

Network Working Group	S. Josefsson
Internet-Draft	SJD AB
Intended status: Standards Track	S. Leonard
Expires: January 4, 2015	Penango, Inc.
	July 3, 2014

Text Encodings of PKIX and CMS Structures

draft-josefsson-pkix-textual-05

Abstract

This document describes and discusses the text encodings of Public-Key Infrastructure using X.509 (PKIX) Certificates, PKIX Certificate Revocation Lists (CRLs), PKCS #10 Certification Request Syntax, PKCS #7 structures, Cryptographic Message Syntax (CMS), PKCS #8 Private-Key Information Syntax, and Attribute Certificates. The text encodings are well-known, are implemented by several applications and libraries, and are widely deployed. This document is intended to articulate the de-facto rules that existing implementations operate by, and to give recommendations that will promote interoperability going forward.

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1. Introduction

Several security-related standards used on the Internet define data formats that are normally encoded using Distinguished Encoding Rules (DER) [CCITT.X690.2002], which is a binary data format. This document is about text encodings of some of these formats:

1. Internet X.509 Public Key Infrastructure Certificate and Certificate Revocation List (CRL) Profile [RFC5280], for both Certificates and Certificate Revocation Lists (CRLs).
2. PKCS #10: Certification Request Syntax [RFC2986].
3. PKCS #7: Cryptographic Message Syntax [RFC2315].
4. Cryptographic Message Syntax [RFC5652].
5. PKCS #8: Private-Key Information Syntax [RFC5208] and One Asymmetric Key (in Asymmetric Key Package [RFC5958]).
6. An Internet Attribute Certificate Profile for Authorization [RFC5755].

A disadvantage of a binary data format is that it cannot be interchanged in textual transports, such as e-mail or text documents. One advantage with text encodings is that they are easy to modify using common text editors; for example, a user may

concatenate several certificates to form a certificate chain with copy-and-paste operations.

The tradition within the RFC series can be traced back to PEM [RFC1421], based on a proposal by M. Rose in Message Encapsulation [RFC0934]. Originally called "PEM encapsulation mechanism", "encapsulated PEM message", or (arguably) "PEM printable encoding", today the format is sometimes referred to as "PEM encoding". Variations include OpenPGP ASCII Armor [RFC2015] and OpenSSH Key File Format [RFC4716].

For reasons that basically boil down to non-coordination or inattention, many PKIX and CMS libraries implement a text encoding that is similar to—but not identical with—PEM encoding. This document specifies the "PKIX text encoding" format, articulates the de-facto rules that most implementations operate by, and provides recommendations that will promote interoperability going forward. This document also provides common nomenclature for syntax elements, reflecting the evolution of this de-facto standard format. Peter Gutmann's X.509 Style Guide [X509SG] contains a section "base64 Encoding" that describes the formats and contains suggestions similar to what is in this 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 RFC 2119 [RFC2119].

2. General Considerations

PKIX text encoding begins with a line starting with `-----BEGIN` and ends with a line starting with `-----END`. Between these lines, or "encapsulation boundaries", are base64-encoded [RFC4648] data. Data before the `-----BEGIN` and after the `-----END` encapsulation boundaries are permitted and MUST NOT cause parsers to malfunction. Furthermore, parsers MUST ignore whitespace and other non-base64 characters and MUST handle different newline conventions.

The type of data encoded is labeled depending on the type label in the `-----BEGIN` line (pre-encapsulation boundary). For example, the line may be `-----BEGIN CERTIFICATE-----` to indicate that the content is a PKIX certificate (see further below). Generators MUST put the same label on the `-----END` line (post-encapsulation boundary) as the corresponding `-----BEGIN` line. Parsers MAY disregard the label on the `-----END` line instead of signaling an error if there is a label mismatch.

The label type implies that the encoded data follows the specified syntax. Parsers MUST handle non-conforming data gracefully. However, not all parsers or generators prior to this Internet-Draft behave consistently. A conforming parser MAY interpret the contents as another label type, but ought to be aware of the security implications discussed in the Security Considerations section.

Unlike legacy PEM encoding [RFC1421], OpenPGP ASCII armor, and the OpenSSH key file format, PKIX text encoding does **not** define or permit attributes to be encoded alongside the PKIX or CMS data. Whitespace MAY appear between the pre-encapsulation boundary and the base64, but generators SHOULD NOT emit such whitespace.

