

# RFC-012: Lamport Logical Clocks

Status: Proposed Date: January 2026 Author: Derrell Piper ddp@eludom.net

---

## Abstract

This RFC specifies Lamport logical clocks for Cyberspace distributed ordering, providing a happened-before relation across federated vaults without synchronized physical clocks.

---

## Motivation

Physical clocks lie:

- **Clock skew:** Machines disagree on time
- **Clock drift:** Skew grows over time
- **NTP failures:** Synchronization breaks
- **Relativity:** No global “now” anyway

Lamport clocks provide:

1. **Logical ordering:**  $a \rightarrow b$  means a happened before b
2. **No synchronization:** No NTP, no GPS, no trusted time
3. **Causality tracking:** If a caused b, then  $C(a) < C(b)$
4. **Consistency:** All nodes agree on partial order

From Lamport (1978):

*Time, Clocks, and the Ordering of Events in a Distributed System*

---

## Specification

### The Happened-Before Relation

**Definition:**  $a \rightarrow b$  (a happened before b) if:

1. a and b are in same process and a comes before b, or
2. a is sending a message and b is receiving it, or
3.  $\exists c$  such that  $a \rightarrow c$  and  $c \rightarrow b$  (transitivity)

### Lamport Clock Rules

Each process P maintains counter  $C(P)$ :

Rule 1: Before each event, increment  $C(P)$   
 $C(P) := C(P) + 1$

Rule 2: When sending message  $m$ , attach  $C(P)$   
 $send(m, C(P))$

Rule 3: When receiving message  $(m, T)$ , update clock  
 $C(P) := \max(C(P), T) + 1$

## Clock Condition

If  $a \rightarrow b$  then  $C(a) < C(b)$ .

Note: Converse is not guaranteed.  $C(a) < C(b)$  does not imply  $a \rightarrow b$ .

---

## Data Structures

### Logical Timestamp

```
(define-record-type <lamport-clock>
  (make-lamport-clock counter node-id)
  lamport-clock?
  (counter clock-counter)
  (node-id clock-node-id))
```

### Timestamped Event

```
(define-record-type <timestamped-event>
  (make-timestamped-event clock event)
  timestamped-event?
  (clock event-clock)
  (event event-data))
```

---

## Operations

### Increment (Local Event)

```
(define (clock-tick! clock)
  "Increment clock for local event"
  (set! (clock-counter clock)
    (+ 1 (clock-counter clock)))
  clock)
```

### Send (Message Departure)

```
(define (clock-send clock message)
  "Attach timestamp to outgoing message"
  (clock-tick! clock)
  (make-timestamped-message
    (clock-counter clock)
    (clock-node-id clock)
    message))
```

### Receive (Message Arrival)

```
(define (clock-receive! clock timestamped-message)
  "Update clock on message receipt"
  (let ((remote-time (message-timestamp timestamped-message)))
    (set! (clock-counter clock)
      (+ 1 (max (clock-counter clock) remote-time)))
    (message-payload timestamped-message)))
```

---

## Total Ordering

Lamport clocks give partial order. For total order, break ties with node ID:

```
(define (lamport-compare a b)
  "Total order: compare by timestamp, then by node-id"
  (let ((ta (clock-counter (event-clock a)))
        (tb (clock-counter (event-clock b)))
        (na (clock-node-id (event-clock a)))
        (nb (clock-node-id (event-clock b))))
    (cond
      ((< ta tb) -1)
      ((> ta tb) 1)
      ((string<? na nb) -1)
      ((string>? na nb) 1)
      (else 0)))
```

---

## Application to Cyberspace

### Audit Trail Ordering

```
(audit-entry
  (lamport-clock 1042 "alice-vault")
  (timestamp "2026-01-06T15:30:00Z") ; Physical (advisory)
  (action (seal-commit "abc123"))
  ...)
```

Logical clock provides causal ordering even if physical clocks differ.

### Federation Message Ordering

```
(federation-message
  (logical-time 573)
  (from "bob-vault")
  (type announcement)
  (payload ...))
```

Receivers update their clocks, ensuring consistent view of causality.

### Conflict Detection

If events are concurrent (neither  $a \rightarrow b$  nor  $b \rightarrow a$ ):

```
(define (concurrent? a b)
  "True if neither event happened before the other"
  (let ((ta (clock-counter (event-clock a)))
        (tb (clock-counter (event-clock b))))
    ; If timestamps equal and different nodes, concurrent
    ; More sophisticated: use vector clocks for accurate detection
    (and (= ta tb)
         (not (equal? (clock-node-id (event-clock a))
                      (clock-node-id (event-clock b)))))))
```

---

## Vector Clocks (Extension)

For precise concurrency detection, use vector clocks:

```
(define-record-type <vector-clock>
  (make-vector-clock entries)
  vector-clock?
  (entries vc-entries)) ; Hash: node-id → counter

;; a → b iff VC(a) < VC(b) (component-wise)
;; a || b (concurrent) iff neither VC(a) < VC(b) nor VC(b) < VC(a)
```

Trade-off: O(N) space vs O(1) for Lamport clocks.

---

## Integration Points

### With Audit Trail (RFC-003)

```
(audit-entry
  (sequence 42)           ; Local sequence
  (lamport-clock 1042)    ; Logical timestamp
  (physical-time "...")   ; Advisory only
  ...)
```

### With Consensus (RFC-011)

```
(consensus-message
  (sequence 573)          ; Consensus sequence
  (lamport-clock 2891)    ; Causal context
  ...)
```

### With Replication (RFC-001)

```
(seal-publish "2.0.0"
  (logical-time 892)
  ...)
```

---

## Security Considerations

### Clock Manipulation

A Byzantine node could:

- Report artificially high clock values
- Attempt to order events incorrectly

Mitigations:

- Clock values bounded by received values + margin
- Signatures prevent retroactive tampering
- Audit trails detect anomalies

## Denial of Service

Flooding with high-timestamped messages forces clock advancement.

Mitigation: Rate limiting, reputation systems.

---

## Implementation Notes

### Thread Safety

Clock updates must be atomic:

```
(define (atomic-tick! clock)
  (mutex-lock! clock-mutex)
  (clock-tick! clock)
  (mutex-unlock! clock-mutex))
```

### Persistence

Clock state survives restarts:

```
(define (save-clock clock path)
  (with-output-to-file path
    (lambda ()
      (write `(lamport-clock
                (counter ,(clock-counter clock))
                (node-id ,(clock-node-id clock)))))))
```

---

## References

1. Lamport, L. (1978). Time, Clocks, and the Ordering of Events in a Distributed System.
  2. Fidge, C. J. (1988). Timestamps in Message-Passing Systems.
  3. Mattern, F. (1989). Virtual Time and Global States of Distributed Systems.
  4. RFC-003: Cryptographic Audit Trail
  5. RFC-010: Federation Protocol
- 

## Changelog

- 2026-01-06 – Initial specification
- 

**Implementation Status:** Proposed **Clock Type:** Lamport scalar, vector clock extension **Ordering:** Partial (causal), total with tie-breaking