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IEEE Recommended Practice for Software Requirements Specifications

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IEEE Recommended Practice for Software Requirements Specifications

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Abstract: The content and qualities of a good software requirements specification (SRS) are described and several sample SRS outlines are presented. This recommended practice is aimed at specifying requirements of software to be developed but also can be applied to assist in the selection of in-house and commercial software products. Guidelines for compliance with IEEE/EIA 12207.1-1997 are also provided.

Keywords: contract, customer, prototyping, software requirements specification, supplier, system requirements specifications

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Introduction

(This introduction is not a part of IEEE Std 830-1998, IEEE Recommended Practice for Software Requirements Specifications.)

This recommended practice describes recommended approaches for the specification of software requirements. It is based on a model in which the result of the software requirements specification process is an unambiguous and complete specification document. It should help

- a) Software customers to accurately describe what they wish to obtain;
- b) Software suppliers to understand exactly what the customer wants;
- c) Individuals to accomplish the following goals:
 - 1) Develop a standard software requirements specification (SRS) outline for their own organizations;
 - 2) Define the format and content of their specific software requirements specifications;
 - 3) Develop additional local supporting items such as an SRS quality checklist, or an SRS writer's handbook.

To the customers, suppliers, and other individuals, a good SRS should provide several specific benefits, such as the following:

- *Establish the basis for agreement between the customers and the suppliers on what the software product is to do.* The complete description of the functions to be performed by the software specified in the SRS will assist the potential users to determine if the software specified meets their needs or how the software must be modified to meet their needs.
- *Reduce the development effort.* The preparation of the SRS forces the various concerned groups in the customer's organization to consider rigorously all of the requirements before design begins and reduces later redesign, recoding, and retesting. Careful review of the requirements in the SRS can reveal omissions, misunderstandings, and inconsistencies early in the development cycle when these problems are easier to correct.
- *Provide a basis for estimating costs and schedules.* The description of the product to be developed as given in the SRS is a realistic basis for estimating project costs and can be used to obtain approval for bids or price estimates.
- *Provide a baseline for validation and verification.* Organizations can develop their validation and verification plans much more productively from a good SRS. As a part of the development contract, the SRS provides a baseline against which compliance can be measured.
- *Facilitate transfer.* The SRS makes it easier to transfer the software product to new users or new machines. Customers thus find it easier to transfer the software to other parts of their organization, and suppliers find it easier to transfer it to new customers.
- *Serve as a basis for enhancement.* Because the SRS discusses the product but not the project that developed it, the SRS serves as a basis for later enhancement of the finished product. The SRS may need to be altered, but it does provide a foundation for continued production evaluation.

The readers of this document are referred to Annex B for guidelines for using this recommended practice to meet the requirements of IEEE/EIA 12207.1-1997, IEEE/EIA Guide—Industry Implementation of ISO/IEC 12207: 1995, Standard for Information Technology—Software life cycle processes—Life cycle data.

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IEEE Recommended Practice for Software Requirements Specifications

1. Overview

This recommended practice describes recommended approaches for the specification of software requirements. It is divided into five clauses. Clause 1 explains the scope of this recommended practice. Clause 2 lists the references made to other standards. Clause 3 provides definitions of specific terms used. Clause 4 provides background information for writing a good SRS. Clause 5 discusses each of the essential parts of an SRS. This recommended practice also has two annexes, one which provides alternate format templates, and one which provides guidelines for compliance with IEEE/EIA 12207.1-1997.

1.1 Scope

This is a recommended practice for writing software requirements specifications. It describes the content and qualities of a good software requirements specification (SRS) and presents several sample SRS outlines.

This recommended practice is aimed at specifying requirements of software to be developed but also can be applied to assist in the selection of in-house and commercial software products. However, application to already-developed software could be counterproductive.

When software is embedded in some larger system, such as medical equipment, then issues beyond those identified in this recommended practice may have to be addressed.

This recommended practice describes the process of creating a product and the content of the product. The product is an SRS. This recommended practice can be used to create such an SRS directly or can be used as a model for a more specific standard.

This recommended practice does not identify any specific method, nomenclature, or tool for preparing an SRS.

2. References

This recommended practice shall be used in conjunction with the following publications.

ASTM E1340-96, Standard Guide for Rapid Prototyping of Computerized Systems.¹

IEEE Std 610.12-1990, IEEE Standard Glossary of Software Engineering Terminology.²

IEEE Std 730-1998, IEEE Standard for Software Quality Assurance Plans.

