# Contents

 Preface vii  
 Acknowledgments ix  
 About this book x  
 About the author xiv

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 1</td>
<td>Getting started with Haskell</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Unit 1  
**FOUNDATIONS OF FUNCTIONAL PROGRAMMING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 2</td>
<td>Functions and functional programming</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 3</td>
<td>Lambda functions and lexical scope</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 4</td>
<td>First-class functions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 5</td>
<td>Closures and partial application</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 6</td>
<td>Lists</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 7</td>
<td>Rules for recursion and pattern matching</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 8</td>
<td>Writing recursive functions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 9</td>
<td>Higher-order functions</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 10</td>
<td>Capstone: Functional object-oriented programming with robots!</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Unit 2  
**INTRODUCING TYPES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 11</td>
<td>Type basics</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 12</td>
<td>Creating your own types</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 13</td>
<td>Type classes</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 14</td>
<td>Using type classes</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 15</td>
<td>Capstone: Secret messages!</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Unit 3  
**PROGRAMMING IN TYPES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 16</td>
<td>Creating types with “and” and “or”</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 17</td>
<td>Design by composition—Semigroups and Monoids</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 18</td>
<td>Parameterized types</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 19</td>
<td>The Maybe type: dealing with missing values</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 20</td>
<td>Capstone: Time series</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Unit 4  
**IO IN HASKELL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 21</td>
<td>Hello World!—introducing IO types</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 22</td>
<td>Interacting with the command line and lazy I/O</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 23</td>
<td>Working with text and Unicode</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 24</td>
<td>Working with files</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 25</td>
<td>Working with binary data</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 26</td>
<td>Capstone: Processing binary files and book data</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Unit 5  
**WORKING WITH TYPE IN A CONTEXT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 27</td>
<td>The Functor type class</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 28</td>
<td>A peek at the Applicative type class: using functions in a context</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 29</td>
<td>Lists as context: a deeper look at the Applicative type class</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 30</td>
<td>Introducing the Monad type class</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 31</td>
<td>Making Monads easier with do-notation</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 32</td>
<td>The list monad and list comprehensions</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 33</td>
<td>Capstone: SQL-like queries in Haskell</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unit 6**

**ORGANIZING CODE AND BUILDING PROJECTS**

| Lesson 34 | Organizing Haskell code with modules | 431 |
| Lesson 35 | Building projects with stack | 442 |

| Lesson 36 | Property testing with QuickCheck | 452 |
| Lesson 37 | Capstone: Building a prime-number library | 466 |

**Unit 7**

**PRACTICAL HASKELL**

| Lesson 38 | Errors in Haskell and the Either type | 483 |
| Lesson 39 | Making HTTP requests in Haskell | 497 |
| Lesson 40 | Working with JSON data by using Aeson | 507 |
| Lesson 41 | Using databases in Haskell | 524 |
| Lesson 42 | Efficient, stateful arrays in Haskell | 544 |
| Afterword | What’s next? | 561 |
| Appendix | Sample answers to exercises | 566 |
| Index | | 589 |
CLOSURES AND PARTIAL APPLICATION

After reading lesson 5, you’ll be able to

- Capture values in a lambda expression
- Use closures to create new functions
- Simplify this process with partial application

In this lesson, you’ll learn the final key element of functional programming: closures. Closures are the logical consequence of having lambda functions and first-class functions. By combining these lambda functions and first-class functions to create closures, you can dynamically create functions. This turns out to be an incredibly powerful abstraction, though the one that takes the most getting used to. Haskell makes closures much easier to work with by allowing for partial application. By the end of the lesson, you’ll see how partial application makes otherwise confusing closures much easier to work with.

Consider this In the preceding lesson, you learned how to pass in programming logic to other functions because of first-class functions. For example, you might have a getPrice function that takes a URL and a website-specific price-extraction function:

```plaintext
getPrice amazonExtractor url
```

Although this is useful, what happens if you need to extract items from 1,000 URLs, but all using `amazonExtractor`? Is there a way to capture this argument on the fly so you have to pass in only the `url` parameter for future calls?
5.1 Closures—creating functions with functions

In lesson 4, you defined a function named \texttt{ifEven} (listing 4.3). By using a function as an argument to \texttt{ifEven}, you were able to abstract out a pattern of computation. You then created the functions \texttt{ifEvenInc}, \texttt{ifEvenDouble}, and \texttt{ifEvenSquare}.

\begin{enumerate}
\item \texttt{ifEvenInc} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenInc} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenInc} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenInc}
\item \texttt{ifEvenDouble} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenDouble} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenDouble} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenDouble}
\item \texttt{ifEvenSquare} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenSquare} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenSquare} \hspace{1em} \texttt{ifEvenSquare}
\end{enumerate}

Using functions as arguments helped to clean up your code. But you’ll notice you’re still repeating a programming pattern! Each of these definitions is identical except for the function you’re passing to \texttt{ifEven}. What you want is a function that builds \texttt{ifEvenX} functions. To solve this, you can build a new function that returns functions, called \texttt{genIfEven}, as shown in figure 5.1.

