

# Don't add to the signed/unsigned mess

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## Abstract

There are many ways of writing a simple loop. Too many, and we are proposing to add more. My suggestion: don't.

The root problem is that in C and C++ signed and unsigned integers don't mix well. We should begin the process of minimizing that problem by not adding more opportunities for such mixing.

Please note that this is not a suggestion to change the WP. It is an argument for keeping status quo until we are certain we have something better.

## Loops

As an example, I will use a very simple loop that simply zeros out the elements of a **vector**.

Use a range for:

```
for (auto& x : v) x=0;
```

That's the simplest and often the best, but people – many people – like to play with loop variables and occasionally they actually need to:

```
for (int i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;           // naive and natural
```

```
for (unsigned i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;    // hard to optimize (e.g., [Carruth,2016])
```

```
for (auto i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;
```

```
for (auto i = 0u; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;
```

```
for (vector<double>::size_type i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;    // verbose and error-prone
```

```
for (decltype(v)::size_type i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;
```

```
for (size_t i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;
```

```
for (ptrdiff_t i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;
```

And more variations. This is too much and offers many opportunities for confusion; we should not add to that.

Now people are proposing [p0330r4] [p1227R1]:

```

for (auto i = 0; i<v.ssize(); ++i) v[i]=0;
for (auto i = 0z; i<v.ssize(); ++i) v[i]=0;
for (auto i = 0uz; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;

```

As ever, people will get confused and - in addition to my examples - use some of the many more variants that I haven't mentioned.

## Workarounds and alternatives

Of course, some (but not all) compilers warn about common cases:

```

for (int i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;    // warning

```

That is most annoying because most **vectors** have far fewer than 2 billion elements. In fact, the standard limits the number of elements of a vector to the largest positive value of its difference type (General Container Requirements, table 64). This leads people to complain bitterly about C++, especially novices and people coming to C++ from other languages. New people come to C++ faster than we can teach them to do such basic things differently from what they were used to.

So, people and organizations ignore those warnings or suppress them, setting a dangerous example for other warnings and causing trouble when you do get a 2B+ **vector**. False positives do harm.

People also look for alternatives:

```

for (int i = 0; i < (int)v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;    // use a cast

```

That's unnecessarily verbose, dangerous in the sense that it could be wrong (here, narrowing on some machines), and teaches people to use the terse, general, and error-prone C-style cast.

Here is a variant that does not use a cast:

```

for (int i = 0, n = v.size(); i < n; ++i ) v[i]=0;    // verbose

```

Such workarounds avoid warnings (but narrows and converts unsigned to signed). They also make people wonder about the sanity of C++.

In places, people use a helper function. For example:

```

for (int i = 0; i < elem_count(v); ++i) v[i]=0;

```

where **elem\_count()** is a function that takes a container or a range and returns a signed value (and hides the cast).

For many examples, there are alternatives to C-style **for**-loops. I mentioned the **range**-for up front, but algorithms often offer alternatives

```

std::fill(v.begin(),v.end(),0);
std::fill(v,0);    // when we get ranges
std::for_each(v.begin(),v.end(),[](int& x){ x=0; });

```

Again, try to explain that to a C++ novice. Better still, try to get the point across to a novice for whom you are not formally a teacher or a Mentor. Or for someone you will never meet. Unless somehow advised otherwise, such people often (typically?) start with

```
for (int i = 0; i<v.size(); ++i) v[i]=0;    // annoying, incomprehensible warning
```

For almost all uses, that warning is a false positive; that is, irrelevant.

## Actual proposals

[p0330r4] proposes to add to the – already confusing – set of suffixes by adding **uz** and **z** (or maybe some other letters). We'd have **u, U, l, L, z, Z, f, F**, and **p** (has **p** been formally proposed?) plus combinations in addition to user-defined suffixes. There are also decimal floating point and soon **short floats**.

[p1227R1] proposes to change **size()** in the ranges TS and for **span** to **unsigned** (making them bug compatible with the STL) and adding **ssize()** to all containers and range accessors

- embeds a type in a function name (and it makes me think of Parseltongue☺)
- leaves the wrong solution (IMO) with the better, more established, and simpler name
- adds a few more cases to the wrong (IMO) solution [P1428R0]

What other types deserves suffixes? What other types could “benefit” from similar addition of signed-type alternatives to current unsigned ones? Are there types for which such additions would offer more help to programmers than the current proposals for (just) signed and unsigned? I suspect so. The quest for patches would be open-ended.

For C++, signed sizes and subscripts are the best solution: make all **size()**s signed!. That is not perfect, and I don't propose that for C++20, but it is the solution with the least problems and the best opportunities to catch problems (e.g., contracts and run-time checks) [P1428R0]. We should aim for that and start gathering facts/data, rather than adding to the problem (e.g., by changing **span<T>::size()** to be unsigned).

## Acknowledgements

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## References

- [P0330R4] JeanHeyd Meneide and Rein Halbersma: [Literal Suffixes for ptrdiff\\_t and size\\_t](#).
- [p1227R1] Jorg Brown: [Signed ssize\(\) functions, unsigned size\(\) functions](#).
- [P1227R3] Jorg Brown: <http://wiki.edg.com/pub/Wg21kona2019/StrawPolls/p1227r2.htm> (the document voted on in Kona).
- [P1428R0] Bjarne Stroustrup: [Subscripts and sizes should be signed](#).
- [Carruth,2016] Chandler Carruth: [Garbage In, Garbage Out: Arguing about Undefined Behavior with Nasal Demons](#) CppCon 2016 (starting around 40min in).