

THIRD EDITION

SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE Quick Python Book

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Foreword by Nicholas Tollervey



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The Quick Python Book
Third Edition
by Naomi Ceder

Sample Chapter 8

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Control flow

This chapter covers

- Repeating code with a `while` loop
- Making decisions: the `if-elif-else` statement
- Iterating over a list with a `for` loop
- Using list and dictionary comprehensions
- Delimiting statements and blocks with indentation
- Evaluating Boolean values and expressions

Python provides a complete set of control-flow elements, with loops and conditionals. This chapter examines each element in detail.

8.1 The while loop

You've come across the basic `while` loop several times already. The full `while` loop looks like this:

```
while condition:
    body
else:
    post-code
```

condition is a Boolean expression—that is, one that evaluates to a True or False value. As long as it's True, the body is executed repeatedly. When the condition evaluates to False, the while loop executes the post-code section and then terminates. If the condition starts out by being False, the body won't be executed at all—just the post-code section. The body and post-code are each sequences of one or more Python statements that are separated by newlines and are at the same level of indentation. The Python interpreter uses this level to delimit them. No other delimiters, such as braces or brackets, are necessary.

Note that the else part of the while loop is optional and not often used. That's because as long as there's no break in the body, this loop

```
while condition:
    body
else:
    post-code
```

and this loop

```
while condition:
    body
post-code
```

do the same things—and the second is simpler to understand. I probably wouldn't mention the else clause except that if you don't know about it, you may find it confusing if you run across this syntax in another person's code. Also, it's useful in some situations.

The two special statements break and continue can be used in the body of a while loop. If break is executed, it immediately terminates the while loop, and not even the post-code (if there is an else clause) is executed. If continue is executed, it causes the remainder of the body to be skipped over; the condition is evaluated again, and the loop proceeds as normal.

8.2 *The if-elif-else statement*

The most general form of the if-then-else construct in Python is

```
if condition1:
    body1
elif condition2:
    body2
elif condition3:
    body3
.
.
.
elif condition(n-1):
    body(n-1)

else:
    body(n)
```

It says: If condition1 is True, execute body1; otherwise, if condition2 is True, execute body2; otherwise . . . and so on until it either finds a condition that evaluates to True or hits the else clause, in which case it executes body (n). As with the while loop, the body sections are again sequences of one or more Python statements that are separated by newlines and are at the same level of indentation.

You don't need all that luggage for every conditional, of course. You can leave out the elif parts, the else part, or both. If a conditional can't find any body to execute (no conditions evaluate to True, and there's no else part), it does nothing.

The body after the if statement is required. But you can use the pass statement here (as you can anywhere in Python where a statement is required). The pass statement serves as a placeholder where a statement is needed, but it performs no action:

```
if x < 5:
    pass
else:
    x = 5
```

There's no case (or switch) statement in Python.

Where's the case statement in Python?

As just mentioned, there's no case statement in Python. In most cases where a case or switch statement would be used in other languages, Python gets by just fine with a ladder of if... elif... elif... else. In the few cases where that gets cumbersome, a dictionary of functions usually works, as in this example:

```
def do_a_stuff():
    #process a
def do_b_stuff():
    #process b
def do_c_stuff():
    #process c

func_dict = {'a' : do_a_stuff,
             'b' : do_b_stuff,
             'c' : do_c_stuff }

x = 'a'
func_dict[x]()
```

run function
from dictionary

In fact, there have been proposals (see PEP 275 and PEP 3103) to add a case statement to Python, but overall consensus has been that it's not needed or worth the trouble.

8.3 The for loop

A for loop in Python is different from for loops in some other languages. The traditional pattern is to increment and test a variable on each iteration, which is what C for loops usually do. In Python, a for loop iterates over the values returned by any

iterable object—that is, any object that can yield a sequence of values. For example, a `for` loop can iterate over every element in a list, a tuple, or a string. But an iterable object can also be a special function called `range` or a special type of function called a *generator* or a generator expression, which can be quite powerful. The general form is

```
for item in sequence:
    body
else:
    post-code
```

`body` is executed once for each element of `sequence`. `item` is set to be the first element of `sequence`, and `body` is executed; then `item` is set to be the second element of `sequence`, and `body` is executed, and so on for each remaining element of the `sequence`.

The `else` part is optional. Like the `else` part of a `while` loop, it's rarely used. `break` and `continue` do the same thing in a `for` loop as in a `while` loop.

