

Build a REST API in 30 minutes with Django REST Framework



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Building a REST API in Django is so super easy. In this tutorial, we'll walk through the steps to get your first API up and running.



(This post is part of a series where I teach how to deploy a React front end on a Django back end. However, nothing in this post is React specific. Whatever your API needs, read on!)

Why REST API?

Before we get to the code, it's worth considering why you would want to build an API. If someone had explained these basic concepts to me before I started, I would have been so much better off.

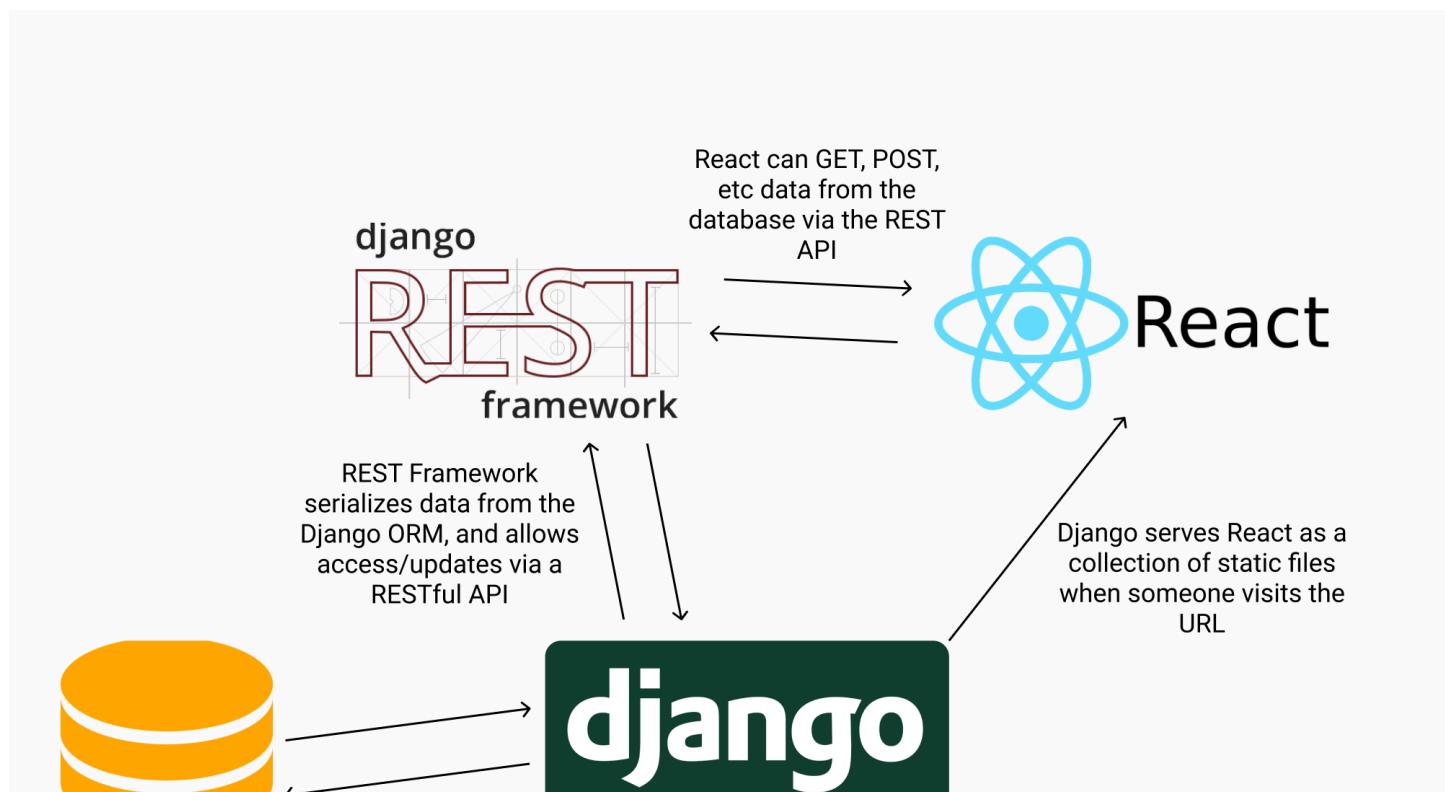
A REST API is a standardized way to provide data to other applications. Those applications can then use the data however they want. Sometimes, APIs also offer a way for other applications to make changes to the data.

