Backtracking

General method

- Useful technique for optimizing search under some constraints
- Express the desired solution as an n-tuple $(x_1, \ldots, x_n)$ where each $x_i \in S_i$, S_i being a finite set
- The solution is based on finding one or more vectors that maximize, minimize, or satisfy a *criterion function* $P(x_1, \ldots, x_n)$
- Sorting an array $a[n]$
  - Find an n-tuple where the element x_i is the index of ith smallest element in a
  - Criterion function is given by $a[x_i] \leq a[x_{i+1}]$ for $1 \leq i < n$
  - Set S_i is a finite set of integers in the range [1,n]
- Brute force approach
  - Let the size of set S_i be m_i
  - There are $m = m_1 m_2 \cdots m_n$ n-tuples that satisfy the criterion function P
  - In brute force algorithm, you have to form all the m n-tuples to determine the optimal solutions by evaulating against P
- Backtrack approach
  - Requires less than m trials to determine the solution
  - Form a solution (partial vector) one component at a time, and check at every step if this has any chance of success
  - If the solution at any point seems not-promising, ignore it
  - If the partial vector $(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_i)$ does not yield an optimal solution, ignore $m_{i+1} \cdots m_n$ possible test vectors even without looking at them
  - Effectively, find solutions to a problem that incrementally builds candidates to the solutions, and abandons each partial candidate that cannot possibly be completed to a valid solution
    - Only applicable to problmes which admit the concept of *partial candidate solution* and a relatively quick test of whether the partial solution can grow into a complete solution
    - If a problem does not satisfy the above constraint, backtracking is not applicable
      - Backtracking is not very efficient to find a given value in an unordered list
- All the solutions require a set of constraints divided into two categories: explicit and implicit constraints

  Definition 1 ***Explicit constraints*** *are rules that restrict each x_i to take on values only from a given set.*

  - Explicit constraints depend on the particular instance I of problem being solved
  - All tuples that satisfy the explicit constraints define a possible *solution space* for I
  - Examples of explicit constraints
    - $x_i \geq 0$, or all nonnegative real numbers
    - $x_i = \{0, 1\}$
    - $l_i \leq x_i \leq u_i$

  Definition 2 ***Implicit constraints*** *are rules that determine which of the tuples in the solution space of I satisfy the criterion function.*

  - Implicit constraints describe the way in which the x_is must relate to each other.

- Determine problem solution by systematically searching the solution space for the given problem instance
  - Use a tree organization for solution space
- 8-queens problem
  - Place eight queens on an 8×8 chessboard so that no queen attacks another queen
    - A queen attacks another queen if the two are in the same row, column, or diagonal

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1				Q				
2						Q		
3								Q
4		Q						
5							Q	
6	Q							
7			Q					
8					Q			

  - Identify data structures to solve the problem
    - First pass: Define the chessboard to be an 8×8 array
    - Second pass: Since each queen is in a different row, define the chessboard solution to be an 8-tuple $(x_1, \ldots, x_8)$, where x_i is the column for ith queen
  - Identify explicit constraints
    - Explicit constraints using 8-tuple formulation are $S_i = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$, $1 \le i \le 8$
    - Solution space of 8^8 8-tuples
  - Identify implicit constraints
    - No two x_i can be the same, or all the queens must be in different columns
      - All solutions are permutations of the 8-tuple $(1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)$
      - Reduces the size of solution space from 8^8 to 8! tuples
    - No two queens can be on the same diagonal
  - The solution above is expressed as an 8-tuple as $4, 6, 8, 2, 7, 1, 3, 5$
- Sum of subsets
  - Given n positive numbers w_i, $1 \le i \le n$, and m, find all subsets of w_i whose sums are m
  - For example, $n = 4$, $w = (11, 13, 24, 7)$, and $m = 31$, the desired subsets are $(11, 13, 7)$ and $(24, 7)$
  - The solution vectors can also be represented by the indices of the numbers as $(1, 2, 4)$ and $(3, 4)$
    - All solutions are k-tuples, $1 \le k \le n$
  - Explicit constraints
    - $x_i \in \{j \mid j \text{ is an integer and } 1 \le j \le n\}$
  - Implicit constraints
    - No two x_i can be the same
    - $\sum w_{x_i} = m$
    - $x_i < x_{i+1}, 1 \le i < k$ (total order in indices)
      - Helps in avoiding the generation of multiple instances of same subset; (1, 2, 4) and (1, 4, 2) are the same subset
  - A better formulation of the problem is where the solution subset is represented by an n-tuple $(x_1, \ldots, x_n)$ such that $x_i \in \{0, 1\}$
    - The above solutions are then represented by $(1, 1, 0, 1)$ and $(0, 0, 1, 1)$

