The Simplified Master Method for Solving Recurrences

Consider recurrences of the form

$$T(n) = aT(n/b) + n^c$$

for constants $a \geq 1$, $b > 1$, and $c \geq 0$. Recurrences of this form include *mergesort*,

$$T(n) = 2T(n/2) + n,$$

Strassen's algorithm for matrix multiplication,

$$T(n) = 7T(n/2) + n^2,$$

binary search,

$$T(n) = T(n/2) + 1,$$

and so on.

We can solve the general form of this recurrence via iteration. Rewriting the recurrence with the recursive component *last* and using a generic parameter not to be confused with n, we obtain:

$$T(\square) = \square^c + aT(\square/b) \tag{1}$$

Since our pattern (Equation 1) is valid for any value of $\square$, we may use it to "iterate" the recurrence as follows.

$$\begin{aligned}
T(n) &= n^c + aT(n/b) \\
&= n^c + a\left[(n/b)^c + a\,T(n/b^2)\right] \\
&= n^c + a(n/b)^c + a^2\,T(n/b^2) \\
&= n^c + a(n/b)^c + a^2\left[(n/b^2)^c + a\,T(n/b^3)\right] \\
&= n^c + a(n/b)^c + a^2(n/b^2)^c + a^3\,T(n/b^3) \\
&= n^c + a(n/b)^c + a^2(n/b^2)^c + a^3\left[(n/b^3)^c + a\,T(n/b^4)\right] \\
&= n^c + a(n/b)^c + a^2(n/b^2)^c + a^3(n/b^3)^c + a^4\,T(n/b^4)
\end{aligned}$$

Pulling out the n^c term common in each of the first four factors, we may simplify this expression and obtain a pattern as follows.

$$\begin{aligned}
T(n) &= n^c + n^c(a/b^c) + n^c(a/b^c)^2 + n^c(a/b^c)^3 + a^4\,T(n/b^4) \\
&\vdots \\
&= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{k-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^k\,T(n/b^k)
\end{aligned}$$

We will next show that the pattern we have established is correct, by induction.

Claim 1 *For all $k \geq 1$, $T(n) = n^c \sum_{j=0}^{k-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^k\,T(n/b^k)$.*

Proof: The proof is by induction on k. The base case, $k = 1$, is trivially true since the resulting equation matches the original recurrence. For the inductive step, assume that the statement is true for $k = i - 1$; i.e.,

$$T(n) = n^c \sum_{j=0}^{i-2} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^{i-1}\, T(n/b^{i-1}).$$

Our task is then to show that the statement is true for $k = i$; i.e.,

$$T(n) = n^c \sum_{j=0}^{i-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^i\, T(n/b^i).$$

This may be accomplished by starting with the inductive hypothesis and applying the definition of the recurrence, as follows.

$$\begin{aligned}
T(n) &= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{i-2} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^{i-1}\, T(n/b^{i-1}) \\
&= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{i-2} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^{i-1} \left[(n/b^{i-1})^c + a\, T(n/b^i)\right] \\
&= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{i-2} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + n^c \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^{i-1} + a^i\, T(n/b^i) \\
&= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{i-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^i\, T(n/b^i)
\end{aligned}$$

□

We thus have that $T(n) = n^c \sum_{j=0}^{k-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^k\, T(n/b^k)$ for all $k \geq 1$. We next choose a value of k which causes our recurrence to reach a known base case. Since $n/b^k = 1$ when $k = \log_b n$, and $T(1) = \Theta(1)$, we have

$$\begin{aligned}
T(n) &= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n - 1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + a^{\log_b n}\, T(1) \\
&= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n - 1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + n^{\log_b a}\, \Theta(1) \\
&= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n - 1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + \Theta(n^{\log_b a})
\end{aligned}$$

The solution to our recurrence involves the geometric series $\sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n - 1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j$. In order to bound this series, we must consider three cases: $a/b^c > 1$, $a/b^c = 1$, and $a/b^c < 1$. This is equivalent to considering the cases $c < \log_b a$, $c = \log_b a$, and $c > \log_b a$.

Case 1: $c < \log_b a \Leftrightarrow a/b^c > 1$.

If $a/b^c > 1$, we then have

$$\sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n - 1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j = \frac{(a/b^c)^{\log_b n} - 1}{(a/b^c) - 1} = \Theta\big((a/b^c)^{\log_b n}\big) = \Theta\left(\frac{n^{\log_b a}}{n^c}\right).$$

From this we may concude that

$$\begin{aligned} T(n) &= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + \Theta(n^{\log_b a}) \\ &= n^c \cdot \Theta\left(\frac{n^{\log_b a}}{n^c}\right) + \Theta(n^{\log_b a}) \\ &= \Theta(n^{\log_b a}). \end{aligned}$$

Case 2: $c = \log_b a \Leftrightarrow a/b^c = 1$.

If $a/b^c = 1$, we then have

$$\sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j = \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} 1^j = \log_b n.$$

Noting that $c = \log_b a$, we may then conclude that

$$\begin{aligned} T(n) &= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + \Theta(n^{\log_b a}) \\ &= n^c \cdot \log_b n + \Theta(n^{\log_b a}) \\ &= \Theta(n^c \log n) = \Theta(n^{\log_b a} \log n) \end{aligned}$$

Case 3: $c > \log_b a \Leftrightarrow a/b^c < 1$.

If $a/b^c < 1$, we then have

$$\sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j \geq (a/b^c)^0 = 1 = \Omega(1)$$

and

$$\sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j \leq \sum_{j=0}^{\infty} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j = \frac{1}{1 - a/b^c} = O(1)$$

which yields

$$\sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j = \Theta(1).$$

Noting that $c > \log_b a$, we may then conclude that

$$\begin{aligned} T(n) &= n^c \sum_{j=0}^{\log_b n-1} \left(\frac{a}{b^c}\right)^j + \Theta(n^{\log_b a}) \\ &= n^c \cdot \Theta(1) + \Theta(n^{\log_b a}) \\ &= \Theta(n^c) \end{aligned}$$

Note that in each case, either c or $\log_b a$ appears in the exponent of the solution, and it is the *larger* of these two values which appears. If these terms are equal, then an extra log factor appears as well. In summary, we have

Case 1:	$c < \log_b a$	$T(n) = \Theta(n^{\log_b a})$
Case 2:	$c = \log_b a$	$T(n) = \Theta(n^c \log n) = \Theta(n^{\log_b a} \log n)$
Case 3:	$c > \log_b a$	$T(n) = \Theta(n^c)$