

Dynamic Memory Allocation: Basic Concepts

15-213: Introduction to Computer Systems
17th Lecture, Oct. 21, 2010

Instructors:

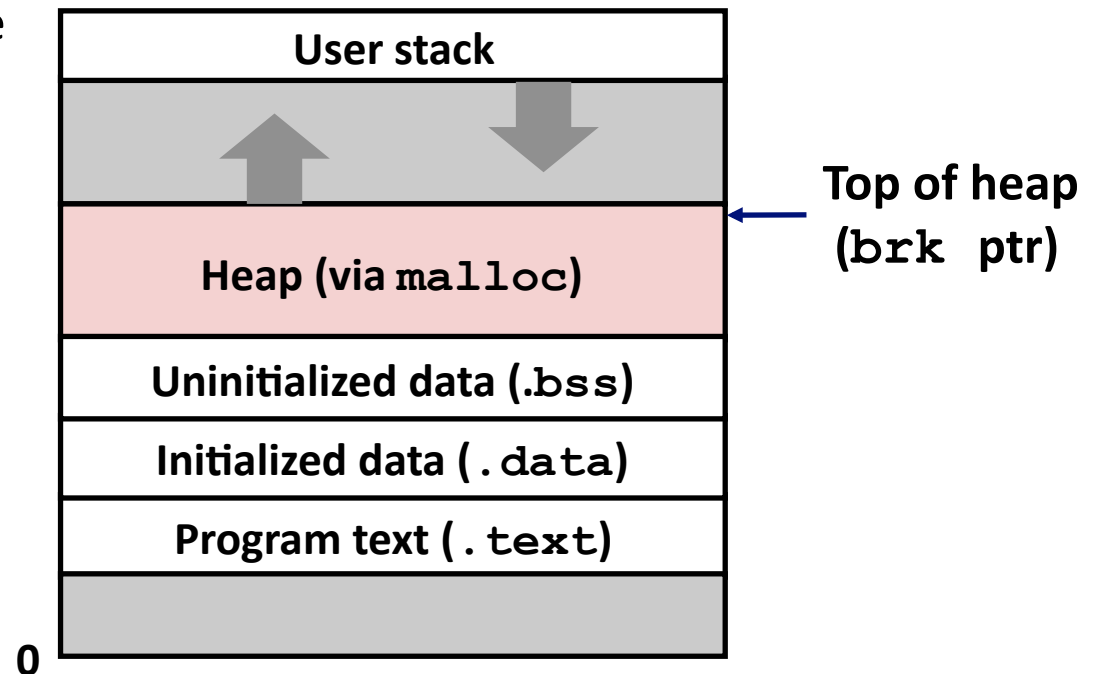
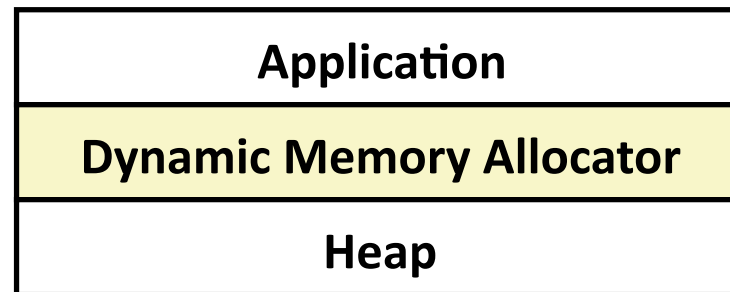
Randy Bryant and Dave O'Hallaron

Today

- **Basic concepts**
- **Implicit free lists**

Dynamic Memory Allocation

- Programmers use *dynamic memory allocators* (such as `malloc`) to acquire VM at run time.
 - For data structures whose size is only known at runtime.
- Dynamic memory allocators manage an area of process virtual memory known as the *heap*.



