation reaches some threshold.

# Implicit Lists: Summary

- **Implementation:** very simple
- **Allocate:** linear time worst case
- **Free:** constant time worst case -- even with coalescing
- **Memory usage:** will depend on placement policy
  - **First fit, next fit or best fit**

**Not used in practice for malloc/free because of linear time allocate. Used in many special purpose applications.**

**However, the concepts of splitting and boundary tag coalescing are general to *all* allocators.**