

Lab 4: Security

This lab will present a few common topics for securing your database server. Taken together, these will cover the main areas around security in PostgreSQL that you should be concerned with. The last topic will cover some cloud-specific topics.

This lab covers the following topics:

- The PostgreSQL superuser
- Revoking user access to a table
- Granting user access to a table
- Granting user access to specific columns
- Granting user access to specific rows
- Creating a new user
- Temporarily preventing a user from connecting
- Removing a user without dropping their data
- Checking whether all users have a secure password
- Giving limited superuser powers to specific users
- Auditing database access
- Always knowing which user is logged in

The PostgreSQL superuser

A PostgreSQL superuser is a user that bypasses all permission checks, except the right to log in. Superuser is a dangerous privilege and should not be used carelessly, and many cloud databases do not allow this level of privilege to be granted at all. It is normal to place strict controls on users of this type. If you are using PostgreSQL in a cloud service, then please read the *Setting up cloud security using predefined roles* topic instead.

In this topic, you will learn how to grant the right to a user to become a superuser.

How to do it...

Follow the next steps to add or remove superuser privileges for any user.

- A user becomes a superuser when they are created with the `SUPERUSER` attribute set:

```
CREATE USER username SUPERUSER;
```

- A user can be deprived of their superuser status by removing the `SUPERUSER` attribute using this command:

```
ALTER USER username NOSUPERUSER;
```

- A user can be restored to superuser status later using the following command:

```
ALTER USER username SUPERUSER;
```

- When neither `SUPERUSER` nor `NOSUPERUSER` is given in the `CREATE USER` command, then the default is to create a user who is not a superuser.

How it works...

The rights to some operations in PostgreSQL are not available by default and need to be granted specifically to users. They must be performed by a special user who has this special attribute set. The preceding commands set and reset this attribute for the user.

There's more...

The PostgreSQL system comes set up with at least one superuser. Most commonly, this superuser is named `postgres`, but occasionally, it adopts the same name as the system user who owns the database directory and with whose rights the PostgreSQL server runs.

Other superuser-like attributes

In addition to `SUPERUSER`, there are two lesser attributes--- `CREATEDB` and `CREATEUSER` ---that give the user only some of the power reserved for superusers: namely, creating new databases and users. See the *Giving limited superuser powers to specific users* topic for more information on this.

Revoking user access to a table

This topic answers the question *How do I make sure that user X cannot access table Y?*

Getting ready

The current user must either be a superuser, the owner of the table, or a user with a `GRANT` option for the table.

Also, bear in mind that you can't revoke rights from a user who is a superuser.

How to do it...

To revoke all rights on the `table1` table from the `user2` user, you must run the following **SQL** command:

```
REVOKE ALL ON table1 FROM user2;
```

However, if `user2` has been granted another role that gives them some rights on `table1` ---say, `role3` ---this command is not enough; you must also choose one of the following options:

- Fix the user---that is, revoke `role3` from `user2`
- Fix the role---that is, revoke privileges on `table1` from `role3`

Both choices are imperfect because of their side effects. The former will revoke all of the privileges associated with `role3`, not just the privileges concerning `table1`; the latter will revoke the privileges on `table1` from all other users that have been granted `role3`, not just from `user2`.

It is normally better to avoid damaging other legitimate users, so we opt for the first solution. We'll now look at a working example.

Using `psql`, display a list of roles that have been granted at least one privilege on `table1` by issuing `\z table1`. For instance, you can obtain the following output (an extra column about column privileges has been removed from the right-hand side because it was not relevant here):

```
Access privileges
Schema | Name  | Type  | Access privileges | ...
-----+-----+-----+-----+ ...
public | table1 | table | postgres=arwdDxt/postgres+ | ...
```

				role3=r/postgres	+		...
				role5=a/postgres			...
(1 row)							

Then, we check whether `user2` is a member of any of those roles by typing `\du user2`:

List of roles		
Role name	Attributes	Member of
-----+-----+-----		
user2		{role3, role4}

In the previous step, we notice that `role3` had been granted the `SELECT` privilege (`r` for `read`) by the `postgres` user, so we must revoke it, as follows:

```
REVOKE role3 FROM user2;
```

We must also inspect `role4`. Even if it doesn't have privileges on `table1`, in theory, it could be a member of one of the three roles that have privileges on that table. We issue `\du role4` and get the following output:

List of roles		
Role name	Attributes	Member of
-----+-----+-----		
role4	Cannot login	{role5}

Our suspicion was well-founded: `user2` can get the `INSERT` privilege (*a* for *append*) on `table1`, first via `role4` and then via `role5`. So, we must break this two-step chain, as follows:

```
REVOKE role4 FROM user2;
```

This example may seem too unlikely to be true. We unexpectedly gain access to the table via a chain of two different role memberships, which was made possible by the fact that a non-login role, such as `role4`, was made a member of another non-login role---that is, `role5`. In most real-world cases, superusers will know whether such chains exist at all, so there will be no surprises; however, the goal of this topic is to make sure that the user cannot access the table, meaning we cannot exclude less-likely options. See also the later topic, *Auditing database access*.

