



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Advanced Database Systems

Spring 2026

Lecture #18:

Query Optimisation: Searching

R&G: Chapter 15

QUERY OPTIMISATION

Plan space

Cost estimation

Search algorithm

FINDING THE “BEST” QUERY PLAN

Holy grail of any DBMS implementation

Challenge: There may be more than one way to answer a given query

Which one of the join operators should we pick?

With which parameters (block size, buffer allocation, ...)?

Which join ordering?

FINDING THE “BEST” QUERY PLAN

The query optimiser

1. **Enumerates** all possible query execution plans
If this yields too many plans, at least enumerate the “promising” plan candidates
2. Determines the **cost** (quality) of each plan
3. Chooses the **best** one as the final execution plan

Ideally: Want to find the best plan. **Practically:** Avoid worst plans!

ENUMERATION OF ALTERNATIVE PLANS

There are two main cases:

- Single-table plans (base case)

- Multiple-table plans (induction)

Single-table queries include selects, projects, and group-by / aggregate

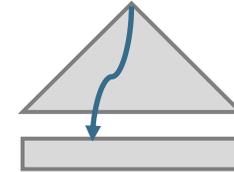
- Consider each available access path (file scan vs. index)

- Choose the one with the least estimated cost

SINGLE-TABLE PLANS: COST ESTIMATES

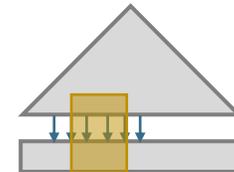
Index I on primary key matches selection:

Cost is $(\text{Height}(I) + 1) + 1$ for a B+ tree (variant *B* or *C*)



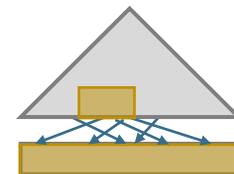
Clustered index I matching selection:

$(\text{NPages}(I) + \text{NPages}(R)) * \text{selectivity}$ (approximately)



Non-clustered index I matching selection:

$(\text{NPages}(I) + \text{NTuples}(R)) * \text{selectivity}$ (approximately)



Sequential scan of file

$\text{NPages}(R)$

Recall: Must also charge for duplicate elimination if required

SINGLE-TABLE PLAN: EXAMPLE

```
SELECT * FROM Sailors
WHERE rating = 8
```

If we have an index **I** on *rating*:

Cardinality

$$= 1/NKeys(rating) \cdot NTuples(Sailors) = 1/10 \cdot 40,000 = 4000 \text{ tuples}$$

Clustered index

$$1/NKeys(rating) \cdot (NPages(I) + NPages(Sailors)) = 1/10 \cdot (50 + 500) = 55 \text{ pages are retrieved}$$

Unclustered index

$$1/NKeys(rating) \cdot (NPages(I) + NTuples(Sailors)) = 1/10 \cdot (50 + 40,000) = 4005 \text{ pages are retrieved}$$

Costs on indexes are approximate as we might not need to retrieve all index pages

If we have an index **I** on *sid*:

Doing an index scan retrieves all pages & tuples

Clustered index: $\sim (50 + 500)$ pages retrieved. Unclustered index: $\sim (50 + 40,000)$ pages retrieved

Doing a file scan retrieves all file pages: 500

$$NTuples(Sailors) = 40,000$$

$$NPages(Sailors) = 500$$

$$NKeys(rating) = 10$$

$$NPages(I) = 50$$

MULTIPLE-TABLE PLANS

We have translated the query into a graph of query blocks

Query blocks are essentially a multi-way product of relations with projections on top

