

The New and Improved Flask Mega-Tutorial



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Contents

Preface	v
1 Who This Book Is For	v
2 Requirements	vi
3 About The Example Application	vii
4 How To Work With The Example Code	viii
5 Conventions Used In This Book	viii
6 Acknowledgements	ix
1 Hello, World!	1
1.1 Installing Python	2
1.2 Installing Flask	2
1.3 A “Hello, World” Flask Application	5
2 Templates	11
2.1 What Are Templates?	12
2.2 Conditional Statements	15
2.3 Loops	15
2.4 Template Inheritance	17
3 Web Forms	21
3.1 Introduction to Flask-WTF	21
3.2 User Login Form	24
3.3 Form Templates	25
3.4 Form Views	26
3.5 Receiving Form Data	28
3.6 Improving Field Validation	31
3.7 Generating Links	32
4 Database	35
4.1 Databases in Flask	35

4.2	Database Migrations	36
4.3	Flask-SQLAlchemy Configuration	37
4.4	Database Models	38
4.5	Creating The Migration Repository	40
4.6	The First Database Migration	41
4.7	Database Upgrade and Downgrade Workflow	42
4.8	Database Relationships	43
4.9	Playing with the Database	45
4.10	Shell Context	48
5	User Logins	51
5.1	Password Hashing	51
5.2	Introduction to Flask-Login	53
5.3	Preparing The User Model for Flask-Login	53
5.4	User Loader Function	54
5.5	Logging Users In	55
5.6	Logging Users Out	56
5.7	Requiring Users To Login	57
5.8	Showing The Logged In User in Templates	59
5.9	User Registration	60
6	Profile Page and Avatars	65
6.1	User Profile Page	65
6.2	Avatars	68
6.3	Using Jinja2 Sub-Templates	71
6.4	More Interesting Profiles	72
6.5	Recording The Last Visit Time For a User	74
6.6	Profile Editor	76
7	Error Handling	81
7.1	Error Handling in Flask	81
7.2	Debug Mode	83
7.3	Custom Error Pages	85
7.4	Sending Errors by Email	87
7.5	Logging to a File	90
7.6	Fixing the Duplicate Username Bug	91
8	Followers	93
8.1	Database Relationships Revisited	93
8.1.1	One-to-Many	93

8.1.2	Many-to-Many	94
8.1.3	Many-to-One and One-to-One	95
8.2	Representing Followers	95
8.3	Database Model Representation	96
8.4	Adding and Removing “follows”	98
8.5	Obtaining the Posts from Followed Users	99
8.5.1	Joins	101
8.5.2	Filters	102
8.5.3	Sorting	103
8.6	Combining Own and Followed Posts	103
8.7	Unit Testing the User Model	104
8.8	Integrating Followers with the Application	107
9	Pagination	111
9.1	Submission of Blog Posts	111
9.2	Displaying Blog Posts	113
9.3	Making It Easier to Find Users to Follow	114
9.4	Pagination of Blog Posts	117
9.5	Page Navigation	120
9.6	Pagination in the User Profile Page	122
10	Email Support	125
10.1	Introduction to Flask-Mail	125
10.2	Flask-Mail Usage	127
10.3	A Simple Email Framework	128
10.4	Requesting a Password Reset	128
10.5	Password Reset Tokens	130
10.6	Sending a Password Reset Email	132
10.7	Resetting a User Password	133
10.8	Asynchronous Emails	135
11	Facelift	137
11.1	CSS Frameworks	137
11.2	Introducing Bootstrap	138
11.3	Using Flask-Bootstrap	139
11.4	Rendering Bootstrap Forms	141
11.5	Rendering of Blog Posts	142
11.6	Rendering Pagination Links	142
11.7	Before And After	143

12 Dates and Times	145
12.1 Timezone Hell	145
12.2 Timezone Conversions	146
12.3 Introducing Moment.js and Flask-Moment	147
12.4 Using Moment.js	148
13 I18n and L10n	153
13.1 Introduction to Flask-Babel	153
13.2 Marking Texts to Translate In Python Source Code	155
13.3 Marking Texts to Translate In Templates	157
13.4 Extracting Text to Translate	158
13.5 Generating a Language Catalog	158
13.6 Updating the Translations	162
13.7 Translating Dates and Times	162
13.8 Command-Line Enhancements	164
14 Ajax	169
14.1 Server-side vs. Client-side	169
14.2 Live Translation Workflow	170
14.3 Language Identification	171
14.4 Displaying a “Translate” Link	172
14.5 Using a Third-Party Translation Service	173
14.6 Ajax From The Server	177
14.7 Ajax From The Client	178
15 A Better Application Structure	183
15.1 Current Limitations	183
15.2 Blueprints	185
15.2.1 Error Handling Blueprint	185
15.2.2 Authentication Blueprint	187
15.2.3 Main Application Blueprint	188
15.3 The Application Factory Pattern	188
15.4 Unit Testing Improvements	192
15.5 Environment Variables	194
15.6 Requirements File	195
16 Full-Text Search	197
16.1 Introduction to Full-Text Search Engines	197
16.2 Installing Elasticsearch	198
16.3 Elasticsearch Tutorial	199