How it works...

The `\z` command, as well as its synonym, `\dp`, displays all privileges granted on tables, views, and sequences. If the `Access privileges` column is empty, it means we use **default privileges**---that is, all privileges are given to the owner (and the superusers, as always).

The `\du` command shows you the attributes and roles that have been granted to roles.

Both commands accept an optional name or pattern to restrict the display.

There's more...

Here, we'll cover some good practices on user and role management.

Database creation scripts

For production systems, it is usually a good idea to always include `GRANT` and `REVOKE` statements in the database creation script so that you can be sure that only the right set of users has access to the table. If this is done manually,

it is easy to forget. Also, in this way, you can be sure that the same roles are used in development and testing environments so that there are no surprises at deployment time.

Here is an extract from the database creation script:

```
CREATE TABLE table1(  
  ...  
);  
GRANT SELECT ON table1 TO webreaders;  
GRANT SELECT, INSERT, UPDATE, DELETE ON table1 TO editors;  
GRANT ALL ON table1 TO admins;
```

Default search path

It is always good practice to use a fully qualified name when revoking or granting rights; otherwise, you may be inadvertently working with the wrong table.

To see the effective search path for the current database, run the following code:

```
pguser=# show search_path ;  
      search_path  
-----  
"$user",public  
(1 row)
```

To see which table will be affected if you omit the schema name, run the following code in `psql` :

```
pguser=# \d x  
      Table "public.x"  
  Column | Type | Modifiers  
-----+-----+-----
```

The `public.x` table name in the response contains the full name, including the schema.

Securing views

It is a common technique to use a view to disclose only some parts of a secret table; however, a clever attacker can use access to the view to display the rest of the table using log messages. For instance, consider the following example:

```
CREATE VIEW for_the_public AS  
  SELECT * FROM reserved_data WHERE importance < 10;  
GRANT SELECT ON for_the_public TO PUBLIC;
```

A malicious user could define the following function:

```
CREATE FUNCTION f(text)  
  RETURNS boolean  
  COST 0.00000001  
  LANGUAGE plpgsql AS $$  
BEGIN  
  RAISE INFO '$1: %', $1;  
  RETURN true;
```

```
END;  
$$;
```

They could use it to filter rows from the view:

```
SELECT * FROM for_the_public x WHERE f(x :: text);
```

The PostgreSQL optimizer will then internally rearrange the query, expanding the definition of the view and then combining the two filter conditions into a single `WHERE` clause. The trick here is that the function has been told to be very cheap using the `COST` keyword, so the optimizer will choose to evaluate that condition first. In other words, the function will access all of the rows in the table, as you will realize when you see the corresponding `INFO` lines on the console if you run the code yourself.

This security leak can be prevented using the `security_barrier` attribute:

```
ALTER VIEW for_the_public SET (security_barrier = on);
```

This means that the conditions that define the view will always be computed first, irrespective of cost considerations.

The performance impact of this fix can be mitigated by the `LEAKPROOF` attribute for functions. In short, a function that cannot leak information other than its output value can be marked as `LEAKPROOF` by a superuser so that the planner will know it's secure enough to compute the function before the other view conditions.

Granting user access to a table

A user needs to have access to a table in order to perform any actions on it.

Getting ready

Make sure that you have the appropriate roles defined and that privileges are revoked from the `PUBLIC` role:

```
CREATE GROUP webreaders;  
CREATE USER tim;  
CREATE USER bob;  
REVOKE ALL ON SCHEMA someschema FROM PUBLIC;
```

How to do it...

We had to grant access to the schema in order to allow access to the table. This suggests that access to a given schema can be used as a fast and extreme way of preventing any access to any object in that schema. Otherwise, if you want to allow some access, you must use specific `GRANT` and `REVOKE` statements, as needed:

```
GRANT USAGE ON SCHEMA someschema TO webreaders;
```

It is often desirable to give a group of users similar permissions to a group of database objects. To do this, you first assign all the permissions to a proxy role (also known as a **permission group**), and then assign the group to selected users, as follows:

```
GRANT SELECT ON someschema.pages TO webreaders;  
GRANT INSERT ON someschema.viewlog TO webreaders;  
GRANT webreaders TO tim, bob;
```

Now, both `tim` and `bob` have the `SELECT` privilege on the `pages` table and `INSERT` on the `viewlog` table. You can also add privileges to the group role after assigning it to users. Consider the following command:

```
GRANT INSERT, UPDATE, DELETE ON someschema.comments TO webreaders;
```

After running this command, both `bob` and `tim` have all of the aforementioned privileges on the `comments` table.