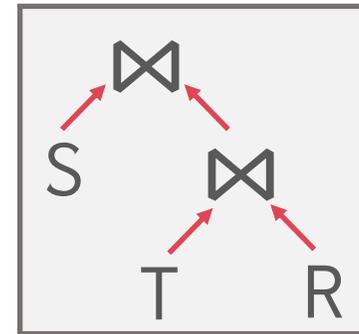
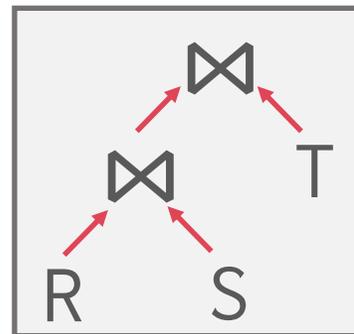
Task: **enumerate** all possible execution plans

i.e., all possible 2-way join combinations for each query block

Example: three-way join

12 possible re-orderings

2 shown here



ENORMOUS SEARCH SPACE

# of relations n	# of different join trees
2	2
3	12
4	120
5	1,680
6	30,240
7	665,280
8	17,297,280
10	17,643,225,600

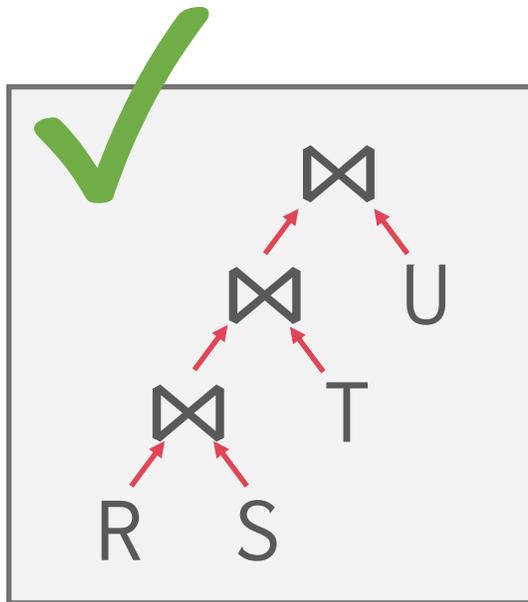
We have not even considered *different join algorithms!*

We need to restrict search space!

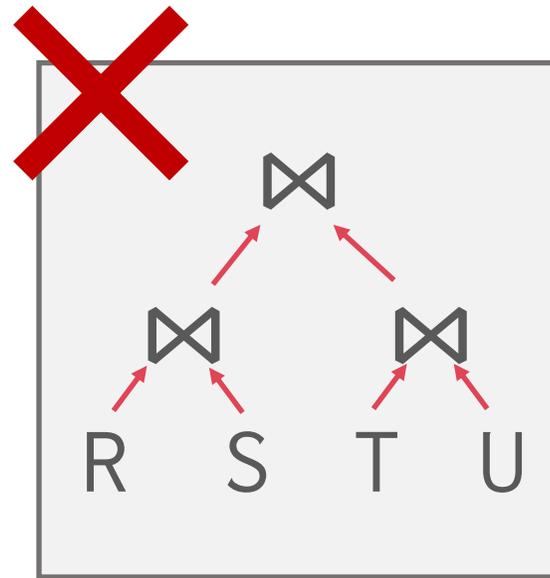
MULTIPLE-TABLE QUERY PLANNING

Fundamental decision in IBM's System R (late 1970):

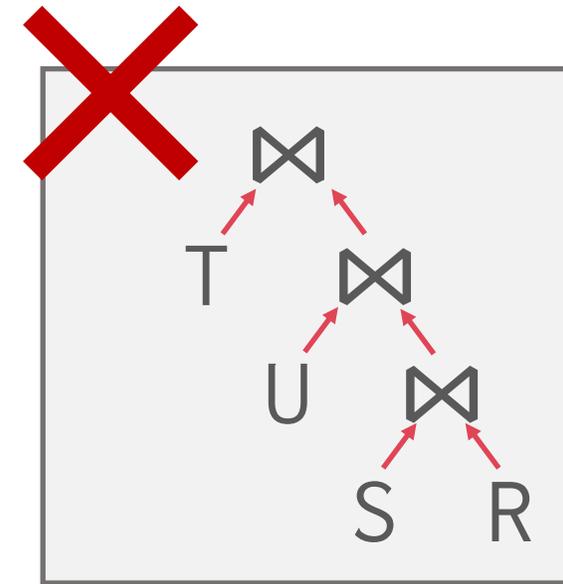
Only consider left-deep join trees



left-deep



bushy
(everything else)



