

How To Write Unmaintainable Code

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Roedy Green

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General Principles

To foil the maintenance programmer, you have to understand how he thinks. He has your giant program. He has no time to read it all, much less understand it. He wants to rapidly find the place to make his change, make it and get out and have no unexpected side effects from the change.

He views your code through a tube taken from the center of a roll of toilet paper. He can only see a tiny piece of your program at a time. You want to make sure he can never get the big picture from doing that. You want to make it as hard as possible for him to find the code he is looking for. But even more important, you want to make it as awkward as possible for him to safely ignore anything.

You might get the idea that every language feature makes code unmaintainable -- not so, only if properly misused.

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1. Lie in the comments. You don't have to actively lie, just fail to keep comments as up to date with the code.
2. Pepper the code with comments like `/* add 1 to i */` however, never document stuff like the overall purpose of the package or method.
3. Make sure that every method does a little bit more (or less) than its name suggests. As a simple example, a method named `isValid(x)` should as a side effect convert `x` to binary and store the result in a database.
4. Use acronyms to keep the code terse. Real men never define acronyms; they understand them genetically.
5. In the interests of efficiency, avoid encapsulation. Callers of a method need all the external clues they can get to remind them how the method works inside.
6. If, for example, you were writing an airline reservation system, make sure there are at least 25 places in the code that need to be modified if you were to add another airline. Never document where they are. People who come after you have no business modifying your code without thoroughly understanding every line of it.

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7. In the name of efficiency, use cut/paste/clone/modify. This works much faster than using many small reusable modules.
8. Never put a comment on a variable. Facts about how the variable is used, its bounds, its legal values, its implied/displayed number of decimal points, its units of measure, its display format, its data entry rules (e.g. total fill, must enter), when its value can be trusted etc. should be gleaned from the procedural code. If your boss forces you to write comments, lard method bodies with them, but never comment a variable, not even a temporary!
9. Try to pack as much as possible into a single line. This saves the overhead of temporary variables, and makes source files shorter by eliminating new line characters and white space. Tip: remove all white space around operators. Good programmers can often hit the 255 character line length limit imposed by some editors. The bonus of long lines is that programmers who cannot read 6 point type must scroll to view them.

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10. Cd wrttn wtht vwls s mch trsr.

When using abbreviations inside variable or method names, break the boredom with several variants for the same word, and even spell it out longhand once in while. This helps defeat those lazy bums who use text search to understand only some aspect of your program. Consider variant spellings as a variant on the ploy, e.g. mixing International colour, with American color and dude-speak kulerz. If you spell out names in full, there is only one possible way to spell each name. These are too easy for the maintenance programmer to remember. Because there are so many different ways to abbreviate a word, with abbreviations, you can have several different variables that all have the same apparent purpose. As an added bonus, the maintenance programmer might not even notice they are separate variables.

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11. Never use an automated source code tidier to keep code aligned. Lobby to have them banned on the grounds they create false deltas in CVS or that every programmer should have his own indenting style held forever sacrosanct for any module he wrote. Insist that other programmers observe those idiosyncratic conventions in "his" modules. Banning beautifiers is quite easy, even though they save the millions of keystrokes doing manual alignment and days wasted misinterpreting poorly aligned code. Just insist that everyone use the same tidied format. This starts an RWAR and the boss, to keep the peace, will ban automated tidying. You are now free to accidentally misalign the code to give the optical illusion that bodies of loops and ifs are longer or shorter than they really are, or that else clauses match a different if than they really do.

```
if(a)
if(b)x = y;
else x = z;
```

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13. Never put in any { } surrounding your if/else blocks unless they are syntactically obligatory. If you have a deeply nested mixture of if/else statements and blocks, especially with misleading indentation, you can trip up even an expert maintenance programmer.

15. Use very long variable names or class names that differ from each other by only one character, or only in upper/lower case. An ideal variable name pair is swimmer and swimner. Exploit the failure of most fonts to clearly discriminate between i|l|1| or o|O|0 with identifier pairs like parseInt and parseInt or DOCalc and DOCalc. l is an exceptionally fine choice for a variable name since it will, to the casual glance, masquerade as the constant 1. Create variable names that differ from each other only in case e.g. HashTable and Hashtable.

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16. Wherever scope rules permit, reuse existing unrelated variable names. Similarly, use the same temporary variable for two unrelated purposes (purporting to save stack slots). For a fiendish variant, morph the variable, for example, assign a value to a variable at the top of a very long method, and then somewhere in the middle, change the meaning of the variable in a subtle way, such as converting it from a 0-based coordinate to a 1-based coordinate. Be certain not to document this change in meaning.

17. Use lower case l to indicate long constants. e.g. 10l is more likely to be mistaken for 10l that 10L is.

18. Ignore the conventions in Java for where to use upper case in variable and class names i.e. Classes start with upper case, variables with lower case, constants are all upper case, with internal words capitalised. After all, Sun does (e.g. instanceof vs isInstanceOf, Hashtable). Not to worry, the compiler won't even issue a warning to give you away. If your boss forces you to use the conventions, when there is any doubt about whether an internal word should be capitalised, avoid capitalising or make a random choice, e.g. use both inputFileName and outputfilename. You can of course drive your team members insane by inventing your own insanely complex naming conventions then berate others for not following them. The ultimate technique is to create as many variable names as possible that differ subtly from each other only in case.

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19. Never use `i` for the innermost loop variable. Use anything but. Use `i` liberally for any other purpose especially for non-int variables. Similarly use `n` as a loop index.
20. Never use local variables. Whenever you feel the temptation to use one, make it into an instance or static variable instead to unselfishly share it with all the other methods of the class. This will save you work later when other methods need similar declarations. C++ programmers can go a step further by making all variables global.
21. Never document gotchas in the code. If you suspect there may be a bug in a class, keep it to yourself. If you have ideas about how the code should be reorganised or rewritten, for heaven's sake, do not write them down. Remember the words of Thumper "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all". What if the programmer who wrote that code saw your comments? What if the owner of the company saw them? What if a customer did? You could get yourself fired.

