

Learn Objective-C on the Mac

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Apress®



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For Jerri Shertzer—teacher, mentor, friend
—Mark

Contents at a Glance

About the Authors	xv
About the Technical Reviewer	xvii
Acknowledgments	xix
Preface	xxi
CHAPTER 1 Before You Start.....	1
CHAPTER 2 Extensions to C	5
CHAPTER 3 Introduction to Object-Oriented Programming	19
CHAPTER 4 Inheritance	57
CHAPTER 5 Composition.....	73
CHAPTER 6 Source File Organization	87
CHAPTER 7 More About Xcode.....	101
CHAPTER 8 A Quick Tour of the Foundation Kit	131
CHAPTER 9 Memory Management	161
CHAPTER 10 Object Initialization	179
CHAPTER 11 Properties	201
CHAPTER 12 Categories.....	217
CHAPTER 13 Protocols	235
CHAPTER 14 Introduction to the AppKit	249
CHAPTER 15 File Loading and Saving.....	265
CHAPTER 16 Key-Value Coding	277
CHAPTER 17 NSPredicate	295
APPENDIX Coming to Objective-C from Other Languages.....	307
INDEX	319

Contents

About the Authors	xv
About the Technical Reviewer	xvii
Acknowledgments	xix
Preface	xxi
 CHAPTER 1	
Before You Start	1
Where the Future Was Made Yesterday	2
What's Coming Up	2
Summary	3
 CHAPTER 2	
Extensions to C	5
The Simplest Objective-C Program	5
Building Hello Objective-C	5
Deconstructing Hello Objective-C	8
That Wacky #import Thing	9
NSLog() and @"strings"	10
Are You the Boolean Type?	13
Mighty BOOL in Action	14
The Comparison Itself	17
Summary	18
 CHAPTER 3	
Introduction to Object-Oriented Programming	19
It's All Indirection	20
Variables and Indirection	21
Indirection Through Filenames	24
Using Indirection in Object-Oriented Programming	30
Procedural Programming	30
Implementing Object Orientation	37
Time Out for Terminology	42
OOP in Objective-C	43
The @interface Section	43
The @implementation Section	47
Instantiating Objects	50
Extending Shapes-Object	52
Summary	55

CHAPTER 4	Inheritance	57
	Why Use Inheritance?	57
	Inheritance Syntax	62
	Time Out for Terminology	64
	How Inheritance Works	65
	Method Dispatching	65
	Instance Variables	67
	Overriding Methods	69
	I Feel Super!	70
	Summary	72
CHAPTER 5	Composition	73
	What Is Composition?	73
	Car Talk	74
	Customizing for NSLog()	75
	Accessor Methods	78
	Setting the Engine	80
	Setting the Tires	81
	Tracking Changes to Car	82
	Extending CarParts	84
	Composition or Inheritance?	85
	Summary	86
CHAPTER 6	Source File Organization	87
	Split Interface and Implementation	87
	Making New Files in Xcode	88
	Breaking Apart the Car	91
	Using Cross-File Dependencies	93
	Recompiling on a Need-to-Know Basis	94
	Making the Car Go	96
	Importation and Inheritance	97
	Summary	100
CHAPTER 7	More About Xcode	101
	Changing the Company Name	102
	Using Editor Tips and Tricks	103
	Writing Your Code with a Little Help from Xcode	105
	Indentation (Pretty Printing)	105
	Code Completion (Code Sense)	106

Kissing Parentheses	108
Mass Edits	108
Navigating Around in Your Code.....	113
emacs is Not a Mac.....	113
Search Your Feelings, Luke.....	114
Open Sesame Seed!.....	115
Bookmarks.....	115
Focus Your Energy.....	116
The Navigation Bar Is Open.....	118
Getting Information.....	121
Research Assistance, Please.....	121
Is There a Documentor in the House?	122
Debugging	123
Ooongawa!	123
Xcode's Debugger.....	123
Subtle Symbolism.....	124
Let's Debug!	124
Taking a Look-See.....	128
Cheat Sheet	129
Summary.....	130

CHAPTER 8

A Quick Tour of the Foundation Kit 131

Some Useful Types.....	132
Home on the Range.....	132
Geometric Types	133
Stringing Us Along.....	134
Build That String	134
Class Methods	134
Size Matters.....	135
Comparative Politics	136
Insensitivity Training	137
Is It Inside?.....	138
Mutability	139
Collection Agency	141
NSArray.....	141
Mutable Arrays.....	146
Enumeration Nation.....	147
Fast Enumeration	148
NSDictionary.....	148
Use but Don't Extend.....	150