16.4 Elasticsearch Configuration	201
16.5 A Full-Text Search Abstraction	203
16.6 Integrating Searches with SQLAlchemy	206
16.7 Search Form	209
16.8 Search View Function	212
17 Deployment on Linux	215
17.1 Traditional Hosting	215
17.2 Creating an Ubuntu Server	216
17.3 Using a SSH Client	217
17.4 Password-less Logins	218
17.5 Securing Your Server	220
17.6 Installing Base Dependencies	221
17.7 Installing the Application	222
17.8 Setting Up MySQL	224
17.9 Setting Up Gunicorn and Supervisor	225
17.10 Setting Up Nginx	227
17.11 Deploying Application Updates	229
17.12 Raspberry Pi Hosting	230
18 Deployment on Heroku	231
18.1 Hosting on Heroku	232
18.2 Creating a Heroku account	232
18.3 Installing the Heroku CLI	232
18.4 Setting Up Git	233
18.5 Creating a Heroku Application	233
18.6 The Ephemeral File System	234
18.7 Working with a Heroku Postgres Database	235
18.8 Logging to stdout	236
18.9 Compiled Translations	237
18.10 Elasticsearch Hosting	237
18.11 Updates to Requirements	238
18.12 The Procfile	239
18.13 Deploying the Application	240
18.14 Deploying Application Updates	241
19 Deployment on Docker Containers	243
19.1 Installing Docker	244
19.2 Building a Container Image	245
19.3 Starting a Container	248

19.4	Using Third-Party “Containerized” Services	250
19.4.1	Adding a MySQL Container	251
19.4.2	Adding a Elasticsearch Container	253
19.5	The Docker Container Registry	254
19.6	Deployment of Containerized Applications	255
20	Some JavaScript Magic	257
20.1	Server-side Support	258
20.2	Introduction to the Bootstrap Popover Component	260
20.3	Executing a Function On Page Load	261
20.4	Finding DOM Elements with Selectors	262
20.5	Popovers and the DOM	263
20.6	Hover Events	264
20.7	Ajax Requests	266
20.8	Popover Creation and Destruction	268
21	User Notifications	271
21.1	Private Messages	271
21.1.1	Database Support for Private Messages	272
21.1.2	Sending a Private Message	273
21.1.3	Viewing Private Messages	274
21.2	Static Message Notification Badge	276
21.3	Dynamic Message Notification Badge	277
21.4	Delivering Notifications to Clients	278
22	Background Jobs	285
22.1	Introduction to Task Queues	285
22.2	Using RQ	286
22.2.1	Creating a Task	287
22.2.2	Running the RQ Worker	288
22.2.3	Executing Tasks	288
22.2.4	Reporting Task Progress	289
22.3	Database Representation of Tasks	290
22.4	Integrating RQ with the Flask Application	292
22.5	Sending Emails from the RQ Task	294
22.6	Task Helpers	295
22.7	Implementing the Export Task	297
22.8	Export Functionality in the Application	300
22.9	Progress Notifications	301
22.10	Deployment Considerations	305

22.10.1 Deployment on a Linux Server	305
22.10.2 Deployment on Heroku	305
22.10.3 Deployment on Docker	306
23 Application Programming Interfaces (APIs)	309
23.1 REST as a Foundation of API Design	310
23.1.1 Client-Server	311
23.1.2 Layered System	311
23.1.3 Cache	311
23.1.4 Code On Demand	312
23.1.5 Stateless	312
23.1.6 Uniform Interface	312
23.2 Implementing an API Blueprint	314
23.3 Representing Users as JSON Objects	316
23.4 Representing Collections of Users	319
23.5 Error Handling	321
23.6 User Resource Endpoints	322
23.6.1 Retrieving a User	322
23.6.2 Retrieving Collections of Users	323
23.6.3 Registering New Users	325
23.6.4 Editing Users	326
23.7 API Authentication	327
23.7.1 Tokens In the User Model	328
23.7.2 Token Requests	329
23.7.3 Protecting API Routes with Tokens	332
23.7.4 Revoking Tokens	334
23.8 API Friendly Error Messages	334