This assumes that both the `bob` and `tim` roles were created with the `INHERIT` default setting. Otherwise, they do not automatically inherit the rights of roles but need to explicitly set their role to the granted user to make use of the privileges granted to that role.

We can grant privileges on all objects of a certain kind in a specific schema, as follows:

```
GRANT SELECT ON ALL TABLES IN SCHEMA someschema TO bob;
```

You still need to grant the privileges on the schema itself in a separate `GRANT` statement.

How it works...

The preceding sequence of commands first grants access to a schema for a group role, then gives appropriate viewing (`SELECT`) and modifying (`INSERT`) rights on certain tables to the role, and finally grants membership in that role to two database users.

There's more...

There is no requirement in PostgreSQL to have some privileges in order to have others. This means that you may well have write-only tables where you are allowed to insert but you can't select. This can be used to implement a mail-queue-like functionality, where several users post messages to one user but can't see what other users have posted.

Alternatively, you could set up a situation where you can write a record, but you can't change or delete it. This is useful for auditing log-type tables, where all changes are recorded but cannot be tampered with.

Granting user access to specific columns

A user can be given access to only some table columns.

Getting ready

We will continue the example from the previous topic, so we assume that there is already a schema called `someschema` and a role called `somerole` with `USAGE` privileges on it. We create a new table on which we will grant column-level privileges:

```
CREATE TABLE someschema.sometable2(col1 int, col2 text);
```

How to do it...

We want to grant `somerole` the ability to view existing data and insert new data; we also want to provide the ability to amend existing data, limited to the `col2` column only. We use the following self-evident statements:

```
GRANT SELECT, INSERT ON someschema.sometable2  
TO somerole;
```

```
GRANT UPDATE (col2) ON someschema.sometable2
TO somerole;
```

We can then test whether this has worked successfully, as follows:

1. Let's assume the identity of the `somerole` role and test these privileges with the following commands:

```
SET ROLE TO somerole;
INSERT INTO someschema.sometable2 VALUES (1, 'One');
SELECT * FROM someschema.sometable2 WHERE col1 = 1;
```

2. As expected, we are able to insert a new row and view its contents. Let's now check our ability to update individual columns. We start with the second column, which we have authorized:

```
UPDATE someschema.sometable2 SET col2 = 'The number one';
```

This command returns the familiar output:

```
UPDATE 1
```

1. This means that we were able to successfully update that column in one row. Now, we try to update the first column:

```
UPDATE someschema.sometable2 SET col1 = 2;
```

This time, we get the following error message:

```
ERROR: permission denied for relation sometable2
```

This confirms that, as planned, we only authorized updates to the second column.

How it works...

The `GRANT` command has been extended to allow for specifying a list of columns, meaning that the privilege is granted on that list of columns, rather than on the whole table.

There's more...

Consider a table, `t`, with `c1`, `c2`, and `c3` columns; there are two different ways of authorizing the user (`u`) to perform the following query:

```
SELECT * FROM t;
```

The first is by granting a table-level privilege, as follows:

```
GRANT SELECT ON TABLE t TO u;
```

The alternative way is by granting column-level privileges, as follows:

```
GRANT SELECT (c1,c2,c3) ON TABLE t TO u;
```

Despite these two methods having overlapping effects, table-level privileges are distinct from column-level privileges, which is correct since the meaning of each is different. Granting privileges on a table means giving them

to all columns present and future, while column-level privileges require the explicit indication of columns and, therefore, don't extend automatically to new columns.

The way privileges work in PostgreSQL means that a given role will be allowed to perform a given action if it matches one of its privileges. This creates some ambiguity in overlapping areas. For example, consider the following command sequence:

```
GRANT SELECT ON someschema.sometable2 TO somerole;
REVOKE SELECT (col1) ON someschema.sometable2 FROM
somerole;
```

The outcome, somehow surprisingly, will be that `somerole` is allowed to view all of the columns of that table using the table-level privilege granted by the first command. The second command was ineffective because it tried to revoke a column-level privilege (`SELECT on col1`) that was never granted in the first place.

Granting user access to specific rows

PostgreSQL supports granting privileges on a subset of rows in a table using RLS.

Getting ready

Just as we did for the previous topic, we assume that there is already a schema called `someschema` and a role called `somerole` with `USAGE` privileges on it. We create a new table to experiment with row-level privileges:

```
CREATE TABLE someschema.sometable3(col1 int, col2 text);
```

RLS must also be enabled on that table:

```
ALTER TABLE someschema.sometable3 ENABLE ROW LEVEL SECURITY;
```

How to do it...