Family Values	151
NSNumber.....	151
NSNumber	152
NSNumber.....	153
Example: Looking for Files.....	154
Behind the Sign That Says “Beware of the Leopard”	158
Summary.....	159

CHAPTER 9

Memory Management 161

Object Life Cycle.....	162
Reference Counting.....	162
Object Ownership.....	165
Retaining and Releasing in Accessors	165
Autorelease.....	167
Everyone into the Pool!	168
The Eve of Our Destruction	169
Pools in Action.....	169
The Rules of Cocoa Memory Management.....	171
Transient Objects	172
Hanging on to Objects	173
Take Out Those Papers and the Trash.....	176
Summary.....	177

CHAPTER 10

Object Initialization 179

Allocating Objects	179
Initializing Objects.....	180
Writing Initialization Methods	180
What to Do When You’re Initializing	182
Isn’t That Convenient?.....	183
More Parts Is Parts	184
init for Tires	184
Updating main()	187
Cleaning Up the Car.....	189
Car Cleaning, GC Style	193
Making a Convenience_INITIALIZER	194
The Designated_INITIALIZER	195
The Subclassing Problem.....	196
Fixing Tire’s Initializers.....	198
Adding the AllWeatherRadial_INITIALIZER	199
Initializer Rules	200
Summary.....	200

CHAPTER 11	Properties	201
	Shrinking Property Values	202
	Shrinking the Interface	203
	Shrinking the Implementation	204
	Dots Incredible	206
	Objecting to Properties	208
	Appellation Spring	212
	Read-Only About It	214
	Alas, Properties Don't Do Everything	214
	Summary	215
CHAPTER 12	Categories	217
	Creating a Category	217
	@interface	218
	@implementation	218
	Bad Categories	220
	Good Categories	221
	Splitting an Implementation with Categories	221
	Using Categories in our Project	222
	Making Forward References with Categories	226
	Categories to the Rescue!	227
	Informal Protocols and Delegation Categories	227
	The iTunesFinder Project	228
	Delegates and Categories	231
	Responds to Selectors	232
	Other Uses for Selectors	233
	Summary	234
CHAPTER 13	Protocols	235
	Formal Protocols	235
	Declaring Protocols	236
	Adopting a Protocol	237
	Implementing a Protocol	237
	Carbon Copies	237
	Copying Engines	238
	Copying Tires	240
	Copying the Car	242
	Protocols and Data Types	245
	Objective-C 2.0 Goodies	246
	Summary	247

CHAPTER 14	Introduction to the AppKit	249
	Making the Project	249
	Making the ApplicationController @interface	252
	Interface Builder	253
	Laying Out the User Interface	256
	Making Connections	258
	Hook Up the Outlets	258
	Hook Up the Actions	260
	AppController Implementation	262
	Summary	264
CHAPTER 15	File Loading and Saving	265
	Property Lists	265
	NSDate	266
	NSData	266
	Writing and Reading Property Lists	267
	Encoding Objects	269
	Summary	276
CHAPTER 16	Key-Value Coding	277
	A Starter Project	277
	Introducing KVC	280
	A Path! A Path!	281
	Aggregated Assault	282
	Pit Stop	284
	Smooth Operator	288
	Life's a Batch	290
	The Nils Are Alive	292
	Handling the Unhandled	292
	Summary	294
CHAPTER 17	NSPredicate	295
	Creating a Predicate	296
	Evaluate the Predicate	297
	Fuel Filters	298
	Format Specifiers	299
	Hello Operator, Give Me Number 9	301
	Comparison and Logical Operators	301
	Array Operators	302

SELF Sufficient	304
String Operations	305
Like, Fer Sure	306
That's All, Folks.	306

APPENDIX **Coming to Objective-C from Other Languages .. 307**

Coming from C	308
Coming from C++	309
C++ vtable vs. Objective-C Dynamic Dispatch	309
Objective-C++	312
Coming from Java	314
Coming from BASIC	316
Coming from Scripting Languages	316
Summary	317

INDEX **319**

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Preface

One of the dangers of being a programmer for a long time is that you can lose that spark of delight that got you interested in programming the first place. Luckily, shiny new technologies come along all the time that can reignite that interest, and Mac OS X is chock full of shiny stuff.

Objective-C is a programming language that blends C's speed and ubiquity with an elegant object-oriented environment and provides a buzzword-laden cornucopia of programming good times. Objective-C is the gateway drug for many of Apple's niftiest technologies, such as the Cocoa toolkit and the iPhone SDK. Once you've mastered the Objective-C language, you're well on your way to conquering the rest of the platform. And from there, you can try to take over the world.

