Dynamic Memory Allocation: Advanced Concepts

15-213 / 18-213: Introduction to Computer Systems
19th Lecture, Mar. 28, 2013

Instructors:

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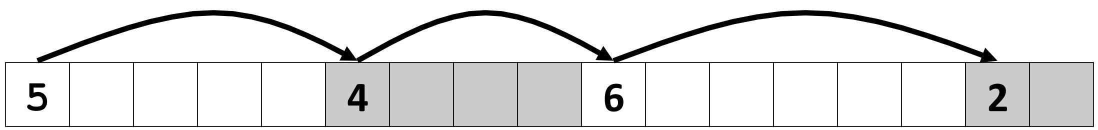
Today

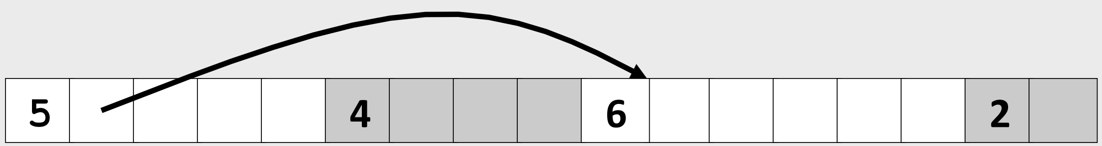
- **Explicit free lists**
- Segregated free lists
- Garbage collection
- Memory-related perils and pitfalls

Keeping Track of Free Blocks

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



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

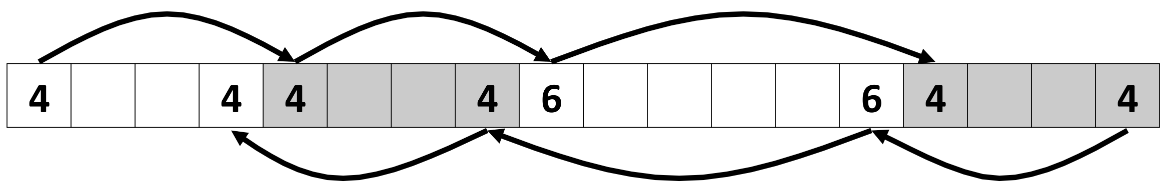


- **Method 3: *Segregated free list***
  - Different free lists for different size classes

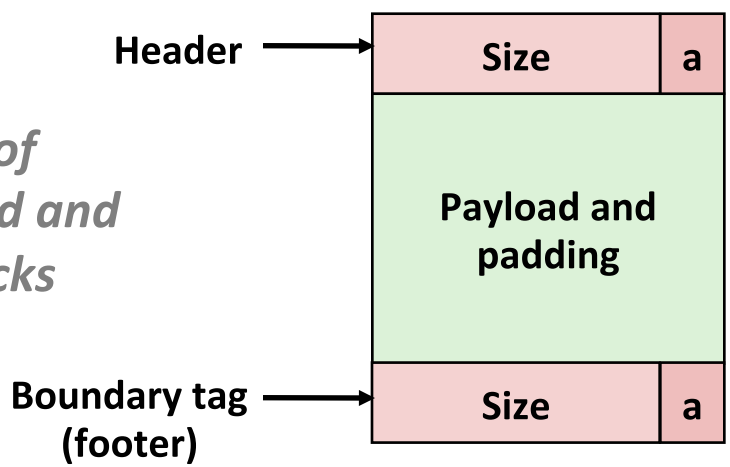
- **Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size***
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

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

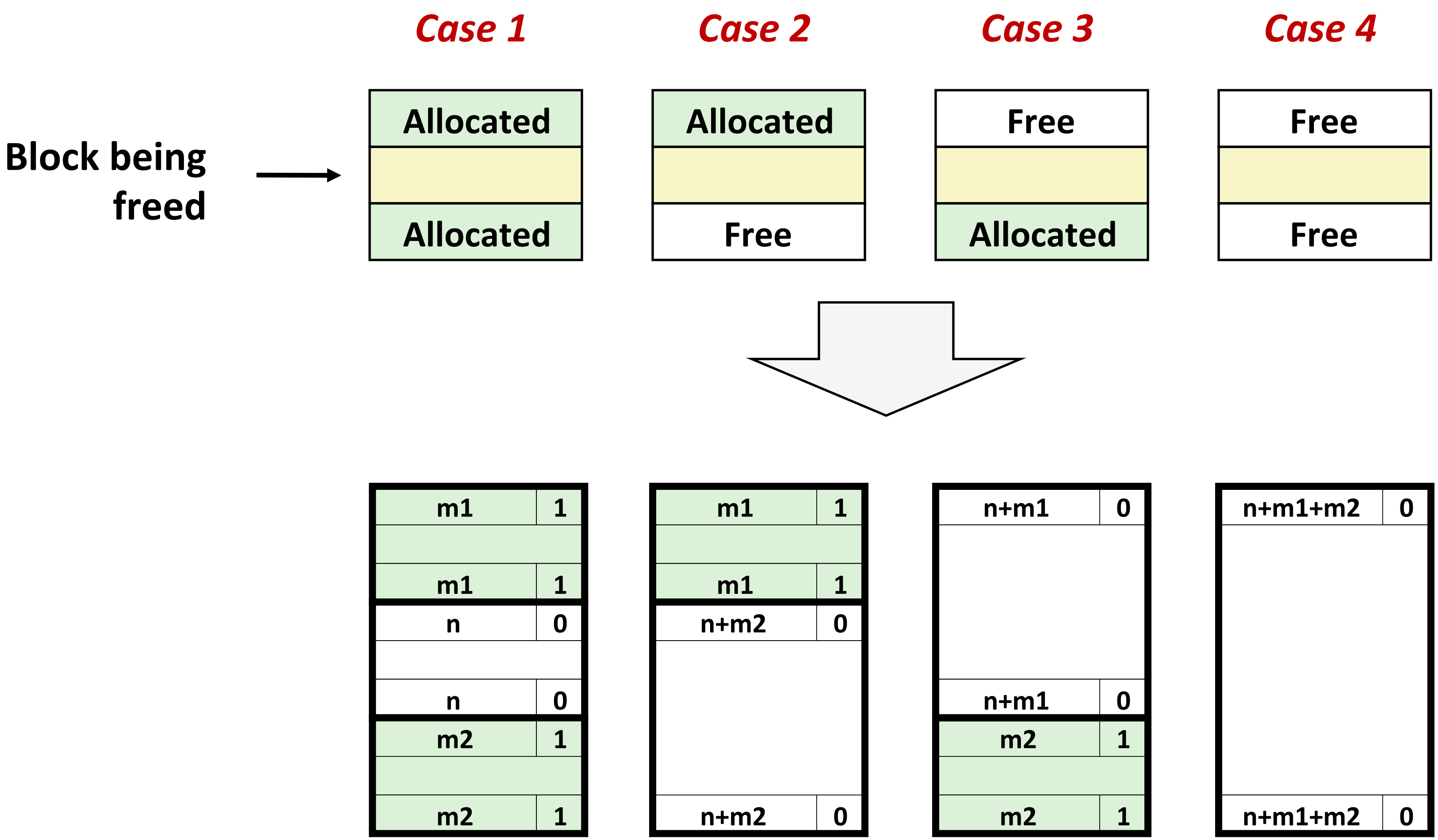


a = 1: Allocated block
a = 0: Free block

Size: Total block size

Payload: Application data (allocated blocks only)