Files MAY contain multiple PKIX text encoding instances. This is used, for example, when a file contains several certificates. Whether the instances are ordered or unordered depends on the context.

Generators MUST wrap the base64 encoded lines so that each line consists of exactly 64 characters except for the final line which will encode the remainder of the data (within the 64 character line boundary). Parsers MAY handle other line sizes. These requirements are consistent with PEM [RFC1421].

3. ABNF

The ABNF of the PKIX text encoding is:

```
pkixmsg      ::= preeb
               *eolWSP
               base64text
               posteb

preeb        ::= "-----BEGIN " label "-----" eol

posteb       ::= "-----END " label "-----" eol

base64char   ::= ALPHA / DIGIT / "+" / "/"

base64pad    ::= "="

base64line   ::= 1*base64char eol

base64finl   ::= *base64char (base64pad eol base64pad /
               *2base64pad) eol
               ; ...AB= <CRLF> = <CRLF> is not good, but is valid

base64text   ::= *base64line base64finl
               ; we could also use <encbinbody> from RFC 1421, which requires
               ; 16 groups of 4 chars, which means exactly 64 chars per
               ; line, except the final line, but this is more accurate

labelchar    ::= %x21-2C / %x2E-%7E    ; any printable character,
               ; except hyphen

label        ::= labelchar *(labelchar / labelchar "-" / SP) labelchar

eol          ::= CRLF / CR / LF

eolWSP       ::= WSP / CR / LF      ; compare with LWSP
```

Figure 1: ABNF

```
pkixmsgstrict ::= preeb
```


elements in the certificate.

```

Subject: CN=Atlantis
Issuer: CN=Atlantis
Validity: from 7/9/2012 3:10:38 AM UTC to 7/9/2013 3:10:37 AM UTC
-----BEGIN CERTIFICATE-----
MIIBmTCCAUEgAwIBAgIBKjAJBgUrDgMCHQUAMBMxETAPBgNVBAMTCEF0bGFudGlz
MB4XDTEyMDcwOTAzMTAzOFoXDTEzMDcwOTAzMTAzNlowEzERMA8GA1UEAxMIQXRz
YW50aXMwXDANBgkqhkiG9w0BAQEFAANLADBIaKEAu+BXo+miabDIHHx+yquqzqNh
Ryn/XtkJIIHvcYtHvIX+S1x5ErgMoHehycpoxbErZmVR4GCq1S2diNmRFZCRtQID
AQABo4GJMIGGMawGA1UdEwEB/wQCMAAwIAYDVR0EAQH/BBYwFDAOMAwGCisGAQQB
gjcCARUDAgeAMB0GA1UdJQQWMBQGCCsGAQUFBwMCBggRBgEFBQcDAzA1BgNVHQEE
LjAsqBA0jOnSSuIHymnVryHADywMoRUwEzERMA8GA1UEAxMIQXRzYW50aXOCASow
CQYFKw4DAh0FAANBAKi6HRBaNEL5R0n56nvfclQNaXiDT174uf+lojzA4lhVInc0
ILwPnZlizL4Mli9eCSHhVQBHEp2uQdXJB+d5Byg=
-----END CERTIFICATE-----

```

Figure 4: Certificate Example with Explanatory Text

4.3. File Extension

Although text encodings of PKIX structures can occur anywhere, many tools are known to offer an option to encode PKIX structures in this text encoding. To promote interoperability and to separate DER encodings from text encodings, This Internet-Draft RECOMMENDS that the extension ".crt" be used for this text encoding. Implementations should be aware that in spite of this recommendation, many tools still default to encode certificates in this text encoding with the extension ".cer".

