The Function Pointer Tutorials
Introduction to C and C++ Function Pointers, Callbacks and Functors

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1 Introduction to Function Pointers

Function Pointers provide some extremely interesting, efficient and elegant programming techniques. You can use them to replace switch/if-statements, to realize your own late-binding or to implement callbacks. Unfortunately – probably due to their complicated syntax – they are treated quite stepmotherly in most computer books and documentations. If at all, they are addressed quite briefly and superficially. They are less error prone than normal pointers cause you will never allocate or de-allocate memory with them. All you’ve got to do is to understand what they are and to learn their syntax. But keep in mind: Always ask yourself if you really need a function pointer. It’s nice to realize one’s own late-binding but to use the existing structures of C++ may make your code more readable and clear. One aspect in the case of late-binding is runtime: If you call a virtual function, your program has got to determine which one has got to be called. It does this using a V-Table containing all the possible functions. This costs some time each call and maybe you can save some time using function pointers instead of virtual functions. Maybe not ...

1.1 What is a Function Pointer?

Function Pointers are pointers, i.e. variables, which point to the address of a function. You must keep in mind, that a running program gets a certain space in the main-memory. Both, the executable compiled program code and the used variables, are put inside this memory. Thus a function in the program code is, like e.g. a character field, nothing else than an address. It is only important how you, or better your compiler/processor, interpret the memory a pointer points to.

1.2 Introductory Example or How to Replace a Switch-Statement

When you want to call a function DoIt() at a certain point called label in your program, you just put the call of the function DoIt() at the point label in your source code. Then you compile your code and every time your program comes up to the point label, your function is called. Everything is ok. But what can you do, if you don’t know at build-time which function has got to be called? What do you do, when you want to decide it at runtime? Maybe you want to use a so called Callback-Function or you want to select one function out of a pool of possible functions. However you can also solve the latter problem using a switch-statement, where you call the functions just like you want it, in the different branches. But there’s still another way: Use a function pointer! In the following example we regard the task to perform one of the four basic arithmetic operations. The task is first solved using a switch-statement. Then it is shown, how the same can be done using a function pointer.²

```cpp
// Task: Perform one of the four basic arithmetic operations specified by the
// characters `+`, `-`, `*` or `/'.

#include <iostream.h> // due to: cout

// the four arithmetic operations
// one of these functions is selected at runtime with a switch or a function pointer
float Plus (float a, float b) { return a+b; }
float Minus (float a, float b) { return a-b; }
float Multiply (float a, float b) { return a*b; }
float Divide (float a, float b) { return a/b; }

// solution with a switch-statement - <opCode> specifies which operation to execute
void Switch(float a, float b, char opCode)
{
    float result;
    switch(opCode) // execute operation
    {
        case '+' : result = Plus (a, b); break;
        case '-' : result = Minus (a, b); break;
    }
```

¹Modern compilers are very good! With my Borland Compiler the time I was able to save calling a virtual function which multiplies two floats was about 2 percent.

²It’s only an example and the task is so easy that I suppose nobody will ever use a function pointer for it ;-)
case '('* : result = Multiply(a, b); break;
case '/' : result = Divide (a, b); break;
}
cout << "switch: 2+5=" << result << endl; // display result
}

// solution with a function pointer - <pt2Func> is a function pointer and points to
// a function which takes two floats and returns a float. The function pointer
// "specifies" which operation shall be executed.
void Switch_With_Function_Pointer(float a, float b, float (*pt2Func)(float, float))
{
    float result = pt2Func(a, b); // call using function pointer
    cout << "switch replaced by function pointer: 2-5="; // display result
    cout << result << endl;
}

// execute example code
void Replace_A_Switch()
{
    cout << endl << "Executing function 'Replace_A_Switch'";
    Switch(2, 5, /* '+' specifies function 'Plus' to be executed */ '+');
    Switch_With_Function_Pointer(2, 5, /* pointer to function 'Minus' */ &Minus);
}

Important note: A function pointer always points to a function with a specific signature! Thus all functions,
you want to use with the same function pointer, must have the same parameters and return-type!

