# User-Level Dynamic Memory Allocation:

## Malloc and Free

# Dynamic Memory Allocation

- **Allocator maintains heap as collection of variable sized *blocks*, which are either *allocated* or *free***
- **Types of allocators**
  - ***Explicit allocator***: application allocates and frees space
    - E.g., `malloc` and `free` in C
  - ***Implicit allocator:*** application allocates, but does not free space
    - E.g. garbage collection in Java, ML, and Lisp
- **Will discuss simple explicit memory allocation today**

# The `malloc` Package

```
#include <stdlib.h>
```

```
void *malloc(size_t size)
```

- Successful:
  - Returns a pointer to a memory block of at least **`size`** bytes aligned to an 8-byte (x86) or 16-byte (x86-64) boundary
  - If **`size == 0`**, returns NULL
- Unsuccessful: returns NULL (0) and sets **`errno`**

```
void free(void *p)
```

- Returns the block pointed at by **`p`** to pool of available memory
- **`p`** must come from a previous call to **`malloc`** or **`realloc`**

**Other functions**

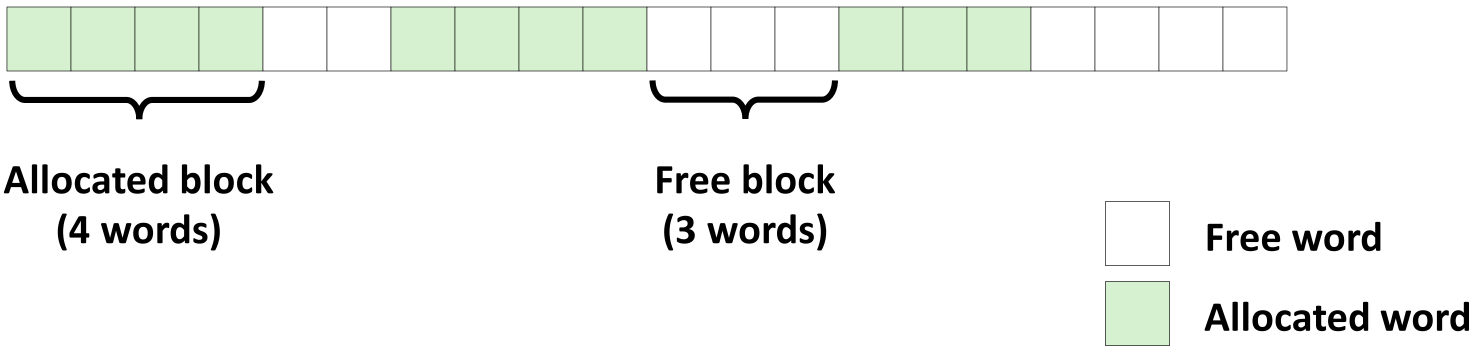
- **`calloc`**: Version of **`malloc`** that initializes allocated block to zero.
- **`realloc`**: Changes the size of a previously allocated block.
- **`sbrk`**: Used internally by allocators to grow or shrink the heap

# malloc Example

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <stdlib.h>

void foo(int n) {
    int i, *p;

    /* Allocate a block of n ints */
    p = (int *) malloc(n * sizeof(int));
    if (p == NULL) {
        perror("malloc");
        exit(0);
    }

    /* Initialize allocated block */
    for (i=0; i<n; i++)
            p[i] = i;


    /* Return allocated block to the heap */
    free(p);
}
```

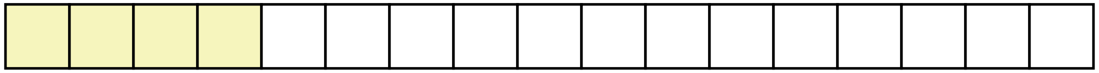
# Assumptions Made in This Lecture

- Memory is word addressed.
- Words are int-sized.

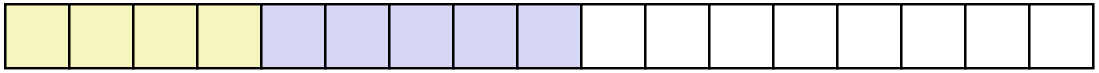


# Allocation Example

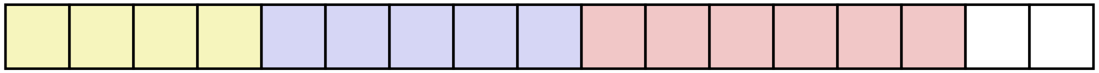
```
p1 = malloc(4)
```



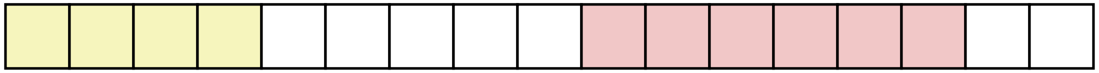
```
p2 = malloc(5)
```



```
p3 = malloc(6)
```



```
free(p2)
```



```
p4 = malloc(2)
```

# Constraints

- **Applications**
  - Can issue arbitrary sequence of **`malloc`** and **`free`** requests
  - **`free`** request must be to a **`malloc`**'d block

- **Allocators**
  - Can't control number or size of allocated blocks
  - Must respond immediately to **`malloc`** requests
    - *i.e.*, can't reorder or buffer requests
  - Must allocate blocks from free memory
    - *i.e.*, can only place allocated blocks in free memory
  - Must align blocks so they satisfy all alignment requirements
    - 8-byte (x86) or 16-byte (x86-64) alignment on Linux boxes
  - Can manipulate and modify only free memory
  - Can't move the allocated blocks once they are **`malloc`**'d
    - *i.e.*, compaction is not allowed

# Performance Goal: Throughput

- **Given some sequence of `malloc` and `free` requests:**
  - $R_0, R_1, ..., R_k, ... , R_{n-1}$

- **Goals: maximize throughput and peak memory utilization**
  - These goals are often conflicting

- **Throughput:**
  - Number of completed requests per unit time
  - Example:
    - 5,000 `malloc` calls and 5,000 `free` calls in 10 seconds
    - Throughput is 1,000 operations/second

# Performance Goal: Peak Memory Utilization

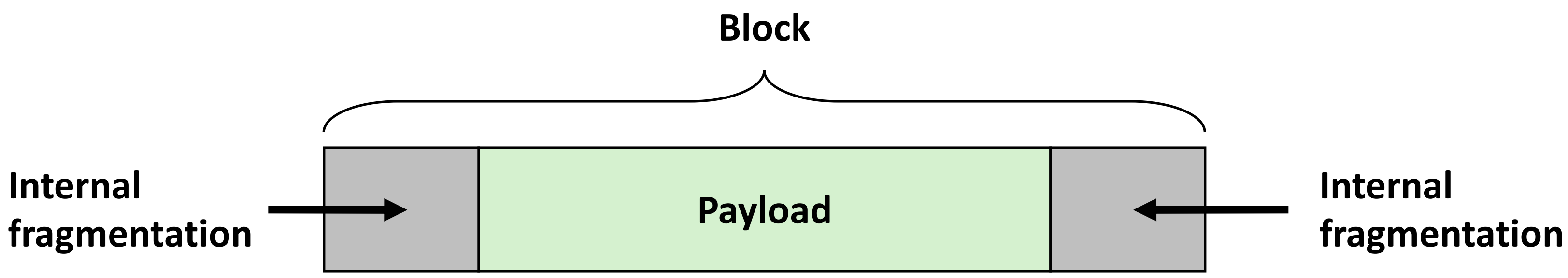
- **Given some sequence of `malloc` and `free` requests:**
  - $R_0, R_1, ..., R_k, ... , R_{n-1}$
- ***Def: Aggregate payload $P_k$***
  - `malloc(p)` results in a block with a ***payload*** of `p` bytes
  - After request $R_k$ has completed, the ***aggregate payload*** $P_k$ is the sum of currently allocated payloads
- ***Def: Current heap size $H_k$***
  - Assume $H_k$ is monotonically nondecreasing
    - i.e., heap only grows when allocator uses `sbrk`
- ***Def: Peak memory utilization after k+1 requests***
  - $U_k = ( max_{i<=k} P_i ) / H_k$

# Fragmentation

- **Poor memory utilization caused by *fragmentation***
  - *internal* fragmentation
  - *external* fragmentation

# Internal Fragmentation

- **For a given block, *internal fragmentation* occurs if payload is smaller than block size**



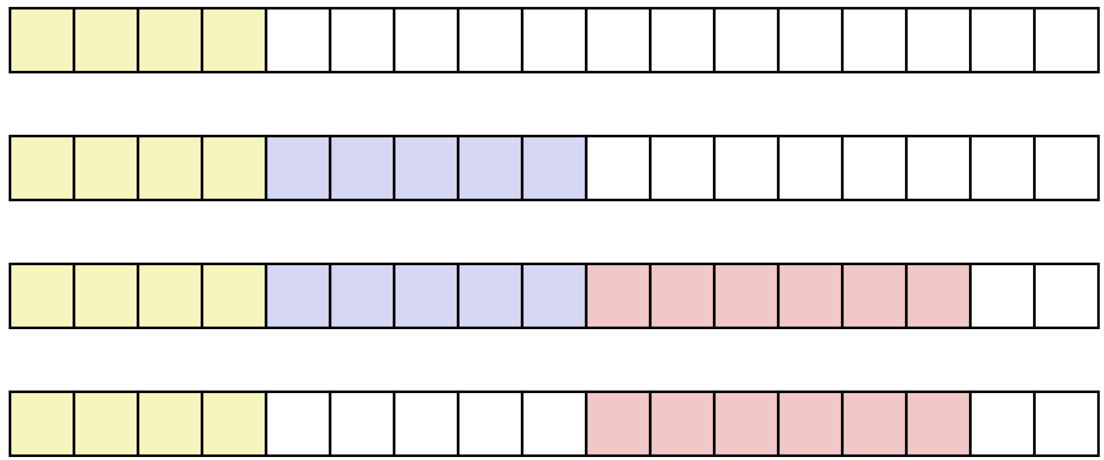

- **Caused by**
  - Overhead of maintaining heap data structures
  - Padding for alignment purposes
  - Explicit policy decisions
    (e.g., to return a big block to satisfy a small request)

- **Depends only on the pattern of *previous* requests**
  - Thus, easy to measure

# External Fragmentation

- **Occurs when there is enough aggregate heap memory, but no single free block is large enough**

