RFC Editor Tutorial --"How to Write an RFC"

IETF-63 Paris, France 31 July 2005

Goals of this Tutorial

- Introduction to the RFC process for newcomers
- Hints for old hands.
 - Improve quality of product
 - Hasten publication
- Review some important editorial policies and formatting rules – Gotchas.

- Grateful acknowledgment: Avri Doria's slides from IETF 61 were our starting point.
- No time to explain everything in detail
- See references, especially: <u>http://www.rfc-editor.org</u>

Overview of this Tutorial

- Background: The RFC Series and the RFC Editor
- The Publication Process
- How to Write an RFC

Background

- The RFC Editor
 - A (very short) history lesson Jon Postel
 - The RFC Editor today
- The RFC Series
 - Relation to the IETF
 - Independent submissions

Historical Context of RFC Series

Short chronology of Internet technology:

- 1969-1983: ARPAnet protocol development
 NCP, Telnet, FTP, SMTP
- 1975-1985: Internet protocol development
 IP, TCP, RIP, ARP, DNS, ...
- 1985-1990: NSFnet
- 1991-today: Commercial Internet
 HTTP protocol

RFCs

RFC document series

- Begun by Steve Crocker [RFC 3] and Jon Postel in 1969.
- Informal memos, technical specs, and much more.
- Jon Postel quickly became *the* RFC Editor.
 - 28 years: 1970 until his death in 1998.
 - Postel had an enormous influence on the developing ARPAnet & Internet protocols – known as the "Protocol Czar" and the "Deputy Internet Architect".
 - He established and maintained the consistent style and editorial quality of the RFC series.
 - Jon was a 2-finger typist.

Jon Postel



Newsweek Aug 8, 1994



Photo by Peter Lothberg – IETF34 Aug 1995

RFC Editor

Jon Postel's Playful Side

April 1 RFCs

- A little humorous self-parody is a good thing...
- Most, but not all, April 1 RFCs are satirical documents.
 - We expect you can tell the difference ;-)
- April 1 submissions are reviewed for cleverness, humor, and topical relation to IETF themes.
 - Avian Carriers is famous [RFC 1149]
 - The Evil Bit is my favorite [RFC 3514]

The RFC Editor today

A small group at Jon's long-term home,

- the Information Sciences Institute (ISI) of USC.
- ~5 FTEs
- Funded by ISOC.
- Current leadership:
 - Joyce Reynolds, Postel's chief editorial assistant 83-98.
 - Bob Braden, colleague of Postel 1970-1998.
 - Aaron Falk, relative newcomer.

The RFC Series

- Earliest document series to be published online.
- 1969 today: 36 years old.
- 4100+ documents.
- An ARCHIVAL series: RFCs are forever!
- A nearly-complete record of Internet technical history
 - Early RFCs: a treasure trove of technical history.
 - Many "wheels" that we repeatedly re-invent.

RFC Publication Rate



RFC Editor

RFCs and the IETF

- It was natural to adapt the RFC series to publication of Internet standards documents.
- The RFC Editor is therefore one component of the standards process, under IAB supervision.[RFC 2026]
- An RFC Editorial Board drawn from IETF community provides advice and counsel to the RFC Editor, particularly about independent submissions.

The Internet Standards process

RFC 2026 rules.

- It defines document maturity levels:
 - Standards track: Proposed, Draft, Standard.
 - Non-standards track: Experimental, Informational, Historical.
 - Not quite either: Best Current Practice.
- Shown on RFC header as "Category:"
 - Except, one category "Standards Track"
- A published RFC can NEVER change, but its category can change (see rfc_index.txt).

Two Sources for RFCs

IETF submissions

- Mostly from Working Groups.
- A few are *individual submissions* via the IESG.
- All are submitted to the RFC Editor by the IESG, after approval and with announcement to community.
- RFC Editor ("*independent"*) submissions
 - Submitted directly to RFC Editor.
 - IESG review for conflict with IETF activity, make publish/do-not-publish recommendation. RFC Editor has final decision, with advice from Editorial Board.
 - Only Experimental or Informational category.

