Lecture 7: Sorting Algorithms

CS 2110

September 15, 2026

Today's Learning Outcomes

28. Compare and contrast the *insertion sort*, *merge sort*, and *quicksort* algorithms, discussing aspects such as time/space complexity and stability.

18. Identify the loop invariant of an iterative method involving an array and visualize it using an array diagram.

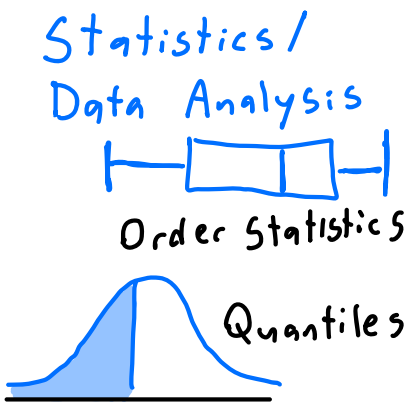
24. Determine the asymptotic time and space complexity of a piece of code involving one or more loops and/or method calls.

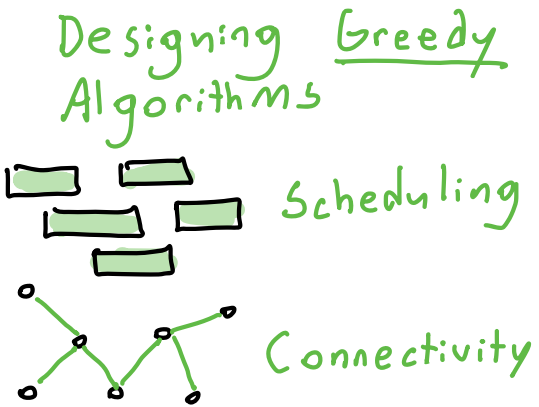
27. Determine the number of recursive calls and the maximum depth of the call stack of a recursive method and use these to compute its time and space complexities.

The Importance of Sorting

Having sorted data can greatly improve code efficiency.

Sorting is an important subroutine for many other computations:





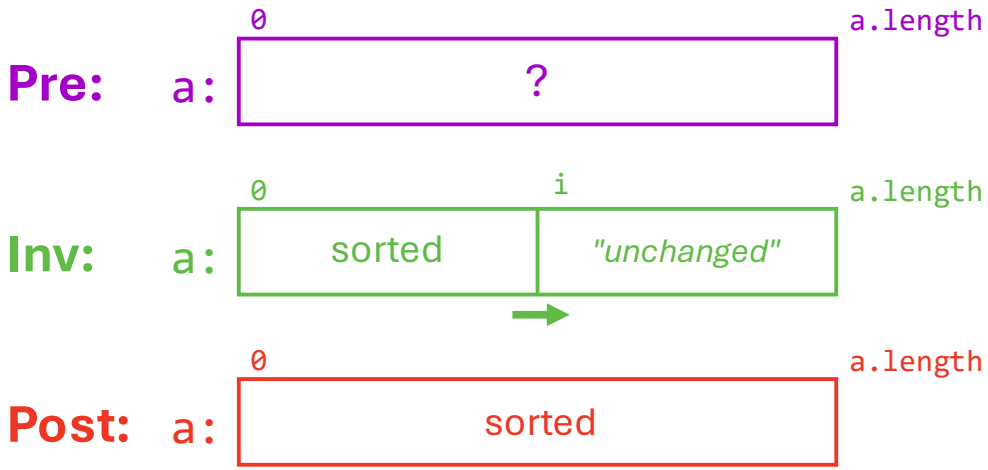
Different Sorting Algorithms

Different sorting procedures trade off different desirable properties:

Being familiar with a varied toolbox of sorting algorithms will help you choose the best for a particular scenario.

Insertion Sort

Big Idea: Build up a sorted range by inserting entries into their sorted positions one at a time.