  - For both the above formulations, the solution space is 2^n distinct tuples

- n-queen problem
  - A generalization of the 8-queen problem
  - Place n queens on an $n \times n$ chessboard so that no queen attacks another queen
  - Solution space consists of all $n!$ permutations of the n-tuple $(1, 2, \ldots, n)$
  - Permutation tree with 4-queen problem
    - Represents the entire solution space
    - $n!$ permutations for the n-tuple solution space
    - Edges are labeled by possible values of x_i
    - Solution space is defined by all paths from root to leaf nodes
    - For 4-queen problem, there are $4! = 24$ leaf nodes in permutation tree
- Sum of subsets problem
  - Possible tree organizations for the two different formulations of the problem
  - Variable tuple size formulation
    - Edges labeled such that an edge from a level i node to a level $i + 1$ node represents a value for x_i
    - Each node partitions the solution space into subsolution spaces
    - Solution space is defined by the path from root node to any node in the tree
  - Fixed tuple size formulation
    - Edges labeled such that an edge from a level i node to a level $i + 1$ node represents a value for x_i which is either 0 or 1
    - Solution space is defined by all paths from root node to a leaf node
    - Left subtree defines all subsets containing w_1; right subtree defines all subsets not containing w_1
    - 2^n leaf nodes representing all possible tuples
- Terminology

  Problem state is each node in the depth-first search tree

  State space is the set of all paths from root node to other nodes

  Solution states are the problem states s for which the path from the root node to s defines a tuple in the solution space
  - In variable tuple size formulation tree, all nodes are solution states
  - In fixed tuple size formulation tree, only the leaf nodes are solution states
  - Partitioned into disjoint sub-solution spaces at each internal node

  Answer states are those solution states s for which the path from root node to s defines a tuple that is a member of the set of solutions
  - These states satisfy implicit constraints

  State space tree is the tree organization of the solution space

  Static trees are ones for which tree organizations are independent of the problem instance being solved
  - Fixed tuple size formulation
  - Tree organization is independent of the problem instance being solved

  Dynamic trees are ones for which organization is dependent on problem instance
  - After conceiving state space tree for any problem, the problem can be solved by systematically generating problem states, checking which of them are solution states, and checking which solution states are answer states

  Live node is a generated node for which all of the children have not been generated yet

E**-node** is a live node whose children are currently being generated or explored

Dead node is a generated node that is not to be expanded any further

- All the children of a dead node are already generated
- Live nodes are killed using a **bounding function** to make them dead nodes

- Depth-first search
  - As soon as a new child C of the current E-node P is generated, C becomes the new E-node; P becomes the E-node again when the subtree for C is fully explored
- Backtracking is depth-first node generation with bounding functions
- Backtracking on 4-queens problem
  - Bounding function
    - If $(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_i)$ is the path to the current E-node, then all children nodes with parent-child labelings x_{i+1} are such that $(x_1, \ldots, x_{i+1})$ represents a chessboard configuration in which no two queens are attacking
  - Start with root node as the only live node, making it E-node and with path $()$
  - Generate children in ascending order
  - If the new node does not evaluate properly with the bounding function, it is immediately killed
- Backtracking process
  - Assume that all answer nodes are to be found and not just one
  - Let $(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_i)$ be the path from root to a node in the state space tree
  - Let $T(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_{i+1})$ be the set of all possible values for x_{i+1} such that $(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_{i+1})$ is also a path to a problem state
  - $T(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n) = \emptyset$
  - Assume a bounding function B_{i+1} expressed as a predicate such that if $B_{i+1}(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_{i+1})$ is false for a path $(x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_{i+1})$ from root to a problem state, then the path cannot be extended to reach an answer node

```
algorithm backtrack ( k )
// Describes a backtracking process using recursion
// Input: First k-1 values x[1], x[2], ..., x[k-1] of the solution vector
//        x[1:n] have been assigned
//        x and n are global
// Invoked by backtrack ( 1 );
{
    for each x[k] in T(x[1], ..., x[k-1])
    {
        if ( B_k(x[1], x[2], ..., x[[k]) != 0 )
        {
            if ( x[1], x[2], ..., x[k] is a path to an answer node )
                write ( x[1:k] );
            if ( k < n )
                backtrack ( k + 1 );
        }
    }
}
```

  - All possible elements for kth position of the tuple that satisfy B_k are generated one by one and attached to the current vector $(x_1, \ldots, x_{k-1})$
  - Each time x_k is attached, we check whether a solution has been found
  - When the `for` loop exits, no more values for x_k exist and the current copy of `backtrack` ends

    * The last unresolved call resumes; the one that continues to examine remaining elements assuming only $k - 2$ values have been set
    * The algorithm can be modified to quit if just a single solution is found