Preface

Back in 2012, I decided to start a software development blog. Because I am a do-it-yourselfer at heart, instead of using Blogger or WordPress, I sat down and wrote my own blog engine, using a then little known web framework called Flask. I knew I wanted to code it in Python, and I first tried Django, which was (and still is) the most popular Python web framework. But unfortunately Django seemed too big and too structured for my needs. I've found that Flask gave me as much power, while being small, unopinionated and unobtrusive.

Writing my own blog engine was an awesome experience that left me with a lot of ideas for topics I wanted to blog about. Instead of writing individual articles about all these topics, I decided to write a long, overarching tutorial that Python beginners can use to learn web development. And just like that, the Flask Mega-Tutorial was born!

The book that you have in your hands is a new edition of the original tutorial, revised, updated and expanded in 2017 thanks to the support of almost 600 Kickstarter backers. The material was further revised in 2021 after the release of Flask 2.0.

1 Who This Book Is For

This book will take you on a journey through a realistic web development project, from start to end. If you have just a little bit of experience coding in Python and understand how the web works at a high-level, you should have no trouble using this book to learn how to develop your own web applications using Python and Flask.

The tutorial assumes that you are familiar with the command line in your operating system. If you aren't, then I recommend that you learn how to execute programs, create directories, copy files, etc. using the command line before you begin.

If you have learned Flask with my original Mega-Tutorial, this new edition will introduce you to new features in Flask that did not exist when I wrote the original articles, as well as give you an updated look at important topics such as authentication, full-text search and international-

ization. In addition to the revised content, this version of the tutorial includes new chapters that cover topics that have become relevant in recent times, such as APIs, background jobs and containers.

2 Requirements

The example code that accompanies this book can be used on any platform on which Python runs, so Mac OS X, Linux and Microsoft Windows are all valid choices. I have tested all the code extensively on Python 3.5 and 3.6, so these are the versions I recommend you to use. Unless specifically noted, the code also runs on Python 2.7, but keep in mind that Python 2.7 will not be supported past the year 2020, so you should seriously consider migrating to Python 3 as soon as possible.

If you are using a Microsoft Windows computer, you probably know that the world of web development is dominated by Unix-based workflows, and you may rightly feel that you are at a disadvantage. That should not be a major concern when you work with this book, because when necessary, specific instructions that apply to Windows users are noted. My assumption is that if you are working on Windows you will be using the command prompt to work with your application. If you prefer to use PowerShell, you will need to translate commands to the appropriate syntax for that shell.

This may be hard to accept if you work on Windows, but I think you will have a better experience if you force yourself to learn Unix, which can be done right on your Windows computer without making any drastic configuration changes. My recommendation is that you install Unix tools on your Windows system and adopt the Unix workflow. If you are interested in doing this, one option is the [Windows Subsystem for Linux \(WSL\)](https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/commandline/wsl/about)¹, an officially supported feature of Windows 10 that adds an Ubuntu Linux system that runs in parallel with your Windows operating system and includes Python 3.5. If your system is not compatible with WSL, then another very good option is [Cygwin](https://cygwin.org)², an open-source POSIX emulation layer that includes Windows ports of a large number of Unix tools, including Python. I have worked with Python under both WSL and Cygwin and find them perfectly adequate for web development work.

¹<https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/commandline/wsl/about>

²<https://cygwin.org>

3 About The Example Application

The application that I'm going to develop as part of this tutorial is a nicely featured microblogging server that I decided to call *Microblog*. Pretty creative, I know.

Just so that you have some idea of what you will learn if you follow this tutorial, these are some of the topics that I will cover:

- User management, including secure password handling, logins, user profiles and avatars.
- Database management and database migration support
- Handling of user input via web forms
- Pagination of long lists of items
- Full-text search
- Email notifications to users
- HTML templates
- Working with dates and times
- Internationalization and localization
- Installation on a production server
- Working with Docker containers
- Application Programming Interfaces
- Push notifications
- Background jobs

I hope this application will serve as a template that you can use for writing your own web applications.

4 How To Work With The Example Code

I have released the complete source code for this project on the following GitHub repository: <https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog>. There is a commit in this repository for each chapter.