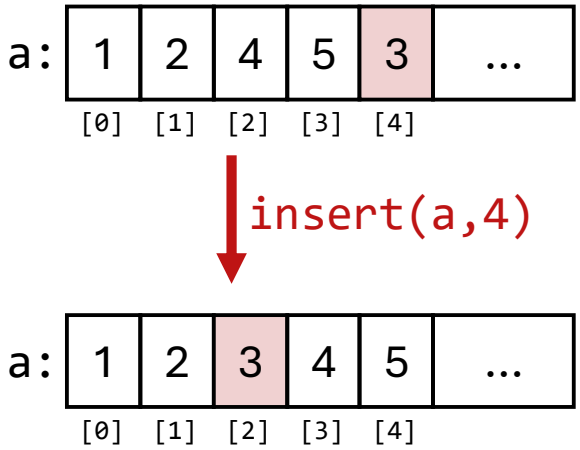


Exercise: The `insert()` helper

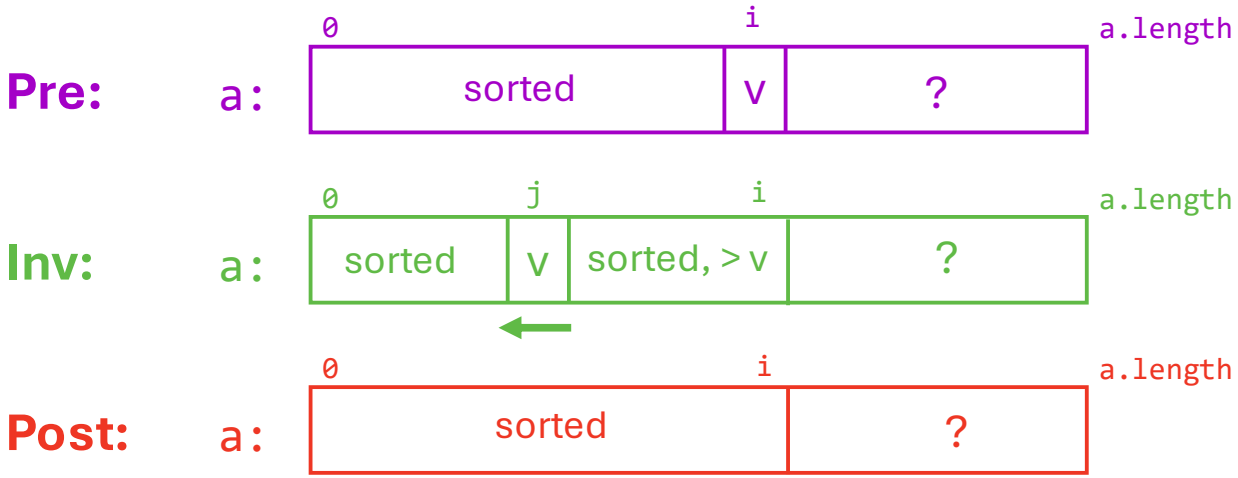
Take some time to write the "loopy" insert() implementation.

```
static void insertionSort(int[] a) {
  /* Loop Inv: a[..i) sorted, a[i..] unchanged. */
  for (int i = 0; i < a.length; i++) {
    insert(a,i);
  }
}

/** Inserts `a[i]` into its sorted position in
 *  `a[..i)`, so `a[..i]` becomes sorted. Requires
 *  `0 <= i < a.length` and `a[..i)` is sorted. */
static void insert(int[] a, int i) { ... }
```



`insert()` Array Diagrams



Coding Demo: Insertion Sort

Insertion Sort (Worst-Case) Complexity

```
1  static void insertionSort(int[] a) {
2    for (int i = 0; i < a.length; i++) {
3      insert(a,i);
4    }
5  }
6
7  static void insert(int[] a, int i) {
8    int j = i;
9    while (j > 0 && a[j - 1] > a[j]) {
10     swap(a, j - 1, j); j--;
11   }
12 }
```

