



Effective STL

50 Specific Ways to Improve
Your Use of the Standard
Template Library

Scott Meyers



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Scott Meyers



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Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Containers	11
Item 1: Choose your containers with care.	11
Item 2: Beware the illusion of container-independent code.	15
Item 3: Make copying cheap and correct for objects in containers.	20
Item 4: Call <code>empty</code> instead of checking <code>size()</code> against zero.	23
Item 5: Prefer range member functions to their single-element counterparts.	24
Item 6: Be alert for C++'s most vexing parse.	33
Item 7: When using containers of newed pointers, remember to delete the pointers before the container is destroyed.	36
Item 8: Never create containers of <code>auto_ptr</code> .	40
Item 9: Choose carefully among erasing options.	43
Item 10: Be aware of allocator conventions and restrictions.	48
Item 11: Understand the legitimate uses of custom allocators.	54
Item 12: Have realistic expectations about the thread safety of STL containers.	58
Chapter 2: vector and string	63
Item 13: Prefer vector and string to dynamically allocated arrays.	63
Item 14: Use <code>reserve</code> to avoid unnecessary reallocations.	66
Item 15: Be aware of variations in string implementations.	68

Item 16:	Know how to pass vector and string data to legacy APIs.	74
Item 17:	Use “the swap trick” to trim excess capacity.	77
Item 18:	Avoid using <code>vector<bool></code> .	79
Chapter 3: Associative Containers		83
Item 19:	Understand the difference between equality and equivalence.	83
Item 20:	Specify comparison types for associative containers of pointers.	88
Item 21:	Always have comparison functions return false for equal values.	92
Item 22:	Avoid in-place key modification in set and multiset.	95
Item 23:	Consider replacing associative containers with sorted vectors.	100
Item 24:	Choose carefully between <code>map::operator[]</code> and <code>map::insert</code> when efficiency is important.	106
Item 25:	Familiarize yourself with the nonstandard hashed containers.	111
Chapter 4: Iterators		116
Item 26:	Prefer iterator to <code>const_iterator</code> , <code>reverse_iterator</code> , and <code>const_reverse_iterator</code> .	116
Item 27:	Use <code>distance</code> and <code>advance</code> to convert a container’s <code>const_iterators</code> to iterators.	120
Item 28:	Understand how to use a <code>reverse_iterator</code> ’s base iterator.	123
Item 29:	Consider <code>istreambuf_iterators</code> for character-by-character input.	126
Chapter 5: Algorithms		128
Item 30:	Make sure destination ranges are big enough.	129
Item 31:	Know your sorting options.	133
Item 32:	Follow remove-like algorithms by <code>erase</code> if you really want to remove something.	139
Item 33:	Be wary of remove-like algorithms on containers of pointers.	143
Item 34:	Note which algorithms expect sorted ranges.	146
Item 35:	Implement simple case-insensitive string comparisons via <code>mismatch</code> or <code>lexicographical_compare</code> .	150
Item 36:	Understand the proper implementation of <code>copy_if</code> .	154

<i>Effective STL</i>	Contents	ix
Item 37: Use accumulate or for_each to summarize ranges.		156
Chapter 6: Functors, Functor Classes, Functions, etc.		162
Item 38: Design functor classes for pass-by-value.		162
Item 39: Make predicates pure functions.		166
Item 40: Make functor classes adaptable.		169
Item 41: Understand the reasons for ptr_fun, mem_fun, and mem_fun_ref.		173
Item 42: Make sure less<T> means operator<.		177
Chapter 7: Programming with the STL		181
Item 43: Prefer algorithm calls to hand-written loops.		181
Item 44: Prefer member functions to algorithms with the same names.		190
Item 45: Distinguish among count, find, binary_search, lower_bound, upper_bound, and equal_range.		192
Item 46: Consider function objects instead of functions as algorithm parameters.		201
Item 47: Avoid producing write-only code.		206
Item 48: Always #include the proper headers.		209
Item 49: Learn to decipher STL-related compiler diagnostics.		210
Item 50: Familiarize yourself with STL-related web sites.		217
Bibliography		225
Appendix A: Locales and Case-Insensitive String Comparisons		229
Appendix B: Remarks on Microsoft's STL Platforms		239
Index		245

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Preface

*It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes or bags!*

— Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, Random House, 1957

I first wrote about the Standard Template Library in 1995, when I concluded the final Item of *More Effective C++* with a brief STL overview. I should have known better. Shortly thereafter, I began receiving mail asking when I'd write *Effective STL*.

I resisted the idea for several years. At first, I wasn't familiar enough with the STL to offer advice on it, but as time went on and my experience with it grew, this concern gave way to other reservations. There was never any question that the library represented a breakthrough in efficient and extensible design, but when it came to *using* the STL, there were practical problems I couldn't overlook. Porting all but the simplest STL programs was a challenge, not only because library implementations varied, but also because template support in the underlying compilers ranged from good to awful. STL tutorials were hard to come by, so learning "the STL way of programming" was difficult, and once that hurdle was overcome, finding comprehensible and accurate reference documentation was a challenge. Perhaps most daunting, even the smallest STL usage error often led to a blizzard of compiler diagnostics, each thousands of characters long, most referring to classes, functions, or templates not mentioned in the offending source code, almost all incomprehensible. Though I had great admiration for the STL and for the people behind it, I felt uncomfortable recommending it to practicing programmers. I wasn't sure it was *possible* to use the STL effectively.

Then I began to notice something that took me by surprise. Despite the portability problems, despite the dismal documentation, despite the compiler diagnostics resembling transmission line noise, many of

my consulting clients were using the STL anyway. Furthermore, they weren't just playing with it, they were using it in production code! That was a revelation. I knew that the STL featured an elegant design, but any library for which programmers are willing to endure portability headaches, poor documentation, and incomprehensible error messages has a lot more going for it than just good design. For an increasingly large number of professional programmers, I realized, even a bad implementation of the STL was preferable to no implementation at all.

Furthermore, I knew that the situation regarding the STL would only get better. Libraries and compilers would grow more conformant with the Standard (they have), better documentation would become available (it has — consult the bibliography beginning on [page 225](#)), and compiler diagnostics would improve (for the most part, we're still waiting, but [Item 49](#) offers suggestions for how to cope while we wait). I therefore decided to chip in and do my part for the STL movement. This book is the result: 50 specific ways to improve your use of C++'s Standard Template Library.

My original plan was to write the book in the second half of 1999, and with that thought in mind, I put together an outline. But then I changed course. I suspended work on the book and developed an introductory training course on the STL, which I then taught several times to groups of programmers. About a year later, I returned to the book, significantly revising the outline based on my experiences with the training course. In the same way that my *Effective C++* has been successful by being grounded in the problems faced by real programmers, it's my hope that *Effective STL* similarly addresses the practical aspects of STL programming — the aspects most important to professional developers.

I am always on the lookout for ways to improve my understanding of C++. If you have suggestions for new guidelines for STL programming or if you have comments on the guidelines in this book, please let me know. In addition, it is my continuing goal to make this book as accurate as possible, so for each error in this book that is reported to me — be it technical, grammatical, typographical, or otherwise — I will, in future printings, gladly add to the acknowledgments the name of the first person to bring that error to my attention. Send your suggested guidelines, your comments, and your criticisms to estl@aristeia.com.

I maintain a list of changes to this book since its first printing, including bug-fixes, clarifications, and technical updates. The list is available at the *Effective STL Errata* web site, <http://www.aristeia.com/BookErrata/estl1e-errata.html>.

If you'd like to be notified when I make changes to this book, I encourage you to join my mailing list. I use the list to make announcements likely to be of interest to people who follow my work on C++. For details, consult <http://www.aristeia.com/MailingList/>.

SCOTT DOUGLAS MEYERS
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STAFFORD, OREGON
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Acknowledgments

I had an enormous amount of help during the roughly two years it took me to make some sense of the STL, create a training course on it, and write this book. Of all my sources of assistance, two were particularly important. The first is Mark Rodgers. Mark generously volunteered to review my training materials as I created them, and I learned more about the STL from him than from anybody else. He also acted as a technical reviewer for this book, again providing observations and insights that improved virtually every Item.

The other outstanding source of information was several C++-related Usenet newsgroups, especially `comp.lang.c++.moderated` (“clcm”), `comp.std.c++`, and `microsoft.public.vc.stl`. For well over a decade, I’ve depended on the participants in newsgroups like these to answer my questions and challenge my thinking, and it’s difficult to imagine what I’d do without them. I am deeply grateful to the Usenet community for their help with both this book and my prior publications on C++.

My understanding of the STL was shaped by a variety of publications, the most important of which are listed in the Bibliography. I leaned especially heavily on Josuttis’ *The C++ Standard Library* [3].

This book is fundamentally a summary of insights and observations made by others, though a few of the ideas are my own. I’ve tried to keep track of where I learned what, but the task is hopeless, because a typical Item contains information garnered from many sources over a long period of time. What follows is incomplete, but it’s the best I can do. Please note that my goal here is to summarize where I first learned of an idea or technique, not where the idea or technique was originally developed or who came up with it.

In [Item 1](#), my observation that node-based containers offer better support for transactional semantics is based on section 5.11.2 of Josuttis’ *The C++ Standard Library* [3]. [Item 2](#) includes an example from Mark Rodgers on how typedefs help when allocator types are changed.

[Item 5](#) was motivated by Reeves' *C++ Report* column, "STL Gotchas" [17]. [Item 8](#) sprang from [Item 37](#) in Sutter's *Exceptional C++* [8], and Kevlin Henney provided important details on how containers of `auto_ptr`s fail in practice. In Usenet postings, Matt Austern provided examples of when allocators are useful, and I include his examples in [Item 11](#). [Item 12](#) is based on the discussion of thread safety at the SGI STL web site [21]. The material in [Item 13](#) on the performance implications of reference counting in a multithreaded environment is drawn from Sutter's writings on this topic [20]. The idea for [Item 15](#) came from Reeves' *C++ Report* column, "Using Standard string in the Real World, Part 2," [18]. In [Item 16](#), Mark Rodgers came up with the technique I show for having a C API write data directly into a vector. [Item 17](#) includes information from Usenet postings by Siemel Naran and Carl Barron. I stole [Item 18](#) from Sutter's *C++ Report* column, "When Is a Container Not a Container?" [12]. In [Item 20](#), Mark Rodgers contributed the idea of transforming a pointer into an object via a dereferencing functor, and Scott Lewandowski came up with the version of `DereferenceLess` I present. [Item 21](#) originated in a Doug Harrison posting to `microsoft.public.vc.stl`, but the decision to restrict the focus of that [Item](#) to equality was mine. I based [Item 22](#) on Sutter's *C++ Report* column, "Standard Library News: sets and maps" [13]; Matt Austern helped me understand the status of the Standardization Committee's Library Issue #103. [Item 23](#) was inspired by Austern's *C++ Report* article, "Why You Shouldn't Use `set` — and What to Use Instead" [15]; David Smallberg provided a neat refinement for my implementation of `DataCompare`. My description of Dinkumware's hashed containers is based on Plauger's *C/C++ Users Journal* column, "Hash Tables" [16]. Mark Rodgers doesn't agree with the overall advice of [Item 26](#), but an early motivation for that [Item](#) was his observation that some container member functions accept only arguments of type iterator. My treatment of [Item 29](#) was motivated and informed by Usenet discussions involving Matt Austern and James Kanze; I was also influenced by Kreft and Langer's *C++ Report* article, "A Sophisticated Implementation of User-Defined Inserters and Extractors" [25]. [Item 30](#) is due to a discussion in section 5.4.2 of Josuttis' *The C++ Standard Library* [3]. In [Item 31](#), Marco Dalla Gasperina contributed the example use of `nth_element` to calculate medians, and use of that algorithm for finding percentiles comes straight out of section 18.7.1 of Stroustrup's *The C++ Programming Language* [7]. [Item 32](#) was influenced by the material in section 5.6.1 of Josuttis' *The C++ Standard Library* [3]. [Item 35](#) originated in Austern's *C++ Report* column "How to Do Case-Insensitive String Comparison" [11], and James Kanze's and John Potter's `clcm` postings helped me refine my understanding of the issues involved. Stroustrup's implementation for `copy_if`, which I

show in [Item 36](#), is from section 18.6.1 of his *The C++ Programming Language* [7]. [Item 39](#) was largely motivated by the publications of Joutsis, who has written about “stateful predicates” in his *The C++ Standard Library* [3], in Standard Library Issue #92, and in his *C++ Report* article, “Predicates vs. Function Objects” [14]. In my treatment, I use his example and recommend a solution he has proposed, though the use of the term “pure function” is my own. Matt Austern confirmed my suspicion in [Item 41](#) about the history of the terms `mem_fun` and `mem_fun_ref`. [Item 42](#) can be traced to a lecture I got from Mark Rodgers when I considered violating that guideline. Mark Rodgers is also responsible for the insight in [Item 44](#) that non-member searches over maps and multimaps examine both components of each pair, while member searches examine only the first (key) component. [Item 45](#) contains information from various `clcm` contributors, including John Potter, Marcin Kasperski, Pete Becker, Dennis Yelle, and David Abrahams. David Smallberg alerted me to the utility of `equal_range` in performing equivalence-based searches and counts over sorted sequence containers. Andrei Alexandrescu helped me understand the conditions under which “the reference-to-reference problem” I describe in [Item 50](#) arises, and I modeled my example of the problem on a similar example provided by Mark Rodgers at the Boost Web Site [22].

