

# README Basics

JHU Open Source Programs Office

*Explainer*



A README serves as the introduction to your software, and provides users with important information on how to get started.



READMEs aren't just for open source projects!

Any code that will be shared - publicly or privately - can benefit from a README.

## Add a README to your repository to:

- Help others understand the purpose of your code, why it was created, what it does, and how it works
- Provide clear instructions on installation, usage and dependencies
- Encourage collaboration by providing clear guidelines for potential contributors

The OSPO has a great checklist in GitHub for writing a README - you can copy it directly to your repository and fill in the blanks!

[https://bit.ly/jhuospo\\_readme](https://bit.ly/jhuospo_readme)

Click through the following slides to learn what info to gather for your README.

# Help the reader identify the project

- Name the file:
  - *READMEs without markup*: Name the file README or README.txt.
  - *READMEs with markup*: Name the file README.extension, where *extension* is a file extension that corresponds to your markup language (such as md for Markdown or rst for reStructuredText - both of which render natively in GitHub and GitLab).
- At the top of the file, make sure the project's name and logo are the first heading.
- Under the project name or linked from it, add a URL for the project (such as repository or homepage URL).
- Under the project name, clearly identify the owner or author of the project (e.g., "By Author McAuthorface" or "Copyright Owner Name 2018"). If your project uses a NOTICE file to identify copyright or authorship, you should point to that file here.

# Help the reader evaluate the project

- Describe the project in terms of what it DOES or ACHIEVES - not how! This is not the place to talk about languages, technologies, or tools (don't worry, that comes later). You can also identify the "who" here, if a project was built for or used by a specific audience.
- Try a MadLib to get started...
  - With <Project> you can <verb><plural noun>...
  - <Project> helps you...
  - If you use <Project> then you...
- Describe who may use the project and under what terms
  - For OSS, describe and then name the license. "You are free to copy, modify, and distribute <Project> under the terms of the MIT license."

# Help the reader use the project

- If applicable, list the project's prerequisites.
  - For example, "Before installing <Project>, you need Python v2.7 or later."
- List the steps to install and use the project one time.
  - Help the reader go from having your project's files to using the project for the first time. These instructions should stop once the project works once - extended usage instructions belong in your docs.
- Test your install and setup steps.
  - Nothing to write down - just make sure what you've written works!



# Help the reader engage with the project


- Tell your readers where to go for more project documentation.
  - This might include: website, doc files, help command(s), README companion files such as LICENSE, CONTRIBUTING, CODE\_OF\_CONDUCT, etc.
- Tell your readers where to go for help.
  - This might include descriptions and links to mailing lists, issue trackers, forums, etc.
- Tell your audience how to help!
  - If OSS, link to and summarize the project's contributor's guide, or describe how and where you want contributors to add to your project (e.g. via GitHub PR or other).
  - Describe how and where bugs should be reported.

# For projects with more than one repository

- Create a README for the project - you can choose one repository to be the primary and place the core README there, or if your repository platform supports it, you can place a README at the project or organization level.
- Create a README in each repository that points to the primary project README and describes in more detail the purpose of that specific component.

# Final Checks

- If your README is long, add a table of contents after your project description
- If your README is *very* long, move content to other docs
- Set a reminder to review your README on a regular basis



Thanks to Daniel Beck for creating the  
README checklist and dedicating it to  
the public domain.

<https://github.com/ddbeck/>



# Questions? Ask the JHU Open Source Programs Office

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