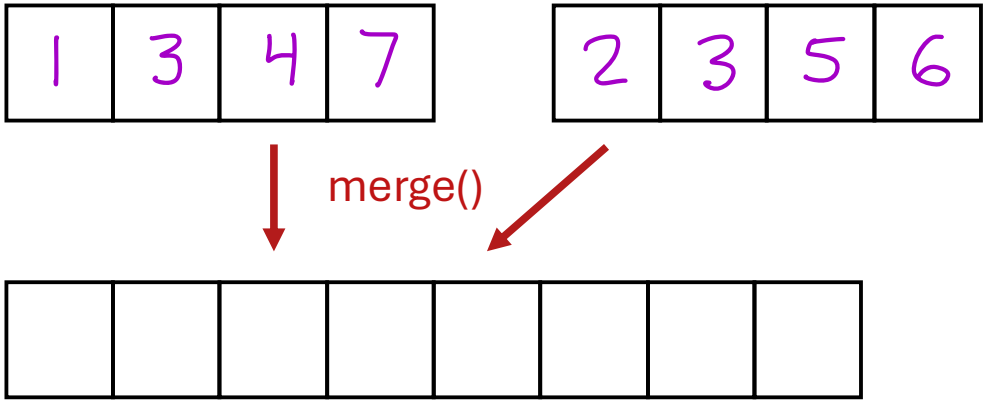
Adaptivity and Stability

A sorting algorithm is **adaptive** if it performs fewer operations when the input starts closer to sorted.

A sorting algorithm is **stable** if it preserves the relative order of equivalent elements.

Merge Sort

Big Idea: If we have two smaller sorted arrays, it's fairly easy to combine them into a single larger sorted array.