This small loop prints out the reciprocal of each number in `x`:

```
x = [1.0, 2.0, 3.0]
for n in x:
    print(1 / n)
```

8.3.1 *The range function*

Sometimes, you need to loop with explicit indices (such as the positions at which values occur in a list). You can use the `range` command together with the `len` command on the list to generate a sequence of indices for use by the `for` loop. This code prints out all the positions in a list where it finds negative numbers:

```
x = [1, 3, -7, 4, 9, -5, 4]
for i in range(len(x)):
    if x[i] < 0:
        print("Found a negative number at index ", i)
```

Given a number n , `range(n)` returns a sequence $0, 1, 2, \dots, n-2, n-1$. So passing it the length of a list (found using `len`) produces a sequence of the indices for that list's elements. The `range` function doesn't build a Python list of integers; it just appears to. Instead, it creates a `range` object that produces integers on demand. This is useful when you're using explicit loops to iterate over really large lists. Instead of building a list with 10 million elements in it, for example, which would take up quite a bit of memory, you can use `range(10000000)`, which takes up only a small amount of memory and generates a sequence of integers from 0 up to (but *not* including) 10000000 as needed by the `for` loop.

8.3.2 *Controlling range with starting and stepping values*

You can use two variants on the `range` function to gain more control over the sequence it produces. If you use `range` with two numeric arguments, the first argument is the starting number for the resulting sequence, and the second number is the

number the resulting sequence goes up to (but doesn't include). Here are a few examples:

```
>>> list(range(3, 7))      ← ❶
[3, 4, 5, 6]
>>> list(range(2, 10))    ← ❶
[2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]
>>> list(range(5, 3))
[]
```

`list()` is used only to force the items `range` would generate to appear as a list. It's not normally used in actual code ❶.

This still doesn't allow you to count backward, which is why the value of `list(range(5, 3))` is an empty list. To count backward, or to count by any amount other than 1, you need to use the optional third argument to `range`, which gives a step value by which counting proceeds:

```
>>> list(range(0, 10, 2))
[0, 2, 4, 6, 8]
>>> list(range(5, 0, -1))
[5, 4, 3, 2, 1]
```

Sequences returned by `range` always include the starting value given as an argument to `range` and never include the ending value given as an argument.

8.3.3 Using *break* and *continue* in for loops

The two special statements `break` and `continue` can also be used in the body of a `for` loop. If `break` is executed, it immediately terminates the `for` loop, and not even the post-code (if there is an `else` clause) is executed. If `continue` is executed in a `for` loop, it causes the remainder of the body to be skipped over, and the loop proceeds as normal with the next item.

8.3.4 The for loop and tuple unpacking

You can use tuple unpacking to make some `for` loops cleaner. The following code takes a list of two-element tuples and calculates the value of the sum of the products of the two numbers in each tuple (a moderately common mathematical operation in some fields):

```
somelist = [(1, 2), (3, 7), (9, 5)]
result = 0
for t in somelist:
    result = result + (t[0] * t[1])
```

Here's the same thing, but cleaner:

```
somelist = [(1, 2), (3, 7), (9, 5)]
result = 0

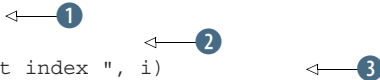
for x, y in somelist:
    result = result + (x * y)
```

This code uses a tuple `x, y` immediately after the `for` keyword instead of the usual single variable. On each iteration of the `for` loop, `x` contains element 0 of the current tuple from `list`, and `y` contains element 1 of the current tuple from `list`. Using a tuple in this manner is a convenience of Python, and doing this indicates to Python that each element of the list is expected to be a tuple of appropriate size to unpack into the variable names mentioned in the tuple after the `for`.

8.3.5 The *enumerate* function

You can combine tuple unpacking with the `enumerate` function to loop over both the items and their index. This is similar to using `range` but has the advantage that the code is clearer and easier to understand. Like the previous example, the following code prints out all the positions in a list where it finds negative numbers:

```
x = [1, 3, -7, 4, 9, -5, 4]
for i, n in enumerate(x):
    if n < 0:
        print("Found a negative number at index ", i)
```

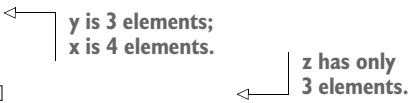


The `enumerate` function returns tuples of (index, item) ❶. You can access the item without the index ❷. The index is also available ❸.

