

Course Info

- Course Number: CS291A
- Quarter: Fall 2025

Instructor

- Zach Walker (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/zachary-walker-6a219059/>)
- email (mailto:zach_walker@ucsb.edu)

Dates

Classes

- Mon and Wed
- 1:00pm – 2:50am PT
- Phelps 2510

Office Hours

Initial tasks due before

Wednesday, Oct 1 12pm PT

- Complete the introduction survey (<https://forms.gle/TyxFWZnkW9qaqBhE7>)
- Join the class on Piazza (<https://piazza.com/ucsb/fall2025/cs291a>)

Project 1 (/project1/) due before

Wednesday, October 8th 10am PT

Project 2 (/project2/) due before

Wednesday, October 22 10am PT

Project 3 (/project3/) Team Message due before

Wednesday, October 29 10am PT

Project 3 (/project3/) due before

Monday, November 10 10am PT

Class Resources

Piazza (<https://piazza.com/ucsb/fall2025/cs291a>): Use to receive class announcements, ask and answer questions, and to communicate with instructor. Access code is available in Google Drive and will be shared in the first class.

GitHub (<https://github.com/scalableinternetservices>): Contains content for this site. Additionally all © 2014-2021 Dr. Bryce Boe (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/bryceboe/>) © 2022 Dr. Nevena Golubovic (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/nevenagolubovic/>) © 2023 Dr. Shyr-Shea Chang (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/shyr-sheachang-642c271b8/>) © 2025 Zach Walker (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/zachary-walker-6a219059/>).

Textbooks

High Performance Browser Networking (<https://www.amazon.com/High-Performance-Browser-Networking-performance/dp/1449344763>)

ISBN: 9781449344764

Available online (<https://hpbn.co/>).

Note: The online version is slightly more up-to-date.

The Ruby On Rails Tutorial (<https://www.railstutorial.org/book>)

Optional Note: This book is only useful once we get to the primary project.

Project 3: Rails Backend with Docker

This project builds upon Project 2 by having you create your own Rails backend that implements the same API you integrated with in the previous project. You'll develop this application using Docker containers to get familiar with containerized development.

This team can be completed alone or in teams of 2. If you choose to work as team, you must send me a message on Piazza by Wed 10/29 at 10am listing who you will be working with on this project.

Learning Outcomes

- Student can create a Rails API application using the Rails API generator
- Student can implement REST API endpoints following a specification
- Student can configure Rails to work with MySQL database
- Student can develop applications using Docker containers
- Student can use Docker Compose for multi-container development
- Student can implement authentication and authorization in Rails
- Student can work with Rails models, controllers, and routes
- Student is familiar with Rails testing framework

Project Submission

- Submission link will be posted at start of quarter

What's Included

- **Docker Environment:** Dockerfile and docker-compose.yml for containerized development
- **API Specification:** Complete API documentation that your Rails app must implement
- **Database:** MySQL database configured for Rails development

Download the Project

Download the starter project: project3.zip (/project3.zip)

Starter Contents:

`API_SPECIFICATION.md` - the spec to be implemented

`project3_er_diagram.png` - ER diagram for the models and relationships needed to implement the API spec
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`Dockerfile` - Configuration of the Web container
`docker-compose.yml` - basic docker-compose setup for running a db and web container in development
`Dockefile - Configuration of the Web container`
`/app/services/jwt_service.rb` - Simple service class for creating JWT tokens used for authentication

`/test/requests/auth_test.rb` - Test that will validate that your auth endpoints work as expected
`/test/requests/cookie_configuration_test.rb` - Test that will validate that your session cookie is properly configured
`/test/requests/conversations_test.rb` - Test that the conversation api endpoints work as expected
`/test/services/jwt_service_test.rb` - A test for the provided `jwt_service.rb` file \

Quick Start

1. Extract the project files:

```
unzip project3.zip  
cd project3
```

2. Start the development environment:

```
docker-compose up -d
```

3. Access the Rails container:

```
docker-compose exec web bash
```

4. Inside the container, create your Rails API app:

```
# Install Rails if not already installed  
gem install rails  
  
# Create new Rails API application  
rails new help_desk_backend --api --skip-kamal --skip-thruster --database=mysql  
  
# Navigate to the app directory  
cd help_desk_backend  
  
# Add required gems to Gemfile  
gem "rack-cors" # For handling Cross-Origin Resource Sharing (CORS) requests from the front end  
gem "jwt" # For JSON Web Token authentication (if you choose JWT over sessions)  
gem "activerecord-session_store" # For database-backed session storage  
group :test do  
  gem "mocha"  
end  
  
# Add the following line to help_desk_backend/test/test_helper.rb  
require "mocha/minitest"  
  
# Install dependencies  
bundle install  
  
# Create the database  
rails db:create
```

