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Stata tip 120: Certifying subroutines

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When you write your own program in Stata, it is good practice and useful to create and run a certification script. A certification script is a do-file that runs your program and compares the results either with a result that is known to be true or with results from a previous run (Gould 2001). It is also good practice and useful to divide your program into smaller subroutines; you can store these subroutines in the same ado-file. These subroutines will be visible only to other programs defined within the same ado-file; the only program that is visible to all other programs in Stata will be the first program defined in an ado-file. This can be useful for subroutines that make sense only within the context of the main program. For example, you may want to delegate the parsing of some complicated syntax element to a subroutine. Moreover, putting a subroutine inside the ado-file of the main program protects users against accidentally running that subroutine. This can be important when, for example, the subroutine changes the data, and the main program has various safeguards in place to ensure that this will not corrupt the user's data.

Sometimes, it is helpful to certify some subroutines in isolation. How would you do that if the subroutines are not visible outside the ado-file? You could copy the subroutine and store it in its own file, thus making the subroutine globally visible. However, as mentioned above, there can be good reasons why you would not want the subroutine to be globally visible in the final program.

Another solution is to `do` or `run` (see [R] **do**) the ado-file. This treats the ado-file as a regular do-file, which in this case defines only a set of programs. So after you `do` or `run` an ado-file, all of its subroutines will also be available. Now you can certify the subroutines from the file that will be released to the general public without having to copy and paste parts out of and into that file. This trick can also be useful when debugging a subroutine.

Consider the example ado-file below:

```
*! version 1.0.0 26Feb2014 MLB
program mainprog
version 13
args input
subprog `input´
di `"`s(output)´"´
end

program subprog, sclass
version 13
args input
sreturn local output `"do something smart with "`input´""´
end
```

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If you store this file where Stata can see it (see [P] **sysdir**) or if you change the working directory to where this ado-file is stored (see [D] **cd**), the command `mainprog` works directly. However, if you try to call `subprog`, Stata will return an error.

```
. clear all
. mainprog "this"
do something smart with "this"
. subprog "this"
unrecognized command:  subprog
r(199);
```

We can look at the names of the programs stored in memory by using `program dir` (see [P] **program**), and we see that `subprog` exists but only as part of the `mainprog` command.

```
. program dir
  ado      232  mainprog.subprog
  ado      213  mainprog
  (output omitted)
```

If we `run` this ado-file first, then we can directly access both `mainprog` and `subprog`.

```
. clear all
. run mainprog.ado
. mainprog "this"
do something smart with "this"
. subprog "this"
. di `"`s(output)´"´
do something smart with "this"
. program dir
           232  subprog
           213  mainprog
  (output omitted)
```

Reference

Gould, W. 2001. Statistical software certification. *Stata Journal* 1: 29–50.