8.3.6 The *zip* function

Sometimes, it's useful to combine two or more iterables before looping over them. The `zip` function takes the corresponding elements from one or more iterables and combines them into tuples until it reaches the end of the shortest iterable:

```
>>> x = [1, 2, 3, 4]
>>> y = ['a', 'b', 'c']
>>> z = zip(x, y)
>>> list(z)
[(1, 'a'), (2, 'b'), (3, 'c')]
```



TRY THIS: LOOPING AND IF STATEMENTS Suppose that you have a list `x = [1, 3, 5, 0, -1, 3, -2]`, and you need to remove all negative numbers from that list. Write the code to do this.

How would you count the total number of negative numbers in a list `y = [[1, -1, 0], [2, 5, -9], [-2, -3, 0]]`?

What code would you use to print `very low` if the value of `x` is below -5, `low` if it's from -5 up to 0, `neutral` if it's equal to 0, `high` if it's greater than 0 up to 5, and `very high` if it's greater than 5?

8.4 List and dictionary comprehensions

The pattern of using a `for` loop to iterate through a list, modify or select individual elements, and create a new list or dictionary is very common. Such loops often look a lot like the following:

```
>>> x = [1, 2, 3, 4]
>>> x_squared = []
```

```
>>> for item in x:
...     x_squared.append(item * item)
...
>>> x_squared
[1, 4, 9, 16]
```

This sort of situation is so common that Python has a special shortcut for such operations, called a *comprehension*. You can think of a list or dictionary comprehension as a one-line for loop that creates a new list or dictionary from a sequence. The pattern of a list comprehension is as follows:

```
new_list = [expression1 for variable in old_list if expression2]
```

and a dictionary comprehension looks like this:

```
new_dict = {expression1:expression2 for variable in list if expression3}
```

In both cases, the heart of the expression is similar to the beginning of a for loop—`for variable in list`—with some expression using that variable to create a new key or value and an optional conditional expression using the value of the variable to select whether it's included in the new list or dictionary. The following code does exactly the same thing as the previous code but is a list comprehension:

```
>>> x = [1, 2, 3, 4]
>>> x_squared = [item * item for item in x]
>>> x_squared
[1, 4, 9, 16]
```

You can even use `if` statements to select items from the list:

```
>>> x = [1, 2, 3, 4]
>>> x_squared = [item * item for item in x if item > 2]

>>> x_squared
[9, 16]
```

Dictionary comprehensions are similar, but you need to supply both a key and a value. If you want to do something similar to the previous example but have the number be the key and the number's square be the value in a dictionary, you can use a dictionary comprehension, like so:

```
>>> x = [1, 2, 3, 4]
>>> x_squared_dict = {item: item * item for item in x}
>>> x_squared_dict
{1: 1, 2: 4, 3: 9, 4: 16}
```

List and dictionary comprehensions are very flexible and powerful, and when you get used to them, they make list-processing operations much simpler. I recommend that you experiment with them and try them any time you find yourself writing a `for` loop to process a list of items.

8.4.1 Generator expressions

Generator expressions are similar to list comprehensions. A generator expression looks a lot like a list comprehension, except that in place of square brackets, it uses parentheses. The following example is the generator-expression version of the list comprehension already discussed:

```
>>> x = [1, 2, 3, 4]
>>> x_squared = (item * item for item in x)
>>> x_squared
<generator object <genexpr> at 0x102176708>
>>> for square in x_squared:
...     print(square,)
...
1 4 9 16
```

Other than the change from square brackets, notice that this expression doesn't return a list. Instead, it returns a generator object that could be used as the iterator in a `for` loop, as shown, which is very similar to what the `range()` function does. The advantage of using a generator expression is that the entire list isn't generated in memory, so arbitrarily large sequences can be generated with little memory overhead.

TRY THIS: COMPREHENSIONS What list comprehension would you use to process the list `x` so that all negative values are removed?

Create a generator that returns only odd numbers from 1 to 100. (Hint: A number is odd if there is a remainder if divided by 2; use `% 2` to get the remainder of division by 2.)

Write the code to create a dictionary of the numbers and their cubes from 11 through 15.

8.5 Statements, blocks, and indentation

Because the control flow constructs you've encountered in this chapter are the first to make use of blocks and indentation, this is a good time to revisit the subject.

