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RUBY

IN PRACTICE



SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Ruby in Practice

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Chapter 1

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Part 1

Ruby techniques

In these first three chapters, we'll look at techniques and tools we'll be using throughout the remainder of the book and that you'll be using throughout your Ruby career.

We'll cover advanced and essential language constructs, strategies (like test- and behavior-driven development), and Ruby tools to put these strategies to use in your applications. We'll round out this part with a thorough introduction to Rake, a useful Ruby tool for transforming database schemas, bootstrapping applications, running tests, and automating nearly any other task.

Ruby under the microscope

This chapter covers

- Minimizing developer cycles
- Loading a lot of features in a little code

Often people, especially computer engineers, focus on the machines. They think, “By doing this, the machine will run faster. By doing this, the machine will run more effectively. By doing this, the machine will something something something.” They are focusing on machines. But in fact we need to focus on humans, on how humans care about doing programming or operating the application of the machines. We are the masters. They are the slaves.

—Yukihiro Matsumoto, creator of Ruby

You’ve heard it all before, right? A new language or framework becomes the flavor du jour, and everyone starts talking about it. First there’s a low rumble on websites, then someone gets ahold of it and does something cool, and out comes the marketing

speak. I'm sure you can imagine Dave from marketing barking at you about another amazing technology: "You'll be more productive! Our synergistic approach to dynamic, domain-driven development will allow you to get to market quicker and get a better return on investment! Get a lower TCO and higher ROI over J2EE with our XP-driven Scrum model based on XML! Take apart your FOB and overhaul your BOB with our easy-to-use turnkey solution!" To some in the world of software development, it sounds like Ruby is all hype and buzz, but this book will show you that you can develop "real" software with Ruby.

Maybe you have heard the accolades and decided to read this book to find out if Ruby is right for you. Maybe you know Ruby already, and you chose this book to pick up practical techniques you can take back to the workplace. Whatever your reason for picking up our book, we're glad you did and we hope that we can help you learn more about using Ruby in the real world. But before we get down to the nuts and bolts, let's take a step back and gain some perspective.

1.1 Why Ruby now?

Here's a fact that surprises many people: Ruby came to the world the same year as Java—1995. Like many other open source technologies (such as Linux and MySQL) it took its time to mature and get noticed. So what happened in those 10 years that turned Ruby from a little-known language into a hot ticket item without the help of a big-vendor marketing machine? The adoption of Ruby on Rails, Ruby's premier web development framework, is the obvious answer, and it has without a doubt skyrocketed Ruby's popularity. It brought on hordes of developers who use Ruby exclusively with Rails, and even more developers who came for Rails, but stayed for Ruby.

Although Rails played a major role in getting Ruby into the mainstream, it still doesn't explain why it happened only recently, and not earlier. One thing that can help explain Ruby's meteoric rise is the recent rise in software complexity.

If you work for a big company, chances are you have to deal with complex problems. Sales across different channels, multiple products and markets, suppliers and distributors, employees and contractors, accounting and SOX compliance, market dynamics and regulations, and on and on. It's unavoidable: the problems of running any sizable business are complex. What about the solutions? You're probably thinking that there are no simple solutions to complex problems, and complexity is the nature of any real business. But do solutions have to be unnecessarily complex?

Given the complexity that naturally arises from these business problems, you don't want the technology you use to solve them to be unnecessarily complex. The more technology you throw at the problem—web servers and databases, online and batch processing, messaging protocols and data formats—the more complexity you add. The only way to alleviate this complexity conundrum is to look for simpler solutions to existing problems, efficiently using the developer cycles you have available.

1.1.1 Optimizing developer cycles

There has been a growing realization that software companies are targeting these business problems (one might call it the "enterprise" space) by offering overly complex

solutions. We can't blame them. Complex solutions sell better. It's easier to obfuscate the solution and abstract the problem or to design a solution that solves every conceivable problem (even problems that the client doesn't have yet!) than to design a solid, simple solution that fits the problem domain. But as more developers realize that these "silver bullet" solutions create more problems than they solve, the momentum is shifting toward simpler, lightweight technologies.

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Open source, with its organic development model, is able to adapt to this changing of tides better. For example, in the Java space, one can see a strong bias toward Spring and Hibernate as opposed to EJB. Many developers are defecting from a lot of spaces to Rails. Why? Those projects aren't afraid to reevaluate their approaches to accommodate current developer attitudes, because these sorts of projects are developed by the developers who use them every day in their own work.

We like to talk about large-scale systems, thousands of servers, petabytes of data, billions of requests. It's captivating, the same way we could talk about horsepower and 0 to 60 acceleration times. But in real life we often face constraints of a different scale. Can you do it with a smaller team? Can you get it done tomorrow? Can you add these new features before we go into beta? Most often businesses have to optimize not for CPU cycles, but developer cycles. It's easy to scale out by throwing more hardware at the problem, but, as many businesses have found out, throwing more people at the problem just makes the project late. That knowledge was captured years ago in Fred Brooks' *Mythical Man-Month*, but our bosses just decided to prove it empirically.

Minimizing developer cycles is probably the single most attractive feature of dynamic languages, and Ruby in particular. Simplifying software development has been the holy grail of the software industry. Say what you will about COBOL, it's much better than writing mainframe applications in assembly language. And believe it or not, productivity was a major selling point for Java, in the early days when it came to replace C/C++. It's the nature of software development that every once in a while we take a leap forward by changing the way we write code, to deal with the growing complexity that developed since the last major leap. And it's not the sole domain of the language and its syntax. One of the biggest criticisms against J2EE is the sheer size of its API, and the complexity involved in writing even the simplest of programs. EJB is the poster child of developer-unfriendly technology.