First, we grant `somerole` the privilege to view the contents of the table, as we did in the previous topic:

```
GRANT SELECT ON someschema.sometable3 TO somerole;
```

Let's assume that the contents of the table are as shown by the following command:

```
SELECT * FROM someschema.sometable3;
 col1 |   col2
-----+-----
    1 | One
   -1 | Minus one
(2 rows)
```

In order to grant the ability to access some rows only, we create a policy specifying what is allowed and on which rows. For instance, this way, we can enforce the condition that `somerole` is only allowed to select rows with positive values of `col1`:

```
CREATE POLICY example1 ON someschema.sometable3
FOR SELECT
```



```
TO somerole
USING (col1 > 0);
```

The effect of this command is that the rows that do not satisfy the policy are silently skipped, as shown when `somerole` issues the following command:

```
SELECT * FROM someschema.sometable3;
 col1 |   col2
-----+-----
    1 | One
(1 row)
```

What if we want to introduce a policy on the `INSERT` clause? The preceding policy shows how the `USING` clause specifies which rows are affected. There is also a `WITH CHECK` clause that can be used to specify which inserts are accepted. More generally, the `USING` clause applies to pre-existing rows, while `WITH CHECK` applies to rows that are generated by the statement being analyzed. So, the former works with `SELECT`, `UPDATE`, and `DELETE`, while the latter works with `INSERT` and `UPDATE`.

Coming back to our example, we may want to allow inserts only where `col1` is positive:

```
CREATE POLICY example2 ON someschema.sometable3
FOR INSERT
TO somerole
WITH CHECK (col1 > 0);
```

We must also remember to allow `INSERT` commands on the table, as we did before with `SELECT`:

```
GRANT INSERT ON someschema.sometable3 TO somerole;
SELECT * FROM someschema.sometable3;
 col1 |   col2
-----+-----
    1 | One
(1 row)
```

Now, we are able to insert a new row and to see it afterward:

```
INSERT INTO someschema.sometable3 VALUES (2, 'Two');
SELECT * FROM someschema.sometable3;
 col1 |   col2
-----+-----
    1 | One
    2 | Two
(2 rows)
```

How it works...

RLS policies are created and dropped on a given table using the `CREATE POLICY` syntax. The RLS policy itself must also be enabled explicitly on the given table because it is disabled by default.

In the previous example, we needed to grant privileges on the table or on the columns, in addition to creating an RLS policy. This is because RLS is not one more privilege to be added to the other; rather, it works as an additional check.

In this sense, it is convenient that it is off by default, as we have to create policies only on the tables where our access logic depends on the row contents.

There's more...

RLS can lead to very complex configurations for a variety of reasons, as in the following instances:

- An `UPDATE` policy can specify both the rows on which we act and which changes can be accepted.
- `UPDATE` and `DELETE` policies, in some cases, require visibility as granted by an appropriate `SELECT` policy.
- `UPDATE` policies are also applied to `INSERT ... ON CONFLICT DO UPDATE`.

We recommend reading the finer details at the following URL: <https://www.postgresql.org/docs/current/static/ddl-rowsecurity.html>

Creating a new user

In this topic, we will show you two ways of creating a new database user---one with a dedicated command-line utility and another using SQL commands.

Getting ready

To create new users, you must either be a superuser or have the `CREATEROLE` or `CREATEUSER` privilege.

How to do it...

From the command line, you can run the `createuser` command:

```
pguser@hvast:~$ createuser bob
```

If you add the `--interactive` command-line option, you activate the interactive mode, which means you will be asked some questions, as follows:

```
pguser@hvast:~$ createuser --interactive alice
Shall the new role be a superuser? (y/n) n
Shall the new role be allowed to create databases? (y/n) y
Shall the new role be allowed to create more new roles? (y/n) n
```

Without `--interactive`, the preceding questions get *no* as the default answer; you can change that with the `-s`, `-d`, and `-r` command-line options.

In interactive mode, questions are asked only if they make sense. One example is when the user is a superuser; no other questions are asked because a superuser is not subject to privilege checks. Another example is when one of the preceding options is used to specify a non-default setting; the corresponding question will not be asked.

How it works...

The `createuser` program is just a shallow wrapper around the executing SQL against the database cluster. It connects to the `postgres` database and then executes SQL commands for user creation. To create the same users through SQL, you can issue the following commands:

```
CREATE USER bob;  
CREATE USER alice CREATEDB;
```

There's more...

You can check the attributes of a given user in `psql`, as follows:

```
pguser=# \du alice
```

This gives you the following output:

```
           List of roles  
Role name | Attributes | Member of  
-----+-----+-----  
alice     | Create DB | {}
```

The `CREATE USER` and `CREATE GROUP` commands are actually variations of `CREATE ROLE`. The `CREATE USER username;` statement is equivalent to `CREATE ROLE username LOGIN;`, and the `CREATE GROUP groupname;` statement is equivalent to `CREATE ROLE groupname NOLOGIN;`.

Temporarily preventing a user from connecting

Sometimes, you need to temporarily revoke a user's connection rights without actually deleting the user or changing the user's password. This topic presents ways of doing this.

