

RSWG
Internet-Draft
Intended status: Informational
Expires: 13 October 2026

B. E. Carpenter
Univ. of Auckland
11 April 2026

Ethical aspects of RFC authorship
draft-carpenter-rswg-authoring-ethics-00

Abstract

This document describes guidelines for assigning authorship in RFC documents, and guidelines for disclosing the use of artificial intelligence during document preparation. It also discusses the related issues of acknowledgements, editors and contributors.

About This Document

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

Status information for this document may be found at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/draft-carpenter-rswg-authoring-ethics/>.

Discussion of this document takes place on the RSWG Working Group mailing list (<mailto:rswg@rfc-editor.org>), which is archived at <https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/browse/rswg/>.

Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft is submitted in full conformance with the provisions of BCP 78 and BCP 79.

Internet-Drafts are working documents of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). Note that other groups may also distribute working documents as Internet-Drafts. The list of current Internet-Drafts is at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/drafts/current/>.

Internet-Drafts are draft documents valid for a maximum of six months and may be updated, replaced, or obsoleted by other documents at any time. It is inappropriate to use Internet-Drafts as reference material or to cite them other than as "work in progress."

This Internet-Draft will expire on 13 October 2026.

Copyright Notice

Copyright (c) 2026 IETF Trust and the persons identified as the document authors. All rights reserved.

This document is subject to BCP 78 and the IETF Trust's Legal Provisions Relating to IETF Documents (<https://trustee.ietf.org/license-info>) in effect on the date of publication of this document. Please review these documents carefully, as they describe your rights and restrictions with respect to this document.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Scope	2
2. General Aspects of Authorship Ethics	3
3. Authors	4
4. Contributors	5
5. Editors	5
6. List of Acknowledgements	6
7. Revised or Replacement Documents	6
8. Other Exceptions and Discussions	7
9. Artificial Intelligence Tools	7
10. Intellectual Property Rights	8
11. Security Considerations	8
12. IANA Considerations	8
13. Change log	9
14. Informative References	9
Acknowledgements	10
Author's Address	10

1. Introduction and Scope

Questions sometimes come up about who should be listed as the author(s) of an RFC, who should be listed as editors or contributors, and what acknowledgements are appropriate. Additionally, questions arise about the use of artificial intelligence tools during the drafting of future RFCs.

The policy guidelines below address these questions and are applicable to all RFC streams as defined in in [RFC7841], [RFC9920] and any streams defined in future. However, each stream may specify its own authorship policies and requirements in addition to those described here.

Open issue: In case of conflict, the stream's policy will prevail over this document.

The guidelines are intended to be compatible with the RFC Editor's style guide [RFC7322] and with an earlier RFC Editor authorship policy: RFCED-policy (https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/msg/rfc-interest/SHM7dHZd_S1a-CkW2JCBvxdKmcs/).

For the IETF stream, there is an existing IESG statement on Internet Draft Authorship: IESG-policy (<https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/statement-iesg-iesg-statement-on-internet-draft-authorship-20210510/>). For the IRTF stream, Section 4 of [RFC9775] covers this topic.

Open issue: Are there items in this draft that should be left as operational choices for the RFC, i.e., they are not really policy issues?

2. General Aspects of Authorship Ethics

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

- * Factual accuracy.
- * Avoidance of misleading or obfuscating statements.
- * Avoidance of misleading omissions.
- * Balance between opposing arguments, when relevant.
- * Careful acknowledgement and citation of sources and references.
- * 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. Two examples from medical science are ICMJE (<https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/>) and NIH (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7821455/>). The IEEE also has clear guidance: IEEE-ethics (<https://journals.ieeeauthorcenter.ieee.org/wp-content/uploads/IEEE-Author-Ethics-Guidelines.pdf>).

Some organisations have adopted strict policies about the use of artificial intelligence (AI) during document preparation. Again the IEEE is an example: IEEE-AI (<https://journals.ieeeauthorcenter.ieee.org/become-an-ieee-journal-author/publishing-ethics/guidelines-and-policies/submission-and-peer-review-policies/#ai-generated-content>).

However, the Internet community that contributes to the RFC series 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 an RFC, we generally consider it to be normal business as long as due acknowledgement is given. We also consider the use of complex software tools during the preparation of a document to be normal practice.

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 is a matter of judgement whether a person who 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 are irrelevant. It is also worth noting that in an RFC, authorship by an employee does not automatically 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 is 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, and in public bibliographies, if the document becomes an RFC.

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.

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, and in public bibliographies, if the document becomes an RFC.