Dynamic Memory Allocation

- Allocator maintains heap as collection of variable sized *blocks*, which are either *allocated* or *free*
- Types of allocators
 - *Explicit allocator*: application allocates and frees space
 - E.g., `malloc` and `free` in C
 - *Implicit allocator*: application allocates, but does not free space
 - E.g. garbage collection in Java, ML, and Lisp
- Will discuss simple explicit memory allocation today

The malloc Package

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

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

- Successful:
 - Returns a pointer to a memory block of at least **size** bytes (typically) aligned to 8-byte boundary
 - If **size == 0**, returns NULL
- Unsuccessful: returns NULL (0) and sets **errno**

```
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**

Other functions

- **calloc**: Version of **malloc** that initializes allocated block to zero.
- **realloc**: Changes the size of a previously allocated block.
- **sbrk**: Used internally by allocators to grow or shrink the heap

malloc Example

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

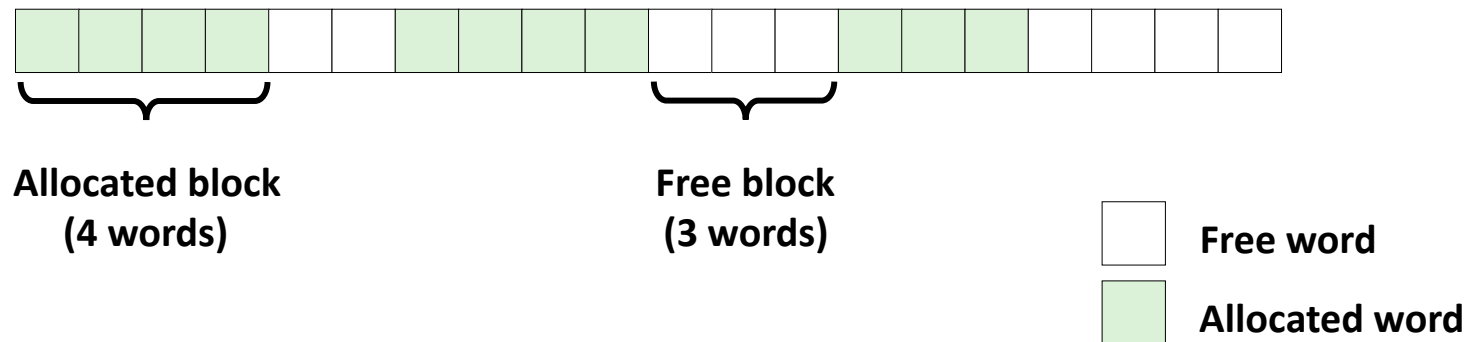
    /* Allocate a block of n ints */
    p = (int *) malloc(n * sizeof(int));
    if (p == NULL) {
        perror("malloc");
        exit(0);
    }

    /* Initialize allocated block */
    for (i=0; i<n; i++)
        p[i] = i;

    /* Return p to the heap */
    free(p);
}
```

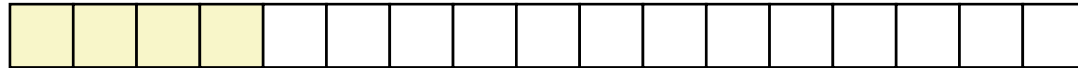
Assumptions Made in This Lecture

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

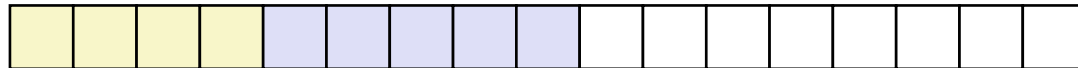


Allocation Example

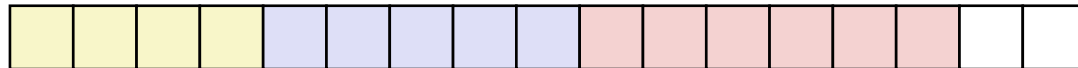
```
p1 = malloc(4)
```



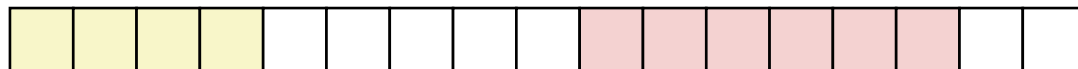
```
p2 = malloc(5)
```



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



```
free(p2)
```



```
p4 = malloc(2)
```



Constraints

■ Applications

- Can issue arbitrary sequence of **malloc** and **free** requests
- **free** request must be to a **malloc**'d block

■ Allocators

- Can't control number or size of allocated blocks
- Must respond immediately to **malloc** 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 manipulate and modify only free memory
- Can't move the allocated blocks once they are **malloc**'d
 - *i.e.*, compaction is not allowed

