

Course Outline

Introduction to Computer Science COMP 250

Fall 2017

section 001: MWF 10:35-11:25 MCMED 522

section 002: MRF 14:35-15:25 MD-HAR 310

(The two sections will be considered together as one course. You can attend either.)

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Course Web Page: <http://www.cim.mcgill.ca/~langer/250.html>
Office Hours: MWR 13:00-14:00 (or by appointment)

Teaching Assistants (T.A.): To be determined.
 See above URL and mycourses for this information.

Introduction

This course introduces you to two core topics in computer science: data structures and algorithms. For the data structures, you will learn about various types of lists (arrays, linked lists, stacks, queues), trees, and graphs, and you will also learn the basic algorithms that use these data structures, and how to analyze such algorithms in terms of the amount of computation they use. These analysis tools will be used heavily in many subsequent courses, in particular, COMP 251 and COMP 360.

The course will use Java which is a object oriented programming language. As such, the course will also teach you some of the basic ideas of object oriented design. You will learn how classes can be organized into hierarchies, and how variables and methods defined in the classes of the hierarchy are related to each other. These relationships will be developed more fully in subsequent software courses such as COMP 303.

Prerequisites

According to

<https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2017-2018/courses/comp-250>

the official prerequisite is "*Familiarity with a high level programming language and CEGEP level Math.*" Admittedly this a vague. So, what do you really need?

To take COMP 250, you need to know basic computer programming using the Java language. All of the assignments will be in Java, and many of the examples in class will use Java. The first few lectures will not use Java. So if you don't know Java coming in, then you should use this time to catch up. To help you out, we will give a few lectures early on reviewing some of the key aspects of Java that you might find strange and new if you only know how to program in other high level languages (see below). *By the third week of the semester when Assignment 1 is posted, you will need to know roughly as much Java as the students who have taken COMP 202.*

Here are some frequently asked questions (FAQ) about this prerequisite issue:

Q: I took COMP 208 or PHYS 257 and so I know some C but not Java. What am I missing?

A: If you know some C, then you are in a strong position to learn Java because you are very familiar with *types* already. However, you don't yet know about objects and classes. You will need to learn about them, and how to use them in Java.

Q: I took a programming course in high school (or CEGEP, or online) in which we used one of Python/Matlab/Javascript/R. What am I missing?

A: The languages in the above list are all powerful high level languages. However, if you have only programmed in one (or more) of these languages, then you are missing some important concepts. These languages do not require you to declare each variable to have a certain type before using the variable, and so you are not be used to thinking about types. Types are hugely important in Java (and C) so you will need to spend time even more time catching up than the folks above you have taken COMP 208 or PHYS 257.

But before you do attempt to learn about types and objects/classes and catchup to the others, you should be very sure that you are comfortable with the other basics elements of programming, in particular, variables, expressions, and assignments, conditional statements (if-then-else), loops (while, for), methods/functions, data structures such as arrays and strings, input/output from a keyboard and to a console and from/to a file. If you are not comfortable with these basics, then I strongly suggest you take COMP 202 instead of COMP 250.

Q: I have not taken a programming course. Instead I learned programming on my own (e.g. online course). How much programming experience do I need?

You also have at least 50 hours experience programming in whatever language you do know. That is roughly the minimum amount of experience that a student who has taken COMP 202/208/etc already has. If you don't have that level of experience, then you should not take COMP 250 this semester, and instead you should take COMP 202.

Q: How can I learn Java?

A: Here are some suggestions.

- Scan through the lecture slides from COMP 202 and make sure you are aware what topics were covered in that course, e.g.

<http://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~cs202/2016-01/web/sec2.html>

For that course, all the material from January to March is core COMP 202. The material from April is extra.

- Learn java online with codeacademy, sololearn, udemy, or others.
- Download the free online Java book “How to think like a computer scientist”. You will need to go as far as chapters 10 and 11 give a brief introduction to Objects and Classes, respectively.
- If you are a Python programmer trying to learn Java, you might try:
<http://interactivepython.org/runestone/static/java4python/index.html>
- Buy or borrow a book on Java programming and go through the parts of it that are covered in COMP 202. Don’t just read: code! Two very good introductory texts (any edition) for Java are:
 - D. Liang, “Introduction to Java Programming,” Brief Edition, Prentice Hall.
 - Lewis and Loftus, “Java software solutions,” Addison-Wesley.

Other recommended McGill courses

If you are registered for COMP 250 in Fall 2017 and you are thinking of pursuing a program in Computer Science, then I strongly recommend that you ...

- ... also take MATH 235 (if you do Math & CS program) or MATH 240 (for CS only programs). These courses will help you with the mathematical parts of COMP 250. Moreover, doing one of them now will be a huge help when you take COMP 251. You *must* take one of these two MATH courses either before or during COMP 251, and I strongly recommend that you do it *before* rather than *while* taking COMP 251.
- ... take Calculus 1, if you haven’t done so already. CEGEP level math is an official prerequisite for COMP 250, and you really should take it *before* COMP 250, if possible.
- ... do not attempt to take COMP 250, 206, 273 all in one semester, unless you have a lot of programming experience already. (Taking 250 and 206 is fine though, and indeed is recommended.)

Lecture Recordings

I will enable Lecture Recordings for the MWF 10:30 section, and make them available on mycourses to students in both sections. If the majority of students consistently choose to take advantage of these recordings rather than come to class, then I may decide to make better use of the MRF 2:30 lectures slot and instead offer tutorials during that slot.