Python uses the indentation of the statements to determine the delimitation of the different blocks (or bodies) of the control-flow constructs. A block consists of one or more statements, which are usually separated by newlines. Examples of Python statements are the assignment statement, function calls, the `print` function, the placeholder `pass` statement, and the `del` statement. The control-flow constructs (`if-elif-else`, `while`, and `for` loops) are compound statements:

```
compound statement clause:
    block
compound statement clause:
    block
```

A compound statement contains one or more clauses that are each followed by indented blocks. Compound statements can appear in blocks just like any other statements. When they do, they create nested blocks.

You may also encounter a couple of special cases. Multiple statements may be placed on the same line if they're separated by semicolons. A block containing a single line may be placed on the same line after the semicolon of a clause of a compound statement:

```
>>> x = 1; y = 0; z = 0
>>> if x > 0: y = 1; z = 10
... else: y = -1
...
>>> print(x, y, z)
1 1 10
```

Improperly indented code results in an exception being raised. You may encounter two forms of this exception. The first is

```
>>>
>>> x = 1
File "<stdin>", line 1
    x = 1
    ^
IndentationError: unexpected indent
>>>
```

This code indented a line that shouldn't have been indented. In the basic mode, the carat (^) indicates the spot where the problem occurred. In the IDLE Python shell (see figure 8.1), the invalid indent is highlighted. The same message would occur if the code didn't indent where necessary (that is, the first line after a compound statement clause).

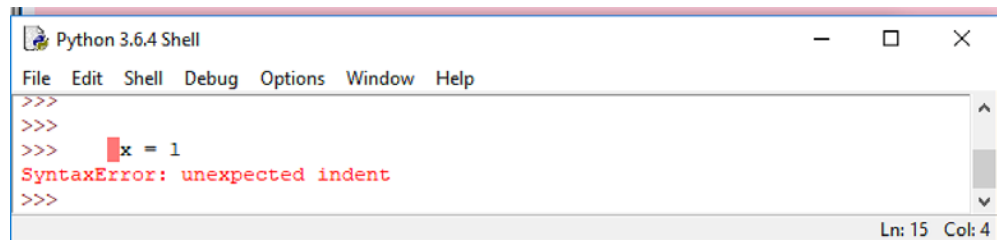


Figure 8.1 Indentation error

One situation where this can occur can be confusing. If you're using an editor that displays tabs in four-space increments (or Windows interactive mode, which indents the first tab only four spaces from the prompt) and indent one line with four spaces and then the next line with a tab, the two lines may appear to be at the same level of indentation. But you receive this exception because Python maps the tab to eight spaces. The best way to avoid this problem is to use only spaces in Python code. If you must use tabs for indentation, or if you're dealing with code that uses tabs, be sure never to mix them with spaces.

On the subject of the basic interactive mode and the IDLE Python shell, you’ve likely noticed that you need an extra line after the outermost level of indentation:

```
>>> x = 1
>>> if x == 1:
...     y = 2
...     if v > 0:
...         z = 2
...         v = 0
...
>>> x = 2
```

No line is necessary after the line `z = 2`, but one is needed after the line `v = 0`. This line is unnecessary if you’re placing your code in a module in a file.

The second form of exception occurs if you indent a statement in a block less than the legal amount:

```
>>> x = 1
>>> if x == 1:
...     y = 2
...     z = 2
File "<stdin>", line 3
...     z = 2
...     ^
IndentationError: unindent does not match any outer indentation level
```

In this example, the line containing `z = 2` isn’t lined up properly below the line containing `y = 2`. This form is rare, but I mention it again because in a similar situation, it may be confusing.

Python allows you to indent any amount and won’t complain regardless of how much you vary indentation as long as you’re consistent within a single block. Please don’t take improper advantage of this flexibility. The recommended standard is to use four spaces for each level of indentation.

Before leaving indentation, I’ll cover breaking up statements across multiple lines, which of course is necessary more often as the level of indentation increases. You can explicitly break up a line by using the backslash character. You can also implicitly break any statement between tokens when within a set of `()`, `{}`, or `[]` delimiters (that is, when typing a set of values in a list, a tuple, or a dictionary; a set of arguments in a function call; or any expression within a set of brackets). You can indent the continuation line of a statement to any level you desire:

```
>>> print('string1', 'string2', 'string3' \
...       , 'string4', 'string5')
string1 string2 string3 string4 string5
>>> x = 100 + 200 + 300 \
...     + 400 + 500
>>> x
1500
>>> v = [100, 300, 500, 700, 900,
...      1100, 1300]
```

```
>>> v
[100, 300, 500, 700, 900, 1100, 1300]
>>> max(1000, 300, 500,
...      800, 1200)
1200
>>> x = (100 + 200 + 300
...      + 400 + 500)
>>> x
1500
```