Performance Goal: Throughput

- Given some sequence of `malloc` and `free` requests:
 - $R_0, R_1, \dots, R_k, \dots, R_{n-1}$
- Goals: 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 Goal: Peak Memory Utilization

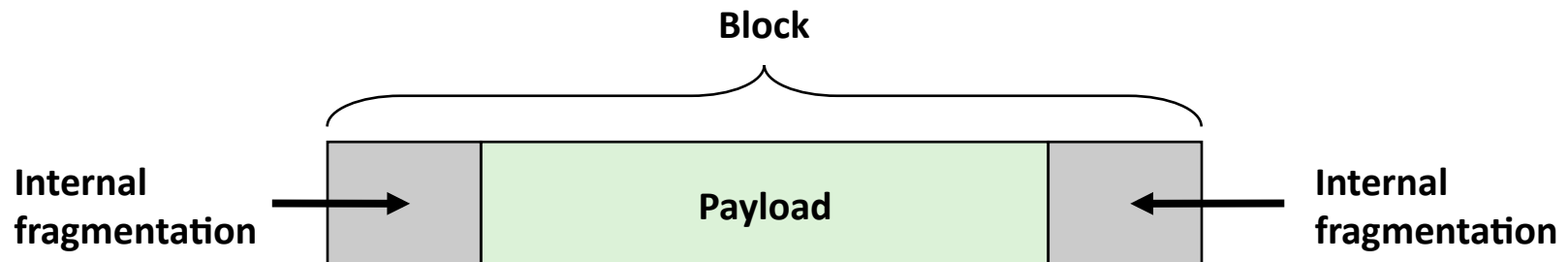
- Given some sequence of `malloc` and `free` requests:
 - $R_0, R_1, \dots, R_k, \dots, R_{n-1}$
- **Def: Aggregate payload P_k**
 - `malloc(p)` results in a block with a **payload** of `p` bytes
 - After request R_k has completed, the **aggregate payload** P_k is the sum of currently allocated payloads
- **Def: Current heap size H_k**
 - Assume H_k is monotonically nondecreasing
 - i.e., heap only grows when allocator uses `sbrk`
- **Def: Peak memory utilization after k requests**
 - $U_k = (\max_{i < k} P_i) / H_k$

Fragmentation

- Poor memory utilization caused by *fragmentation*
 - *internal* fragmentation
 - *external* fragmentation

Internal Fragmentation

- For a given block, *internal fragmentation* occurs if payload is smaller than block size

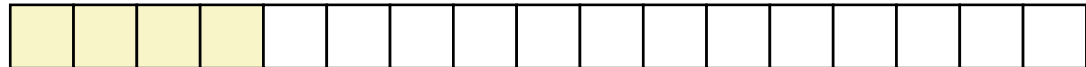


- **Caused by**
 - Overhead of maintaining heap data structures
 - Padding for alignment purposes
 - Explicit policy decisions
(e.g., to return a big block to satisfy a small request)
- **Depends only on the pattern of *previous* requests**
 - Thus, easy to measure

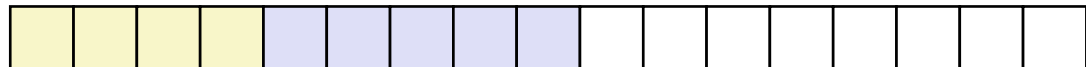
External Fragmentation

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

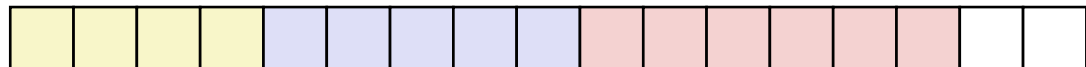
```
p1 = malloc(4)
```



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



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



```
free(p2)
```



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

Oops! (what would happen now?)