The true measure of a programming language's productivity is how little code you need in order to solve a given problem. Writing less code, while being able to do the same thing, will make you far more productive than writing a whole lot of code without doing much at all. This is the reverse of how many businesses view productivity: lines of code produced. If simple lines of code were the metric, Perl would win every time. Just as too much code can make your application unmaintainable, so can terse, short code that's "write only." Many of Ruby's language features contribute to creating short, sane, and maintainable code.

1.1.2 **Language features**

Ruby seems to hit the sweet spot and appeal to developers who value natural interfaces and choose to migrate away from languages that inherently promote complexity. But why? Why would developers move away from “proven” technologies to Ruby, which is, arguably, the “new kid,” regardless of its positive aspects? Primarily because Ruby is a dynamic language that works well for applications and scripting, that supports the object-oriented and functional programming styles, that bakes arrays and hash literals into the syntax, and that has just enough metaprogramming features to make building domain-specific languages fun and easy. Had enough marketing? Of course, this laundry list of buzzwords is not as important as what happens when you combine all these features together. In combination, the buzzwords and abstract concepts become a powerful tool.

For example, consider Ruby on Rails. Rails is one incarnation in a long series of web application frameworks. Like so many web application frameworks before it, Rails deals with UI and remote APIs, business logic, and persistence. Unlike many web application frameworks before it, it does so effortlessly, without taxing the developer. In its three years of existence, it leapfrogged the more established frameworks to become the benchmark by which all other frameworks are judged.

All that power comes from Ruby. The simplicity of mapping relational databases to objects without the burden of XML configuration results from Ruby’s combination of object-oriented and dynamic styles. The ease with which HTML and XML templates can be written and filters can be set up comes from functional programming. Magic features like dynamic finders and friendly URL routing are all forms of metaprogramming. The little configuration Rails needs is handled effortlessly using a set of domain-specific languages. It’s not that Rails (or really Ruby) is doing anything new; the attractiveness comes from *how* it does things. Besides being a successful framework on its own, Rails showed the world how to use Ruby’s combination of language features to create applications that, quite frankly, rock. Dynamic features like `method_missing` and closures go beyond conceptual curiosity and help you deliver.

So, why is Ruby popular now? This popularity can, for the most part, be traced to developers growing weary of complex, taxing development tools and to the emergence of Rails as a definite, tangible project that shows how Ruby can be used to create production quality software that’s still developer friendly. Once you start working with Ruby, you’ll probably realize this too. It takes about the same amount of effort to work with flat files, produce PDFs, make SOAP requests, and send messages using WebSphere MQ as it does to map objects to databases, send email, or parse an XML file. Wrap that into a nice, natural syntax, and you have a potent tool for software development.

Let’s jump right into some Ruby code.

1.2 **Ruby by example**

We think the best way to illustrate Ruby’s capabilities and features is by example, and what better way than by diving into some code? Let’s take a fairly typical situation: you

need to pull data from a database and create graphs with it. Perhaps you need to trace the sales performance of a range of products across all of your sales locations. Can we keep it simple?

First, we'll need to install three libraries: Active Record (an object-relational mapper for databases), Scruffy (a graphing solution for Ruby), and RMagick (ImageMagick bindings for Ruby, required by Scruffy). Let's do that using the RubyGems utility:

```
gem install active_record
gem install rmagick
gem install scruffy
```

Assuming you have all the system prerequisites for these packages (for example, ImageMagick for RMagick to bind to), you should now have all you need.

TIP RMagick can be a beast to set up. We suggest checking the project's documentation, the mailing list, and your favorite search engine if you have problems.

Now, let's set up our database. Figure 1.1 shows our schema diagram for the database.

You can use figure 1.1 as a model to create the tables (if you prefer to use some sort of GUI tool), or you can use the SQL in listing 1.1.

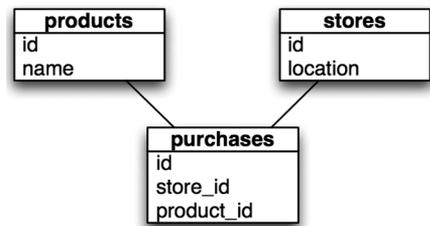


Figure 1.1 For our graph, we will build a simple domain model: products will have purchases, which belong to the stores where they happened.

Listing 1.1 SQL for graph example database

```
CREATE DATABASE `paper`;

CREATE TABLE `products` (
  `id` int NOT NULL auto_increment,
  `name` text,
  PRIMARY KEY (`id`)
);

CREATE TABLE `purchases` (
  `id` int NOT NULL auto_increment,
  `product_id` int default NULL,
  `store_id` int default NULL,
  PRIMARY KEY (`id`)
);

CREATE TABLE `stores` (
  `id` int NOT NULL auto_increment,
  `location` text,
  PRIMARY KEY (`id`)
);
```

Now, let's set up ActiveRecord to work with the database. ActiveRecord is typically used inside of a Rails application, and because we're not using it in that environment,

it takes a few more lines of configuration. See our configuration and implementation code in listing 1.2.

Listing 1.2 Setting up our database with ActiveRecord

```
require 'rubygems'
require 'activerecord'

# Begin ActiveRecord configuration
ActiveRecord::Base.establish_connection(
  :adapter => "mysql",
  :host => "localhost",
  :database => "paper",
  :username => "root",
  :password => ""
)

# Begin ActiveRecord classes
class Product < ActiveRecord::Base
  has_many :purchases
end

class Purchase < ActiveRecord::Base
  belongs_to :store
end

class Store < ActiveRecord::Base
end

# Begin logic
myproducts = Product.find(:all)

require 'pp'
pp myproducts
```

1 Requires RubyGems

2 Configures ActiveRecord

3 Builds ActiveRecord classes

4 Searches for all products

5 Uses Pretty Printing to output collection

As you can see, it doesn't take a lot of code to get a full object-rationally mapped database connection. First, we import the RubyGems library **1**, so we can then import ActiveRecord. Next, we establish a database connection with ActiveRecord **2**. Normally this configuration data would live in a database configuration file in a Rails application (such as `database.yml`), but for this example we chose to run outside Rails, so we've used `establish_connection` directly. Next, we create ActiveRecord classes and associations to map our database **3**. Finally, we execute a query **4** and output its results using Pretty Printing (`pp`) **5**.

