

INTERNET-DRAFT
[draft-rfc-editor-author-lists-00.txt](#)
Category: Informational
Expires: November 2002

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8 May 2002

RFC Editor Guidelines on Author Lists

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Abstract

This memo presents a new set of guidelines to govern lists of authors on RFC documents. It is intended to counteract a recent tendency towards author list inflation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, there has been a tendency toward inflation of the author lists on RFCs, contrary to the traditional culture of the IETF and to long-standing RFC editorial policies. This memo summarizes guidelines that have been formulated by the RFC Editor and the IESG to limit future author list inflation.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Historical RFC Policy

During the 30 year history of the RFC series, long lists of authors on a single RFC have been rare. In general, the front page header of an RFC has listed only the person (or the few people) who wrote the document. When there were more than a few contributors to developing the specification, some RFCs listed important contributors in an Acknowledgment section; the single person who had been tasked with integrating the results into a single document was listed as "Editor" (see [RFC 1122](#) for an example). One of the reasons for limiting the author list is practical: the long-existing RFC formatting conventions do not comfortably handle large author lists. We now discuss the philosophical reasons.

2.2 The IETF Culture

Most standards bodies publish anonymous standards, whereas the IETF attaches the names of the responsible authors to its technical specifications. This relates directly to the IETF's tradition of individual rather than corporate representation (which in turn arose from the academic research origins of the Internet technology). The person(s) who actually write an RFC take responsibility for it, even if the specification recorded in the RFC originated in a working group of several hundred people. At the opposite extreme, some academic communities (e.g., high-energy physics) have adopted a very liberal view of authorship, resulting in papers listing hundreds of authors. The IETF community does not wish to emulate this approach.

The selection and ordering of authors on any publication is always a sensitive issue. Those individuals who contributed substantially to the content of an RFC naturally wish to be recognized. On the other hand, there are rumors that some Internet companies are paying bounties for getting their corporate names on RFCs, and in some cases there is reason to believe that corporate marketing functions may play a role in author list inflation.

Some see a list of 17 authors on one RFC as motivated by a desire for corporate name-dropping, which would be inappropriate in the IETF/RFC context. If there is a desire to demonstrate that many companies are interested in this spec, Contributor and/or Acknowledgment sections, described below, can accomplish the same goal without "author overload."

To prevent erosion of the IETF's traditional (and highly successful) approach to protocol standardization, the guidelines in the following section have been crafted. They are an elaboration of rules suggested independently in several different recent email discussions of this topic. These guidelines are intended to apply both to working group output and to individual submissions.

3. GUIDELINES ON RFC AUTHOR LISTS

- (1) A small set of author names, with affiliations, may appear on the front page header. These should be the lead author(s) who are most responsible for the actual text. When there are many contributors, the best choice will be to list the person or (few) persons who acted as document editor(s) (e.g., "Tom Smith, Editor").

There is no rigid limit on the size of this set, but there is likely to be a discussion if the set exceeds five authors, in which case the right answer is probably one editor.

The RFC Editor will hold all the people listed on the front page equally responsible for the final form and content of the published RFC. In particular, the "Author's 48 Hours" final approval period will require signoff from all listed authors.

- (2) An RFC may include a Contributors section, listing those contributors who deserve significant credit for the document contents. When a long author list is replaced by a single Editor in the front page header, the displaced authors can be properly and fully acknowledged in the Contributors section.

The Contributors section may include brief statements about the nature of particular contributions ("Sam contributed [section 3](#)") and it may also include affiliations of listed contributors. It may also include contact addresses for some or all of the contributors cited; see item (4).

- (3) An RFC may include an Acknowledgements section, in addition to or instead of a Contributors section. The Acknowledgment section may be lengthy, and it may explain scope and nature of contributions. It may also specify affiliations.
- (4) The Author Address section at the end of the RFC must include the authors listed in the front page header. The purpose of this section is to (1) unambiguously define author/contributor identity (e.g., the John Smith who works for FooBar Systems) and to (2) provide contact information for future readers who have questions or comments.

At the discretion of the author(s), contact addresses may also be included in the Contributors section for those contributors whose knowledge makes them useful future contacts for information about the RFC.

- (5) The RFC Editor may grant exceptions to these guidelines upon specific IESG request or in other exceptional circumstances.

The optional Contributors section is intended to provide a level of recognition greater than an acknowledgment and nearly equal to listing on the front page. The choice of either, both, or none of Contributor and Acknowledgment sections in a particular RFC depends upon the circumstance. There is no fixed position for a Contributors section or an Acknowledgments section within the body of the RFC. If they appear, they must appear later than the Abstract section and earlier than the Author's Address section.

4. TRANSITION

These guidelines will be published for Last Call. It is intended that they will become applicable to all RFCs after the Yokahama meeting. Until then, the RFC Editor and the IESG will ask for voluntary compliance with these guidelines, even on documents that have long been in process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the input from IESG members and from a number of individual members of the IETF community who share our concern for doing the right thing.

Security Considerations

There are no security issues in this document.

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Acknowledgement:

Funding for the RFC Editor function is currently provided by the Internet Society.

