A Brief Introduction to Requests for Comments

The Specifications for the Internet

Noah Mendelsohn
Tufts University
Email: noah@cs.tufts.edu
Web: http://www.cs.tufts.edu/~noah
Goals

- Briefly explain the history of RFCs
- Explain the role of RFCs and W3C Recommendations
Open Standards and Open Source (review)
Open protocol and format *standards*

URI is http://webarch.noahdemo.com/demo1/test.html

HTTP GET

HTTP RESPONSE

demo1/test.html
Host: webarch.noahdemo.com
Open protocol and format standards

URI is http://webarch.noahdemo.com/demo1/test.html

Open Standards protocols and formats: client doesn’t see resource/server details

HTTP GET

HTTP RESPONSE

Host: webarch.noahdemo.com
demo1/test.html
Open protocol and format *standards*

URI is http://webarch.noahdemo.com/demo1/test.html

Open Standards protocols and formats: server supports any client.
Open source software

URI is http://webarch.noahdemo.com/demo1/test.html

HTTP GET

Firefox?

Apache?

demo1/test.html

At: webarch.noahdemo.com

Open Software sometimes useful for implementing servers or clients – promotes open standards protocols and formats: server supports any client
A short history of RFCs

All quotes from Steve Crocker: the “inventor” of RFCs
There was no adult in the room, as it were. We were all more or less in our mid-20s and self-organized...

Source: [http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2012/05/steve-crocker/all/](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2012/05/steve-crocker/all/)
[...] but then I realized that the mere act of writing down what were talking about could be seen as a presumption of authority and someone was going to come and yell at us — presumably some adult out of the east, either Boston or Washington...
[...] so I got increasingly nervous. I was staying with some friends in the Pacific Palisades area, and late one night, I couldn’t sleep and the only place I could work without waking people up was in the bathroom. It was 3 a.m., and I scribbled down some rules for these notes...

Source: http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2012/05/steve-crocker/all/
...I said that they were completely informal, that they didn’t count as publications. You could ask questions without answers. You just had to put your name and the date and a title on these things, and I’d assign them a number as fast as you wrote them...
... to emphasize the informal nature, I hit upon this silly little idea of calling every one of them a ‘Request for Comments’ — no matter whether it really was a request or how formal or how informal.

Source: http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2012/05/steve-crocker/all/
RFCs remain the documentation for Internet Protocols

- **RFCs**
  - The official documentation for Internet and low-level Web technologies
  - Created in the Internet Engineering Task Force
  - IETF is a very open organization: *you* could attend meetings and participate
  - RFCs cover wide range of topics from specifications to more informal and speculative discussion
  - IETF’s mantra: “*rough consensus and running code*”

- **W3C Recommendations**
  - Used for specification of Web-specific technologies like HTML
  - Created by member-driven “process” with public input
  - HTTP & URI are joint work of IETF and W3C (RFC 2616, RFC 3986, etc.)