9. Writing Functions

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In this session

One of the most powerful features of R is the user’s ability to expand existing functions and write custom functions. We will give an introduction to writing functions in R.

- Structure of a function
- Creating your own function
- Examples and applications of functions
Functions are an important part of R because they allow the user to customize and extend the language.

- Functions allow for reproducible code without copious/error prone retyping
- Organizing code into functions for performing specified tasks makes complex programs tractable
- Often necessary to develop your own algorithms or take existing functions and modify them to meet your needs
Structure of a function

Functions are created using the `function()` directive and are stored as R objects.

Functions are defined by;

1. A function name with assignment to the `function()` directive. (Function names can be almost anything. However, the usage of names of existing functions should be avoided.)

2. The declaration of arguments/variables ‘passed’ to the function

3. Finally, giving the operations (the function body) that perform computations on the provided arguments
Structure of a function

The basic structure of a function is:

my.func <- function(arg1, arg2, arg3, ...) {
  <commands>
  return(output.object)
}

- Function arguments (arg1, arg2, ...) are the objects ‘passed’ to the function and used by the function’s code to perform calculations.
- The <commands> part describes what the function will do to arg1, arg2
- After doing these tasks, return() the output of interest. (If this is omitted, output from the last expression evaluated is returned)
Calling a function

Functions are called by their name followed by parentheses containing possible argument names.

A call to the function generally takes the form;

my.func(arg1=expr1, arg2=expr2, arg3=exp3, ...)

or

my.func(expr1, expr2, expr3, ...)

- Arguments can be ‘matched’ by name or by position (recall Session 2, and use of defaults when calling functions)
- A function can also take no arguments; entering my.func() will just execute its commands. This can be useful, if you do exactly the same thing repeatedly
- Typing just the function name without parentheses prints the definition of a function
Function body – more details

- The function body appears within \{curly brackets\}. For functions with just one expression the curly brackets \{\} are not required – but they may help you read your code.

- Individual commands/operations are separated by new lines.

- An object is returned by a function with the \texttt{return()} command, where the object to be returned appears inside the parentheses. Experts: you can \texttt{return()} from any place in the function, not just in the final line.

- Variables that are created inside the function body exist only for the lifetime of the function. This means they are not accessible outside of the function, in an R session.
Example: returning a single value

Here's a function for calculating the coefficient of variation (the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean) for a vector;

```
coef.of.var <- function(x){
    meanval <- mean(x,na.rm=TRUE) # recall this means "ignore NAs"
    sdval <- sd(x,na.rm=TRUE)
    return(sdval/meanval)
}
```

Translated, this function says “if you give me an object, that I will call x, I will store its mean() as meanval, then its sd() as sdval, and then return their ratio sdval/meanval.”

Doing this to the airquality’s 1973 New York ozone data;

```
> data(airquality) # make the data available in this R session
> coef.of.var(airquality$Ozone)
[1] 0.7830151
```
Example: returning multiple values

A function can return multiple objects/values by using `list()` – which collects objects of (potentially) different types.

The function below calculates estimates of the mean and standard deviation of a population, based on a vector \((x)\) of observations;

```r
popn.mean.sd <- function(x){
  n       <- length(x)
  mean.est <- mean(x, na.rm=TRUE)
  var.est  <- var(x, na.rm=TRUE)*(n-1)/n
  est      <- list(mean=mean.est, sd=sqrt(var.est))
  return(est)
}
```

- The in-built `var()` applies a bias correction term of \(n/(n-1)\), which we don’t want here
- Easier to write a new function than correct this every time
Example: returning multiple values

Applying our `popn.mean.sd()` function to the daily ozone concentrations in New York data:

```r
> results <- popn.mean.sd(airquality$Ozone)
> attributes(results) #list the attributes of the object returned

$names
[1] "mean" "sd"

> results$mean
[1] 42.12931

> results$sd
[1] 32.8799
```

- Elements of lists can also be obtained using *double* square brackets, e.g. `results[[1]]` or `results[[2]]`.
- Can also use `str()` to see what’s in a list
Declaring functions within functions

Usually, functions that take arguments, execute R commands, and return output will be enough. But functions can be declared and used inside a function;

```
square.plus.cube <- function(y) {
    square <- function(x) { return(x*x) }
    cube <- function(x) { return(x^3) }
    return(square(y) + cube(y))
}
```

Translated; “if you given me a number, that I will call \( y \), I will define a function I call \( \text{square} \) that takes a number that \( it \) calls \( x \) and returns \( x \)-squared, then similarly one I call \( \text{cube} \) that cubes, then I will return the sum of applying \( \text{square} \) to \( y \) and \( \text{cube} \) to \( y \)”.

> square.plus.cube(4)

[1] 80
Example: function returning a function

And functions can also return other functions, as output;

```r
make.power <- function(n){
    pow <- function(x){x^n}
    pow
}
```

Translated; “if you given me a number, that I will call \( n \), I will define a function that takes a number that *it* calls \( x \) and raises \( x \) to the \( n \)th power, and I will return this function”.

```r
cube <- make.power(3)
square <- make.power(2)
> cube(3)
[1] 27
> square(3)
[1] 9
```
Example: functions as arguments

Functions can take other functions as arguments. This is helpful with finding *roots* of a function; values of $x$ such that $f(x) = 0$.

The *Newton-Raphson* method finds roots of $f(x) = 0$ by the following iteration procedure:

$$x_{n+1} = x_n - \frac{f(x_n)}{f'(x_n)}$$
Example: functions as arguments

A function to implement the Newton-Raphson method, given input of arguments, a place to start, and convergence tolerance:

```r
newton.raphson <- function(f,fprime,x0,thresh){
  myabsdiff <- Inf
  xold <- x0
  while(myabsdiff>thresh){ # have we converged yet? If no, move;
    xnew <- xold-f(xold)/(fprime(xold))
    myabsdiff <- abs(xnew-xold)
    xold <- xnew
  }
  return(xnew)
}
```

- *Inf* is (positive) infinity – here, it ensures we go round the loop at least once
- Recall we saw *while()* loops in Session 6
- We could also use *repeat()* here
Example: functions as arguments

We'll find the roots of \( f(x) = x^2 + 3x - 5 \), using Newton-Raphson. We need the derivative of \( f(x) \): \( f'(x) = 2x + 3 \)

```r
myf <- function(x) { x^2 + 3*x - 5 }
myfprime <- function(x) { 2*x + 3 }
```

We use the `newton.raphson()` function with initial value of 10 and a convergence threshold of 0.0001 to obtain a root:

```r
> newton.raphson(f=myf, fprime=myfprime, x0=10, thresh=0.0001)
[1] 1.192582
```

How did we do?

\[
\frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a} = \frac{-3 \pm \sqrt{3^2 + 4 \times 5}}{2} \approx -4.19, 1.19
\]

(Try other values of \( x0 \) to find the other root)
Tips for writing functions

- Avoid rewriting the same code... use functions!

- Modularize as much as possible: write function that call other functions. (Start with the low-level ones)

- Test your functions: use data/arguments for which you know the results to verify that your functions are working properly

- Later on: provide documentation, including detailed comments describing the procedures being conducted by the functions, especially for large, complex programs

- Use meaningful variable and function names
Summary

- User-defined functions are easy to create in R, with `my.fun <- function(argument list)`

- Arguments of a function are allowed to be practically any R object including lists, numeric vectors, data frames, and functions

- In functions calls, arguments are matched by name or by position

- An object can be returned by a function with `return()`. If `return()` is not invoked, the last evaluated expression in the body of a function will be returned.

- `list()` can be used for returning multiple values