Hello



Welcome to *Learn Objective-C on the Mac*! This book is designed to teach you the basics of the Objective-C language. Objective-C is a superset of C and is the language used by many (if not most) applications that have a true Mac OS X look and feel.

This book teaches you the Objective-C language and introduces you to its companion, Apple's Cocoa toolkit. Cocoa is written in Objective-C and contains all the elements of the Mac OS X user interface, plus a whole lot more. Once you learn Objective-C in this book, you'll be ready to dive into Cocoa with a full-blown project or another book such as *Learn Cocoa on the Mac* or *Beginning iPhone Development*, both by Dave Mark and Jeff LaMarche (Apress 2009).

In this chapter, we'll let you know the basic information you need before you get started with this book. We'll also serve up a bit of history about Objective-C and give you a thumbnail sketch of what's to come in future chapters.

Before You Start

Before you read this book, you should have some experience with a C-like programming language such as C++, Java, or venerable C itself. Whatever the language, you should feel comfortable with its basic principles. You should know what variables and functions are and understand how to control your program's flow using conditionals and loops. Our focus is the features Objective-C adds to its base language, C, along with some goodies chosen from Apple's Cocoa toolkit.

Are you coming to Objective-C from a non-C language? You'll still be able to follow along, but you might want to take a look at Appendix A or check out *Learn C on the Mac* by Dave Mark (Apress 2009).

Where the Future Was Made Yesterday

Cocoa and Objective-C are at the heart of Apple's Mac OS X operating system. Although Mac OS X is relatively new, Objective-C and Cocoa are much older. Brad Cox invented Objective-C in the early 1980s to meld the popular and portable C language with the elegant Smalltalk language. In 1985, Steve Jobs founded NeXT, Inc., to create powerful, affordable workstations. NeXT chose Unix as its operating system and created NextSTEP, a powerful user interface toolkit developed in Objective-C. Despite its features and a small, loyal following, NextSTEP achieved little commercial success.

When Apple acquired NeXT in 1996 (or was it the other way around?), NextSTEP was renamed Cocoa and brought to the wider audience of Macintosh programmers. Apple gives away its development tools—including Cocoa—for free, so any Mac programmer can take advantage of them. All you need is a bit of programming experience, basic knowledge of Objective-C, and the desire to dig in and learn stuff.

You might wonder, "If Objective-C and Cocoa were invented in the '80s—in the days of *Alf* and *The A-Team*, not to mention stuffy old Unix—aren't they old and moldy by now?" Absolutely not! Objective-C and Cocoa are the result of years of effort by a team of excellent programmers, and they have been continually updated and enhanced. Over time, Objective-C and Cocoa have evolved into an incredibly elegant and powerful set of tools. Objective-C is also the key to writing applications for the iPhone. So now, twenty-some years after NeXT adopted Objective-C, all the cool kids are using it.

What's Coming Up

Objective-C is a superset of C. Objective-C begins with C, and then adds a couple of small but significant additions to the language. If you've ever looked at C++ or Java, you may be surprised at how small Objective-C really is. We'll cover Objective-C's additions to C in detail in this book's chapters:

- Chapter 2, "Extensions to C," focuses on the basic features that Objective-C introduces.
- In Chapter 3, "An Introduction to Object-Oriented Programming," we kick off the learning by showing you the basics of object-oriented programming.
- Chapter 4, "Inheritance," describes how to create classes that gain the features of their parent classes.
- Chapter 5, "Composition," discusses techniques for combining objects so they can work together.
- Chapter 6, "Source File Organization," presents real-world strategies for creating your program's sources.

- Chapter 7, “More about Xcode,” shows you some shortcuts and power-user features to help you get the most out of your programming day.
- We take a brief respite from Objective-C in Chapter 8, “A Quick Tour of the Foundation Kit,” to impress you with some of Cocoa’s cool features using one of its two primary frameworks.
- You’ll spend a lot of time in your Cocoa applications dealing in Chapter 9, “Memory Management” (sorry about that).
- Chapter 10, “Object Initialization,” is all about what happens when objects are born.
- Chapter 11, “Properties,” gives you the lowdown on Objective-C’s new dot notation and an easier way to make object accessors.
- Chapter 12, “Categories,” describes the supercool Objective-C feature that lets you add your own methods to existing classes—even those you didn’t write.
- Chapter 13, “Protocols,” tells about a form of inheritance in Objective-C that allows classes to implement packaged sets of features.
- Chapter 14, “Introduction to the Application Kit,” gives you a taste of the gorgeous applications you can develop in Cocoa using its other primary framework.
- Chapter 15, “File Loading and Saving,” shows you how to save and retrieve your data.
- Chapter 16, “Key-Value Coding,” gives you ways to deal with your data indirectly.
- And finally, in Chapter 17, “NSPredicate,” we show you how to slice and dice your data.