Coalescing Cases



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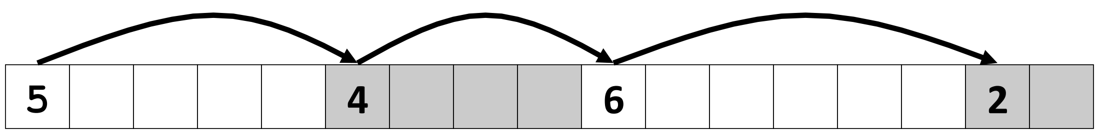

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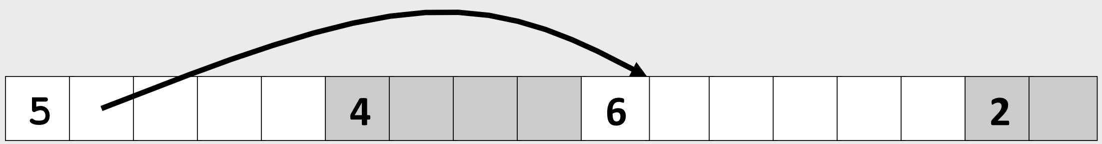

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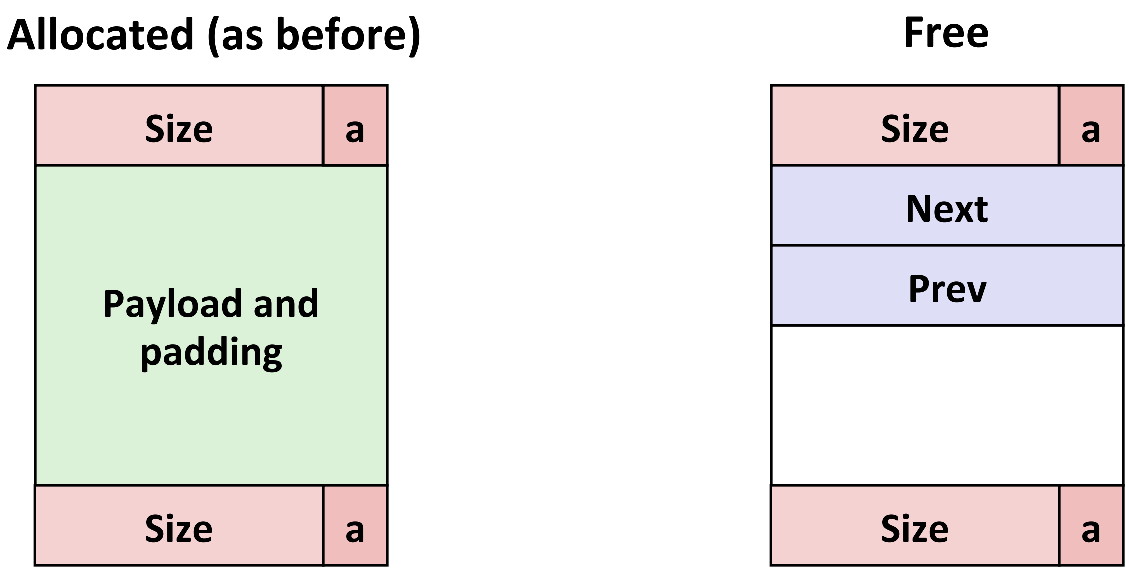
Explicit Free Lists

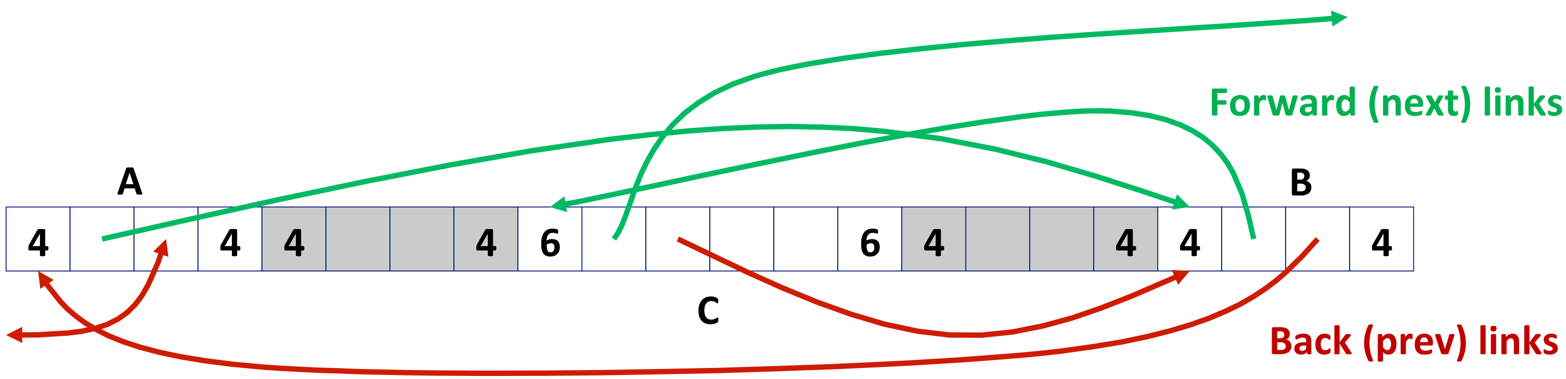


- **Maintain list(s) of *free* blocks, not *all* blocks**
  - The "next" free block could be anywhere
    - So we need to store forward/back pointers, not just sizes
  - Still need boundary tags for coalescing
  - Luckily we track only free blocks, so we can use payload area

