How to Develop Small Programming Projects*

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CS 3358
Summer II 2013

*without banging your head against the wall

Getting Started

• Start early: we always underestimate the complexity of the problem.
• Understand the requirements (READ the directions, don’t make assumptions).
• Understand the material: study first!
• Use some top-down or object-oriented design to break up the problem into pieces.
• Make a plan before you implement.

Develop Programs Progressively (incremental development)

• Do not attempt to implement an entire program all at once.
• Implement a very small, but workable, part.
• Compile, fix syntax errors, execute, debug
• Add another small part, refine the code
• Compile + test. Any new errors are (probably) due to newly added code.
• Repeat until complete

Compiler (syntax) Errors

• Fix only the first one or two before re-compiling, later errors may be dependent.
• Don’t speak compiler? Google the error text (with caution)
• Think of common syntax errors
  - Missing semicolons
  - Misspelled variable names
  - Misplaced ( ) or { }, backwards << or >>
Testing

- Testing: running (part of) the program with simulated data, checking the actual results against expected result
- Run tests for boundary conditions:
  - Empty arrays, full arrays, last element
  - Smallest and largest valid values
  - Values used in if/while conditions

Runtime Errors (bugs)

- Program executes but output is wrong, running a test gives unexpected result
- Debugging: figure out why it failed
- Add output statements in strategic places
  - check values of variables (label them!)
  - trace execution path, see which statements are being reached.