Credit for the material in [Appendix A](#) goes to Matt Austern, of course. I’m grateful that he not only gave me permission to include it in this book, he also tweaked it to make it even better than the original.

Good technical books require a thorough pre-publication vetting, and I was fortunate to benefit from the insights of an unusually talented group of technical reviewers. Brian Kernighan and Cliff Green offered early comments on a partial draft, and complete versions of the manuscript were scrutinized by Doug Harrison, Brian Kernighan, Tim Johnson, Francis Glassborow, Andrei Alexandrescu, David Smallberg, Aaron Campbell, Jared Manning, Herb Sutter, Stephen Dewhurst, Matt Austern, Gillmer Derge, Aaron Moore, Thomas Becker, Victor Von, and, of course, Mark Rodgers. Katrina Avery did the copyediting.

One of the most challenging parts of preparing a book is finding good technical reviewers. I thank John Potter for introducing me to Jared Manning and Aaron Campbell.

Herb Sutter kindly agreed to act as my surrogate in compiling, running, and reporting on the behavior of some STL test programs under a beta version of Microsoft’s Visual Studio .NET, while Leor Zolman undertook the herculean task of testing all the code in this book. Any errors that remain are my fault, of course, not Herb’s or Leor’s.

Angelika Langer opened my eyes to the indeterminate status of some aspects of STL function objects. This book has less to say about function objects than it otherwise might, but what it does say is more likely to remain true. At least I hope it is.

This printing of the book is better than earlier printings, because I was able to address problems identified by the following sharp-eyed readers: Jon Webb, Michael Hawkins, Derek Price, Jim Scheller, Carl Manaster, Herb Sutter, Albert Franklin, George King, Dave Miller, Harold Howe, John Fuller, Tim McCarthy, John Hershberger, Igor Mikolic-Torreira, Stephan Bergmann, Robert Allan Schwartz, John Potter, David Grigsby, Sanjay Pattni, Jesper Andersen, Jing Tao Wang, André Blavier, Dan Schmidt, Bradley White, Adam Petersen, Wayne Goertel, Gabriel Netterdag, Jason Kenny, Scott Blachowicz, Seyed H. Haeri, Gareth McCaughan, Giulio Agostini, Fraser Ross, Wolfram Burkhardt, Keith Stanley, Leor Zolman, Chan Ki Lok, Motti Abramsky, Kevlin Henney, Stefan Kuhlins, Phillip Ngan, Jim Phillips, Ruediger Dreier, Guru Chandar, Charles Brockman, Day Barr, Eric Niebler, Sharad Kala, Declan Moran, Nick de Smith, David Callaway, Shlomi Frank, Andrea Griffini, Hans Eckardt, David Smallberg, Matt Page, Andy Fyfe, Vincent Stojanov, Randy Parker, Thomas Schell, Cameron Mac Minn, Mark Davis, Giora Unger, Julie Nahil, Martin Rottinger, Neil Henderson, Andrew Savige, and Molly Sharp. I'm grateful for their help in improving *Effective STL*.

My collaborators at Addison-Wesley included John Wait (my editor and now a senior VP), Alicia Carey and Susannah Buzard (his assistants n and $n+1$), John Fuller (the production coordinator), Karin Hansen (the cover designer), Jason Jones (all-around technical guru, especially with respect to the demonic software spewed forth by Adobe), Marty Rabinowitz (their boss, but he works, too), and Curt Johnson, Chanda Leary-Coutu, and Robin Bruce (all marketing people, but still very nice).

Abbi Staley made Sunday lunches a routinely pleasurable experience.

As she has for the six books and one CD that came before it, my wife, Nancy, tolerated the demands of my research and writing with her usual forbearance and offered me encouragement and support when I needed it most. She never fails to remind me that there's more to life than C++ and software.

And then there's our dog, Persephone. As I write this, it is her sixth birthday. Tonight, she and Nancy and I will visit Baskin-Robbins for ice cream. Persephone will have vanilla. One scoop. In a cup. To go.

Introduction

You're already familiar with the STL. You know how to create containers, iterate over their contents, add and remove elements, and apply common algorithms, such as `find` and `sort`. But you're not satisfied. You can't shake the sensation that the STL offers more than you're taking advantage of. Tasks that should be simple aren't. Operations that should be straightforward leak resources or behave erratically. Procedures that should be efficient demand more time or memory than you're willing to give them. Yes, you know how to use the STL, but you're not sure you're using it *effectively*.

I wrote this book for you.

In *Effective STL*, I explain how to combine STL components to take full advantage of the library's design. Such information allows you to develop simple, straightforward solutions to simple, straightforward problems, and it also helps you design elegant approaches to more complicated problems. I describe common STL usage errors, and I show you how to avoid them. That helps you dodge resource leaks, code that won't port, and behavior that is undefined. I discuss ways to optimize your code, so you can make the STL perform like the fast, sleek machine it is intended to be.

The information in this book will make you a better STL programmer. It will make you a more productive programmer. And it will make you a happier programmer. Using the STL is fun, but using it effectively is outrageous fun, the kind of fun where they have to drag you away from the keyboard, because you just can't believe the good time you're having. Even a cursory glance at the STL reveals that it is a wondrously cool library, but the coolness runs broader and deeper than you probably imagine. One of my primary goals in this book is to convey to you just how amazing the library is, because in the nearly 30 years I've been programming, I've never seen anything like the STL. You probably haven't either.

Defining, Using, and Extending the STL

There is no official definition of “the STL,” and different people mean different things when they use the term. In this book, “the STL” means the parts of C++’s Standard Library that work with iterators. That includes the standard containers (including `string`), parts of the `iostream` library, function objects, and algorithms. It excludes the standard container adapters (`stack`, `queue`, and `priority_queue`) as well as the containers `bitset` and `valarray`, because they lack iterator support. It doesn’t include arrays, either. True, arrays support iterators in the form of pointers, but arrays are part of the C++ *language*, not the library.

Technically, my definition of the STL excludes extensions of the standard C++ library, notably hashed containers, singly linked lists, ropes, and a variety of nonstandard function objects. Even so, an effective STL programmer needs to be aware of such extensions, so I mention them where it’s appropriate. Indeed, [Item 25](#) is devoted to an overview of nonstandard hashed containers. They’re not in the STL now, but something similar to them is almost certain to make it into the next version of the standard C++ library, and there’s value in glimpsing the future.

One of the reasons for the existence of STL extensions is that the STL is a library designed to be extended. In this book, however, I focus on *using* the STL, not on adding new components to it. You’ll find, for example, that I have little to say about writing your own algorithms, and I offer no guidance at all on writing new containers and iterators. I believe that it’s important to master what the STL already provides before you embark on increasing its capabilities, so that’s what I focus on in *Effective STL*. When you decide to create your own STL-esque components, you’ll find advice on how to do it in books like Josuttis’ *The C++ Standard Library* [\[3\]](#) and Austern’s *Generic Programming and the STL* [\[4\]](#). One aspect of STL extension I *do* discuss in this book is writing your own function objects. You can’t use the STL effectively without knowing how to do that, so I’ve devoted an entire chapter to the topic ([Chapter 6](#)).

Citations

The references to the books by Josuttis and Austern in the preceding paragraph demonstrate how I handle bibliographic citations. In general, I try to mention enough of a cited work to identify it for people who are already familiar with it. If you already know about these authors’ books, for example, you don’t have to turn to the Bibliography to find out that [\[3\]](#) and [\[4\]](#) refer to books you already know. If you’re

not familiar with a publication, of course, the Bibliography (which begins on [page 225](#)) gives you a full citation.

I cite three works often enough that I generally leave off the citation number. The first of these is the International Standard for C++ [5], which I usually refer to as simply “the Standard.” The other two are my earlier books on C++, *Effective C++* [1] and *More Effective C++* [2].

The STL and Standards

I refer to the C++ Standard frequently, because *Effective STL* focuses on portable, standard-conformant C++. In theory, everything I show in this book will work with every C++ implementation. In practice, that isn’t true. Shortcomings in compiler and STL implementations conspire to prevent some valid code from compiling or from behaving the way it’s supposed to. Where that is commonly the case, I describe the problems, and I explain how you can work around them.

Sometimes, the easiest workaround is to use a different STL implementation. [Appendix B](#) gives an example of when this is the case. In fact, the more you work with the STL, the more important it becomes to distinguish between your *compilers* and your *library implementations*. When programmers run into difficulties trying to get legitimate code to compile, it’s customary for them to blame their compilers, but with the STL, compilers can be fine, while STL implementations are faulty. To emphasize the fact that you are dependent on both your compilers and your library implementations, I refer to your *STL platforms*. An STL platform is the combination of a particular compiler and a particular STL implementation. In this book, if I mention a compiler problem, you can be sure that I mean it’s the compiler that’s the culprit. However, if I refer to a problem with your STL platform, you should interpret that as “maybe a compiler bug, maybe a library bug, possibly both.”

I generally refer to your “compilers” — *plural*. That’s an outgrowth of my longstanding belief that you improve the quality (especially the portability) of your code if you ensure that it works with more than one compiler. Furthermore, using multiple compilers generally makes it easier to unravel the Gordian nature of error messages arising from improper use of the STL. ([Item 49](#) is devoted to approaches to decoding such messages.)

Another aspect of my emphasis on standard-conforming code is my concern that you avoid constructs with undefined behavior. Such constructs may do anything at runtime. Unfortunately, this means they may do precisely what you want them to, and that can lead to a false

sense of security. Too many programmers assume that undefined behavior always leads to an obvious problem, e.g., a segmentation fault or other catastrophic failure. The results of undefined behavior can actually be much more subtle, e.g., corruption of rarely-referenced data. They can also vary across program runs. I find that a good working definition of undefined behavior is “works for me, works for you, works during development and QA, but blows up in your most important customer’s face.” It’s important to avoid undefined behavior, so I point out common situations where it can arise. You should train yourself to be alert for such situations.

Reference Counting

It’s close to impossible to discuss the STL without mentioning reference counting. As you’ll see in Items 7 and 33, designs based on containers of pointers almost invariably lead to reference counting. In addition, many string implementations are internally reference counted, and, as Item 15 explains, this may be an implementation detail you can’t afford to ignore. In this book, I assume that you are familiar with the basics of reference counting. If you’re not, most intermediate and advanced C++ texts cover the topic. In *More Effective C++*, for example, the relevant material is in Items 28 and 29. If you don’t know what reference counting is and you have no inclination to learn, don’t worry. You’ll get through this book just fine, though there may be a few sentences here and there that won’t make as much sense as they otherwise would.

string and wstring

Whatever I say about string applies equally well to its wide-character counterpart, wstring. Similarly, any time I refer to the relationship between string and char or char*, the same is true of the relationship between wstring and wchar_t or wchar_t*. In other words, just because I don’t explicitly mention wide-character strings in this book, don’t assume that the STL fails to support them. It supports them as well as char-based strings. It has to. Both string and wstring are instantiations of the same template, basic_string.

Terms, Terms, Terms

This is not an introductory book on the STL, so I assume you know the fundamentals. Still, the following terms are sufficiently important that I feel compelled to review them:

- vector, string, deque, and list are known as the *standard sequence containers*. The *standard associative containers* are set, multiset, map, and multimap.
- Iterators are divided into five categories, based on the operations they support. Very briefly, *input iterators* are read-only iterators where each iterated location may be read only once. *Output iterators* are write-only iterators where each iterated location may be written only once. Input and output iterators are modeled on reading and writing input and output streams (e.g., files). It's thus unsurprising that the most common manifestations of input and output iterators are `istream_iterators` and `ostream_iterators`, respectively.

Forward iterators have the capabilities of both input and output iterators, but they can read or write a single location repeatedly. They don't support operator--, so they can move only forward with any degree of efficiency. All standard STL containers support iterators that are more powerful than forward iterators, but, as you'll see in [Item 25](#), one design for hashed containers yields forward iterators. Containers for singly linked lists (considered in [Item 50](#)) also offer forward iterators.

Bidirectional iterators are just like forward iterators, except they can go backward as easily as they go forward. The standard associative containers all offer bidirectional iterators. So does list.

Random access iterators do everything bidirectional iterators do, but they also offer "iterator arithmetic," i.e., the ability to jump forward or backward in a single step. vector, string, and deque each provide random access iterators. Pointers into arrays act as random access iterators for the arrays.

- Any class that overloads the function call operator (i.e., operator()) is a *functor class*. Objects created from such classes are known as *function objects* or *functors*. Most places in the STL that work with function objects work equally well with real functions, so I often use the term "function objects" to mean both C++ functions as well as true function objects.
- The functions `bind1st` and `bind2nd` are known as *binders*.

A revolutionary aspect of the STL is its complexity guarantees. These guarantees bound the amount of work any STL operation is allowed to perform. This is wonderful, because it can help you determine the relative efficiency of different approaches to the same problem, regardless of the STL platform you're using. Unfortunately, the terminology

behind the complexity guarantees can be confusing if you haven't been formally introduced to the jargon of computer science. Here's a quick primer on the complexity terms I use in this book. Each refers to how long it takes to do something as a function of n , the number of elements in a container or range.

- An operation that runs in *constant time* has performance that is unaffected by changes in n . For example, inserting an element into a list is a constant-time operation. Regardless of whether the list has one element or one million, the insertion takes about the same amount of time.

Don't take the term "constant time" too literally. It doesn't mean that the amount of time it takes to do something is literally constant, it just means that it's unaffected by n . For example, two STL platforms might take dramatically different amounts of time to perform the same "constant-time" operation. This could happen if one library has a much more sophisticated implementation than another or if one compiler performs substantially more aggressive optimization.

