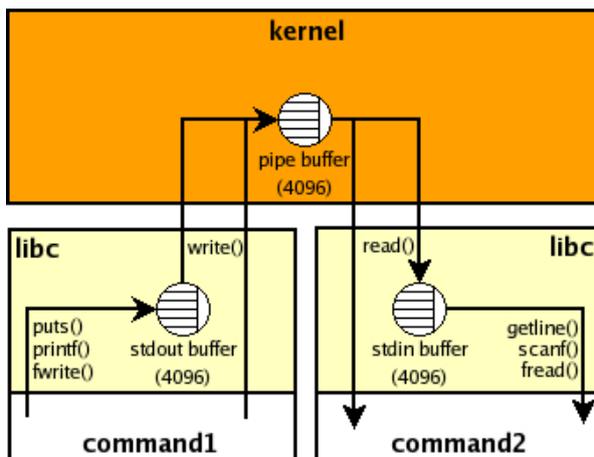


buffering in standard streams

I found it difficult to figure out what buffering was applied to the standard streams. Consider for example the following unix shell pipeline:

```
$ command1 | command2
```

Here the shell forks off 2 processes and connects them using a pipe in the manner depicted in the [Diagram](#) below. Note the 3 buffers involved in the connection.



The kernel buffer, created by the pipe system call from the shell, is sized based on the page size for the system. We have no control really over the kernel buffer size or operation but that is not an issue for us as it will [efficiently copy](#) data as soon as it's received (on linux at least).

[Update: The linux pipe buffers have changed to [circular buffers](#) (16 x 4KiB) also there is a [proposed patch](#) to make the size dynamic.]

The other buffers represented are associated with the standard streams, and for efficiency are only allocated on first use of these streams. There are 3 standard streams (stdin, stdout, stderr) created automatically for nearly all unix programs by the C library (libc) at the start of program execution, and new streams can be created to connect to files, sockets, pipes, ... To control how data is read/written from these buffers one can control both the buffer sizes and modes (Unbuffered, Buffered, Line Buffered). To determine the characteristics of the buffering automatically applied to the standard streams I used [this program](#), which indicated the following:

Default Buffering modes:

- stdin is always buffered
- stderr is always unbuffered
- if stdout is a terminal then buffering is automatically set to line buffered, else it is set to buffered

Default Buffer sizes:

- Buffer size only directly affects buffered mode
- The default size like the kernel is based on the page size (4096 bytes on my system)
- if stdin/stdout are connected to a terminal then default size = 1024; else size = 4096

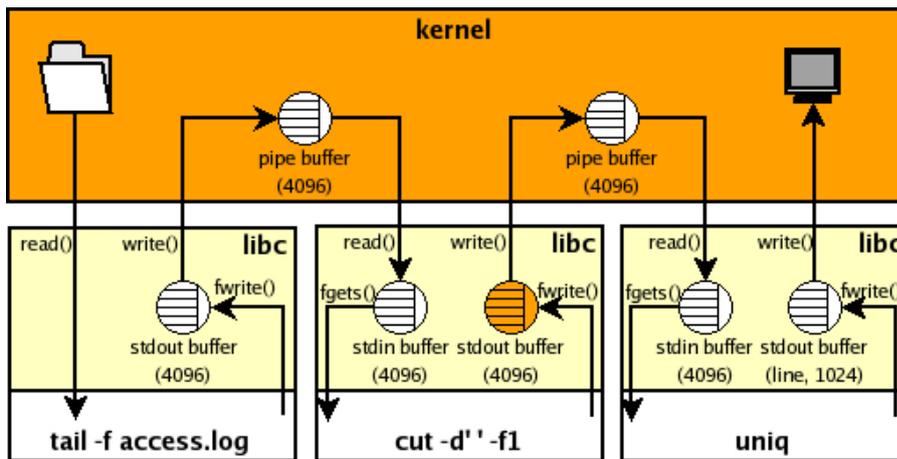
stdio output buffering problems

Now consider the case where the data source has intermittent output and one wants to both see the data as it appears and filter the data. For example, one wants to filter the output of `tcpdump -l` or `tail -f` etc. Note certain filters (like `sort`) need to buffer all data internally and so can't be used in this application.

As a concrete example consider the following pipeline which shows the IP addresses accessing a web site while filtering out consecutive access from a particular IP.

```
$ tail -f access.log | cut -d' ' -f1 | uniq
```

The problem with this is that one will not see the hosts as they appear in the log file, because of the automatic stdio buffering applied by `libc`. Given the above rules, one gets buffering for the example pipeline above, as depicted in the following [Diagram](#).



