6. Writing Big Loops

Ken Rice
Thomas Lumley

Universities of Washington and Auckland

Auckland, November 2013
Writing loops in \texttt{R}

We saw that \texttt{replicate()}, and \texttt{apply()}, \texttt{sapply()} are \texttt{R}'s preferred way of \textbf{looping} (doing the same thing many times)

Even for expert users, their use requires some careful thought; debugging code may be complex.

In this session we’ll talk about some alternatives, and their application to \texttt{genome-wide} studies.
for() loops

Your first computer program?

for(i in 1:100){
    print("Hello world!")
    print(i*i)
}

• Everything inside the curly brackets {...} is done 100 times

• Looped commands can depend on i (or whatever you called the counter)

• R creates a vector i with 1:100 in it. You could use any vector that’s convenient
for() loops

for() loops are very intuitive, but have some drawbacks;

- They can be slow;
  - ‘growing’ a large dataset is a bad idea;
    mydata <- cbind(mydata, rnorm(1000, mean=i))
  - so set up blank output first, then ‘fill it in’

- apply() is interpreted slightly faster than for() – but typically this will not matter, contrary to some urban myths

- for() loops require more typing than apply()! For tasks which will be repeated, writing a function really is the Right Thing to do, in the long run.

Using for(i in 1:N) sets up a vector (i) of length N. Do you really need this?
for() loops

Two alternatives; (see ?Control for details)

```r
i <- 1; my.mat <- matrix(NA, N, 3)
while(i <= N){
    z <- work.on.gene(i)
    my.mat[i,] <- summary(z)
    i <- i+1
}

– note that we avoided ‘growing’ the output

i <- 1; my.mat <- matrix(NA, N, 3)
repeat{
    z <- work.on.gene(i)
    my.mat[i,] <- summary(z)
    i <- i+1
    if(i>=N) break
}

Use apply(), sapply() to avoid the ‘setup’ stage
 Application to whole-genome study

Whole genome studies look very intimidating ...

Genome-wide association study identifies new susceptibility loci for Crohn disease and implicates autophagy in disease pathogenesis

Application to whole-genome study

... however, each $p$-value on that picture comes from a single logistic regression.

There may be 304,413 tests in total; if each one takes 1/10 sec, the analysis is done in under an hour;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time per test</th>
<th>Total time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.01 sec</td>
<td>51 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 sec</td>
<td>8 hours 27 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sec</td>
<td>3 days 12.5 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 sec</td>
<td>17 days 15 hrs (!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 mins</td>
<td>2 yrs 11 months (!!!)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cutting time per test from 1 sec $\rightarrow$ 0.1 sec is clearly worthwhile – but proposing analyses where each test takes $> 5$ secs is silly.
Making code run faster, part 1

Some easy ‘streamlining’ ideas;

- Write a function to do just the analysis you want
  ```r
  > my.output <- apply(my.data, 1, my.function)
  ```

- Pre-process/‘clean’ your data before analysis; e.g. `sum(x)/length(x)` doesn’t error-check like `mean(x)`

- Similarly, you can streamline `glm()` to just `glm.fit()` [as we’ll see, in some examples]

- Use vectorized operations, where possible

- Store data as matrices, not data.frames
Making code run faster, part 2

Streamlining, for experts;

- Write small but *important* pieces of code in C, and call these from R

- **Batch mode** processing lets you break down e.g. the whole genome into 23 chromosomes – great if you have 23 processors to use.

  - Save your analysis in 23 output files
  
  - read in the answers
  
  - finally produce e.g. multi-color pictures

Various packages help implement this, but use is platform-specific
Timing

“Premature optimization is the root of all evil”

Donald Knuth

Do you need to optimize your code? Running 2 or 3 times faster may not be worth the time spent coding/debugging!

But going an order of magnitude faster is A Good Thing.

After you have code that works, you may need to speed it up. Experienced users may be able to ‘eyeball’ the problem; measurement is an easier and more reliable approach.
Timing

• `proc.time()` returns the current time. Save it before a task and subtract from the value after a task.

• `system.time()` times the evaluation of expression

• R has a **profiler**; this records which functions are being run, many times per second. `Rprof(filename)` turns on the profiler, `Rprof(NULL)` turns it off. `summaryRprof(filename)` reports how much time was spent in each function.

Remember that a 1000-fold speedup in a function used 10% of the time is **less helpful** than a 30% speedup in a function used 50% of the time.
High-throughput code – caveats

We saw yesterday that ‘weird’ datasets can crash your code. These **will appear** in genome-wide studies, and a crash at SNP 299,999 will be **very frustrating**.

- Some ‘weirdness’ is easy to spot;
  - Everyone is homozygous
  - All cases missing
  - No variation in outcome ...

- In more complex models, it’s easier to ‘try it and see’. Use `tryCatch()`

- When ‘weirdness’ is found, high-throughput code should;
  - Produce sensible output (`NA`, `-999` etc)
  - Handle these appropriately in summary output