- Depends on the pattern of future requests
 - Thus, difficult to measure

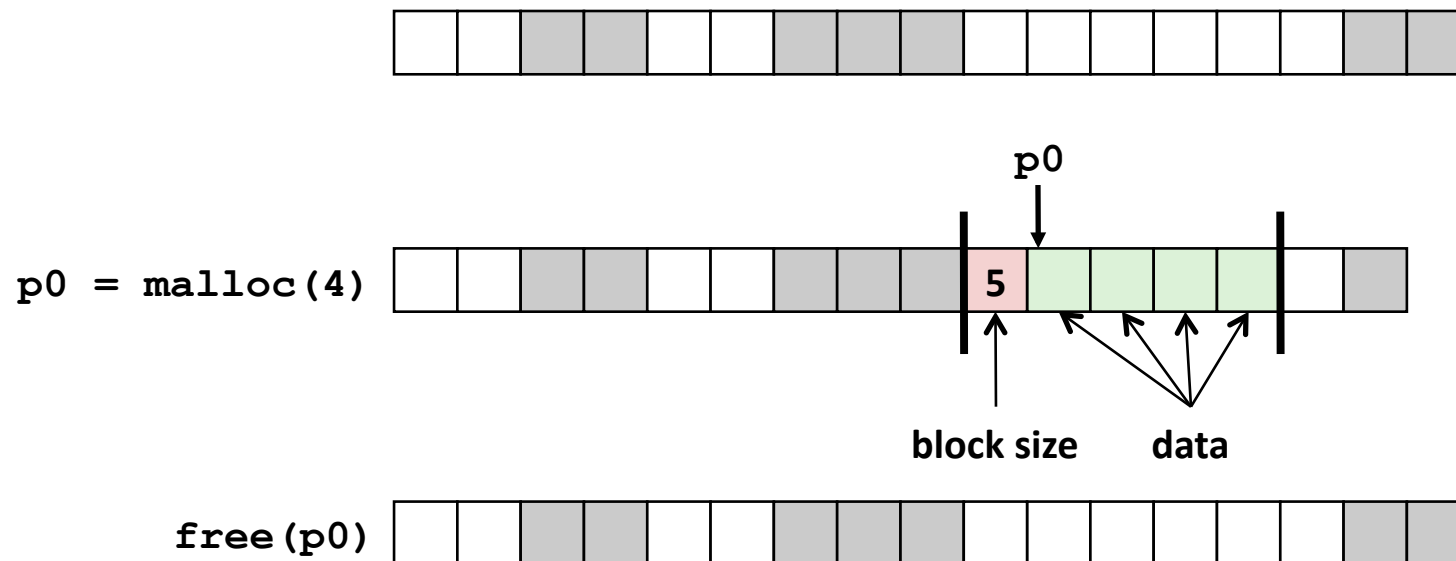
Implementation Issues

- How do we know how much memory to free given just 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

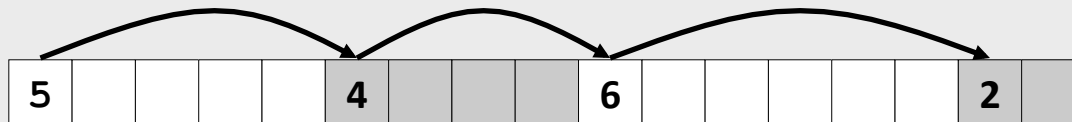
■ Standard method

- 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

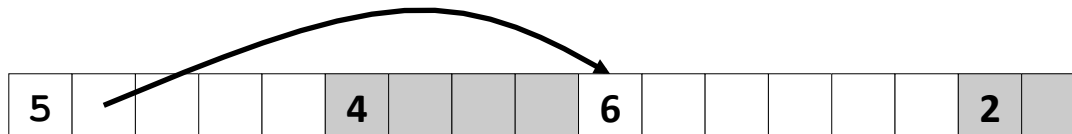


Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- Method 1: *Implicit list* using length—links all blocks



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



- 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

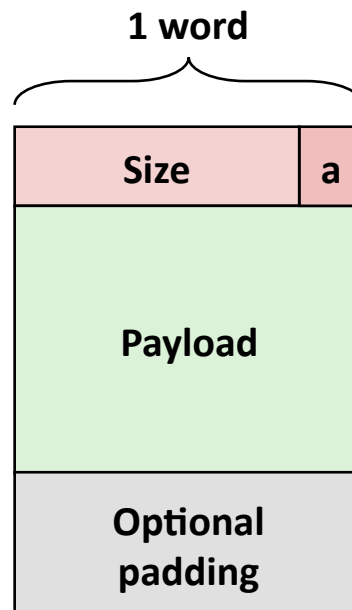
Today

- Basic concepts
- **Implicit free lists**

Method 1: Implicit List

- For each block we need both size and allocation status
 - Could store this information in two words: wasteful!
- Standard trick
 - If blocks are aligned, some low-order address bits are always 0
 - Instead of storing an always-0 bit, use it as a allocated/free flag
 - When reading size word, must mask out this bit