Just fill in some testing data (or download the script from the book's source code to generate some for you), and run the script. You should see something like the following output:

```
[#<Product:0x639e30 @attributes={"name"=>"Envelopes", "id"=>"1"}>,
 #<Product:0x639e08 @attributes={"name"=>"Paper", "id"=>"2"}>,
 #<Product:0x639c00 @attributes={"name"=>"Folders", "id"=>"3"}>,
 #<Product:0x639bb0 @attributes={"name"=>"Cardstock", "id"=>"4"}>]
```

Our database is set up and our query works, so let's move on to generating a graph from the data. First, remove those last two lines from listing 1.2 (they'll be superfluous

by the time we're done). Now let's take the data we retrieved, process it, and build the graph using Scruffy. In listing 1.3, you'll see how to do that.

Listing 1.3 Generating a graph with Scruffy

```
graph = Scruffy::Graph.new
graph.title = "Comparison of Product Sales"
stores = Store.find(:all, :select=>"id, location")

myproducts.each do |product|
  counts = stores.collect do |store|
    Purchase.count("id", :conditions => {
      :store_id=>store.id,
      :product_id=>product.id
    })
  end

  graph.add :line, product.name, counts
end

graph.point_markers = stores.map {|store| store.location}
graph.render :as => 'PNG', :to => 'productsales.png',
             :width => 720,
             :theme => Scruffy::Themes::Keynote.new
```

1 Creates new Scruffy object, gives it a title

2 Iterates through products

3 Adds a line to graph for each

4 Puts in point markers

5 Generates graph with a theme

First, we create a `Scruffy::Graph` instance and do a little bit of setup ①. Next, we iterate through the products we found earlier and calculate the sales counts for each store location ②. Then we add a line on the graph showing the sales trends for that product across the stores ③. Before we render the graph, we need to add the markers to indicate which sales location we're looking at ④. Finally, we render the graph to a PNG file using one of Scruffy's built-in themes ⑤.

If you open the graph and look at it, you can see that it is polished (ours looks like figure 1.2).

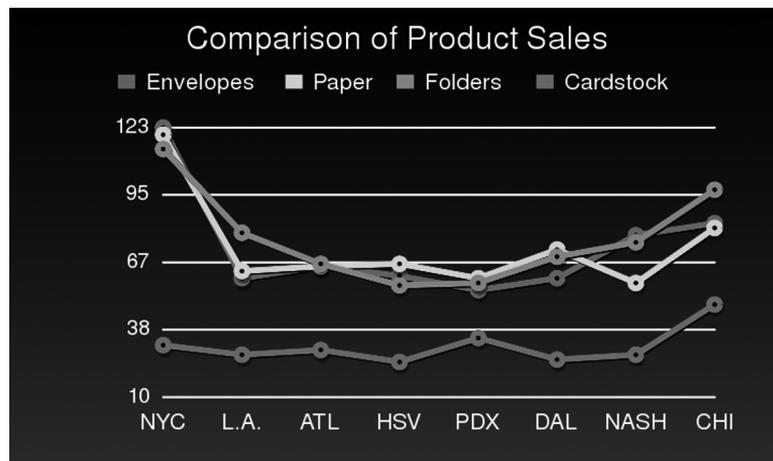


Figure 1.2 Our finished graph: in about 40 lines of code, we pulled data from the database, processed it, and graphed it in a rather attractive fashion.

Not bad for 40 lines of code, including whitespace, comments, and more verbose than required constructs. Sure, this example isn't representative of every situation—you can't develop a full CRM solution in Ruby with 40 lines of code—but it speaks volumes about the expressiveness of the language and the power of its toolkit.

In the next section and subsequent chapters, we'll look at a lot of the concepts that power this example, so you can start building applications and tools that take full advantage of Ruby's features.

1.3 **Facets of Ruby**

Now that we've discussed the "why" of Ruby, let's look at the "how." One of the goals of this book is to make you into a truly effective Ruby developer; we want you to be able to use Ruby to reframe problems and craft solutions. In this section, we'll discuss Ruby concepts and unique "Rubyisms" that will help you do this and that will power the examples and libraries you'll see throughout the rest of the book. We intend that you'll come away with a grasp of these advanced concepts and know how to craft code that is readable, expressive, and "good" (by whatever subjective method you use to measure that). If we're successful, you'll be able to use Ruby to do your job more effectively and develop more maintainable applications.

But what do we mean when we talk about reframing problems in Ruby? Every programming language has its own set of idioms and best practices. Once you're comfortable with the syntax and know your way around the libraries, you start to explore that which makes the language unique. You explore the character of the language, if you will: the way it promotes a certain style of programming and rewards you for following it. If you work with the language, it will work for you.

Object-oriented languages, for example, ask you to encapsulate behavior and data into objects, and they reward you for that in reuse. If you're coming from Java, you know the value of using JavaBeans and the standard collections library, of throwing and catching exceptions, and so on. Today we take those for granted, but in the early days of Java development, many developers would use Java as if it were C or Visual Basic. They wrote code that didn't follow Java idioms, which made it harder to maintain and use.

Like Java, Ruby has its own set of idioms. For example, in Ruby you often use *blocks* to keep your code simple and readable. You can write methods that extend classes with new functionality (metaprogramming). You enrich classes with common behavior by mixing in modules, fondly known as *mixins*. You can use *blocks* to abstract loops and even extend methods and reduce code duplication.

