C Recursion

Recursion

Recursion is the technique of making a function call itself. This technique provides a way to break complicated problems down into simple problems which are easier to solve.

Recursion may be a bit difficult to understand. The best way to figure out how it works is to experiment with it.

Recursion Example

Adding two numbers together is easy to do, but adding a range of numbers is more complicated. In the following example, recursion is used to add a range of numbers together by breaking it down into the simple task of adding two numbers:

Example

```
int sum(int k);

int main() {
  int result = sum(10);
  printf("%d", result);
  return 0;
}

int sum(int k) {
  if (k > 0) {
    return k + sum(k - 1);
  } else {
    return 0;
  }
}
```

Example Explained

When the `sum()` function is called, it adds parameter `k` to the sum of all numbers smaller than `k` and returns the result. When k becomes 0, the function just returns 0. When running, the program follows these steps:

```
10 + sum(9)
10 + ( 9 + sum(8) )
10 + ( 9 + ( 8 + sum(7) ) )
...
10 + 9 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1 + sum(0)
10 + 9 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1 + 0
```

Since the function does not call itself when `k` is 0, the program stops there and returns the result.

The developer should be very careful with recursion as it can be quite easy to slip into writing a function which never terminates, or one that uses excess amounts of memory or processor power. However, when written correctly recursion can be a very efficient and mathematically-elegant approach to programming.