right-deep

LEFT-DEEP JOIN TREES

DBMSs often prefer left-deep join trees

The inner (rhs) relation always is a base relation

Allows the use of index nested loops join

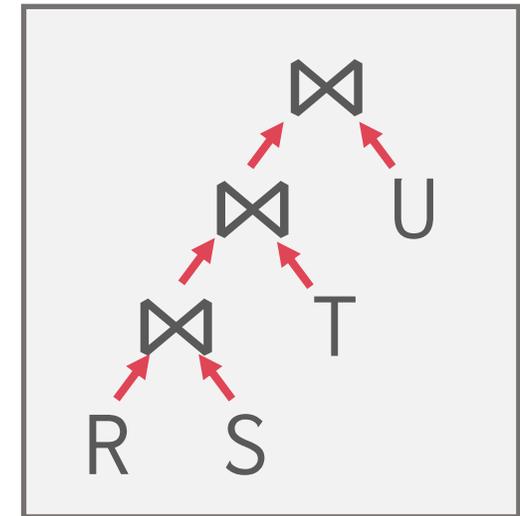
Allows for **fully pipelined plans** where intermediate results are not written to temporary files

Should be factored into global cost calculation

Not all left-deep trees are fully pipelined (e.g., sort-merge join)

Pipelining requires **non-blocking** operators

Modern DBMSs may also consider non left-deep join trees



MULTI-TABLE QUERY PLANNING

System R-style join order enumeration

Left-deep tree #1, Left-deep tree #2...

Eliminate plans with cross products immediately

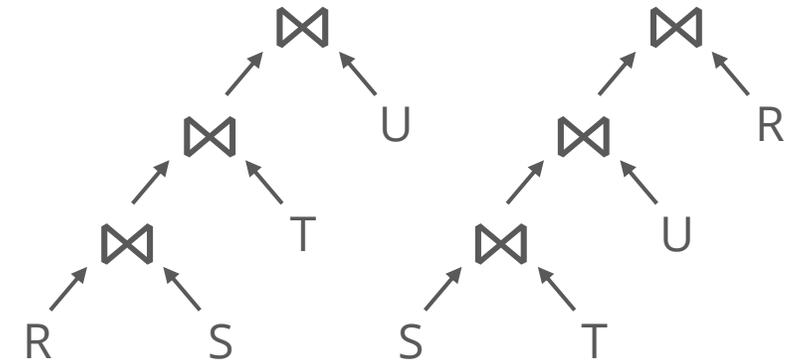
Enumerate the plans for each operator

Hash, Sort-Merge, Nested Loop...

Enumerate the access paths for each table

Index #1, Index #2, Sequential scan...

Use **dynamic programming** to reduce the number of cost estimations



THE PRINCIPLE OF OPTIMALITY

The best overall plan is composed of best decisions on the subplans

Optimal result has optimal substructure

For example, the best left-deep plan to join tables R, S, T is either:

(The best plan for joining R, S) \bowtie T

(The best plan for joining R, T) \bowtie S

(The best plan for joining S, T) \bowtie R

This is great!

When optimising a subplan (e.g., R \bowtie S), don't worry how it will be used later (e.g., when joining with T)!

When optimizing a higher-level plan (e.g., R \bowtie S \bowtie T), reuse the best results of subplans (e.g., R \bowtie S)!

EXAMPLE: DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

Pass #1 (best 1-relation plans): Find best access path to each relation (index vs. full table scans)

```
SELECT * FROM R, S, T
WHERE R.A = S.A
AND S.B = T.B
```