Let's say you were writing a script to interface with an old legacy server. It accepts TCP connections and operates on simple commands like `LOGIN`, `GET`, `DELETE`, and so on. Each time you start a session with the server, you need the same setup and tear-down, but you want to do different things during the socket's connection each time. You could write a number of methods for each sequence of events, duplicating the setup and teardown code in each one, or you could use a block. Listing 1.4 shows a simple implementation of this script.

Listing 1.4 Using blocks to reduce code duplication

```

def remote_session
  config = get_configuration_information
  sock = TCPSocket::new(config.host, config.port)
  yield sock ❶
  sock.close
  log_results
end

# Send some data
def send_login
  remote_session {|sock| sock.send('LOGIN')} ❷
end

# A little more advanced
def login ❸
  remote_session do |sock|
    sock.send('LOGIN')
    received = sock.recv(128)
    received == 'OK' ❹
  end
end
end

```

First, we create a method to execute our setup and teardown, with a `yield` statement inside ❶. That `yield` statement tells Ruby to execute the block that is fed to the method as a parameter. Next, we create a simple method to send the `LOGIN` command to our server ❷. Note that a block is fed to this method as a parameter. The `sock` parameter is the socket from our setup method (`remote_session`) that is given to the block to use. We do the same for the `login` method ❸, but this time we send the login and do something with the returned data ❹. Notice the code duplication we've eliminated by putting all of our setup and teardown into a separate method; this is just one of the many facets of Ruby that make development with it that much cleaner and easier.

Ruby is a dynamic language, and as you get to explore that facet of Ruby, known as *duck typing*, you'll notice that you don't need to use interfaces and abstract classes as often. The way Ruby allows you to extend objects and use constructors relieves you from juggling factories. Iteration is often done with blocks and functions, whereas in nonfunctional languages you tend to use `for` loops and define anonymous classes.

Once you get the hang of all these ideas, you'll start reframing problems in terms of Ruby, rather than thinking out a solution in a language you're more familiar with, and writing it in the Ruby syntax. You will often find that reframing problems changes the way you think about code, and you'll discover new ways to become a better developer.

Imagine a method that queries the database for products based on different criteria. You could call the method with any number of arguments. But it's hard to understand exactly what criteria it's using if your code looks like this:

```
find_products nil, nil, nil, nil, 5, 50, 250
```

What does the 5 stand for? What about the 50? Some languages promote the idiom of method overloading, creating several methods with different signatures, depending on the expected call. But overloading doesn't always work if all the arguments are

integers. In that case you'll want to follow a different idiom, creating an object, populating its fields, then passing it to the method. Those are all good idioms, but not the ones you'll likely use with Ruby.

Ruby has a convenient syntax for handling hashes, which you can use to simulate named arguments. Instead of method overloading and populating objects, you can write something like this:

```
find_products :category => 5, :price => 50..250
```

Duck typing even makes it possible to call the following line and let the method extract the identifier from the storage object:

```
find_products :category => storage, :price => 50..250
```

As you practice these idioms, you'll notice certain things change. For one, you'll have fewer methods in your objects, making your APIs easier to understand. In fact, you'll have fewer classes to deal with. In this example, we've eliminated an object to hold all the properties and a class to define it. With fewer classes and methods, it's easier to understand the overall design of your software and how all the pieces fit together.

This discussion has barely scratched the surface. This book is not a walkthrough of the Ruby language; we only wanted to give you a taste for the language's features. We could go on and on about all of the dynamic features of Ruby, but it would ultimately be redundant. We'll cover some of these concepts, features, and practices in this chapter, but throughout the book you'll see these and other Ruby idioms in practice, which is where real education happens: when you use your knowledge in practice. We hope that we can help you learn those mostly by example, with some explanations along the way. The more you invest in learning the language, the better a developer you'll be. There's always a learning curve, but fortunately there's not a lot to it with Ruby. You'll see the benefit of Ruby while you're learning and practicing the language, but you'll want to take that information and go deeper to get even better.

One of the killer apps for Ruby is the Ruby on Rails web application framework. Developers are attracted to the magic of Rails and the productivity gains therein, but, in reality, most of the magic is good Ruby programming applied to web applications. Think about this: what if you could make the same magic work for you in other domains, to make you a better developer for any problem you need to solve? What if you could take those same productivity gains and magic methods, and use them in *your* code? Let's look at some of the facets of this gem we call Ruby that can make this possible: duck typing, simplicity, efficiency, and functional programming.

1.3.1 Duck typing

Ruby uses dynamic typing rather than static typing, and Ruby's brand of dynamic typing has been dubbed *duck typing*. It's not so much that Ruby's typing behaves differently than most dynamically typed languages; it's merely that one thinks about objects based on behavior rather than type: if an object walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck.

In a static typing system, an object's type is determined by its class definition at compile time. Static typing forces each object to declare its heritage, so you're always asking, "where are you coming from?" In dynamic languages, behavior is captured by the object, not the interface. Dynamic typing only cares about merits, so the question to ask each object is, "what can you do?"

You can do the same with reflection in Java or C#, but reflection hides your business logic in a haystack of type-bypassing code. With dynamic typing, you don't have to declare so many interfaces and abstract classes in anticipation of reuse, you don't have to write adapters and decorators as often, and you don't need to choose between readability and functionality. All these help you reuse code more often.

A byproduct of duck typing is that method calls do not check their recipient's type beforehand. Your code calls a method, and if it fails, it raises an exception. This concept sounds a little cloudy, so let's look at a piece of code to explain it. Let's say we have a method that calls `size` and returns it in a friendly message.

```
def print_size(item)
  puts "The item's size is #{item.size}."
end
```

Our method calls `size` on the object without regard for its class, so if you feed it an object that responds to the `size` method, it will work.

```
mystring = "This is a string."
print_size(mystring)          # => The item's size is 17.
myarray = [1,2,3,4,5]
print_size(myarray)          # => The item's size is 5.
myfile = File::Stat.new("readme.txt")
print_size(myfile)           # => The item's size is 432.
```

This is a perfect illustration of duck typing: all three objects walk and talk like ducks. We're expecting the object to do something, and we only have to ask: does it do that?