If you’re coming from another language like Java or C++, or from another platform like Windows or Linux, you may want to check out Appendix A, “Coming to Objective-C from Other Languages,” which points out some of the mental hurdles you’ll need to jump to embrace Objective-C.

Summary

Mac OS X programs are written in Objective-C, using technology from way back in the 1980s that has matured into a powerful set of tools. In this book, we’ll start by assuming you know something about C programming and go from there.

We hope you enjoy the ride!

Extensions to C

Objective-C is nothing more than the C language with some extra features drizzled on top—it's delicious! In this chapter, we'll cover some of those key extras as we take you through building your first Objective-C program.

The Simplest Objective-C Program

You've probably seen the C version of the classic Hello World program, which prints out the text "Hello, world!" or a similar pithy remark. Hello World is usually the first program that neophyte C programmers learn. We don't want to buck tradition, so we're going to write a similar program here called Hello Objective-C.

Building Hello Objective-C

As you work through this book, we're assuming you have Apple's Xcode tools installed. If you don't already have Xcode, or if you've never used it before, an excellent section in Chapter 2 of Dave Mark's *Learn C on the Mac* (Apress 2009) walks you through the steps of acquiring, installing, and creating programs with Xcode.

In this section, we'll step through the process of using Xcode to create your first Objective-C project. If you are already familiar with Xcode, feel free to skip ahead; you won't hurt our feelings. Before you go, be sure to expand the *Learn ObjC Projects* archive from this book's archive (which you can download from the Source Code/Download page of the Apress web site). This project is located in the *02.01 - Hello Objective-C* folder.

To create the project, start by launching Xcode. You can find the Xcode application in */Developer/Applications*. We put the Xcode icon in the Dock for easy access. You might want to do that too.

Once Xcode finishes launching, choose **New Project** from the **File** menu. Xcode shows you a list of the various kinds of projects it can create. Use your focus to ignore most of the intriguing project types there, and choose *Command Line Utility* on the left-hand side of the window and *Foundation Tool* on the right-hand side, as shown in Figure 2-1. Click the *Choose* button.



Figure 2-1. Making a new foundation tool

Xcode drops a sheet and asks you to name the project. You can choose any name you want, but as you can see in Figure 2-2, we called it Hello Objective-C. We're putting it into one of our *Projects* directories here to keep things organized, but you can put it anywhere you want.

After you click *Save*, Xcode shows you its main window, called the project window (see Figure 2-3). This window displays the pieces that compose your project along with an editing pane. The highlighted file, *Hello Objective-C.m*, is the source file that contains the code for Hello Objective-C.

Hello Objective-C.m contains boilerplate code, kindly provided by Xcode for each new project. We can make our Hello Objective-C application a little simpler than the sample Xcode supplies. Delete everything in *Hello Objective-C.m* and replace it with this code:

```
#import <Foundation/Foundation.h>

int main (int argc, const char *argv[])
{
    NSLog(@"Hello, Objective-C!");

    return (0);
} // main
```

