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PCAP Capture File Format
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Abstract

This document describes the format used by the libpcap library to record captured packets to a file. Programs using the libpcap library to read and write those files, and thus reading and writing files in that format, include tcpdump.

Discussion Venues

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

Discussion of this document takes place on the OPSAWG Working Group mailing list (opsawg@ietf.org), which is archived at <https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/browse/opsawg/>.

Source for this draft and an issue tracker can be found at <https://github.com/pcapng/pcapng>.

Status of This Memo

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Internet-Draft

pcap

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[1.](#) Introduction

In the late 1980's, Van Jacobson, Steve McCanne, and others at the Network Research Group at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory developed the tcpdump program to capture and dissect network traces. The code to capture traffic, using low-level mechanisms in various operating systems, and to read and write network traces to a file was later put into a library named libpcap.

This document describes the format used by tcpdump, and other

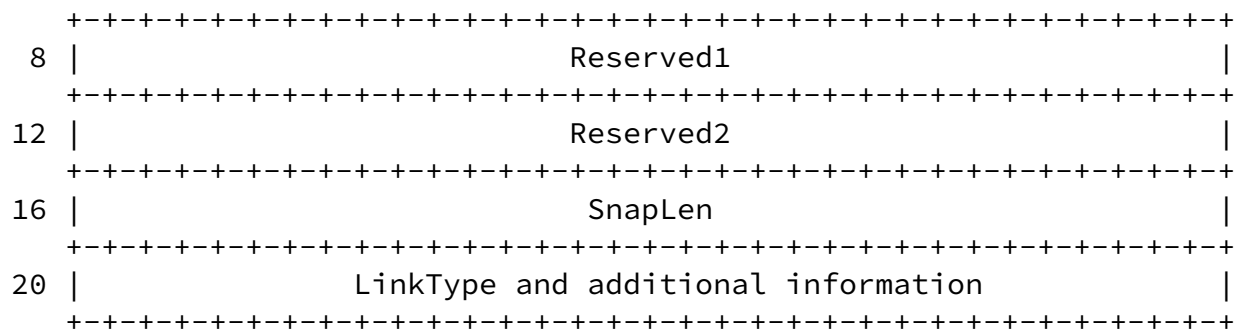


Figure 1: File Header

The File Header length is 24 octets.

The meaning of the fields in the File Header is:

Magic Number (32 bits): an unsigned magic number, whose value is either the hexadecimal number 0xA1B2C3D4 or the hexadecimal number 0xA1B23C4D.

If the value is 0xA1B2C3D4, time stamps in Packet Records (see Figure 2) are in seconds and microseconds; if it is 0xA1B23C4D, time stamps in Packet Records are in seconds and nanoseconds.

These numbers can be used to distinguish sessions that have been written on little-endian machines from the ones written on big-endian machines, and to heuristically identify pcap files.

Major Version (16 bits): an unsigned value, giving the number of the current major version of the format. The value for the current version of the format is 2. This value should change if the format changes in such a way that code that reads the new format could not read the old format (i.e., code to read both formats would have to check the version number and use different code paths for the two formats) and code that reads the old format could not read the new format.

Minor Version (16 bits): an unsigned value, giving the number of the current minor version of the format. The value is for the current version of the format is 4. This value should change if the format changes in such a way that code that reads the new format

could read the old format without checking the version number but code that reads the old format could not read all files in the new format.

Reserved1 (32 bits): not used - SHOULD be filled with 0 by pcap file writers, and MUST be ignored by pcap file readers. This value was documented by some older implementations as "gmt to local correction". Some older pcap file writers stored non-zero values in this field.

Reserved2 (32 bits): not used - SHOULD be filled with 0 by pcap file writers, and MUST be ignored by pcap file readers. This value was documented by some older implementations as "accuracy of timestamps". Some older pcap file writers stored non-zero values in this field.

SnapLen (32 bits): an unsigned value indicating the maximum number

of octets captured from each packet. The portion of each packet that exceeds this value will not be stored in the file. This value MUST NOT be zero; if no limit was specified, the value should be a number greater than or equal to the largest packet length in the file.

LinkType and additional information (32 bits): a 32-bit unsigned value that contains the link-layer type of packets in the file and may contain additional information.

The LinkType and additional information field is in the form

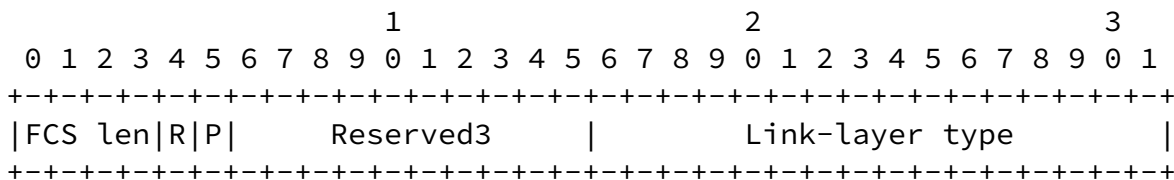


Figure 2: LinkType and additional information

The field is shown as if it were in the byte order of the host reading or writing the file, with bit 0 being the most-significant