*Format of
allocated and
free blocks*

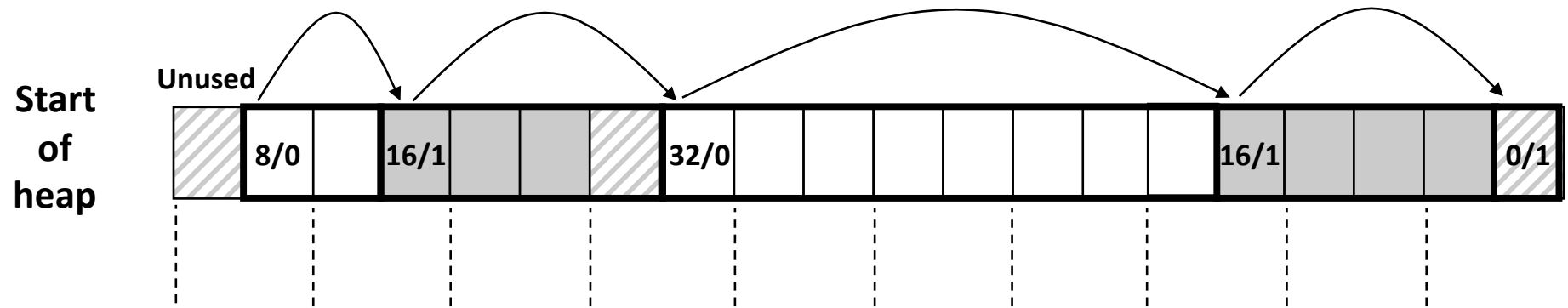


a = 1: Allocated block
a = 0: Free block

Size: block size

**Payload: application data
(allocated blocks only)**

Detailed Implicit Free List Example



Double-word
aligned

Allocated blocks: shaded

Free blocks: unshaded

Headers: labeled with size in bytes/allocated bit

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
    p = p + (*p & -2);      \\ goto next block (word addressed)
```

- 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 starting where previous search finished
- Should often be faster than first fit: avoids re-scanning unhelpful blocks
- Some research suggests that fragmentation is worse

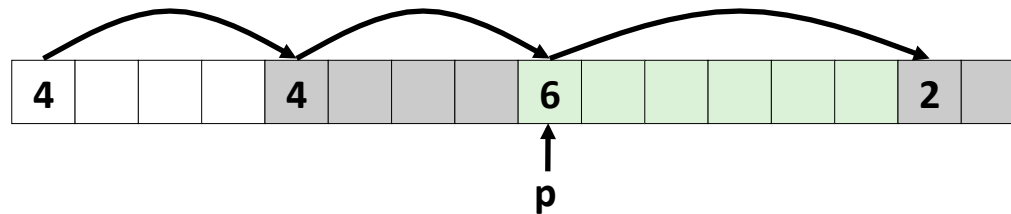
■ *Best fit:*

- Search the list, choose the *best* free block: fits, with fewest bytes left over
- Keeps fragments small—usually helps fragmentation
- Will typically run slower than first fit

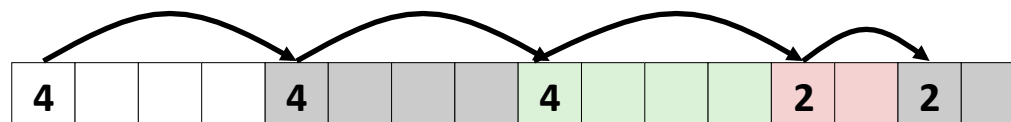
Implicit List: Allocating in Free Block

■ Allocating in a free block: *splitting*

- Since allocated space might be smaller than free space, we might want to split the block



`addblock(p, 4)`