A variant of constant time complexity is *amortized constant time*. Operations that run in amortized constant time are usually constant-time operations, but occasionally they take time that depends on n . Amortized constant time operations *typically* run in constant time.

- An operation that runs in *logarithmic time* needs more time to run as n gets larger, but the time it requires grows at a rate proportional to the logarithm of n . For example, an operation on a million items would be expected to take only about three times as long as on a hundred items, because $\log n^3 = 3 \log n$. Most search operations on associative containers (e.g., `set::find`) are logarithmic-time operations.
- The time needed to perform an operation that runs in *linear time* increases at a rate proportional to increases in n . The standard algorithm `count` runs in linear time, because it has to look at every element of the range it's given. If the range triples in size, it has to do three times as much work, and we'd expect it to take about three times as long to do it.

As a general rule, a constant-time operation runs faster than one requiring logarithmic time, and a logarithmic-time operation runs faster than one whose performance is linear. This is always true when n gets big enough, but for relatively small values of n , it's sometimes possible for an operation with a worse theoretical complexity to outperform an operation with a better theoretical complexity. If you'd like to know more about STL complexity guarantees, turn to Josuttis' *The C++ Standard Library* [3].

As a final note on terminology, recall that each element in a map or multimap has two components. I generally call the first component the *key* and the second component the *value*. Given

```
map<string, double> m;
```

for example, the string is the key and the double is the value.

Code Examples

This book is filled with example code, and I explain each example when I introduce it. Still, it's worth knowing a few things in advance.

You can see from the map example above that I routinely omit `#include`s and ignore the fact that STL components are in namespace `std`. When defining the map `m`, I could have written this,

```
#include <map>
#include <string>

using std::map;
using std::string;

map<string, double> m;
```

but I prefer to save us both the noise.

When I declare a formal type parameter for a template, I use `typename` instead of `class`. That is, instead of writing this,

```
template<class T>
class Widget { ... };
```

I write this:

```
template<typename T>
class Widget { ... };
```

In this context, `class` and `typename` mean exactly the same thing, but I find that `typename` more clearly expresses what I usually want to say: that *any* type will do; `T` need not be a class. If you prefer to use `class` to declare type parameters, go right ahead. Whether to use `typename` or `class` in this context is purely a matter of style.

It is not a matter of style in a different context. To avoid potential parsing ambiguities (the details of which I'll spare you), you are required to use `typename` to precede type names that are dependent on formal type parameters. Such types are known as *dependent types*, and an example will help clarify what I'm talking about. Suppose you'd like to write a template for a function that, given an STL container, returns whether the last element in the container is greater than the first element. Here's one way to do it:

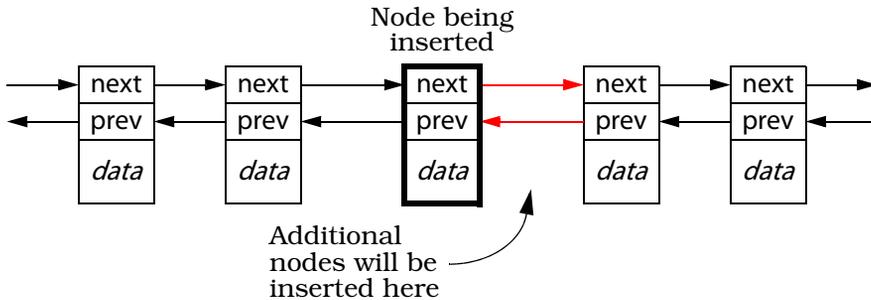
```

template<typename C>
bool lastGreaterThanFirst(const C& container)
{
    if (container.empty()) return false;
    typename C::const_iterator begin(container.begin());
    typename C::const_iterator end(container.end());
    return *--end > *begin;
}

```

In this example, the local variables `begin` and `end` are of type `C::const_iterator`. `const_iterator` is a type that is dependent on the formal type parameter `C`. Because `C::const_iterator` is a dependent type, you are required to precede it with the word `typename`. (Some compilers incorrectly accept the code without the `typename`s, but such code isn't portable.)

I hope you've noticed my use of color in the examples above. It's there to focus your attention on parts of the code that are particularly important. Often, I highlight the differences between related examples, such as when I showed the two possible ways to declare the parameter `T` in the `Widget` example. This use of color to call out especially noteworthy parts of examples carries over to diagrams, too. For instance, this diagram from [Item 5](#) uses color to identify the two pointers that are affected when a new element is inserted into a list:



I also use color for chapter numbers, but such use is purely gratuitous. This being my first two-color book, I hope you'll forgive me a little chromatic exuberance.

Two of my favorite parameter names are `lhs` and `rhs`. They stand for “left-hand side” and “right-hand side,” respectively, and I find them especially useful when declaring operators. Here's an example from [Item 19](#):

```

class Widget { ... };
bool operator==(const Widget& lhs, const Widget& rhs);

```

When this function is called in a context like this,

```
if (x == y) ... // assume x and y are Widgets
```

`x`, which is on the left-hand side of the “==”, is known as lhs inside operator==, and `y` is known as rhs.

As for the class name `Widget`, that has nothing to do with GUIs or tool-kits. It’s just the name I use for “some class that does something.” Sometimes, as on [page 7](#), `Widget` is a class template instead of a class. In such cases, you may find that I still refer to `Widget` as a class, even though it’s really a template. Such sloppiness about the difference between classes and class templates, structs and struct templates, and functions and function templates hurts no one as long as there is no ambiguity about what is being discussed. In cases where it could be confusing, I do distinguish between templates and the classes, structs, and functions they generate.

Efficiency Items

I considered including a chapter on efficiency in *Effective STL*, but I ultimately decided that the current organization was preferable. Still, a number of Items focus on minimizing space and runtime demands. For your performance-enhancing convenience, here is the table of contents for the virtual chapter on efficiency:

Item 4 : Call empty instead of checking size() against zero.	23
Item 5 : Prefer range member functions to their single-element counterparts.	24
Item 14 : Use reserve to avoid unnecessary reallocations.	66
Item 15 : Be aware of variations in string implementations.	68
Item 23 : Consider replacing associative containers with sorted vectors.	100
Item 24 : Choose carefully between map::operator[] and map::insert when efficiency is important.	106
Item 25 : Familiarize yourself with the nonstandard hashed containers.	111
Item 29 : Consider istreambuf_iterators for character-by-character input.	126
Item 31 : Know your sorting options.	133
Item 44 : Prefer member functions to algorithms with the same names.	190
Item 46 : Consider function objects instead of functions as algorithm parameters.	201

The Guidelines in *Effective STL*

The guidelines that make up the 50 Items in this book are based on the insights and advice of the world's most experienced STL programmers. These guidelines summarize things you should almost always do — or almost always avoid doing — to get the most out of the Standard Template Library. At the same time, they're just guidelines. Under some conditions, it makes sense to violate them. For example, the title of [Item 7](#) tells you to invoke `delete` on newed pointers in a container before the container is destroyed, but the text of that Item makes clear that this applies only when the objects pointed to by those pointers should go away when the container does. This is often the case, but it's not universally true. Similarly, the title of [Item 35](#) beseeches you to use STL algorithms to perform simple case-insensitive string comparisons, but the text of the Item points out that in some cases, you'll be better off using a function that's not only outside the STL, it's not even part of standard C++!

Only you know enough about the software you're writing, the environment in which it will run, and the context in which it's being created to determine whether it's reasonable to violate the guidelines I present. Most of the time, it won't be, and the discussions that accompany each Item explain why. In a few cases, it will. Slavish devotion to the guidelines isn't appropriate, but neither is cavalier disregard. Before venturing off on your own, you should make sure you have a good reason.

1

Containers

Sure, the STL has iterators, algorithms, and function objects, but for most C++ programmers, it's the containers that stand out. More powerful and flexible than arrays, they grow (and often shrink) dynamically, manage their own memory, keep track of how many objects they hold, bound the algorithmic complexity of the operations they support, and much, much more. Their popularity is easy to understand. They're simply better than their competition, regardless of whether that competition comes from containers in other libraries or is a container type you'd write yourself. STL containers aren't just good. They're *really* good.

This chapter is devoted to guidelines applicable to all the STL containers. Later chapters focus on specific container types. The topics addressed here include selecting the appropriate container given the constraints you face; avoiding the delusion that code written for one container type is likely to work with other container types; the significance of copying operations for objects in containers; difficulties that arise when pointers or `auto_ptr`s are stored in containers; the ins and outs of erasing; what you can and cannot accomplish with custom allocators; tips on how to maximize efficiency; and considerations for using containers in a threaded environment.

That's a lot of ground to cover, but don't worry. The Items break it down into bite-sized chunks, and along the way, you're almost sure to pick up several ideas you can apply to your code *now*.

Item 1: Choose your containers with care.

You know that C++ puts a variety of containers at your disposal, but do you realize just how varied that variety is? To make sure you haven't overlooked any of your options, here's a quick review.

- The **standard STL sequence containers**, vector, string, deque, and list.

- The **standard STL associative containers**, set, multiset, map, and multimap.
- The **nonstandard sequence containers** slist and rope. slist is a singly linked list, and rope is essentially a heavy-duty string. (A “rope” is a heavy-duty “string.” Get it?) You’ll find a brief overview of these nonstandard (but commonly available) containers in [Item 50](#).
- The **nonstandard associative containers** hash_set, hash_multiset, hash_map, and hash_multimap. I examine these widely available hash-table-based variants on the standard associative containers in [Item 25](#).
- **vector<char> as a replacement for string.** [Item 13](#) describes the conditions under which such a replacement might make sense.
- **vector as a replacement for the standard associative containers.** As [Item 23](#) makes clear, there are times when vector can outperform the standard associative containers in both time and space.
- Several **standard non-STL containers**, including arrays, bitset, valarray, stack, queue, and priority_queue. Because these are non-STL containers, I have little to say about them in this book, though [Item 16](#) mentions a case where arrays are preferable to STL containers and [Item 18](#) explains why bitset may be better than vector<bool>. It’s also worth bearing in mind that arrays can be used with STL algorithms, because pointers can be used as array iterators.

That’s a panoply of options, and it’s matched in richness by the range of considerations that should go into choosing among them. Unfortunately, most discussions of the STL take a fairly narrow view of the world of containers, ignoring many issues relevant to selecting the one that is most appropriate. Even the Standard gets into this act, offering the following guidance for choosing among vector, deque, and list:

vector, list, and deque offer the programmer different complexity trade-offs and should be used accordingly. vector is the type of sequence that should be used by default. list should be used when there are frequent insertions and deletions from the middle of the sequence. deque is the data structure of choice when most insertions and deletions take place at the beginning or at the end of the sequence.

If your primary concern is algorithmic complexity, I suppose this constitutes reasonable advice, but there is so much more to be concerned with.

In a moment, we'll examine some of the important container-related issues that complement algorithmic complexity, but first I need to introduce a way of categorizing the STL containers that isn't discussed as often as it should be. That is the distinction between contiguous-memory containers and node-based containers.

Contiguous-memory containers (also known as *array-based containers*) store their elements in one or more (dynamically allocated) chunks of memory, each chunk holding more than one container element. If a new element is inserted or an existing element is erased, other elements in the same memory chunk have to be shifted up or down to make room for the new element or to fill the space formerly occupied by the erased element. This kind of movement affects both performance (see Items 5 and 14) and exception safety (as we'll soon see). The standard contiguous-memory containers are vector, string, and deque. The nonstandard rope is also a contiguous-memory container.

Node-based containers store only a single element per chunk of (dynamically allocated) memory. Insertion or erasure of a container element affects only pointers to nodes, not the contents of the nodes themselves, so element values need not be moved when something is inserted or erased. Containers representing linked lists, such as list and slist, are node-based, as are all the standard associative containers. (They're typically implemented as balanced trees.) The nonstandard hashed containers use varying node-based implementations, as you'll see in [Item 25](#).

With this terminology out of the way, we're ready to sketch some of the questions most relevant when choosing among containers. In this discussion, I omit consideration of non-STL-like containers (e.g., arrays, bitsets, etc.), because this is, after all, a book on the STL.

- *Do you need to be able to insert a new element at an arbitrary position in the container?* If so, you need a sequence container; associative containers won't do.
- *Do you care how elements are ordered in the container?* If not, a hashed container becomes a viable choice. Otherwise, you'll want to avoid hashed containers.
- *Must the container be part of standard C++?* If so, that eliminates hashed containers, slist, and rope.
- *What category of iterators do you require?* If they must be random access iterators, you're technically limited to vector, deque, and string, but you'd probably want to consider rope, too. (See [Item 50](#))

for information on rope.) If bidirectional iterators are required, you must avoid `slist` (see [Item 50](#)) as well as one common implementation of the hashed containers (see [Item 25](#)).

