

Formal Languages and Computability

CS 154

Fall 2026 Section 01 In Person 3 Unit(s) 08/19/2026 to 12/07/2026 Modified 08/22/2026

Course Information

Class time	Sec 1: MW 15:00 - 16:15 Sec 2: TR 15:00 - 16:15 Sec 3: TR 16:30 - 17:45
Classroom*	Sec 1: MacQuarrie Hall 523 Sec 2: Duncan Hall 250 Sec 3: Hugh Gillis Hall 124
Instructor	Yan Chen (yan.chen01@sjsu.edu)
Office Hour	MW 14:00 - 15:00 on Zoom (https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/82436528015 (https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/82436528015)) Or in person in DH282 Or Make an Appointment (https://scheduler.zoom.us/yan-chen-rurbn3/fa26)
Grader	TBD

*The class is in person. The lecture part will be recorded, but the quality is not guaranteed. Some in-class demos and exercises may not be recorded.

Course Description and Requisites

Finite automata, context-free languages, Turing machines, computability.

Prerequisite(s): MATH 42 or MATH 42X and CS 46B (with a grade of "C-" or better in each); Allowed Majors: Computer Science or Applied and Computational Mathematics; or instructor consent.

Letter Graded

Classroom Protocols

- Do NOT share any course material publicly (on Canvas, GitHub, etc.) without permission, including but not limited to lecture notes, lecture videos, passwords, homework/exam solutions, and class meeting links.
- No late homework questions (within 24 hours before due, excluding follow-ups) via email.
- For all homework and exams, only use the notations mentioned in the class. Wrong/different notation(s) will be considered as wrong answer(s).
- **Instances of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.** Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San José State University and the University's Academic Integrity Policy (<https://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/F15-7.pdf>), requires you to be honest in all your academic coursework. Cheating or plagiarism (presenting the work of another as your own, or the use of another person's ideas without giving proper credit, or use of AI-generated text, etc.) will result in **a reduction in final course grade** (for assignments, 2/3 grade off every time except the first time; for the final, one letter grade off) and administrative sanctions by the University.

Program Information

Diversity Statement - At SJSU, it is important to create a safe learning environment where we can explore, learn, and grow together. We strive to build a diverse, equitable, inclusive culture that values, encourages, and supports students from all backgrounds and experiences.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

Upon successful completion of this course, students would be able to:

- Understand the high-level building blocks of computer science.
- Analyze and design deterministic and non-deterministic machines for various formal languages.
- Describe regular languages in terms of regular expressions and vice versa.
- Analyze and design pushdown automata for some formal languages.
- Analyze and design Turing machines for some formal languages.
- Describe the properties of various automata and formal languages.
- Construct different type of grammars (regular, context-free, etc.) for some formal languages.
- Use the pumping lemma to prove that some formal languages are not regular.
- Describe decidability and classify problems as decidable or undecidable.
- Describe computability and complexity of problems.
- Categorize languages based on their complexities.
- Be familiar with some open questions in computer science.

Course Materials

There is no required text for this course other than all the materials (lecture notes, homework, etc.) on Canvas. You are responsible for **regularly checking the Canvas course page** for any updates, including its messaging system.

Further Readings (optional)

- Peter Linz, "An Introduction to Formal Languages and Automata," 5th edition, Jones & Bartlett Learning, ISBN-13: 978-1449615529
- The references at the end of each lecture note

Course Requirements and Assignments

There will be weekly assignments (optional), a midterm (optional) and a final (mandatory). No high-level programming is required in this course.

Although weekly assignments and midterm are optional, they are highly recommended to practice what you learned in class and to enhance your score. University Policy S16-9

(<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf> (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>)) states that:

"Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally three hours per unit per week) for instruction, preparation/studying, or course related activities, including but not limited to internships, labs, and clinical practice. Other course structures will have equivalent workload expectations as described in the syllabus."

Canvas Quiz: Weekly Assignments

Assignments will be posted on Canvas every week, and **locked by passwords that are ONLY given in the lectures**. They are optional (except for Assignment 0*), but points earned in those assignments will be extra points added to the final score. See "Grading Information" for more details.

There will be two types of assignments (either one of below each week):

- Timed quizzes that are **closed-all-materials**. You can start the quiz any time before due, but must finish it in one sitting, within the time limit. They are cumulative with more focus on the material learned during that week.
- Design problems that are open notes with no time limit before the due but more complex than those that appear in timed quizzes.