Some Common Questions

- Why does every RFC say "Network Working Group" at the top?
 - A reminder of our history [RFC 3] (1969).
- "I want to read RFC 219, but the index says "not online".
 - The early archive (RFCs 1-800) did not survive the changeover from TOPS20 to Unix around 1983.
 - Volunteers have been retyping early RFCs.
 - There are still about 80 that have not been typed and proof-read. (This effort on hold for several years.)

More Common Questions

• Why do Internet Drafts expire after 6 months?

- Experience with RFCs in the early days showed the value of having ONE archival series, the RFC series. To avoid accidentally creating a competing archival series, the early IAB made I-Ds expire.
- There has been much heated discussion about whether this is still a good idea.
- Why does the RFC Editor publish independent submissions?

Why Independent Submissions (1)?

- 1. Document proprietary protocols
 - Encourage companies to publish their protocol designs
 - Socially desirable behavior...
- 2. Republish output of other standards bodies, to make it easily available to Internet community.
 - More socially-desirable behavior

Why Independent Submissions (2)?

- 3. Repository of technical history
 - To record important new ideas, including perhaps controversial ideas.
 - Should follow norms of academic publication, including in-depth motivation and analysis of previous work in the field.
 - Hopefull, can help to counter possible ossification of the IETF technical discourse.

Why Independent Submissions (3)?

4. Document minority views in WG discussions

- This may (or may not) justify publication.
- Must be very clear about its intent and status as roadnot-taken.
- RFC Editor listens carefully to what WG chairs and IESG say.
- When WG is active, IESG can say "[Please] Do Not Publish *Now*", providing up to 1.5 years pub delay.

The RFC Editor Web site

http://www.rfc-editor.org

- Search engines for RFCs, Internet Drafts
- RFC publication queue
- Master index to RFCs: rfc-index.html, .xml
- "Official Internet Protocols Standards" list
- Errata
- Policy changes, news, ...

RFC Publication Process

- Overview
- Queue states
- AUTH48 procedure
- Contents of an RFC

RFC Sub-Series

- All RFCs are numbered sequentially.
- There was a desire to identify significant subsets of RFCs – Postel invented "sub-series". Some RFCs have a sub-series designator and number.
 - E.g., "RFC 2026, BCP 9"
- Subseries designations:
 - BCP Best Current Practice category
 - STD Standard category
 - FYI Informational: user documentation

STD Sub-Series

- Originally: all protocols expected to reach Standard category and enter STD sub-series.
- STD sub-series were overloaded to represent "complete standards".
- Multiple RFCs can be included in one STD.
 Examples:
 - STD 5 = "IP" includes RFCs 791, 792, 919, 922, 950, 1112
 - STD 13 = "DNS", includes RFCs 1034, 1035
 - STD 12 = "Network Time Protocol", currently no RFCs.
 - See: <u>www.rfc-editor.org/rfcxx00.html#STDbySTD</u> for complete list.

STD Subseries and ISDs

- Postel's idea was that protocols evolve, so RFC numbers make confusing names for protocols. He adapted STD numbers as effectively protocol names.
- And reality is increasingly complicated!
 - The IESG (who assigns STD numbers) does not follow Jon's intent for STDs.
- We need a better way. The newtrk proposal, an ISD (Internet Standards Document), could be the better way.

Publication Process: Overview (1)

First published as an Internet Draft

Send us the nroff or xml2rfc source, if available.

RFC Editor

- Copy-edits for clarity, syntax, punctuation, ...
- Creates official nroff source containing editorial changes
- Makes many consistency checks
- IANA acts on IANA Considerations
 - Creates new registries, assign numbers, informs RFC Editor
 - RFC Editor plugs assigned numbers into document.

Publication Process: Overview (2)

Publication may be held up by other RFCs.

- "REF" state: doc set linked by Normative refs must be published simultaneously.
- An RFC # is assigned.
- Document and diff file sent to authors for final check
 - "AUTH48" state.
 - All named authors are responsible.
- Finished document added to archive and index.
 - Announcement on ietf-announce list.
 - .nroff files archived, for later revision.



31 Jul 05

RFC Editor



The RFC Editor *Does Edit* ...