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.

Historically, RFC streams have chosen to retain the word "Author" in most cases, with the formal designation of editors being exceptional. Some standards development organizations always remove individual authorship when a document is formally adopted. This is not done for RFCs, but in a few instances, RFCs have been published with "IAB" or "IAB and IESG" listed as authors, with editors credited as such, e.g., [RFC4089].

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 RFCs and drafts, 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:

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 RFC 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 active participation.

When an RFC is drafted by one or more new people but reuses significant amounts of text from one or more earlier RFCs, 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 relevant RFC stream manager(s). However, we need flexibility to deal with unusual cases, such as these:

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

9. Artificial Intelligence Tools

Authors will use various editing programs and other tools for document preparation, and in general these do not raise any ethical concerns. For example, if tables, graphs or diagrams are generated using a specialized software program, this is of no concern. If formal notation is verified by specialized software, this is also of no concern.

If an AI tool is used for document preparation, the following guidelines apply:

- * The authors or editors remain entirely responsible for any content generated by AI.

- * The authors or editors remain entirely responsible for all intellectual property matters.
- * If a substantial part of the document was created by AI this should be disclosed clearly in the Acknowledgements section.
- * The authors or editors must verify that no unacceptable plagiarism has been performed by the AI. If material has been copied from earlier RFCs or drafts by the AI, as mentioned in Section 7, this must be clearly acknowledged.
- * If, on the other hand, AI usage has been limited to improving English grammar, translating from a draft in another language, or other purely editorial uses, disclosure is not necessary.

10. Intellectual Property Rights

This document does not discuss intellectual property rights (IPR) and in no way preempts or alters the various RFC streams' rules and requirements concerning IPR. In particular some of the ethical guidelines above might be mandatory requirements under those rules. All authors are strongly advised to be familiar with the applicable rules.

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

Copyright in RFCs is governed by the IETF document [BCP78], the IETF Trust/IPMC'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 the IETF document [BCP79]. That BCP and the specific rules of the relevant RFC stream should be consulted by anyone concerned about requirements for disclosure of IPR.

11. Security Considerations

None, really.

12. IANA Considerations

This memo includes no request to IANA.

13. Change log

draft-carpenter-rswg-authoring-ethics-00, 2026-04-11: original version (derived from draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-03).

14. Informative References

- [BCP78] Best Current Practice 78,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/bcp78>>.
At the time of writing, this BCP comprises the following:
- Bradner, S., Ed. and J. Contreras, Ed., "Rights Contributors Provide to the IETF Trust", BCP 78, RFC 5378, DOI 10.17487/RFC5378, November 2008,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc5378>>.
- [BCP79] Best Current Practice 79,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/bcp79>>.
At the time of writing, this BCP comprises the following:
- Bradner, S. and J. Contreras, "Intellectual Property Rights in IETF Technology", BCP 79, RFC 8179, DOI 10.17487/RFC8179, May 2017,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8179>>.
- [I-D.draft-carpenter-whats-an-author]
Carpenter, B. E., "What is an Author of an IETF Stream Draft?", Work in Progress, Internet-Draft, draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-02, 13 June 2015,
<<https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/draft-carpenter-whats-an-author-02>>.
- [RFC4089] Hollenbeck, S., Ed. and IAB and IESG, "IAB and IESG Recommendation for IETF Administrative Restructuring", RFC 4089, DOI 10.17487/RFC4089, May 2005,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc4089>>.
- [RFC7322] Flanagan, H. and S. Ginoza, "RFC Style Guide", RFC 7322, DOI 10.17487/RFC7322, September 2014,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc7322>>.
- [RFC7841] Halpern, J., Ed., Daigle, L., Ed., and O. Kolkman, Ed., "RFC Streams, Headers, and Boilerplates", RFC 7841, DOI 10.17487/RFC7841, May 2016,
<<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc7841>>.

- [RFC9775] Perkins, C. S., "IRTF Code of Conduct", RFC 9775, DOI 10.17487/RFC9775, March 2025, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc9775>>.
- [RFC9920] Hoffman, P. and A. Rossi, "RFC Editor Model (Version 3)", RFC 9920, DOI 10.17487/RFC9920, February 2026, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc9920>>.

Acknowledgements

Valuable comments on this document and its 2015 predecessor [I-D.draft-carpenter-whats-an-author] 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.

Author's Address

Brian E. Carpenter
The University of Auckland
School of Computer Science
The University of Auckland
PB 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand
Email: brian.e.carpenter@gmail.com