```
p1 = malloc(4)

p2 = malloc(5)

p3 = malloc(6)

free(p2)

p4 = malloc(6)
```



***Oops! (what would happen now?)***

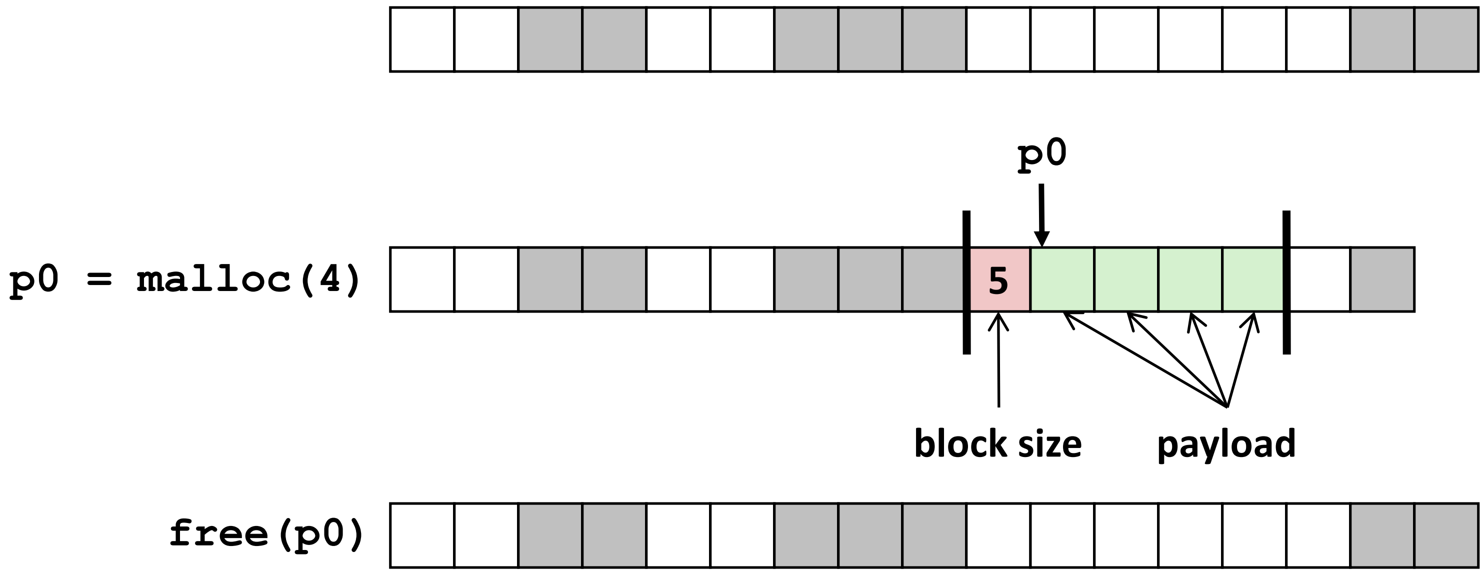
- **Depends on the pattern of future requests**
  - Thus, difficult to measure

# Implementation Issues

- How do we know how much memory to free given just a pointer?
- How do we keep track of the free blocks?
- What do we do with the extra space when allocating a structure that is smaller than the free block it is placed in?
- How do we pick a block to use for allocation -- many might fit?
- How do we reinsert freed block?

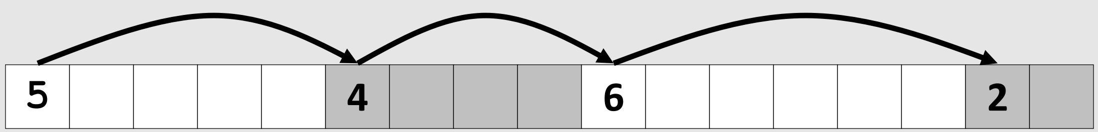
# Knowing How Much to Free

- **Standard method**
  - Keep the length of a block in the word preceding the block.
    - This word is often called the ***header field*** or ***header***
  - Requires an extra word for every allocated block

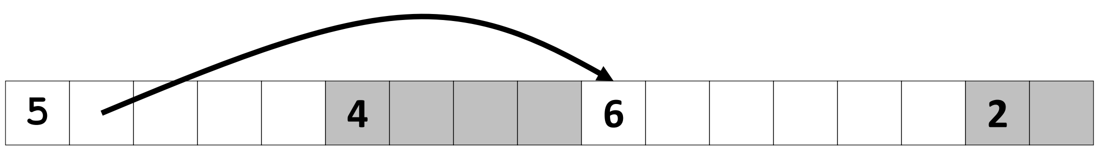


# Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- **Method 1: *Implicit list* using length—links all blocks**




- **Method 2: *Explicit list* among the free blocks using pointers**



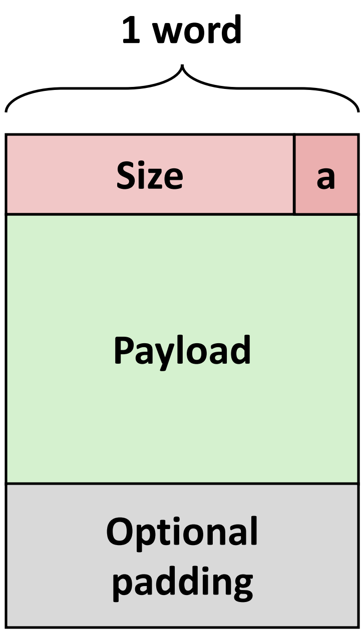

- **Method 3: *Segregated free list***
  - Different free lists for different size classes

- **Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size***
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

# Method 1: Implicit List

- **For each block we need both size and allocation status**
  - Could store this information in two words: wasteful!
- **Standard trick**
  - If blocks are aligned, some low-order address bits are always 0
  - Instead of storing an always-0 bit, use it as a allocated/free flag
  - When reading size word, must mask out this bit

*Format of allocated and free blocks*

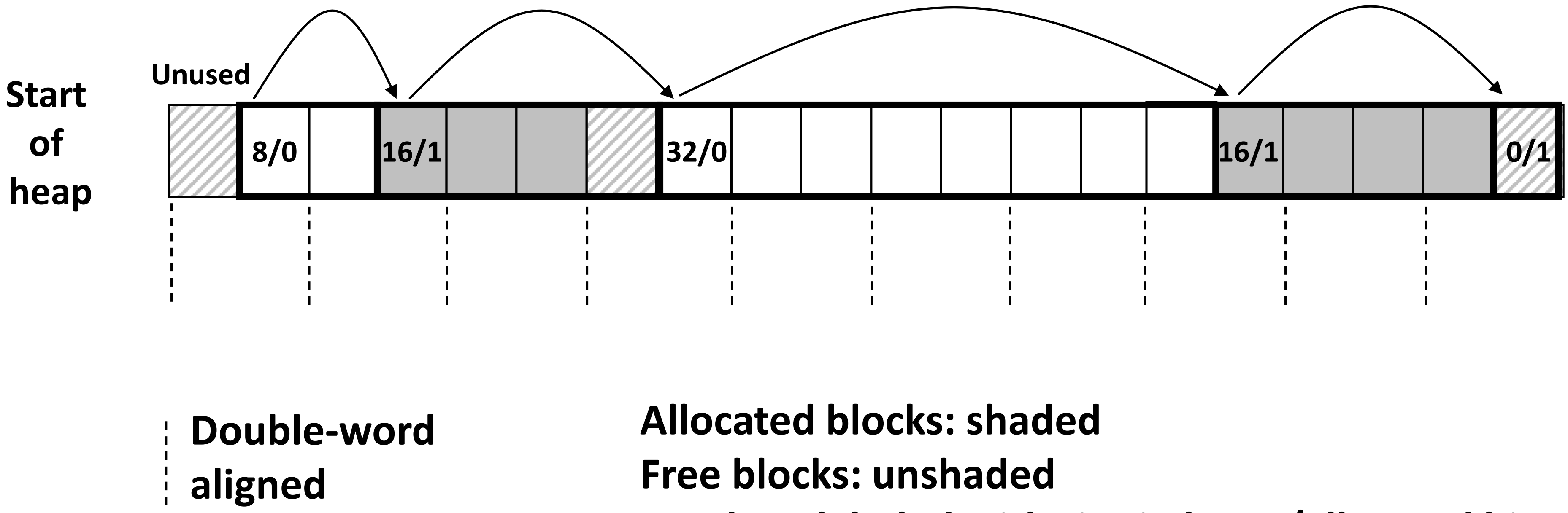



**a = 1: Allocated block**
**a = 0: Free block**

**Size: block size**

**Payload: application data (allocated blocks only)**

# Detailed Implicit Free List Example




**Allocated blocks: shaded**
**Free blocks: unshaded**
**Headers: labeled with size in bytes/allocated bit**

# Implicit List: Finding a Free Block

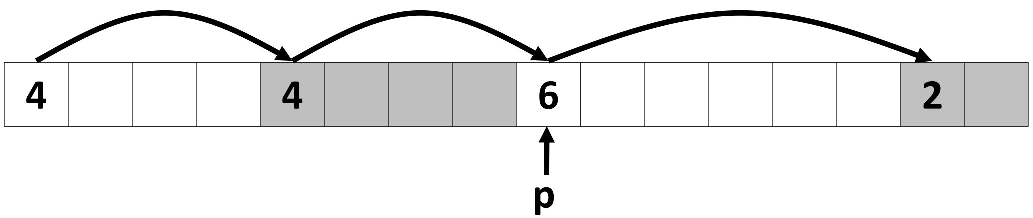
- ***First fit:***
  - Search list from beginning, choose ***first*** free block that fits:

```
p = start;
while ((p < end) &&      \\ not passed end
       ((*p & 1) ||      \\ already allocated
       (*p  <= len)))    \\ too small
  p = p + (*p & -2);     \\ goto next block (word addressed)
```

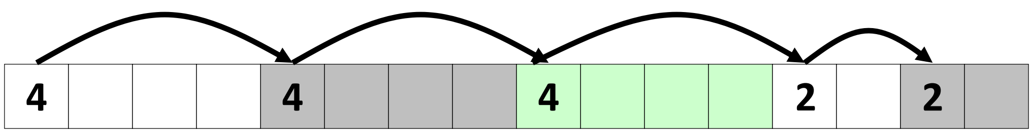
  - Can take linear time in total number of blocks (allocated and free)
  - In practice it can cause “splinters” at beginning of list
- ***Next fit:***
  - Like first fit, but search list starting where previous search finished
  - Should often be faster than first fit: avoids re-scanning unhelpful blocks
  - Some research suggests that fragmentation is worse
- ***Best fit:***
  - Search the list, choose the ***best*** free block: fits, with fewest bytes left over
  - Keeps fragments small—usually improves memory utilization
  - Will typically run slower than first fit

# Implicit List: Allocating in Free Block

- **Allocating in a free block: *splitting***
  - Since allocated space might be smaller than free space, we might want to split the block




`addblock(p, 4)`



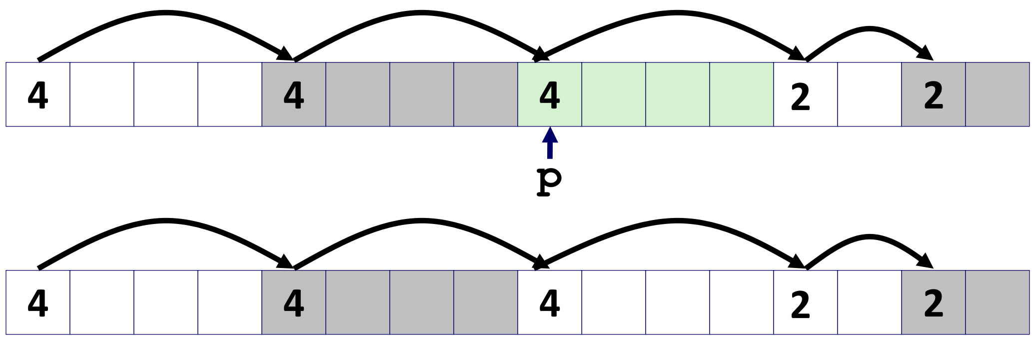

```
void addblock(ptr p, int len) {
  int newsize = ((len + 1) >> 1) << 1;  // round up to even
  int oldsize = *p & -2;                // mask out low bit
  *p = newsize | 1;                     // set new length
  if (newsize < oldsize)
    *(p+newsize) = oldsize - newsize;   // set length in remaining
}                                       //   part of block
```

# Implicit List: Freeing a Block

- **Simplest implementation:**
  - Need only clear the "allocated" flag

```
void free_block(ptr p) { *p = *p & -2 }
```

  - But can lead to "false fragmentation"



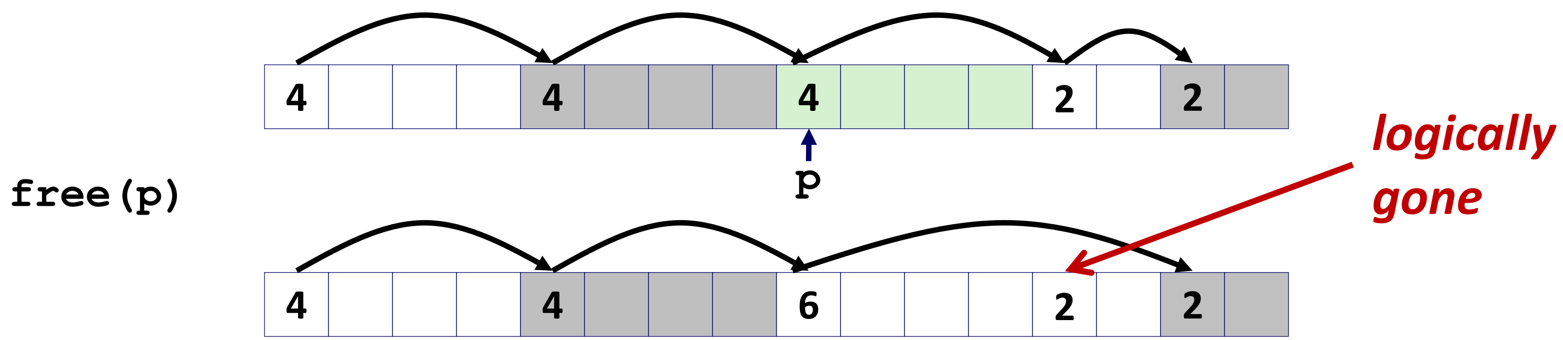

`free(p)`

`malloc(5)` ***Oops!***

***There is enough free space, but the allocator won't be able to find it***

# Implicit List: Coalescing

- **Join *(coalesce)* with next/previous blocks, if they are free**
  - Coalescing with next block

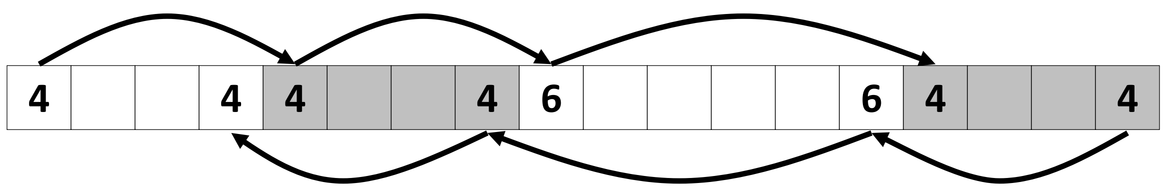