- At least, for correct syntax and punctuation.
- Ideally, to improve clarity, consistency, and quality of the prose.
- To maintain consistent format and style.
 - Using the format and style that many, many years of experience have been found to work well.

The RFC Editor checks many things

- Header format and content
- Title format
- Abstract length and format
- Table of Contents
- Presence of required sections
- No uncaught IANA actions
- Spelling checked
- ABNF/MIB/XML OK, using algorithmic checker
- Citations match references
- Most recent RFC/I-D cited
- Pure ASCII, max 72 char lines, hyphens, etc.
- Header and footer formats
- "Widows" removed
- References split into Normative, Informative
- Boilerplate OK

AUTH48 State: Final Author Review

- Authors given rfcxxxx.txt file and diff file (.html)
- Last-minute editorial changes allowed But should not be technically substantive or too extensive.
 - Else, must get OK from AD, WG chair.
- This process can involve a fair amount of work & time
 - AT LEAST 48 hours!
 - All listed authors must sign off on final document
 - Authors should take it seriously review the entire document, not just the diffs.
 - Your last chance to avoid enrollment in the *Errata Hall of Infamy*!

General RFC Policies

- Immutability (but we get pretty close to the wire...)
- Not all RFC's are standards
- All RFCs in in English
 - RFC2026 allows translations
 - British English is allowed in principle, but...
- Consistent Publication Format
 - ASCII (also .txt.pdf for Windows victims)
 - Also .ps or .pdf (special process for handling)

RFC Formatting Rules

- ASCII, 72 char/line.
- 58 lines per page, followed by FF (^L).
- No overstriking or underlining.
- No "filling" or (added) hyphenation across a line.
- <.><sp>> between sentences.
- No footnotes.

Parsing an RFC

- Header
- Title
- Header boilerplate (Short copyright, Status of Memo)
- IESG Note (when requested by IESG)
- Abstract
- Table of Contents (not req'd for short docs)
- Body
- Authors' Addresses
- IPR boilerplate
 - See RFC 3667/BCP 78, RFC 3668/BCP 79.

RFC Header

Network Working Group	T. Berners-Lee
Request for Comments: 3986	W3C/MIT
STD: 66	R. Fielding
Updates: 1738	Day Software
Obsoletes: 2732, 2396, 1808	L. Masinter
Category: Standards Track	Adobe Systems
	January 2005

- STD number: labels a *standard* (as opposed to a document)
 - One STD may include a set of related RFCs.
 - An STD number will be re-assigned to replacement RFC(s)
 - IETF considering elaboration of STD idea into an "Internet Standards Document (ISD)"
- Updates, Obsoletes: relation to earlier RFCs..
RFC Header: another example

Network Working Group Request for Comments: 2396 Updates: 1808, 1738 Category: Standards Track

T. Berners-Lee MIT/LCS R. Fielding U. C. Irvine L. Masinter Xerox Corporation August 1998

Corresponding RFC Index entry (search on "2396")

RFC2396 T. Berne Fielding Masinter	L. 1998	Upda	ates RFC1808, 1738, Updated by 2732	DRAFT STANDARD
--	---------	------	---	-------------------

Note fields that were not known when RFC was published

31 Jul 05

More First-Page Stuff

Uniform Resource Identifier (URI): Generic Syntax

Status of This Memo

Title

This document specifies an Internet standards track protocol for the Internet community, and requests discussion and suggestions for improvements. Please refer to the current edition of the "Internet Official Protocol Standards" (STD 1) for the standardization state and status of this protocol. Distribution of this memo is unlimited.

Copyright Notice

Copyright (C) The Internet Society (2005).

Abstract

Authors in Header

- Limited to lead authors, document editors.
- There must be very good reason to list more than 5.
- All authors in header are responsible for "48 hour" review.
- Authors section should provide unambiguous contact information.
- Other names can be included in Contributors and/or Acknowledgments sections.



