

What is a CONTRIBUTING file?



JHU Open Source Programs Office

Explainer





A **CONTRIBUTING** file in your open source repository provides potential project contributors with a short guide to how they can help with your project.

Think of your CONTRIBUTING file as an anchor for your project, around which you will build community.

It complements other "all-caps" resources like your README.md and your LICENSE.md. The OSPO has Explainers for those file types, too!



The CONTRIBUTING file is useful for:

- Project contributors - users who want to know items they're welcome to tackle, and how to reach out to the owners
 - Project owners - creators and maintainers
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Before starting to write, connect with your project's core contributors to discuss what types of contributions you'd like to invite - bug fixes, new features, non-code contributions like docs or graphic design?

You might also decide that you don't want to accept outside contributions. It's still useful to have a CONTRIBUTING file, just use it to note that you're not seeking contributors.

What should go into my CONTRIBUTING file?

Getting Started with Contributing

- Welcome contributors to the project.
- Add links to important resources like your docs, issue/bug tracker, and regular communication platforms like a forum link, developer email, or web form.
- Describe how to test the project, and where the tests are located in your directories.

How to Report and Fix Issues

- Let users know how and where to report bugs.
- You can link to a bug report "template" like this one [here](#) which contributors can copy and add context to; this will keep your bugs tidy and relevant.
- If you want users to fix bugs and not just report them, consider labeling some bugs as “good first issues,” and directing users to them.

Pull Request Guidelines

- Outline your pull request protocol, including what kind of response a user will get back from the team on submission, and any caveats about the speed of response.
- Include a link or overview of your project's Style Guide / Coding conventions - a document of standards and conventions that dictates how software code should be formatted, structured, and written to ensure consistency.
- Let users know how and where to request enhancements.

Contact & Help

- List the core contributors and their preferred methods of contact, or link to a [humans.txt](#) file in your root directory.
- Let users know where they can ask for help, with links to good communication channels for anyone with questions. If the project has standing meetings or calls where new contributors would be welcome, include information about when they occur and how to attend.
- If your CONTRIBUTING.md file ended up long, consider including a table of contents with links to different headings in your document.

Feeling overwhelmed? Focus on your Contributors!

- There's no right way to make a CONTRIBUTING file, and examples that you find can vary considerably, unlike many other standard project files such as licenses or citations.
- The most important thing to keep in mind is that someone reading your CONTRIBUTING file wants to contribute to your project but doesn't know how.
- Make sure they find the information they need to make those first connections.

Some CONTRIBUTING.md examples and templates:

- Ruby on Rails:
<https://github.com/rails/rails/blob/main/CONTRIBUTING.md>
- Open Government:
<https://github.com/opengovernment/opengovernment/blob/master/CONTRIBUTING.md>
- Nadia Asparouhova's CONTRIBUTING template:
<https://github.com/JH-OSPO/contributing-template>



Once your doc is done, it is convention to capitalize the word "**CONTRIBUTING**" as the file title and save it as a resource in **markdown** in your root directory.

Not familiar with markdown formatting? There's a great how-to guide in the [GitHub documentation](#).

Unless otherwise cited, content in this Explainer is adapted from:

Mozilla Science Lab. “Wrangling Web Contributions: How to Build a CONTRIBUTING.Md.” Online Resource. 2016.

<https://mozillascience.github.io/working-open-workshop/contributing/>.

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Questions? Ask the JHU Open Source Programs Office

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