

Network Working Group  
Internet-Draft  
Intended status: Informational  
Expires: December 16, 2015

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June 14, 2015

**What is an Author of an IETF Stream Draft?  
draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-02**

Abstract

This draft suggests guidelines for assigning authorship in IETF stream Internet-Drafts. It also discusses the related issues of acknowledgements, editors and contributors.

Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft is submitted in full conformance with the provisions of [BCP 78](#) and [BCP 79](#).

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**1. Introduction and Scope**

The question sometimes comes up of who should be listed as the author(s) of a draft, who should be listed as editors or contributors, and what acknowledgements are appropriate. The guidelines below are aimed at Internet-Drafts in the IETF publication stream [[RFC4844](#)], [[RFC5741](#)].

Any inconsistency with [[RFC7221](#)] is unintentional, and related issues are discussed in [[I-D.crocker-rfc2418bis-wgguidelines](#)]. The guidelines are intended to be compatible with the RFC Editor's style guide [[RFC7322](#)], with the RFC Editor's authorship policies <<http://www.rfc-editor.org/pipermail/rfc-interest/2015-May/008869.html>> and with the IESG statement on Internet Draft Authorship <<http://www.ietf.org/iesg/statement/internet-draft-authorship.html>>.

This draft has been written to aid discussion and is not intended to be published as an RFC. It in no way, shape or form intends to change the IETF standards process and the related rules on intellectual property. It could be used as input to revision of the Tao of the IETF or of other relevant IETF documents.

**2. General Issues of Authorship Ethics**

There are some quite general aspects of the ethics of professional authorship of academic or technical documents that naturally apply to IETF drafts. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of authorship ethics, but the most important points are

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- o Factual accuracy.
- o Avoidance of misleading or obfuscating statements.
- o Avoidance of misleading omissions.
- o Balance between opposing arguments, when relevant.
- o Careful acknowledgement and citation of sources and references.
- o Avoidance of unacknowledged plagiarism.

Factual accuracy includes accuracy about who wrote the document: only people who made a real contribution should be listed as authors or contributors.

Other aspects are that personal or business considerations should not affect accuracy and balance, and any hidden conflicts of interest should be documented. Corrections, clarifications and retractions should be made promptly when needed.

Many academic journals and universities have published policies about authorship ethics. Examples from life sciences are <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/>, and <http://www.apa.org/research/responsible/publication/>.

However, the IETF has some peculiarities. Perhaps the most important is that we generally encourage the free flow of ideas and their re-use in fresh documents. Sometimes that means that small or large sections of text are copied from one document into another, and subsequently changed as the discussion evolves. In the world at large that is considered to be plagiarism. In the IETF, we consider it to be normal business as long as due acknowledgement is given. This document is specifically scoped for IETF Internet-Drafts and is not intended to apply to non-IETF Internet-Drafts. Some parts might apply to other document streams but that is incidental. (See [Section 5 of \[RFC4844\]](#) for an explanation of the various document streams.)

### **3. Authors**

Authors are people who have made a substantial creative contribution to the document. Normally this means writing text or drawing diagrams. Occasionally, with the consent of the other authors, it means making some other substantial creative contribution to the document, for example by writing a software implementation as part of the design process. It's a matter of judgement whether a person who

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simply makes a key intellectual contribution should rank as an author.

People who did not make any such substantial contribution should not be listed as authors. Funding support, professional reputation, managerial or supervisory status, and CV embellishment don't count. It's also worth noting that in the IETF, authorship by an employee does not imply endorsement by the employer. Therefore, authors should not be added just because of who they work for.

There are quite a few subjective judgements to be made about whether a contribution is substantial enough to count as authorship. What fraction of new or corrected text counts? Is a particular brilliant idea enough? Should the author of a previous trail-blazing document be invited to join? Should someone who promised to contribute significantly, but only contributed fragments, be removed? It's hard to give definite guidelines for such cases.

In normal circumstances, people should never be listed as authors without their explicit permission. In case of doubt, the person submitting the draft should check with each listed author in advance to avoid any misunderstandings. If an author wishes to withdraw, this should be honoured, although the person may then be listed as a contributor or be mentioned in the acknowledgements.

The practical impact is that the authors will be listed as such on the front page if the document becomes an RFC, and in public bibliographies.

#### **4. Contributors**

Contributors are people who made smaller creative contributions to the document than the authors, for example providing initial ideas that others have transformed into publishable text, or drafting only a few paragraphs.

People who did not make any such contribution should not be listed as contributors. People should not normally be listed as contributors without their explicit permission.

The dividing line between contributors and authors is a matter of judgement and cannot be rigidly defined. However, the RFC Editor's policy is to query any document that has more than five listed authors. Any list of more than five authors will need to be negotiated if the document is approved for publication as an RFC.