Titles

- Should be thoughtfully chosen
- No unexpanded abbreviations except for very well known (eg, IP, TCP, HTTP, MIME, MPLS...)
- We like short, snappy titles, but sometimes...
 - "An alternative to XML Configuration Access Protocol (XCAP) for manipulating resource lists and authorization lists, Using HTTP extensions for Distributed Authoring and Versioning (DAV)"*
 - (*So far, only an Internet Draft)
 - Note the ambiguity, BTW

DID they mean:

 "Using HTTP extensions for Distributed Authoring and Versioning (DAV)" in place of XML Configuration Access Protocol (XCAP)"

??

Abstracts

Abstracts

- Carefully written for clarity (HARD to write!)
- No unexpanded abbreviations (again, except well-known)
- No citations
- Less than 20 lines! Shorter is good.
- Not a substitute for the Introduction; redundancy is OK.
- I dislike abstracts that bury "This document..." 10 lines down, or omit it entirely!

Body of RFC

First section should generally be "1. Introduction".

- Following special sections may appear:
 - Contributions, Acknowledgments
 - Internationalization Considerations
 - When needed -- see Sect 6, RFC 2277/BCP 18.
 - References
- Sections that MUST appear:
 - Security Considerations
 - IANA Considerations



Normative vs. Informative

- Normative refs in stds-track documents can hold up pub.
- [Normative gets over-used]
- Recommend against numeric citations "[37]".
- Citations and references must match.
- Handy file of RFC reference text:
 - ftp://ftp.rfc-editor.org/in-notes/rfc-ref.txt

Copyrights and Patents

Copyright Issues

- Specified in RFC 3977/BCP 77 "IETF Rights in Contributions"
- Independent submissions: generally follows IETF rules
- Differences should be of interest only to lawyers.

Patent ("IPR") issues

 RFC boilerplate specified in RFC 3978/BCP 78 "Intellectual Property Rights in IETF Technology"

Security Considerations

- Security Considerations section required in every RFC.
- IESG is (rightfully!) suspicious of "There are no security considerations in this document."
 - There are security considerations in nearly everything that we do.
 - The IESG asks for in-depth, meaningful SC sections!
- See: RFC 3552: "Guidelines for Writing RFC Text on Security Considerations"

IANA Considerations

- Primary input to IANA
- Defines:
 - Individual code points, in one place
 - New registries (number spaces), with instructions on future assignment rules.
- Section is required in draft, but "No IANA Considerations" section will be removed by RFC Editor.
- See: RFC 2434, "Guidelines for Writing an IANA Considerations Section in RFCs"

How to Write an RFC

- Some editorial guidelines
- Improving your writing
- Tools
- MIBs and formal languages

Writing an RFC

Primary goal: clear, unambiguous technical prose.

- Some preference for American English style
- The RFC Editor staff generally follows two sources for style advice:
 - Strunk & White (4th Edition, 2000)
 - "A Pocket Style Manual" by Diana Hacker (4th Ed., 2004).

In any case, internally consistent usage is required.



- Simple fact: writing clear, unambiguous technical prose is very *HARD* !!
 - Reread RFC 793 for inspiration and example.
- Not *literary* English, but *comprehensibility* would be nice!
 - Avoid ambiguity
 - Use consistent terminology and notation
 - Define each term and abbreviation at first use.
 - Expand every abbreviation at first use.

Writing Hints

Simple declarative sentences are good.

- Flowery, literary language is not good.
- Say enough, but not more than enough
- Avoid long, involuted sentences. You are not James Joyce.
 - Use ";" | ", and" | ", or" sparingly to glue successive sentences together.
- Make parallel clauses parallel in syntax.
 Bad: "... whether the name should be of fixed length or whether it is variable length".

A Few Common Errors

- Some Protocol Engineers over-capitalize Nouns.
- Keep your sentences short and direct.
 - Don't make simple things complex
- "which"s that should be "that"s.
 - "Which" is used parenthetically and follows a comma.
 - "The interface which the users sees is too complex." that /
 - Or better: "The user interface is too complex."

RFC Editor conventions

- A comma before the last item of a series:
 - "TCP service is reliable, ordered, and full-duplex"
 - Avoids ambiguities, clearly shows parallelism.
- Punctuation outside quote marks: "This is a sentence"{.|?|!}
 - To avoid computer language ambiguities.