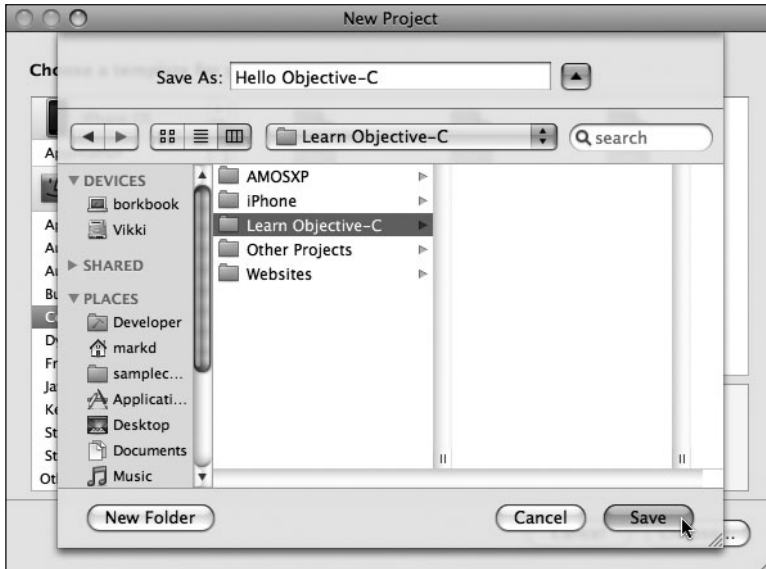


Figure 2-2. Name the new foundation tool

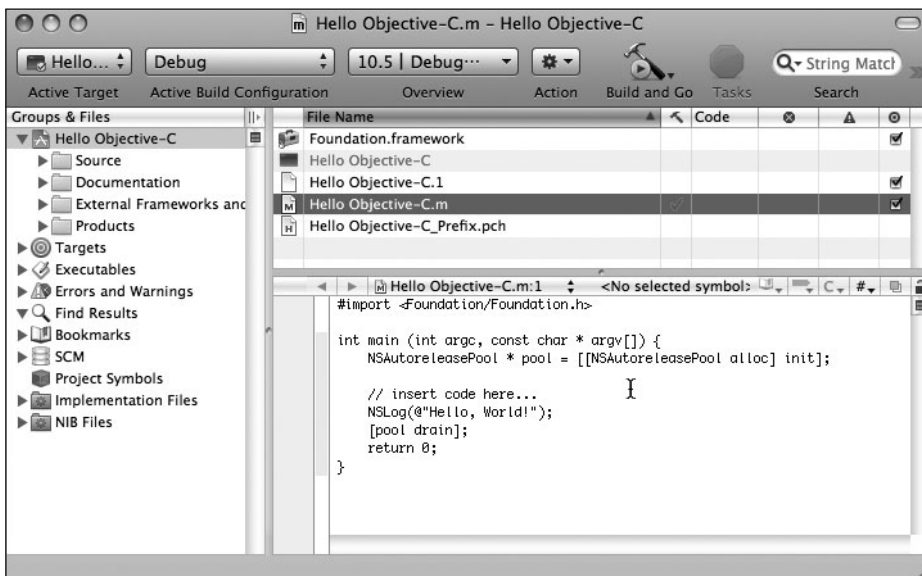


Figure 2-3. XCode's main window

If you don't understand all the code right now, don't worry about it. We'll go through this program in excruciating, line-by-line detail soon.

Source code is no fun if you can't turn it into a running program. Build and run the program by clicking the *Build and Go* button or pressing ⌘R. If there aren't any nasty syntax errors, Xcode compiles and links your program and then runs it. Open the Xcode console window

(by selecting **Console** from the **Run** menu or pressing ⌘⇧R), which displays your program's output, as shown in Figure 2-4.

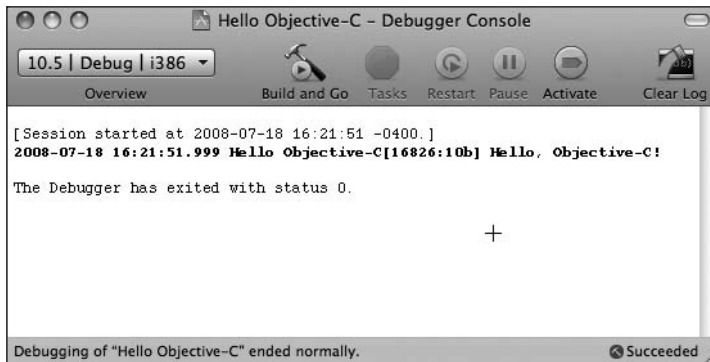


Figure 2-4. Running *Hello Objective-C*

And there you have it: your first working Objective-C program. Congratulations! Let's pull it apart and see how it works.

Deconstructing Hello Objective-C

Here, again, are the contents of *Hello Objective-C.m*:

```
#import <Foundation/Foundation.h>

int main (int argc, const char *argv[])
{
    NSLog (@"Hello, Objective-C!");

    return (0);
} // main
```

Xcode uses the *.m* extension to indicate a file that holds Objective-C code and will be processed by the Objective-C compiler. File names ending in *.c* are handled by the C compiler, and *.cpp* files are the province of the C++ compiler. (In Xcode, all this compiling is handled by the GNU Compiler Collection [GCC], a single compiler that understands all three variations of the language.)

The *main.m* file contains two lines of code that should be familiar to you already if you know plain C: the declaration of `main()` and the `return (0)` statement at the end. Remember that Objective-C really is C at heart, and the syntax for declaring `main()` and returning a value is the same as in C. The rest of the code looks slightly different from regular C. For example, what is that wacky `#import` thing? To find out, read on!

NOTE

The `.m` extension originally stood for “messages” when Objective-C was first introduced, referring to a central feature of Objective-C that we’ll talk about in future chapters. Nowadays, we just call them **dot-m files**.