Explicit Free Lists

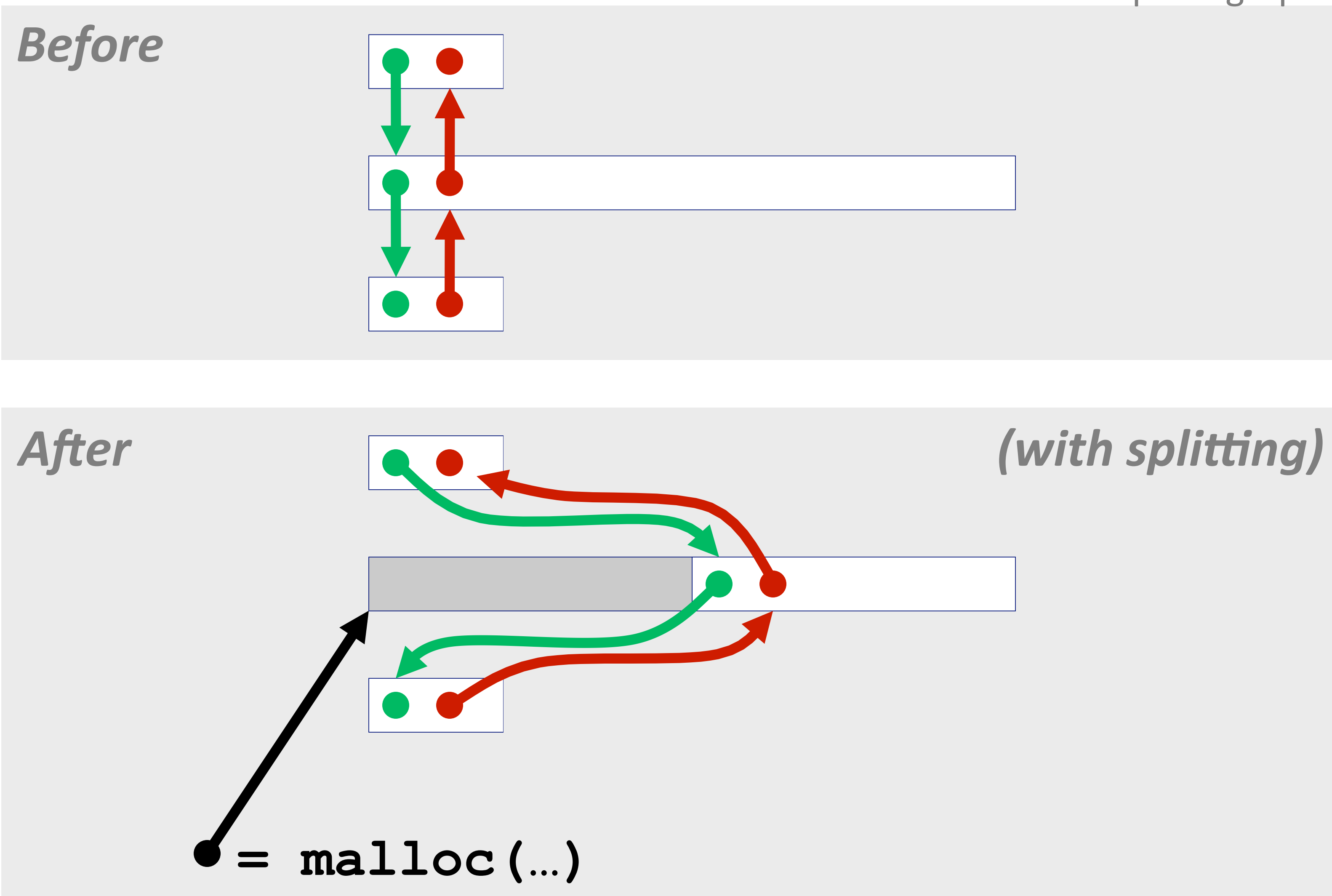
- **Logically:**

- **Physically: blocks can be in any order**



Allocating From Explicit Free Lists

conceptual graphic



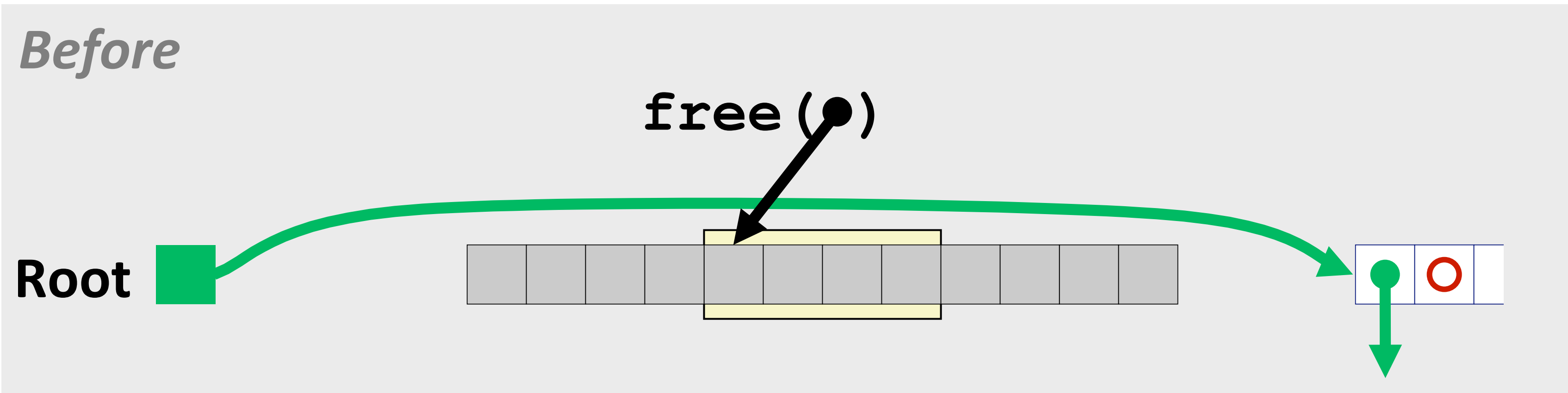
Freeing With Explicit Free Lists

- ***Insertion policy***: **Where in the free list do you put a newly freed block?**
  - **LIFO (last-in-first-out) policy**
    - Insert freed block at the beginning of the free list
    - ***Pro:*** simple and constant time
    - ***Con:*** studies suggest fragmentation is worse than address ordered
  - **Address-ordered policy**
    - Insert freed blocks so that free list blocks are always in address order:

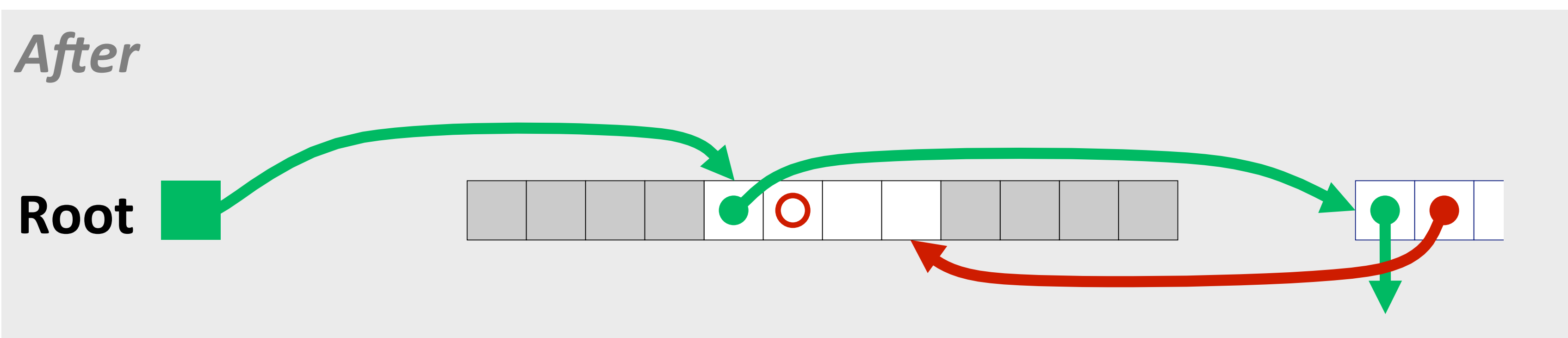
      addr(prev) < addr(curr) < addr(next)
    - ***Con:*** requires search
    - ***Pro:*** studies suggest fragmentation is lower than LIFO

Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 1)

conceptual graphic

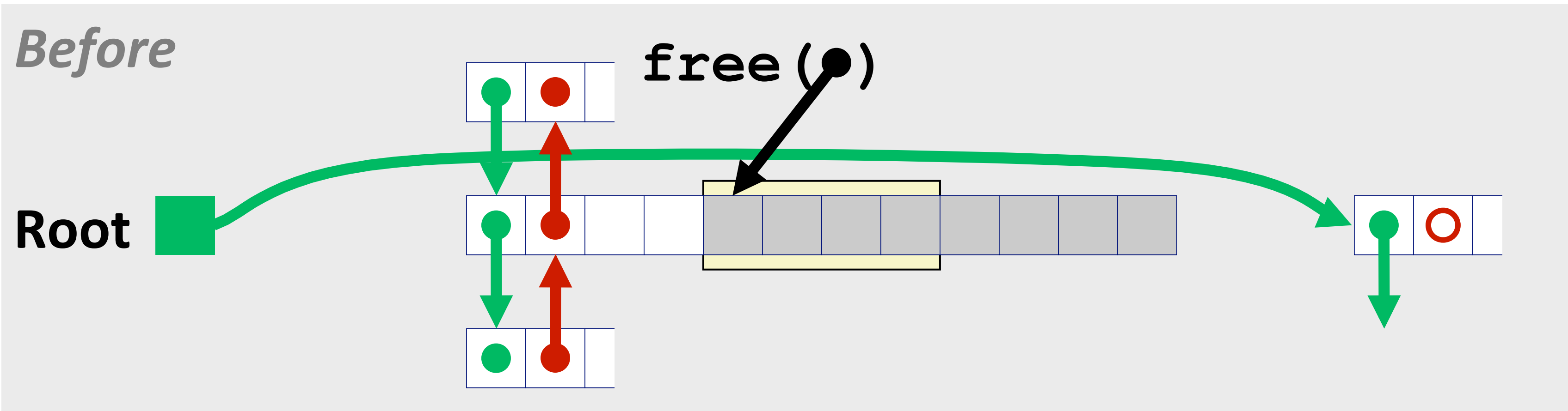


- Insert the freed block at the root of the list

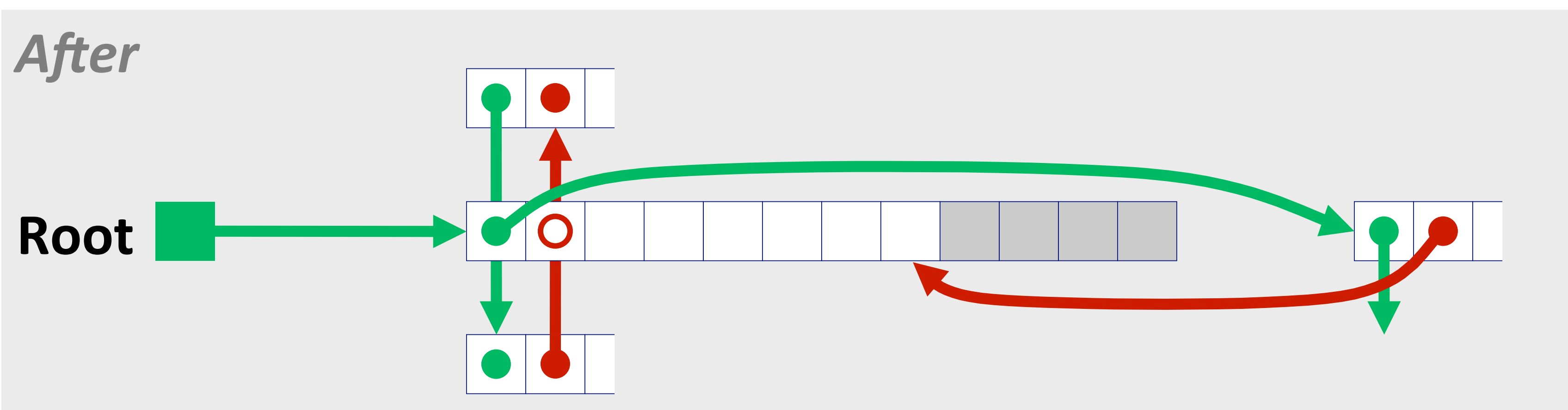


Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 2)

conceptual graphic

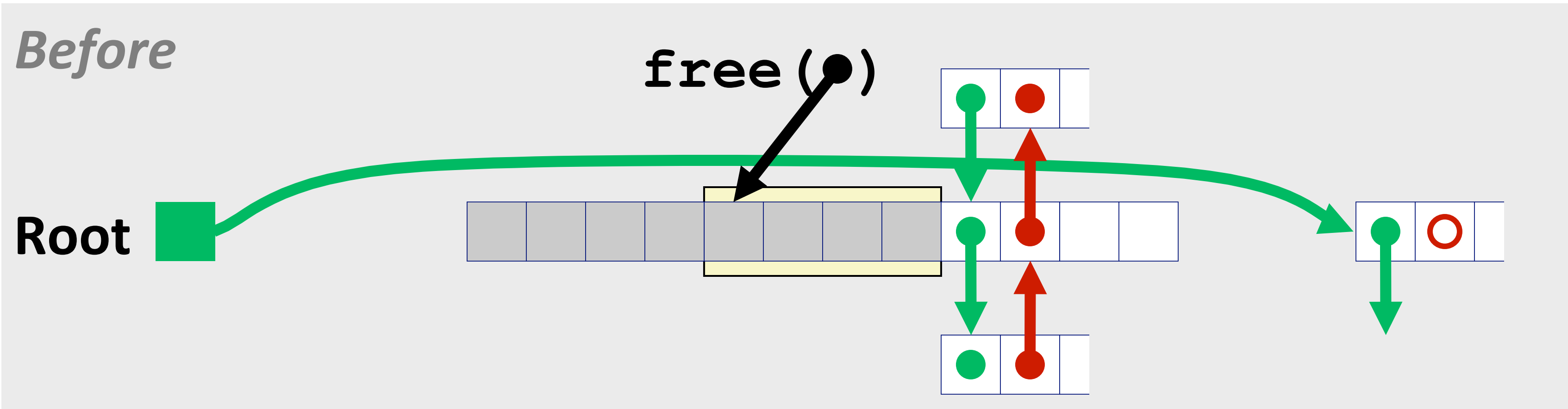


- Splice out predecessor block, coalesce both memory blocks, and insert the new block at the root of the list