There are a few key options for a REST API request:

- GET — The most common option, returns some data from the API based on the endpoint you visit and any parameters you provide
- POST — Creates a new record that gets appended to the database
- PUT — Looks for a record at the given URI you provide. If it exists, update the existing record. If not, create a new record
- DELETE — Deletes the record at the given URI
- PATCH — Update individual fields of a record

Typically, an API is a window into a database. The API backend handles querying the database and formatting the response. What you receive is a static response, usually in JSON format, of whatever resource you requested.

REST APIs are so commonplace in software development, it's an essential skill for a developer to know how they work. APIs are how applications communicate with one another or even within themselves.





Django ORM
creates & manages
database models &
queries

A typical Django application that uses React as a front end. It needs an API to allow React to consume data from the database.

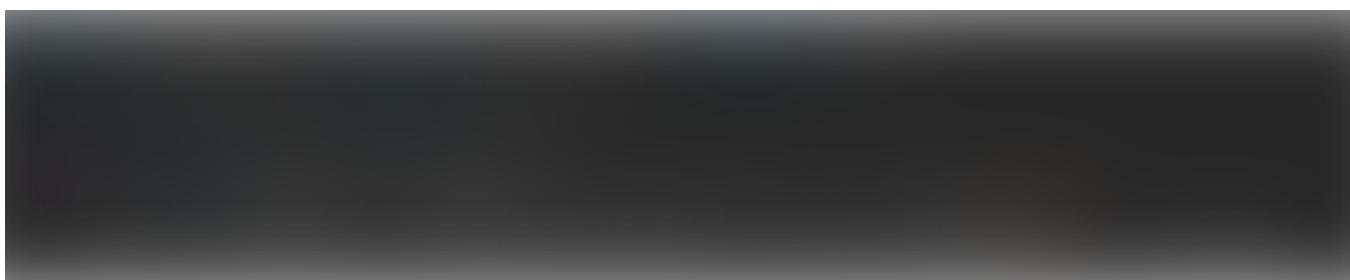
For example, in web development, many applications rely on REST APIs to allow the front end to talk to the back end. If you're deploying a React application atop Django, for instance, you'll need an API to allow React to consume information from the database.

The process of querying and converting tabular database values into JSON or another format is called **serialization**. When you're creating an API, correct serialization of data is the major challenge.

Why Django REST Framework?

The biggest reason to use Django REST Framework is because it makes serialization so easy!

In Django, you define your models for your database using Python. While you *can* write raw SQL, for the most part the Django ORM handles all the database migrations and queries.



A sample Django database model, defined in Python. The Django ORM writes all the SQL needed to create and update this model.

Think of the Django ORM like a librarian, pulling the information you need for you, so you don't have to go get it yourself.

As a developer, this frees you up to worry about the business logic of your application and forget about the low level implementation details. Django ORM handles all that for you.

The Django REST Framework, then, plays nicely with the Django ORM that's already doing all the heavy lifting of querying the database. Just a few lines of code using Django REST Framework, and you can serialize your database models to REST-ful formats.

To-do list to create a REST API in Django

Okay, so based on what we know, what are the steps to creating a REST API?

1. Set up Django
2. Create a model in the database that the Django ORM will manage
3. Set up the Django REST Framework
4. Serialize the model from step 2
5. Create the URI endpoints to view the serialized data

If it seems simple, that's because it is. Let's get to it!

1. Set up Django

To create a Django app, we'll need to install Django. That's easy enough!

First, though, consider creating a new virtual environment for your project so you can manage your dependencies separately.