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## **5. Editors**

When a document has a large number of contributors and potential authors, it may be appropriate to designate one or two people as both "Authors" and "Editors" and list the others as contributors. The editors will indeed do the actual work of editing the document on behalf of the community. The practical impact of this is that the editors will be listed as such on the front page if the document becomes an RFC, and in public bibliographies.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to retain a list of authors of which one or two are designated as editors. What matters is "truth in advertising": the people involved should all feel happy that the designations of editors, authors and contributors are fair and accurate.

It's worth noting that in some people's opinion, once a draft has been adopted by a WG, all future changes are performed as an editing action on behalf of the WG. Traditionally, the IETF has chosen to retain the word "Author" in most cases, with the formal designation of editors being exceptional. Some other standards development organizations always remove individual authorship when a document is formally adopted.

## **6. List of Acknowledgements**

Acknowledgements should be given to people who have made significant creative contributions smaller than those from the authors and contributors, or to people who have made useful comments, provided critical reviews, or otherwise contributed significantly to the development of the document. If text or ideas have been adopted from other written sources, including IETF documents, clearly a reference is an ethical requirement, but an acknowledgement might also be appropriate.

Acknowledgements may also be given to people or organizations that have given material support and assistance, but this should not include the authors' regular employers unless there are exceptional circumstances.

An acknowledgement should be written as a description of a fact. It does not and should not signify that the person acknowledged agrees with or supports the document. In general, people who do not wish to be listed as an author or a contributor, but have in fact made a significant contribution, should be given an acknowledgement. In unusual circumstances, acknowledgements of contributions have specifically indicated that the contributor does not support the document as posted. Language such as the following might be used:



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Thanks to <insert names> for their valuable comments and help during the development of this document, even though they did not fully agree with the WG's conclusion.

When in doubt, it is usually better to include an acknowledgement than to omit it.

## **7. Revised or Replacement Documents**

A common occurrence is that an IETF document from some years ago requires updating. This is often done by people who were not the original authors. The question then arises of whether to list the original authors on the "bis" draft, even if they are long gone from IETF participation.

When an Internet-Draft is prepared by one or more new people but reuses significant amounts of text from one or more earlier RFCs and/or I-Ds, a situation arises that often requires thought and careful handling. The criteria above suggest that the authors of the original documents should continue to be listed as authors. After all, there is rarely any question that the earlier publications constitute "a substantial creative contribution" to the revised document. However, there are no guarantees that the prior authors will want to be listed as authors of the new draft and take on whatever responsibilities that implies. Ideally, those assembling the newer version will consult with the authors of the previous ones and make mutually acceptable arrangements, but, especially when that is not feasible, sensitivity to all possible issues will be needed.

## **8. Other Exceptions and Discussions**

It goes without saying that normally nobody should be listed as an author, contributor or editor against their will. Ideally, the parties involved will agree among themselves, or defer to the judgement of the WG Chairs or Area Directors. Practice may vary between WGs. However, we need flexibility to deal with unusual cases, such as these:

- o As noted above, an acknowledgement is a statement of fact (the person contributed to the discussion). In some cases it may be included even if the person acknowledged objects, for example if they made a suggestion that might later be viewed as prior art.
- o Generalising the point made in [Section 7](#), an earlier author or contributor may deserve to be listed, even if they cannot be contacted when a document is updated after a long interval. Each such case needs to be considered on its merits.

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- o In particular, an author or contributor might be deceased.

## **9. Intellectual Property Rights**

This document does not discuss intellectual property rights and in no way preempts or alters the IETF's rules and requirements concerning intellectual property rights. In particular some of the ethical guidelines above might be mandatory requirements under those rules. All IETF participants are strongly advised to be familiar with the rules.

It is worth noting that if a draft includes complete acknowledgements and references, it will be much simpler to clarify its status as possible prior art in years to come.

Copyright in IETF documents is governed by [BCP 78](#) [[RFC5378](#)] and its predecessors, the IETF Trust's Legal Provisions, and applicable national and international law.

The word "contributor" used in this draft might not mean the same thing as the word "Contributor" used in [BCP 79](#) [[RFC3979](#)]. That BCP should be consulted by anyone concerned about the IETF requirement for disclosure of intellectual property rights.

## **10. Security Considerations**

None, really.

## **11. IANA Considerations**

This memo includes no request to IANA.

## **12. Acknowledgements**

Valuable comments were received from Loa Andersson, Andy Bierman, Carsten Bormann, Dave Crocker, David Farmer, John Klensin (who also contributed some text), Larry Kreeger, Eliot Lear, Tom Petch, Alexandru Petrescu, Yaron Sheffer, and Joe Touch.

Especially given the topic of this draft, the author apologises for any accidental omissions.

## **13. Change log**

[draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-02](#), 2015-06-14: more comments, nits, some reorganisation.



[draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-01](#), 2015-05-30: incorporating community comments, citing RFC Editor and IESG statements.

[draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-00](#), 2015-04-24: original version.

#### **14. Informative References**

- [I-D.crocker-rfc2418bis-wgguidelines]  
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- [RFC7322] Flanagan, H. and S. Ginoza, "RFC Style Guide", [RFC 7322](#), September 2014.

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