Independent Submission
Request for Comments: 0002
Category: Informational
ISSN: 2070-1721

J. Editor
RFC.EE Project

January 2026

Typographic Conventions of the RFC Series

Abstract

RFCs have a distinctive visual style: a 72-column monospace layout, running headers and footers, form-feed-delimited pages, and ASCII-art figures aligned on a character grid. This document describes these conventions and explains why they have survived essentially unchanged since 1969.

Status of This Memo

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

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1. Introduction

The original RFC format was a plain-text file, printable on a standard line printer. Line length was limited to seventy-two characters so that a full document would fit on letter- and A4-sized paper with margins, and so that two columns of text could appear side by side on a wide terminal.

The Series has preserved this layout even as the web, XML, and HTML have become the preferred delivery formats. Readers continue to expect the familiar shape of a page: a three-line running header, a body, and a page footer naming the authors and the category.

2. Line Length and Wrapping

The canonical line length is seventy-two characters. Paragraphs are indented three spaces from the left margin and wrap at sixty-nine characters to preserve the margin. Lists, definitions, and preformatted figures may use different indentation, but they never exceed the seventy-two-character limit.

NOTE: Some older RFCs are eighty characters wide. Contemporary submissions SHOULD use the seventy-two-character limit.

3. Page Layout

Each page carries a running header and a running footer. The header has three fields: the RFC number on the left, a short document title in the center, and the publication date on the right. The footer has three fields as well: the primary author(s) on the left, the category in the center, and the page number, in square brackets, on the right.

Pages are separated by a form-feed character (ASCII 0x0C). This character is interpreted by text viewers and printers as a page break. In HTML output, form feeds are replaced by horizontal rules and "New Page" comments.

4. Figures and Tables

RFCs use ASCII art for diagrams. Packet formats, state machines, and protocol exchanges are drawn with hyphens, vertical bars, and plus signs on a fixed character grid. Alignment matters: a diagram that wraps unexpectedly is unreadable.

Because the grid is monospace, every character is one column wide, and a figure's visual shape survives faithfully from author to reader. This is a feature, not a limitation: a table drawn with box-drawing characters in 1969 renders identically on modern displays.

5. The Canonical HTML Rendering

The RFC Editor publishes an HTML rendering alongside the plain-text form. The HTML uses a fixed-width font, preserves line breaks, and adds anchor links for sections and references. Styling is kept minimal so that the document reads the same in a browser as on paper.

This web application takes a similar approach. The block-based content model is rendered to HTML that mimics the plain-text layout, so the same document can be served as HTML, extracted to a plain-text file, or rendered to PDF for printing.

6. Security Considerations

This document describes a display format. It introduces no protocol behavior and therefore has no direct security considerations. Authors should, however, be aware that form feeds and non-printing characters can in principle be used to conceal content from casual readers; automated tools SHOULD normalize whitespace before comparing RFC texts.

7. References

[RFC7994] Flanagan, H., "Requirements for Plain-Text RFCs", RFC 7994, December 2016

[RFC7322] Flanagan, H. and S. Ginoza, "RFC Style Guide", RFC 7322, September 2014

8. Author's Address

J. Editor
RFC.EE Project

Email: editor@example.org