Introduction to Computer Systems

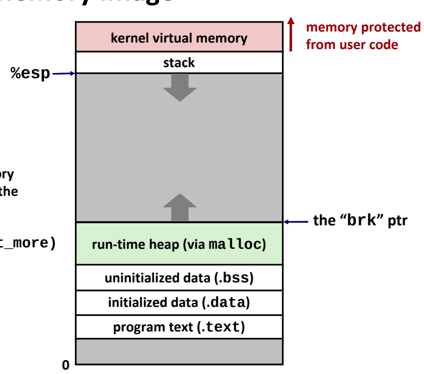
15-213/18-243, fall 2009
16th Lecture, Oct. 22nd

Instructors:
Gregory Kesden and Markus Püschel

Today

- **Dynamic memory allocation**

Process Memory Image



Allocators request additional heap memory from the kernel using the `sbrk()` function:

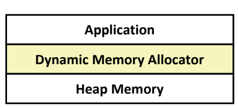
`error = sbrk(amt_more)`

Why Dynamic Memory Allocation?

- **Sizes of needed data structures may only be known at runtime**

Dynamic Memory Allocation

- **Memory allocator?**
  - VM hardware and kernel allocate pages
  - Application objects are typically smaller
  - Allocator manages objects within pages



- **Explicit vs. Implicit Memory Allocator**
  - *Explicit:* application allocates and frees space
    - In C: `malloc()` and `free()`
  - *Implicit:* application allocates, but does not free space
    - In Java, ML, Lisp: garbage collection
- **Allocation**
  - A memory allocator doles out memory blocks to application
  - A "block" is a contiguous range of bytes
    - of any size, in this context
- ***Today:*** **simple explicit memory allocation**

Malloc Package

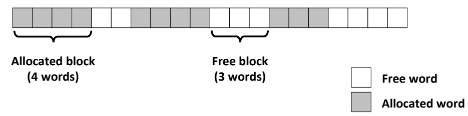
- `#include <stdlib.h>`
- `void *malloc(size_t size)`
  - Successful:
    - Returns a pointer to a memory block of at least `size` bytes (typically) aligned to 8-byte boundary
    - If `size == 0`, returns NULL
  - Unsuccessful: returns NULL (0) and sets errno
- `void free(void *p)`
  - Returns the block pointed at by `p` to pool of available memory
  - `p` must come from a previous call to `malloc()` or `realloc()`
- `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
  - Old block has been `free()`'d (logically, if new != old)

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);
  }
  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 Made in This Lecture

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



Allocation Example

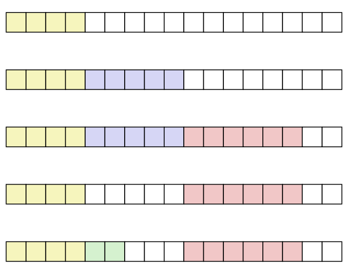
`p1 = malloc(4)`

`p2 = malloc(5)`

`p3 = malloc(6)`

`free(p2)`

`p4 = malloc(2)`



Constraints

- **Applications**
  - Can issue arbitrary sequence of malloc() and free() requests
  - free() requests 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:**
  - $R_0, R_1, \ldots, R_k, \ldots, R_{n-1}$
- **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
  - ***How to do `malloc()` and `free()` in O(1)? What's the problem?***

Performance Goal: Peak Memory Utilization

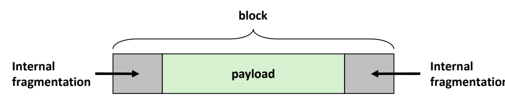
- **Given some sequence of `malloc` and `free` requests:**
  - $R_0, R_1, \ldots, R_k, \ldots, R_{n-1}$
- ***Def: Aggregate payload P_k***
  - **`malloc(p)`** results in a block with a ***payload*** of **p** bytes
  - After request R_k has completed, the ***aggregate payload*** P_k is the sum of currently allocated payloads
    - all **`malloc()`**'d stuff minus all **`free()`**'d stuff
- ***Def: Current heap size = H_k***
  - Assume H_k is monotonically nondecreasing
    - reminder: it 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

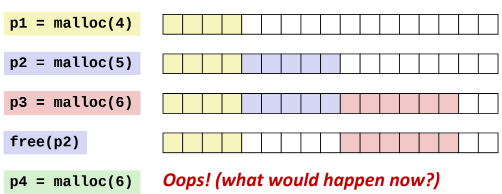
- **For a given block, *internal fragmentation* occurs if payload is smaller than block size**



- **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**



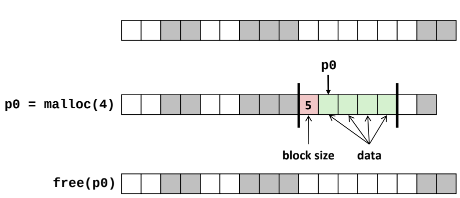
- **Depends on the pattern of future requests**
  - Thus, difficult to measure