The `merge()` Invariant

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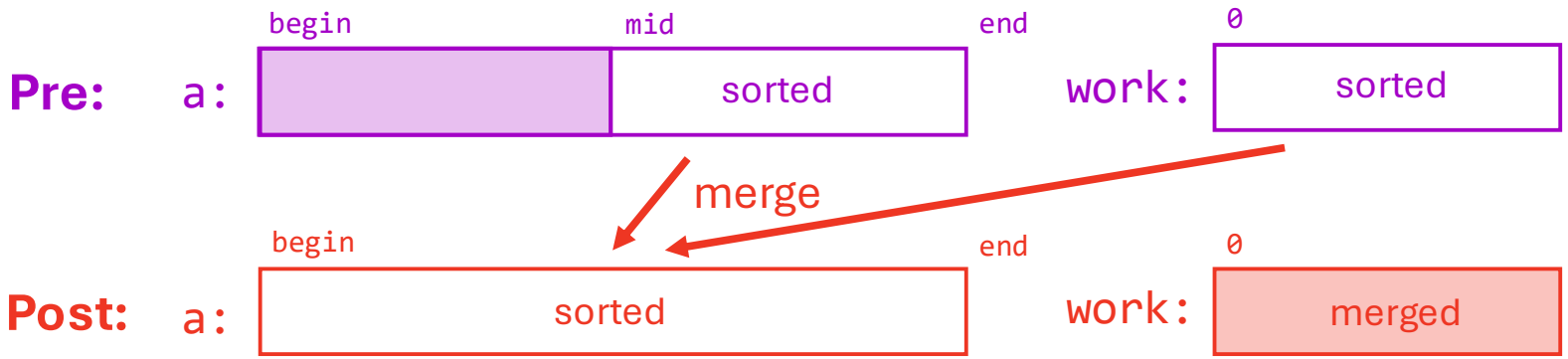
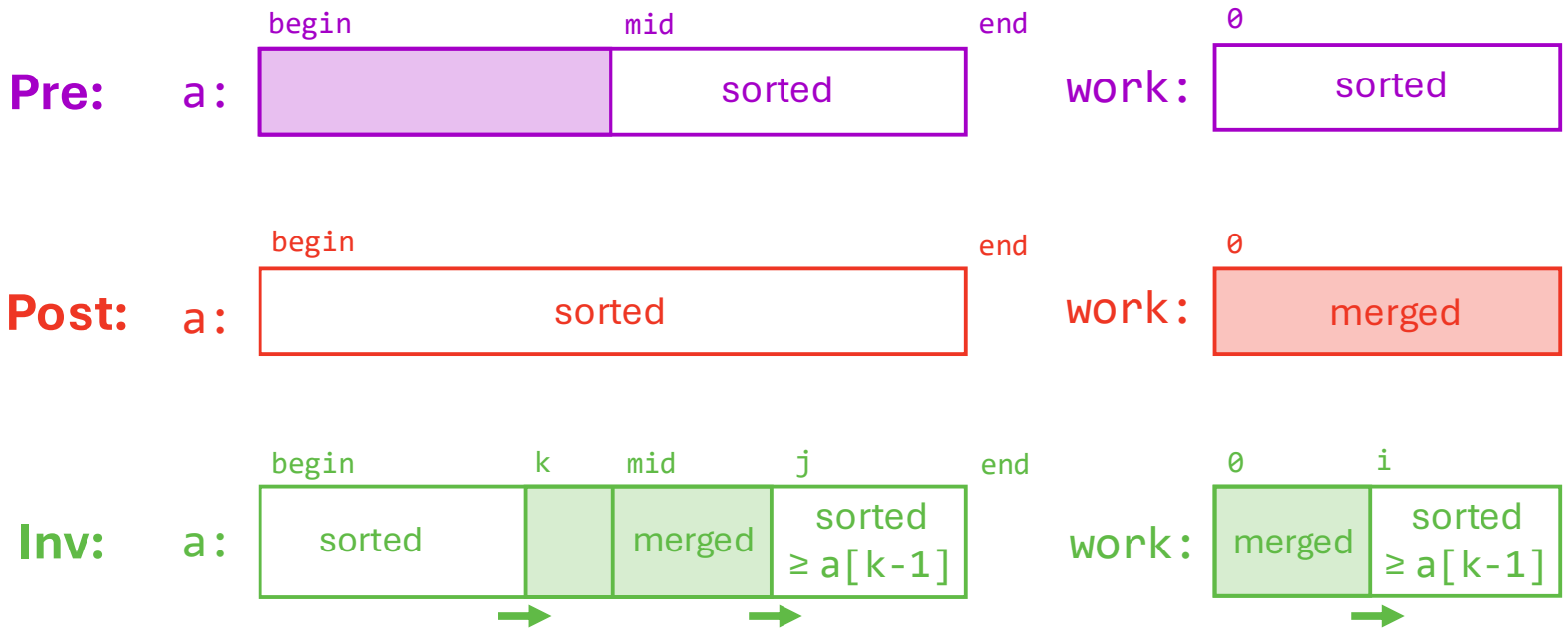