Now you’re passing in a function and returning a lambda function. The function \( f \) that you passed in is captured inside the lambda function! When you capture a value inside a lambda function, this is referred to as a \textit{closure}.

Even in this small example, it can be difficult to understand exactly what’s happening. To see this better, let’s see how to create your \texttt{ifEvenInc} function by using \texttt{genIfEven}, as shown in figure 5.2.
Now let’s move on to a real-world example of using closures to help build URLs to use with an API.

Quick check 5.1 Write a function genIfXEven that creates a closure with x and returns a new function that allows the user to pass in a function to apply to x if x is even.

QC 5.1 answer

```haskell
ifEven f x = if even x then f x else x

genIfXEven x = (\f -> ifEven f x)
```
Building a URL from these parts is straightforward. Here’s your basic `getRequestURL` builder.

```haskell
getRequestURL host apiKey resource id = host ++ 
  "/" ++ 
  resource ++ 
  "/" ++ 
  id ++ 
  "?token=" ++ 
  apiKey
```

One thing that might strike you as odd about this function is that the order of your arguments isn’t the same as the order you use them or that they appear in the URL itself. *Anytime you might want to use a closure (which in Haskell is pretty much anytime), you want to order your arguments from most to least general.* In this case, each host can have multiple API keys, each API key is going to use different resources, and each resource is going to have many IDs associated with it. The same is true when you define `ifEven`; the function you pass will work with a huge range of inputs, so it’s more general and should appear first in the argument list.

Now that you have the basic request-generating function down, you can see how it works:

```
GHCi> getRequestURL "http://example.com" "1337hAsk3ll" "book" "1234"
"http://example.com/book/1234?token=1337hAsk3ll"
```

Great! This is a nice, general solution, and because your team as a whole will be querying many hosts, it’s important not to be too specific. Nearly every programmer on the team will be focusing on data from just a few hosts. It seems silly, not to mention error-prone, to have programmers manually type in `http://example.com` every time they need to make a request. What you need is a function that everyone can use to generate a request URL builder just for them. The answer to this is a closure. Your generator will look like figure 5.4.
Example: Generating URLs for an API

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Example: Generating URLs for an API
Lesson 5  Closures and partial application

Listing 5.5  myExampleUrlBuilder v.1

myExampleUrlBuilder = genApiRequestBuilder exampleUrlBuilder "1337hAsk3ll"

And you can use this to quickly create URLs for different resource/ID combos:

GHCi> myExampleUrlBuilder "book" "1234"
"http://example.com/book/1234?token=1337hAsk3ll"

Quick check 5.2  Write a version of genApiRequestBuilder that also takes the resource as an argument.

5.2.1  Partial application: making closures simple

Closures are both powerful and useful. But the use of a lambda function to create the closure makes reading and reasoning about them more difficult than it should be. Additionally, all the closures you’ve written so far follow a nearly identical pattern: provide some of the parameters that a function takes and create a new function awaiting the rest. Suppose you have a function \(\text{add4}\) that takes four variables and adds them:

\[
\text{add4 } a \ b \ c \ d = a + b + c + d
\]

Now you want to create a function \(\text{addXto3}\), which takes an argument \(x\) and then returns a closure awaiting the remaining three arguments:

\[
\text{addXto3 } x = (\lambda b \ c \ d \rightarrow \\
\text{add4 } x \ b \ c \ d)
\]

The explicit lambda makes it relatively hard to reason about what’s happening. What if you want to make an \(\text{addXYto2}\)?

\[
\text{addXYto2 } x \ y = (\lambda c \ d \rightarrow \\
\text{add4 } x \ y \ c \ d)
\]

With four arguments to manage visually, even this trivial function isn’t easy to understand. Lambda functions are powerful and useful, but can definitely clutter up otherwise neat function definitions.

QC 5.2 answer

\[
\text{genApiRequestBuilder hostBuilder apiKey resource } = (\lambda id \rightarrow \\
\text{hostBuilder apiKey resource id})
\]
Haskell has an interesting feature that addresses this problem. What happens if you call
`add4` with fewer than four arguments? This answer seems obvious: it should throw an
error. This isn’t what Haskell does. You can define a `mystery` value in GHCi by using `Add4`
and one argument:

```
GHCi> mystery = add4 3
```

If you run this code, you’ll find that it doesn’t cause an error. Haskell has created a
brand new function for you:

```
GHCi> mystery 2 3 4
12
GHCi> mystery 5 6 7
21
```