The way I envision you will work through this tutorial is by writing the application on your own, based on the instructions provided in the text, at least for the first few chapters. You can certainly copy and paste portions of code from the text or from GitHub to save some typing, but I think it is important that you familiarize yourself with the task of coding a Flask application by writing the code yourself, instead of just downloading the files from GitHub (unless explicitly instructed to do so).

The GitHub repository can serve as a reference if you get lost and can't get the application to work. You can compare your files against the code in the repository link provided with each chapter if you get stuck with a problem you can't solve.

5 Conventions Used In This Book

This book frequently includes commands that you need to type in a terminal session. For these commands, a `$` will be shown as a command prompt. This is a standard prompt for many Linux shells, but may look unfamiliar to Microsoft Windows users. For example:

```
$ python hello.py
hello
```

In a lot of the terminal examples, you are going to be required to have an activated *virtual environment* (do not worry if you don't know what this is yet, you will find out very soon!). For those examples, the prompt will appear as `(venv) $`:

```
(venv) $ python hello.py
hello
```

You will also need to interact with the Python interactive interpreter. Examples that show statements that need to be entered in a Python interpreter session will use a `>>>` prompt, as in the following example:

```
>>> print('hello!')  
hello
```

In all cases, lines that are not prefixed with a `$` or `>>>` prompt, are output printed by the command, and should not be typed.

6 Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the amazing support of my Kickstarter backers. My deepest thanks go to Dhritiman Sagar, Alex Anderson, Bahrom Matyakubov, Dave Finnegan, John Gann, John W. O'Brien, Kojo Idrissa, Mark Anders, Raph, Fredrik Dahlgren, Jorge García García, Todd Twiggs, Pietro P Peterlongo, Chris Davis, Alexandre Harano, Bob Jordan, Chris Dent, Chris Jones, CptJason, Daniel Abeles, Daniel Plas Rivera, Dipanjan Sarkar, Eric Chou, Eric Ho, Graham Williamson, jiho Bak, John Sobanski, Kai Mies, Len Sumnler, Marc P. Rostock, Michael Sim, Nick Brandaleone, Nnamdi E. Anyanwu, R. Da Costa Faro, Reimund Klain, Scott Strattner, SNC Cloud Dev (twitter.com/snc_cloudev), T81, Tobias Siebenlist, Viet Le, Ed Wachtel, Shivas Jayaram, JVA, GenLots.com, Martin Thorsen Ranang, DFW Python, Allan Swanepoel, Andrej Stabenow, Anthony Bourguignon, Aron Filbert, Auke Bakker, Bryson Tyrrell, Chuck Woodraska, Colin R. Crossman, Dario Varotto, Dax Morrow, Eric G. Barron, Everett Toews, Fisherworks, flasky mcflaskface, Iain Hunter, Jeremy Barisch Rooney, Jesse Liles, Jindrich K. Smitka, Jing Sheng Pang, Karthik Ramakrishnan, Kevin Porterfield (KP), Leonel Decunta, Martynas Budvytis, Mathew Divine, Matt Makai (Full Stack Python), Matt Trentini, Michael from Talk Python, Nana B Okyere, Nathan Sanders, Nduka Obinna Azubuike, Neal Duncan, Philip Penquitt, Rémi Debette, Romer Ibo, Ryan Hagan, Scott Andrew Underwood, Stephan Simon, Steve Bartell, Timothy D'Auria, Vitaly Popovich, Yi Luo and the remaining 484 backers.

Chapter 1

Hello, World!

Welcome! You are about to start on a journey to learn how to create web applications with [Python¹](https://python.org) and the [Flask²](https://flask.pocoo.org) framework. In this first chapter, you are going to learn how to set up a Flask project. By the end of this chapter you are going to have a simple Flask web application running on your computer!

All the code examples presented in this book are hosted on a GitHub repository. Downloading the code from GitHub can save you a lot of typing, but I strongly recommend that you type the code yourself, at least for the first few chapters. Once you become more familiar with Flask and the example application you can access the code directly from GitHub if the typing becomes too tedious.

At the beginning of each chapter, I'm going to give you three GitHub links that can be useful while you work through the chapter. The **Browse** link will open the GitHub repository for Microblog at the place where the changes for the chapter you are reading were added, without including any changes introduced in future chapters. The **Zip** link is a download link for a zip file including the entire application up to and including the changes in the chapter. The **Diff** link will open a graphical view of all the changes that were made in the chapter you are about to read.