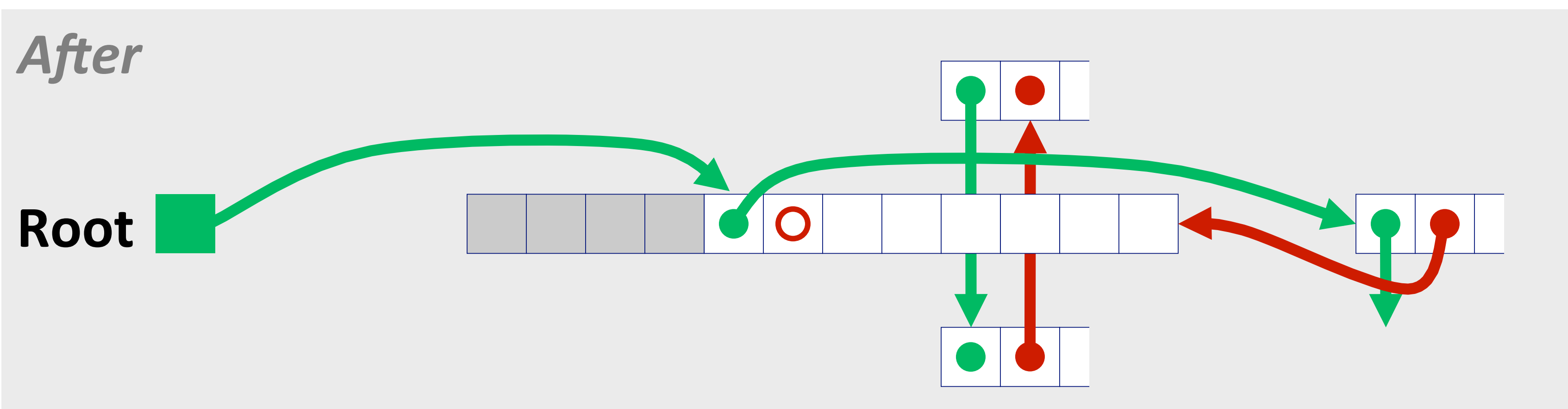


Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 3)

conceptual graphic

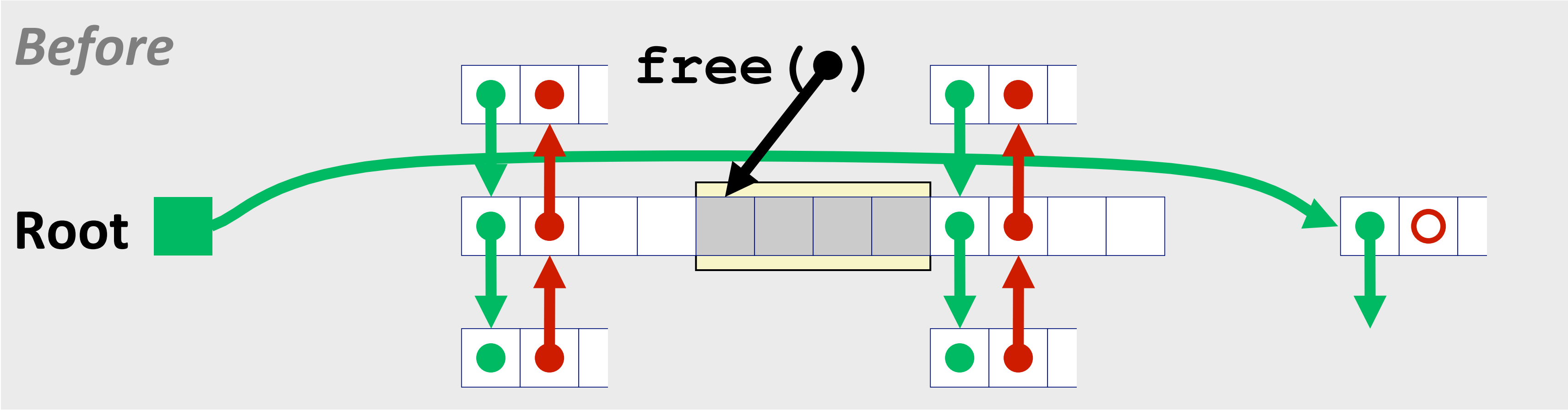


- Splice out successor block, coalesce both memory blocks and insert the new block at the root of the list

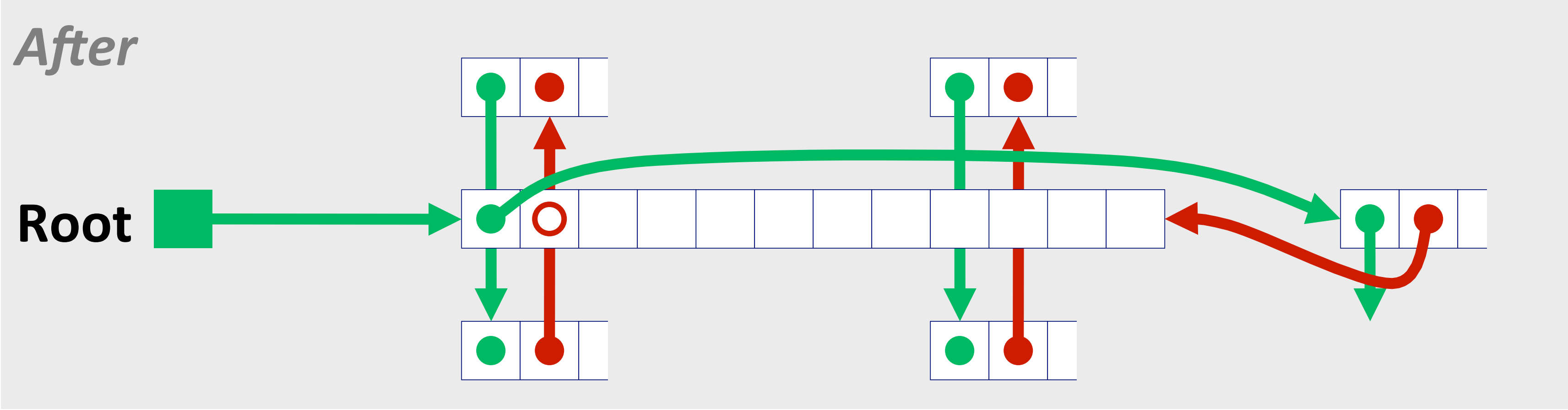


Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 4)

conceptual graphic



- Splice out predecessor and successor blocks, coalesce all 3 memory blocks and insert the new block at the root of the list



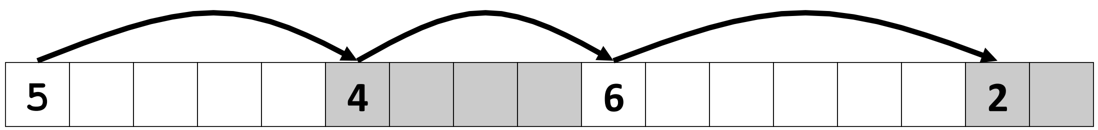
Explicit List Summary

- **Comparison to implicit list:**
  - Allocate is linear time in number of ***free*** blocks instead of ***all*** blocks
    - ***Much faster*** when most of the memory is full
  - Slightly more complicated allocate and free since needs to splice blocks in and out of the list
  - Some extra space for the links (2 extra words needed for each block)
    - Does this increase internal fragmentation?