- *Is it important to avoid movement of existing container elements when insertions or erasures take place?* If so, you'll need to stay away from contiguous-memory containers (see [Item 5](#)).
- *Does the data in the container need to be layout-compatible with C?* If so, you're limited to vectors (see [Item 16](#)).
- *Is lookup speed a critical consideration?* If so, you'll want to look at hashed containers (see [Item 25](#)), sorted vectors (see [Item 23](#)), and the standard associative containers — probably in that order.
- *Do you mind if the underlying container uses reference counting?* If so, you'll want to steer clear of `string`, because many `string` implementations are reference-counted (see [Item 13](#)). You'll need to avoid `rope`, too, because the definitive `rope` implementation is based on reference counting (see [Item 50](#)). You have to represent your strings somehow, of course, so you'll want to consider `vector<char>`.
- *Do you need transactional semantics for insertions and erasures?* That is, do you require the ability to reliably roll back insertions and erasures? If so, you'll want to use a node-based container. If you need transactional semantics for multiple-element insertions (e.g., the range form — see [Item 5](#)), you'll want to choose `list`, because `list` is the only standard container that offers transactional semantics for multiple-element insertions. Transactional semantics are particularly important for programmers interested in writing exception-safe code. (Transactional semantics can be achieved with contiguous-memory containers, too, but there is a performance cost, and the code is not as straightforward. To learn more about this, consult [Item 17](#) of Sutter's *Exceptional C++* [8].)
- *Do you need to minimize iterator, pointer, and reference invalidation?* If so, you'll want to use node-based containers, because insertions and erasures on such containers never invalidate iterators, pointers, or references (unless they point to an element you are erasing). In general, insertions or erasures on contiguous-memory containers may invalidate all iterators, pointers, and references into the container.
- *Do you care if using `swap` on containers invalidates iterators, pointers, or references?* If so, you'll need to avoid `string`, because `string` is alone in the STL in invalidating iterators, pointers, and references during swaps.

- *Would it be helpful to have a sequence container with random access iterators where pointers and references to the data are not invalidated as long as nothing is erased and insertions take place only at the ends of the container? This is a very special case, but if it's your case, deque is the container of your dreams. (Interestingly, deque's iterators may be invalidated when insertions are made only at the ends of the container. deque is the only standard STL container whose iterators may be invalidated without also invalidating its pointers and references.)*

These questions are hardly the end of the matter. For example, they don't take into account the varying memory allocation strategies employed by the different container types. (Items 10 and 14 discuss some aspects of such strategies.) Still, they should be enough to convince you that, unless you have no interest in element ordering, standards conformance, iterator capabilities, layout compatibility with C, lookup speed, behavioral anomalies due to reference counting, the ease of implementing transactional semantics, or the conditions under which iterators are invalidated, you have more to think about than simply the algorithmic complexity of container operations. Such complexity is important, of course, but it's far from the entire story.

The STL gives you lots of options when it comes to containers. If you look beyond the bounds of the STL, there are even more options. Before choosing a container, be sure to consider *all* your options. A "default container"? I don't think so.

Item 2: Beware the illusion of container-independent code.

The STL is based on generalization. Arrays are generalized into containers and parameterized on the types of objects they contain. Functions are generalized into algorithms and parameterized on the types of iterators they use. Pointers are generalized into iterators and parameterized on the type of objects they point to.

That's just the beginning. Individual container types are generalized into sequence and associative containers, and similar containers are given similar functionality. Standard contiguous-memory containers (see Item 1) offer random-access iterators, while standard node-based containers (again, see Item 1) provide bidirectional iterators. Sequence containers support `push_front` and/or `push_back`, while associative containers don't. Associative containers offer logarithmic-time `lower_bound`, `upper_bound`, and `equal_range` member functions, but sequence containers don't.

With all this generalization going on, it's natural to want to join the movement. This sentiment is laudable, and when you write your own containers, iterators, and algorithms, you'll certainly want to pursue it. Alas, many programmers try to pursue it in a different manner. Instead of committing to particular types of containers in their software, they try to generalize the notion of a container so that they can use, say, a vector, but still preserve the option of replacing it with something like a deque or a list later — all without changing the code that uses it. That is, they strive to write *container-independent code*. This kind of generalization, well-intentioned though it is, is almost always misguided.

Even the most ardent advocate of container-independent code soon realizes that it makes little sense to try to write software that will work with both sequence and associative containers. Many member functions exist for only one category of container, e.g., only sequence containers support `push_front` or `push_back`, and only associative containers support `count` and `lower_bound`, etc. Even such basics as `insert` and `erase` have signatures and semantics that vary from category to category. For example, when you insert an object into a sequence container, it stays where you put it, but if you insert an object into an associative container, the container moves the object to where it belongs in the container's sort order. For another example, the form of `erase` taking an iterator returns a new iterator when invoked on a sequence container, but it returns nothing when invoked on an associative container. (Item 9 gives an example of how this can affect the code you write.)

Suppose, then, you aspire to write code that can be used with the most common sequence containers: `vector`, `deque`, and `list`. Clearly, you must program to the intersection of their capabilities, and that means no uses of `reserve` or `capacity` (see Item 14), because `deque` and `list` don't offer them. The presence of `list` also means you give up `operator[]`, and you limit yourself to the capabilities of bidirectional iterators. That, in turn, means you must stay away from algorithms that demand random access iterators, including `sort`, `stable_sort`, `partial_sort`, and `nth_element` (see Item 31).

On the other hand, your desire to support vector rules out use of `push_front` and `pop_front`, and both `vector` and `deque` put the kibosh on `splice` and the member form of `sort`. In conjunction with the constraints above, this latter prohibition means that there is no form of `sort` you can call on your "generalized sequence container."

That's the obvious stuff. If you violate any of those restrictions, your code will fail to compile with at least one of the containers you want to be able to use. The code that *will* compile is more insidious.

The main culprit is the different rules for invalidation of iterators, pointers, and references that apply to different sequence containers. To write code that will work correctly with `vector`, `deque`, and `list`, you must assume that any operation invalidating iterators, pointers, or references in any of those containers invalidates them in the container you're using. Thus, you must assume that every call to `insert` invalidates everything, because `deque::insert` invalidates all iterators and, lacking the ability to call `capacity`, `vector::insert` must be assumed to invalidate all pointers and references. (Item 1 explains that `deque` is unique in sometimes invalidating its iterators without invalidating its pointers and references.) Similar reasoning leads to the conclusion that, unless you're erasing the last element of a container, calls to `erase` must also be assumed to invalidate everything.

Want more? You can't pass the data in the container to a C interface, because only `vector` supports that (see Item 16). You can't instantiate your container with `bool` as the type of objects to be stored, because, as Item 18 explains, `vector<bool>` doesn't always behave like a vector, and it never actually stores booleans. You can't assume `list`'s constant-time insertions and erasures, because `vector` and `deque` take linear time to perform those operations.

When all is said and done, you're left with a "generalized sequence container" where you can't call `reserve`, `capacity`, `operator[]`, `push_front`, `pop_front`, `splice`, or any algorithm requiring random access iterators; a container where every call to `insert` and `erase` takes linear time and invalidates all iterators, pointers, and references; and a container incompatible with C where booleans can't be stored. Is that really the kind of container you want to use in your applications? I suspect not.

If you rein in your ambition and decide you're willing to drop support for `list`, you still give up `reserve`, `capacity`, `push_front`, and `pop_front`; you still must assume that all calls to `insert` and `erase` take linear time and invalidate everything; you still lose layout compatibility with C; and you still can't store booleans.

If you abandon the sequence containers and shoot instead for code that can work with different associative containers, the situation isn't much better. Writing for both `set` and `map` is close to impossible, because sets store single objects while maps store pairs of objects. Even writing for both `set` and `multiset` (or `map` and `multimap`) is tough. The `insert` member function taking only a value has different return types for sets/maps than for their multi cousins, and you must reli-

giously avoid making any assumptions about how many copies of a value are stored in a container. With `map` and `multimap`, you must avoid using `operator[]`, because that member function exists only for `map`.

Face the truth: it's not worth it. The different containers are *different*, and they have strengths and weaknesses that vary in significant ways. They're not designed to be interchangeable, and there's little you can do to paper that over. If you try, you're merely tempting fate, and fate doesn't like to be tempted.

Still, the day will dawn when you'll realize that a container choice you made was, er, suboptimal, and you'll need to use a different container type. You now know that when you change container types, you'll not only need to fix whatever problems your compilers diagnose, you'll also need to examine all the code using the container to see what needs to be changed in light of the new container's performance characteristics and rules for invalidation of iterators, pointers, and references. If you switch from a vector to something else, you'll also have to make sure you're no longer relying on vector's C-compatible memory layout, and if you switch to a vector, you'll have to ensure that you're not using it to store booleans.

Given the inevitability of having to change container types from time to time, you can facilitate such changes in the usual manner: by encapsulating, encapsulating, encapsulating. One of the easiest ways to do this is through the liberal use of typedefs for container types. Hence, instead of writing this,

```
class Widget { ... };
vector<Widget> vw;
Widget bestWidget;
...
vector<Widget>::iterator i =
    find(vw.begin(), vw.end(), bestWidget);
```

// give bestWidget a value
// find a Widget with the
// same value as bestWidget

write this:

```
class Widget { ... };
typedef vector<Widget> WidgetContainer;
WidgetContainer cw;
Widget bestWidget;
...
WidgetContainer::iterator i = find(cw.begin(), cw.end(), bestWidget);
```

This makes it a lot easier to change container types, something that's especially convenient if the change in question is simply to add a custom allocator. (Such a change doesn't affect the rules for iterator/pointer/reference invalidation.)

```
class Widget { ... };
template<typename T>                               // see Item 10 for why this
SpecialAllocator { ... };                          // needs to be a template
typedef vector<Widget, SpecialAllocator<Widget> > WidgetContainer;
WidgetContainer cw;                                // still works
Widget bestWidget;
...
WidgetContainer::iterator i =
    find(cw.begin(), cw.end(), bestWidget);        // still works
```

If the encapsulating aspects of typedefs mean nothing to you, you're still likely to appreciate the work they can save, especially for iterator types. For example, if you have an object of type

```
map< string,
    vector<Widget>::iterator,
    CStringCompare>
// CStringCompare is "case-
// insensitive string compare,"
// Item 19 describes it
```

and you want to walk through the map using `const_iterator`s, do you really want to spell out

```
map<string, vector<Widget>::iterator, CStringCompare>::const_iterator
```

more than once? Once you've used the STL a little while, you'll realize that typedefs are your friends.

A typedef is just a synonym for some other type, so the encapsulation it affords is purely lexical. A typedef doesn't prevent a client from doing (or depending on) anything they couldn't already do (or depend on). You need bigger ammunition if you want to limit client exposure to the container choices you've made. You need classes.

To limit the code that may require modification if you replace one container type with another, hide the container in a class, and limit the amount of container-specific information visible through the class interface. For example, if you need to create a customer list, don't use a list directly. Instead, create a `CustomerList` class, and hide a list in its private section:

```

class CustomerList {
private:
    typedef list<Customer> CustomerContainer;
    typedef CustomerContainer::iterator CClterator;

    CustomerContainer customers;

public:
    // limit the amount of list-specific
    ... // information visible through
}; // this interface

```

At first, this may seem silly. After all a customer list is a *list*, right? Well, maybe. Later you may discover that you don't need to insert or erase customers from the middle of the list as often as you'd anticipated, but you do need to quickly identify the top 20% of your customers — a task tailor-made for the `nth_element` algorithm (see [Item 31](#)). But `nth_element` requires random access iterators. It won't work with a list. In that case, your customer “list” might be better implemented as a vector or a deque.

When you consider this kind of change, you still have to check every `CustomerList` member function and every friend to see how they'll be affected (in terms of performance and iterator/pointer/reference invalidation, etc.), but if you've done a good job of encapsulating `CustomerList`'s implementation details, the impact on `CustomerList` clients should be small. You can't write container-independent code, but *they* might be able to.

Item 3: Make copying cheap and correct for objects in containers.

Containers hold objects, but not the ones you give them. Instead, when you add an object to a container (via, e.g., `insert` or `push_back`, etc.), what goes into the container is a *copy* of the object you specify.

Once an object is in a container, it's not uncommon for it to be copied further. If you insert something into or erase something from a vector, string, or deque, existing container elements are typically moved (copied) around (see [Items 5](#) and [14](#)). If you use any of the sorting algorithms (see [Item 31](#)); `next_permutation` or `previous_permutation`; `remove`, `unique`, or their ilk (see [Item 32](#)); `rotate` or `reverse`, etc., objects will be moved (copied) around. Yes, copying objects is the STL way.

It may interest you to know how all this copying is accomplished. That's easy. An object is copied by using its copying member functions, in particular, its *copy* constructor and its *copy* assignment operator. (Clever names, no?) For a user-defined class like `Widget`, these functions are traditionally declared like this:

```
class Widget {
public:
    ...
    Widget(const Widget&);           // copy constructor
    Widget& operator=(const Widget&); // copy assignment operator
    ...
};
```

As always, if you don't declare these functions yourself, your compilers will declare them for you. Also as always, the copying of built-in types (e.g., ints, pointers, etc.) is accomplished by simply copying the underlying bits. (For details on copy constructors and assignment operators, consult any introductory book on C++. In *Effective C++*, Items 11 and 27 focus on the behavior of these functions.)

With all this copying taking place, the motivation for this Item should now be clear. If you fill a container with objects where copying is expensive, the simple act of putting the objects into the container could prove to be a performance bottleneck. The more things get moved around in the container, the more memory and cycles you'll blow on making copies. Furthermore, if you have objects where "copying" has an unconventional meaning, putting such objects into a container will invariably lead to grief. (For an example of the kind of grief it can lead to, see [Item 8](#).)