The GitHub links for this chapter are: [Browse³](#), [Zip⁴](#), [Diff⁵](#).

¹<https://python.org>

²[http://flask.pocoo.org](https://flask.pocoo.org)

³<https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog/tree/v0.1>

⁴<https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog/archive/v0.1.zip>

⁵<https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog/compare/v0.0...v0.1>

1.1 Installing Python

If you don't have Python installed on your computer, go ahead and install it now. If your operating system does not provide you with a Python package, you can download an installer from the [Python official website](http://python.org/download/)⁶. If you are using Microsoft Windows along with WSL or Cygwin, note that you will not be using the Windows native version of Python, but a Unix-friendly version that you need to obtain from Ubuntu (if you are using WSL) or from Cygwin.

To make sure your Python installation is functional, you can open a terminal window and type `python3`, or if that does not work, just `python`. Here is what you should expect to see:

```
$ python3
Python 3.9.6 (default, Jul 10 2021, 16:13:29)
[Clang 12.0.0 (clang-1200.0.32.29)] on darwin
Type "help", "copyright", "credits" or "license" for more information.
>>> _
```

The Python interpreter is now waiting at an interactive prompt, where you can enter Python statements. In future chapters you will learn what kinds of things this interactive prompt is useful for. But for now, you have confirmed that Python is installed on your system. To exit the interactive prompt, you can type `exit()` and press Enter. On the Linux and Mac OS X versions of Python you can also exit the interpreter by pressing Ctrl-D. On Windows, the exit shortcut is Ctrl-Z followed by Enter.

1.2 Installing Flask

The next step is to install Flask, but before I go into that I want to tell you about the best practices associated with installing Python *packages*.

In Python, packages such as Flask are available in a public repository, from where anybody can download them and install them. The official Python package repository is called [PyPI](https://pypi.python.org/pypi)⁷, which stands for Python Package Index (some people also refer to this repository as the “cheese shop”). Installing a package from PyPI is very simple, because Python comes with a tool called `pip` that does this work.

To install a package on your machine, you use `pip` as follows:

⁶<http://python.org/download/>

⁷<https://pypi.python.org/pypi>

```
$ pip install <package-name>
```

Interestingly, this method of installing packages will not work in most cases. If your Python interpreter was installed globally for all the users of your computer, chances are your regular user account is not going to have permission to make modifications to it, so the only way to make the command above work is to run it from an administrator account. But even without that complication, consider what happens when you install a package as above. The `pip` tool is going to download the package from PyPI, and then add it to your Python installation. From that point on, every Python script that you have on your system will have access to this package. Imagine a situation where you have completed a web application using version 1.1 of Flask, which was the most current version of Flask when you started, but now has been superseded by version 2.0. You now want to start a second application, for which you'd like to use the 2.0 version, but if you replace the 1.1 version that you have installed you risk breaking your older application. Do you see the problem? It would be ideal if it was possible to have Flask 1.1 installed and accessible to your old application, while also install Flask 2.0 for your new one.

To address the issue of maintaining different versions of packages for different applications, Python uses the concept of *virtual environments*. A virtual environment is a complete copy of the Python interpreter. When you install packages in a virtual environment, the system-wide Python interpreter is not affected, only the copy is. So the solution to have complete freedom to install any versions of your packages for each application is to use a different virtual environment for each application. Virtual environments have the added benefit that they are owned by the user who creates them, so they do not require an administrator account.

Let's start by creating a directory where the project will live. I'm going to call this directory `microblog`, since that is the name of the application:

```
$ mkdir microblog
$ cd microblog
```

Support for virtual environments is included in all recent versions of Python, so all you need to do to create one is this:

```
$ python3 -m venv venv
```

With this command, I'm asking Python to run the `venv` package, which creates a virtual environment named `venv`. The first `venv` in the command is the name of the Python virtual environment package, and the second is the virtual environment name that I'm going to use

for this particular environment. If you find this confusing, you can replace the second `venv` with a different name that you want to assign to your virtual environment. In general I create my virtual environments with the name `venv` in the project directory, so whenever I `cd` into a project I find its corresponding virtual environment.

Note that in some operating systems you may need to use `python` instead of `python3` in the command above. Some installations use `python` for Python 2.x releases and `python3` for the 3.x releases, while others map `python` to the 3.x releases.

After the command completes, you are going to have a directory named `venv` where the virtual environment files are stored.