The highlighted buffer causes the problem because it is connected to a pipe and hence will automatically buffer up data into 4096 byte chunks before sending to `uniq`. Note `tail`'s `stdout` buffer would also have this problem, but `tail -f` calls `fflush` on the `stdout` stream when new data is received to alleviate this (as do `tcpdump -l`, `grep --line-buffered` and `sed --unbuffered` for example). Note also that `uniq`'s `stdout` buffer is connected to a terminal and so will be automatically flushed when a new line is written to it which is fine for our needs.

stdio input buffering problems

Buffering on `stdin` like `stdout` is used (to coalesce reads) for efficiency. One would have more control with byte by byte reads, but that would not be practical. Consider the following issue:

```
$ printf "one\ntwo\nthree\n" | ( sed lq ; sed lq ; sed lq )
one
```

As you can see the first `sed` process reads all the data, starving the rest. Note if one could set the `stdin` buffer to line buffering mode it still would have no affect as that only controls when output is flushed. [Reading lines from stdin](#) is a common requirement but implemented above the `stdin` buffer. Generally one can only control whether a process reads `stdin` or not, or if the process needs to read a specific amount, then buffering on `stdin` has to be disabled. A related common issue is with `ssh`:

```
$ printf "one\ntwo\nthree\n" | ( ssh localhost printf 'zero\n' ; cat )
zero
```

Here the remote `printf` command doesn't read `stdin` but the local `ssh` client does not know this and so it will read the data on its behalf.

To tell ssh that the remote command doesn't require any input use the `-n` option:

```
$ printf "one\two\nthree\n" | ( ssh -n localhost printf 'zero\n' ; cat )
zero
one
two
three
```

The common issue with this is if you want to put the ssh client in the background when you know the remote command will not need any input from stdin (graphical apps being the usual case), then the ssh client will block trying to read from stdin which will consequently stall the app. One can tell ssh to ignore stdin and to fork to the background when appropriate with the `-f` option. For e.g.: `ssh -fY localhost xterm`

stdio buffer control

Programmatically one can bypass the buffers by using read/write directly, but that would be inefficient in most cases. Also one can set both the buffering mode and buffer size used using the `setvbuf` library call, as can be seen in my [example program](#). It should be noted here that changing the buffering for a stream can have unexpected effects. For example glibc (2.3.5 at least) will do a `read(blksize)` after every `fseek()` if buffering is on.

However currently there is no way to directly control the buffering mode or buffer size of existing applications. There is a hack where one can use the `unbuffer` script that comes as standard with "expect" to trick "cut" in the example above into thinking that it is connected to a terminal. However this is dependent on what libc does to control the buffer and so can currently only control toggling between line and fully buffered mode. There are also caveats with that hack as documented in the [unbuffer man page](#), and in addition there is the increased possibility of running out of ptys on the system.

[Update Nov 2008: I noticed another method from Brian Dessent for using [LD_PRELOAD to control buffering](#), as detailed by Jim Meyering.]

[Update Aug 2009: We've made the LD_PRELOAD method above easily available in `coreutils 7.5` with the a new `stdbuf` command which can be used with the example presented here like:

```
tail -f access.log | stdbuf -oL cut -d ' ' -f1 | uniq
```

Note use `stdbuf -o0` if your data is not line oriented.
For full details please see the [stdbuf man page](#) or [stdbuf info manual](#).]

[Update Dec 2012: I notice that `stdbuf` has been [made available](#) in FreeBSD 9.1.]

possible stdio buffer control enhancements

Since all the default stdio buffering parameters are setup before `main()` is entered, the only way to control them is with environment variables. One could control both the buffering mode and size with variables of the format: `BUF_X_=Y` where `X = 0 (stdin), 1 (stdout), 2 (stderr), ...` and `Y = 0 (unbuffered), 1 (line buffered), >1 buffered + size`

So for our example we could have:

```
$ tail -f access.log | BUF_1_=1 cut -d ' ' -f1 | uniq
```

This logic would be very easy to add to glibc, however something like this was suggested previously and independently of me and was [rejected](#). Also it was suggested directly to me that adding this to libc would add Denial Of Service possibilities, and that in any case applications expect

a particular buffering setup.

Note adding this logic to applications isn't nearly as general, especially given the fact that there is no way to generically map from file descriptor number to stream pointer outside of libc. Anyway [here is a patch](#) against cut.c from coreutils-0.94 to illustrate what is required to support the pipeline above.

Many thanks to Bob Proulx for feedback and ideas for this page.

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