Getting ready

To modify other users, you must either be a superuser or have the `CREATEROLE` privilege (in the latter case, only non-superuser roles can be altered).

How to do it...

Follow these steps to temporarily prevent and reissue the logging-in capability to a user:

1. To temporarily prevent the user from logging in, run this command:

```
pguser=# alter user bob nologin;  
ALTER ROLE
```

2. To let the user connect again, run the following command:

```
pguser=# alter user bob login;  
ALTER ROLE
```

How it works...

This sets a flag in the system catalog, telling PostgreSQL not to let the user log in. It does not kick out already connected users.

There's more...

Here are some additional remarks.

Limiting the number of concurrent connections by a user

The same result can be achieved by setting the connection limit for that user to `0` :

```
pguser=# alter user bob connection limit 0;
ALTER ROLE
```

To allow `10` concurrent connections for the `bob` user, run this command:

```
pguser=# alter user bob connection limit 10;
ALTER ROLE
```

To allow an unlimited number of connections for this user, run the following command:

```
pguser=# alter user bob connection limit -1;
ALTER ROLE
```

Allowing unlimited connections to PostgreSQL concurrently could allow a **denial-of-service (DoS)** attack by exhausting connection resources; also, a system could fail or degrade by an overload of legitimate users. To reduce these risks, you may wish to limit the number of concurrent sessions per user.

Forcing NOLOGIN users to disconnect

In order to make sure that all users whose login privileges have been revoked are disconnected right away, run the following SQL statement as a superuser:

```
SELECT pg_terminate_backend(pid)
FROM pg_stat_activity a
JOIN pg_roles r ON a.username = r.rolname AND NOT rolcanlogin;
```

This disconnects all users who are no longer allowed to connect by terminating the backends opened by these users.

Removing a user without dropping their data

When trying to drop a user who owns some tables or other database objects, you get the following error, and the user is not dropped:

```
testdb=# drop user bob;
ERROR:  role "bob" cannot be dropped because some objects depend on it
DETAIL:  owner of table bobstable
owner of sequence bobstable_id_seq
```

This topic presents two solutions to this problem.

Getting ready

To modify users, you must either be a superuser or have the `CREATEROLE` privilege.

How to do it...

The easiest solution to this problem is to refrain from dropping the user and use the trick from the *Temporarily preventing a user from connecting* topic to prevent the user from connecting:

```
pguser=# alter user bob nologin;  
ALTER ROLE
```

This has the added benefit of the original owner of the table being available later, if needed, for auditing or debugging purposes (*Why is this table here? Who created it?*).

Then, you can assign the rights of the deleted user to a new user, using the following code:

```
pguser=# GRANT bob TO bobs_replacement;  
GRANT
```

How it works...

As noted previously, a user is implemented as a role with the login attribute set. This topic works by removing that attribute from the user, which is then kept just as a role.

If you really need to get rid of a user, you have to assign all ownership to another user. To do so, run the following query, which is a PostgreSQL extension to standard SQL:

```
REASSIGN OWNED BY bob TO bobs_replacement;
```

It does exactly what it says: it assigns ownership of all database objects currently owned by the `bob` role to the `bobs_replacement` role.

However, you need to have privileges on both the old and the new roles to do that, and you need to do it in all databases where `bob` owns any objects, as the `REASSIGN OWNED` command works only on the current database.

After this, you can delete the original user, `bob`.

Checking whether all users have a secure password

By default, as of PostgreSQL 14, passwords are encrypted using the SCRAM-SHA-256 login method for users, which was added in PostgreSQL 10. Any servers upgrading from earlier versions should upgrade from **MD5** to SCRAM-SHA-256 password encryption since the MD5 authentication method is considered insecure for many applications.

For client applications connecting from trusted private networks, either real or a **virtual private network (VPN)**, you may use host-based access, provided you know that the machine on which the application is running is not used by some non-trusted individuals. For remote access over public networks, it may be a better idea to use SSL client certificates. See the later topic, *Using SSL certificates to authenticate*, for more on this.

How to do it...

To see which users don't yet have `SCRAM`-encrypted passwords, use this query:

```
test2=# select username,passwd from pg_shadow where passwd  
not like 'SCRAM%' or passwd is null;  
username | passwd  
-----+-----  
tim      | weakpassword
```

```
asterisk | md5chicken
(2 rows)
```

How it works...

The `password_encryption` parameter decides how the `ALTER USER` statement will encrypt the password. This should be set globally in the `postgresql.conf` file or by using `ALTER SYSTEM`. As of PostgreSQL 14, the default value is `scram-sha-256`.

Having the passwords encrypted in the database is just half of the equation. The bigger problem is making sure that users actually use passwords that are hard to guess. Passwords such as `password`, `secret`, or `test` are out of the question, and most common words are not good passwords either.

