Dynamic Memory Allocation: Basic Concepts

CSci 2021: Machine Architecture and Organization
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Your instructor: Stephen McCamant

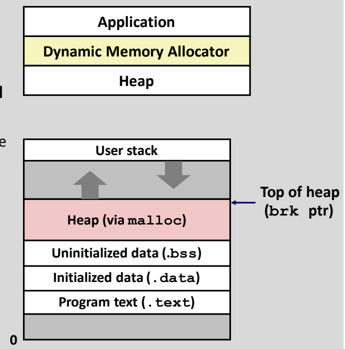
Based on slides originally by:
Randy Bryant, Dave O'Hallaron, Antonia Zhai

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`**, may return NULL
- Unsuccessful: returns NULL (0) (on Unix, also 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`**

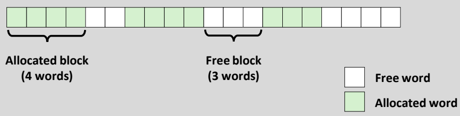
Other functions
- **`calloc`:** Version of **`malloc`** that initializes allocated block to zero.
- **`realloc`:** Changes the size of a previously allocated block.
- **`sbrk`:** Used internally by allocators to grow or shrink the heap

`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)



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Allocation Example

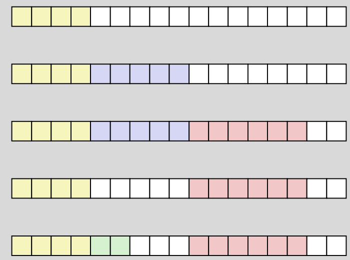
`p1 = malloc(4)`

`p2 = malloc(5)`

`p3 = malloc(6)`

`free(p2)`

`p4 = malloc(2)`



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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`) 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

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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

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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
- ***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**
  - $U_k = (max_{i<k} P_i) \ / \ H_k$

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Fragmentation

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

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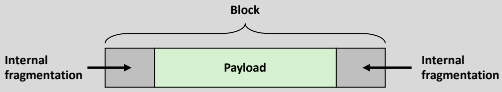
Internal Fragmentation

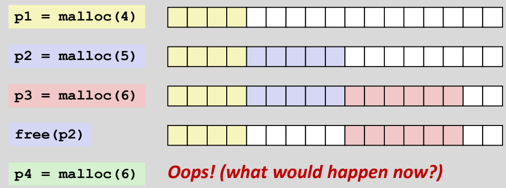
- For a given block, ***internal fragmentation*** occurs if payload is smaller than block size



- 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



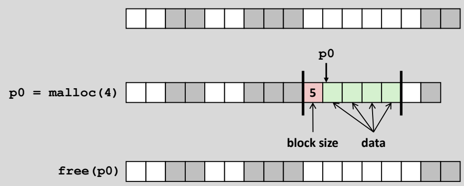
- Depends on the pattern of future requests
  - Thus, difficult to measure

Implementation Issues

- How 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 payload 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 a freed block?

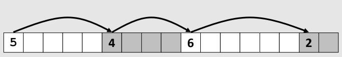
Knowing How Much to Free

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

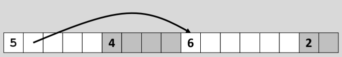


Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- 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

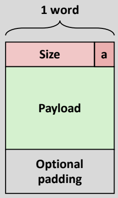
Today

- 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

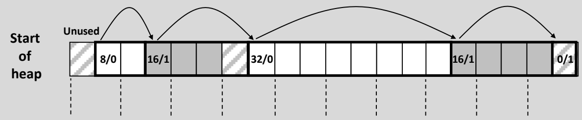


a = 1: Allocated block
a = 0: Free block

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

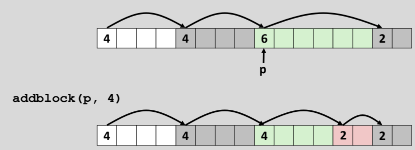
- ***First fit:***
  - Search list from beginning, choose ***first*** free block that fits:

```
p = start;
while ((p < end) &&      // not passed end
       ((*p & 1) ||      // already allocated
       (*p <= len)))     // too small
  p = p + (*p & -2);     // go to 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



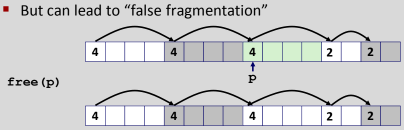

```
void addblock(ptr p, int len) {
  int newsize = ((len + 1) >> 1) << 1;  // round up to even
  int oldsize = *p & -2;                // mask out low bit
  *p = newsize | 1;                     // set new length
  if (newsize < oldsize)
    *(p+newsize) = oldsize - newsize;   // set length in remaining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

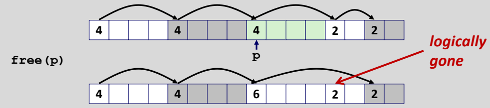


`malloc(5)` ***Oops!***

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

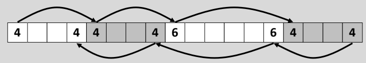


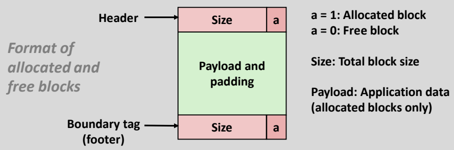

```
void free_block(ptr p) {
    *p = *p & -2;          // clear allocated flag
    next = p + *p;         // find next block
    if ((*next & 1) == 0)
      *p = *p + *next;     // add to this block if
}                          //    not allocated
```

  - 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!





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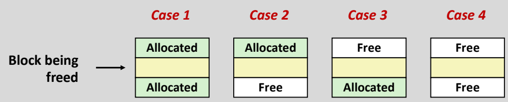
Constant Time Coalescing



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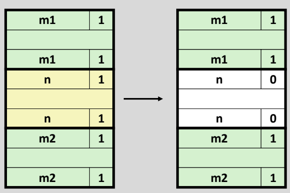
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 1)



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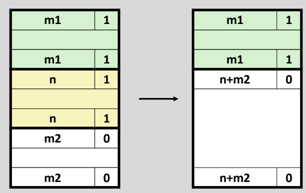
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 2)



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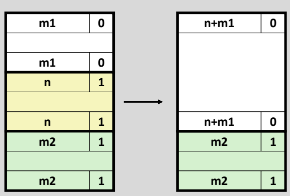
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 3)



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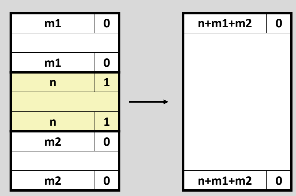
Constant Time Coalescing (Case 4)



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Disadvantages of Boundary Tags

- **Internal fragmentation: wasted space for tags**

- **Can it be optimized?**
  - Which blocks need the footer tag?
    - We only coalesce with free blocks, so only free blocks need a footer
  - Idea: use footer only for free blocks
    - Same space can be used for payload if block is allocated
    - (Assume payload is not size 0)
  - If there's no footer, how do we know that the preceding block is free?
    - Use another low-order bit in the next block's header

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

- **Rarely 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 quite general**