Now you have to tell the system that you want to use this virtual environment, and you do that by *activating* it. To activate your brand new virtual environment you use the following command:

```
$ source venv/bin/activate  
(venv) $ _
```

If you are using a Microsoft Windows command prompt window, the activation command is slightly different:

```
$ venv\Scripts\activate  
(venv) $ _
```

When you activate a virtual environment, the configuration of your terminal session is modified so that the Python interpreter stored inside it is the one that is invoked when you type `python`. Also, the terminal prompt is modified to include the name of the activated virtual environment. The changes made to your terminal session are all temporary and private to that session, so they will not persist when you close the terminal window. If you work with multiple terminal windows open at the same time, it is perfectly fine to have different virtual environments activated on each one.

Now that you have a virtual environment created and activated, you can finally install Flask in it:

```
(venv) $ pip install flask
```

If you want to confirm that your virtual environment now has Flask installed, you can start the Python interpreter and *import* Flask into it:

```
>>> import flask  
>>> _
```

If this statement does not give you any errors you can congratulate yourself, as Flask is installed and ready to be used.

Note that the above installation commands does not specify which version of Flask you want to install. The default when no version is specified is to install the latest version available in the package repository. This tutorial can be followed with Flask versions 1 and 2. The above command will install the latest 2.x version. If for any reason you prefer to follow this tutorial on a 1.x release of Flask, you can use the following command to install the latest 1.x version:

```
(venv) % pip install "flask<2"
```

1.3 A “Hello, World” Flask Application

If you go to the [Flask website](#)⁸, you are welcomed with a very simple example application that has just five lines of code. Instead of repeating that trivial example, I’m going to show you a slightly more elaborate one that will give you a good base structure for writing larger applications.

The application will exist in a *package*. In Python, a sub-directory that includes a `__init__.py` file is considered a package, and can be imported. When you import a package, the `__init__.py` executes and defines what symbols the package exposes to the outside world.

Let’s create a package called `app`, that will host the application. Make sure you are in the `microblog` directory and then run the following command:

```
(venv) $ mkdir app
```

The `__init__.py` for the `app` package is going to contain the following code:

Listing 1.1: `app/__init__.py`: Flask application instance

```
from flask import Flask  
  
app = Flask(__name__)  
  
from app import routes
```

⁸<http://flask.pocoo.org/>

The script above simply creates the application object as an instance of class `Flask` imported from the `flask` package. The `__name__` variable passed to the `Flask` class is a Python predefined variable, which is set to the name of the module in which it is used. Flask uses the location of the module passed here as a starting point when it needs to load associated resources such as template files, which I will cover in [Chapter 2](#). For all practical purposes, passing `__name__` is almost always going to configure Flask in the correct way. The application then imports the `routes` module, which doesn't exist yet.

One aspect that may seem confusing at first is that there are two entities named `app`. The `app` package is defined by the `app` directory and the `__init__.py` script, and is referenced in the `from app import routes` statement. The `app` variable is defined as an instance of class `Flask` in the `__init__.py` script, which makes it a member of the `app` package.

Another peculiarity is that the `routes` module is imported at the bottom and not at the top of the script as it is always done. The bottom import is a workaround to *circular imports*, a common problem with Flask applications. You are going to see that the `routes` module needs to import the `app` variable defined in this script, so putting one of the reciprocal imports at the bottom avoids the error that results from the mutual references between these two files.

So what goes in the `routes` module? The routes are the different URLs that the application implements. In Flask, handlers for the application routes are written as Python functions, called *view functions*. View functions are mapped to one or more route URLs so that Flask knows what logic to execute when a client requests a given URL.

Here is the first view function for this application, which you need to write in a new module named `app/routes.py`:

Listing 1.2: `app/routes.py`: Home page route

```
from app import app

@app.route('/')
@app.route('/index')
def index():
    return "Hello, World!"
```

This view function is actually pretty simple, it just returns a greeting as a string. The two strange `@app.route` lines above the function are *decorators*, a unique feature of the Python language. A decorator modifies the function that follows it. A common pattern with decorators is to use them to register functions as callbacks for certain events. In this case, the `@app.route` decorator creates an association between the URL given as an argument and the function. In this example there are two decorators, which associate the URLs `/` and `/index` to this function. This means that when a web browser requests either of these two URLs, Flask is going to

invoke this function and pass the return value of it back to the browser as a response. If this does not make complete sense yet, it will in a little bit when you run this application.