That Wacky `#import` Thing

Just like C, Objective-C uses **header files** to hold the declarations of elements such as structs, symbolic constants, and function prototypes. In C, you use the `#include` statement to inform the compiler that it should consult a header file for some definitions. You can use `#include` in Objective-C programs for the same purpose, but you probably never will. Instead, you’ll use `#import`, like this:

```
#import <Foundation/Foundation.h>
```

`#import` is a feature provided by the GCC compiler, which is what Xcode uses when you’re compiling Objective-C, C, and C++ programs. `#import` guarantees that a header file will be included only once, no matter how many times the `#import` directive is actually seen for that file.

NOTE

In C, programmers typically use a scheme based on the `#ifdef` directive to avoid the situation where one file includes a second file, which then, recursively, includes the first.

In Objective-C, programmers use `#import` to accomplish the same thing.

The `#import <Foundation/Foundation.h>` statement tells the compiler to look at the `Foundation.h` header file in the Foundation framework.

What’s a framework? We’re glad you asked. A framework is a collection of parts—header files, libraries, images, sounds, and more—collected together into a single unit. Apple ships technologies such as Cocoa, Carbon, QuickTime, and OpenGL as sets of frameworks. Cocoa consists of a pair of frameworks, Foundation and Application Kit (also known as AppKit), along with a suite of supporting frameworks, including Core Animation and Core Image, which add all sorts of cool stuff to Cocoa.

The Foundation framework handles features found in the layers beneath the user interface, such as data structures and communication mechanisms. All the programs in this book are based on the Foundation framework.

NOTE

Once you finish this book, your next step along the road to becoming a Cocoa guru is to master Cocoa's Application Kit, which contains Cocoa's high-level features: user interface elements, printing, color and sound management, AppleScript support, and so on. To find out more, check out *Learn Cocoa on the Mac* by Dave Mark and Jeff LaMarche (Apress 2009).

Each framework is a significant collection of technology, often containing dozens or even hundreds of header files. Each framework has a master header file that includes all the framework's individual header files. By using `#import` on the master header file, you have access to all the framework's features.

The header files for the Foundation framework take up nearly a megabyte of disk storage, and contain more than 14,000 lines of code, spread across over a hundred files. When you include the master header file with `#import <Foundation/Foundation.h>`, you get that whole vast collection. You might think wading through all that text for every file would take the compiler a lot of time, but Xcode is smart: it speeds up the task by using precompiled headers, a compressed and digested form of the header that's loaded quickly when you `#import` it.

If you're curious about which headers are included with the Foundation framework, you can peek inside its *Headers* directory (`/System/Library/Frameworks/Foundation.framework/Headers/`). You won't break anything if you browse the files in there; just don't remove or change anything.

NSLog() and @"strings"

Now that we have used `#import` on the master header file for the Foundation framework, you're ready to write code that takes advantage of some Cocoa features. The first (and only) real line of code in Hello Objective-C uses the `NSLog()` function, like so:

```
NSLog(@"Hello, Objective-C!");
```

This prints "Hello, Objective-C!" to the console. If you've used C at all, you have undoubtedly encountered `printf()` in your travels. `NSLog()` is a Cocoa function that works very much like `printf()`.

Just like `printf()`, `NSLog()` takes a string as its first argument. This string can contain format specifiers (such as `%d`), and the function takes additional parameters that match the format specifiers. `printf()` plugs these extra parameters into the string before it gets printed.

As we've said before, Objective-C is just C with a little bit of special sauce, so you're welcome to use `printf()` instead of `NSLog()` if you want. We recommend `NSLog()`, however, because it adds features such as time and date stamps, as well as automatically appending the newline (`'\n'`) character for you.

You might be thinking that `NSLog()` is kind of a strange name for a function. What is that "NS" doing there? It turns out that Cocoa prefixes all its function, constant, and type names with "NS". This prefix tells you the function comes from Cocoa instead of some other toolkit.

The prefix helps prevent **name collisions**, big problems that result when the same identifier is used for two different things. If Cocoa had named this function `Log()`, there's a good chance the name would clash with a `Log()` function created by some innocent programmer somewhere. When a program containing `Log()` is built with Cocoa included, Xcode complains that `Log()` is defined multiple times, and sadness results.

Now that you have an idea why a prefix is a good idea, you might wonder about the specific choice: why "NS" instead of "Cocoa," for example? Well, the "NS" prefix dates back from the time when the toolkit was called NextSTEP and was the product of NeXT Software (formerly NeXT, Inc.), which was acquired by Apple in 1996. Rather than break compatibility with code already written for NextSTEP, Apple just continued to use the "NS" prefix. It's a historical curiosity now, like your appendix.