You can break a string with a `\` as well. But any indentation tabs or spaces become part of the string, and the line *must* end with the `\`. To avoid this situation, remember that any string literals separated by whitespace are automatically concatenated by the Python interpreter:

```
>>> "strings separated by whitespace " \
...   ""are automatically"" ' concatenated'
'strings separated by whitespace are automatically concatenated'
>>> x = 1
>>> if x > 0:
...     string1 = "this string broken by a backslash will end up \
...               with the indentation tabs in it"
...
>>> string1
'this string broken by a backslash will end up \t\t\twith
  the indentation tabs in it'
>>> if x > 0:
...     string1 = "this can be easily avoided by splitting the " \
...               "string in this way"
...
>>> string1
'this can be easily avoided by splitting the string in this way'
```

8.6 Boolean values and expressions

The previous examples of control flow use conditional tests in a fairly obvious manner but never really explain what constitutes true or false in Python or what expressions can be used where a conditional test is needed. This section describes these aspects of Python.

Python has a Boolean object type that can be set to either `True` or `False`. Any expression with a Boolean operation returns `True` or `False`.

8.6.1 Most Python objects can be used as Booleans

In addition, Python is similar to C with respect to Boolean values, in that C uses the integer 0 to mean false and any other integer to mean true. Python generalizes this idea: 0 or empty values are `False`, and any other values are `True`. In practical terms, this means the following:

- The numbers 0, 0.0, and 0+0j are all `False`; any other number is `True`.
- The empty string "" is `False`; any other string is `True`.
- The empty list [] is `False`; any other list is `True`.

- The empty dictionary `{ }` is `False`; any other dictionary is `True`.
- The empty set `set ( )` is `False`; any other set is `True`.
- The special Python value `None` is always `False`.

We haven't looked at some Python data structures yet, but generally, the same rule applies. If the data structure is empty or `0`, it's taken to mean `false` in a Boolean context; otherwise, it's taken to mean `true`. Some objects, such as file objects and code objects, don't have a sensible definition of a `0` or empty element, and these objects shouldn't be used in a Boolean context.

8.6.2 *Comparison and Boolean operators*

You can compare objects by using normal operators: `<`, `<=`, `>`, `>=`, and so forth. `==` is the equality test operator, and `!=` is the “not equal to” test. There are also `in` and `not in` operators to test membership in sequences (lists, tuples, strings, and dictionaries), as well as `is` and `is not` operators to test whether two objects are the same.

Expressions that return a Boolean value may be combined into more complex expressions using the `and`, `or`, and `not` operators. This code snippet checks to see whether a variable is within a certain range:

```
if 0 < x and x < 10:
    ...
```

Python offers a nice shorthand for this particular type of compound statement. You can write it as you would in a math paper:

```
if 0 < x < 10:
    ...
```

Various rules of precedence apply; when in doubt, you can use parentheses to make sure that Python interprets an expression the way you want it to. Using parentheses is probably a good idea for complex expressions, regardless of whether it's necessary, because it makes clear to future maintainers of the code exactly what's happening. See the Python documentation for more details on precedence.

The rest of this section provides more advanced information. If you're reading this book as you're learning the language, you may want to skip that material for now.

The `and` and `or` operators return objects. The `and` operator returns either the first false object (that an expression evaluates to) or the last object. Similarly, the `or` operator returns either the first true object or the last object. This may seem a little confusing, but it works correctly; if an expression with `and` has even one false element, that element makes the entire expression evaluate as `False`, and that `False` value is returned. If all of the elements are `True`, the expression is `True`, and the last value, which must also be `True`, is returned. The converse is true for `or`; only one `True` element makes the statement logically `True`, and the first `True` value found is returned. If no `True` values are found, the last (`False`) value is returned. In other words, as with

many other languages, evaluation stops as soon as a true expression is found for the `or` operator or as soon as a false expression is found for the `and` operator:

```
>>> [2] and [3, 4]
[3, 4]
>>> [] and 5
[]
>>> [2] or [3, 4]
[2]
>>> [] or 5
5
>>>
```

The `==` and `!=` operators test to see whether their operands contains the same values. `==` and `!=` are used in most situations, as opposed to `is` and `is not` operators, which test to see whether their operands are the same object:

```
>>> x = [0]
>>> y = [x, 1]
>>> x is y[0]
True
>>> x = [0]
>>> x is y[0]
False
>>> x == y[0]
True
```

They reference the same object.

x has been assigned to a different object.

