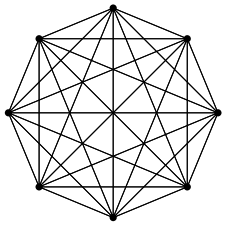
Chapter 22

Conditional Execution



In addition to the capabilities of R described so far, R also contains standard programming language capabilities, as outlined in the next three chapters. This chapter introduces *conditional execution*; the next chapter introduces *looping*; the subsequent chapter introduces *recursion*. The topics considered in this chapter are (a) the `if` statement, and (b) applications of conditional execution.

An *algorithm* is a step-by-step procedure for performing a task, such as baking a cake. On a computer, algorithms are generally associated with calculations or data manipulation. The programming capabilities that will be introduced in this chapter and the next two chapters can be used to define an algorithm as a sequence of instructions for problem solving. Many programmers like to draw out the algorithm using a flow chart or d-chart prior to coding up the algorithm in a particular language. This important step of planning is encouraged, particularly for large or complicated algorithms. R supports *structured programming*, which enhances program clarity; indenting R commands contained within an `if` statement or a loop is consistent with structured programming.

22.1 The `if` statement

This chapter introduces conditional execution via the `if` statement, which is a generalization of the `ifelse` function from Section 13.2. The syntax for the `if` statement in its simplest form is

```
if (condition) command
```

The `condition` is a single logical value (a vector of length one whose element is `logical`) or if `condition` is numeric, then 0 is `FALSE` and nonzero is `TRUE`. The execution of the `if` statement in this simplest form is that if the `condition` is `TRUE`, then the `command` will be executed. If the `condition` is `FALSE`, then the `command` will not be executed. If the `condition` or the `command` is lengthy, it is acceptable to write the `if` statement involving a single command in the form

```
if (condition)
  command
```

These forms of the `if` statement work fine if there is just a single command to be executed. But if there are two or more commands to be executed, the syntax is

```
if (condition) {
  commands
}
```

It is good programming practice to left-align all of the R commands contained in the curly braces and to indent them two spaces (some programmers prefer four spaces, but whatever you choose, be consistent) as shown above for readability. This practice also emphasizes the logical structure of the program. The curly braces serve as delimiters to enclose the R commands that are to be executed if the `condition` is `TRUE`. R uses the + continuation prompt as the R commands are entered from the keyboard, then returns to the > prompt after the closing curly brace has been entered.

It is oftentimes the case that there are also one or more commands that should be executed if the condition is `FALSE`. If there is just a single command to be executed when the `condition` is `TRUE` and another single command to be executed when the `condition` is `FALSE`, then the `if` statement can be written on a single line with the syntax

```
if (condition) command1 else command2
```

If the `condition` is `TRUE`, `command1` will be executed; if the `condition` is `FALSE`, `command2` will be executed. When there are two or more commands to execute when the `condition` is `TRUE` or `FALSE`, the curly braces are again used to enclose the commands:

```
if (condition) {
  commands1
}
else {
  commands2
}
```

It is good programming practice to left-align all of the R commands within each block of R commands and indent two spaces for readability. This particular style is fine when the R code has been stored in a file and is being executed with the `source` function. But if you are keying in the code line-by-line, R will assume that the `if` statement has concluded when it encounters the first closing curly brace. So when keying these commands into an R session, the syntax is

```
if (condition) {
  commands1
} else {
  commands2
}
```

We begin the illustration of the use of the `if` statement with a simple example that prints the character string `"x is negative"` when `x` assumes a negative value.

```
> x = -3
> if (x < 0) print("x is negative")
[1] "x is negative"
```

The condition `x < 0` evaluates to `TRUE` because `x = -3`, so the call to the `print` function gets executed.

As a second example, an `if` statement is used to replace `x` by its opposite if it is negative. The R commands to accomplish this are

```
> x = -3
> if (x < 0) x = -x
> x
[1] 3
```