As of PostgreSQL 14, passwords can be of arbitrary length. However, on PgBouncer, there is a limit of 996 characters, so that is the reasonable limit. Note that usernames can be---at most---63 characters.

If you don't trust your users to select strong passwords, you can write a wrapper application that checks the password strength and make them use that when changing passwords. A `contrib` module lets you do this for a limited set of cases (the password is sent from client to server in plain text). Visit

<http://www.postgresql.org/docs/current/static/passwordcheck.html> for more information on this.

Giving limited superuser powers to specific users

The superuser role has some privileges that can also be granted to non-superuser roles separately.

To give the `bob` role the ability to create new databases, run this:

```
ALTER ROLE BOB WITH CREATEDB;
```

To give the `bob` role the ability to create new users, run the following command:

```
ALTER ROLE BOB WITH CREATEROLE;
```

Note that the PostgreSQL documentation warns against doing the preceding action:

"*Be careful with the CREATEROLE privilege. There is no concept of inheritance for the privileges of a CREATEROLE-role. That means that even if a role does not have a certain privilege but is allowed to create other roles, it can easily create another role with different privileges than its own (except for creating roles with superuser privileges). For example, if the role "user" has the CREATEROLE privilege but not the CREATEDB privilege, nonetheless it can create a new role with the CREATEDB privilege. Therefore, regard roles that have the CREATEROLE privilege as almost-superuser-roles.*"

(<https://www.postgresql.org/docs/current/sql-createrole.html>)

It is also possible to give ordinary users more fine-grained and controlled access to an action reserved for superusers using `security definer` functions. The same trick can also be used to pass partial privileges between different users.

Getting ready

First, you must have access to the database as a superuser in order to delegate powers. Here, we assume we are using a default superuser named `postgres`.

We will demonstrate two ways to make some superuser-only functionality available to a selected ordinary user.

How to do it...

An ordinary user cannot tell PostgreSQL to copy table data from a file. Only a superuser can do that, as follows:

```
pguser@hvost:~$ psql -U postgres
test2
...
test2=# create table lines(line text);
CREATE TABLE
test2=# copy lines from '/home/bob/names.txt';
COPY 37
test2=# SET ROLE to bob;
SET
test2=> copy lines from '/home/bob/names.txt';
ERROR:  must be superuser to COPY to or from a file
HINT:  Anyone can COPY to stdout or from stdin. psql's \copy command also works for anyone.
```

To let `bob` copy directly from the file, the superuser can write a special wrapper function for `bob`, as follows:

```
create or replace function copy_from(tablename text, filepath text)
returns void
security definer
as
$$
declare
begin
    execute 'copy ' || quote_ident(tablename)
           || ' from ' || quote_literal(filepath) ;
end;
$$ language plpgsql;
```

It is usually a good idea to restrict the use of such a function to the intended user only:

```
revoke all on function copy_from( text, text) from public;
grant execute on function copy_from( text, text) to bob;
```

You may also want to verify that `bob` imports files only from his home directory.

Unfortunately, this solution is not completely secure against superuser privilege escalation by a malicious attacker.

This is because the execution of the `COPY` command inside the function will also cause the execution, as the

`postgres` user, of all side effects, such as the execution of any `INSERT` trigger, the computation of any `CHECK` constraint, the computation of any functional index, and more.

In other words, if the user wants to execute a given function as the superuser, it's enough to put that function inside any of the preceding functions.

There are a few workarounds for this security hole, none of which is optimal.

You can require that the table has no triggers and `CHECK` constraints and functional indexes.

Instead of running `COPY` on the given table, create a new table with the same structure using the `CREATE newtable(LIKE oldtable)` syntax. Run `COPY` against the new table, drop the old table, and give the new table the same name as the old one.

How it works...

When a function defined with `security definer` is called, PostgreSQL changes the session's rights to those of the user who defined the function while that function is being executed.

So, when `bob` executes the `copy_from(tablename, filepath)` function, `bob` is effectively promoted to a superuser when the function is running.

This behavior is similar to the `setuid` flag in Unix systems, where you can have a program that can be run by anybody (with `execute` access) as the owner of that program. It also carries similar risks.

There's more...

There are other operations that are reserved for PostgreSQL superusers, such as setting certain parameters.

Writing a debugging_info function for developers

Several of the parameters controlling logging are reserved for superusers.

If you want to allow some of your developers to set logging, you can write a function for them to do exactly that:

```
create or replace function debugging_info_on()
returns void
security definer
as
$$
begin
    set client_min_messages to 'DEBUG1';
    set log_min_messages to 'DEBUG1';
    set log_error_verbosity to 'VERBOSE';
    set log_min_duration_statement to 0;
end;
$$ language plpgsql;
revoke all on function debugging_info_on() from public;
grant execute on function debugging_info_on() to bob;
```

You may also want to have a function go back to the default logging state by assigning `DEFAULT` to all of the variables involved:

```
create or replace function debugging_info_reset()
returns void
security definer
as
$$
begin
    set client_min_messages to DEFAULT;
    set log_min_messages to DEFAULT;
    set log_error_verbosity to DEFAULT;
    set log_min_duration_statement to DEFAULT;
```



```
end;
$$ language plpgsql;
```

There's no need for `GRANT` and `REVOKE` statements here, as setting them back to the default does not pose a security risk. Instead of `SET xxx to DEFAULT`, you can also use a shorter version of the same command---namely, `RESET xxx`.

