10.2.1 Running Time of Divide-and-Conquer Algorithms

All the efficient divide-and-conquer algorithms we will see divide the problems into subproblems, each of which is some fraction of the original problem, and then perform some additional work to compute the final answer. As an example, we have seen that mergesort operates on two problems, each of which is half the size of the original, and then uses $O(N)$ additional work. This yields the running time equation (with appropriate initial conditions)

$$T(N) = 2T(N/2) + O(N)$$

We saw in Chapter 7 that the solution to this equation is $O(N \log N)$. The following theorem can be used to determine the running time of most divide-and-conquer algorithms.

Theorem 10.6.
The solution to the equation $T(N) = aT(N/b) + \Theta(N^k)$, where $a \geq 1$ and $b > 1$, is

$$T(N) = \begin{cases} O(N^{\log_b a}) & \text{if } a > b^k \\ O(N^k \log N) & \text{if } a = b^k \\ O(N^k) & \text{if } a < b^k \end{cases}$$

Proof.
Following the analysis of mergesort in Chapter 7, we will assume that N is a power of b; thus, let $N = b^m$. Then $N/b = b^{m-1}$ and $N^k = (b^m)^k = b^{mk} = b^{km} = (b^k)^m$. Let us assume $T(1) = 1$, and ignore the constant factor in $\Theta(N^k)$. Then we have

$$T(b^m) = aT(b^{m-1}) + (b^k)^m$$

If we divide through by a^m, we obtain the equation

$$\frac{T(b^m)}{a^m} = \frac{T(b^{m-1})}{a^{m-1}} + \left\{\frac{b^k}{a}\right\}^m \tag{10.3}$$

We can apply this equation for other values of m, obtaining

$$\frac{T(b^{m-1})}{a^{m-1}} = \frac{T(b^{m-2})}{a^{m-2}} + \left\{\frac{b^k}{a}\right\}^{m-1} \tag{10.4}$$

$$\frac{T(b^{m-2})}{a^{m-2}} = \frac{T(b^{m-3})}{a^{m-3}} + \left\{\frac{b^k}{a}\right\}^{m-2} \tag{10.5}$$

$$\cdots$$

$$\frac{T(b^1)}{a^1} = \frac{T(b^0)}{a^0} + \left\{\frac{b^k}{a}\right\}^1 \tag{10.6}$$

We use our standard trick of adding up the telescoping Equations (10.3) through (10.6). Virtually all the terms on the left cancel the leading terms on the right, yielding

$$\frac{T(b^m)}{a^m} = 1 + \sum_{i=1}^{m} \left\{ \frac{b^k}{a} \right\}^i \tag{10.7}$$

$$= \sum_{i=0}^{m} \left\{ \frac{b^k}{a} \right\}^i \tag{10.8}$$

Thus

$$T(N) = T(b^m) = a^m \sum_{i=0}^{m} \left\{ \frac{b^k}{a} \right\}^i \tag{10.9}$$

If $a > b^k$, then the sum is a geometric series with ratio smaller than 1. Since the sum of infinite series would converge to a constant, this finite sum is also bounded by a constant, and thus Equation (10.10) applies:

$$T(N) = O(a^m) = O(a^{\log_b N}) = O(N^{\log_b a}) \tag{10.10}$$

If $a = b^k$, then each term in the sum is 1. Since the sum contains $1 + \log_b N$ terms and $a = b^k$ implies that $\log_b a = k$,

$$\begin{aligned} T(N) &= O(a^m \log_b N) = O(N^{\log_b a} \log_b N) = O(N^k \log_b N) \\ &= O(N^k \log N) \end{aligned} \tag{10.11}$$

Finally, if $a < b^k$, then the terms in the geometric series are larger than 1, and the second formula in Section 1.2.3 applies. We obtain

$$T(N) = a^m \frac{(b^k/a)^{m+1} - 1}{(b^k/a) - 1} = O(a^m (b^k/a)^m) = O((b^k)^m) = O(N^k) \tag{10.12}$$

proving the last case of the theorem.

As an example, mergesort has $a = b = 2$ and $k = 1$. The second case applies, giving the answer $O(N \log N)$. If we solve three problems, each of which is half the original size, and combine the solutions with $O(N)$ additional work, then $a = 3$, $b = 2$, and $k = 1$. Case 1 applies here, giving a bound of $O(N^{\log_2 3}) = O(N^{1.59})$. An algorithm that solved three half-sized problems, but required $O(N^2)$ work to merge the solution, would have an $O(N^2)$ running time, since the third case would apply.

There are two important cases that are not covered by Theorem 10.6. We state two more theorems, leaving the proofs as exercises. Theorem 10.7 generalizes the previous theorem.

Theorem 10.7.

The solution to the equation $T(N) = aT(N/b) + \Theta(N^k \log^p N)$, where $a \geq 1$, $b > 1$, and $p \geq 0$ is

$$T(N) = \begin{cases} O(N^{\log_b a}) & \text{if } a > b^k \\ O(N^k \log^{p+1} N) & \text{if } a = b^k \\ O(N^k \log^p N) & \text{if } a < b^k \end{cases}$$

Theorem 10.8.
If $\sum_{i=1}^{k} \alpha_i < 1$, then the solution to the equation $T(N) = \sum_{i=1}^{k} T(\alpha_i N) + O(N)$ is $T(N) = O(N)$.