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5. Access your application at <http://localhost:3000>

Development Environment Services

- **web**: Rails development container with Ruby 3.4.5
- **db**: MySQL 8.0 database server

Ports

- **3000**: Rails development server
- **3306**: MySQL database

Session Configuration

For API applications, you'll need to configure database-backed sessions:

1. **Generate session migration:**

```
rails generate active_record:session_migration
```

2. **Run the migration:**

```
rails db:migrate
```

3. **Add session middleware in config/application.rb :**

```
config.middleware.use ActionDispatch::Cookies
config.middleware.use ActionDispatch::Session::ActiveRecordStore, {
  expire_after: 24.hours,
  same_site: Rails.env.development? ? :lax : :none,
  secure: Rails.env.production?
}
```

This setup allows your Rails API to maintain user sessions across requests, which is essential for authentication functionality.

CORS Configuration

After adding the `rack-cors` gem, configure it in `config/application.rb`:

```
# Add this inside the Application class
config.middleware.insert_before 0, Rack::Cors do
  allow do
    origins [
      'http://localhost:5173',
      'http://127.0.0.1:5173',
    ]
    resource '*',
      headers: :any,
      methods: [:get, :post, :put, :patch, :delete, :options, :head],
      credentials: true
  end
end
```

This allows your frontend application to make requests to your Rails API when hosted in different domains. Even though both may be hosted on localhost during development localhost:3000 is considered a different domain than localhost 5173.

Assignment Files

You should also have received these files with your assignment:

- `API_SPECIFICATION.md` - Complete API documentation that your Rails app must implement

What You Need to Implement

Rails API Application

Create a Rails API application that implements all endpoints specified in the `API_SPECIFICATION.md` file. The API should include:

Below is a possible organization of your application. It is not the only possible organization.

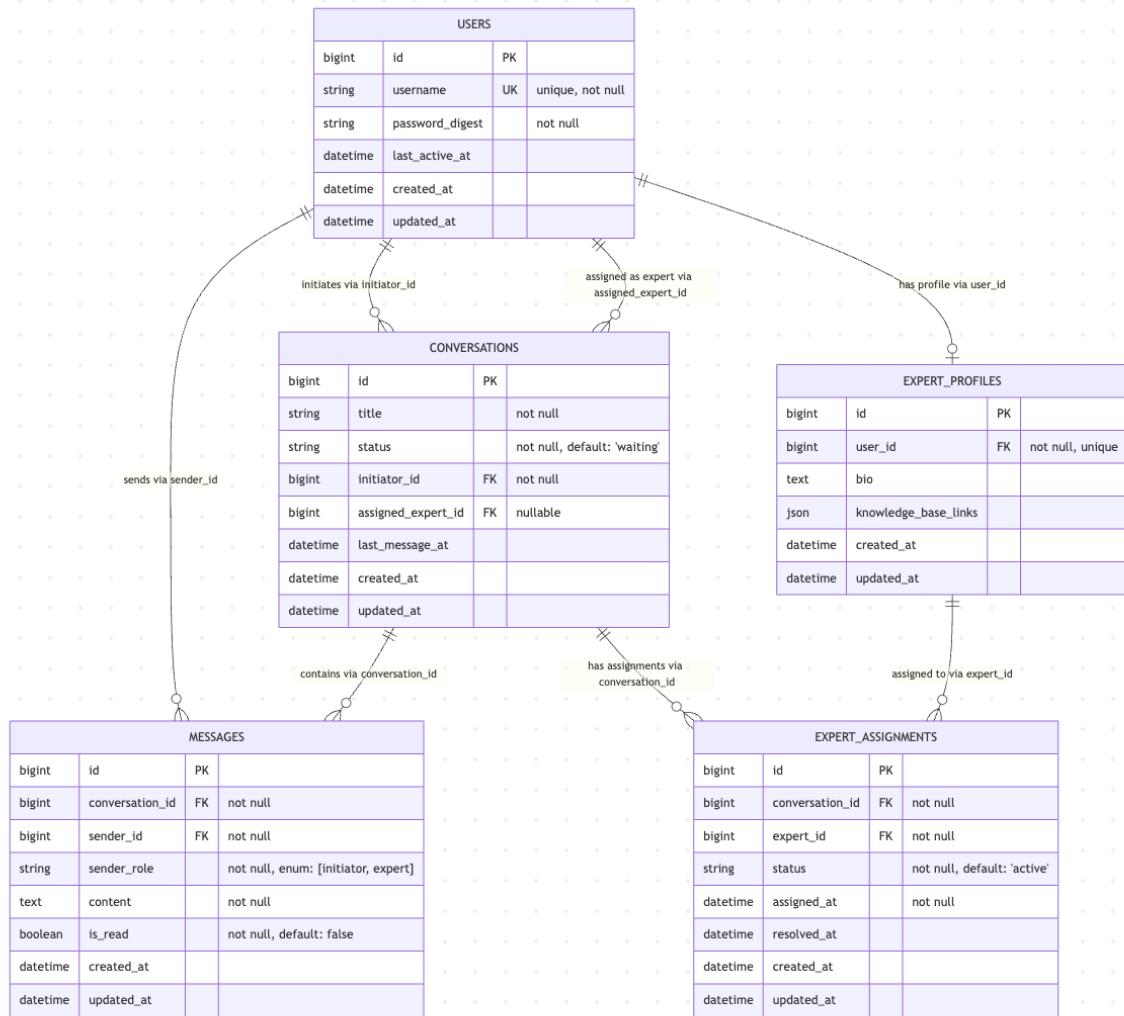
Controllers:

- AuthController (Uses session cookie for authentication where needed (register and login do not require auth))
- ConversationsController (Uses JWT for token based authentication)
- MessagesController (Uses JWT for token based authentication)
- HealthController (No authentication necessary)
- UpdatesController (Uses JWT for token based authentication)
- ExpertController (Uses JWT for token based authentication)

Models:

- User
- Message
- Conversation
- ExpertAssignment

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Docker Development

- Use the provided Dockerfile and docker-compose.yml
- Ensure your application runs properly in containers
- Test that the database connection works correctly

Implementation Strategy

- Use github from the beginning
- Consider breaking down the work into a set of tasks in a TODO style list. For Example
 - Create a git repo
 - Get the server running in the docker environment
 - Add the User model
 - adds db migration
 - creation of ActiveRecord model file
 - adds any Tests for the User model
 - Add the UsersController with a registration action
 - adds The UsersController file
 - adds an action to the UsersController file for registering a new user
 - adds an entry to the routes.rb file for the new controller/action

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- adds tests of the user registration controller action
 - ...
- Commit small changes frequently with meaningful commit messages. For example
 - Creating the User Model
 - Adding the UsersController with a registration action for new users
 - ...
- Consider when you want to implement authentication/authorization
 - Could you delay implementing authentication or authorization or both until after you have implemented the api functionality?
 - What are the pros and cons of this?

Testing Your Implementation

Writing request tests

- Use the example test files provided in the starter package to test your AuthController and ConversationsController.
- Writing additional tests that follow the same structure for your other controllers will help you confirm your code is working without needing to integrate with the front end.

Using the Project 2 Frontend

1. **Start your Rails backend** (running on `http://localhost:3000`)
2. **Run your Project 2 frontend** from the previous assignment
3. **Configure the frontend** to point to your Rails backend:
 - Go to Settings in the frontend
 - Change Backend Mode to “API (Real Backend)”
 - Set API Base URL to: `http://localhost:3000`
 - Save configuration
4. **Test all functionality** using the frontend interface

API Testing

If you need to, you can also test your API directly using tools like:

- **Postman** for API testing
- **curl** commands from the terminal
- **Rails console** for database testing

What you will turn in

1. A link to your github repo containing your backend implementation
2. A video walk through of your frontend (project2) and backend (project3) applications working together to accomplish the following flows

Cases to cover in demo video

- Registration of a new user
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- Login of the new user
- As a question asker

- starting a new conversation
- Show the new conversation appears in the conversation list
- view their list of created conversations
 - list of conversations only includes conversations initiated by the current user
- posting a message to a conversation
- receive a new message for a conversation without refreshing the screen
- As an expert
 - modifying expert profile
 - view the list of conversations initiated by other users
 - claiming a conversation as an expert
 - responding with a new message to a claimed conversation
 - receive a new message for a conversation without refreshing the screen
 - unclaim a conversation

Getting Help

1. Refer to the Rail Intro lecture slides
2. Refer to API_SPECIFICATION.md file
3. Compare output for project2backend.cs291.com
4. Ask questions in Piazza
5. Pair with classmates
6. Schedule time with the instructor to get assistance