```
void free_block(ptr p) {
    *p = *p & -2;            // clear allocated flag
    next = p + *p;           // find next block
    if ((*next & 1) == 0)
      *p = *p + *next;       // add to this block if
}                            //    not allocated
```

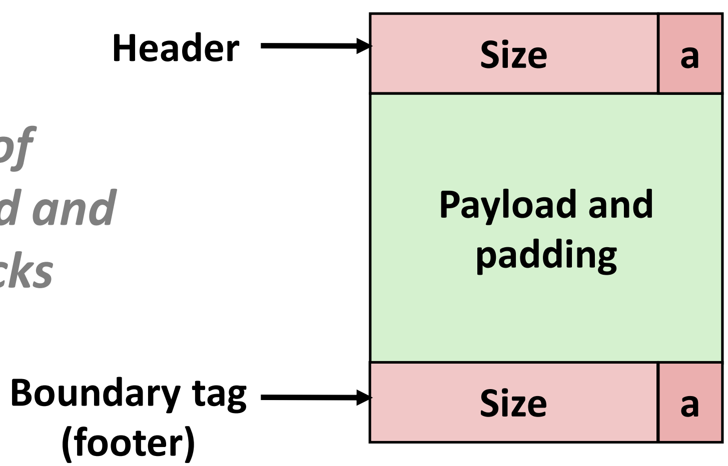
  - But how do we coalesce with *previous* block?

# Implicit List: Bidirectional Coalescing

- ***Boundary tags*** [Knuth73]
  - Replicate size/allocated word at "bottom" (end) of free blocks
  - Allows us to traverse the "list" backwards, but requires extra space
  - Important and general technique!




*Format of allocated and free blocks*




**a = 1: Allocated block**
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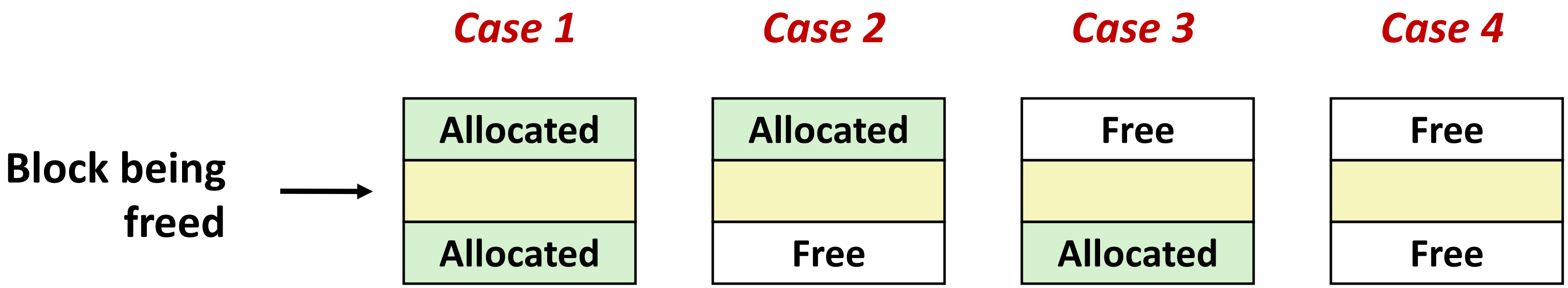
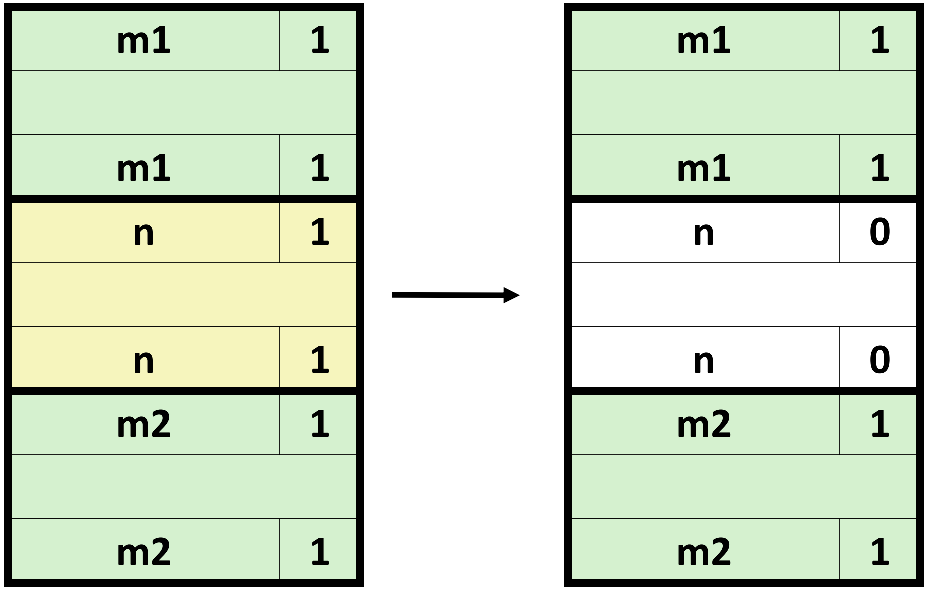
**Size: Total block size**

**Payload: Application data (allocated blocks only)**

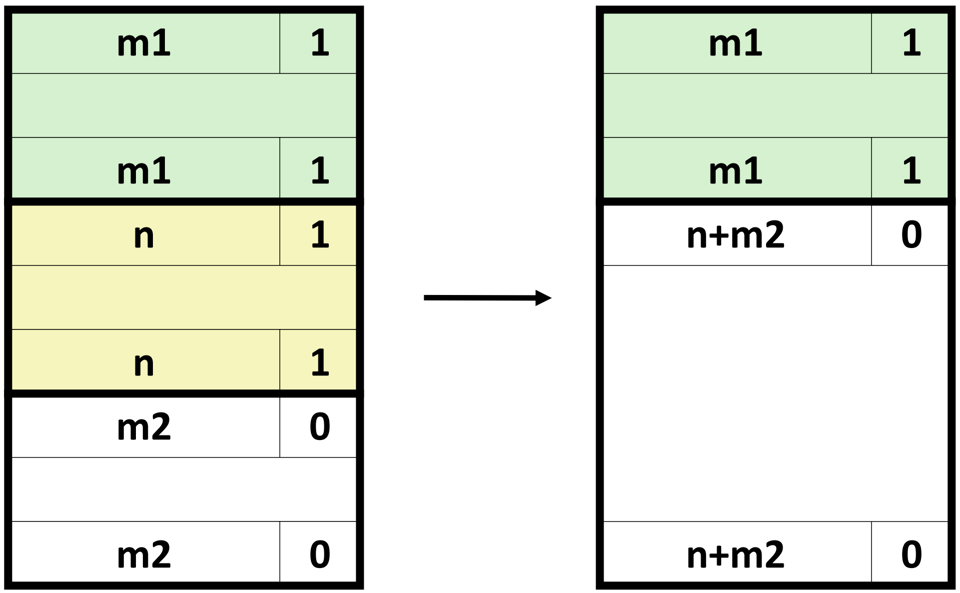
# Constant Time Coalescing



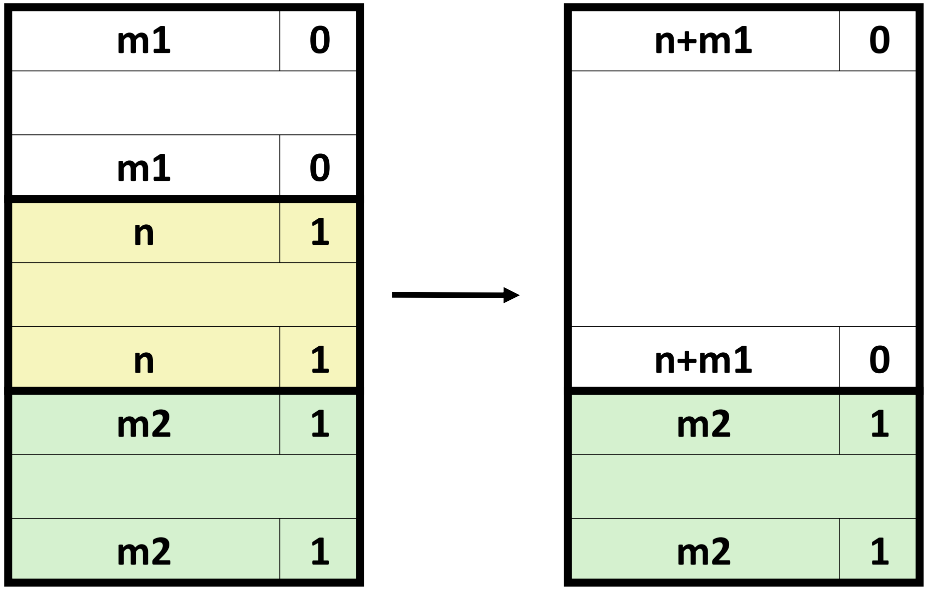
# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 1)



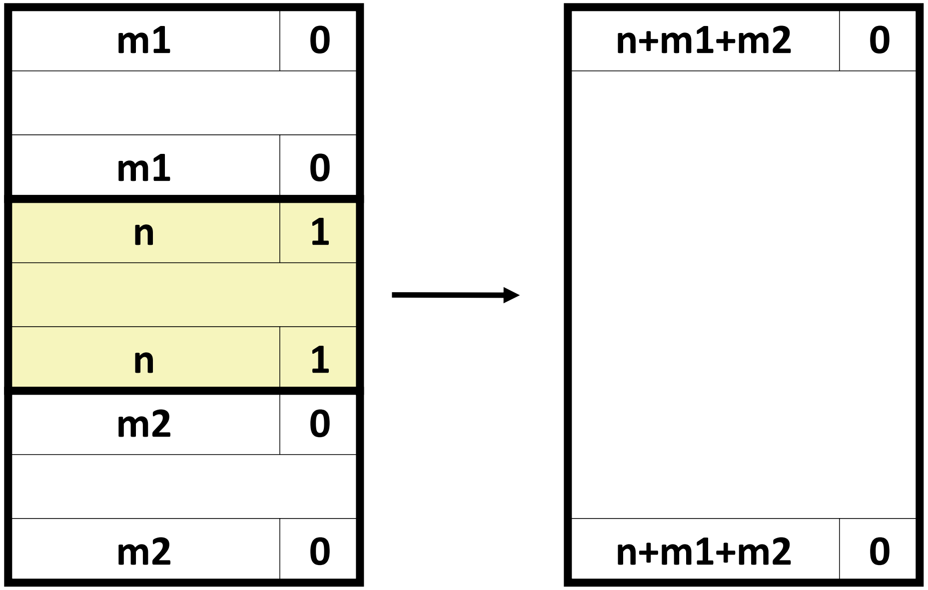
# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 2)



# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 3)



# Constant Time Coalescing (Case 4)



# Disadvantages of Boundary Tags

- **Internal fragmentation**

- **Can it be optimized?**
  - Which blocks need the footer tag?
  - What does that mean?

# Summary of Key Allocator Policies

- **Placement policy:**
  - First-fit, next-fit, best-fit, etc.
  - Trades off lower throughput for less fragmentation