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27. I am going to let you in on a little-known coding secret. Exceptions are a pain in the behind. Properly-written code never fails, so exceptions are actually unnecessary. Don't waste time on them. Subclassing exceptions is for incompetents who know their code will fail. You can greatly simplify your program by having only a single try/catch in the entire application (in main) that calls `System.exit()`. Just stick a perfectly standard set of throws on every method header whether they could throw any exceptions or not.
31. Nest as deeply as you can. Good coders can get up to 10 levels of `()` on a single line and `20 { }` in a single method. C++ coders have the additional powerful option of preprocessor nesting totally independent of the nest structure of the underlying code. You earn extra Brownie points whenever the beginning and end of a block appear on separate pages in a printed listing.
Wherever possible, convert nested ifs into nested `[? :]` ternaries.

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22. To break the boredom, use a thesaurus to look up as much alternate vocabulary as possible to refer to the same action, e.g. display, show, present. Vaguely hint there is some subtle difference, where none exists. However, if there are two similar functions that have a crucial difference, always use the same word in describing both functions (e.g. print to mean write to a file, and to print on a laser, and to display on the screen). Under no circumstances, succumb to demands to write a glossary with the special purpose project vocabulary unambiguously defined. Doing so would be unprofessional breach of the structured design principle of information hiding.
23. In naming functions, make heavy use of abstract words like it, everything, data, handle, stuff, do, routine, perform and the digits e.g. routineX48, PerformDataFunction, DoIt, HandleStuff and do_args_method.
24. In Java, all primitives passed as parameters are effectively read-only because they are passed by value. The callee can modify the parameters, but that has no effect on the caller's variables. In contrast all objects passed are read-write. The reference is passed by value, which means the object itself is effectively passed by reference. The callee can do whatever it wants to the fields in your object. Never document whether a method actually modifies the fields in each of the passed parameters. Name your methods to suggest they only look at the fields when they actually change them.

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29. If you have an array with 100 elements in it, hard code the literal 100 in as many places in the program as possible. Never use a static final named constant for the 100, or refer to it as `myArray.length`. To make changing this constant even more difficult, use the literal 50 instead of `100/2`, or 99 instead of `100-1`. You can further disguise the 100 by checking for `a == 101` instead of `a > 100` or `a > 99` instead of `a >= 100`.
Consider things like page sizes, where the lines consisting of `x` header, `y` body, and `z` footer lines, you can apply the obfuscations independently to each of these and to their partial or total sums.
These time-honoured techniques are especially effective in a program with two unrelated arrays that just accidentally happen to both have 100 elements. There are even more fiendish variants. To lull the maintenance programmer into a false sense of security, dutifully create the named constant, but very occasionally "accidentally" use the literal 100 value instead of the named constant. Most fiendish of all, in place of the literal 100 or the correct named constant, sporadically use some other unrelated named constant that just accidentally happens to have the value 100, for now. It almost goes without saying that you should avoid any consistent naming scheme that would associate an array name with its size constant.

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43. Keep all of your unused and outdated methods and variables around in your code. After all - if you needed to use it once in 1976, who knows if you will want to use it again sometime? Sure the program's changed since then, but it might just as easily change back, you "don't want to have to reinvent the wheel" (supervisors love talk like that). If you have left the comments on those methods and variables untouched, and sufficiently cryptic, anyone maintaining the code will be too scared to touch them.
45. Reverse the parameters on a method called `drawRectangle(height, width)` to `drawRectangle(width, height)` without making any change whatsoever to the name of the method. Then a few releases later, reverse it back again. The maintenance programmers can't tell by quickly looking at any call if it has been adjusted yet. Generalisations are left as an exercise for the reader.
46. Instead of using a parameters to a single method, create as many separate methods as you can. For example instead of `setAlignment(int alignment)` where `alignment` is an enumerated constant, for `left`, `right`, `center`, create three methods: `setLeftAlignment`, `setRightAlignment`, and `setCenterAlignment`. Of course, for the full effect, you must clone the common logic to make it hard to keep in sync.

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48. Declare every method and variable public. After all, somebody, sometime might want to use it. Once a method has been declared public, it can't very well be retracted, now can it? This makes it very difficult to later change the way anything works under the covers. It also has the delightful side effect of obscuring what a class is for. If the boss asks if you are out of your mind, tell him you are following the classic principles of transparent interfaces.
55. Java offers great opportunity for obfuscation whenever you have to convert. As a simple example, if you have to convert a double to a String, go circuitously, via `Double` with `new Double(d).toString()` rather than the more direct `Double.toString(d)`. You can, of course, be far more circuitous than that! Avoid any conversion techniques recommended by the Conversion Amanuensis. You get bonus points for every extra temporary object you leave littering the heap after your conversion.
57. Use exceptions for non-exceptional conditions. Routinely terminate loops with an `ArrayIndexOutOfBoundsException`. Pass return standard results from a method in an exception.

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60. Use octal constants. Smuggle them into a list of decimal numbers like this:

```
array = new int []
{
    111,
    120,
    013,
    121,
};
```

72. If you cannot find the right English word to convey the meaning of a temporary variable (and you ignore the other suggestions about not giving meaningful names to variables), you may use a foreign language word as the name of the variable. For example, instead of using variable "p" for a "point", you may use "punkt", which is the German word for it. Maintenance coders without your firm grasp of German will enjoy the multicultural experience of deciphering the meaning. It breaks the tedium of an otherwise tiring and thankless job.

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