Duck typing is a trade-off. You no longer have a compiler that will catch type errors upfront, but you do have fewer opportunities for errors. In a statically typed language, you'll repeat the type declaration in multiple places: class definition, variable declaration, constructor, method arguments, and so on. If you need to refactor code, perhaps splitting a class into an interface and separate implementation, maybe adding a factory or writing a decorator, you end up making type changes in multiple places, and you'll want a type-checking compiler to help you minimize errors.

That's not a problem with Ruby. As you grow more familiar with Ruby, you'll notice that you don't have to declare types that often, or repeat them all over the place. You rarely need to separate interfaces and implementation classes, or conjure factories and decorators. When you have fewer types to deal with, type checking is less of an issue. What you get in return is being able to do more with less code, which means fewer places for bugs to hide. Give it a shot. We doubt you'll miss type checking.

If you do end up needing a way to assert that an object at least responds to a method, every object defines a method named `respond_to?` that will respond `true` or `false` depending on whether or not that object will respond to the method indicated:

```
3.respond_to?(:to_s)      # => true
3.respond_to?(:im_fake)  # => false
"string".respond_to?(:gsub) # => true
```

This isn't type checking, but it's a pretty good indicator of an object's identity if you need it. This is also useful if you want to branch depending on the parameter given to the method:

```
if param.respond_to?(:convert)
  param.convert
else
  MyClass.from_object(param)
end
```

This technique can help make your API simpler, and, depending on how the code is written, make your code shorter.

1.3.2 **Simplicity**

Ruby values simplicity. To be fair, all programming languages do, each striving for simplicity in its own way. But they don't all achieve it in the same way. A language cannot enforce simplicity any more than it can keep your code bug free, but it can certainly reward you for keeping things simple. Or, it can reward you for making things complex, often in the form of over-engineering.

As much as we hate to admit it, once we write a piece of software and release it to the world, the software becomes harder to change. Yet, it often needs to change to add new features, switch databases, support more protocols, or integrate with other systems. And so we plan for change.

Each language has its own patterns that deal with change. In a statically typed language like Java, you need to think about these requirements upfront: once the implementation has been fixed, it is hard to change. You tend to figure out the interfaces upfront, use factories liberally, allow for decorators, and so on. Because those changes are hard to make later on, you're better off doing them up front, just in case, even for cases that will never happen. In their own way, statically typed languages reward you for over-engineering.

In contrast, you'll find that it's much easier to make local changes with Ruby without affecting the rest of your code because it's a dynamic language. When change is easy to make, you don't have to plan as much for every eventuality. In dynamic languages, there's less need to design interfaces that are separate from the implementation, because it's possible to refactor the implementation without breaking code all around. You won't need to bury the business logic in layers of factories, decorators, listeners, and anonymous classes. That might seem hard to imagine if you have a strong background with statically typed languages, but as you get comfortable with Ruby, you'll notice it too. Ruby will reward you for keeping things simple, and saying no to code you don't need will reward you with quicker development and easier maintenance.

1.3.3 **DRY efficiency**

Ruby is a DRY language. DRY stands for: Don't Repeat Yourself. Syntactically, it's an efficient language: you can express the same thing with fewer lines of code. As we

know, computers are fast enough that more lines of code do not slow them down, but what about you? When it comes to debugging and maintaining, the more code you have to deal with, the harder it is to see what it does and find the problems that need fixing. Ruby helps you keep your code short and concise.

Listing 1.5 shows this with a simple example. The first style is Ruby, but you'll notice that it looks similar to many other programming languages. The second style is the preferred way of doing it in Ruby: shorter and less repetitive (and if this is the last value in a method, the `return` is superfluous). There's not a lot to this example, but imagine that you could do this throughout your code, eliminating thousands of lines of unnecessary cruft.

Listing 1.5 A small example of DRY syntax

```
# The long way
record = Hash.new
record[:name] = "Dave"
record[:email] = "admin@net.com"
record[:phone] = "555-1235"
return record

# The Ruby way
return { :name=>"Dave", :email=>"admin@net.com", :phone=>"555-1235" }
```

Though this example is a bit contrived, it illustrates part of a consistent effort to make Ruby's syntax efficient without being unreadable. Ruby's syntax has a lot of little features like this that end up giving you huge gains: blocks, iterators, open classes, and more. And many of these features are due to Ruby's ties to functional programming.

1.3.4 Functional programming

Ruby is an object-oriented language: it is objects all the way down. Like many other dynamic languages, functions are also first-class citizens. Couple that with outstanding support for closures, and it's easy to adopt a functional style of programming. But unlike more traditional functional programming languages, like LISP or Haskell, Ruby is easier to pick up, and it can let you enjoy both worlds of functional and procedural style.

Why is functional programming so important? For one, it helps you write shorter and more concise code, and some things are easier to express in functional style. For another, the functional style leads to code that doesn't depend on state and has fewer side effects. Code like that is much easier to mold and refactor, and it gives you more opportunities for reuse. It also makes it easier to build applications that scale.

The easiest way to build software that scales is using the "shared nothing" architecture. The less shared state you have to deal with, the easier it is to scale. Although Ruby comes with modern libraries that support threads, locks, mutexes, and other concurrency mechanisms, it helps that you don't have to use them often.

We're sure a lot of this discussion sounds like academia mixed with astronaut buzz talk. Functional programming hasn't yet hit the big time in the world of software development, but perhaps you're familiar with the Google MapReduce algorithm, which achieves unparalleled scalability by running tasks independently of each other. Its efficiency is achieved through two main algorithms or methods: map and reduce.

You can see Ruby’s “map” in listing 1.6 as the obviously named map method; the “reduce” part in Ruby is most often done using the inject method.