  - ***Interesting observation***: segregated free lists (next lecture) approximate a best fit placement policy without having to search entire free list
- **Splitting policy:**
  - When do we go ahead and split free blocks?
  - How much internal fragmentation are we willing to tolerate?
- **Coalescing policy:**
  - ***Immediate coalescing:*** coalesce each time **`free`** is called
  - ***Deferred coalescing:*** try to improve performance of **`free`** by deferring coalescing until needed. Examples:
    - Coalesce as you scan the free list for **`malloc`**
    - Coalesce when the amount of external fragmentation reaches some threshold

# Implicit Lists: Summary

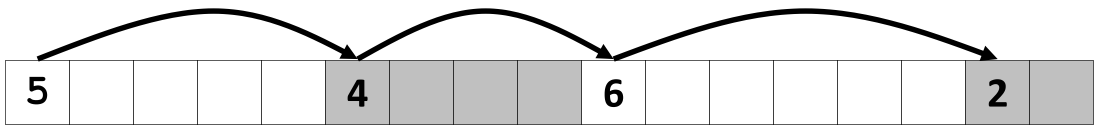
- **Implementation: very simple**
- **Allocate cost:**
  - linear time worst case
- **Free cost:**
  - constant time worst case
  - even with coalescing
- **Memory usage:**
  - will depend on placement policy
  - First-fit, next-fit or best-fit

- **Not used in practice for `malloc/free` because of linear-time allocation**
  - used in many special purpose applications

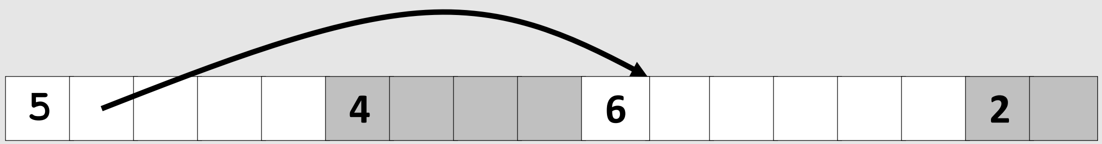
- **However, the concepts of splitting and boundary tag coalescing are general to *all* allocators**

# Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- **Method 1: *Implicit free list* using length—links all blocks**

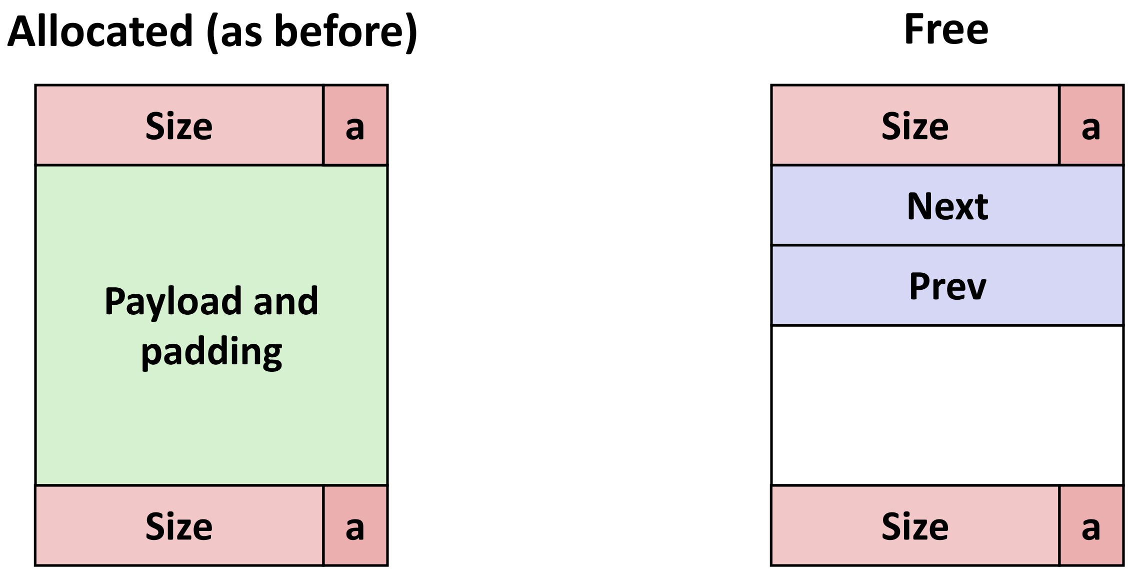



- **Method 2: *Explicit free list* among the free blocks using pointers**




- **Method 3: *Segregated free list***
  - Different free lists for different size classes
- **Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size***
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

