



Structural Induction with Haskell

Thomas Sewell
UNSW
Term 3 2025

Recap: Induction

Definition

Let $P(x)$ be a predicate on natural numbers $x \in \mathbb{N}$. To show $\forall x \in \mathbb{N}. P(x)$, we can use induction:

- Show $P(0)$
- Assuming $P(k)$ (the *inductive hypothesis*), show $P(k + 1)$.

Example (Sum of Integers)

Write a recursive function *sumTo* to sum up all integers from 0 to the input n .

Show that:

$$\forall n \in \mathbb{N}. \text{sumTo } n = \frac{n(n + 1)}{2}$$

Haskell Data Types

We can define natural numbers as a Haskell data type, reflecting this inductive structure.

```
data Nat = Z | S Nat
```

Example

Define addition, prove that $\forall n. n + Z = n$.

Inductive Structure

Observe that the non-recursive constructors correspond to **base cases** and the recursive constructors correspond to **inductive cases**

Lists

Lists are **singly-linked** lists in Haskell. The empty list is written as `[]` and a list node is written as `x : xs`. The value `x` is called the **head** and the rest of the list `xs` is called the **tail**. Thus:

```
"hi!" == ['h', 'i', '!'] == 'h' : 'i' : '!' : []  
      == 'h':('i':('!':[]))
```

When we define recursive functions on lists, think about the `x : xs / []` representation to write pattern matches.

Example

(Re)-define the functions *length*, *take* and *drop*.

Induction on Lists

If lists weren't already defined in the standard library, we could define them ourselves:

```
data List a = Nil | Cons a (List a)
```

Induction

If we want to prove that a proposition holds for all lists:

$$\forall xs. P(xs)$$

It suffices to:

- 1 Show $P([])$ (the base case from nil)
- 2 Assuming the inductive hypothesis $P(xs)$, show $P(x:xs)$ (the inductive case from cons).

Induction on Lists

Example (Take and Drop)

- Show that $\text{take } (\text{length } xs) \text{ } xs = xs$ for all xs .
- Show that $\text{take } 5 \text{ } xs ++ \text{drop } 5 \text{ } xs = xs$ for all xs .
 - ⇒ Sometimes we must **generalise** the proof goal.
 - ⇒ Sometimes we must prove auxiliary **lemmas**.

Binary Trees

```
data Tree a = Leaf
            | Branch a (Tree a) (Tree a)
```

Induction Principle

To prove a property $P(t)$ for all trees t :

- Prove the base case $P(\text{Leaf})$.
- Assuming the two *inductive hypotheses*:
 - $P(l)$ and
 - $P(r)$

We must show $P(\text{Branch } x \mid r)$.

Example (Tree functions)

Define *leaves* and *height*, and show $\forall t. \text{height } t < \text{leaves } t$

Rose Trees

data *Forest* a = Empty | Cons (*Rose* a) (*Forest* a)

data *Rose* a = Node a (*Forest* a)

Note that *Forest* and *Rose* are defined *mutually*.

Example (Rose tree functions)

Define *size* and *height*, and try to show

$$\forall t. \text{height } t \leq \text{size } t$$

Simultaneous Induction

To prove a property about two types defined mutually, we have to prove **two** properties *simultaneously*.

```
data Forest a = Empty | Cons (Rose a) (Forest a)
```

```
data Rose a = Node a (Forest a)
```

Inductive Principle

To prove a property $P(t)$ about all *Rose* trees t and a property $Q(ts)$ about all *Forests* ts simultaneously:

- Prove $Q(\text{Empty})$
- Assuming $P(t)$ and $Q(ts)$ (inductive hypotheses), show $Q(\text{Cons } t \ ts)$.
- Assuming $Q(ts)$ (inductive hypothesis), show $P(\text{Node } x \ ts)$.