Listing 1.6 Map is one way Ruby uses functional programming for parallelism

```
# Code that iterates in order to map one array to another
application_names = []
for application in applications
  application_names << application.visible_name
end

# Code that maps one array to another
applications.map { |application| application.visible_name }

# An even shorter way to express it in Rails and Ruby 1.9
applications.map &:visible_name
```

Code that has fewer dependencies is easier to run in parallel, taking advantage of modern multicode CPUs, or when deploying on a cluster of servers. There are other ways to do it, but functional programming makes it extremely easy.

Now let’s look at one of the most attractive features of Ruby. In covering these facets of Ruby, we’ve been working our way toward one of the biggest features of the language: metaprogramming.

1.4 **Metaprogramming**

We talked in the beginning about reframing solutions in terms of Ruby. Software development bridges the gap between your ideas and applications you can use. The smaller that gap, the more quickly you can cross it. We’re going to stop the analogies here, but the point is that you want to translate your ideas into code quickly and easily. The language you choose can increase or reduce this distance between ideas and your implementation (see figure 1.3).

But as you progress and become an expert with the tools of your trade (regardless of which language you use), this gap will slowly close. You’ll be able to frame things in terms of a language’s idioms, keeping the language’s limitations, strengths, and so on, in the back of your mind. Your ideas are then much closer to real code (figure 1.4 illustrates this).

Most programming languages are content being what they are. Some languages are more generic, but they force you to deal with more details. Other languages help you deal with a specific domain problem but tend to be simple and inflexible, such as

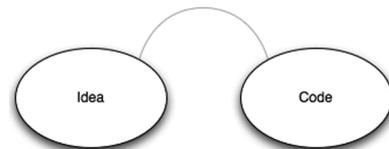


Figure 1.3 Some languages create a gulf between your ideas and working code.

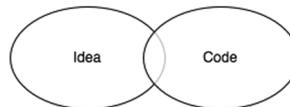


Figure 1.4 Ideas can more closely match the resulting code if your expertise and perspective create an overlap between the framing of an idea and the real code that will execute it.

SQL, RuleML, XML Schema, Ant, and CSS. Through *metaprogramming*, Ruby allows you to have a mixture of both. You can extend Ruby with mini-languages that can get you closer to the problem you’re solving, and you can still use all the expressive power of Ruby (see figure 1.5).

This book isn’t focused on teaching much Ruby “technique” in the sense of the core language, but there are a couple of powerful tools that will let you crank your developer volume all the way to 11 and give you the ability to solve problems with ease. We think it’s worthwhile to spend a few minutes introducing you to these tools: metaprogramming and domain-specific languages.

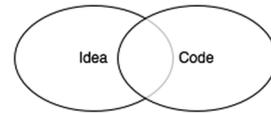


Figure 1.5 Ruby can be bent to your problem domain, making the overlap between your problem domain and real code significant.

1.4.1 Getting started with metaprogramming

The software industry always looks for that one silver bullet that can turn ideas into code without the “overhead” of software developers. We’re not too worried about losing our jobs, but software that writes software is a wonderful tool, even if it only takes on part of the workload. Compilers that turn source code into machine code do that—they let us work with higher-level languages. Source code generators and IDE wizards give us a head start by writing boilerplate code and skeletons. And even further up the ladder, there’s *metaprogramming*, writing code that writes code.

Methods that define methods

If you come from a background in Java or C#, you learned that objects and classes are different in one fundamental way. Objects are mutable, so you can change them by calling methods on them, but classes are immutable: their definitions are written down, and once compiled, cannot be changed. In Ruby, classes, like objects, are mutable. You can call a method on a class that will change the class definition.

Let’s look at a simple example. Suppose we have a `Project` that has an `owner`, an attribute you can both get and set. Listing 1.7 shows two ways to express that. We can write a couple of methods, or we can call `attr_accessor`. By calling this method on the class, we allow it to change the class definition and essentially define a method for getting the value of the instance variable `@owner`, and a method for setting it.

Listing 1.7 Using `attr_accessor` to define accessor methods on your class

```
class Project
  def owner()
    @owner
  end
  def owner=(who)
    @owner = who
  end
end
class Project
  attr_accessor :owner
end
```

Diagram annotations: A vertical line with a circled '1' points to the `owner` and `owner=` methods in the first class definition. A circled '2' with an arrow points to the `attr_accessor :owner` line in the second class definition.

The class definitions in listing 1.7 both do the same thing: define an attribute owner that you can get and set. The first version is rather explicit ❶, but the second version uses a lot less code ❷. This seems a little contrived now, but imagine having 12 or 15 attributes in a class. Then you're going from 40 or 50 lines of code down to 1. That's a *huge* spread across an entire application. Even better, you describe the intent of what needs to happen (accessing an attribute) without having to be totally verbose about it.

But how does it work? Let's take a look at an implementation of `attr_accessor` in Ruby in listing 1.8. This is not *the* implementation from Ruby, but it has the same effect.

Listing 1.8 A reimplement of `attr_accessor`

```
class Module
  def attr_accessor (*symbols) ❶
    symbols.each do |symbol|
      class_eval %{
        def #{symbol}
          @#{symbol}
        end

        def #{symbol}=(val)
          @#{symbol} = val
        end
      }
    end
  end
end
```

Using Ruby's open classes, we reopen the class definition of the Ruby core class `Module` ❶ and add a method, `attr_accessor`, to it. This method takes each provided symbol and executes a code block in the context of the class definition using `class_eval` ❷. You will become familiar with the `*_eval` family of methods in your metaprogramming. Check out table 1.1 for a summary of their usage.