Alternatively, you can simply end your session, as the parameters are valid only for the current session.

Auditing database access

Auditing database access is a much bigger topic than you might expect because it can cover a whole range of requirements.

Getting ready

First, decide which of these you want and look at the appropriate subsection:

- Which privileges can be executed? (*Auditing access*)
- Which SQL statements were executed? (*Auditing SQL*)
- Which tables were accessed? (*Auditing table access*)
- Which data rows were changed? (*Auditing data changes*)
- Which data rows were viewed? (Not described here---usually too much data)

Auditing just SQL produces the lowest volume of audit log information, especially if you choose to log only **data definition language (DDL)**. Higher levels accumulate more information very rapidly, so you may quickly decide not to do this in practice. Read each section to understand the benefits and trade-offs.

Auditing access

Reviewing which users have access to which information is important. There are a few ways of doing this:

- Write scripts that access the database catalog tables. **Access control list (ACL)** information is not held in one place, so you have lots of places to look at:

```
postgres=# select relname, attname
from pg_attribute join pg_class c on attrelid = c.oid
where attname like '%acl%' and relkind = 'r';
```

relname	attname
pg_proc	proacl
pg_type	typacl
pg_attribute	attacl
pg_class	relacl
pg_language	lanacl
pg_largeobject_metadata	lomacl
pg_namespace	nspacl
pg_database	datacl
pg_tablespace	spcacl
pg_foreign_data_wrapper	fdwacl
pg_foreign_server	srvacl
pg_default_acl	defaclrole
pg_default_acl	defaclnamespace

```
pg_default_acl          | defaclobjtype
pg_default_acl          | defaclacl
(15 rows)
```

- Write scripts that test access conforms to a specific definition. This can be achieved by writing tests using the database information functions provided by PostgreSQL---for example, `has_table_privilege()` , `has_column_privilege()` , and so on.

Auditing SQL

There are a few ways to capture SQL statements:

- Using the PostgreSQL `log_statement` parameter---a fairly crude approach
- Using the `pgaudit` extension's `pgaudit.log` parameter
- Using EDB Postgres' audit facility

The `log_statement` parameter can be set to one of the following options:

- `ALL` : Logs all SQL statements executed at the top level
- `MOD` : Logs all SQL statements for `INSERT` , `UPDATE` , `DELETE` , and `TRUNCATE`
- `ddl` : Logs all SQL statements for DDL commands
- `NONE` : No statements logged

For example, to log all DDL commands, edit your `postgresql.conf` file to set the following:

```
log_statement = 'ddl'
```

`log_statement` SQL statements are explicitly given in top-level commands. It is still possible to perform SQL without it being logged by this setting if you use any of the **Python Languages (PLs)**, either through `DO` statements or by calling a function that includes SQL statements.

Was the change committed? It is possible to have some statements recorded in the log file but for these not to be visible in the database structure. Most DDL commands in PostgreSQL can be rolled back, so what is in the log is just a list of commands executed by PostgreSQL---not what was actually committed. The log file is not transactional, and it keeps commands that were rolled back. It is possible to display the **transaction identifier (TID)** on each log line by including `%x` in the `log_line_prefix` setting, though that has some difficulties in terms of usage.

Who made the changes? To be able to know which database user made the DDL changes, you have to make sure that this information is logged as well. In order to do so, you may have to change the `log_line_prefix` parameter to include the `%u` format string.

A recommended minimal `log_line_prefix` format string for auditing DDL is `%t %u %d` , which tells PostgreSQL to log the timestamp, database user, and database name at the start of every log line.

The `pgaudit` extension provides two levels of audit logging: session and object levels. The session level has been designed to solve some of the problems of `log_statement` . `pgaudit` will log all access, even if it is not executed as a top-level statement, and it will log all dynamic SQL. `pgaudit.log` can be set to include zero or more of the following settings:

- `READ` : `SELECT` and `COPY`
- `WRITE` : `INSERT` , `UPDATE` , `DELETE` , `TRUNCATE` , and `COPY`
- `FUNCTION` : Function calls and `DO` blocks
- `ROLE` : `GRANT` , `REVOKE` , `CREATE` / `ALTER` / `DROP` `ROLE`
- `DDL` : All DDL not already included in the `ROLE` category

- **MISC : Miscellaneous**--- `DISCARD` , `FETCH` , `CHECKPOINT` , `VACUUM` , and so on