To complete the application, you need to have a Python script at the top-level that defines the Flask application instance. Let’s call this script *microblog.py*, and define it as a single line that imports the application instance:

Listing 1.3: *microblog.py*: Main application module

```
from app import app
```

Remember the two `app` entities? Here you can see both together in the same sentence. The Flask application instance is called `app` and is a member of the `app` package. The `from app import app` statement imports the `app` variable that is a member of the `app` package. If you find this confusing, you can rename either the package or the variable to something else.

Just to make sure that you are doing everything correctly, below you can see a diagram of the project structure so far:

```
microblog/
  venv/
    app/
      __init__.py
      routes.py
    microblog.py
```

Believe it or not, this first version of the application is now complete! Before running it, though, Flask needs to be told how to import it, by setting the `FLASK_APP` environment variable:

```
(venv) $ export FLASK_APP=microblog.py
```

If you are using the Microsoft Windows command prompt, use `set` instead of `export` in the command above.

Are you ready to be blown away? You can run your first web application, with the following command:

```
(venv) $ flask run
 * Serving Flask app 'microblog.py' (lazy loading)
 * Environment: production
 WARNING: This is a development server. Do not use it in a production deployment.
 Use a production WSGI server instead.
 * Debug mode: off
 * Running on http://127.0.0.1:5000/ (Press CTRL+C to quit)
```

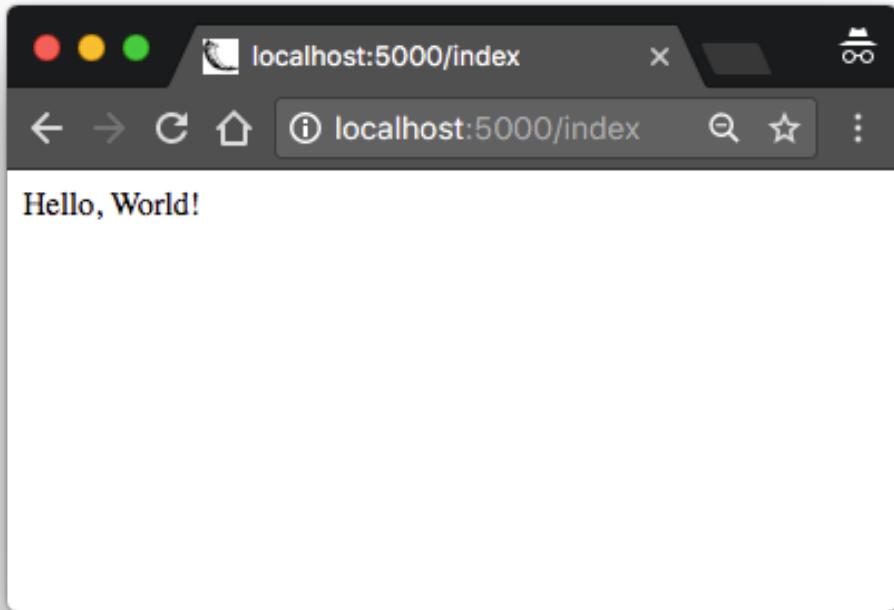
After the server initializes it will wait for client connections. The output from `flask run` indicates that the server is running on IP address 127.0.0.1, which is always the address of your own computer. This address is so common that it also has a simpler name that you may have seen before: *localhost*. Network servers listen for connections on a specific port number. Applications deployed on production web servers typically listen on port 443, or sometimes 80 if they do not implement encryption, but access to these ports requireis administration rights. Since this application is running in a development environment, Flask uses the freely available port 5000. Now open up your web browser and enter the following URL in the address field:

```
http://localhost:5000/
```

Alternatively you can use this other URL:

```
http://localhost:5000/index
```

Do you see the application route mappings in action? The first URL maps to `/`, while the second maps to `/index`. Both routes are associated with the only view function in the application, so they produce the same output, which is the string that the function returns. If you enter any other URL you will get an error, since only these two URLs are recognized by the application.



When you are done playing with the server you can just press **Ctrl-C** to stop it.

Congratulations, you have completed the first big step to become a web developer!