1.1 Virtual Environment

I use pyenv and pyenv-virtualenv for my environments:

```
$ pyenv virtualenv django-rest
Looking in links: /tmp/tmpjizkdynp
Requirement already satisfied: setuptools in
/home/bennett/.pyenv/versions/3.6.8/envs/django-
rest/lib/python3.6/site-packages (40.6.2)
Requirement already satisfied: pip in
/home/bennett/.pyenv/versions/3.6.8/envs/django-
rest/lib/python3.6/site-packages (18.1)
$ pyenv local django-rest
```

1.2 Install Django

Now, we can install Django:

```
$ pip install django
```

Next, let's start a new Django project:

```
$ django-admin startproject mysite
```

If we look at the directory now, we'll see that Django created a new folder for us:

```
$ ls  
mysite/
```

And if we look inside that folder, there's everything we need to run a Django site:

```
$ cd mysite/  
$ ls  
manage.py* mysite/
```

Let's make sure it works. Test run the Django server:

```
$ python manage.py runserver  
Watching for file changes with StatReloader  
Performing system checks...  
  
System check identified no issues (0 silenced).  
  
You have 17 unapplied migration(s). Your project may not work  
properly until you apply the migrations for app(s): admin, auth,  
contenttypes, sessions.  
Run 'python manage.py migrate' to apply them.
```

```
May 17, 2019 - 16:09:28  
Django version 2.2.1, using settings 'mysite.settings'  
Starting development server at http://127.0.0.1:8000/  
Quit the server with CONTROL-C.
```

Go to localhost:8000 and you should see the Django welcome screen!



Hey! Django works!

1.3 Create API app

We could build our application with the folder structure the way it is right now. However, best practice is to separate your Django project into separate apps when you build something new.

So, let's create a new app for our API:

```
$ python manage.py startapp myapi  
$ ls  
db.sqlite3  manage.py*  myapi/  mysite/
```

1.4 Register the myapi app with the mysite project

We need to tell Django to recognize this new app that we just created. The steps we do later won't work if Django doesn't know about myapi.

So, we edit `mysite/settings.py` :

```
INSTALLED_APPS = [
    'myapi.apps.MyapiConfig',
    ... # Leave all the other INSTALLED_APPS
]
```

1.5 Migrate the database

Remember how I said Django allows you to define database models using Python?

Whenever we create or make changes to a model, we need to tell Django to migrate those changes to the database. The Django ORM then writes all the SQL `CREATE TABLE` commands for us.

It turns out that Django comes with a few models already built in. We need to migrate those built in models to our database.

(For those of you thinking, “We didn’t create a database!” You’re right. But Django will create a simple SQLite database for us if we don’t specify differently. And SQLite is awesome!)

So, let’s migrate those initial models:

```
$ python manage.py migrate
```

Operations to perform:

Apply all migrations: admin, auth, contenttypes, sessions

Running migrations:

```
  Applying contenttypes.0001_initial... OK
  Applying auth.0001_initial... OK
  Applying admin.0001_initial... OK
  Applying admin.0002_logentry_remove_auto_add... OK
  Applying admin.0003_logentry_add_action_flag_choices... OK
  Applying contenttypes.0002_remove_content_type_name... OK
  Applying auth.0002_alter_permission_name_max_length... OK
  Applying auth.0003_alter_user_email_max_length... OK
  Applying auth.0004_alter_user_username_opts... OK
  Applying auth.0005_alter_user_last_login_null... OK
  Applying auth.0006_require_contenttypes_0002... OK
  Applying auth.0007_alter_validators_add_error_messages... OK
  Applying auth.0008_alter_user_username_max_length... OK
```

```
Applying auth.0009_alter_user_last_name_max_length... OK
Applying auth.0010_alter_group_name_max_length... OK
Applying auth.0011_update_proxy_permissions... OK
Applying sessions.0001_initial... OK
```

1.6 Create Super User

One more thing before we move on.

We're about to create some models. It would be nice if we had access to Django's pretty admin interface when we want to review the data in our database.

To do so, we'll need login credentials. So, let's make ourselves the owners and administrators of this project. THE ALL-POWERFUL SUPERUSER!!!

```
$ python manage.py createsuperuser

Username (leave blank to use 'bennett'):
Email address: hello@bennettgarner.com
Password:
Password (again):
Superuser created successfully.
```

Let's verify that it works. Start up the Django server:

```
$ python manage.py runserver
```

And then navigate to localhost:8000/admin





Oooo, Django Admin!!! Pretty.