```
void addblock(ptr p, int len) {
    int newsize = ((len + 1) >> 1) << 1; // round up to even
    int oldsize = *p & -2; // mask out low bit
    *p = newsize | 1; // set new length
    if (newsize < oldsize)
        *(p+newsized) = oldsize - newsized; // set length in remaining
                                                // part of block
}
```

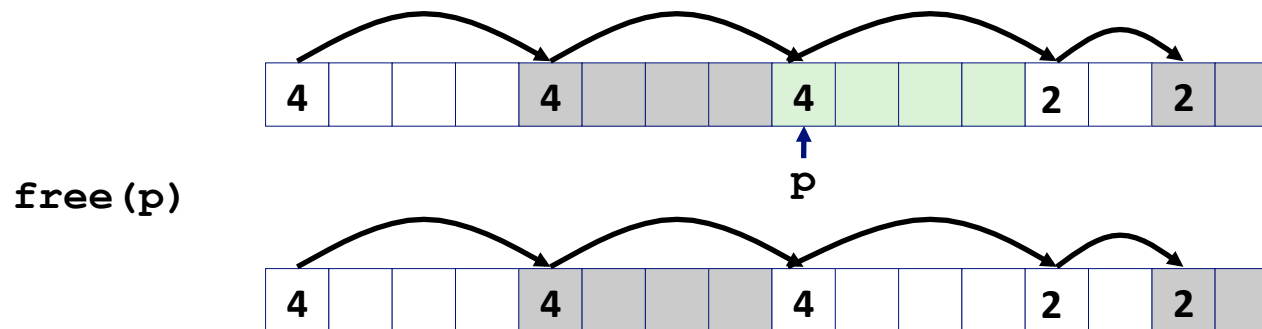
Implicit List: Freeing a Block

■ Simplest implementation:

- Need only clear the “allocated” flag

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

- But can lead to “false fragmentation”

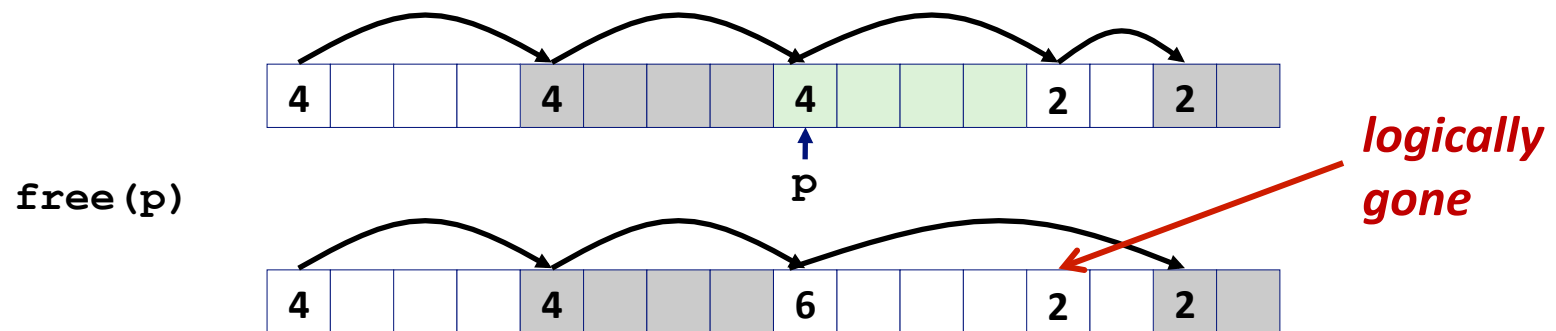


malloc(5) **Oops!**

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

Implicit List: Coalescing

- Join (*coalesce*) with next/previous blocks, 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
}

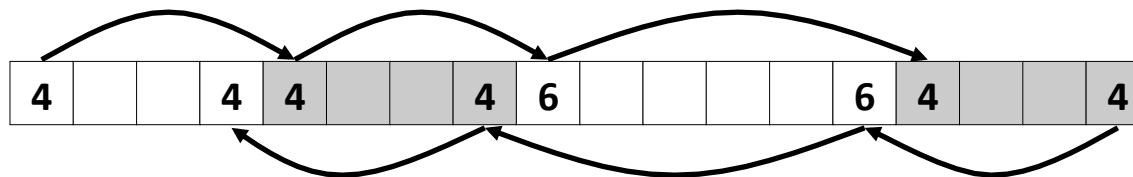
```

- But how do we coalesce with *previous* block?