# Explicit Free Lists

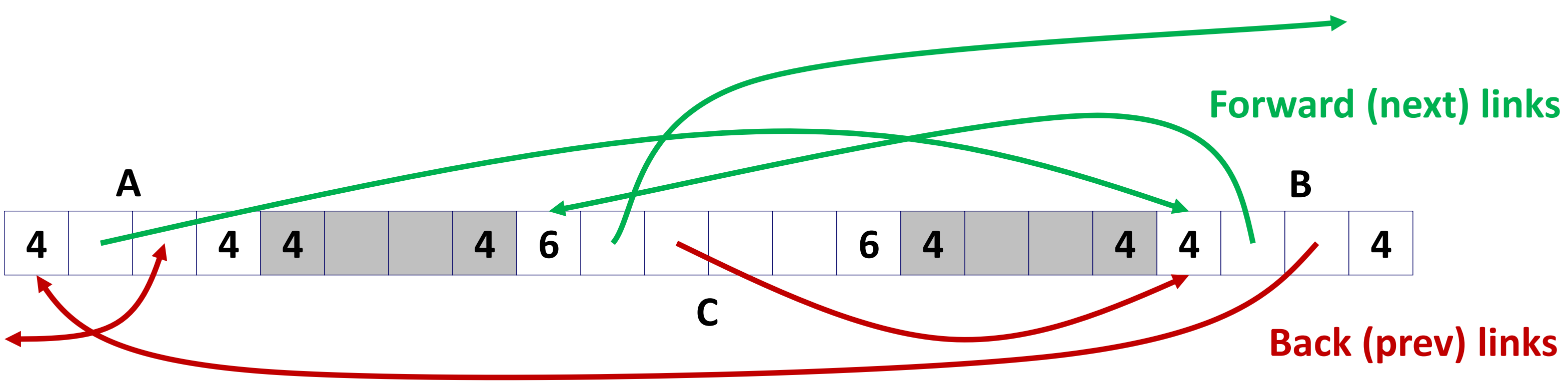



- Maintain list(s) of ***free*** blocks, not ***all*** blocks
  - The "next" free block could be anywhere
    - So we need to store forward/back pointers, not just sizes
  - Still need boundary tags for coalescing
  - Luckily we track only free blocks, so we can use payload area

# Explicit Free Lists

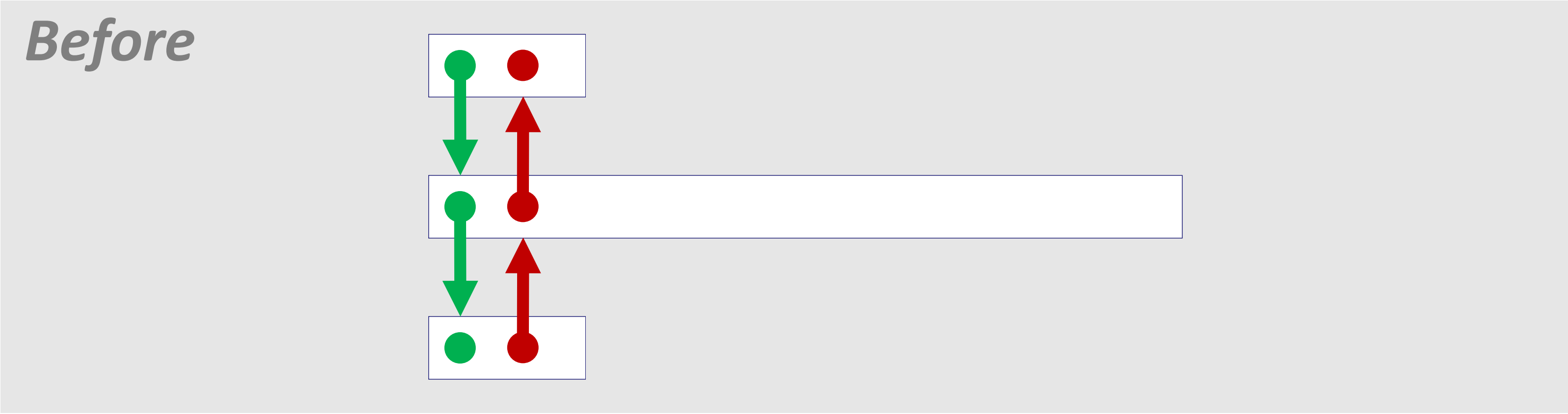
- **Logically:**

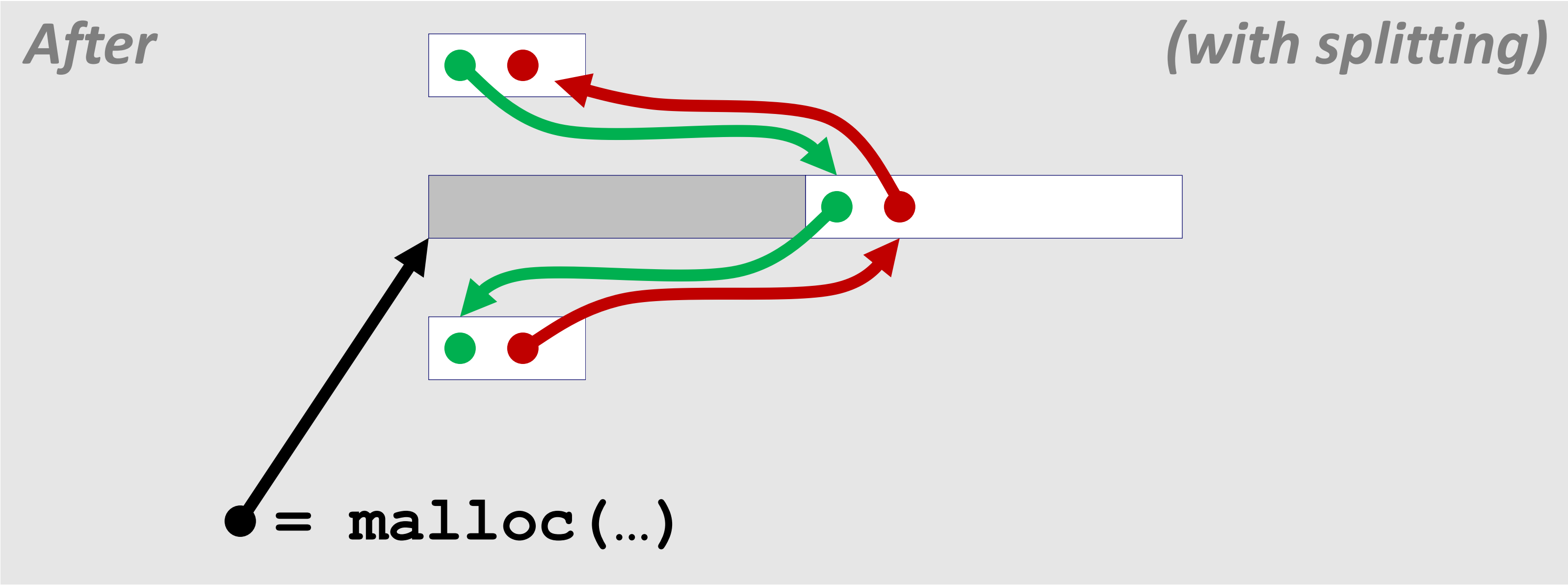

- **Physically: blocks can be in any order**



# Allocating From Explicit Free Lists

conceptual graphic



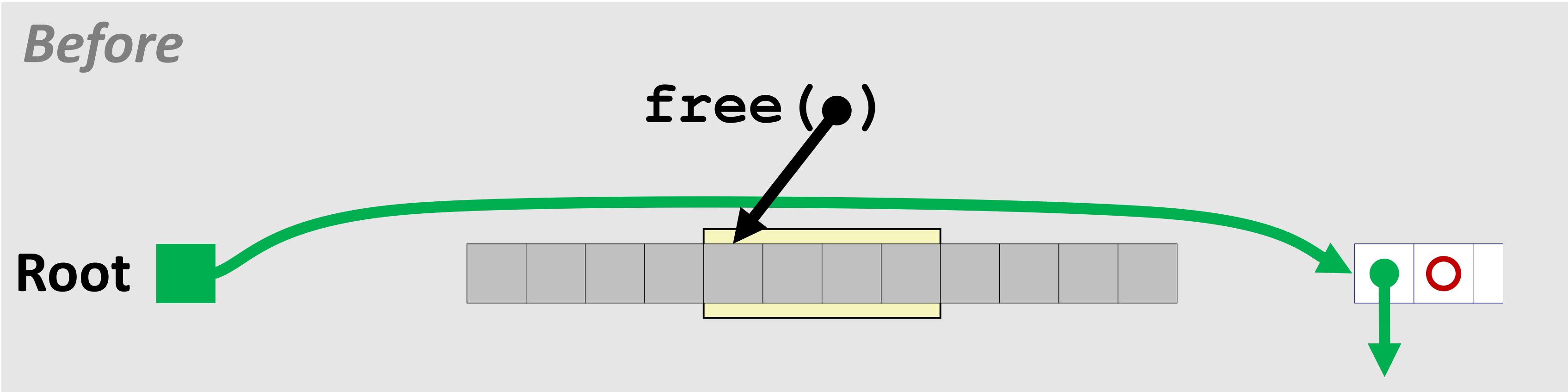
# Freeing With Explicit Free Lists

- ***Insertion policy*: Where in the free list do you put a newly freed block?**
- **LIFO (last-in-first-out) policy**
  - Insert freed block at the beginning of the free list
  - ***Pro:*** simple and constant time
  - ***Con:*** studies suggest fragmentation is worse than address ordered
- **Address-ordered policy**
  - Insert freed blocks so that free list blocks are always in address order:

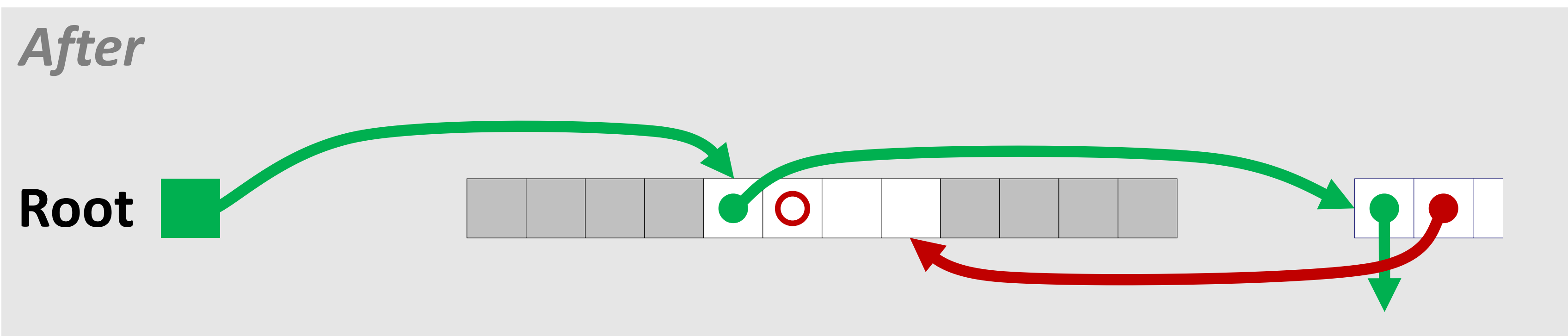
    *addr(prev) < addr(curr) < addr(next)*
  - ***Con:*** requires search
  - ***Pro:*** studies suggest fragmentation is lower than LIFO

# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 1)

conceptual graphic

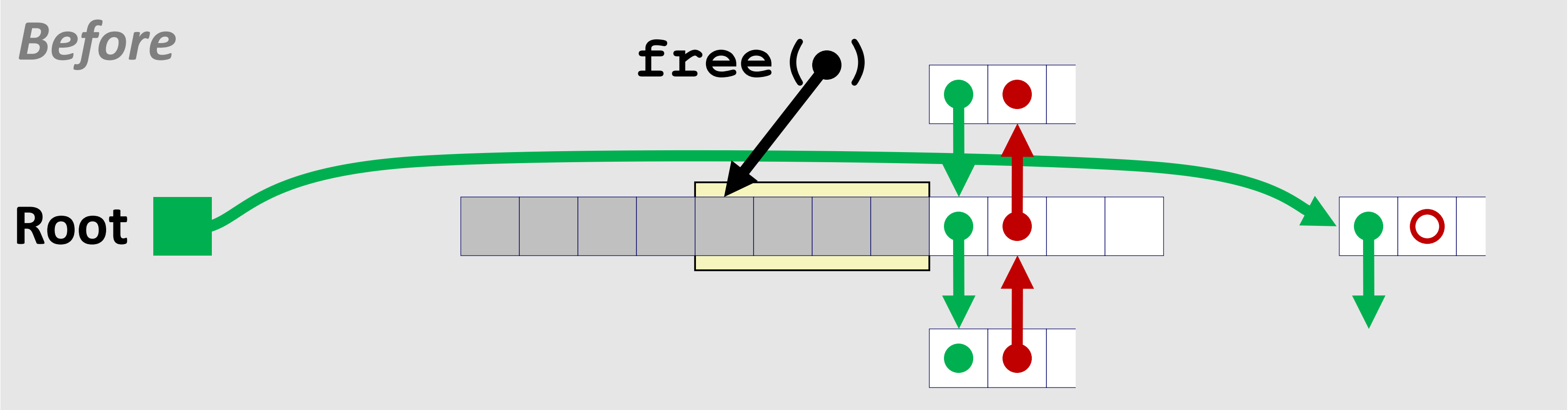



- Insert the freed block at the root of the list

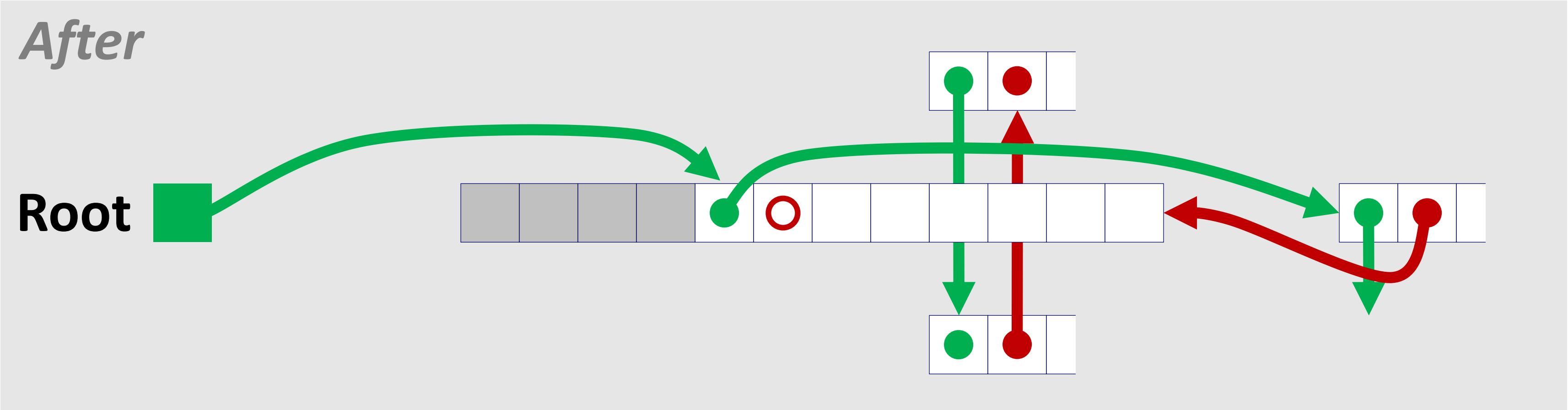


# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 2)

conceptual graphic

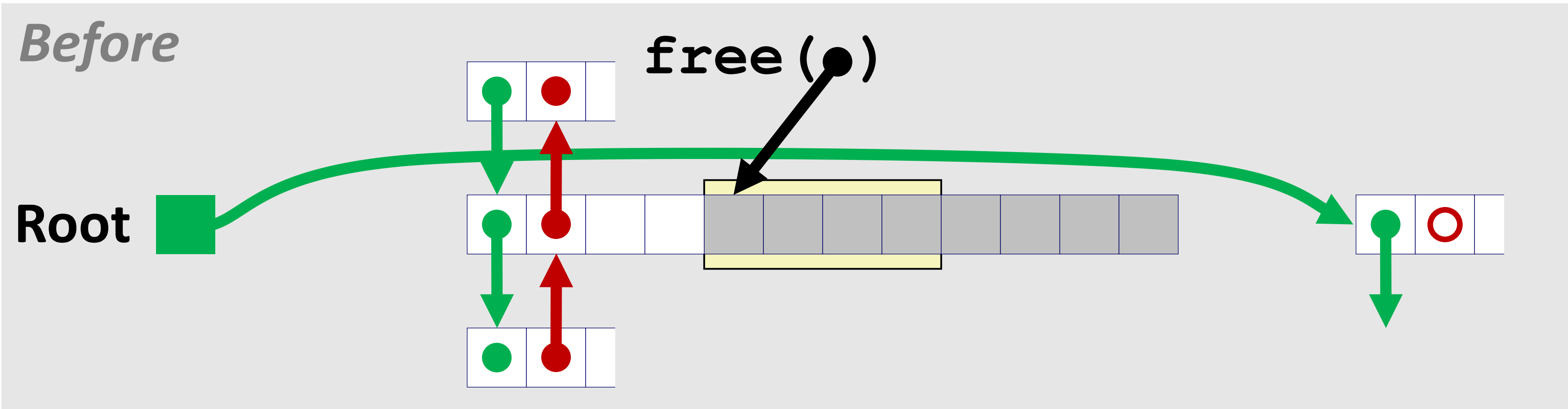



- Splice out successor block, coalesce both memory blocks and insert the new block at the root of the list