R
S
T

R ⋈ S
T

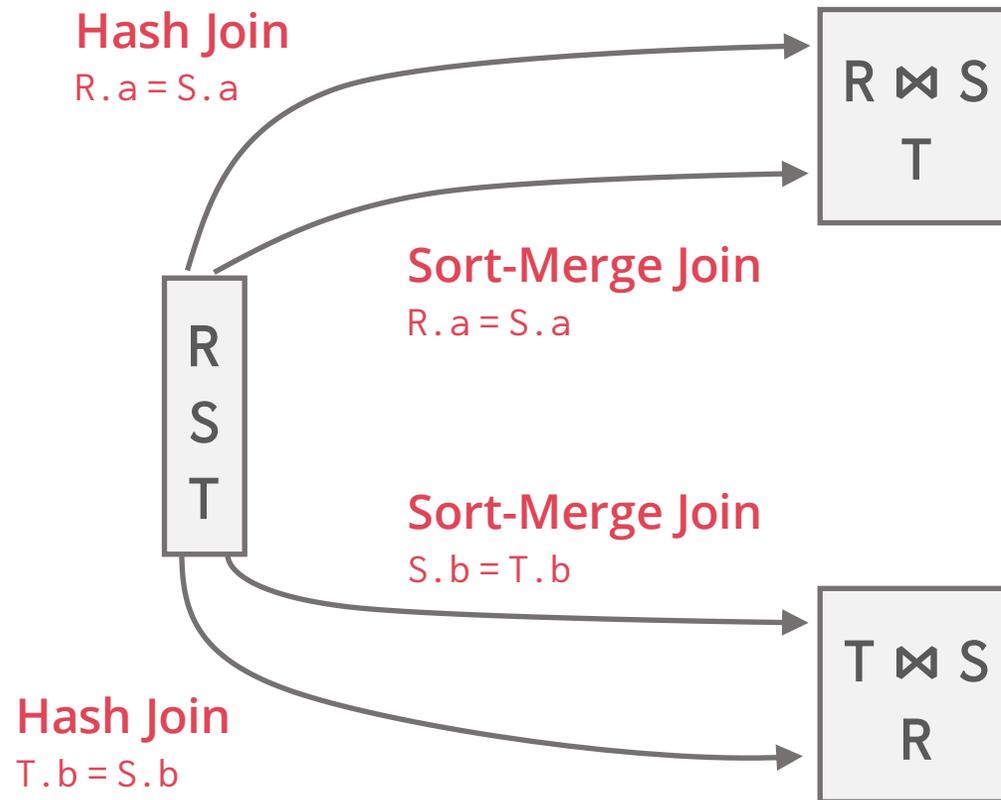
R ⋈ S ⋈ T

T ⋈ S
R

EXAMPLE: DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

Pass #2 (best 2-relation plans): determine best join order ($R \bowtie S$ or $S \bowtie R$), choose best candidate

```
SELECT * FROM R, S, T
WHERE R.A = S.A
      AND S.B = T.B
```