Lean and Mean

- You often improve your writing, by simply crossing out extraneous extra words.
 - Look at each sentence and ask yourself, "Do I need every word to make my meaning clear and unambiguous?"
 - English professors call it the "Lard Factor" (LF) [Lanham79]
 - "If you've not paid attention to your own writing before, think of a LF of 1/3 to ½ as normal and don't stop revising until you've removed it." [Lanham79]
 - [Lanham79] Richard Lanham, "Revising Prose", Scribner's, New York, 1979

A Real Example

- "When the nature of a name is decided one must decide whether the name should be of fixed length or whether it is variable length." (25 words)
- A. "One must decide whether the length of a name should be fixed or variable." (14 words, LF = .44)
- B. "We may choose fixed or variable length for a particular class of name." (13 words)
- C. "A name may have fixed or variable length."
 (7 words, LF = .72)

Another Real Example

 "One way to avoid a new administrative overhead would be for individuals to be able to generate statistically unique names." (20)

- A. "We can avoid new administrative overhead by allowing individuals to generate statistically unique names." (14, LF = .30)
- B. "Allowing individuals to generate statistically unique names will avoid new administrative overhead." (12, LF = .40)

How about:

"New administrative overhead can be avoided by allowing individuals to generate statistically-unique names."

Compare to:

"The nail has been hit on the head by you!"

Passive voice: generally a bad idea...

Another (reality-based) Example

- "This is the kind of situation in which the receiver is the acknowledger and the sender gets the acknowedgments." (19)
 - "An acknowledgment action is taking place from the receiver and the sender." (11, LF=.42)
 - "The receiver returns acknowledgments to the sender." (7, LF=.63)

Another Real Example

 "Also outside the scope are all aspects of network security which are independent of whether a network is a PPVPN network or a private network (for example, attacks from the Internet to a webserver inside a given PPVPN will not be considered here, unless the way the PPVPN network is provisioned could make a difference to the security of this server)."

- Two sentences!!
- "make a difference to" -> "affect"

Seeking Clarity, Resolving Ambiguity

- With appropriate consideration in router design, in the event of failure of a BGP peer to provide the equivalent filtering, the risk of compromise can be limited to the peering session on which filtering is not performed by the peer or the interface or line card on which the peering is supported."
 - "Appropriate router design can limit the risk of compromise when a BGP peer fails to provide adequate filtering. The risk can be limited to the peering session on which filtering is not performed by the peer, or to the interface or line card on which the peering is supported." [??]

Removing ambiguity

- "Consequently, BGP security is secondarily dependent on the security of the protocols by which the platform is operated, managed and configured that might signal this event."
 - "Consequently, BGP security is secondarily dependent on the security of the platform's operation, management, and configuration protocols that might signal this event", OR
 - "Consequently, BGP security is secondarily dependent on the security of the operation, management, and configuration protocols of the platform that might signal this event" ??



Format for Readabilty

- Careful use of indentation and line spacing can greatly improveme readability.
 - Goes a long way to compensate for single font.
 - Bullets often help.
- High density on the page may be the enemy of clarity and readability

Hard to read

3.1 RSVP Message Formats
3.1.1 Common Header
The fields in the common header are as
follows:
Flags: 4 bits
 0x01-0x08: Reserved
 No flag bits are defined yet.
Send_TTL: 8 bits
 The IP TTL value with which the message is
 sent. See Section 3.8.

Formatted for Easier Reading

3.1 Message Formats

3.1.1 Common Header

The fields in the common header are as follows:

Flags: 4 bits

0x01-0x08: Reserved

No flag bits are defined yet.

Send_TTL: 8 bits

The IP TTL value with which the message is sent. See Section 3.8.

Preserving the Meaning

- A comment that does not faze us:
 - "How dare you change my perfect prose..."?
 - Sorry... we are just doing our job. See earlier.
- A comment that concerns us very much: "You have changed the meaning of what I wrote".
 - Often, because we misunderstood what you meant.
 - That implies that your prose is ambiguous.
 - You should recast the sentence/paragraph to make it clear and unambiguous, so even the dumb RFC Editor cannot mistake the meaning.;-)



- A well-formed RFC starts with a well-formed I-D
 Surviving IESG review:
 - http://www.ietf.org/ID-Checklist.html
 - http://www.ietf.org/ietf/1id-guidelines.txt

Text Formatting Tools

Author tools: <u>www.rfc-editor.org/formatting.html</u>

- xml2rfc
- nroff
- Microsoft word templates
- LaTeX
- RFC Editor does final RFC formatting using venerable Unix tool nroff –ms.