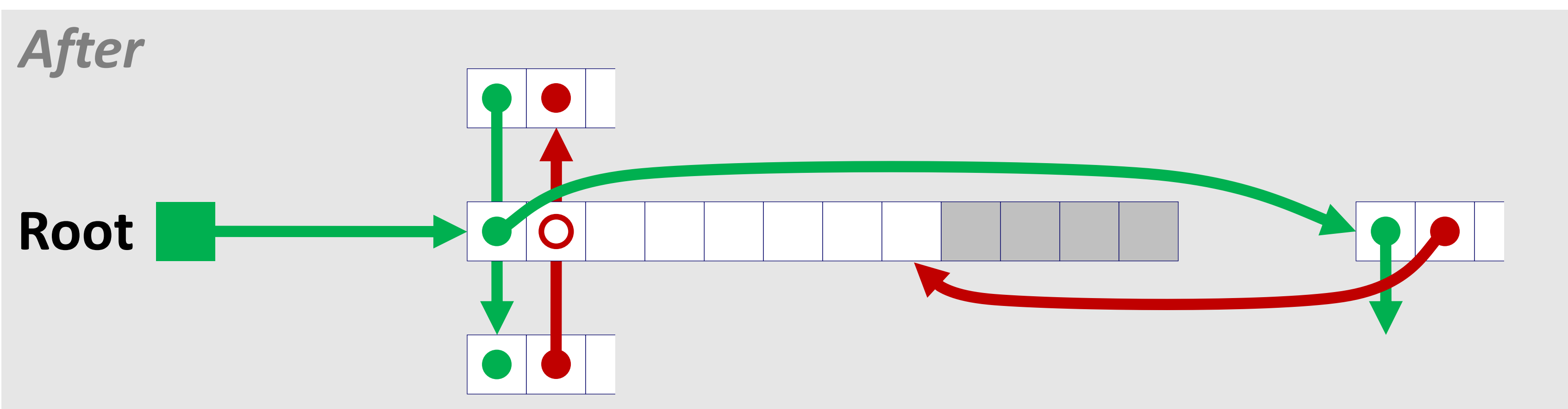


# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 3)

conceptual graphic

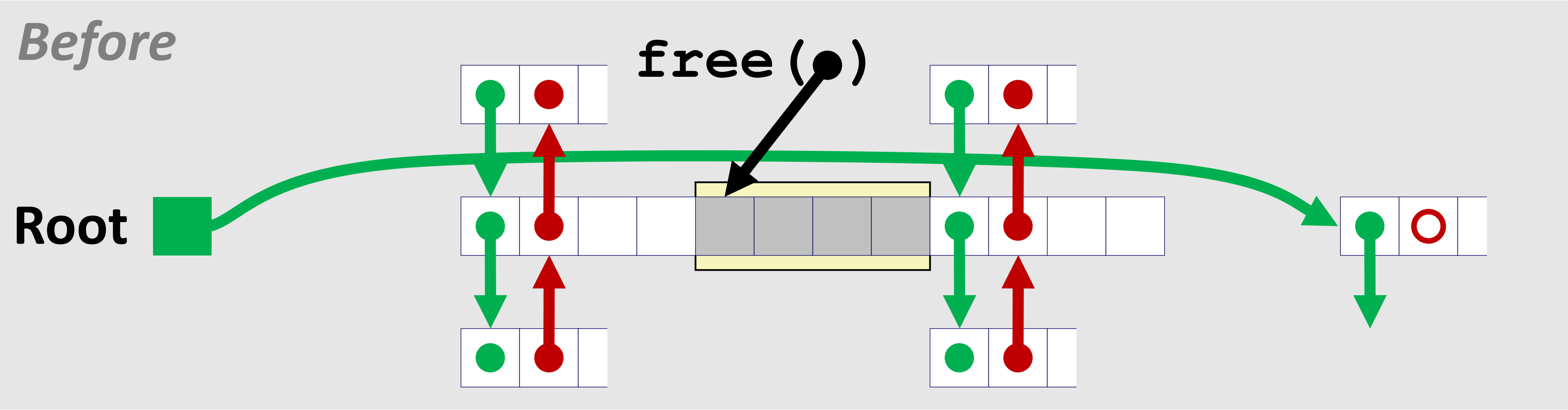



- Splice out predecessor block, coalesce both memory blocks, and insert the new block at the root of the list

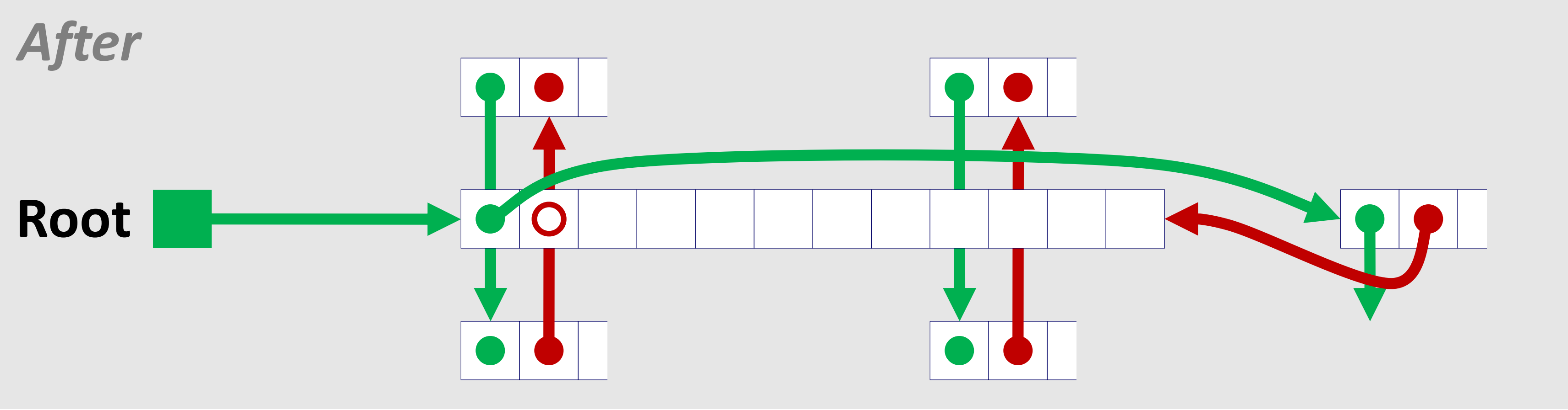


# Freeing With a LIFO Policy (Case 4)

conceptual graphic




- Splice out predecessor and successor blocks, coalesce all 3 memory blocks and insert the new block at the root of the list



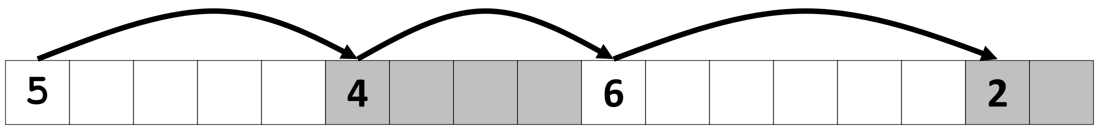
# Explicit List Summary

- **Comparison to implicit list:**
  - Allocate is linear time in number of ***free*** blocks instead of ***all*** blocks
    - ***Much faster*** when most of the memory is full
  - Slightly more complicated allocate and free since needs to splice blocks in and out of the list
  - Some extra space for the links (2 extra words needed for each block)
    - Does this increase internal fragmentation?

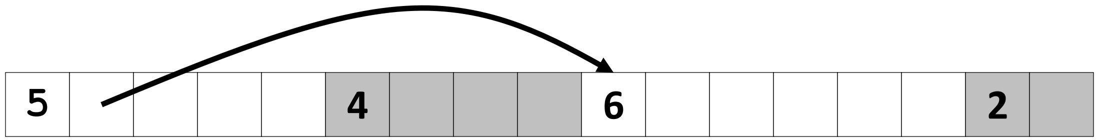
- **Most common use of linked lists is in conjunction with segregated free lists**
  - Keep multiple linked lists of different size classes, or possibly for different types of objects

# Keeping Track of Free Blocks

- **Method 1: *Implicit list* using length—links all blocks**




- **Method 2: *Explicit list* among the free blocks using pointers**

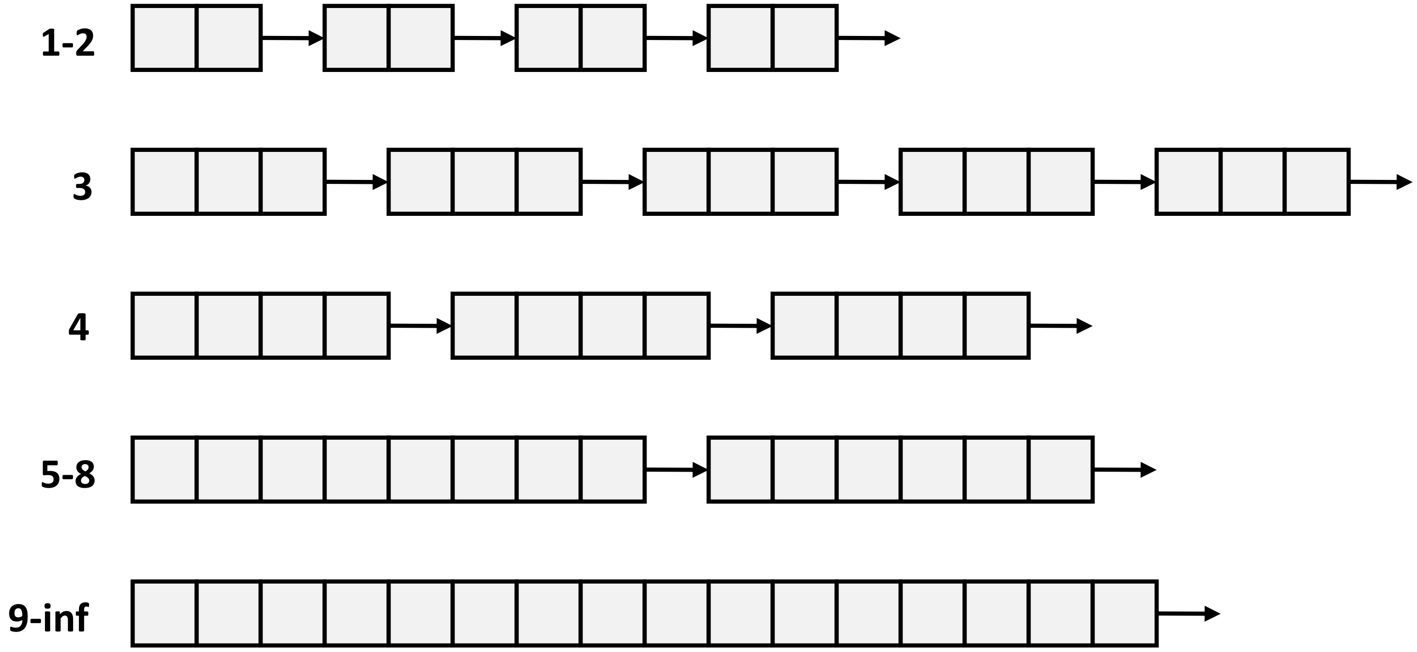



- **Method 3: *Segregated free list***
  - Different free lists for different size classes

- **Method 4: *Blocks sorted by size***
  - Can use a balanced tree (e.g. Red-Black tree) with pointers within each free block, and the length used as a key

