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S. Bradner
Harvard University
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Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels

Status of this Memo

This document specifies an Internet Best Current Practices for the Internet Community, and requests discussion and suggestions for improvements. Distribution of this memo is unlimited.

Abstract

In many standards track documents several words are used to signify the requirements in the specification. These words are often capitalized. This document defines these words as they should be interpreted in IETF documents. Authors who follow these guidelines should incorporate this phrase near the beginning of their document:

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [RFC 2119](#).

Note that the force of these words is modified by the requirement level of the document in which they are used.

1. **MUST** This word, or the terms "REQUIRED" or "SHALL", mean that the definition is an absolute requirement of the specification.
2. **MUST NOT** This phrase, or the phrase "SHALL NOT", mean that the definition is an absolute prohibition of the specification.
3. **SHOULD** This word, or the adjective "RECOMMENDED", mean that there may exist valid reasons in particular circumstances to ignore a particular item, but the full implications must be understood and carefully weighed before choosing a different course.
4. **SHOULD NOT** This phrase, or the phrase "NOT RECOMMENDED" mean that there may exist valid reasons in particular circumstances when the particular behavior is acceptable or even useful, but the full implications should be understood and the case carefully weighed before implementing any behavior described with this label.

5. MAY This word, or the adjective "OPTIONAL", mean that an item is truly optional. One vendor may choose to include the item because a particular marketplace requires it or because the vendor feels that it enhances the product while another vendor may omit the same item. An implementation which does not include a particular option MUST be prepared to interoperate with another implementation which does include the option, though perhaps with reduced functionality. In the same vein an implementation which does include a particular option MUST be prepared to interoperate with another implementation which does not include the option (except, of course, for the feature the option provides.)

6. Guidance in the use of these Imperatives

Imperatives of the type defined in this memo must be used with care and sparingly. In particular, they MUST only be used where it is actually required for interoperation or to limit behavior which has potential for causing harm (e.g., limiting retransmissions) For example, they must not be used to try to impose a particular method on implementors where the method is not required for interoperability.

7. Security Considerations

These terms are frequently used to specify behavior with security implications. The effects on security of not implementing a MUST or SHOULD, or doing something the specification says MUST NOT or SHOULD NOT be done may be very subtle. Document authors should take the time to elaborate the security implications of not following recommendations or requirements as most implementors will not have had the benefit of the experience and discussion that produced the specification.

8. Acknowledgments

The definitions of these terms are an amalgam of definitions taken from a number of RFCs. In addition, suggestions have been incorporated from a number of people including Robert Ullmann, Thomas Narten, Neal McBurnett, and Robert Elz.

9. Author's Address

Scott Bradner
Harvard University
1350 Mass. Ave.
Cambridge, MA 02138

phone - +1 617 495 3864

email - sob@harvard.edu

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B. Leiba
Huawei Technologies
May 2017

Ambiguity of Uppercase vs Lowercase in [RFC 2119](#) Key Words

Abstract

[RFC 2119](#) specifies common key words that may be used in protocol specifications. This document aims to reduce the ambiguity by clarifying that only UPPERCASE usage of the key words have the defined special meanings.

Status of This Memo

This memo documents an Internet Best Current Practice.

This document is a product of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). It represents the consensus of the IETF community. It has received public review and has been approved for publication by the Internet Engineering Steering Group (IESG). Further information on BCPs is available in [Section 2 of RFC 7841](#).

Information about the current status of this document, any errata, and how to provide feedback on it may be obtained at <http://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8174>.

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1. Introduction

[RFC 2119](#) specifies common key words, such as "MUST", "SHOULD", and "MAY", that may be used in protocol specifications. It says that the key words "are often capitalized," which has caused confusion about how to interpret non-capitalized words such as "must" and "should".

This document updates [RFC 2119](#) by clarifying that only UPPERCASE usage of the key words have the defined special meanings. This document is part of [BCP 14](#).

2. Clarifying Capitalization of Key Words

The following change is made to [RFC2119]:

=== OLD ===

In many standards track documents several words are used to signify the requirements in the specification. These words are often capitalized. This document defines these words as they should be interpreted in IETF documents. Authors who follow these guidelines should incorporate this phrase near the beginning of their document:

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in RFC 2119.

=== NEW ===

In many IETF documents, several words, when they are in all capitals as shown below, are used to signify the requirements in the specification. These capitalized words can bring significant clarity and consistency to documents because their meanings are well defined. This document defines how those words are interpreted in IETF documents when the words are in all capitals.

- o These words can be used as defined here, but using them is not required. Specifically, normative text does not require the use of these key words. They are used for clarity and consistency when that is what's wanted, but a lot of normative text does not use them and is still normative.
- o The words have the meanings specified herein only when they are in all capitals.
- o When these words are not capitalized, they have their normal English meanings and are not affected by this document.

Authors who follow these guidelines should incorporate this phrase near the beginning of their document:

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

=== END ===

3. IANA Considerations

This document does not require any IANA actions.

4. Security Considerations

This document is purely procedural; there are no related security considerations.

5. Normative References

[RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, DOI 10.17487/RFC2119, March 1997, <<http://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc2119>>.

Author's Address

Barry Leiba
Huawei Technologies

Phone: +1 646 827 0648
Email: barryleiba@computer.org
URI: <http://internetmessagingtechnology.org/>