2 The Syntax of C and C++ Function Pointers

Regarding their syntax, there are two different types of function pointers: On the one hand there are pointers
to ordinary C functions or static C++ member functions, on the other hand there are pointers to non-static
C++ member functions. The basic difference is that all pointers to non-static member functions need a hidden
argument: The this-pointer to an instance of the class. Always keep in mind: These two types of function
pointers are incompatible with each other.

2.1 Define a Function Pointer

Since a function pointer is nothing else than a variable, it must be defined as usual. In the following example
we define two function pointers named pt2Function and pt2Member. They point to functions, which take one
float and two char and return an int. In the C++ example it is assumed, that the function, our pointer points
to, is a member function of TMyClass.

// 2.1 define a function pointer
int (*pt2Function)(float, char, char); // C
int (TMyClass::*pt2Member)(float, char, char); // C++

2.2 Calling Convention

Normally you don’t have to think about a function’s calling convention: The compiler assumes __cdecl as
default if you don’t specify another convention. However if you want to know more, keep on reading ... The
calling convention tells the compiler things like how to pass the arguments or how to generate the name of a
function. Examples for other calling conventions are __stdcall, __pascal, __fastcall. The calling convention belongs
to a functions signature: Thus functions and function pointers with different calling convention
are incompatible with each other! For Borland and Microsoft compilers you specify a specific calling
convention between the return type and the function’s or function pointer’s name. For the GNU GCC you use
the __attribute__ keyword: Write the function definition followed by the keyword __attribute__ and then state the calling convention in double parentheses.\(^3\)

// 2.2 define the calling convention
void _cdecl DoIt(float a, char b, char c); // Borland and Microsoft
void DoIt(float a, char b, char c) __attribute__((cdecl)); // GNU GCC

2.3 Assign an Address to a Function Pointer

It’s quite easy to assign the address of a function to a function pointer. You simply take the name of a suitable and known function or member function. It’s optional to use the address operator & in front of the function’s name. Note: You may have got to use the complete name of the member function including class-name and scope-operator (::). Also you have got to ensure, that you are allowed to access the function right in scope where your assignment stands.

// 2.3 assign an address to the function pointer

// C
int DoIt (float a, char b, char c){ printf("DoIt\n"); return a+b+c; }
int DoMore(float a, char b, char c){ printf("DoMore\n"); return a-b+c; }

pt2Function = DoMore; // assignment
pt2Function = &DoIt; // alternative using address operator

// C++
class TMyClass
{
public:
    int DoIt (float a, char b, char c){ cout << "TMyClass::DoIt" << endl; return a+b+c; }
    int DoMore(float a, char b, char c){ cout << "TMyClass::DoMore" << endl; return a-b+c; }
    /* more of TMyClass */
};
pt2Member = TMyClass::DoIt; // assignment
pt2Member = &TMyClass::DoMore; // alternative using address operator

2.4 Comparing Function Pointers

You can use the comparison-operator (==) to compare function pointers with each other or with functions. In the following example it is checked, whether pt2Function and pt2Member actually contain the address of the functions DoIt and TMyClass::DoMore. A text is shown in case of equality.

// 2.4 compare function pointers to functions

// C
if(pt2Function == &DoIt)
    printf("pointer points to DoIt\n");

// C++
if(pt2Member == &TMyClass::DoMore)
    cout << "pointer points to TMyClass::DoMore" << endl;

2.5 Calling a Function using a Function Pointer

In C you have two alternatives of how to call a function using a function pointer: You can just use the name of the function pointer instead of the name of the function or you can explicitly de-reference it. In C++ it’s a little bit tricky since you need to have an instance of a class to call one of their (non-static) member functions. If the call takes place within another member function you can use the this-pointer.