5. Text Encoding of PKIX CRLs

PKIX CRLs are encoded using the `X509 CRL` label. The encoded data MUST be a DER encoded ASN.1 `CertificateList` structure as described in Section 5 of [RFC5280].

```

-----BEGIN X509 CRL-----
MIIB9DCCA8CAQEWcWYJKoZIhvcNAQEFMIIBCDEXMBUGA1UEChMOVmVyaVNPZ24s
IEluYy4xHZAAdBgNVBAsTF1Zlcm1TaWduIFRydXN0IE5ldHdvcmsxRjBEBGVBAsT
PX3dy52ZXJpc2lnbi5jb20vcmlvbnB3NpdG9yeS9SUEEgSW5jb3JwLiBieSBSZWYu
LExJQUiUwTFREKGMpOTGxHjAcBgNVBAsTFVBlcnNvbWVzTm90IFZhbG1kYXRlZDEm
MCQGA1UECXMdRGlnaXRhbCBJRCDDBGFzcyAxIC0gTmV0c2NhcGUxGDAwBgNVBAMU
D1NpbW9uIEpvc2Vmc3Nvb3RlZDQwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMw
Lm9yZxcNMDYxMjM0MjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMwMjMw
elUNp1lhhTgXDTA2MTIyNzA4MDIzNFowCwYJKoZIhvcNAQEF4GBAD0zX+J2hkcc
Nbrq1Dn5IKL8nXLgPGcHv1I/le1MNO9t1ohGQxB5HnFUkRPAY82fR6Epor4aHgVy
b+5y+neKN9Kn2mPF4iiun+a4o26cjJ0pArojCL1p8T0yyi9Xxvyc/ezaZ98HiIyP
c3DGMNR+oUmSjKZ0jIhAYmeLxaPHfQwR
-----END X509 CRL-----

```

Figure 5: CRL Example

Historically the label `CRL` has rarely been used. Today it is not common and many popular tools do not understand the label. Therefore, this document standardizes `X509 CRL` in order to promote interoperability and backwards-compatibility. Generators conforming to this document MUST generate `X509 CRL` labels and MUST

NOT generate `CRL` labels. Parsers are NOT RECOMMENDED to treat `CRL` as equivalent to `X509 CRL`.

6. Text Encoding of PKCS #10 Certification Request Syntax

PKCS #10 Certification Requests are encoded using the `CERTIFICATE REQUEST` label. The encoded data MUST be a DER encoded ASN.1 `CertificationRequest` structure as described in [RFC2986].

```
-----BEGIN CERTIFICATE REQUEST-----
MIIBWDCCAQcCAQAwTjELMAkGA1UEBhMCU0UxJzAlBgNVBAoTH1NpbW9uIEpvc2Vm
c3NvbiBEYXRha29uc3VsdCBBOjEWMBQGA1UEAxMNam9zZWZzc29uLm9yZzBOMBAG
ByqGSM49AgEGBSuBBAAhAzoABLLPSkuXY0166MbxVJ3Mot5FCFugQfn6dTs+9/CM
E0lSwVej77tj56kj9R/j9Q+LfysX8FO9I5p3oGIwYAYJKoZIhvcNAQkOMVMwUTAY
BgNVHREETAPgg1qb3NlZnNzb24ub3JnMAWGA1UdEwEB/wQCMAAwDwYDVR0PAQH/
BAUDAwegADAWBgNVHSUBAf8EDDAKBggrBgEFBQcDATAKBggqhkJOPQDAGM/ADA8
AhxBvfhxPFfbBbsE1NoFmCuczOFAPeUQVUw3ZP69AhwWXk3dgSUSKnuwL5g/ftAY
dEQc8B8jAcnuOrfU
-----END CERTIFICATE REQUEST-----
```

Figure 6: PKCS #10 Example

The label `NEW CERTIFICATE REQUEST` is also in wide use. Generators conforming to this document MUST generate `CERTIFICATE REQUEST` labels. Parsers MAY treat `NEW CERTIFICATE REQUEST` as equivalent to `CERTIFICATE REQUEST`.

7. Text Encoding of PKCS #7 Cryptographic Message Syntax

PKCS #7 Cryptographic Message Syntax structures are encoded using the `PKCS7` label. The encoded data MUST be a DER encoded ASN.1 `ContentInfo` structure as described in [RFC2315].

```
-----BEGIN PKCS7-----
MIHjBgsqhkig9w0BCRABF6CB0zCB0AIBADfho18CAQCgGwYJKoZIhvcNAQUMMA4E
CLfrI6dr0gUWAgITiDAjBgsqhkig9w0BCRADCTAUBggqhkiG9w0DBwQIZpECRWtz
u5kEGDCjerXY8odQ7EEEromZJvAurk/j81IrozBSBqkqhkiG9w0BBwEwMwYLKoZI
hvcNAQkQAw8wJDAUBggqhkiG9w0DBwQI0tCBcU09nxEwDAYIKwYBBQUIAQIFAIQAQ
OsYGYUFdAH0Rnc1p4VbKEAQUM2Xo8PMHBoYdqEcsbTodlCFAZH4=
-----END PKCS7-----
```

Figure 7: PKCS #7 Example

The label `CERTIFICATE CHAIN` has been in use to denote a degenerative PKCS #7 structure that contains only a list of certificates. Several modern tools do not support this label. Generators MUST NOT generate the `CERTIFICATE CHAIN` label. Parsers are NOT RECOMMENDED to treat `CERTIFICATE CHAIN` as equivalent to `PKCS7`.