In the presence of inheritance, of course, copying leads to slicing. That is, if you create a container of base class objects and you try to insert derived class objects into it, the derivedness of the objects will be removed as the objects are copied (via the base class copy constructor) into the container:

```
vector<Widget> vw;
class SpecialWidget:           // SpecialWidget inherits from
    public Widget { ... };     // Widget above
SpecialWidget sw;
vw.push_back(sw);             // sw is copied as a base class
                               // object into vw. Its specialness
                               // is lost during the copying
```

The slicing problem suggests that inserting a derived class object into a container of base class objects is almost always an error. If you want

the resulting object to *act* like a derived class object, e.g., invoke derived class virtual functions, etc., it is always an error. (For more background on the slicing problem, consult *Effective C++*, Item 22. For another example of where it arises in the STL, see [Item 38](#).)

An easy way to make copying efficient, correct, and immune to the slicing problem is to create containers of *pointers* instead of containers of objects. That is, instead of creating a container of `Widget`, create a container of `Widget*`. Copying pointers is fast, it always does exactly what you expect (it copies the bits making up the pointer), and nothing gets sliced when a pointer is copied. Unfortunately, containers of pointers have their own STL-related headaches. You can read about them in [Items 7](#) and [33](#). As you seek to avoid those headaches while still dodging efficiency, correctness, and slicing concerns, you'll probably discover that containers of *smart pointers* are an attractive option. To learn more about this option, turn to [Item 7](#).

If all this makes it sound like the STL is copy-crazy, think again. Yes, the STL makes lots of copies, but it's generally designed to avoid copying objects *unnecessarily*. In fact, it's generally designed to avoid *creating* objects unnecessarily. Contrast this with the behavior of C's and C++'s only built-in container, the lowly array:

```
Widget w[maxNumWidgets]; // create an array of maxNumWidgets
                        // Widgets, default-constructing each one
```

This constructs `maxNumWidgets` `Widget` objects, even if we normally expect to use only a few of them or we expect to immediately overwrite each default-constructed value with values we get from someplace else (e.g., a file). Using the STL instead of an array, we can use a vector that grows when it needs to:

```
vector<Widget> vw;           // create a vector with zero Widget
                           // objects that will expand as needed
```

We can also create an empty vector that contains enough space for `maxNumWidgets` `Widgets`, but where zero `Widgets` have been constructed:

```
vector<Widget> vw;
vw.reserve(maxNumWidgets); // see Item 14 for details on reserve
```

Compared to arrays, STL containers are much more civilized. They create (by copying) only as many objects as you ask for, they do it only when you direct them to, and they use a default constructor only when you say they should. Yes, STL containers make copies, and yes, you need to understand that, but don't lose sight of the fact that they're still a big step up from arrays.

Item 4: Call `empty` instead of checking `size()` against zero.

For any container `c`, writing

```
if (c.size() == 0) ...
```

is essentially equivalent to writing

```
if (c.empty()) ...
```

That being the case, you might wonder why one construct should be preferred to the other, especially in view of the fact that `empty` is typically implemented as an inline function that simply returns whether `size` returns 0.

You should prefer the construct using `empty`, and the reason is simple: `empty` is a constant-time operation for all standard containers, but for some list implementations, `size` may take linear time.

But what makes list so troublesome? Why can't it, too, offer a constant-time `size`? The answer has much to do with the range form of list's unique splicing functions. Consider this code:

```
list<int> list1;
list<int> list2;

...
list1.splice(                               // move all nodes in list2
    list1.end(), list2,                     // from the first occurrence
    find(list2.begin(), list2.end(), 5),    // of 5 through the last
    find(list2.rbegin(), list2.rend(), 10).base() // occurrence of 10 to the
);                                           // end of list1. See Item 28
                                           // for info on the "base()" call
```

This code won't work unless `list2` contains a 10 somewhere beyond a 5, but let's assume that's not a problem. Instead, let's focus on this question: how many elements are in `list1` after the splice? Clearly, `list1` after the splice has as many elements as it did before the splice plus however many elements were spliced into it. But how many elements were spliced into it? As many as were in the range defined by `find(list2.begin(), list2.end(), 5)` and `find(list2.rbegin(), list2.rend(), 10).base()`. Okay, how many is that? Without traversing the range and counting them, there's no way to know. And therein lies the problem.

Suppose you're responsible for implementing `list`. `list` isn't just any container, it's a *standard* container, so you know your class will be widely used. You naturally want your implementation to be as efficient as possible. You figure that clients will commonly want to find out how many elements are in a list, so you'd like to make `size` a constant-

time operation. You'd thus like to design `list` so it always knows how many elements it contains.

At the same time, you know that of all the standard containers, only `list` offers the ability to splice elements from one place to another without copying any data. You reason that many list clients will choose `list` specifically because it offers high-efficiency splicing. They know that splicing a range from one list to another can be accomplished in constant time, and you know that they know it, so you certainly want to meet their expectation that `splice` is a constant-time member function.

This puts you in a quandary. If `size` is to be a constant-time operation, each list member function must update the sizes of the lists on which it operates. That includes `splice`. But the only way for the range version of `splice` to update the sizes of the lists it modifies is for it to count the number of elements being spliced, and doing that would prevent it from achieving the constant-time performance you want for *it*. If you eliminate the requirement that the range form of `splice` update the sizes of the lists it's modifying, `splice` can be made constant-time, but then `size` becomes a linear-time operation. In general, it will have to traverse its entire data structure to see how many elements it contains. No matter how you look at it, something — `size` or the range form of `splice` — has to give. One or the other can be a constant-time operation, but not both.

Different list implementations resolve this conflict in different ways, depending on whether their authors choose to maximize the efficiency of `size` or the range form of `splice`. If you happen to be using a list implementation where a constant-time range form of `splice` was given higher priority than a constant-time `size`, you'll be better off calling `empty` than `size`, because `empty` is always a constant-time operation. Even if you're not using such an implementation, you might find yourself using such an implementation in the future. For example, you might port your code to a different platform where a different implementation of the STL is available, or you might just decide to switch to a different STL implementation for your current platform.

No matter what happens, you can't go wrong if you call `empty` instead of checking to see if `size() == 0`. So call `empty` whenever you need to know whether a container has zero elements.

Item 5: Prefer range member functions to their single-element counterparts.

Quick! Given two vectors, `v1` and `v2`, what's the easiest way to make `v1`'s contents be the same as the second half of `v2`'s? Don't agonize

Index

The example classes and class templates declared or defined in this book are indexed under *example classes/templates*. The example functions and function templates are indexed under *example functions/templates*.

Before A

`__default_alloc_template` 211

A

Abrahams, David xvii

abstraction bonus 203

abstraction penalty 201

accumulate

function objects for 158

initial value and 157, 159

side effects and 160

adaptability

algorithm function objects and 156

definition of 170

functor classes and 169–173

overloading operator() and 173

add or update functionality, in map 107

adjacent_difference 157

Adobe, demonic software spewed by xviii

advance

efficiency of 122

to create iterators from

`const_iterators` 120–123

Alexandrescu, Andrei xvii, 227, 230

algorithms

accumulate 156–161

function objects for 158

initial value and 157, 159

side effects and 160

adaptable function objects and 156

adjacent_difference 157

as a vocabulary 186

binary_search 192–201

container mem funcs vs. 190–192

copy, eliminating calls to 26

copy_if, implementing 154–156

copying func objects within 166–168

count 156, 192–201

equal_range vs., for sorted ranges 197

count_if 157

efficiency, vs. explicit loops 182–184

equal_range 192–201

count vs., for sorted ranges 197

find 192–201

count in multiset, multimap vs. 199

lower_bound in multiset, multimap
vs. 201

using equivalence vs. equality 86

for_each 156–161

side effects and 160

function call syntax in 175

function parameters to 201–205

hand-written loops vs. 181–189

includes 148

inner_product 157

inplace_merge 148

lexicographical_compare 153

longest name 153

loops and 182

lower_bound 192–201

equality vs. equivalence and 195

max_element 157

merge 148, 192

min_element 157

mismatch 151

nth_element 133–138

optimizations in 183

- partial_sort 133–138
- partial_sum 157
- partition 133–138
 - containers of pointers and 145
- remove 139–143
 - on containers of pointers 143–146
- remove_copy_if 44
- remove_if 44, 144, 145
 - see also [remove](#)
 - possible implementation of 167
- set_difference 148
- set_intersection 148
- set_symmetric_difference 148, 153
- set_union 148
- sort 133–138
- sorted ranges and 146–150
- sorting 133–138
 - alternatives to 138
- stable_partition 133–138
- stable_sort 133–138
- string member functions vs. 230
- transform 129
- unique 145, 148, 149
 - see also [remove](#)
- unique_copy 148, 149
- upper_bound 197–198

[All your base are belong to us](#)

- allocations
 - minimizing via reserve 66–68
 - minimum, in string 72
- allocator
 - allocate interface, vs. operator new 51
- allocators
 - boilerplate code for 54
 - conventions and restrictions 48–54
 - fraud in interface 51
 - in string 69
 - legitimate uses 54–58
 - never being called 52
 - permitted assumptions about 49
 - rebind template within 53
 - stateful, portability and 50, 51, 212
 - summary of guidelines for 54
 - typedefs within 48
 - URLs for examples 227, 228
- allusions
 - to *Candide* 143
 - to *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night* 187
 - to Martin Luther King, Jr. 51
 - to Matthew 25:32 222
 - to *The Little Engine that Could* 63
- amortized constant time complexity 6
- ANSI Standard for C++
 - see [C++ Standard, The](#)
- anteater 88
- argument_type 170
- array-based containers, definition of 13

- arrays
 - as part of the STL 2
 - as STL containers 64
 - containers vs. 22
 - vector and string vs. 63–66
- assignments
 - assign vs. operator= 25
 - superfluous, avoiding 31
 - via range member functions 33
- associative containers
 - see [standard associative containers](#), [hashed containers](#)
- Austern, Matt *xvi*, *xvii*, 54, 226, 227, 228
 - see also [Generic Programming and the STL](#)
- author, contacting the *xii*
- auto_ptr
 - as container element 40–43
 - semantics of copying 41
 - sorting 41
 - URL for update page on 228
- average, finding, for a range 159–161
- Avery, Katrina *xvii*

B

- back_insert_iterator 216
- back_inserter 130, 216
 - push_back and 130
- backwards order, inserting elements
 - in 184
- Barron, Carl *xvi*
- base, see [reverse_iterator](#)
- basic_ostream, relation to ostream 230
- basic_string
 - relation to string 210, 229
 - relation to string and wstring 4
- Becker, Pete *xvii*
- Becker, Thomas *xvii*
- begin/end, relation to rbegin/rend 123
- bidirectional iterators
 - binary search algorithms and 148
 - definition of 5
 - standard associative containers and 5
- binary_function 170–172
 - pointer parameters and 172
 - reference parameters and 171
- binary_search 199
 - bsearch vs. 194
 - related functions vs. 192–201
- bind1st 216
 - adaptability and 170
- bind2nd 210, 216
 - adaptability and 170
 - reference-to-reference problem and 222
- binder1st 216

binder2nd 216
 binders, definition of 5
 bitfields 80
 bitset
 as alternative to `vector<bool>` 81
 as part of the STL 2
 Boost 170, 172, 221–223
 shared_array 222
 shared_ptr 39, 146, 165, 178, 222
 web site URL 217, 227
 Bridge Pattern 165
 Bruce, Robin xviii
 bsearch, vs. `binary_search` 194
 bugs
 Dinkumware list for MSVC 244
 in this book, reporting xii
 Bulka, Dov 226
 see also *Efficient C++*
 Buzard, Susannah xviii

C

C++ Programming Language, The 61, 155
 bibliography entry for 226
C++ Standard Library, The 2, 6, 94, 113, 207
 bibliographic entry for 225
 C++ Standard, The
 bibliography entry for 226
 citation number omitted for 3
 guidance on choosing containers 12
 reference counting and 64
 URL for purchasing 226
 Campbell, Aaron xvii
Candide, allusion to 143
 capacity
 cost of increasing for `vector/string` 66
 minimizing in `vector` and `string` 77–79
 capacity, vs. size 66–67
 Carey, Alicia xviii
 case conversions, when not one-for-one 234
 case-insensitive
 string class 229–230
 string comparisons, see *string*
 casts
 const_iterator to iterator 120
 creating temporary objects via 98
 to references 98
 to remove constness 98
 to remove `map/multimap` constness 99
 categories, for iterators 5
 char_traits 113, 211, 230
 choosing
 among `binary_search`, `lower_bound`,
 `upper_bound`, and
 `equal_range` 192–201
 among containers 12

 among iterator types 116–119
 vector vs. `string` 64
 citations, in this book 2
 class vs. `typename` 7
 classes, vs. structs for functor classes 171
 clustering, in node-based containers 103
 COAPs, see *containers*, *auto_ptr*
 collate facet 234
 color, use in this book 8
`comp.lang.c++.moderated` xv
`comp.std.c++` xv
 comparison functions
 consistency and 149
 equal values and 92–94
 for pairs 104
 comparisons
 see also *string*, *comparisons*, *compari-*
 son functions
 iterators with `const_iterators` 118
 lexicographic 231
 compilers
 diagnostics, deciphering 210–217
 implementations, vs. STL impls 3
 independence, value of 3
 optimizations, inlining and 202
 problems, see *workarounds*
 complexity
 amortized constant time 6
 constant time 6
 guarantees, in the STL 5–6
 linear time 6
 logarithmic time 6
`compose1` 219
`compose2` 187, 219
`const_iterator`
 casting to iterator 120
 comparisons with iterators 118
 converting to iterator 120–123
 other iterator types vs. 116–119
`const_reverse_iterator`
 other iterator types vs. 116–119
 constant time complexity 6
 amortized, see *amortized constant time*
 constness
 casting away 98
 of `map/multimap` elements 95
 of `set/multiset` elements 95
 construction, via range mem funcs 31
 contacting the author xii
 container adapters, as part of the STL 2
 container-independent code 16, 47
 illusory nature of 15–20
 containers
 arrays as 64
 arrays vs. 22
 assign vs. `operator=` in 25
 associative, see *standard associative*
 containers