This `mystery` function adds 3 to the three remaining arguments you pass to it. When you
call any function with fewer than the required number of parameters in Haskell, you get
a new function that’s waiting for the remaining parameters. This language feature is
called *partial application*. The mystery function is the same thing as if you wrote `addXto3`
and then passed in the argument 3 to it. Not only has partial application saved you from
using a lambda function, but you don’t even need to define the awkwardly named
`addXto3`! You can also easily re-create the behavior of `addXYto2`:

```
GHCi> anotherMystery = add4 2 3
GHCi> anotherMystery 1 2
8
GHCi> anotherMystery 4 5
14
```

If you find using closures confusing so far, you’re in luck! Thanks to partial application,
you rarely have to write or think explicitly about closures in Haskell. All of the work of
genHostRequestBuilder and genApiRequestBuilder is built in and can be replaced by leaving out
the arguments you don’t need.

```
Listing 5.6 exampleUrlBuilder v.2 and myExampleUrlBuilder v.2
```
```
exampleUrlBuilder = getRequestUrl "http://example.com"
myExampleUrlBuilder = exampleUrlBuilder "1337hAsk3ll"
```

In some cases in Haskell, you’ll still want to use lambda functions to create a closure,
but using partial application is far more common. Figure 5.5 shows the process of par-
tial application.
Partial application is also the reason we created the rule that arguments should be ordered from most to least general. When you use partial application, the arguments are applied first to last. You violated this rule when you defined your `addressLetter` function in lesson 4 (listing 4.6):

```plaintext
def addressLetter name location = locationFunction name
    where locationFunction = getLocationFunction location
```

In `addressLetter`, the `name` argument comes before the `location` argument. It makes much more sense that you’d want to create a function `addressLetterNY` that’s waiting for a name,

```plaintext
exampleBuilder = getRequestUrl "http://example.com" "1337hAsk3ll" "books"
```
rather than an `addressLetterBobSmith` that will write letters to all the Bob Smiths of the world. Rather than rewriting your function, which might not always be possible if you’re using functions from another library, you can fix this by creating a partial-application-friendly version, as follows.

This is a fine solution for the one-time case of fixing your `addressLetter` function. What if you inherited a code base in which many library functions had this same error in the case of two arguments? It’d be nice to find a general solution to this problem rather than individually writing out each case. Combining all the things you’ve learned so far, you can do this in a simple function. You want to make a function called `flipBinaryArgs` that will take a function, flip the order of its arguments, and then return it otherwise untouched. To do this, you need a lambda function, first-class functions, and a closure. You can put all these together in a single line of Haskell, as shown in figure 5.6.

![Figure 5.6](image)

Now you can rewrite `addressLetterV2` by using `flipBinaryArgs`, and then create an `addressLetterNY`:

```
addressLetterV2 = flipBinaryArgs addressLetter
addressLetterNY = addressLetterV2 "ny"
```

And you can test this out in GHCi:

```
GHCi> addressLetterNY ("Bob", "Smith")
Bob Smith: PO Box 789 - New York, NY, 10013
```

Your `flipBinaryArgs` function is useful for more than fixing code that didn’t follow our generalization guidelines. Plenty of binary functions have a natural order, such as
division. A useful trick in Haskell is that any infix operator (such as +, /, -, *) can be used as a prefix function by putting parentheses around it:

```
GHCi> 2 + 3
5
GHCi> (+) 2 3
5
GHCi> 10 / 2
5.0
GHCi> (/) 10 2
5.0
```

In division and subtraction, the order of arguments is important. Despite there being a natural order for the arguments, it’s easy to understand that you might want to create a closure around the second argument. In these cases, you can use `flipBinaryArgs` to help you. Because `flipBinaryArgs` is such a useful function, there’s an existing function named `flip` that behaves the same.

**Quick check 5.4** Use `flip` and partial application to create a function called `subtract2` that removes 2 from whatever number is passed in to it.

```
subtract2 = flip (-) 2
```

**Summary**

In this lesson, our objective was to teach the important idea of a closure in functional programming. With lambda functions, first-class functions, and closures, you have all you need to perform functional programming. Closures combine lambda functions and first-class functions to give you amazing power. With closures, you can easily create new functions on the fly. You also learned how partial application makes working with closures much easier. After you’re used to using partial application, you may sometimes forget you’re working with closures at all! Let’s see if you got this.

**Q5.1** Now that you know about partial application, you no longer need to use `genIfEvenX`. Redefine `ifEvenInc`, `ifEvenDouble`, and `ifEvenSquare` by using `ifEven` and partial application.

**QC 5.4 answer**

```
subtract2 = flip (-) 2
```
Q5.2 Even if Haskell didn’t have partial application, you could hack together some approximations. Following a similar pattern to flipBinaryArgs (figure 5.6), write a function binaryPartialApplication that takes a binary function and one argument and returns a new function waiting for the missing argument.
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Will Kurt

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