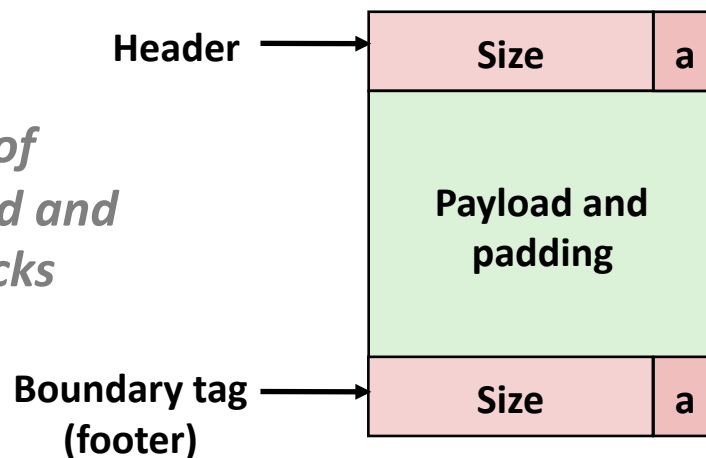
Implicit List: Bidirectional Coalescing

■ *Boundary tags* [Knuth73]

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



*Format of
allocated and
free blocks*

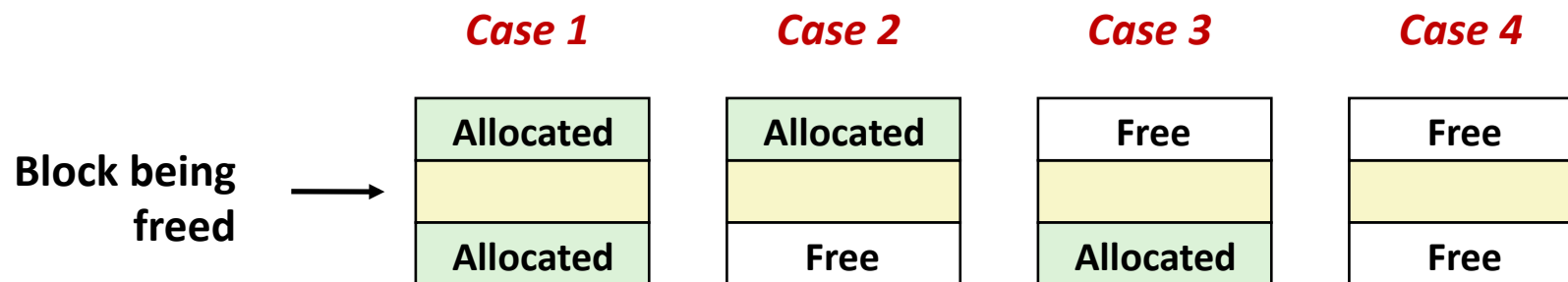


a = 1: Allocated block
a = 0: Free block

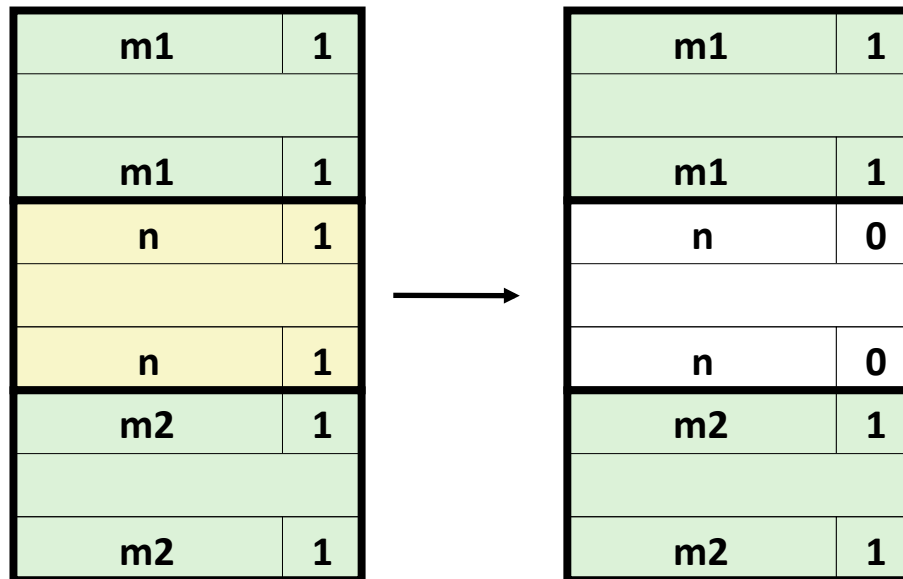
Size: Total block size

Payload: Application data
(allocated blocks only)

