

Recursion (Part 1)



EECS2101 Z:
Fundamentals of Data Structures
Winter 2026

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Beyond this lecture ...

- Fantastic resources for developing your recursive skills:

<http://codingbat.com/java/Recursion-1>

<http://codingbat.com/java/Recursion-2>

- The **best** long-term approaches for mastering recursion are:
 - learning a **functional programming** language
[e.g., Haskell: <https://www.haskell.org/tutorial/>]
 - learning to develop a **compiler** (after learning **trees** in this course)
[e.g., ANTLR4 from EECS4302]

Background Study: Basic Recursion

- It is assumed that, in EECS2030, you learned about the basics of **recursion** in Java:
 - What makes a method recursive?
 - How to trace recursion using a **call stack**?
 - How to define and use **recursive helper methods** on arrays?
- If needed, review the above assumed basics from the relevant parts of EECS2030:
 - From F'21: Parts A – C, Lecture 8, Week 12
 - From F'24: Lecture 24, Sec. E (Tower of Hanoi)

Tips.

- Skim the **slides**: watch lecture videos if needing explanations.
- Recursion lab from EECS2030-F22: **here** [Solution: **here**]
- Ask questions related to the assumed basics of **recursion**!
- Assuming that you know the basics of **recursion**, we will:
 - Look at an advanced example of **recursion on arrays** together.
 - Have you complete an assignment on the more advanced recursion problems.

Learning Outcomes of this Lecture

This module is designed to help you:

- Quickly review the *recursion basics*.
- Know about the resources on *recursion basics*.
- Get used to the more advanced use of recursion.

Recursion: Principle

- **Recursion** is useful in expressing solutions to problems that can be **recursively** defined:
 - **Base Cases:** Small problem instances immediately solvable.
 - **Recursive Cases:**
 - Large problem instances *not immediately solvable*.
 - Solve by reusing *solution(s) to strictly smaller problem instances*.
- Similar idea learnt in high school: [**mathematical induction**]

Tracing Method Calls via a Stack

- When a method is called, it is **activated** (and becomes **active**) and **pushed** onto the stack.
- When the body of a method makes a (helper) method call, that (helper) method is **activated** (and becomes **active**) and **pushed** onto the stack.
 - ⇒ The stack contains activation records of all **active** methods.
 - **Top** of stack denotes the current point of execution.
 - Remaining parts of stack are (temporarily) **suspended**.
- When entire body of a method is executed, stack is **popped**.
 - ⇒ The current point of execution is returned to the new **top** of stack (which was **suspended** and just became **active**).
- Execution terminates when the stack becomes **empty**.

Tracing Method Calls via a Stack

- Can you identify the pattern of a Fibonacci sequence?

$$F = 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, \dots$$

- Here is the formal, **recursive** definition of calculating the n_{th} number in a Fibonacci sequence (denoted as F_n):

$$F_n = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } n = 1 \\ 1 & \text{if } n = 2 \\ F_{n-1} + F_{n-2} & \text{if } n > 2 \end{cases}$$

- Your tasks are then to review how to
 - **implement** the above mathematical, recursive function in Java
 - **trace**, via a stack, the recursive execution at runtimeby studying **this video** (≈ 20 minutes):

Making Recursive Calls on an Array

- For **efficiency**, we exploit the feature of **call by value**, by:
 - passing the **reference** of the same array
 - specifying the **range of indices** to be considered

```
void m(int[] a, int from, int to) {  
    if(from > to) { /* base case */ }  
    else if(from == to) { /* base case */ }  
    else { m(a, from + 1, to) } }
```

- `m(a, 0, a.length - 1)` [Initial call; entire array]
- `m(a, 1, a.length - 1)` [1st r.c. on array of size `a.length - 1`]
- `m(a, a.length-1, a.length-1)` [Last r.c. on array of size 1]

- Required Task:**

Study the two examples `allPositive` and `isSorted` from the background study.

A More Advanced Example on Recursion

Assuming that you will review the assumed basic, let's go over an advanced example from paper to Eclipse:

- **Problem Description:**

`https://www.eecs.yorku.ca/~wangcw/teaching/lectures/2026/W/EECS2101/exercises/EECS2101-W26-Problem-Recursion-splitArray-Spec.pdf`

- **Java starter project** (with hints and **JUnit tests**):

`https://www.eecs.yorku.ca/~wangcw/teaching/lectures/2026/W/EECS2101/exercises/ExtraRecursionProblemSplitArray\_Starter.zip`

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