\(^3\)If someone knows more: Let me know :-) And if you want to know how function calls work under the hood you should take a look at the chapter Subprograms in Paul Carter’s PC Assembly Tutorial (http://www.drpaulcarter.com/pcasm/).
2.5 calling a function using a function pointer
int result1 = pt2Function (12, 'a', 'b'); // C short way
int result2 = (*pt2Function) (12, 'a', 'b'); // C

TMyClass instance;
int result3 = (instance.*pt2Member)(12, 'a', 'b'); // C++
int result4 = (*this.*pt2Member)(12, 'a', 'b'); // C++ if this-pointer can be used

2.6 How to Pass a Function Pointer as an Argument?
You can pass a function pointer as a function’s calling argument. You need this for example if you want to pass
a pointer to a callback function. The following code shows how to pass a pointer to a function which returns
an int and takes a float and two char:

// 2.6 How to Pass a Function Pointer

// <pt2Func> is a pointer to a function which returns an int and takes a float and two char
void PassPtr(int (*pt2Func)(float, char, char))
{
    int result = pt2Func(12, 'a', 'b'); // call using function pointer
    cout << result << endl;
}

// execute example code - 'DoIt' is a suitable function like defined above in 2.1-4
void Pass_A_Function_Pointer()
{
    cout << endl << "Executing 'Pass_A_Function_Pointer'" << endl;
    PassPtr(&DoIt);
}

2.7 How to Return a Function Pointer?
It’s a little bit tricky but a function pointer can be a function’s return value. In the following example there are
two solutions of how to return a pointer to a function which is taking two float arguments and returns a float.
If you want to return a pointer to a member function you have just got to change the definitions/declarations
of all function pointers.

// 2.7 How to Return a Function Pointer

// 'Plus' and 'Minus' are defined above in 2.1-4. They return a float and take two float

// direct solution
// function takes a char and returns a pointer to a function which is taking two
// floats and returns a float. <opCode> specifies which function to return
float (*GetPtr1(const char opCode))(float, float)
{
    if(opCode == '+') return &Plus;
    if(opCode == '-') return &Minus;
}

// solution using a typedef
// define a pointer to a function which is taking two floats and returns a float
typedef float(*pt2Func)(float, float);

// function takes a char and returns a function pointer which is defined as a
// type above. <opCode> specifies which function to return
pt2Func GetPtr2(const char opCode)
{
    if(opCode == '+') return &Plus;
if(opCode == '-') return &Minus;
}

// execute example code void Return_A_Function_Pointer()
{
    cout << endl << "Executing 'Return_A_Function_Pointer'" << endl;
    float (*pt2Function)(float, float); // define a function pointer
    pt2Function=GetPtr1('+'); // get function pointer from function 'GetPtr1'
    cout << pt2Function(2, 4) << endl; // call function using the pointer
    pt2Function=GetPtr2('-'); // get function pointer from function 'GetPtr2'
    cout << pt2Function(2, 4) << endl; // call function using the pointer
}

2.8 How to Use Arrays of Function Pointers?

Operating with arrays of function pointer is very interesting. This offers the possibility to select a function using an index. The syntax appears difficult, which frequently leads to confusion.

//-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
// 2.8 How to Use Arrays of Function Pointers
// C
// type-definition: 'pt2Function' now can be used as type
typedef int (*pt2Function)(float, char, char);
// illustrate how to work with an array of function pointers void Array_Of_Function_Pointers()
{
    printf("Executing 'Array_Of_Function_Pointers'\n");
    // <funcArr> is an array with 10 pointers to functions which return an int
    // and take a float and two char
    pt2Function funcArr[10];

    // assign the function's address - 'DoIt' and 'DoMore' are suitable functions
    // like defined above in 2.1-4
    funcArr[0] = &DoIt;
    funcArr[1] = &DoMore;
    /* more assignments */

    // calling a function using an index to address the function pointer
    printf("%d\n", funcArr[1](12, 'a', 'b'));
    printf("%d\n", funcArr[0](12, 'a', 'b'));
}

// C++
// type-definition: 'pt2Member' now can be used as type
typedef int (TMyClass::*pt2Member)(float, char, char);
// illustrate how to work with an array of member function pointers void Array_Of_Member_Function_Pointers()
{
    cout << endl << "Executing 'Array_Of_Member_Function_Pointers'" << endl;
    // <funcArr> is an array with 10 pointers to member functions which return an
    // int and take a float and two char

pt2Member funcArr[10];