Schedule your time well to protect yourself against unexpected problems. Start early so you have time to ask questions if you need help. Late work will be accepted with a penalty of 20% per day (will NOT be accepted after 4 days have passed its deadline).

The assignments are individual assignments. **Copying from others' work (from other students, previous semesters, the Internet, or AI) will be considered cheating.**

*Note that only **Assignment 0 is mandatory**, which serves the following purposes:

- Roll call for attendance of the first 2 classes (submitting Assignment 0 indicates your attendance).
- Submitting your transcript so the instructor can double-check your prerequisites.
- Getting familiar with the question types you will encounter in future assignments/exams.

Canvas Quiz: Midterm

The midterm will be held in class on Oct. 14 for section 1 and Oct. 15 for sections 2 & 3 (tentative). It will be posted on Canvas as a timed quiz, with more questions but less time per problem than normal assignments. No class meeting on the midterm day, but you need to finish the exam during the required time frame. Exceptions may ONLY be given in cases of a verifiable emergency. You can view the midterm as a checkpoint and practice for the final.

Canvas Quiz: Final Examination

The final will be in the same format as the midterm and is cumulative. It will be online, so it can be taken anywhere with a stable internet connection. The latest of the three sections' scheduled final-exam times, **Friday, December 11, 15:15 - 17:15 Pacific Time**, will serve as the default exam time for all sections. Students whose sections have an earlier scheduled exam time may choose to take the exam at that earlier time instead. Approximately one week before the final exam, a form will be distributed for students to select their preferred exam time. Students who do not submit the form will be expected to take the exam at the default time.

It can be substituted/averaged with a final project; more details will be given in class around Nov. 10 (tentative).

Both the Midterm and Final are closed-all-materials. Copying from others' work (from other students, previous semesters, the Internet, or AI) will be considered cheating.

The final Exam is mandatory as University policy S17-1 (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S17-1.pdf> (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S17-1.pdf>)) states:

"Faculty members are required to have a culminating activity for their courses, which can include a final examination, a final research paper or project, a final creative work or performance, a final portfolio of work, or other appropriate assignment."

✓ Grading Information

Criteria

Note that the "weight" is not percentage - they are "points". There will be 130 points available, including extra credits from optional exercises/activities. More details will be given in class.

Type	Weight	Topic	Notes
Final Exam	100	Cumulative	Can be substituted with final project
(Optional) Midterm	3	Cumulative	3 pts if grade over 50% (all-or-nothing)
(Optional) Assignments	21	Weekly	14 assignments total, 1.5 pts each

Type	Weight	Topic	Notes
(Optional) Others	6	Others	Other class activities, such as reading assignments, discussions, etc.

Breakdown

The range also refers to "points", not percentages.

- A+ will be given to the top 1% of students.
- Grades near the borderlines will be rounded up depending on your level and quality of class participation (in class and in the Discussions on Canvas).
- The grade might be curved ONLY if the final grades of the class at the end of the semester are not normal.

Grade	Points	Grade	Points	Grade	Points
A	Above 93.00	B minus	80.00 to 82.99	D plus	66.00 to 69.99
A minus	90.00 to 92.99	C plus	76.00 to 79.99	D	63.00 to 65.99
B plus	86.00 to 89.99	C	73.00 to 75.99	D minus	60.00 to 62.99
B	83.00 to 85.99	C minus	70.00 to 72.99	F	Below 59.99

University Policies

Per [University Policy S16-9 \(PDF\)](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf) (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>), relevant university policy concerning all courses, such as student responsibilities, academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. and available student services (e.g. learning assistance, counseling, and other resources) are listed on the [Syllabus Information](https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php) (<https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php>) web page. Make sure to visit this page to review and be aware of these university policies and resources.

Course Schedule

Important dates

Visit <https://www.sjsu.edu/registrar/calendar/fall-2026.php> (<https://www.sjsu.edu/registrar/calendar/fall-2026.php>) for the Academic Calendar.

Date	Description
Aug. 28, Friday	Waitlist ends
Sep. 15, Tuesday	Last day to drop without a W grade
	Last day to add classes via MySJSU
Nov. 1, Sunday	Daylight saving time ends (2 AM -> 1 AM)
Sep. 17, Thursday	Last day to late drop/withdraw
Dec. 7, Monday	All class activities are due except for the final (for this class)
Dec. 11, Friday	Final Exam (for this class) 15:15 - 17:15 Pacific Time
Dec. 19, Saturday	Grades (should be) viewable on MySJSU

Lecture Schedule

Will be posted on Canvas.