Log in with your superuser credentials, and you should see the admin dashboard:



Look at those lovely User and Group models

2. Create a model in the database that Django ORM will manage

Let's make our first model!

We'll build it in `myapi/models.py`, so open up that file.

2.1 myapi/models.py

Let's make a database of superheroes! Each hero has a name and an alias that they go by in normal life. We'll start there with our model:

```
# models.py
from django.db import models

class Hero(models.Model):
    name = models.CharField(max_length=60)
    alias = models.CharField(max_length=60)
```

```
def __str__(self):
    return self.name
```

`name` and `alias` are character fields where we can store strings. The `__str__` method just tells Django what to print when it needs to print out an instance of the `Hero` model.

2.2 Make migrations

Remember, whenever we define or change a model, we need to tell Django to migrate those changes.

```
$ python manage.py makemigrations

Migrations for 'myapi':
  myapi/migrations/0001_initial.py
    - Create model Hero

$ python manage.py migrate

Operations to perform:
  Apply all migrations: admin, auth, contenttypes, myapi, sessions
Running migrations:
  Applying myapi.0001_initial... OK
```

2.3 Register Hero with the admin site

Remember that awesome admin site that comes out of the box with Django?

It doesn't know the `Hero` model exists, but with two lines of code, we can tell it about `Hero`.

Open `myapi/admin.py` and make it look like this:

```
from django.contrib import admin
from .models import Hero

admin.site.register(Hero)
```

Now run the Django server:

```
$ python manage.py runserver
```

And visit localhost:8000/admin



Heros is there now!

2.4 Create some new heroes

While we're on the admin site, might as well create a few heroes to play around with in our application.

Click "Add." Then, make your heroes!



My sample heroes

3. Set up Django REST Framework

Okay, time to start thinking about our heroes API. We need to serialize the data from our database via endpoints.

To do that, we'll need Django REST Framework, so let's get that installed.

```
$ pip install djangorestframework
```

Now, tell Django that we installed the REST Framework in mysite/settings.py:

```
INSTALLED_APPS = [
    # All your installed apps stay the same
    ...
    'rest_framework',
]
```

That's it!

4. Serialize the Hero model

Now we're starting to get into some new waters. We need to tell REST Framework about our Hero model and how it should serialize the data.

To do so, let's create a new file — myapi/serializers.py

In this file, we need to:

1. Import the Hero model
2. Import the REST Framework serializer
3. Create a new class that links the Hero with its serializer

Here's how:

```
# serializers.py

from rest_framework import serializers
from .models import Hero

class HeroSerializer(serializers.HyperlinkedModelSerializer):
```

```
class Meta:
    model = Hero
    fields = ('name', 'alias')
```

5. Display the data

Now, all that's left to do is wire up the URLs and views to display the data!

5.1 Views

Let's start with the view. We need to render the different heroes in JSON format.

To do so, we need to:

1. Query the database for all heroes
2. Pass that database queryset into the serializer we just created, so that it gets converted into JSON and rendered

In myapi/views.py:

```
# views.py

from rest_framework import viewsets
from .serializers import HeroSerializer
from .models import Hero

class HeroViewSet(viewsets.ModelViewSet):
    queryset = Hero.objects.all().order_by('name')
    serializer_class = HeroSerializer
```

5.2 Site URLs

Okay, awesome. We're sooooo close. The last step is to point a URL at the viewset we just created.

In Django, URLs get resolved at the project level first. So there's a file in mysite directory called urls.py.

Head over there. You'll see the URL for the admin site is already in there. Now, we just need to add a URL for our API. For now, let's just put our API at the index:

```
# mysite/urls.py

from django.contrib import admin
from django.urls import path, include

urlpatterns = [
    path('admin/', admin.site.urls),
    path('', include('myapi.urls')),
]
```

5.3 API URLs

If you're paying attention and not just blindly copy-pasting, you'll notice that we included '`myapi.urls`' . That's a path to a file we haven't edited yet. And that's where Django is going to look next for instructions on how to route this URL.