- Iterative backtracking algorithm

```
algorithm ibacktrack ( n )
// Iterative backtracking process
// All solutions are generated in x[1:n] and printed as soon as they are found
{
    k = 1;
    while ( k != 0 )
    {
        if ( there remains an untried x[k] in T(x[1], x[2], ..., x[k-1])
             and B_k( x[1], ..., x[k] ) is true )
        {
            if ( x[1], ..., x[k] is a path to an answer node )
                write ( x[1:k] );
            k = k + 1;    // Consider the next set
        }
        else
            k = k - 1;    // Backtrack to the previous set
    }
}
```

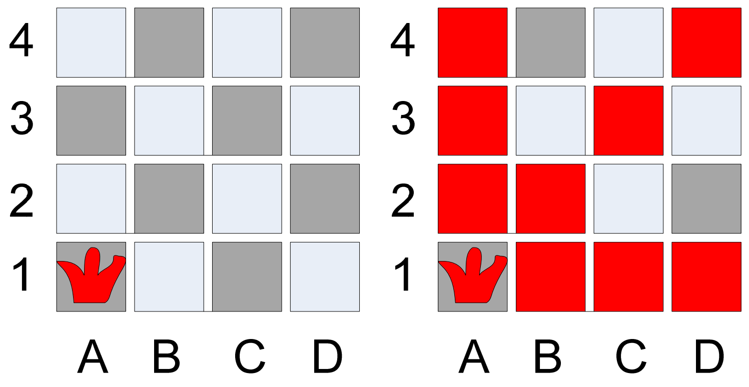
Solving 8 queen problem by backtracking

The 8 queen problem is a case of more general set of problems namely “n queen problem”. The basic idea: How to place n queen on n by n board, so that they don’t attack each other. As we can expect the complexity of solving the problem increases with n. We will briefly introduce solution by backtracking.
First let’s explain what is backtracking? The boar should be regarded as a set of constraints and the solution is simply satisfying all constraints. For example: Q1 attacks some positions, therefore Q2 has to comply with these constraints and take place, not directly attacked by Q1. Placing Q3 is harder, since we have to satisfy constraints of Q1 and Q2. Going the same way we may reach point, where the constraints make the placement of the next queen impossible. Therefore we need to relax the constraints and find new solution. To do this we are going backwards and finding new admissible solution. To keep everything in order we keep the simple rule: last placed, first displaced. In other words if we place successfully queen on the ith column but cannot find solution for (i+1)th queen, then going backwards we will try to find other admissible solution for the ith queen first. This process is called backtrack
Let’s discuss this with example. For the purpose of this handout we will find solution of 4 queen problem.

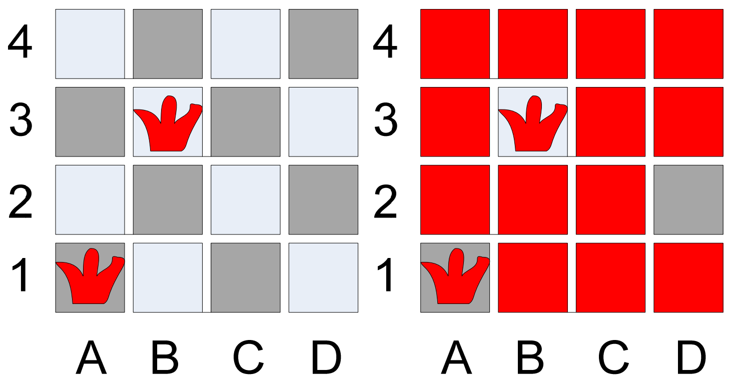
Algorithm:

- Start with one queen at the first column first row
- Continue with second queen from the second column first row
- Go up until find a permissible situation
- Continue with next queen

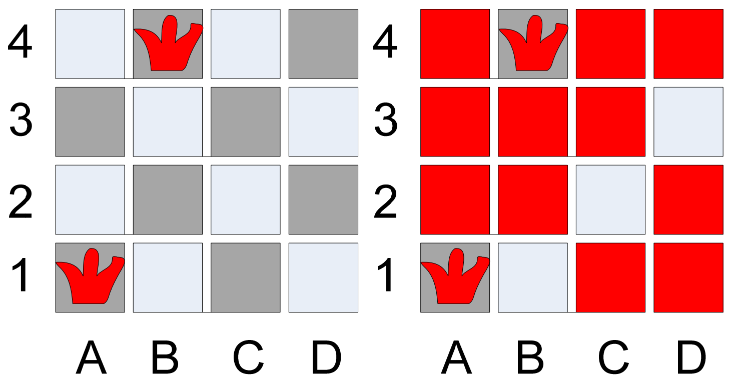
We place the first queen on A1:



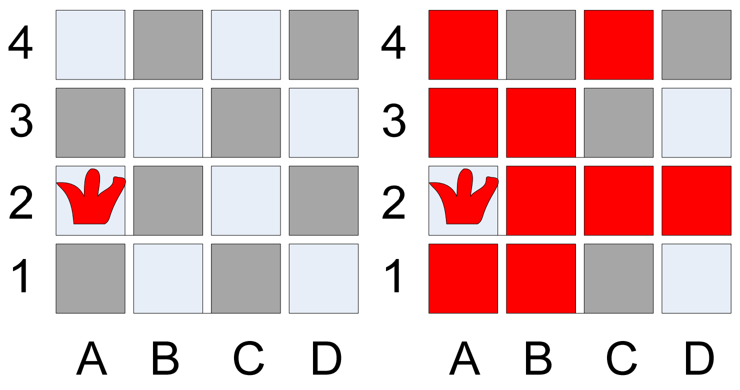
Note the positions which Q1 is attacking. So the next queen Q2 has to options: B3 or B4. We choose the firs one B3



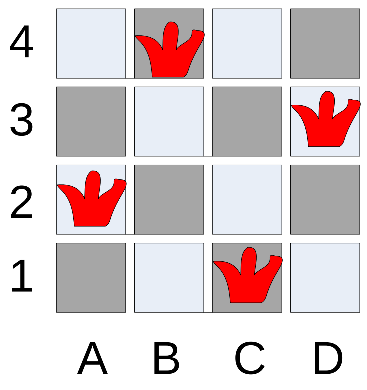
Again with red we show the prohibited positions. It turned out that we cannot place the third queen on the third column (we have to have a queen for each column!). In other words we imposed a set of constraints in a way that we no longer can satisfy them in order to find a solution. Hence we need to revise the constraints or rearrange the board up to the state which we were stuck. Now we may ask a question what we have to change. Since the problem happened after placing Q2 we are trying first with this queen.
OK we know that there were to possible places for Q2. B3 gives problem for the third queen, so there is only one position left – B4:



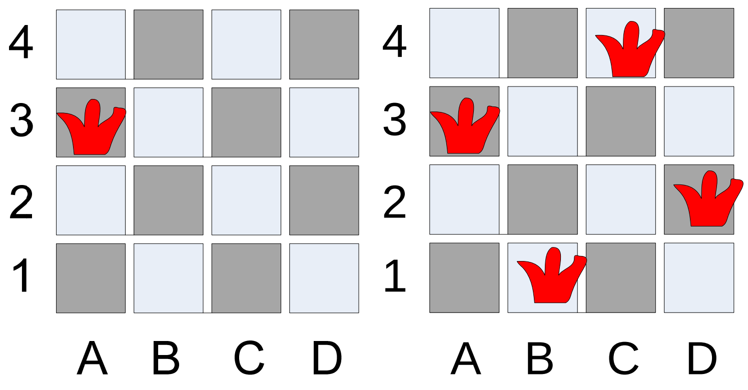
As you can see from the new set of constraints (the red positions) now we have admissible position for Q3, but it will make impossible to place Q4 since the only place is D3. Hence placing Q2 on the only one left position B4 didn't help. Therefore the one step backtrack was not enough. We need to go for second backtrack. Why? The reason is that there is no position for Q2, which will satisfy any position for Q4 or Q3. Hence we need to deal with the position of Q1.
We have started from Q1 so we will continue upward and placing the queen at A2



Now it is easy to see that Q2 goes to B4, Q3 goes to C1 and Q4 takes D3:



To find this solution we had to perform two backtracks. So what now? In order to find all solutions we use as you can guess – backtrack!
Start again in reverse order we try to place Q4 somewhere up, which is not possible. We backtrack to Q3 and try to find admissible place different from C1. Again we need to backtrack. Q2 has no other choice and finally we reach Q1. We place Q1 on A3:



Continuing further we will reach the solution on the right. Is this distinct solution? No it is rotated first solution. In fact for 4x4 board there is only one unique solution. Placing Q1 on A4 has the same effect as placing it on A1. Hence we explored all solutions.

How implement backtrack in code. Remember that we used backtrack when we cannot find admissible position for a queen in a column. Otherwise we go further with the next column until we place a queen on the last column. Therefore your code must have fragment:

```
int PlaceQueen(int board[8], int row)

If (Can place queen on ith column)
        PlaceQueen(newboard, 0)
Else
        PlaceQueen(oldboard,oldplace+1)
End
```

If you can place queen on ith column try to place a queen on the next one, or backtrack and try to place a queen on position above the solution found for i-1 column.