IEEE Std 730.1-1995, IEEE Guide for Software Quality Assurance Planning.

IEEE Std 828-1998, IEEE Standard for Software Configuration Management Plans.³

IEEE Std 982.1-1988, IEEE Standard Dictionary of Measures to Produce Reliable Software.

IEEE Std 982.2-1988, IEEE Guide for the Use of IEEE Standard Dictionary of Measures to Produce Reliable Software.

IEEE Std 1002-1987 (Reaff 1992), IEEE Standard Taxonomy for Software Engineering Standards.

IEEE Std 1012-1998, IEEE Standard for Software Verification and Validation.

IEEE Std 1012a-1998, IEEE Standard for Software Verification and Validation: Content Map to IEEE/EIA 12207.1-1997.⁴

IEEE Std 1016-1998, IEEE Recommended Practice for Software Design Descriptions.⁵

IEEE Std 1028-1997, IEEE Standard for Software Reviews.

IEEE Std 1042-1987 (Reaff 1993), IEEE Guide to Software Configuration Management.

IEEE P1058/D2.1, Draft Standard for Software Project Management Plans, dated 5 August 1998.⁶

IEEE Std 1058a-1998, IEEE Standard for Software Project Management Plans: Content Map to IEEE/EIA 12207.1-1997.⁷

IEEE Std 1074-1997, IEEE Standard for Developing Software Life Cycle Processes.

IEEE Std 1233, 1998 Edition, IEEE Guide for Developing System Requirements Specifications.⁸

¹ASTM publications are available from the American Society for Testing and Materials, 100 Barr Harbor Drive, West Conshohocken, PA 19428-2959, USA.

²IEEE publications are available from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, 445 Hoes Lane, P.O. Box 1331, Piscataway, NJ 08855-1331, USA.

³As this standard goes to press, IEEE Std 828-1998; IEEE Std 1012a-1998; IEEE Std 1016-1998; and IEEE Std 1233, 1998 Edition are approved but not yet published. The draft standards are, however, available from the IEEE. Anticipated publication date is Fall 1998. Contact the IEEE Standards Department at 1 (732) 562-3800 for status information.

⁴See Footnote 3.

⁵See Footnote 3.

⁶Upon approval of IEEE P1058 by the IEEE-SA Standards Board, this standard will be integrated with IEEE Std 1058a-1998 and published as IEEE Std 1058, 1998 Edition. Approval is expected 8 December 1998.

⁷As this standard goes to press, IEEE Std 1058a-1998 is approved but not yet published. The draft standard is, however, available from the IEEE. Anticipated publication date is December 1998. Contact the IEEE Standards Department at 1 (732) 562-3800 for status information. See Footnote 6.

⁸See Footnote 3.

3. Definitions

In general the definitions of terms used in this recommended practice conform to the definitions provided in IEEE Std 610.12-1990. The definitions below are key terms as they are used in this recommended practice.

3.1 contract: A legally binding document agreed upon by the customer and supplier. This includes the technical and organizational requirements, cost, and schedule for a product. A contract may also contain informal but useful information such as the commitments or expectations of the parties involved.

3.2 customer: The person, or persons, who pay for the product and usually (but not necessarily) decide the requirements. In the context of this recommended practice the customer and the supplier may be members of the same organization.

3.3 supplier: The person, or persons, who produce a product for a customer. In the context of this recommended practice, the customer and the supplier may be members of the same organization.

3.4 user: The person, or persons, who operate or interact directly with the product. The user(s) and the customer(s) are often not the same person(s).

4. Considerations for producing a good SRS

This clause provides background information that should be considered when writing an SRS. This includes the following:

- a) Nature of the SRS;
- b) Environment of the SRS;
- c) Characteristics of a good SRS;
- d) Joint preparation of the SRS;
- e) SRS evolution;
- f) Prototyping;
- g) Embedding design in the SRS;
- h) Embedding project requirements in the SRS.

4.1 Nature of the SRS

The SRS is a specification for a particular software product, program, or set of programs that performs certain functions in a specific environment. The SRS may be written by one or more representatives of the supplier, one or more representatives of the customer, or by both. Subclause 4.4 recommends both.

The basic issues that the SRS writer(s) shall address are the following:

- a) *Functionality.* What is the software supposed to do?
- b) *External interfaces.* How does the software interact with people, the system's hardware, other hardware, and other software?
- c) *Performance.* What is the speed, availability, response time, recovery time of various software functions, etc.?
- d) *Attributes.* What are the portability, correctness, maintainability, security, etc. considerations?
- e) *Design constraints imposed on an implementation.* Are there any required standards in effect, implementation language, policies for database integrity, resource limits, operating environment(s) etc.?