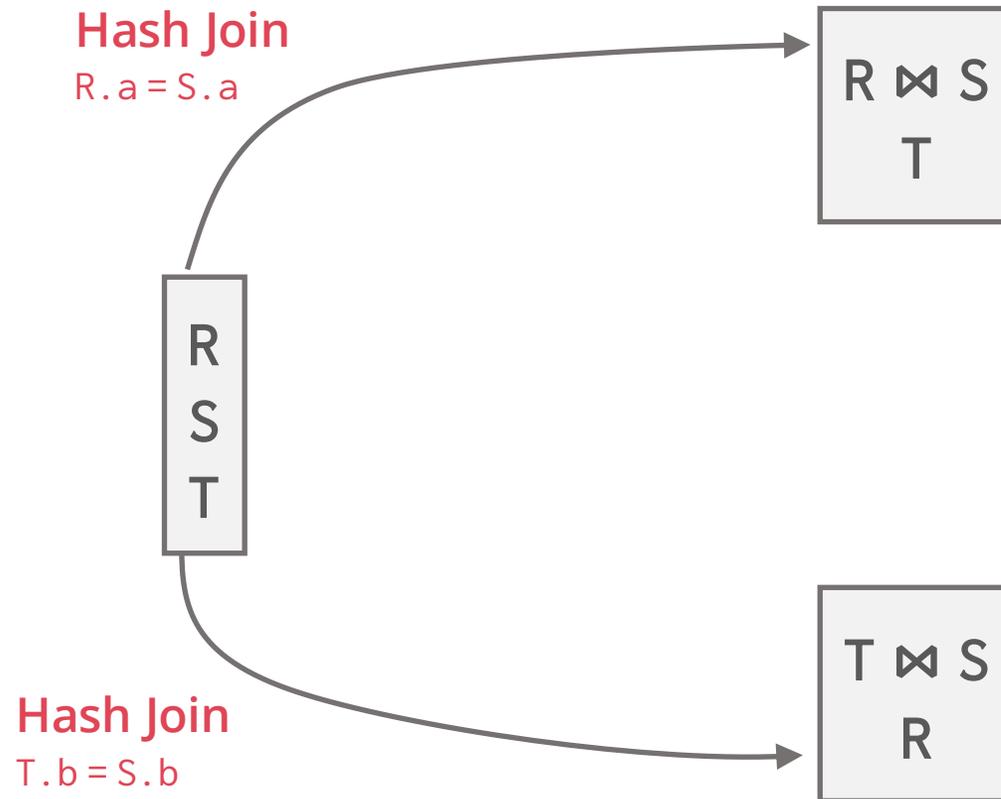


$R \bowtie S \bowtie T$

EXAMPLE: DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

Pass #2 (best 2-relation plans): determine best join order ($R \bowtie S$ or $S \bowtie R$), choose best candidate

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SELECT * FROM R, S, T
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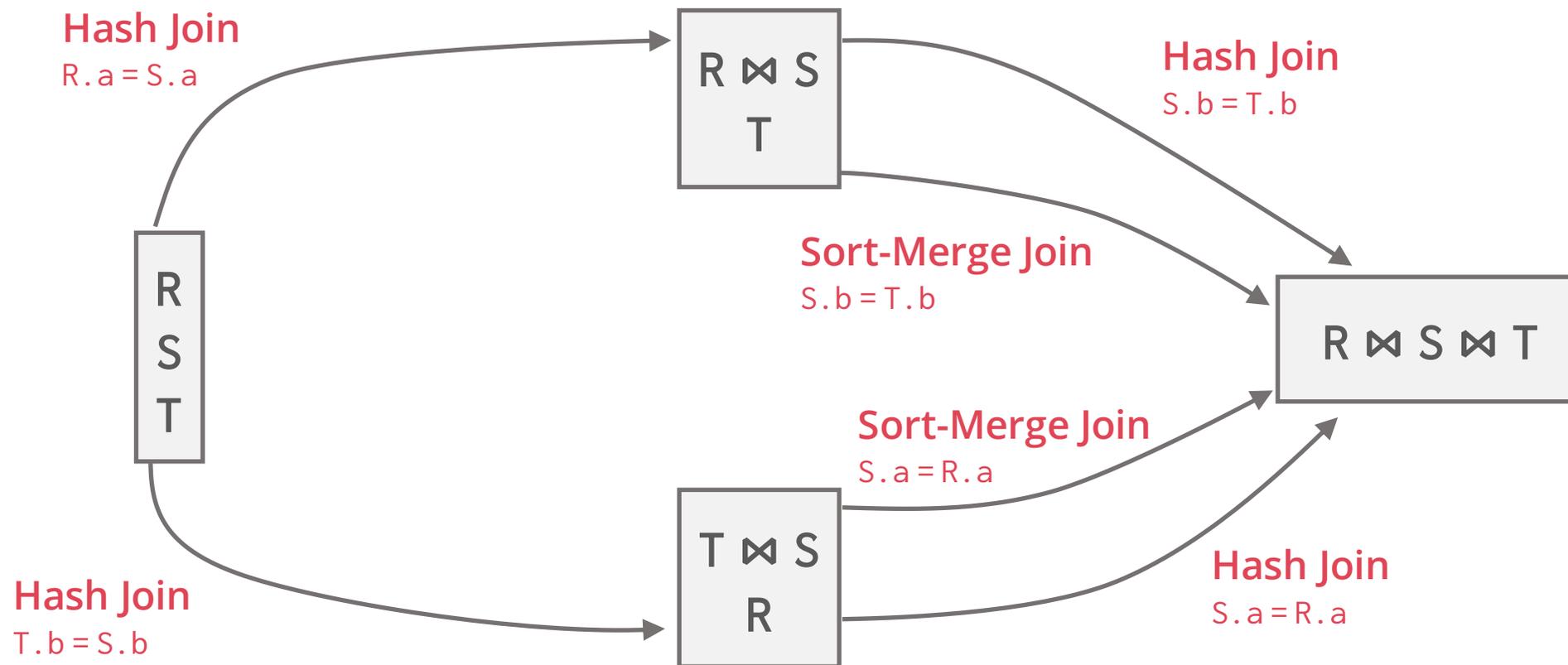