- **Most common use of linked lists is in conjunction with segregated free lists**
  - Keep multiple linked lists of different size classes, or possibly for different types of objects

Keeping Track of Free Blocks

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



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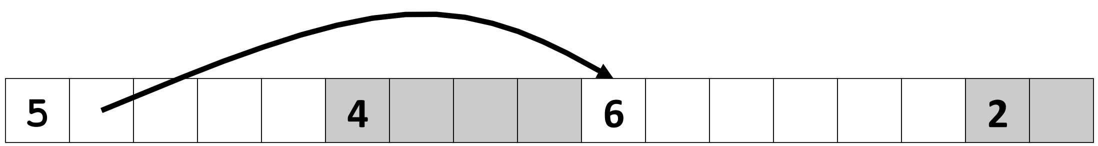

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  - Different free lists for different size classes

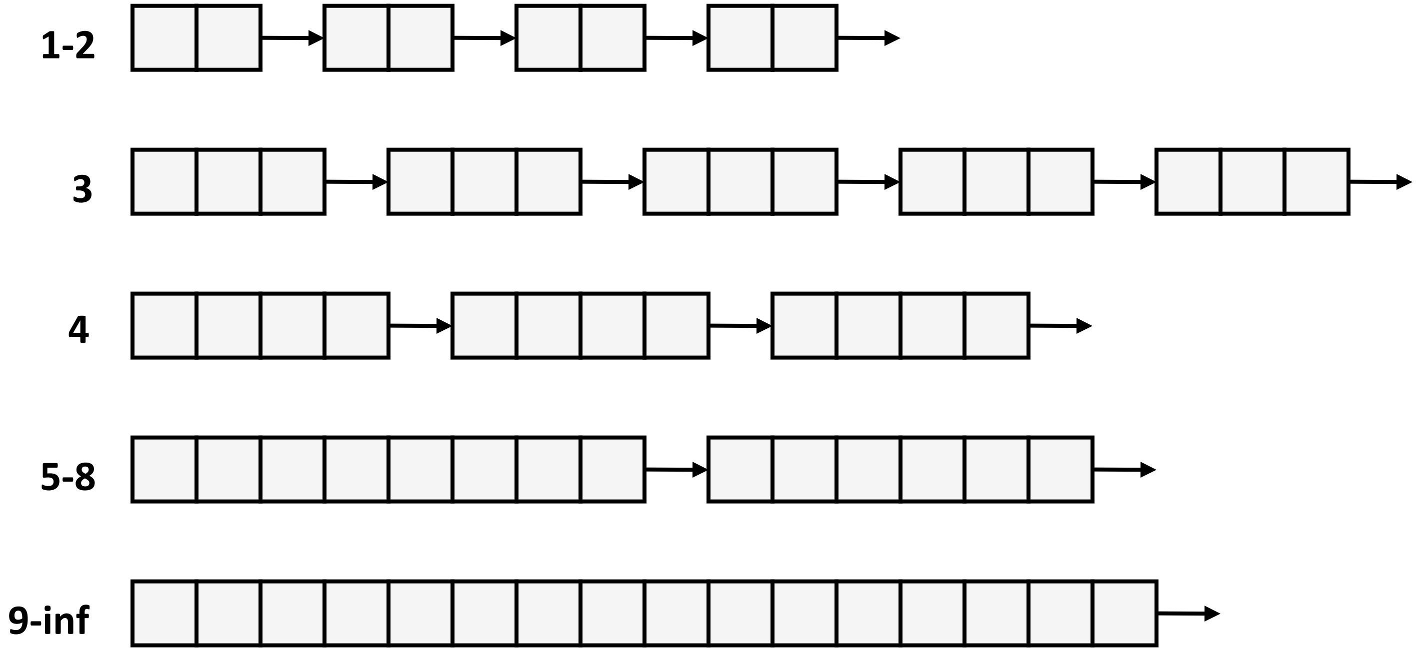
- **Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size***
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

Today

- Explicit free lists
- **Segregated free lists**
- Garbage collection
- Memory-related perils and pitfalls

Segregated List (Seglist) Allocators

- Each ***size class*** of blocks has its own free list



- Often have separate classes for each small size
- For larger sizes: One class for each two-power size

Seglist Allocator

- **Given an array of free lists, each one for some size class**

- **To allocate a block of size *n*:**
  - Search appropriate free list for block of size *m* > *n*
  - If an appropriate block is found:
    - Split block and place fragment on appropriate list (optional)
  - If no block is found, try next larger class
  - Repeat until block is found

- **If no block is found:**
  - Request additional heap memory from OS (using **`sbrk()`**)
  - Allocate block of *n* bytes from this new memory
  - Place remainder as a single free block in largest size class.

Seglist Allocator (cont.)

- **To free a block:**
  - Coalesce and place on appropriate list (optional)

- **Advantages of seglist allocators**
  - Higher throughput
    - log time for power-of-two size classes
  - Better memory utilization
    - First-fit search of segregated free list approximates a best-fit search of entire heap.
    - Extreme case: Giving each block its own size class is equivalent to best-fit.

More Info on Allocators

- **D. Knuth, "*The Art of Computer Programming*", 2nd edition, Addison Wesley, 1973**
  - The classic reference on dynamic storage allocation

- **Wilson et al, "*Dynamic Storage Allocation: A Survey and Critical Review*", Proc. 1995 Int'l Workshop on Memory Management, Kinross, Scotland, Sept, 1995.**
  - Comprehensive survey
  - Available from CS:APP student site (csapp.cs.cmu.edu)

Today

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- **Garbage collection**
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Implicit Memory Management: Garbage Collection

- ***Garbage collection:*** **automatic reclamation of heap-allocated storage—application never has to free**

```
void foo() {
   int *p = malloc(128);
   return; /* p block is now garbage */
}
```

- **Common in many dynamic languages:**
  - Python, Ruby, Java, Perl, ML, Lisp, Mathematica

- **Variants ("conservative" garbage collectors) exist for C and C++**
  - However, cannot necessarily collect all garbage

Garbage Collection

- **How does the memory manager know when memory can be freed?**
  - In general we cannot know what is going to be used in the future since it depends on conditionals
  - But we can tell that certain blocks cannot be used if there are no pointers to them

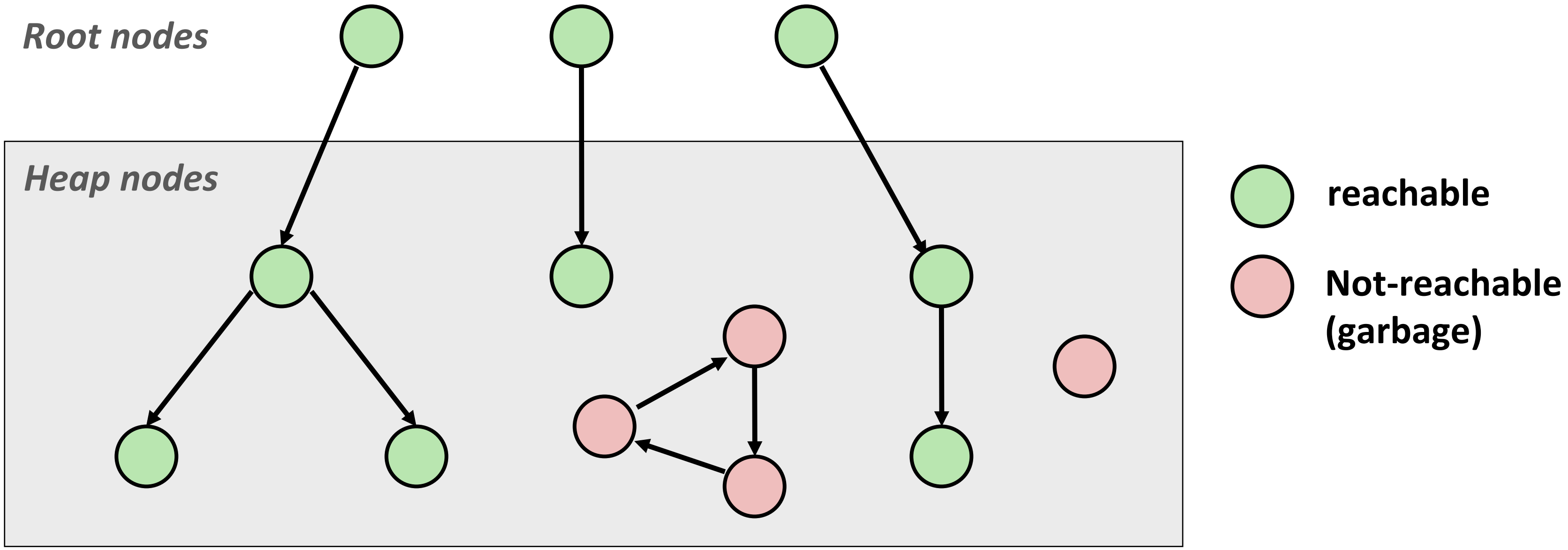
- **Must make certain assumptions about pointers**
  - Memory manager can distinguish pointers from non-pointers
  - All pointers point to the start of a block
  - Cannot hide pointers
    (e.g., by coercing them to an `int`, and then back again)