Implementation Issues

- **How to know how much memory is being `free()`'d when it is given only a pointer (and no length)?**
- **How to keep track of the free blocks?**
- **What to do with extra space when allocating a block that is smaller than the free block it is placed in?**
- **How to pick a block to use for allocation—many might fit?**
- **How to reinsert a freed block into the heap?**

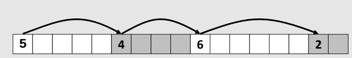
Knowing How Much to Free

- **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

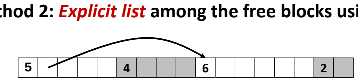


Keeping Track of Free Blocks

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



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

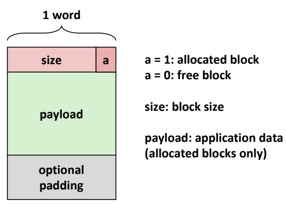


- **Method 3: *Segregated free list***
  - Different free lists for different size classes
- **Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size***
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

Method 1: Implicit List

- **For each block we need: length, is-allocated?**
  - 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



Implicit List: Finding a Free Block

- ***First fit:***
  - Search list from beginning, choose ***first*** free block that fits: ***(Cost?)***

```
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

Bit Fields

- **How to represent the Header: Masks and bitwise operators**

```
#define SIZEMASK          (~0x7)
#define PACK(size, alloc) ((size) | (alloc))
#define GET_SIZE(p)       ((p)->size & SIZEMASK)
```

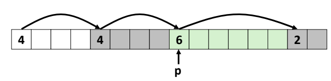
- **Bit Fields**

```
struct {
    unsigned allocated:1;
    unsigned size:31;
} Header;
```

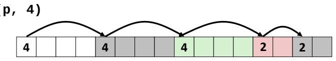
Check your K&R: structures are not necessarily packed

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)`

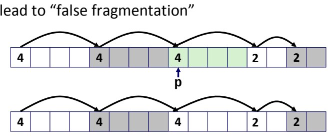



```
void addblock(ptr p, int len) {
  int newsize = ((len + 1) >> 1) << 1;  // round up to even
  int oldsize = *p & -2;                // mask out low bit
  *p = newsize | 1;                     // set new length
  if (newsize < oldsize)
    *(p+newsize) = oldsize - newsize;   // set length in remaining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

`free(p)`



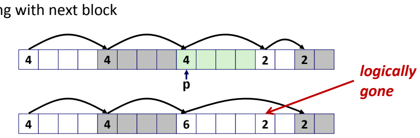
`malloc(5)` ***Oops!***

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

`free(p)`

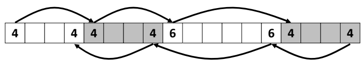



```
void free_block(ptr p) {
    *p = *p & -2;          // clear allocated flag
    next = p + *p;         // find next block
    if ((*next & 1) == 0)
      *p = *p + *next;     // add to this block if
}                          //    not allocated
```

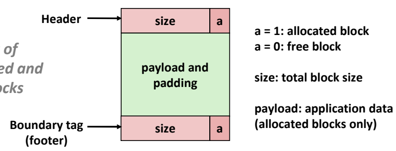
  - But how do we coalesce with *previous* block?

Implicit List: Bidirectional Coalescing

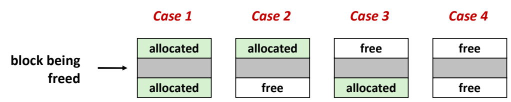
- ***Boundary tags*** [Knuth73]
  - Replicate size/allocated word at "bottom" (end) of free blocks
  - Allows us to traverse the "list" backwards, but requires extra space
  - Important and general technique!



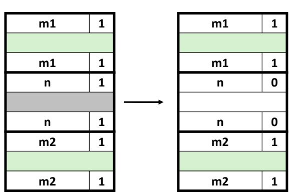
Format of allocated and free blocks



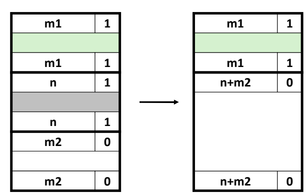
Constant Time Coalescing



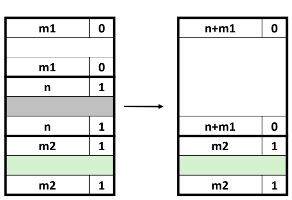
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 1)



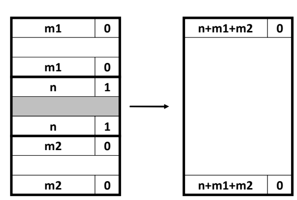
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 2)



Constant Time Coalescing (Case 3)



Constant Time Coalescing (Case 4)



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**