

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
FACULTY OF ENGINEERING
Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering

ECE 150 *Fundamentals of Programming*

The const keyword: keeping data safe

ECE150

Prof. Hiren Patel, Ph.D.
Prof. Werner Dietl, Ph.D.
Douglas Wilhelm Harder, M.Math.

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Outline

- In this lesson, we will:
 - Understand the need to protect stored values
 - Examine constant local variables and constant parameters
 - See how this is used
 - Understand the software engineering principle behind this keyword






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Programming practice

- Up to this point, we have looked most at principles of programming
- We have seen the structured programming theorem
 - This is responsible for our ability to write software projects on the scale we see today
 - By restricting flow control to conditional statements and looping statements, code maintainability is greatly increased
- We will now look at another software engineering tool that can be used to reduce both development and maintenance time and costs

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Software problem

- Some local variables or parameters contain values that are not meant to be changed:


```
int main() {
    double pi{3.1415926535897932};
    // do something...

    if ( pi > x ) {
        // Do something...
    } else if ( pi = x ) {
        // Do something else...
    }

    // Keep doing stuff...
}
```
- What happened here?



Local constants

- To prevent assignment to a local variable after initialization, that identifier can be declared constant:


```
typename const IDENTIFIER{value};
```
- During the software design phase, all local variables should be inspected to determine if their value need be changed after initialization
 - Indicating that a local variable is constant can allow for optimizations by the compiler
 - Constants are identified using ALL CAPS
 - This ensures other developers immediately differentiate between local constants and local variables

- You can also use

```
const typename IDENTIFIER{value};
```



Local constants

- It is a compile-time error if a local constant is initialized:


```
example.cpp: In function 'int main()':
example.cpp:6:12: error: uninitialized const 'SAMPLE_COUNT'
int const SAMPLE_COUNT;
      ^
```
- It is a compile-time error to ever assign to a local constant:


```
example.cpp: In function 'int main()':
example.cpp:7:15: error: assignment of read-only variable
'SAMPLE_COUNT'
SAMPLE_COUNT = 64;
      ^
```
- A local constant is also referred to as a “read-only variable”



Mathematical constants

- Mathematical and physical constants are declared to be constant:

```
int main() {
    double const PI{3.1415926535897932};
    double const TWO_PI{2.0*PI};
    double const PI_BY_2{PI/2.0};
    double const HC{1.98644586e-25}; // Jm
    double const AVOGADRO{6.02214076e23}; // 1/mol
    // Do something...
}
```



Constant parameters

- It is also possible to declare a parameter constant


```
double average( unsigned int const num_values ) {
    // cannot accidentally assign to 'num_values'
}
```





Constant parameters

- This prevents any future editor of this code from accidentally changing the value
 - There may be no reason for the function to change this value
 - Most functions we have written would benefit from this:

```
unsigned long factorial(unsigned long const n) {
    // 64
    // 21! = 51090942171709440000 > 2
    assert( n <= 20 );

    unsigned long result{1};

    for ( unsigned long k{2}; k <= n; ++k ) {
        result *= k;
    }

    return result;
}
```



Synopsis

- A perfectly functioning program that uses const will still be a perfectly functioning program if **all** instances of const are removed
- A perfectly functioning program that uses const correctly, however, is less likely to have errors introduced by subsequent programmers
- All const says to the programmer or compiler:
 - This local variable or parameter should not be changed



Summary

- Following this lesson, you now:
 - Know that the const keyword is there for one reason only:
 - To prevent you from assigning to a variable or parameter that must not be changed
 - Understand that anything declared const must be initialized
 - Know the relationships:
 - local variable ↔ local constant
 - parameter ↔ constant parameter



References

- [1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Const_\(computer_programming\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Const_(computer_programming))
- [2] <http://www.cplusplus.com/doc/tutorial/constants/>
- [3] <http://www.dietmar-kuehl.de/mirror/c++-faq/const-correctness.html>





Colophon

These slides were prepared using the Georgia typeface. Mathematical equations use Times New Roman, and source code is presented using Consolas.

The photographs of lilacs in bloom appearing on the title slide and accenting the top of each other slide were taken at the Royal Botanical Gardens on May 27, 2018 by Douglas Wilhelm Harder. Please see

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