Classical GC Algorithms

- **Mark-and-sweep collection (McCarthy, 1960)**
  - Does not move blocks (unless you also "compact")
- **Reference counting (Collins, 1960)**
  - Does not move blocks (not discussed)
- **Copying collection (Minsky, 1963)**
  - Moves blocks (not discussed)
- **Generational Collectors (Lieberman and Hewitt, 1983)**
  - Collection based on lifetimes
    - Most allocations become garbage very soon
    - So focus reclamation work on zones of memory recently allocated
- **For more information:**
  Jones and Lin, "*Garbage Collection: Algorithms for Automatic Dynamic Memory*", John Wiley & Sons, 1996.

Memory as a Graph

- **We view memory as a directed graph**
  - Each block is a node in the graph
  - Each pointer is an edge in the graph
  - Locations not in the heap that contain pointers into the heap are called ***root*** nodes (e.g. registers, locations on the stack, global variables)

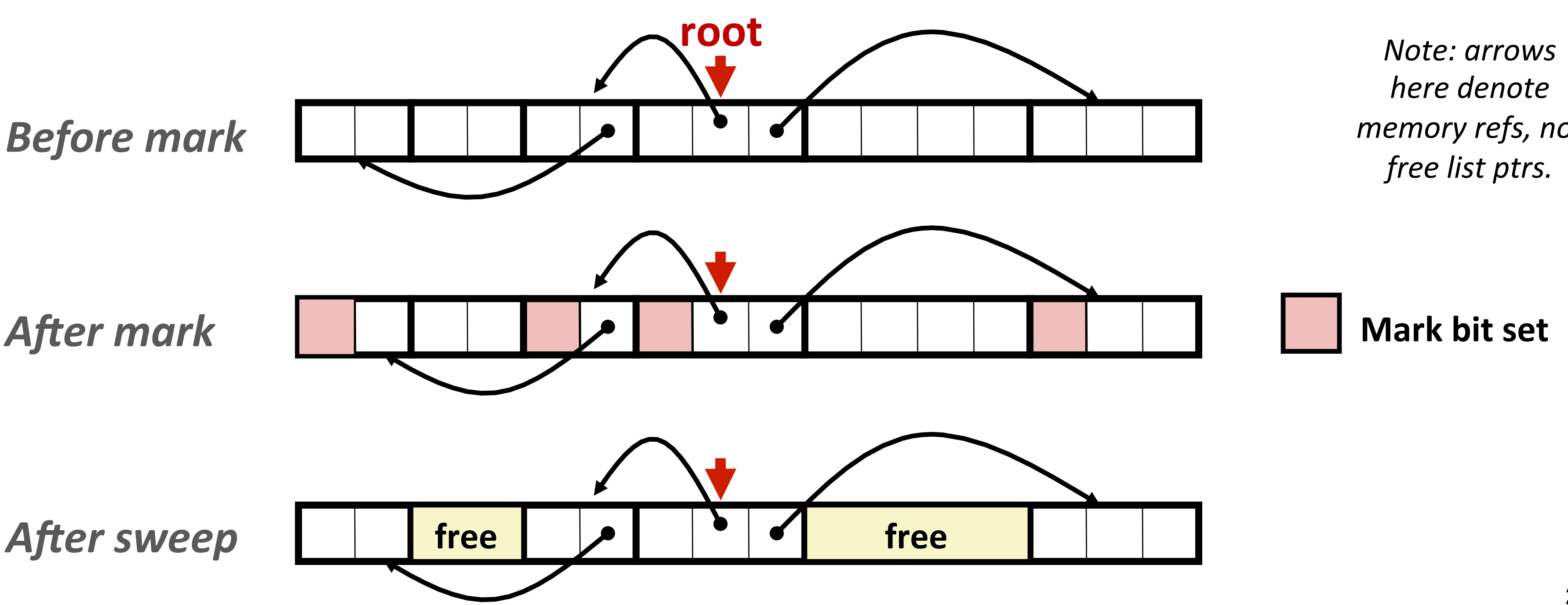


A node (block) is *reachable* if there is a path from any root to that node.

Non-reachable nodes are *garbage* (cannot be needed by the application)

Mark and Sweep Collecting

- **Can build on top of malloc/free package**
  - Allocate using `malloc` until you "run out of space"
- **When out of space:**
  - Use extra ***mark bit*** in the head of each block
  - ***Mark:*** Start at roots and set mark bit on each reachable block
  - ***Sweep:*** Scan all blocks and free blocks that are not marked



Note: arrows here denote memory refs, not free list ptrs.

Assumptions For a Simple Implementation

- **Application**
  - **`new(n)`:** returns pointer to new block with all locations cleared
  - **`read(b,i)`:** read location **`i`** of block **`b`** into register
  - **`write(b,i,v)`:** write **`v`** into location **`i`** of block **`b`**

- **Each block will have a header word**
  - addressed as **`b[-1]`**, for a block **`b`**
  - Used for different purposes in different collectors

- **Instructions used by the Garbage Collector**
  - **`is_ptr(p)`:** determines whether **`p`** is a pointer
  - **`length(b)`:** returns the length of block **`b`**, not including the header
  - **`get_roots()`:** returns all the roots

Mark and Sweep (cont.)