Before I end this chapter, I will do one more thing. Since environment variables aren't remembered across terminal sessions, you may find tedious to always have to set the **FLASK_APP** environment variable when you open a new terminal window. Starting with version 1.0, Flask allows you to register environment variables that you want to be automatically imported when you run the **flask** command. To use this option you have to install the *python-dotenv* package:

```
(venv) $ pip install python-dotenv
```

Then you can just write the environment variable name and value in a file named *.flaskenv* located in the top-level directory of the project:

Listing 1.4: *flaskenv*: Environment variables for flask command

```
FLASK_APP=microblog.py
```

Chapter 2

Templates

After you complete [Chapter 1](#), you should have a simple, yet fully working web application that has the following file structure:

```
microblog\  
  venv\  
  app\  
    __init__.py  
    routes.py  
  microblog.py
```

To run the application you set the `FLASK_APP=microblog.py` in your terminal session (or add a `.flaskenv` file with this variable), and then execute `flask run`. This starts a web server with the application, which you can open by typing the `http://localhost:5000/` URL in your web browser's address bar.

In this chapter you will continue working on the same application, and in particular, you are going to learn how to generate more elaborate web pages that have a complex structure and many dynamic components. If anything about the application or the development workflow so far isn't clear, please review [Chapter 1](#) again before continuing.

The GitHub links for this chapter are: [Browse](#)¹, [Zip](#)², [Diff](#)³.

¹<https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog/tree/v0.2>

²<https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog/archive/v0.2.zip>

³<https://github.com/miguelgrinberg/microblog/compare/v0.1...v0.2>

2.1 What Are Templates?

I want the home page of my microblogging application to have a heading that welcomes the user. For the moment, I'm going to ignore the fact that the application does not have the concept of users yet, as this is going to come later. Instead, I'm going to use a *mock* user, which I'm going to implement as a Python dictionary, as follows:

```
user = {'username': 'Miguel'}
```

Creating mock objects is a useful technique that allows you to concentrate on one part of the application without having to worry about other parts of the system that don't exist yet. I want to design the home page of my application, and I don't want the fact that I don't have a user system in place to distract me, so I just make up a user object so that I can keep going.

The view function in the application returns a simple string. What I want to do now is expand that returned string into a complete HTML page, maybe something like this:

Listing 2.1: *app/routes.py*: Return complete HTML page from view function

```
from app import app

@app.route('/')
@app.route('/index')
def index():
    user = {'username': 'Miguel'}
    return '''
<html>
    <head>
        <title>Home Page - Microblog</title>
    </head>
    <body>
        <h1>Hello, ''' + user['username'] + '''!</h1>
    </body>
</html>'''
```

If you are not familiar with HTML, I recommend that you read [HTML Markup⁴](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTML#Markup) on Wikipedia for a brief introduction.

Update the view function as shown above and give the application a try to see how it looks in your browser.

⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTML#Markup>



I hope you agree with me that the solution used above to deliver HTML to the browser is not good. Consider how complex the code in this view function will become when you add blog posts from users, which are going to constantly change. The application is also going to have more view functions that are going to be associated with other URLs, so imagine if one day I decide to change the layout of this application, and have to update the HTML in every view function. This is clearly not an option that will scale as the application grows.

If you could keep the logic of your application separate from the layout or presentation of your web pages, then things would be much better organized, don't you think? You could even hire a web designer to create a killer web site while you code the application logic in Python.

Templates help achieve this separation between presentation and business logic. In Flask, templates are written as separate files, stored in a *templates* folder that is inside the application package. So after making sure that you are in the *microblog* directory, create the directory where templates will be stored:

```
(venv) $ mkdir app/templates
```

Below you can see your first template, which is similar in functionality to the HTML page returned by the `index()` view function above. Write this file in `app/templates/index.html`:

Listing 2.2: `app/templates/index.html`: Main page template

```
<!doctype html>
<html>
  <head>
    <title>{{ title }} - Microblog</title>
  </head>
  <body>
    <h1>Hello, {{ user.username }}!</h1>
  </body>
</html>
```

This is a mostly standard, very simply HTML page. The only interesting thing in this page is that there are a couple of placeholders for the dynamic content, enclosed in `{{ ... }}` sections. These placeholders represent the parts of the page that are variable and will only be known at runtime.

Now that the presentation of the page was offloaded to the HTML template, the view function can be simplified:

Listing 2.3: `app/routes.py`: Use `render_template()` function

```
from flask import render_template
from app import app

@app.route('/')
@app.route('/index')
def index():
    user = {'username': 'Miguel'}
    return render_template('index.html', title='Home', user=user)
```

This looks much better, right? Try this new version of the application to see how the template works. Once you have the page loaded in your browser, you may want to view the source HTML and compare it against the original template.

The operation that converts a template into a complete HTML page is called *rendering*. To render the template I had to import a function that comes with the Flask framework called `render_template()`. This function takes a template filename and a variable list of template