Table 1.1 The `eval` family of methods

Method	Usage
<code>eval(str)</code>	Evaluates a string of code: <pre>eval("puts 'I love eval!'")</pre>
<code>instance_eval(str)</code> <code>instance_eval { }</code>	Evaluates a given string of code or a code block, changing the receiver of the call to <code>self</code> : <pre>class Hider def initialize @hidden = "Hello, world!" end end my_hidden = Hider.new my_hidden.instance_eval { puts @hidden } # => Hello, world!</pre>

Table 1.1 The eval family of methods (continued)

Method	Usage
<pre>class_eval(str) class_eval { }</pre>	<p>Evaluates a given string of code or a code block in the context of a class's definition:</p> <pre>def printable_attribute(attr) class_eval %{ def p_#{attr} puts attr.to_s end } end class Printer attr_accessor :name printable_attribute :name end my_printer = Printer.new my_printer.name = "LaserPrint 5000" my_printer.p_name # => LaserPrint 5000</pre>

Now that we have added our method to the class definition, every instance of a Module or Class object has this method available to it.

Now let's look at a more complex example. We're further along in the development of our application, and we realize there will be a lot of projects to manage. We want to help users by giving them a way to tag projects, so they can then find projects through tags and through related projects. We need a separate table to hold the tags, and we need to add methods to retrieve projects by tags, to delete tag associations when a project is deleted, and so forth.

That's quite a lot of work: a lot of database work for inserting new tags, editing and deleting tags, not to mention searching. We decide to reinvent the wheel some other time, and instead we download a plugin called `ActsAsTaggable`. Listing 1.9 shows how we use it.

Listing 1.9 Using `ActsAsTaggable` to get a lot of features in one line of code

```
class Project < ActiveRecord::Base
  acts_as_taggable
end
```

Why is this a more complex example when it's no longer than the previous one? Because `acts_as_taggable` adds a lot of functionality to our `Project` model that would take us several days to do otherwise. Now our `Project` model has access to a set of tags in the database and has methods to search with baked right in (such as `find_tagged_with`). We can call `Project.find_tagged_with(:all => 'ruby')` and get an array of models that have the tag `ruby`. It required little code on our part: that is the power of metaprogramming.

Ruby is flexible enough that in addition to defining new methods, you can extend existing methods. Think of this as aspect-oriented programming baked into the language. It can also let you define complete classes, from the simple `Struct`, which declares a `JavaBean`-like class in one method call, to more complicated mechanisms, such as creating a collection of model classes from your database schema.

Now let's look at dynamic method definition.

Implementing methods dynamically

This style of metaprogramming happens at class definition, but metaprogramming can also be used to dynamically alter objects. With languages that have static (or early) binding, you can only call a method if that method is part of the class definition. With languages that have dynamic (or late) binding, you can call any method on an object. The object then checks its class definition to decide how to respond to the method call.

This means that in Ruby, if the method is not part of the class definition, the object calls `method_missing`. Typically, `method_missing` will throw an exception, but you can override it to do more interesting things. Let's try to create an XML document (an RSS feed for our projects) using `XML::Builder`. Take a look at listing 1.10.

Listing 1.10 Building an RSS feed for our projects

```
xml = XML::Builder.new
xml.rss "version"=>"2.0" do
  xml.channel do
    xml.title "Projects"
    xml.pubDate CGI.rfc1123_date(Time.now)
    xml.description "List of all our projects"
    for project in projects do
      xml.item do
        xml.title project.name
        xml.guid project_url(project), :permalink=>true
        xml.pubDate CGI.rfc1123_date(project.created_on)
        xml.description project.details
      end
    end
  end
end
```

If you're looking for the step where we use a DTD or XML Schema to generate source code, you won't find it. `Builder` uses `method_missing` to create elements based on the method name, attributes from the method arguments, and text nodes from the first argument, if it's a string. So a simplified version of that method might look like listing 1.11.

Listing 1.11 A simplified look at `XML::Builder`'s use of `method_missing`

```
def method_missing(sym, *args, &block)
  root_element = sym
  args.each do |arg|
```

①

②

```

case arg
  when Hash
    build_elements(root_element)
  when String
    add_element(root_element)
  end
end
end
end

```



Using Ruby’s open classes, Builder overrides the `method_missing` method. Builder takes the name of the missing method that is called ❶, and the value provided ❷, and makes elements out of them depending on the value’s type ❸. You’ll likely find coding like this sprinkled throughout your favorite and most-used libraries, including ActiveRecord.

Builder is one of those staple libraries you’ll use quite often in your projects, and it’s an interesting library to analyze if you’re curious about metaprogramming. If you learn enough about it, metaprogramming can help you build mini-languages that you can use to reframe business logic in terms of the problem domains, rather than in terms of a language’s syntax. We’re talking about *domain-specific languages*.

1.4.2 Domain-specific languages

Functions, objects, libraries, and frameworks all help you work at a higher level of abstraction, closer to the problem. If you look at the software landscape, you’ll see a lot of different specialty domains. You can imagine languages, each of which is designed to solve a specific set of problems by expressing solutions in a way that’s easy and natural for that specific domain. Perhaps you hadn’t heard of domain-specific languages (DSLs) before reading this book, but you certainly have used them. Do any of the following names sound familiar: SQL, regular expressions, HTML, Make, WSDL, .htaccess, UML, CSS, Ant, XSLT, Bash? These are all domain-specific languages.

Within the domain of relational databases, there needs to be a way to define new tables. There needs to be a way to query these tables and return the results, to create new records, to update and delete existing records. You could do those things by delving into low-level database APIs, creating the table structures directly, iterating over B-tree indexes to fetch records, performing joins in memory, and sorting the data yourself. In fact, many system developers used to do just that. Nowadays, we use SQL.

But DSLs have a limit: it’s hard to create a programming language that has good support for variables, expressions, functions, objects, and all the tooling around it. So DSLs tend to be simple, static, and inflexible. HTML, for example, can express rich multimedia content, including text, images, audio, and video. But if you want to do anything dynamic, like pull-down menus, partial updates, or drag and drop, you need a more generic programming language. You’ll want to use JavaScript. On the other hand, because JavaScript is a generic programming language, it will take a mountain of statements to create a page using the DOM API. But what if you could mix a generic programming language with a domain-specific language?