- auto_ptrs in 40–43
- calling empty vs. size 23–24
- choosing among
 - advice from the Standard 12
 - iterator types 116–119
- contiguous memory
 - see [contiguous-memory containers](#), [vector](#), [string](#), [deque](#), [rope](#)
- converting const_iterators to iterators 120–123
- criteria for selecting 11–15
- deleting pointers in 36–40
- encapsulating 19
- erasing
 - see also [erase-remove idiom](#)
 - elements in 43–48
 - iterator invalidation during 14, 45
 - relation to remove 139–143
- exception safety and 14, 37, 39
- filling from legacy APIs 77
- [hashed](#), see [hashed containers](#)
- improving efficiency via reserve 66–68
- insertions
 - in reverse order 184
 - iterator invalidation during 14
- iterators
 - casting among 121
 - invalidation, see [iterators](#), [invalidation](#)
- mem funcs vs. algorithms 190–192
- node-based
 - see [node-based containers](#), [list](#), [standard associative containers](#), [slist](#)
- object copying and 20–22
- of pointers, remove and 143–146
- of proxy objects 82
- of smart pointers 39
- range vs. single-element member functions 24–33
- relation of begin/end, rbegin/rend 123
- replacing one with another 18
- requirements in the Standard 79
- resize vs. reserve 67
- rolling back insertions and erasures 14
- rope 218
- sequence
 - see [standard sequence containers](#)
- size vs. capacity 66–67
- size_type typedef 158
- slist 218
- sorted vector vs. associative 100–106
- thread safety and 58–62
- transactional semantics for insertion and erasing 14
- typedefs for 18–19
- value_type typedef 36, 108
- vector<bool>, problems with 79–82

- contiguous memory
 - for string 75
 - for vector 74
- contiguous-memory containers
 - see also [vector](#), [string](#), [deque](#), [rope](#)
 - cost of erasing in 32
 - cost of insertion 28
 - definition of 13
 - iterator invalidation in, see [iterators](#), [invalidation](#)
- conventions, for allocators 48–54
- conversions
 - among iterator types 117
 - from const_iterator to iterator 120–123
 - when not one-for-one 234
- copy
 - eliminating calls to 26
 - insert iterators and 26
 - missing member templates and 242
- copy_if, implementing 154–156
- copying
 - auto_ptrs, semantics of 41
 - function objects
 - efficiency and 164
 - within algorithms 166–168
 - objects in containers 20–22
- count 156
 - as existence test 193
 - equal_range vs., for sorted ranges 197
 - related functions vs. 192–201
- count_if 157
- <cctype>, conventions of functions in 151
- <ctype.h>, conventions of functions in 151

D

- Dalla Gasperina, Marco *xvi*
- [debug mode](#), see [STLport](#), [debug mode](#)
- deciphering compiler diagnostics 210–217
- definitions
 - adaptable function object 170
 - amortized constant time complexity 6
 - array-based container 13
 - bidirectional iterator 5
 - binder 5
 - COAP 40
 - constant time complexity 6
 - container-independent code 16
 - contiguous-memory container 13
 - equality 84
 - equivalence 84–85
 - forward iterator 5
 - function object 5
 - functor 5
 - functor class 5
 - input iterator 5
 - linear time complexity 6

- local class 189
 - logarithmic time complexity 6
 - monomorphic function object 164
 - node-based container 13
 - output iterator 5
 - predicate 166
 - predicate class 166
 - pure function 166
 - random access iterator 5
 - range member function 25
 - resource acquisition is initialization 61
 - stability, in sorting 135
 - standard associative container 5
 - standard sequence container 5
 - STL platform 3
 - transactional semantics 14
 - delete
 - delete[] vs. 63
 - using wrong form 64
 - deleting
 - objects more than once 64
 - pointers in containers 36–40
 - dependent types, typename and 7–8
 - deque
 - unique invalidation rules for 15
 - see also [iterators](#), [invalidation](#)
 - deque<bool>, as alternative to
 - vector<bool> 81
 - dereferencing functor class 90
 - Derge, Gillmer xvii
 - Design Patterns* 80, 165
 - bibliography entry for 226
 - Design Patterns CD*
 - bibliography entry for 226
 - destination range, ensuring adequate
 - size 129–133
 - destructors, calling explicitly 56
 - Dewhurst, Stephen xvii
 - dictionary order comparison, see [lexicographic comparison](#)
 - Dinkumware
 - bug list for MSVC STL 244
 - hashed containers implementation 114
 - interface for hashed containers 113
 - slist implementation 218
 - STL replacement for MSVC6 243
 - web site for 243
 - disambiguating function and object
 - declarations 35
 - distance
 - declaration for 122
 - efficiency of 122
 - explicit template argument specification and 122
 - to convert const iterators to
 - iterators 120–123
 - Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*,
 - allusion to 187
 - documentation, on-line, for the STL 217
 - Dr. Seuss xi
- ## E
- Effective C++*
 - bibliography entry for 225
 - citation number omitted for 3
 - inheritance from class without a virtual
 - destructor discussion in 37
 - inlining discussion in 202
 - object copying discussions in 21
 - pointer to implementation class discussion in 165
 - slicing problem discussion in 22
 - URL for errata list for 228
 - Effective C++ CD*
 - bibliography entry for 225
 - URL for errata list for 228
 - Effective STL*, web site for xii
 - efficiency
 - see also [optimizations](#)
 - advance and 122
 - algorithms vs. explicit loops 182–184
 - associative container vs. sorted
 - vector 100–106
 - case-insensitive string comparisons
 - and 154
 - comparative, of sorting algorithms 138
 - copy vs. range insert 26
 - copying
 - function objects and 164
 - objects and 21
 - distance and 122
 - empty vs. size 23–24
 - erasing from contiguous-memory
 - containers 32
 - function objects vs. functions 201–205
 - hashed containers, overview of 111–115
 - hashing and 101
 - “hint” form of insert and 110
 - improving via custom allocators 54
 - increasing vector/string capacity 66
 - inlining and 202
 - inserting into contiguous-memory
 - containers 28
 - istreambuf_iterators and 126–127
 - Items on 9
 - list::remove vs. the erase-remove
 - idiom 43
 - logarithmic vs. linear 190
 - map::operator[] vs. map::insert 106–111
 - mem funcs vs. algorithms 190–192
 - minimizing reallocs via reserve 66–68
 - ostreambuf_iterators and 127
 - range vs. single-element member
 - functions 24–33
 - small string optimization 71
 - sort vs. qsort 203

- sorting algorithms, overview of 133–138
 - string implementation trade-offs 68–73
 - toupper and 236–237
 - use_facet and 234
- Efficient C++* 202
 - bibliography entry for 226
- Einstein, Albert 69
- Emacs 27
- email address
 - for comments on this book xii
 - for the President of the USA 212
- embedded nulls 75, 154
- empty, vs. size 23–24
- encapsulating containers 19
- equal_range 196–197
 - count vs., for sorted ranges 197
 - related functions vs. 192–201
- equal_to 86, 112
- equality
 - definition of 84
 - equivalence vs. 83–88
 - in hashed containers 113
 - lower_bound and 195
- equivalence
 - definition of 84–85
 - equality vs. 83–88
 - in hashed containers 113
 - lower_bound and 195
- equivalent values, inserting in order 198
- erase
 - see also [erase-remove idiom](#)
 - relation to remove algorithm 139–143
 - return types for 32
 - return value for standard sequence containers 46
- erase_after 218
- erase-remove idiom 43, 47, 142, 145, 146, 184, 207
 - limitations of 46
 - list::remove vs. 43
 - remove_if variant 144
- erasing
 - see also [containers, erasing](#)
 - base iterators and 124
 - elements in containers 43–48
 - rolling back 14
 - via range member functions 32
- errata list
 - for *Effective C++* 228
 - for *Effective C++ CD* 228
 - for *More Effective C++* 228
 - for this book xii
- error messages, deciphering 210–217
- example classes/templates
 - Average 205
 - BadPredicate 167, 168
 - BetweenValues 188, 189
 - BPFC 164, 165
 - BPFCImpl 165
 - CStringCompare 85
 - Contestant 77
 - CustomerList 20
 - DataCompare 105
 - DeleteObject 37, 38
 - Dereference 90
 - DereferenceLess 91
 - DoSomething 163
 - Employee 95
 - Heap1 57
 - Heap2 57
 - IDNumberLess 96
 - list 52
 - list::ListNode 52
 - Lock 60
 - lt_nocase 231
 - lt_str_1 235
 - lt_str_1::lt_char 235
 - lt_str_2 236
 - lt_str_2::lt_char 236
 - MaxSpeedCompare 179
 - MeetsThreshold 171
 - NiftyEmailProgram 212, 215
 - Person 198
 - PersonNameLess 198
 - Point 159, 161
 - PointAverage 160, 161
 - PtrWidgetNameCompare 172
 - RCSP 146
 - SharedMemoryAllocator 55
 - SpecialAllocator 19, 49
 - SpecialContainer 240
 - SpecialString 37
 - SpecialWidget 21
 - SpecificHeapAllocator 57
 - std::less<Widget> 178
 - StringPtrGreater 93
 - StringPtrLess 89
 - StringSize 204
 - Timestamp 197
 - vector 240
 - Widget 7, 18, 19, 21, 35, 84, 106, 111, 143, 174, 177, 182, 222
 - WidgetNameCompare 171
- example functions/templates
 - anotherBadPredicate 169
 - average 204
 - Average::operator() 205
 - BadPredicate::BadPredicate() 167
 - BadPredicate::operator() 167, 168
 - BetweenValues::BetweenValues 188
 - BetweenValues::operator() 188
 - BPFC::operator() 164, 165
 - BPFCImpl::BPFCImpl 165
 - BPFCImpl::operator() 165

- ciCharCompare 151
 - ciCharLess 153
 - ciStringCompare 152, 153, 154
 - CiStringCompare::operator() 85
 - ciStringCompareImpl 152
 - copy_if 155, 156
 - DataCompare::keyLess 105
 - DataCompare::operator() 105
 - delAndNullifyUncertified 145
 - DeleteObject::operator() 37, 38
 - Dereference::operator() 90
 - DereferenceLess::operator() 91
 - doSomething 36, 37, 38, 39, 74, 75, 77
 - DoSomething::operator() 163
 - doubleGreater 202
 - efficientAddOrUpdate 110
 - Employee::idNumber 95
 - Employee::name 95
 - Employee::setName 95
 - Employee::setTitle 95
 - Employee::title 95
 - fillArray 76, 77, 184
 - fillString 76
 - hasAcceptableQuality 137
 - Heap1::alloc 57
 - Heap1::dealloc 57
 - IDNumberLess::operator() 96
 - isDefective 155
 - isInteresting 169
 - lastGreaterThanFirst 8
 - Lock::Lock 60
 - Lock::Lock 60
 - lt_nocase::operator() 231
 - lt_str_1::lt_char::lt_char 235
 - lt_str_1::lt_char::operator() 235
 - lt_str_1::lt_str_1 236
 - lt_str_1::operator() 236
 - lt_str_2::lt_char::lt_char 236
 - lt_str_2::lt_char::operator() 236
 - lt_str_2::lt_str_2 237
 - lt_str_2::operator() 237
 - MaxSpeedCompare::operator() 179
 - MeetsThreshold::MeetsThreshold 171
 - MeetsThreshold::operator() 171
 - NiftyEmailProgram::showEmailAddress 212, 215
 - operator< for Timestamp 197
 - operator< for Widget 177
 - operator== for Widget 8, 84
 - Person::name 198
 - Person::operator() 198
 - Point::Point 159
 - PointAverage::operator() 160, 161
 - PointAverage::PointAverage 160, 161
 - PointAverage::result 161
 - print 90
 - PtrWidgetNameCompare::operator() 172
 - qualityCompare 134
 - SharedMemoryAllocator::allocate 55
 - SharedMemoryAllocator::deallocate 55
 - SpecificHeapAllocator::allocate 57
 - SpecificHeapAllocator::deallocate 57
 - std::less<Widget>::operator() 178
 - stringLengthSum 158
 - StringPtrGreater::operator() 93
 - stringPtrLess 91
 - StringPtrLess::operator() 89
 - StringSize::operator() 204
 - test 174
 - transmogrify 129, 220
 - vector<bool>::operator[] 80
 - vector<bool>::reference 80
 - Widget::isCertified 143
 - Widget::maxSpeed 177
 - Widget::operator= 21, 106, 111
 - Widget::readStream 222
 - Widget::redraw 182
 - Widget::test 174
 - Widget::weight 177
 - Widget::Widget 21, 106
 - widgetAPCompare 41
 - WidgetNameCompare::operator() 171
 - writeAverages 204, 205
 - exception safety 14, 37, 39, 50, 61
 - Exceptional C++* 14, 165
 - bibliography entry for 226
 - exceptions, to guidelines in this book 10
 - explicit template argument specification
 - distance and 122
 - for_each and 163
 - use_facet and 234
 - extending the STL 2
- ## F
- facets, locales and 234–235
 - find
 - count in multiset, multimap vs. 199
 - lower_bound in multiset, multimap vs. 201
 - related functions vs. 192–201
 - using equivalence vs. equality 86
 - first_argument_type 170
 - for_each
 - declaration for 163
 - explicit template argument specification and 163
 - possible implementation of 174
 - side effects and 160
 - forward iterators
 - definition of 5
 - operator-- and 5
 - fragmentation, memory, reducing 54
 - fraud, in allocator interface 51
 - free STL implementations 217, 220
 - front_insert_iterator 216

front_inserter 130, 216
 push_front and 130

Fuller, John xviii

function objects
 as workaround for compiler problems 204
 definition of 5
 dereferencing, generic 90
 for accumulate 158
 functions vs. 201–205
 monomorphic, definition of 164
 pass-by-value and 162–166
 slicing 164

functional programming 206

functions
 calling forms 173
 calling syntax in the STL 175
 comparison
 equal values and 92–94
 for pointers 88–91
 declaration forms 33–35
 declaring templates in 188
 function objects vs. 201–205
 in <cctype>, conventions of 151
 in <ctype.h>, conventions of 151
 pointers to, as formal parameters 34
 predicates, need to be pure 166–169
 pure, definition of 166
 range vs. single-element 24–33

functor classes
 adaptability and 169–173
 classes vs. structs 171
 definition of 5
 overloading operator() in 114
 pass-by-value and 162–166

functor, see [function objects](#)