Revisit section 5.6, “Nested lists and deep copies,” if this example isn’t clear to you.

QUICK CHECK: BOOLEANS AND TRUTHINESS Decide whether the following statements are true or false: `1`, `0`, `-1`, `[0]`, `1` and `0`, `1 > 0` or `[]`.

8.7 Writing a simple program to analyze a text file

To give you a better sense of how a Python program works, this section looks at a small sample that roughly replicates the UNIX `wc` utility and reports the number of lines, words, and characters in a file. The sample in this listing is deliberately written to be clear to programmers who are new to Python and to be as simple as possible.

Listing 8.1 word_count.py

```
#!/usr/bin/env python3

""" Reads a file and returns the number of lines, words,
    and characters - similar to the UNIX wc utility
    """

infile = open('word_count.tst')
lines = infile.read().split("\n")
line_count = len(lines)
```

Opens file

Reads file; splits into lines

Gets number of lines with len()

```

word_count = 0
char_count = 0
for line in lines:
    words = line.split()
    word_count += len(words)
    char_count += len(line)
print("File has {0} lines, {1} words, {2} characters".format
      (line_count, word_count, char_count))

```

Initializes other counts

Iterates through lines

Splits into words

Returns number of characters

Prints answers

To test, you can run this sample against a sample file containing the first paragraph of this chapter's summary, like this.

Listing 8.2 word_count.tst

Python provides a complete set of control flow elements, including while and for loops, and conditionals. Python uses the level of indentation to group blocks of code with control elements.

Upon running word_count.py, you get the following output:

```

naomi@mac:~/quickpythonbook/code $ python3.1 word_count.py
File has 4 lines, 30 words, 189 characters

```

This code can give you an idea of a Python program. There isn't much code, and most of the work gets done in three lines of code in the for loop. In fact, this program could be made even shorter and more idiomatic. Most Pythonistas see this conciseness as one of Python's great strengths.

LAB 8: REFACTOR WORD_COUNT Rewrite the word-count program from section 8.7 to make it shorter. You may want to look at the string and list operations already discussed, as well as think about different ways to organize the code. You may also want to make the program smarter so that only alphabetic strings (not symbols or punctuation) count as words.

Summary

- Python uses indentation to group blocks of code.
- Python has loops using while and for, and conditionals using if-elif-else.
- Python has the Boolean values True and False, which can be referenced by variables.
- Python also considers any 0 or empty value to be False and any nonzero or nonempty value to be True.

The Quick Python Book Third Edition

Naomi Ceder

Initially Guido van Rossum's 1989 holiday project, Python has grown into an amazing computer language. It's a joy to learn and read, and powerful enough to handle everything from low-level system resources to advanced applications like deep learning. Elegantly simple and complete, it also boasts a massive ecosystem of libraries and frameworks. Python programmers are in high demand—you can't afford not to be fluent!

The Quick Python Book, Third Edition is a comprehensive guide to the Python language by a Python authority, Naomi Ceder. With the personal touch of a skilled teacher, she beautifully balances details of the language with the insights and advice you need to handle any task. Extensive, relevant examples and learn-by-doing exercises help you master each important concept the first time through. Whether you're scraping websites or playing around with nested tuples, you'll appreciate this book's clarity, focus, and attention to detail.

What's Inside

- Clear coverage of Python 3
- Core libraries, packages, and tools
- In-depth exercises
- Five new data science–related chapters

Written for readers familiar with programming concepts—no Python experience assumed.

Naomi Ceder is chair of the Python Software Foundation. She has been learning, using, and teaching Python since 2001.

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“Naomi's book epitomizes what it is to be Pythonic: beautiful is better than ugly, simple is better than complex, and readability counts.”

—From the Foreword by
 Nicholas Tollervey
 Python Software Foundation

“Leads you from a basic knowledge of Python to its most interesting features, always using accessible language.”

—Eros Pedrini, everis

“Unleash your Pythonic powers with this book and start coding real-world applications fast.”

—Carlos Fernández Manzano
 Aguas de Murcia

“The complete and definitive book to start learning Python.”

—Christos Paisios, e-Travel



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