Mark using depth-first traversal of the memory graph

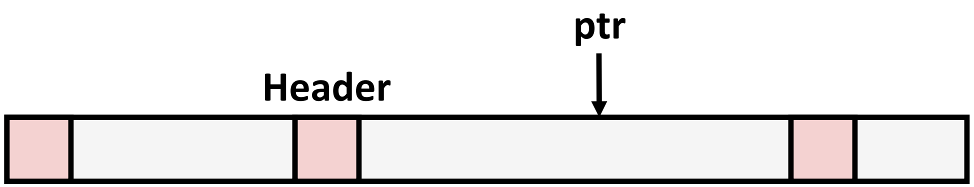
```
ptr mark(ptr p) {
   if (!is_ptr(p)) return;         // do nothing if not pointer
   if (markBitSet(p)) return;      // check if already marked
   setMarkBit(p);                  // set the mark bit
   for (i=0; i < length(p); i++)   // call mark on all words
     mark(p[i]);                   //   in the block
   return;
}
```

Sweep using lengths to find next block

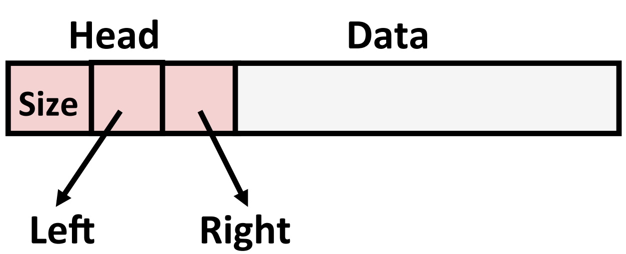
```
ptr sweep(ptr p, ptr end) {
   while (p < end) {
      if markBitSet(p)
         clearMarkBit();
      else if (allocateBitSet(p))
         free(p);
      p += length(p);
}
```

Conservative Mark & Sweep in C

- A "conservative garbage collector" for C programs
  - `is_ptr()` determines if a word is a pointer by checking if it points to an allocated block of memory
  - But, in C pointers can point to the middle of a block



- So how to find the beginning of the block?
  - Can use a balanced binary tree to keep track of all allocated blocks (key is start-of-block)
  - Balanced-tree pointers can be stored in header (use two additional words)



Left: smaller addresses
Right: larger addresses

Today

- Explicit free lists
- Segregated free lists
- Garbage collection
- **Memory-related perils and pitfalls**

Memory-Related Perils and Pitfalls

- Dereferencing bad pointers
- Reading uninitialized memory
- Overwriting memory
- Referencing nonexistent variables
- Freeing blocks multiple times
- Referencing freed blocks
- Failing to free blocks

C operators

<table>
<tr><th>Operators</th><th>Associativity</th></tr>
<tr><td>() [] -> .</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>! ~ ++ -- + - * & (type) sizeof</td><td>right to left</td></tr>
<tr><td>* / %</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>+ -</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td><< >></td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>< <= > >=</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>== !=</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>&</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>^</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>|</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>&&</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>||</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
<tr><td>?:</td><td>right to left</td></tr>
<tr><td>= += -= *= /= %= &= ^= != <<= >>=</td><td>right to left</td></tr>
<tr><td>,</td><td>left to right</td></tr>
</table>

- **->, (), and [] have high precedence, with * and & just below**
- **Unary +, -, and * have higher precedence than binary forms**

Source: K&R page 53

C Pointer Declarations: Test Yourself!

`int *p`	p is a pointer to int
`int *p[13]`	p is an array[13] of pointer to int
`int *(p[13])`	p is an array[13] of pointer to int
`int **p`	p is a pointer to a pointer to an int
`int (*p)[13]`	p is a pointer to an array[13] of int
`int *f()`	f is a function returning a pointer to int
`int (*f)()`	f is a pointer to a function returning int
`int (*(*f())[13])()`	f is a function returning ptr to an array[13] of pointers to functions returning int
`int (*(*x[3])())[5]`	x is an array[3] of pointers to functions returning pointers to array[5] of ints

Source: K&R Sec 5.12

Dereferencing Bad Pointers

- The classic `scanf` bug

```
int val;

...

scanf("%d", val);
```

Reading Uninitialized Memory

- **Assuming that heap data is initialized to zero**

```
/* return y = Ax */
int *matvec(int **A, int *x) {
   int *y = malloc(N*sizeof(int));
   int i, j;

   for (i=0; i<N; i++)
      for (j=0; j<N; j++)
         y[i] += A[i][j]*x[j];
   return y;
}
```

Overwriting Memory

- **Allocating the (possibly) wrong sized object**

```
int **p;

p = malloc(N*sizeof(int));

for (i=0; i<N; i++) {
   p[i] = malloc(M*sizeof(int));
}
```

Overwriting Memory

- Off-by-one error

```
int **p;

p = malloc(N*sizeof(int *));

for (i=0; i<=N; i++) {
   p[i] = malloc(M*sizeof(int));
}
```

Overwriting Memory

- **Not checking the max string size**

```
char s[8];
int i;

gets(s);  /* reads "123456789" from stdin */
```

- **Basis for classic buffer overflow attacks**

Overwriting Memory

- **Misunderstanding pointer arithmetic**

```
int *search(int *p, int val) {

   while (*p && *p != val)
      p += sizeof(int);

   return p;
}
```

Referencing Nonexistent Variables

- **Forgetting that local variables disappear when a function returns**

```
int *foo () {
   int val;

   return &val;
}
```

Freeing Blocks Multiple Times

- **Nasty!**

```
x = malloc(N*sizeof(int));
        <manipulate x>
free(x);

y = malloc(M*sizeof(int));
        <manipulate y>
free(x);
```

Referencing Freed Blocks

- Evil!

```
x = malloc(N*sizeof(int));
  <manipulate x>
free(x);
   ...
y = malloc(M*sizeof(int));
for (i=0; i<M; i++)
   y[i] = x[i]++;
```

Failing to Free Blocks (Memory Leaks)

- **Slow, long-term killer!**

```
foo() {
   int *x = malloc(N*sizeof(int));
   ...
   return;
}
```

Failing to Free Blocks (Memory Leaks)

- Freeing only part of a data structure

```
struct list {
   int val;
   struct list *next;
};

foo() {
   struct list *head = malloc(sizeof(struct list));
   head->val = 0;
   head->next = NULL;
   <create and manipulate the rest of the list>
     ...
   free(head);
   return;
}
```

Dealing With Memory Bugs

- **Conventional debugger (`gdb`)**
  - Good for finding bad pointer dereferences
  - Hard to detect the other memory bugs

- **Debugging `malloc` (UToronto CSRI `malloc`)**
  - Wrapper around conventional **`malloc`**
  - Detects memory bugs at **`malloc`** and **`free`** boundaries
    - Memory overwrites that corrupt heap structures
    - Some instances of freeing blocks multiple times
    - Memory leaks
  - Cannot detect all memory bugs
    - Overwrites into the middle of allocated blocks
    - Freeing block twice that has been reallocated in the interim
    - Referencing freed blocks

Dealing With Memory Bugs (cont.)

- **Some malloc implementations contain checking code**
  - Linux glibc malloc: `setenv MALLOC_CHECK_ 3`
  - FreeBSD: `setenv MALLOC_OPTIONS AJR`
- **Binary translator: valgrind (Linux), Purify**
  - Powerful debugging and analysis technique
  - Rewrites text section of executable object file
  - Can detect all errors as debugging `malloc`
  - Can also check each individual reference at runtime
    - Bad pointers
    - Overwriting
    - Referencing outside of allocated block
- **Garbage collection (Boehm-Weiser Conservative GC)**
  - Let the system free blocks instead of the programmer.