G

Gamma, Erich 226
 see also [Design Patterns](#)

Generic Programming and the STL 2, 94, 217, 229
 bibliography entry for 226

gewürztraminer 232

glass, broken, crawling on 95, 97

Glassborow, Francis xvii

Green, Cliff xvii

growth factor, for vector/string 66

H

hand-written loops
 algorithms vs. 181–189
 iterator invalidation and 185

Hansen, Karin xviii

Harrison, Doug xvi, xvii

hashed containers 111–115
 Dinkumware interface for 113
 equality vs. equivalence in 113
 SGI interface for 112
 two implementation approaches to 114

headers
 #including the proper ones 209–210
 <algorithm> 210
 <cctype> 151
 <ctype.h> 151
 <functional> 210
 <iterator> 210
 <list> 209
 <map> 209
 <numeric> 210
 <numeric> 157
 <set> 209
 <vector> 209
 failing to #include 217
 summary of 209–210

heaps, separate, allocators and 56–58

Helm, Richard 226
 see also [Design Patterns](#)

Henney, Kevlin xvi

“hint” form of insert 100, 110

How the Grinch Stole Christmas! xi

I

identifiers, reserved 213

identity 219

implementations
 compilers vs. the STL 3
 variations for string 68–73

includes 148

#includes, portability and 209–210

inlining 202
 function pointers and 203

inner_product 157

inplace_merge 148

input iterators
 definition of 5
 range insert and 29

insert
 as member template 240
 “hint” form 100, 110
 operator[] in map vs. 106–111
 return types for 32

insert iterators
 see also [inserter](#), [back_inserter](#), [front_inserter](#)
 container::reserve and 131
 copy algorithm and 26

insert_after 218

insert_iterator 216

inserter 130, 216
 inserting
 see also [containers, insertions](#)
 base iterators and 124
 equivalent values in order 198
 in reverse order 184
 rolling back 14
 via range member functions 32
 internationalization
 see also [locales](#)
 strcmp and 150
 stricmp/strcmpi and 154
 invalidation, [see iterators, invalidation](#)
 ios::skipws 126
 iostreams library, SGI implementation
 of 220
 ISO Standard for C++
 see [C++ Standard, The](#)
 istream_iterators 157, 210
 operator>> and 126
 parsing ambiguities and 35
 istreambuf_iterators 157, 210
 use for efficient I/O 126–127
 Items on efficiency, list of 9
 iterator
 comparisons with const iterators 118
 other iterator types vs. 116–119
 reverse_iterator's base and 123–125
 iterator_traits 113
 value_type typedef 42
 iterators
 see also [istreambuf_iterators](#),
 [ostreambuf_iterators](#)
 base, erasing and 124
 base, insertion and 124
 casting 120
 categories 5
 see also [input iterators, output iterator](#),
 [forward iterators, bidirectional it-](#)
 [erators, random access iterators](#)
 in hashed containers 114
 choosing among types 116–119
 conversions among types 117
 dereferencing function object for 91
 implemented as pointers 120
 invalidation
 during deque::insert 185
 during erasing 14, 45, 46
 during insertion 14
 during vector reallocation 59
 during vector/string insert 68
 during vector/string reallocation 66
 during vector::insert 27
 in hand-written loops 185
 in standard sequence containers 17
 in STLport STL implementation 221
 predicting in vector/string 68

 undefined behavior from 27, 45, 46,
 185
 unique rules for deque 15
 pointers in vector vs. 75
 relationship between iterator and
 reverse_iterator's base 123–125
 typedefs for 18–19
 types in containers
 see also [iterator](#), [const_iterator](#),
 [reverse_iterator](#), [const_reverse_iterator](#)
 casting among 121
 types, mixing 119

J

Johnson, Curt xviii
 Johnson, Ralph 226
 see also [Design Patterns](#)
 Johnson, Tim xvii
 Jones, Jason xviii
 Josuttis, Nicolai xv, xvi, xvii, 225, 227
 see also [C++ Standard Library, The](#)

K

Kanze, James xvi
 Kasperski, Marcin xvii
 Kernighan, Brian xvii
 key_comp 85, 110
 keys, for set/multiset, modifying 95–100
 King, Martin Luther, Jr., allusion to 51
 Kreft, Klaus xvi, 228

L

Langer, Angelika xvi, xviii, 228
 leaks, [see resource leaks](#)
 Leary-Coutu, Chanda xviii
 legacy APIs
 filling containers from 77
 sorted vectors and 76
 vector and string and 74–77
 vector<bool> and 81
 lemur 88
 less 210
 operator< and 177–180
 less_equal 92
 Lewandowski, Scott xvi
 lexicographic comparison 231
 lexicographical_compare 153
 strcmp and 153
 use for case-insensitive string
 comparisons 150–154
 lhs, as parameter name 8–9

- linear time complexity 6
 - for binary search algorithms with bidirectional iterators 148
 - logarithmic complexity vs. 190
- list
 - algorithm specializations 192
 - iterator invalidation in, see *iterators*, *invalidation*
 - merge 192
 - remove 142–143
 - vs. the *erase-remove idiom* 43
 - sort 137
 - splice
 - exception safety of 50
 - vs. size 23–24
 - unique 143
- Little Engine that Could, The*, allusion to 63
- local classes
 - definition of 189
 - type parameters and 189
- locales 232–233
 - case-insensitive string comparisons and 229–237
 - facets and 234–235
- locality of reference 103
 - improving via allocators 55
- locking objects 60
- logarithmic time complexity 6
 - linear complexity vs. 190
 - meaning for binary search algorithms 147
- longest algorithm name 153
- lookup speed, maximizing 100
- lower_bound
 - equality vs. equivalence and 195
 - related functions vs. 192–201

M

- mailing list for Scott Meyers xiii
- Manning, Jared xvii
- map
 - add or update functionality in 107
 - constness of elements 95
 - iterator invalidation in, see *iterators*, *invalidation*
 - key, casting away constness 99
 - key_comp member function 110
 - value_type typedef 108
- Matthew 25:32, allusion to 222
- max_element 157
- max_size 66
- Mayhew, David 226
 - see also *Efficient C++*

- mem_fun
 - declaration for 175
 - reasons for 173–177
 - reference-to-reference problem and 222
- mem_fun_ref
 - reasons for 173–177
 - reference-to-reference problem and 222
- mem_fun_ref_t 175
- mem_fun_t 175
- member funcs, vs. algorithms 190–192
- member function templates
 - see *member templates*
- member templates
 - avoiding client redundancy with 38
 - in the STL 239–240
 - Microsoft’s STL platforms and 239–244
 - vector::insert as 240
 - workaround for when missing 242
- memory fragmentation, allocators and 54
- memory layout
 - for string 69–71, 75
 - for vector 74
- memory leaks, see *resource leaks*
- memory, shared, allocators and 55–56
- merge 148, 192
- Meyers, Scott
 - mailing list for xiii
 - web site for xiii
- Microsoft’s STL platforms 239–244
 - Dinkumware replacement library for 243
- microsoft.public.vc.stl xv
- min_element 157
- mismatch 151
 - use for case-insensitive string comparisons 150–154
- mixing iterator types 119
- modifying
 - components in std 178
 - const objects 99
 - set or multiset keys 95–100
- monomorphic function objects 164
- Moore, Aaron xvii
- More Effective C++*
 - auto_ptr and 40
 - bibliography entry for 225
 - citation number omitted for 3
 - errata list 228
 - smart pointers and 39
 - placement new discussion in 56
 - proxy objects discussion in 49, 80
 - reference counting discussion in 4, 71
 - resource acquisition is initialization discussion in 61
 - smart pointer discussion in 39

STL overview in [xi](#)
 URL for auto_ptr update page for [228](#)
 URL for errata list for [228](#)
More Exceptional C++
 bibliography entry for [226](#)
 multimap
 constness of elements [95](#)
 find vs. count in [199](#)
 find vs. lower_bound in [201](#)
 indeterminate traversal order in [87](#)
 iterator invalidation in, see [iterators](#),
[invalidation](#)
 key, casting away constness [99](#)
 value_type typedef [108](#)
 multiple deletes [64](#)
 multiplies [159](#)
 multiset
 constness of elements [95](#)
 corrupting via element modification [97](#)
 find vs. count in [199](#)
 find vs. lower_bound in [201](#)
 indeterminate traversal order in [87](#)
 iterator invalidation in, see [iterators](#),
[invalidation](#)
 keys, modifying [95–100](#)
 multithreading
 allocators and [54](#)
 containers and [58–62](#)
 reference counting and [64–65](#)
 string and [64–65](#)

N

Naran, Siemel [xvi](#)
 newsgroups [xv](#)
 comp.lang.c++.moderated [xv](#)
 comp.std.c++ [xv](#)
 microsoft.public.vc.stl [xv](#)
 node-based containers
 see also [standard associative contain-](#)
[ers](#), [list](#), [slist](#), [hashed containers](#)
 allocators and [52](#)
 clustering in [103](#)
 definition of [13](#)
 nonstandard containers
 see [hashed containers](#), [slist](#), [rope](#)
 not1 [155](#), [156](#), [169](#), [170](#), [172](#), [210](#), [222](#)
 adaptability and [170](#)
 not2 [152](#), [222](#)
 adaptability and [170](#)
 nth_element [133–138](#)
 nulls, embedded [75](#), [154](#)
 <numeric> [157](#)

O

objects
 copying, in containers [20–22](#)
 for locking [60](#)
 slicing [21–22](#), [164](#)
 temporary, created via casts [98](#)
 One True Editor, the, see [Emacs](#)
 operator new, interface,
 vs. allocator::allocate [51](#)
 operator() [5](#)
 declaring const [168](#)
 functor class and [5](#)
 inlining and [202](#)
 overloading
 adaptability and [173](#)
 in functor classes [114](#)
 operator++, side effects in [45](#)
 operator--, forward iterators and [5](#)
 operator. (“operator dot”) [49](#)
 operator<, less and [177–180](#)
 operator>>
 istream_iterators and [126](#)
 sentry objects and [126](#)
 whitespace and [126](#)
 operator[], vs. insert in map [106–111](#)
 optimizations
 algorithms and [183](#)
 function pointers and [203](#)
 inlining and [202](#)
 istreambuf_iterators and [127](#)
 range insertions and [31](#)
 reference counting and [64](#)
 small strings and [71](#)
 stricmp/strcmpi and [154](#)
 to reduce default allocator size [70](#)
 ostream, relation to basic_ostream [230](#)
 ostream_iterators [216](#)
 ostreambuf_iterators [216](#)
 efficiency and [127](#)
 output iterator, definition of [5](#)
 overloading, operator() in functor
 classes [114](#)

P

page faults [102](#), [103](#)
 pair, comparison functions for [104](#)
 parameters
 function objects vs. functions [201–205](#)
 pointers to functions [34](#)
 type, local classes and [189](#)
 parentheses
 ignored, around parameter names [33](#)
 to distinguish function and object
 declarations [35](#)

parse, most vexing in C++ 33–35
 parsing, objects vs. functions 33–35
 partial_sort 133–138
 partial_sum 157
 partition 133–138
 containers of pointers and 145
 remove vs. 141
 pass-by-value
 function objects and 163
 functor classes and 162–166
 penguin 88
 Perfect Woman, see [Woman, Perfect](#)
 performance, see [efficiency](#)
 Persephone xviii
 Pimpl Idiom 165
 placement new 56
 Plauger, P. J. xvi, 114, 227
 pointers
 allocator typedef for 48
 as iterators 120
 as return type from `vector::begin` 75
 assignments, avoiding superfluous 31
 comparison functions for 88–91
 deleting in containers 36–40
 dereferencing function object for 91
 destructors for 36
 invalidation, see [iterators, invalidation](#)
 iterators in vector vs. 75
 parameters, `binary_function` and 172
 parameters, `unary_function` and 172
 returned from `reverse_iterator::base` 125
 smart, see [smart pointers](#)
 to bitfields 80
 to functions, as formal parameters 34
 portability
 #include and 209–210
 casting const iterator to iterators 121
 `container::<auto_ptr>` and 41
 explicit template argument specification and 163
 hashed containers, code using 112
 identity, `project1st`, `project2nd`,
 `compose1`, `compose2`, `select1st`,
 `select2nd` and 219
 multiple compilers and 3
 range construction with
 `istream_iterators` and 35
 `reverse_iterator::base` and 125
 set/multiset key modification and 98
 stateful allocators and 50, 51
 STLport STL implementation and 220
 `stricmp/strcmpi` and 154
 Potter, John xvi, xvii
 predicate class, definition of 166
 predicates
 definition of 166
 need to be pure functions 166–169

predicting iterator invalidation, in vector/
 string 68
 principle of least astonishment, the 179
 priority_queue 138
 as part of the STL 2
 project1st 219
 project2nd 219
 proxy objects 49
 containers of 82
 vector<bool> and 80
 ptr_fun, reasons for 173–177
 pure function, definition of 166
 push_back, `back_inserter` and 130
 push_front, `front_inserter` and 130