So, let's go there next — `myapi/urls.py`:

```
# myapi/urls.py

from django.urls import include, path
from rest_framework import routers
from . import views

router = routers.DefaultRouter()
router.register(r'heroes', views.HeroViewSet)

# Wire up our API using automatic URL routing.
# Additionally, we include login URLs for the browsable API.
urlpatterns = [
    path('', include(router.urls)),
    path('api-auth/', include('rest_framework.urls',
    namespace='rest_framework'))
]
```

The REST Framework router will make sure our requests end up at the right resource dynamically. If we add or delete items from the database, the URLs will update to match. Cool right?

So far, we've only added one model/serializer/view group to the router — `heroes`. But we can add more in the future repeating the same process above for different models!

Test it out!

Start up the Django server again:

```
$ python manage.py runserver
```

Now go to localhost:8000



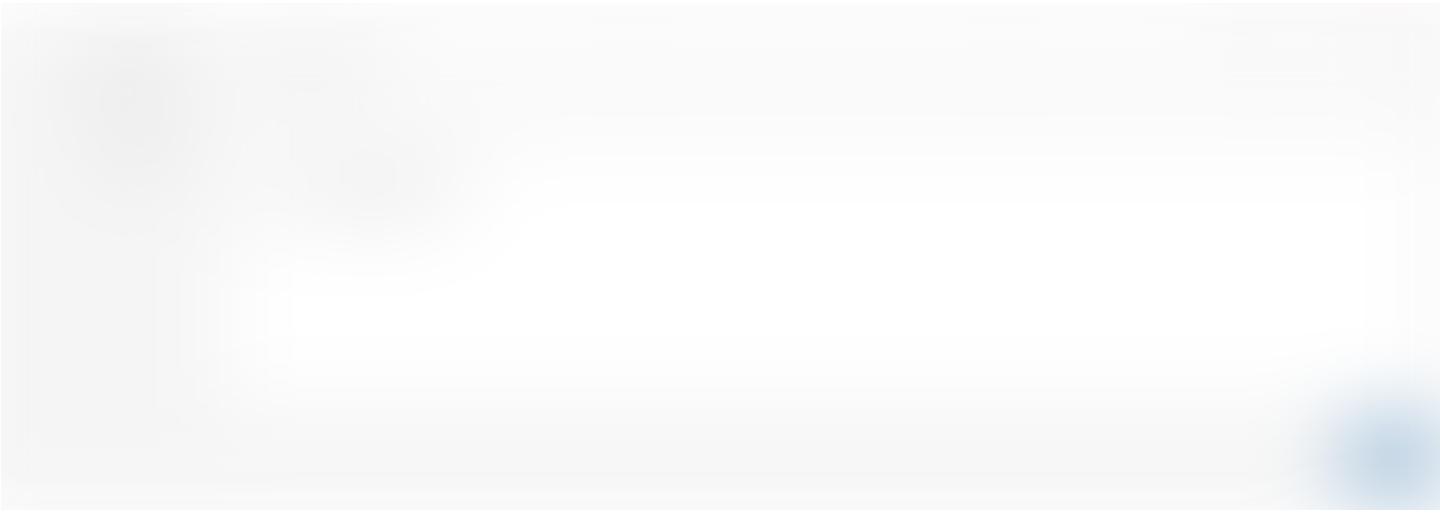
The root of our new API — Django REST Framework makes it look nice

Visit the endpoint via GET

If we click the link (Hyperlinks are good REST-ful design, btw), we see the heroes API results:

Send a POST request

Our API also handles post requests. We can send JSON to the API and it will create a new record in the database.



Sending a POST request to our API

Now, our API includes Captain America!

Quick REST APIs with Django REST Framework

I hope you enjoyed this quick tutorial. Of course, APIs can get much more complicated with multiple models intersecting and endpoints with more complex queries.

That said, you're well on your way with this post. REST Framework handles complexity fairly well. If you get stuck, there's a great community willing to help you find a solution.

Have fun building some new APIs!

About Bennett

I'm a software developer in New York City. I do web stuff in Python and JavaScript.

Like what you've read here? I have an email list you can subscribe to. Infrequent emails, only valuable content, no time wasters. I'd love to have you there.

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