# Segregated List (Seglist) Allocators

- Each ***size class*** of blocks has its own free list




- Often have separate classes for each small size
- For larger sizes: One class for each two-power size

# Seglist Allocator

- **Given an array of free lists, each one for some size class**

- **To allocate a block of size *n*:**
  - Search appropriate free list for block of size *m* > *n*
  - If an appropriate block is found:
    - Split block and place fragment on appropriate list (optional)
  - If no block is found, try next larger class
  - Repeat until block is found

- **If no block is found:**
  - Request additional heap memory from OS (using `sbrk()`)
  - Allocate block of *n* bytes from this new memory
  - Place remainder as a single free block in largest size class.

# Seglist Allocator (cont.)

- **To free a block:**
  - Coalesce and place on appropriate list
- **Advantages of seglist allocators**
  - Higher throughput
    - log time for power-of-two size classes
  - Better memory utilization
    - First-fit search of segregated free list approximates a best-fit search of entire heap.
    - Extreme case: Giving each block its own size class is equivalent to best-fit.

# More Info on Allocators

- **D. Knuth, “*The Art of Computer Programming*”, 2nd edition, Addison Wesley, 1973**
  - The classic reference on dynamic storage allocation

- **Wilson et al, “*Dynamic Storage Allocation: A Survey and Critical Review*”, Proc. 1995 Int’l Workshop on Memory Management, Kinross, Scotland, Sept, 1995.**
  - Comprehensive survey
  - Available from CS:APP student site (csapp.cs.cmu.edu)