// assign the function’s address - 'DoIt' and 'DoMore' are suitable member functions
// of class TMyClass like defined above in 2.1-4
funcArr[0] = &TMyClass::DoIt;
funcArr[1] = &TMyClass::DoMore;
/* more assignments */

// calling a function using an index to address the member function pointer
// note: an instance of TMyClass is needed to call the member functions
TMyClass instance;
cout << (instance.*funcArr[1])(12, 'a', 'b') << endl;
cout << (instance.*funcArr[0])(12, 'a', 'b') << endl;
}

3 How to Implement Callback Functions in C and C++

3.1 Introduction to the Concept of Callback Functions

Function Pointers provide the concept of callback functions. I’ll try to introduce the concept of callback functions using the well known sort function qsort. This function sorts the items of a field according to a user-specific ranking. The field can contain items of any type; it is passed to the sort function using a void-pointer. Also the size of an item and the total number of items in the field has got to be passed. Now the question is: How can the sort-function sort the items of the field without any information about the type of an item? The answer is simple: The function receives the pointer to a comparison-function which takes void-pointers to two field-items, evaluates their ranking and returns the result coded as an int. So every time the sort algorithm needs a decision about the ranking of two items, it just calls the comparison-function via the function pointer.

3.2 How to Implement a Callback in C?

To explain I just take the declaration of the function qsort which reads itself as follows:\(^4\):

void qsort(void* field, size_t nElements, size_t sizeOfAnElement,
        int(_USERENTRY *cmpFunc)(const void *, const void*));

field points to the first element of the field which is to be sorted, nElements is the number of items in the field, sizeOfAnElement the size of one item in bytes and cmpFunc is the pointer to the comparison function. This comparison function takes two void-pointers and returns an int. The syntax, how you use a function pointer as a parameter in a function-definition looks a little bit strange. Just review, how to define a function pointer and you’ll see, it’s exactly the same. A callback is done just like a normal function call would be done: You just use the name of the function pointer instead of a function name. This is shown below. Note: All calling arguments other than the function pointer were omitted to focus on the relevant things.

void qsort( ... , int(_USERENTRY *cmpFunc)(const void*, const void*))
{
    /* sort algorithm - note: item1 and item2 are void-pointers */

    int bigger=cmpFunc(item1, item2); // make callback

    /* use the result */
}

3.3 Example Code of the Usage of qsort

//---------------------------------------------------------------------
// 3.3 How to make a callback in C by the means of the sort function qsort

#include <stdlib.h> // due to: qsort

\(^4\)Taken from the Borland Compiler C++ 5.02 (BC5.02)


```c
#include <time.h>  // randomize
#include <stdio.h>  // printf

// comparison-function for the sort-algorithm
// two items are taken by void-pointer, converted and compared
int CmpFunc(const void* _a, const void* _b)
{
    // you've got to explicitly cast to the correct type
    const float* a = (const float*) _a;
    const float* b = (const float*) _b;

    if(*a > *b) return 1;  // first item is bigger than the second one -> return 1
    else if(*a == *b) return 0;  // equality -> return 0
    else return -1;  // second item is bigger than the first one -> return -1
}

// example for the use of qsort()
void QSortExample()
{
    float field[100];
    ::randomize();  // initialize random-number-generator
    for(int c=0; c<100; c++)  // randomize all elements of the field
        field[c] = random(99);

    // sort using qsort()
    qsort((void*) field, /*number of items*/ 100, /*size of an item*/ sizeof(field[0]),
          /*comparison-function*/ CmpFunc);

    // display first ten elements of the sorted field
    printf("The first ten elements of the sorted field are ...\n");
    for(int c=0; c<10; c++)
        printf("element #%d contains %.0f\n", c+1, field[c]);
    printf("\n");
}
```

3.4 How to Implement a Callback to a static C++ Member Function?

This is the same as you implement callbacks to C functions. Static member functions do not need an object to be invoked on and thus have the same signature as a C function with the same calling convention, calling arguments and return type.