$R \bowtie S \bowtie T$

EXAMPLE: DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

Pass #3 (best 3-relation plans):
best 2-relation plans + one other relation

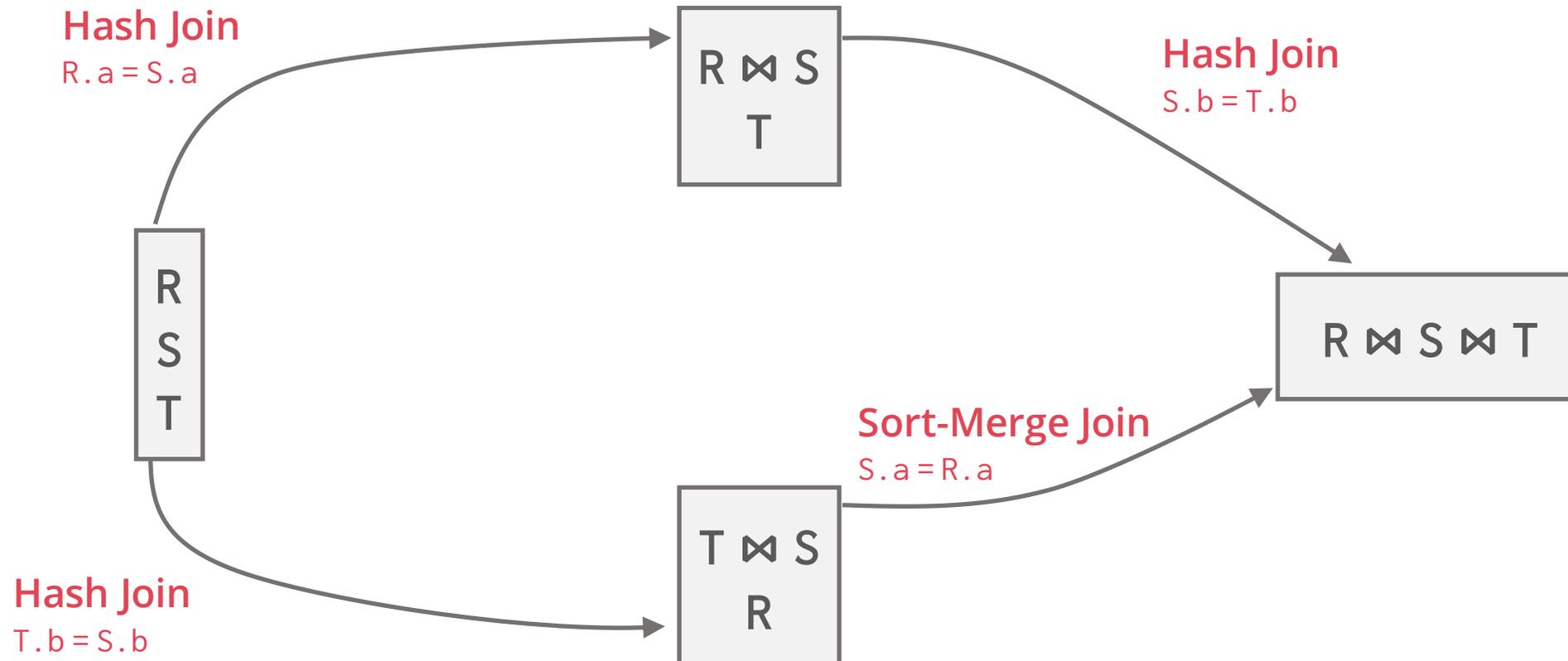
```
SELECT * FROM R, S, T
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AND S.B = T.B
```