Cocoa has staked its claim on the NS prefix, so obviously, you should not prefix any of your own variables or function names with "NS". If you do, you will confuse the readers of your code, making them think your stuff actually belongs to Cocoa. Also, your code might break in the future if Apple happens to add a function to Cocoa with the same name as yours. There is no centralized prefix registry, so you can pick your own prefix. Many people prefix names with their initials or company names. To make our examples a little simpler, we won't use a prefix for the code in this book.

Let's take another look at that `NSLog()` statement:

```
NSLog(@"Hello, Objective-C!");
```

Did you notice the at sign before the string? It's not a typo that made it past our vigilant editors. The at sign is one of the features that Objective-C adds to standard C. A string in double quotes preceded by an at sign means that the quoted string should be treated as a Cocoa `NSString` element.

So what's an `NSString` element? Peel the "NS" prefix off the name and you see a familiar term: "String". You already know that a string is a sequence of characters, usually human-readable, so you can probably guess (correctly) that an `NSString` is a sequence of characters in Cocoa.

NSString elements have a huge number of features packed into them and are used by Cocoa any time a string is needed. Here are just a few of the things an NSString can do:

- Tell you its length
- Compare itself to another string
- Convert itself to an integer or floating-point value

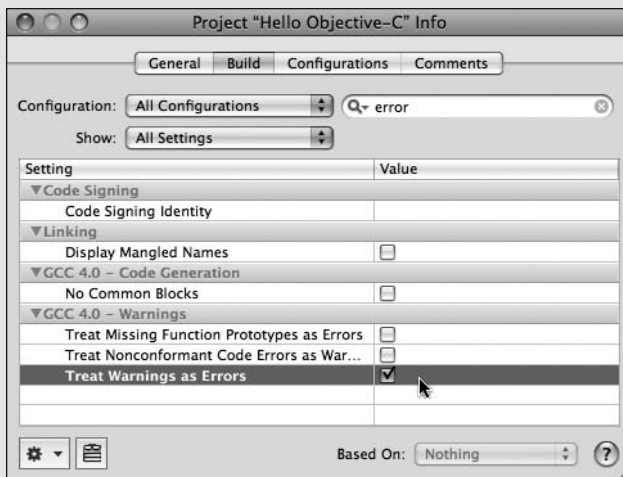
That's a whole lot more than you can do with C-style strings. We'll be using and exploring NSString elements much more in Chapter 8.

WATCH THOSE STRINGS

One mistake that's easy to make is to pass a C-style string to `NSLog()` instead of one of the fancy NSString @"strings" elements. If you do this, the compiler will give you a warning:

```
main.m:46: warning: passing arg 1 of 'NSLog' from  
incompatible pointer type
```

If you run this program, it might crash. To catch problems like this, you can tell Xcode to always treat warnings as errors. To do that, select the top item in the Xcode *Groups & Files* list, choose **File > Get Info**, select the *Build* tab, type *error* into the search field, and check the *Treat Warnings as Errors* checkbox, as shown in the following image. Also make sure that the *Configuration* pop-up menu at the top says *All Configurations*.



Here's another cool fact about `NSString`: the name itself highlights one of the nice features of Cocoa. Most Cocoa elements are named in a very straightforward manner, striving to describe the features they implement. For instance, `NSArray` provides arrays; `NSDateFormatter` helps you format dates in different ways; `NSThread` gives you tools for multithreaded programming; and `NSSpeechSynthesizer` lets you hear speech.

Now, we'll get back to stepping through our little program. The last line of the program is the return statement that ends the execution of `main()` and finishes the program:

```
return (0);
```

The zero value returned says that our program completed successfully. This is just the way return statements work in C.

Congratulations, again! You've just written, compiled, run, and dissected your first Objective-C program.

Are You the Boolean Type?

Many languages have a Boolean type, which is, of course, a fancy term for variables that store true and false values. Objective-C is no exception.

C has a Boolean data type, `bool`, which can take on the values `true` and `false`. Objective-C provides a similar type, `BOOL`, which can have the values `YES` and `NO`. Objective-C's `BOOL` type, incidentally, predates C's `bool` type by over a decade. The two different Boolean types can coexist in the same program, but when you're writing Cocoa code, you'll be using `BOOL`.

NOTE

BOOL in Objective-C is actually just a type definition (typedef) for the signed character type (`signed char`), which uses 8 bits of storage. YES is defined as 1 and NO as 0 (using `#define`).

Objective-C doesn't treat BOOL as a true Boolean type that can hold only YES or NO values. The compiler considers BOOL to be an 8-bit number, and the values of YES and NO are just a convention. This causes a subtle gotcha: if you inadvertently assign an integer value that's more than 1 byte long, such as a short or an int value, to a BOOL variable, only the lowest byte is used for the value of the BOOL. If that byte happens to be zero (as with 8960, which in hexadecimal is 0x2300), the BOOL value will be zero, the NO value.