Read <u>RFC2629.txt</u> - Marshall Rose

- Writing I-Ds and RFCs using XML
- Explains use of DTD for RFC production
- Engine to convert .xml to .txt or to .nroff available online at: <u>http://xml.resource.org/</u>
 - If you use xml2rfc, give the .xml file to the RFC Editor! It saves us doing the markup on your document.
- Xml2rfc resources at: <u>http://xml.resource.org/</u>

nroff, groff

Handy templates for authors using nroff:

- ftp.rfc-editor.org/in-notes/rfc-editor/2-nroff.template
 - Published in 1991 J. Postel
 - Gives instructions on using macros for creating RFCs
- www.1-4-5.net/~dmm/generic_draft.tar.gz
 - Updated nroff template maintained by David Meyer.

If you use nroff -ms (without a private make file), give the .nroff source to the RFC Editor.

MIB RFCs – Important special case

MIB references

- O&M Web Site at <u>www.ops.ietf.org/</u>
- MIB doctors at <u>www.ops.ietf.org/mib-doctors.html</u>
- MIB Review: draft-ietf-ops-mib-review-guidelines
- Tools
 - http://www.ops.ietf.org/mib-review-tools.html
 - smilint at <u>www.ibr.cs.tu-bs.de/projects/libsmi/</u>
 - SMICng at <u>www.snmpinfo.com/</u>

Use of Formal Languages

- Formal languages and pseudo-code can be useful as an aid in explanations, although English remains the primary method of describing protocols.
- Pseudo-code judged on the basis of clarity.
- Formal Languages (e.g., ABNF, XML, ASN.1 (MIBs))
 - Requires normative reference to language specification
 - RFC Editor will run verifier program.
- www.ietf.org/IESG/STATEMENTS/pseudo-code-in-specs.txt
- <u>ftp.rfc-editor.org/in-notes/rfc-editor/UsingPseudoCode.txt</u>

Persistent Editorial Issues

- Normative references
 - Practical effect: can hold up publication
 - Some disagreement on what should be Normative
- MUST/MAY/SHOULD/... applicability words
 - Do they belong in Informative documents at all?
 - Tend to overuse makes it sound important.
 - Worse, often inconsistent use
- URLs in RFCs
 - Some are more stable than others...

Persistent Editorial Issues

Author contact information

- Seems important, but hard to keep it current
- RFC Editor gets many queries from newbies.
- Ideal: maintain database of current email addresses; daunting job.
- Update and Obsolete relationships
 - Some disagreement on what they mean
 - At best, only high-order bit of complex relationship
 - RFC Editor supports ISD (Internet Standard Document) [Newtrk] as more systematic and complete.

Persistent Issues

"What are the current Internet standards?"

- STD sub-series is supposed to define this.
- See STD 1: "Official Internet Protocol Standards"
- Latest: www.rfc-editor.org/rfcxx00.html
- In practice, reality is so complex that this is probably not even a valid question.
 - Again, ISDs would be better than STDs (but more work)
- What is meaning of Historic category?
 - "Really Bad", or just "well, not very current..."?



www.rfc-editor.org/errata.html

- A list of *technical and editorial* errors that have been reported to the RFC Editor.
- Verified by the authors and/or the IESG.
- The RFC Editor search engine results contain hyperlinks to errata, when present.

Authoritative references

- Overview of RFC publication: <u>www.rfc-editor.org/howtopub.html</u>
- "Instructions to Request for Comments (RFC) Authors". Draft-rfc-editor-rfc2223bis-08.txt aka <u>ftp.rfc-editor.org/in-notes/rfceditor/instructions2authors.txt</u>



Questions? Comments? mailto:edu-discuss@ietf.org mailto:rfc-editor@rfc-editor.org