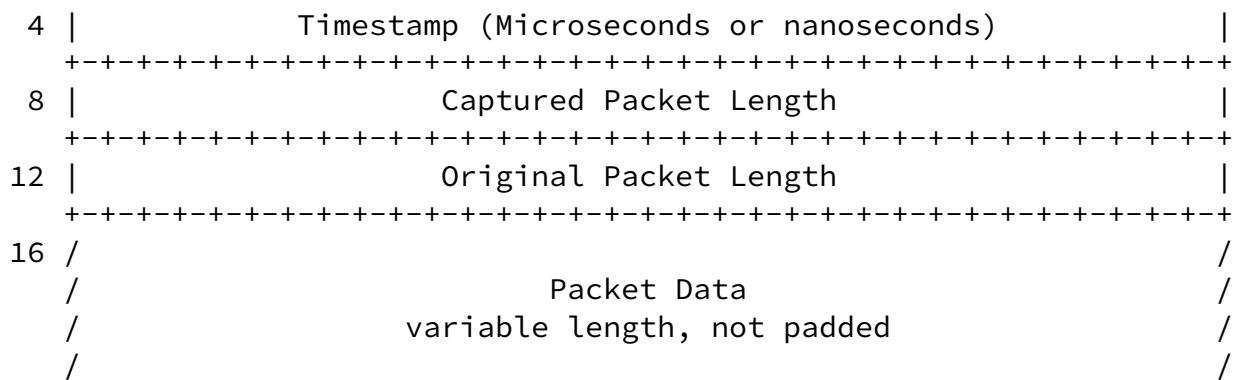


Figure 3: Packet Record

The Packet Record begins with a 16-octet header, followed by data from the packet.

The meaning of the fields in the Packet Record is:

Timestamp (Seconds) and Timestamp (Microseconds or nanoseconds): seconds and fraction of a seconds values of a timestamp.

The seconds value is a 32-bit unsigned integer that represents the number of seconds that have elapsed since 1970-01-01 00:00:00 UTC, and the microseconds or nanoseconds value represents the number of microseconds or nanoseconds that have elapsed since that seconds.

Whether the value represents microseconds or nanoseconds is specified by the magic number in the File Header.

Captured Packet Length (32 bits): an unsigned value that indicates

the number of octets captured from the packet (i.e. the length of the Packet Data field). It will be the minimum value among the Original Packet Length and the snapshot length for the interface (SnapLen, defined in Figure 1).

Original Packet Length (32 bits): an unsigned value that indicates the actual length of the packet when it was transmitted on the network. It can be different from the Captured Packet Length if

the packet has been truncated by the capture process.

Packet Data: the data coming from the network, including link-layer headers. The actual length of this field is Captured Packet Length. The format of the link-layer headers depends on the LinkType field specified in the file header (see Figure 1) and it is specified in [[I-D.richardson-opsawg-pcaplinktype](#)].

Packet Records are not padded to a 4-octet boundary; if the number of octets of packet data is not a multiple of 4, there are no padding octets following it, so Packet Records are not guaranteed to begin on a 4-octet boundary within a file.

6. Recommended File Name Extension: .pcap

The recommended file name extension for the "PCAP Capture File Format" specified in this document is ".pcap".

On Windows and macOS, files are distinguished by an extension to their filename. Such an extension is technically not actually required, as applications should be able to automatically detect the pcap file format through the "magic bytes" at the beginning of the file, as some other UN*X desktop environments do. However, using name extensions makes it easier to work with files (e.g. visually distinguish file formats) so it is recommended - though not required - to use .pcap as the name extension for files following this specification.

Please note: To avoid confusion (such as the current usage of .cap for a plethora of different capture file formats) file name extensions other than .pcap should be avoided.

There is new work to create the PCAP Next Generation capture File Format (see [[I-D.tuexen-opsawg-pcapng](#)]). The new file format is not compatible with this specification, but many programs read both transparently. Files of that type will usually start with a Section Header Block, with a magic number of 0x0A0D0D0A.

7. Security Considerations

TBD.

[8.](#) IANA Considerations

This document requires the following IANA actions:

[8.1.](#) Media-Type Registry

This section registers the the 'application/pcap' in the "Media Types" registry. These media types are used to indicate that the content is packet capture as described in this document.

[8.1.1.](#) application/pcap

Type name: application

Subtype name: pcap

Required parameters: none

Optional parameters: none

Encoding considerations: PCAP files contain network packets

Security considerations: See Security Considerations, Section

Interoperability considerations: The format is designed to be broadly inte

Published specification: THIS RFC.

Applications that use this media type: tcpdump, wireshark, others.

Additional information:

 Magic number(s): 0xA1B2C3D4, and 0xA1B23C4D in both endian orders

 File extension(s): .pcap

 Macintosh file type code(s): none

Person & email address to contact for further information: The Tcpdump Group

Intended usage: LIMITED

Restrictions on usage: NONE

Author: Guy Harris and Michael Richardson

Change controller: The Tcpdump Group

Provisional registration? (standards tree only): NO

[9.](#) Contributors

Insert pcap developers etc. here

[10.](#) Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank (many reviewers) and many others for their invaluable comments.

[11.](#) References

[11.1.](#) Normative References

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