Mighty BOOL in Action

To show mighty BOOL in action, we move on to our next project, *02.02 - BOOL Party*, which compares pairs of integers to see if they're different. Aside from `main()`, the program defines two functions. The first, `areIntsDifferent()`, takes two integer values and returns a BOOL: YES if the integers are different and NO if they are the same. A second function, `boolString()`, takes a BOOL parameter and returns the string @"YES" if the parameter is YES and @"NO" if the parameter is NO. This is a handy function to have around when you want to print out a human-readable representation of BOOL values. `main()` uses these two functions to compare integers and print out the results.

Creating the project for BOOL Party is exactly the same process as making the project for Hello Objective-C:

1. Launch Xcode, if it's not already running.
2. Select **New Project** from the **File** menu.
3. Choose *Command Line Utility* on the left and *Foundation Tool* on the right.
4. Click *Choose*.
5. Type *BOOL Party* as the *Project Name*, and click *Save*.

Edit *BOOL Party.m* to make it look like this:

```
#import <Foundation/Foundation.h>

// returns NO if the two integers have the same
// value, YES otherwise

BOOL areIntsDifferent (int thing1, int thing2)
{
    if (thing1 == thing2) {
        return (NO);
    } else {
        return (YES);
    }
}

} // areIntsDifferent


// given a YES value, return the human-readable
// string "YES". Otherwise return "NO"

NSString *boolString (BOOL yesNo)
{
    if (yesNo == NO) {
        return (@"NO");
    }
}
```

```

    } else {
        return (@"YES");
    }

} // boolString

int main (int argc, const char *argv[])
{
    BOOL areTheyDifferent;

    areTheyDifferent = areIntsDifferent (5, 5);

    NSLog (@"are %d and %d different? %@",
           5, 5, boolString(areTheyDifferent));

    areTheyDifferent = areIntsDifferent (23, 42);

    NSLog (@"are %d and %d different? %@",
           23, 42, boolString(areTheyDifferent));

    return (0);

} // main

```

Build and run your program. You'll need to bring up the *Console* window to see the output, by choosing **Console** from the **Run** menu, or using the keyboard shortcut **⌘⇧R**. In the *Run Debugger Console* window, you should see output like the following:

```

2008-07-20 16:47:09.528 02 BOOL Party[16991:10b] are 5 and 5 different? NO
2008-07-20 16:47:09.542 02 BOOL Party[16991:10b] are 23 and 42 different?
YES

```

The Debugger has exited with status 0.

Once again, let's pull this program apart, function by function, and see what's going on. The first function in our tour is `areIntsDifferent()`:

```

BOOL areIntsDifferent (int thing1, int thing2)
{
    if (thing1 == thing2) {
        return (NO);
    } else {
        return (YES);
    }

}

} // areIntsDifferent

```

The `areIntsDifferent()` function that takes two integer parameters and returns a `BOOL` value. The syntax should be familiar to you from your C experience. Here you can see `thing1` being compared to `thing2`. If they're the same, `NO` is returned (since they're not different). If they're different, `YES` is returned. That's pretty straightforward, isn't it?

WON'T GET BOOLED AGAIN

Experienced C programmers might be tempted to write the `areIntsDifferent()` function as a single statement:

```
BOOL areIntsDifferent_faulty (int thing1, int thing2)
{
    return (thing1 - thing2);
} // areIntsDifferent_faulty
```

They'd do so operating under the assumption that a nonzero value is the same as `YES`. But that's not the case. Yes, this function returns a value, as far as C is concerned, that is true or false, but callers of functions returning `BOOL` will expect either `YES` or `NO` to be returned. If a programmer tries to use this function as follows, it will fail, since 23 minus 5 is 18:

```
if (areIntsDifferent_faulty(23, 5) == YES) {
    // ....
}
```

While the preceding function may be a true value in C, it is not equal to `YES` (a value of 1) in Objective-C.

It's a good idea never to compare a `BOOL` value directly to `YES`, because too-clever programmers sometimes pull stunts similar to `areIntsDifferent_faulty()`. Instead, write the preceding `if` statement like this:

```
if (areIntsDifferent_faulty(5, 23)) {
    // ....
}
```

Comparing directly to `NO` is always safe, since falsehood in C has a single value: zero.

The second function, `boolString()`, maps a numeric `BOOL` value to a string that's readable by mere humans:

```
NSString *boolString (BOOL yesNo)
{
    if (yesNo == NO) {
        return (@"NO");
    } else {
        return (@"YES");
    }
}

} // boolString
```