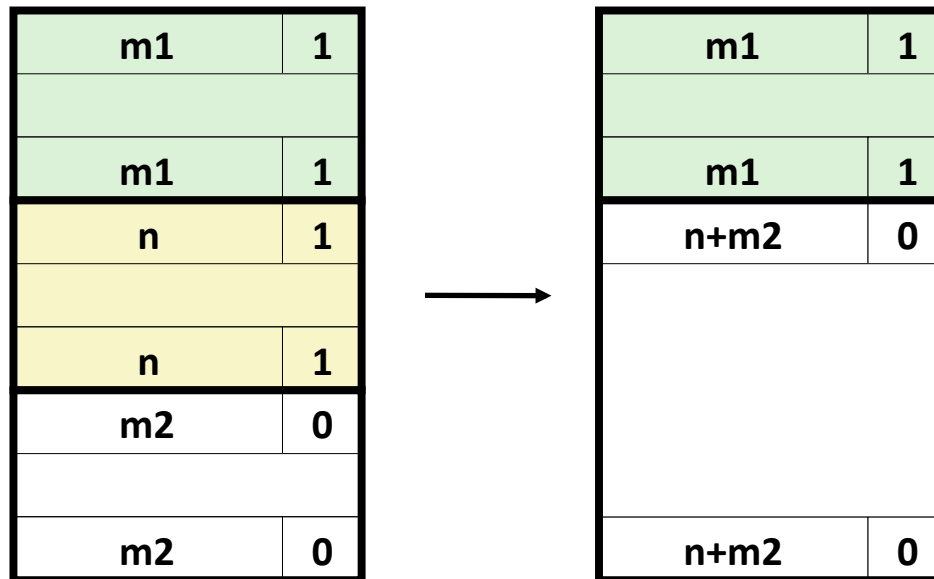
Constant Time Coalescing



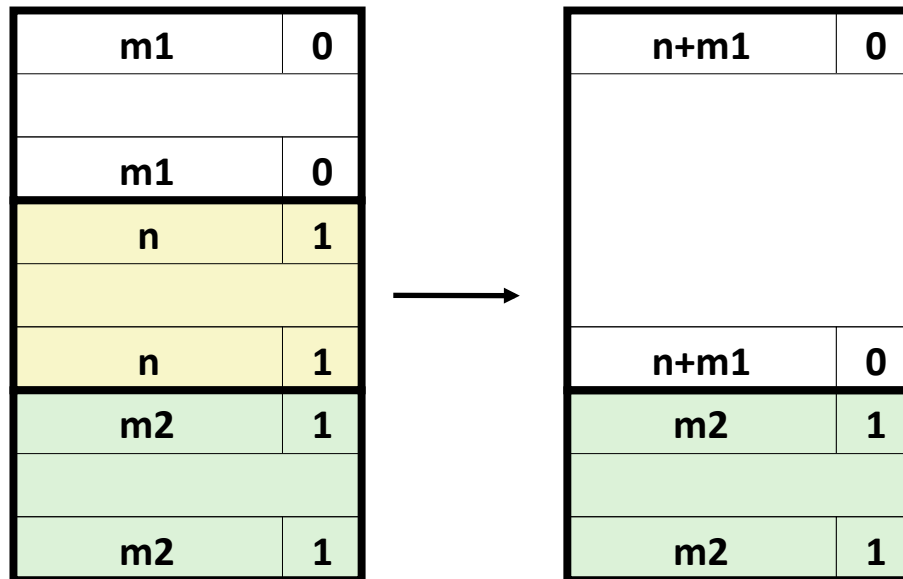
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 1)



Constant Time Coalescing (Case 2)



Constant Time Coalescing (Case 3)



Disadvantages of Boundary Tags

- **Internal fragmentation**
- **Can it be optimized?**
 - Which blocks need the footer tag?
 - What does that mean?

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 to 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 each time **free** is called
- *Deferred coalescing*: try to improve performance of **free** by deferring coalescing until needed. Examples:
 - 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 cost:**
 - linear time worst case
- **Free cost:**
 - 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 allocation**
 - used in many special purpose applications

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