The `merge()` Invariant

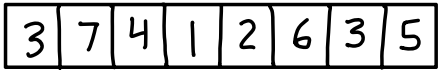


Coding Demo: The `merge()` Method

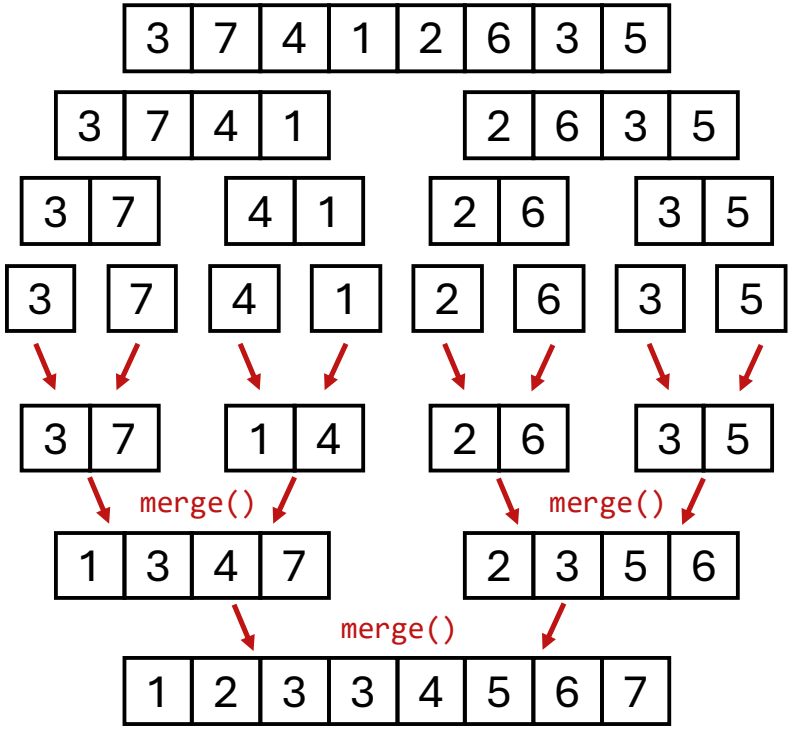
Merge Sort

```
static void mergeSort(int[] a) {
  mergeSortRecursive(a, 0, a.length);
}
/**  Recursively sorts `a[begin..end)` using the merge sort algorithm. */
static void mergeSortRecursive(int[] a, int begin, int end) {









}
```

Visualizing Merge Sort



Merge Sort Runtime Analysis



Merge Sort Space Complexity

Merge Sort has $O(\log N)$ recursive depth

The space complexity of each call is dominated by merge(), which allocates an $O(N)$ work array.

Merge Sort: Other Considerations

Merge sort is **stable** (since we prioritize copying from `work` in `merge()`).

Merge sort is **not adaptive**.

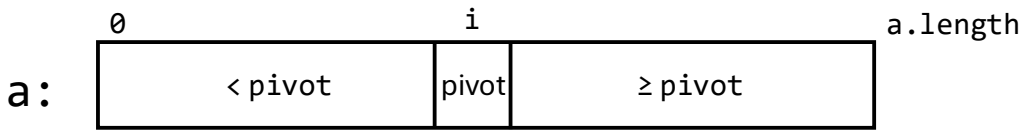
$O(N \log N)$ is the best possible worst-case asymptotic runtime for a `swap()`-based sorting algorithm, so merge sort has the optimal runtime.

Merge sort is the default stable sort in many languages (including Java).

Merge sort parallelizes well, and it is good for really large datasets since only small ranges of data are accessed at a time.

Quicksort

Big Idea: After we partition an array about some pivot value, we're left with two smaller sorting problems that we handle recursively.



Computing the partition using a loop invariant problem (see Discussion 3).

For now: `pivot` = leftmost entry of range

Coding Demo: `quicksort()`

Quicksort Complexity Analysis

Each call is dominated by the `partition()`, which requires O(length) time and O(1) space.

How many calls are made?

Quicksort: Other Considerations

Quicksort is **not adaptive** and **not stable**.

Choosing the pivot in a more sophisticated way leads to good performance.

Quicksort has an **expected** (typical) $O(N \log N)$ runtime, often outperforming merge sort in practice.

Quicksort is the default unstable sort in many languages (including Java).

Sorting Summary

Algorithm	Worst-Case Time Complexity	Expected Time Complexity	Best-Case Time Complexity	Space Complexity	Stable?	Adaptive?
Insertion Sort	$O(N^2)$	$O(N^2)$	$O(N)$	O(1)	Yes	Yes
Merge Sort	$O(N \log N)$	$O(N \log N)$	$O(N \log N)$	$O(N)$	Yes	No
Quicksort	$O(N^2)$	$O(N \log N)$	$O(N \log N)$	$O(\log N)$*	No	No

No obvious "best" choice, it's all about the trade-offs!