3.5 How to Implement a Callback to a non-static C++ Member Function?

Pointers to non-static members are different to ordinary C function pointers since they need the this-pointer of a class object to be passed. Thus ordinary function pointers and non-static member functions have different and incompatible signatures! If you just want to callback to a member of a specific class you just change your code from an ordinary function pointer to a pointer to a member function. But what can you do, if you want to callback to a non-static member of an arbitrary class? It's a little bit difficult. You need to write a static member function as a wrapper. A static member function has the same signature as a C function! Then you cast the pointer to the object on which you want to invoke the member function to void* and pass it to the wrapper as an additional argument or via a global variable.\(^5\) Of course you've also got to pass the calling arguments for the member function. The wrapper casts the void-pointer to a pointer to an instance of the correct class and calls the member function. Below you find two examples:

Example A: Pointer to a class instance passed as an additional argument  The function `DoIA` does something with objects of the class `TClassA` which implies a callback. Therefore a pointer to an object of class

\(^5\)If you use a global variable it is very important that you make sure that it will always point to the correct object!
TClassA and a pointer to the static wrapper function TClassA::Wrapper_To_Call_Display are passed to DoItA. This wrapper is the callback-function. You can write arbitrary other classes like TClassA and use them with DoItA as long as these other classes provide the necessary functions. **Note:** This solution may be useful if you design the callback interface yourself. It is much better than the second solution which uses a global variable.

```cpp
#include <iostream.h> // due to: cout

class TClassA
{
public:
    void Display(const char* text) { cout << text << endl; };
    static void Wrapper_To_Call_Display(void* pt2Object, char* text);
    /* more of TClassA */
};

// static wrapper function to be able to callback the member function Display()
void TClassA::Wrapper_To_Call_Display(void* pt2Object, char* string)
{
    // explicitly cast to a pointer to TClassA
    TClassA* mySelf = (TClassA*) pt2Object;

    // call member
    mySelf->Display(string);
}

// function does something which implies a callback
// note: of course this function can also be a member function
void DoItA(void* pt2Object, void (*pt2Function)(void* pt2Object, char* text))
{
    /* do something */
    pt2Function(pt2Object, "hi, i'm calling back using a argument ;-)"); // make callback
}

// execute example code
void Callback_Using_Argument()
{
    // 1. instantiate object of TClassA
    TClassA objA;

    // 2. call 'DoItA' for <objA>
    DoItA((void*) &objA, TClassA::Wrapper_To_Call_Display);
}
```

**Example B:** Pointer to a class instance is stored in a global variable  The function DoItB does something with objects of the class TClassB which implies a callback. A pointer to the static wrapper function TClassB::Wrapper_To_Call_Display is passed to DoItB. This wrapper is the callback-function. The wrapper uses the global variable void* pt2Object and explicitly casts it to an instance of TClassB. It is very important, that you always initialize the global variable to point to the correct class instance. You can write arbitrary other classes like TClassB and use them with DoItB as long as these other classes provide the necessary functions. **Note:** This solution may be useful if you have an existing callback interface which cannot be changed. It is
not a good solution because the use of a global variable is very dangerous and could cause serious errors.

#include <iostream.h>  // due to: cout

void* pt2Object;  // global variable which points to an arbitrary object

class TClassB
{
public:

    void Display(const char* text) { cout << text << endl; };
    static void Wrapper_To_Call_Display(char* text);

    /* more of TClassB */
};

// static wrapper function to be able to callback the member function Display()
void TClassB::Wrapper_To_Call_Display(char* string)
{
    // explicitly cast global variable <pt2Object> to a pointer to TClassB
    // warning: <pt2Object> MUST point to an appropriate object!
    TClassB* mySelf = (TClassB*) pt2Object;

    // call member
    mySelf->Display(string);
}

// function does something which implies a callback
// note: of course this function can also be a member function
void DoItB(void (*pt2Function)(char* text))
{
    /* do something */

    pt2Function("hi, i'm calling back using a global ;-)");  // make callback
}

// execute example code
void Callback_Using_Global()
{
    // 1. instantiate object of TClassB
    TClassB objB;