EXAMPLE: DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

Pass #3 (best 3-relation plans):
best 2-relation plans + one other relation

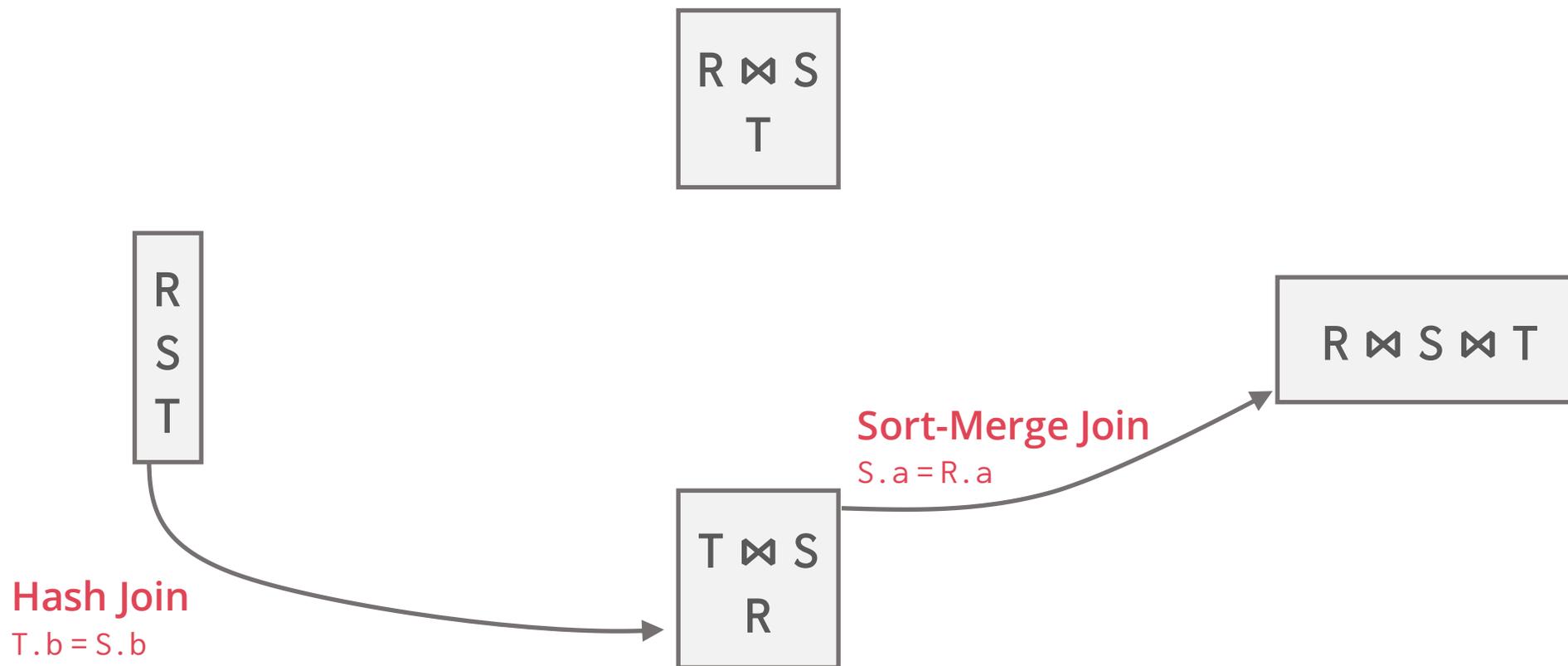
```
SELECT * FROM R, S, T
WHERE R.A = S.A
AND S.B = T.B
```



EXAMPLE: DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

Pass #3 (best 3-relation plans):
best 2-relation plans + one other relation

```
SELECT * FROM R, S, T
WHERE R.A = S.A
AND S.B = T.B
```