PKCS #7 is an old standard that has long been superseded by CMS [RFC5652]. Implementations SHOULD NOT generate PKCS #7 when CMS is an alternative.

8. Text Encoding of Cryptographic Message Syntax

Cryptographic Message Syntax structures are encoded using the **CMS** label. The encoded data MUST be a DER encoded ASN.1 **ContentInfo** structure as described in [RFC5652].

```
-----BEGIN CMS-----
MIGDBgsqhkiG9w0BCRABCaB0MHICAQAwDQYLKoZIhvcNAQkQAwgXgYJKoZIhvcN
AQcBoFEET3icc87PK0nNK9ENqSxItVIOsa0o0S/ISczMs1ZIZkgsKk4tsQ0N1nUM
dvb05OXi5XLPLEtViMwvLVLwSE0sKlFIVHAqSk3MBkkBAJv0Fxo=
-----END CMS-----
```

Figure 8: CMS Example

CMS is the IETF successor to PKCS #7. Section 1.1.1 of [RFC5652] describes the changes since PKCS #7 v1.5. Implementations SHOULD generate CMS when it is an alternative, promoting interoperability and forwards-compatibility.

9. Text Encoding of PKCS #8 Private Key Info, and One Asymmetric Key

Unencrypted PKCS #8 Private Key Information Syntax structures (**PrivateKeyInfo**), renamed to Asymmetric Key Packages (**OneAsymmetricKey**), are encoded using the **PRIVATE KEY** label. The encoded data MUST be a DER encoded ASN.1 **PrivateKeyInfo** structure as described in PKCS #8 [RFC5208], or a **OneAsymmetricKey** structure as described in [RFC5958]. The two are semantically identical, and can be distinguished by version number.

```
-----BEGIN PRIVATE KEY-----
MIGEAgEAMBAGByqGSM49AgEGBSuBBAKBG0wawIBAQQgVcB/UNPxa1R9zDYAjQIf
jojUDIQuGnSjrFEEZZPT/92hRANCAAsc7UJtgnF/abqWM60T3XNJEzBv5ez9TdwK
H0M6xpM2q+53wmsN/eYldgtjgBd3DBmHtPilCkiFICXyaA8z9LkJ
-----END PRIVATE KEY-----
```

Figure 9: PKCS #8 PrivateKeyInfo Example

10. Text Encoding of PKCS #8 Encrypted Private Key Info

Encrypted PKCS #8 Private Key Information Syntax structures (**EncryptedPrivateKeyInfo**), called the same in [RFC5958], are encoded using the **ENCRYPTED PRIVATE KEY** label. The encoded data MUST be a DER encoded ASN.1 **EncryptedPrivateKeyInfo** structure as described in PKCS #8 [RFC5208] and [RFC5958].

```
-----BEGIN ENCRYPTED PRIVATE KEY-----
MIHNMEAGCSqGSib3DQEFDTAzMBSGCSqGSib3DQEFDDA0BAghhICA6T/51QICCAAw
FAYIKoZIhvcNAwcECBCxDgvI59i9BIGIY3CAqLMNBgaSI5QiiWVNJ3IpfLnEiEsW
Z0JIoHyRmKK/+cr9QPLnzxImm0TR9s4JrG3CilzTWvb0jIvbG3hu0zyFPraoMkap
8eRzWsIvc5Svel+CSjoS2mVS87cyjld+txrmrXOVYDE+eTgMLbrLmsWh3QkCTRtF
QC7k0NNzUHTV9yGDwfqMbw==
-----END ENCRYPTED PRIVATE KEY-----
```

