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J. Editor
RFC.EE Project

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About the RFC Document Series

Abstract

The Request for Comments (RFC) Series is a collection of technical and organizational documents about the Internet. The Series began in 1969 and has grown to more than nine thousand documents covering every layer of the networking stack.

This document is a short introduction for readers who are new to RFCs. It describes the Series, its categories, and the conventions that have made RFCs recognizable across more than five decades of history.

Status of This Memo

This document is not an Internet Standards Track specification; it is published for informational purposes.

This document is a product of an independent submission. It has been approved for publication by the RFC Editor, but is not a candidate for any level of Internet Standard; see Section 2 of RFC 7841.

Information about the current status of this document, any errata, and how to provide feedback on it may be obtained at https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc0001.

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1. Introduction

The first RFC was published on April 7, 1969, by Steve Crocker at UCLA. Titled "Host Software", it proposed a set of programs and protocols for the early ARPANET. Many decades later, the RFC Series remains the canonical written record of how the Internet is built.

Despite the name, most RFCs are not requests for comment in any active sense. The term reflects the modest culture of the network's early designers, who preferred tentative labels for documents they knew might be superseded. Once an RFC is published and assigned a number, however, it never changes: errata may be filed, and later RFCs may obsolete it, but the text itself is immutable.

The Series is maintained by the RFC Editor, an organization originally run by Jon Postel at the Information Sciences Institute and now operated under the oversight of the Internet Society.

2. Document Categories

Every RFC carries a category label that describes its intent. The five principal categories are:

Standards Track
: Documents that specify Internet standards. They progress through Proposed Standard and, rarely, Internet Standard.

Best Current Practice (BCP)
: Operational, procedural, or policy guidance considered best practice at the time of publication.

Informational
: Documents that provide information to the community without specifying any standard.

Experimental
: Documents that describe research, prototypes, or proposals not yet ready for standardization.

Historic
: Documents that are obsolete or have been superseded.

A sixth category, "Unknown", exists only for early RFCs whose category was never formally assigned.

3. Streams

An RFC is produced by one of four streams. The stream determines the review process and the boilerplate wording that appears on the first page.

- IETF -- documents produced by Internet Engineering Task Force Working Groups.
- IAB -- documents from the Internet Architecture Board.
- IRTF -- documents from the Internet Research Task Force.
- Independent Submission -- documents submitted directly to the RFC Editor by individual authors.

The stream appears in the upper-left corner of the first page of every RFC, and is echoed in the "Status of This Memo" boilerplate.

4. Document Structure

An RFC follows a strict document skeleton. Every document contains, in order:

- A four-line header block carrying the stream, RFC number, category, and ISSN, alongside author and date information.
- The document title and, optionally, a subtitle.
- An abstract summarizing the document in one or two paragraphs.
- "Status of This Memo" and "Copyright Notice" boilerplate, automatically derived from the category and stream.
- A table of contents.
- Numbered sections carrying the technical body.
- A Security Considerations section. This section is required in every RFC.
- References, split into Normative and Informative.
- One or more Authors' Addresses.

5. Conventions

RFCs are written in a deliberately plain style. The original format is a monospace plain-text file, seventy-two characters wide, with form-feed characters separating pages. A canonical HTML rendering is also published, but the plain text remains the reference form.

The Series uses a small set of capitalized keywords -- MUST, SHOULD, MAY, and their negations -- to signal requirement levels. Their meanings are defined in [BCP14].

6. Security Considerations

This document is informational and does not introduce any protocol behavior. It therefore raises no direct security considerations. Readers interested in writing the Security Considerations section of their own RFCs should consult [RFC3552].

7. References

7.1. Informative References

[RFC0001] Crocker, S., "Host Software", RFC 1, April 1969 <https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc1>.

[BCP14] Bradner, S. and B. Leiba, "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, RFC 8174, May 2017

[RFC3552] Rescorla, E. and B. Korver, "Guidelines for Writing RFC Text on Security Considerations", BCP 72, RFC 3552, July 2003

[RFC7841] Halpern, J., Ed., Daigle, L., Ed., and O. Kolkman, Ed., "RFC Streams, Headers, and Boilerplates", RFC 7841, May 2016

8. Author's Address

J. Editor
RFC.EE Project

Email: editor@example.org
URI: https://rfc.ee/