The SRS writer(s) should avoid placing either design or project requirements in the SRS.

For recommended contents of an SRS see Clause 5.

4.2 Environment of the SRS

It is important to consider the part that the SRS plays in the total project plan, which is defined in IEEE Std 610.12-1990. The software may contain essentially all the functionality of the project or it may be part of a larger system. In the latter case typically there will be an SRS that will state the interfaces between the system and its software portion, and will place external performance and functionality requirements upon the software portion. Of course the SRS should then agree with and expand upon these system requirements.

IEEE Std 1074-1997 describes the steps in the software life cycle and the applicable inputs for each step. Other standards, such as those listed in Clause 2, relate to other parts of the software life cycle and so may complement software requirements.

Since the SRS has a specific role to play in the software development process, the SRS writer(s) should be careful not to go beyond the bounds of that role. This means the SRS

- a) Should correctly define all of the software requirements. A software requirement may exist because of the nature of the task to be solved or because of a special characteristic of the project.
- b) Should not describe any design or implementation details. These should be described in the design stage of the project.
- c) Should not impose additional constraints on the software. These are properly specified in other documents such as a software quality assurance plan.

Therefore, a properly written SRS limits the range of valid designs, but does not specify any particular design.

4.3 Characteristics of a good SRS

An SRS should be

- a) Correct;
- b) Unambiguous;
- c) Complete;
- d) Consistent;
- e) Ranked for importance and/or stability;
- f) Verifiable;
- g) Modifiable;
- h) Traceable.

4.3.1 Correct

An SRS is correct if, and only if, every requirement stated therein is one that the software shall meet.

There is no tool or procedure that ensures correctness. The SRS should be compared with any applicable superior specification, such as a system requirements specification, with other project documentation, and with other applicable standards, to ensure that it agrees. Alternatively the customer or user can determine if the SRS correctly reflects the actual needs. Traceability makes this procedure easier and less prone to error (see 4.3.8).

4.3.2 Unambiguous

An SRS is unambiguous if, and only if, every requirement stated therein has only one interpretation. As a minimum, this requires that each characteristic of the final product be described using a single unique term.

In cases where a term used in a particular context could have multiple meanings, the term should be included in a glossary where its meaning is made more specific.

An SRS is an important part of the requirements process of the software life cycle and is used in design, implementation, project monitoring, verification and validation, and in training as described in IEEE Std 1074-1997. The SRS should be unambiguous both to those who create it and to those who use it. However, these groups often do not have the same background and therefore do not tend to describe software requirements the same way. Representations that improve the requirements specification for the developer may be counterproductive in that they diminish understanding to the user and vice versa.

Subclauses 4.3.2.1 through 4.3.2.3 recommend how to avoid ambiguity.

4.3.2.1 Natural language pitfalls

Requirements are often written in natural language (e.g., English). Natural language is inherently ambiguous. A natural language SRS should be reviewed by an independent party to identify ambiguous use of language so that it can be corrected.

4.3.2.2 Requirements specification languages

One way to avoid the ambiguity inherent in natural language is to write the SRS in a particular requirements specification language. Its language processors automatically detect many lexical, syntactic, and semantic errors.

One disadvantage in the use of such languages is the length of time required to learn them. Also, many non-technical users find them unintelligible. Moreover, these languages tend to be better at expressing certain types of requirements and addressing certain types of systems. Thus, they may influence the requirements in subtle ways.

4.3.2.3 Representation tools

In general, requirements methods and languages and the tools that support them fall into three general categories—object, process, and behavioral. Object-oriented approaches organize the requirements in terms of real-world objects, their attributes, and the services performed by those objects. Process-based approaches organize the requirements into hierarchies of functions that communicate via data flows. Behavioral approaches describe external behavior of the system in terms of some abstract notion (such as predicate calculus), mathematical functions, or state machines.

The degree to which such tools and methods may be useful in preparing an SRS depends upon the size and complexity of the program. No attempt is made here to describe or endorse any particular tool.

When using any of these approaches it is best to retain the natural language descriptions. That way, customers unfamiliar with the notations can still understand the SRS.

4.3.3 Complete

An SRS is complete if, and only if, it includes the following elements:

- a) All significant requirements, whether relating to functionality, performance, design constraints, attributes, or external interfaces. In particular any external requirements imposed by a system specification should be acknowledged and treated.