    // 2. assign global variable which is used in the static wrapper function
    // important: never forget to do this!!
    pt2Object = (void*) &objB;

    // 3. call 'DoItB' for <objB>
    DoItB(TClassB::Wrapper_To_Call_Display);
}
4 Functors to encapsulate C and C++ Function Pointers

4.1 What are Functors?

Functors are functions with a state. In C++ you can realize them as a class with one or more private members to store the state and with an overloaded operator () to execute the function. Functors can encapsulate C and C++ function pointers employing the concepts templates and polymorphism. You can build up a list of pointers to member functions of arbitrary classes and call them all through the same interface without bothering about their class or the need of a pointer to an instance. All the functions just have got to have the same return-type and calling parameters. Sometimes Functors are also known as Closures. You can also use Functors to implement callbacks.

4.2 How to Implement Functors?

First you need a base class TFunctor which provides a virtual function named Call or a virtually overloaded operator () with which you will be able to call the member function. It’s up to you if you prefer the overloaded operator or a function like Call. From the base class you derive a template class TSpecificFunctor which is initialized with a pointer to an object and a pointer to a member function in its constructor. The derived class overrides the function Call and/or the operator () of the base class: In the overridden versions it calls the member function using the stored pointers to the object and to the member function.

```cpp
// abstract base class
class TFunctor
{
public:
  // two possible functions to call member function. virtual cause derived
  // classes will use a pointer to an object and a pointer to a member function
  // to make the function call
  virtual void operator()(const char* string)=0; // call using operator
  virtual void Call(const char* string)=0; // call using function
};

// derived template class
template <class TClass> class TSpecificFunctor : public TFunctor
{
  private:
    void (*pt2Object::*fpt)(const char*); // pointer to member function
    TClass* pt2Object; // pointer to object
  public:
    // constructor - takes pointer to an object and pointer to a member and stores
    // them in two private variables
    TSpecificFunctor(TClass* _pt2Object, void(TClass::*_fpt)(const char*))
    { pt2Object = _pt2Object; fpt=_fpt; }

    // override operator "()"
    virtual void operator()(const char* string)
    { (*pt2Object::*fpt)(string); }; // execute member function

    // override function "Call"
    virtual void Call(const char* string)
    { (*pt2Object::*fpt)(string); }; // execute member function
};
```

*If you prefer you can also use a function called Execute or something like that.
4.3 Example of How to Use Functors

In the following example we have two dummy classes which provide a function called Display which returns nothing (void) and needs a string (const char*) to be passed. We create an array with two pointers to TFunctor and initialize the array entries with two pointers to TSpecificFunctor which encapsulate the pointer to an object and the pointer to a member of TClassA respectively TClassB. Then we use the functor-array to call the respective member functions. No pointer to an object is needed to make the function calls and you do not have to bother about the classes anymore!

// 4.3 Example of How to Use Functors

// dummy class A
class TClassA{
 public:
 TClassA();
 void Display(const char* text) { cout << text << endl; };
 /* more of TClassA */
};

// dummy class B
class TClassB{
 public:
 TClassB();
 void Display(const char* text) { cout << text << endl; };
 /* more of TClassB */
};

// main program
int main(int argc, char* argv[])
{
// 1. instantiate objects of TClassA and TClassB
 TClassA objA;
 TClassB objB;

// 2. instantiate TSpecificFunctor objects ...
// a) functor which encapsulates pointer to object and to member of TClassA
 TSpecificFunctor<TClassA> specFuncA(&objA, TClassA::Display);

// b) functor which encapsulates pointer to object and to member of TClassB
 TSpecificFunctor<TClassB> specFuncB(&objB, &TClassB::Display);

// 3. make array with pointers to TFunctor, the base class, and initialize it
 TFunctor* vTable[] = { &specFuncA, &specFuncB };

// 4. use array to call member functions without the need of an object
 vTable[0]->Call("TClassA::Display called!"); // via function "Call"
 (*vTable[1]) ("TClassB::Display called!"); // via operator "()"

cout << endl << "Hit Enter to terminate!" << endl;
cin.get();
return 0;
}