INTERESTING ORDERS

System R-style query optimisers also consider **interesting orders**

Sorting orders of the input tables that may be beneficial later in the query plan

E.g., for a sort-merge join, projection with duplicate removal, order-by clause

Determined by ORDER BY and GROUP BY clauses in the input query or join attributes of subsequent joins (to facilitate merging)

For each subset of relations, retain only:

Cheapest plan overall, plus

Cheapest plan for each **interesting order** of the tuples

EXAMPLE

```
SELECT S.sid, COUNT(*) AS number
FROM Sailors S
JOIN Reserves R ON S.sid = R.sid
JOIN Boats B ON R.bid = B.bid
WHERE B.color = 'red'
GROUP BY S.sid
```

Sailors:

B+ tree on *sid*

Reserves:

Clustered B+ tree on *bid*

B+ tree on *sid*

Boats:

B+ tree on *color*

Pass 1: Best plan for each relation

Sailors, Reserves: File scan

Boats: B+ tree on *color*

Also B+ tree on *Sailors.sid* as interesting order (output sorted on *sid*)

Also B+ tree on *Reserves.bid* as interesting order (output sorted on *bid*)

Also B+ tree on *Reserves.sid* as interesting order (output sorted on *sid*)

EXAMPLE: PASS 2

Pass 2: Best 2-relation plans

```
// for each left-deep logical plan
foreach plan P in Pass 1:
  foreach FROM table T not in P:
    // for each physical plan
    foreach access method M on T:
      foreach join method ⋈:
        generate P ⋈ M(T)
```

Eliminate cross products

Retain cheapest plan for each (pair of relations, order)

EXAMPLE: PASS 3

Using **Pass 2 plans** as outer relations, generate plans for the next join in the same way as Pass 2

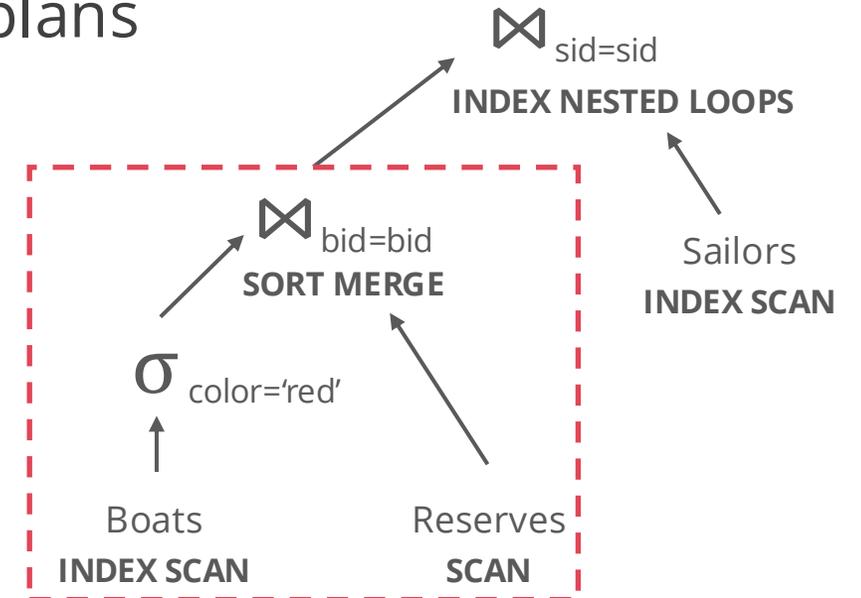
Example: the marked subplan is the best plan for { Reserves, Boats } and provides an interesting order on Boats.bid and Reserves.bid

Then, add cost for group-by / aggregate:

This is the cost to sort the result by *sid*

... unless it has already been sorted by a previous operator

Finally, choose the cheapest plan



SUMMARY

Query optimisation is an important task in a relational DBMS

Explores a set of alternative plans

- Must prune search space; typically, left-deep plans only

- Uses dynamic programming for join orderings

Must estimate cost of each plan that is considered

- Must estimate the size of result and cost for each plan node

Query optimiser is the most complex part of database systems!