Let's look at XML Schema definitions, for example. The XML Schema language was originally designed to validate XML documents. With it, you can express what a valid XML document looks like, so you can check XML documents against these rules before deciding whether or not to process them. It's much easier to use than iterating over the DOM and checking whether the current element is allowed to follow the previous element, and whether it has all the right attributes.

But, like most DSLs, XML Schema has its limits. For example, you can check that a customer element has optional contact data, such as email, phone, or IM handle, but there's no easy way to require that at least one of these elements exists. There's no easy way to validate that all U.S. addresses have a state, or that the ZIP Code matches the address. But if we created a DSL using a powerful host language (like Ruby), we could come up with something that looks like listing 1.12.

Listing 1.12 A validation domain-specific language example

```
contact_information_verification do |the_persons|
  the_persons.name.is_required

  the_persons.address.is_required
  the_persons.address.must_be(10).characters_long

  the_persons.phone.must_be(10).characters_long

  the_persons.im_handle.must_not_be(in_existing_accounts)
end
```

This gives us a nice set of readable rules that can be updated by anyone (probably even your secretary), which will generate or execute the validations we need. DSLs can bring the same simplicity and abstraction to a lot of your specific problems.

NOTE What we've created here is not *technically* a DSL in the purest sense, but an embedded DSL (EDSL)—a domain-specific language that's embedded inside a host language, in this case Ruby. Throughout this book, we'll show different Ruby libraries and tools that include their own mini-languages, all of which are EDSLs.

Think about code that expresses business rules or composes tasks, and you'll find many opportunities to simplify and reduce noise. DSLs don't just help your secretary or business manager keep your code up, they can also help you as a developer keep yourself sane. Using Ruby's metaprogramming capabilities, you can build these sorts of solid, literate tools and fluent interfaces.

1.4.3 Refining your metaprogramming

If you've never built a DSL, it can be slightly daunting to make sure your implementation stays flexible yet still clean. Even the masters have to take a step back to rethink things every once in a while. (For example, Rspec, a popular Ruby testing library, changed its DSL numerous times before settling on the current implementation.) But there are steps you can take to make sure that you're approaching the right problems

the right way with metaprogramming, and to ensure that you aren't carrying around a hammer looking for a nail to hit.

The place to start is with the problem you solve over and over again. When you see a lot of repetition in your code, or when you find yourself getting bogged down by details, that's the right time to simplify things. Metaprogramming helps you simplify by creating an easier, more expressive way to write code. There's no point in writing a DSL that you will only use once, but it pays several times over if you use it repeatedly.

You could let your imagination run wild and use metaprogramming to solve problems you think you'll have someday, but you'll quickly realize that those are just mental exercises. Instead, look for patterns you have in your code right now, for practices and idioms you use often, and use metaprogramming to simplify those. This process is called *extraction*, and it's based on what you need and use, not what you could imagine doing some day. You'll notice that Rails, Rake, RSpec, and many of the other frameworks we cover in this book all came from extractions, from looking at existing solutions and finding better, easier ways to write those.

The best way to write a DSL is to practice *intentional programming*. Step away from the code and ask yourself, "if I were not limited by the language I use right now, if I could express the solution itself in some other language, what would my code look like?" Try to write that code as if that language already exists. You've just defined a DSL. Now you have to go and implement it, but the hardest part is behind you.

So how do you know you're successful? A good DSL has two interesting qualities. The first is that you'll want to use it. You know you're successful when, out of all the possible things you can do that day, just after coffee, you decide to write code using that DSL.

The second quality of a good DSL is that you can throw away the documentation and still use it, or you might say it follows the "the rule of least surprise." When the code comes naturally to you, it's easier to write and less painful to maintain. When we work with Rails, we never have to stop to ask, "how do we access the `order_on` field?" We know that in Rails it's accessed with the `order_on` method. We know that to find an employee record by their name, we use `find_by_name`. The rule of least surprise is one of those, "I'll know it when I see it" guidelines. Just ask your teammates what they expect to happen, and if you've followed the rule closely enough, they should be able to tell you.

Using `method_missing` and a few other fun metaprogramming tricks, you may work yourself into a position where you have a lot of methods that aren't explicitly defined. The Rails API is much larger than the API documentation indicates because there is so much runtime code generation that goes on. How do you make sure that your users and coworkers know what your code can do, that your code is testable, and, above all, that your intentions are clear (even six months from now)? You document, of course. And if you follow the rule of least surprise, you have little to worry about: other developers will intuitively know which methods to expect when it all makes sense.

But what about testing? Don't the dynamic features make it harder to test? Testing metaprogramming is no different from testing any other piece of code. There's nothing magical about it, no hidden traps. You can use any tool available for testing, and, in fact, in the next chapter we're going to talk about testing at length.

1.5 Summary

Ruby has gained a lot of popularity in recent times because it's a simpler, expressive alternative to other contemporary languages. This success is partially due to the emergence of Rails as a tangible tool that developers can use to develop production-quality software that's still developer friendly. Rails owes this friendliness to Ruby, which offers a lot of features, such as metaprogramming, that make Ruby more expressive and even fun.

As more and more developers pick up Ruby, they will want to use their current programming paradigms, like aspect-oriented programming or declarative programming, and development practices such as Scrum or test-driven development. Ruby has a number of libraries to help bring these old practices into your new environment (such as *Ruleby* or *AspectR*). In the next chapter, we'll concentrate on the most prevalent of these—test-driven development—and we'll look at testing Ruby code using the built-in testing library and some related third-party tools and libraries.

RUBY IN PRACTICE

Jeremy McAnally • Assaf Arkin

with Yehuda Katz, David Black, Gregory Brown, Peter Cooper, and Luke Melia

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