Figure 10: PKCS #8 EncryptedPrivateKeyInfo Example

11. Text Encoding of Attribute Certificates

Attribute certificates are encoded using the `ATTRIBUTE CERTIFICATE` label. The encoded data **MUST** be a DER encoded ASN.1 `AttributeCertificate` structure as described in [RFC5755].

```
-----BEGIN ATTRIBUTE CERTIFICATE-----
MIICKzCCAZQCAQEwgZeggZQwgYmkgYYwgYMxCzAJBgNVBAYTA1VMTREwDwYDVQQI
DAhOZXcgWW9yazEUMBIGA1UEBwwLU3RvbnkgQnJvb2sxZDZANBgNVBAoMBkNTRTU5
MjE6MDgGA1UEAwwxU2NvdHogU3RhbGxlcj9lbWFPbEFkZHZJc3M9c3N0YWxsZXJA
aWMuc3VueXNiLmVkdQIGARWrgUUSoIGMMIGJpIGGMIGDMQswCQYDVQQGEwJVUzER
MA8GA1UECAwITmV3IFlvcmsxZDASBgNVBACMC1N0b255IEJyb29rMQ8wDQYDVQQK
DAZDU0U1OTIxOjA4BgNVBAMMMVNjb3R0IFN0YWxsZXIvZW1haWxBZGRyZXNzPXMz
dGFsbGVyQGljLnN1bnlzYi5lZHUwDQYJKoZIhvcNAQEFBQACBgEVq4FFSjAiGA8z
OTA3MDIwMTA1MDAwMFoYDzM5MTEwMTMxMDUwMDAwWjArmCkGA1UYSDEiMCCGHmh0
dHA6Ly9pZGVyYXNobi5vcmcvaW5kZXguaHRtbDANBgkqhkiG9w0BAQUFAAOBgQAV
M9axFPXXozEFcer06bj9MCBBCQLtAM7ZXcZjcxyva7xCBDmtZXPYUluHf5OcWPJz
5XPus/xS9wBgtlM3fldIKNyNO8RsMp6Ocx+PGLICc7zpZiGmCYLl64LAEGPO/bsw
Smluak1azIttePeTAHeJJs8izNJ5aR3Wcd3A5gLztQ==
-----END ATTRIBUTE CERTIFICATE-----
```

Figure 11: Attribute Certificate Example

12. Security Considerations

Data in this format often originates from untrusted sources, thus parsers must be prepared to handle unexpected data without causing security vulnerabilities.

Ambiguities are introduced by having more than one canonical encoding of the same data. The first ambiguity is introduced by permitting the text encoded representation instead of the binary DER encoding, but further ambiguities arise when multiple labels are treated as similar. Variations of whitespace and non-base64 alphabetic characters can create further ambiguities. Implementations that rely on canonical representation or the ability to fingerprint a particular data format need to understand that this Internet-Draft does not define canonical encodings. If canonical encodings are desired, the encoded structure must be decoded and processed into a canonical form (namely, DER encoding). Data encoding ambiguities also create opportunities for side channels.

13. IANA Considerations

This document implies no IANA Considerations.

14. Acknowledgements

Peter Gutmann suggested to document labels for Attribute Certificates and PKCS #7 messages, and to add examples for the non-standard variants.

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```
CLfrI6dr0gUWAgITiDAjBgsqhkIG9w0BCRADCTAUBggqhkIG9w0DBwQIZpECRWtz  
u5kEGDCjerXY8odQ7EEErOmZJvAurk/j81IrozBSBgkqhkIG9w0BBwEwMwYLKoZI  
hvcNAQkQAw8wJDAUBggqhkIG9w0DBwQI0tCBcU09nxEwDAYIKwYBBQUIAQIFAIQ  
OsYGYUfdAH0Rnc1p4VbKEAQUM2Xo8PMHBoYdqEcsbTodlCFAZH4=  
-----END CERTIFICATE CHAIN-----
```

Figure 15: Non-standard 'CERTIFICATE CHAIN' Example

Authors' Addresses

Simon Josefsson

SJD AB

Johan Olof Wallins Väg 13

Solna, 171 64

SE

E-Mail: simon@josefsson.org

URI: <http://josefsson.org/>

Sean Leonard

Penango, Inc.

5900 Wilshire Boulevard

21st Floor

Los Angeles, CA 90036

USA

E-Mail: dev+ietf@seantek.com

URI: <http://www.penango.com/>