Course Materials

There is no course textbook. Instead, I have made for you a complete set of Lecture Notes, Slides, and Exercises. These are available on the public course web page. I will modify these as the course goes along.

Course Announcements

Announcements will be made either on the public web page and on the mycourses COMP 250 page. You will use the public web page extensively for the Course Materials, and so you will naturally see the Announcements there. *I will also make some Announcements on mycourses, since these announcements will be sent to you automatically if you are subscribed to mycourses Announcements. Therefore I strongly recommend that you subscribe.*

MyCourses Discussion Board Rules

I strongly encourage you to participate in the mycourses Discussion board, or at least to subscribe to it. It is much more efficient for me to disseminate information that is of interest to many people by answering questions there, rather than answering individual emails.

When posting to the Discussion Board, please obey the following. *Posting that do not conform may be deleted.*

- Put you posting in the correct folder.
- Use the search feature to see if your question has been asked before.
- Choose a suitable subject line, so that readers know what the posting is about.
- If you have multiple questions that are unrelated, then *use multiple postings*.
- Proofread before posting, and take an extra minute to make sure your question makes sense.
- If you would like your posting to be deleted, just add a request within the thread.
- Be polite. Be professional.
- Although it is nice for you to post a "thank you" note on mycourses when I or another student answers your questions, I would prefer that you don't. Let's keep the number of postings down, please!

Instructor's email policy

Please refrain from emailing me (Prof. Langer) with technical questions about the course material. Instead, post the questions on the mycourses Discussion Board so that everyone can benefit. I will do my best to moderate the Discussion Board, and give timely answers if no one else steps in.

Only email me if you have questions that you are sure are individual to you. I will try to get back to you as soon as I can, but please understand that there are over 600 students in the class, and I may be too busy.

Evaluation

Your final grade will be calculated using the following percentage breakdown.

- **Four Assignments (40 % total, each worth 10 %)**

- A1 to be posted in mid-late September
- A2 to be posted in early October
- A3 to be posted in late October
- A4 to be posted in early-mid November

You will be given approximately two weeks to complete each assignment.

If you do not do an assignment, then you will receive a grade of 0 for it.

- **Online Quizzes (10 %)**

I plan to have 6-8 multiple choice quizzes throughout the semester. These quizzes will be done online with mycourses. *The quizzes must be done entirely on your own.* See Policy below about 'Collaboration versus cheating'.

Because I have not used mycourses for quizzes before, I am not entirely sure if it will work as I am currently planning. Details will be announced within the first few weeks.

- **Final Exam (50 %)**

It will be a multiple choice exam, and will be held during Final Examination Period.

It is *closed book*. No crib sheet or electronic devices are permitted (no calculators and no cell phones).

Other Miscellaneous Policies

Collaboration versus cheating on assignments:

I strongly encourage you to discuss the assignment problems with each other, and to help each other out with debugging problems (especially with the mechanics of debugging). There is no better way to learn than through discussion. However, this discussion should not go so far that you are revealing the solutions to each other or sharing code (or posting your code on a public web site such as github).

I realize there is sometimes a fine line between giving hints and revealing solutions, so I ask you try to follow a simple guideline: any discussion you have about an assignment should be *open* in the sense that the discussion meets the criteria of the previous paragraph, and you would be comfortable if anyone else including the TAs or me were listening in.

Cheating on quizzes:

I am planning to have quizzes online and to let you do them with a time interval, and wherever you like (from home, library, Trottier labs, etc). I will use the honour system here, namely you must do the quizzes entirely on your own just as if you were writing an exam in class. Any communication between two students about a quiz before the time limit for finish the quiz is complete will be considered cheating.

Re-grading assignments:

Mistakes can occur when grading assignments. Not surprisingly, requests for re-grading are always situations in which you feel that you received fewer points than deserved, rather than more points than you deserved. With that upward tendency in mind, please note that if you wish me or the TAs to re-grade a question on an exam or assignment, we will do so. However, to avoid upward grade ratcheting, *we reserve the right to re-grade other questions as well.*

In choosing a grading scheme for each assignment, we often partition the assignment into small parts and give either 0 % or 100 % on each of those parts. We recognize that this 'all or none' method may be imperfect, namely you may get 0 % on a question even though you made only one small mistake that led to the error. However, we ask you also to recognize that the errors can go the other direction: you might get 100 % on a part, even though your solution is imperfect e.g. your code is inefficient or awkward or poorly commented, or your solution may have met the criterion we set but would not have met a more stringent criterion that we could have set. My view is that over the four assignments, these errors will tend to average out such that you will receive an overall course grade that approximately reflects your overall performance.

Bonus points:

If you inform me of significant errors in the lecture slides, exercises, or assignments, then I will be very appreciative and will make a note of it and you may be eligible for bonus points.

Final grade:

There are many factors that determine your grades including how hard you work, how talented you are in this subject, how much time you have available because of other commitments, what your academic background is, what your health situation or family situation is,

etc. However, your final course grade is independent of all these other factors. Your final grade is calculated according to the grading scheme specified above.

Additional Work:

If you receive a grade of D, F or J, you will *not* be given the opportunity to complete additional work to upgrade your grade.

Supplemental Exam:

It will cover the same material as the Final Exam and will replace the Final Exam grade.

For information on Supplemental Exams, see

<https://www.mcgill.ca/science/student/general/exams/supplemental>.

McGill language policy

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2017-2018/university_regulations_and_resources/undergraduate/gi_lang_policy

McGill policy on academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. See <http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/> for more information