Q

qsort 162
 declaration for 162
 sort vs. 203
 queue, as part of the STL 2

R

Rabinowitz, Marty xviii
 random access iterators
 definition of 5
 sorting algorithms requiring 137
 range
 destination, ensuring adequate
 size 129–133
 member functions 25
 input iterators and 29
 single-element versions vs. 24–33
 summary of 31–33
 pointer assignments in list and 31
 sorted, algorithms requiring 146–150
 summarizing 156–161
 raw_storage_iterator 52
 RB trees, see [red-black trees](#)
 rbegin/rend, relation to begin/end 123
 reallocations
 invalidation of iterators during 59
 minimizing via reserve 66–68
 rebinding allocators 53
 red-black trees 190, 191, 214
 redundant computations, avoiding via
 algorithm calls 182
 Reeves, Jack xvi, 227
 reference counting
 disabling, for string 65
 multithreading and 64–65
 smart pointers 39, 146
 see also [Boost, shared_ptr](#)
 string and 64–65

The C++ Standard and 64
 this book and 4

references

- allocator typedef for 48
- casting to 98
- invalidation, see [iterators, invalidation](#)
- parameters, [binary_function](#) and 171
- parameters, [unary_function](#) and 171
- to bitfields 80

reference-to-reference problem 222

remove 139–142

- see also [erase-remove idiom](#)
- on containers of pointers 143–146
- partition vs. 141

[remove_copy_if](#) 44

[remove_if](#) 44, 144, 145

- see also [remove](#)
- possible implementation of 167

[replace_if](#) 186

replacing STL implementations 243

reporting bugs in this book [xii](#)

reserve

- insert iterators and 131
- resize vs. 67

resize

- reallocation and 67
- reserve vs. 67

resource acquisition is initialization 61

resource leaks 36, 39, 63, 144, 145

- avoiding via smart pointers 39, 146
- preventing via classes 61

[result_type](#) 170

return type

- [allocator::allocate](#) vs. [operator new](#) 51
- for [container::begin](#) 75
- for [distance](#) 122
- for [erase](#) 32, 117
- for function objects for [accumulate](#) 158
- for [insert](#) 17, 32, 117
- for [vector::operator\[\]](#) 80

reverse order

- inserting elements in 184

[reverse_iterator](#)

- base member function 123–125
- other iterator types vs. 116–119

rhs, as parameter name 8–9

Rodgers, Mark [xv](#), [xvi](#), [xvii](#)

rolling back, insertions and erasures 14

rope 218

S

Scheme 206

[second_argument_type](#) 170

[select1st](#) 219

[select2nd](#) 219

sentry objects, [operator<<](#) and 126

separate heaps, allocators and 56–58

sequence containers

- see [standard sequence containers](#)

set

- constness of elements 95
- corrupting via element modification 97
- iterator invalidation in, see [iterators, invalidation](#)
- keys, modifying 95–100
- membership test, idiomatic 199

[set_difference](#) 148

[set_intersection](#) 148

[set_symmetric_difference](#) 148, 153

[set_union](#) 148

[sgetc](#) 127

SGI

- hashed containers implementation 114
- iostreams implementation 220
- slist implementation 218
- STL web site 94, 207, 217–220
- thread-safety definition at 58
- URL for 217, 227

shared memory, allocators and 55–56

[shared_ptr](#), see [Boost, shared_ptr](#)

shrink to fit, see [swap trick, the](#)

side effects

- [accumulate](#) and 160
- [for_each](#) and 160
- in [operator++](#) 45

size

- vs. [capacity](#) 66–67
- vs. [empty](#) 23–24

[size_type](#) 158

[sizeof](#), variations when applied to string 69

[skipws](#) 126

slicing problem 21–22, 164

slist 218

small string optimization 71

Smallberg, David [xvi](#), [xvii](#)

smart pointers

- see also [Boost, shared_ptr](#)
- avoiding resource leaks with 39, 146
- dereferencing function object for 91
- implicit conversions and 146

[sort](#) 133–138

- [qsort](#) vs. 203

sorted range

- algorithms requiring 146–150

sorted vectors

- associative containers vs. 100–106
- legacy APIs and 76

sorting

- algorithms for 133–138
- [auto_ptr](#) 41
- consistency and 149

- stability, in sorting 135
- stable_partition 133–138
- stable_sort 133–138
- stack, as part of the STL 2
- Staley, Abbi xviii
- standard associative containers
 - see also [containers](#)
 - bidirectional iterators and 5
 - comparison funcs for pointers 88–91
 - definition of 5
 - “hint” form of insert 100, 110
 - iterator invalidation in, see [iterators, invalidation](#)
 - key_comp member function 85
 - search complexity of 6
 - sorted vector vs. 100–106
 - typical implementation 52, 190
- Standard for C++
 - see [C++ Standard, The](#)
- standard sequence containers
 - see also [containers](#)
 - definition of 5
 - erase’s return value 46
 - iterator invalidation in, see [iterators, invalidation](#)
 - push_back, back_inserter and 130
 - push_front, front_inserter and 130
- Standard Template Library, see [STL](#)
- Stepanov, Alexander 201
- STL
 - algorithms, vs. string member functions 230
 - arrays and 2
 - bitset and 2
 - complexity guarantees in 5–6
 - container adapters and 2
 - containers, selecting among 11–15
 - definition of 2
 - documentation, on-line 217
 - early usage problems with xi
 - extending 2
 - free implementations of 217, 220
 - function call syntax in 175
 - implementations
 - compiler implementations vs. 3
 - Dinkumware bug list for MSVC 244
 - replacing 243
 - member templates in 239–240
 - platform, see [STL platform](#)
 - priority_queue and 2
 - queue and 2
 - stack and 2
 - thread safety and 58–62
 - valarray and 2
 - web sites about 217–223
 - wide-character strings and 4
- STL platform
 - definition of 3
 - Microsoft’s, remarks on 239–244
- STLport 220–221
 - debug mode 185, 216
 - detecting invalidated iterators in 221
 - hashed containers at 112
 - URL for 217
- stricmp 152, 234
 - internationalization issues and 150
 - lexicographical_compare and 153
- strncmpi 154
- streams, relation to string 230
- stricmp 154
- strict weak ordering 94
- string
 - allocators in 69
 - alternatives to 65
 - arrays vs. 63–66
 - as typedef for basic_string 65
 - c_str member function 75
 - comparisons
 - case-insensitive 150–154, 235–237
 - using locales 229–237
 - cost of increasing capacity 66
 - disabling reference counting 65
 - embedded nulls and 75, 154
 - growth factor 66
 - implementation variations 68–73
 - inheriting from 37
 - iterator invalidation in, see [iterators, invalidation](#)
 - iterators as pointers 120
 - legacy APIs and 74–77
 - mem funcs vs. algorithms 230
 - memory layout for 75
 - minimum allocation for 72
 - multithreading and 64–65
 - reference counting and 64–65
 - relation to basic_string 4, 210, 229
 - relation to streams 230
 - reserve, input iterators and 131
 - resize vs. reserve 67
 - shrink to fit 78–79
 - size vs. capacity 66–67
 - size_type typedef 158
 - sizeof, variations in 69
 - small, optimization for 71
 - summing lengths of 158
 - trimming extra capacity from 77–79
 - vector vs. 64
 - vector<char> vs. 65
 - whether reference-counted 65
 - wstring and 4
- string_char_traits 211

strings
 case-insensitive 229–230
 wide-character, see *wstring*
 Stroustrup, Bjarne xvi, 68, 226, 228
 see also *C++ Programming Language, The*
 structs, vs. classes for functor classes 171
 summarizing ranges 156–161
 Sutter, Herb xvi, xvii, 65, 226, 227, 228
 see also *Exceptional C++*
 swap trick, the 77–79

T

templates
 declaring inside functions 188
 explicit argument specification for 122, 163, 234
 instantiating with local classes 189
 member
 in the STL 239–240
 Microsoft’s platforms and 239–244
 parameters, declared via class vs. typename 7
 temporary objects, created via casts 98
 thread safety, in containers 58–62
 see also *multithreading*
 tolower 151
 as inverse of toupper 235
 toupper
 as inverse of tolower 235
 cost of calling 236–237
 traits classes 113, 211, 230
 transactional semantics 14
 transform 129, 186
 traversal order, in multiset, multimap 87
 trees, red-black 190, 191, 214
 typedefs
 allocator::pointer 48
 allocator::reference 48
 argument_type 170
 container::size_type 158
 container::value_type 36
 first_argument_type 170
 for container and iterator types 18–19
 mem_fun and 176
 mem_fun_ref and 176
 ptr_fun and 170
 result_type 170
 second_argument_type 170
 string as 65
 wstring as 65
 typename
 class vs. 7
 dependent types and 7–8

U

unary_function 170–172
 pointer parameters and 172
 reference parameters and 171
 undefined behavior
 accessing v[0] when v is empty 74
 applying some algorithms to ranges of unsorted values 147
 associative container comparison funcs yielding true for equal values 92
 attempting to modify objects defined to be const 99
 changing a set or multiset key 97
 deleting an object more than once 64
 deleting derived object via ptr-to-base with a nonvirtual destructor 38
 detecting via STLport’s debug mode 220–221
 modifying components in std 178
 multithreading and 59
 practical meaning of 3–4
 side effects inside accumulate’s function object 160
 specifying uninitialized memory as destination range for algorithms 132
 using algorithms with inconsistent sort orders 149
 using the wrong form of delete 64
 when using invalidated iterator 27, 45, 46, 185
 underscores, in identifiers 213
 uninitialized_fill 52
 uniq 148
 unique 145, 148, 149
 see also *remove*
 unique_copy 148, 149
 unsigned char, use in <cctype> and <cctype.h> 151
 upper_bound 197–198
 related functions vs. 192–201
 Urbano, Nancy L., see *Perfect Woman*
 URLs
 for Austern’s sample allocator 228
 for auto_ptr update page 228
 for Boost web site 217, 227
 for Dinkumware web site 243
 for *Effective C++ CD* errata list 228
 for *Effective C++* errata list 228
 for *Effective STL* errata list xii
 for Josuttis’ sample allocator 227
 for *More Effective C++* errata list 228
 for Persephone’s web site 71
 for purchasing The C++ Standard 226
 for Scott Meyers’ mailing list xiii
 for Scott Meyers’ web site xiii
 for SGI STL web site 217, 227

- for STLport web site 217
- for this book's errata list xii
- for this book's web site xii
- use_facet 234
 - cost of calling 234
 - explicit template argument specification and 234
- Usenet newsgroups, see [newsgroups](#)

V

- valarray, as part of the STL 2
- value_type typedef
 - in containers 36, 108
 - in iterator_traits 42
- vector
 - see also [vector<bool>](#), [vector<char>](#)
 - arrays vs. 63–66
 - contiguous memory for 74
 - cost of increasing capacity 66
 - growth factor 66
 - iterator invalidation in, see [iterators](#), [invalidation](#)
 - iterators as pointers 120
 - legacy APIs and 74–77
 - reserve, input iterators and 131
 - resize vs. reserve 67
 - return type from begin 75
 - shrink to fit 78–79
 - size vs. capacity 66–67
 - sorted
 - legacy APIs and 76
 - vs. associative containers 100–106
 - string vs. 64
 - trimming extra capacity from 77–79
- vector::insert, as member template 240
- vector<bool>
 - alternatives to 81
 - legacy APIs and 81
 - problems with 79–82
 - proxy objects and 80
- vector<char>, vs. string 65
- virtual functions, toupper and 236–237
- Visual Basic 127
- Visual C++, see [Microsoft's STL platforms](#)
- Vlissides, John 226
 - see also [Design Patterns](#)
- vocabulary, algorithms as 186
- Von, Victor xvii

W

- Wait, John xviii
- wchar_t 4
- web sites
 - see also [URLs](#)
 - for STL-related resources 217–223

- whitespace, operator<< and 126
- wide-character strings, see [wstring](#)
- Widget, use in this book 9
- Wizard of Oz, The* 83
- Woman, Perfect, see [Urbano, Nancy L.](#)
- wombat 88
- workarounds
 - for improperly declared iterator-related functions 119
 - for Microsoft's STL platforms 242–244
 - for missing member templates 242
 - for use_facet 234
 - function objects as 204
- write-only code, avoiding 206–208
- writing the author xii
- wstring
 - as typedef for basic_string 65
 - relation to basic_string 4
 - string and 4
 - this book and 4

Y

- Yelle, Dennis xvii

Z

- Zolman, Leor xvii, 211, 228