For example, to log all DDL commands, edit your `postgresql.conf` file to set the following:

```
pgaudit.log = 'role, ddl'
```

You should set these parameters to reduce the overhead of logging:

```
pgaudit.log_catalog = off
pgaudit.log_relation = off
pgaudit.log_statement_once = on
```

The `pgaudit` extension was originally written by Simon Riggs and Abhijit Menon-Sen of *2ndQuadrant* as part of the **Advanced Analytics for Extremely Large European Databases (AXLE)** project for the **European Union (EU)**. The next version was designed by Simon Riggs and David Steele to provide object-level logging. The original version was deprecated and is no longer available. The new version is fully supported and has been adopted by the **United States Department of Defense (US DoD)** as the tool of choice for PostgreSQL audit logging.

`pgaudit` is available in binary form via `postgresql.org` repositories.

Auditing table access

`pgaudit` can log access to each table. So, if an SQL table touches three tables, then it can generate three log records, one for each table. This is important because otherwise, you might have to try to parse the SQL to find out which tables it touched, which would be difficult without access to the schema and the `search_path` settings.

To make it easier to access the audit log per table, adjust these settings:

```
pgaudit.log_relation = on
pgaudit.log_statement_once = off
```

If you want even finer-grained auditing, `pgaudit` allows you to control which tables are audited. The user cannot tell which tables are logged and which are not, so it is possible for investigators to quietly enhance the level of logging once they are alerted to a suspect or a potential attack.

First, set the role that will be used by the auditor:

```
pgaudit.role = 'investigator'
```

Then, you can define logging through the privilege system, as in the following command:

```
GRANT INSERT, UPDATE, DELETE on <vulnerable_table> TO investigator;
```

Remove it again when no longer required.

Privileges may be set at the individual column level to protect **personally identifiable information (PII)**.

Managing the audit log

Both `log_statement` and `pgaudit` output audit log records to the server log. This is the most flexible approach since the log can be routed in various ways to ensure it is safe and separate from normal log entries.

If you allow the log entries to go the normal server log, you can find all occurrences of the `CREATE` , `ALTER` , and `DROP` commands in the log:

```
postgres@hvost:~$ egrep -i "create|alter|drop" \  
/var/log/postgresql/postgresql-14-main.log
```

If log rotation is in effect, you may need to use `grep` on older logs as well.

If the available logs are too new and you haven't saved the older logs in some other place, you are out of luck.

The default settings in the `postgresql.conf` file for log rotation look like this:

```
log_filename = 'postgresql-%Y-%m-%d_%H%M%S.log'  
log_rotation_age = 1d  
log_rotation_size = 10MB
```

Log rotation can also be implemented with third-party utilities. For instance, the default behavior on Debian and Ubuntu distributions is to use the `logrotate` utility to compress or delete old log files, according to the rules specified in the `/etc/logrotate.d/postgresql-common` file.

To make sure you have the full history of DDL commands, you may want to set up a cron job that saves the DDL statements extracted from the main PostgreSQL log to a separate DDL audit log. You would still want to verify that the logs are not rotating too fast for this to catch all DDL statements.

If you use `syslog`, you can then route audit messages using various **operating system (OS)** utilities.

Alternatively, you can use the `pgaudit` analyze extension to load data back into a special audit log database. Various other options exist.

Auditing data changes

This section of the topic provides different ways of collecting changes to data contained in the tables for auditing purposes.

First, you must make the following decisions:

- Do you need to audit all changes or only some?
- What information about the changes do you need to collect? Only the fact that the data has changed?
- When recording the new value of a field or tuple, do you also need to record the old value?
- Is it enough to record which user made the change, or do you also need to record the **Internet Protocol (IP)** address and other connection information?
- How secure (tamper-proof) must the auditing information be? For example, does it need to be kept separately, away from the database being audited?

Changes can be collected using triggers that collect new (and, if needed, old) values from tuples and save them to auditing table(s). Triggers can be added to whichever tables need to be tracked.

The `audit_trigger` extension provides a handy universal audit trigger, so you do not need to write your own. It logs both old and new values of rows in any table, serialized as `hstore` data type values. The latest version and its documentation are both available at <https://github.com/2ndQuadrant/audit-trigger>.

The extension creates a schema called `audit` into which all of the other components of the audit trigger code are placed, after which we can enable auditing on specific tables.

As an example, we create standard `pgbench` tables by running the `pgbench` utility:

```
pgbench -i
```

Next, we connect to PostgreSQL as a superuser, and issue the following SQL to enable auditing on the `pgbench_account` table:

```
SELECT audit.audit_table('pgbench_accounts');
```

Now, we perform some write activity to see how it is audited. The easiest choice is to run the `pgbench` utility again, this time to perform some transactions, as follows:

```
pgbench -t 1000
```

We expect the audit trigger to have logged the actions on `pgbench_accounts`, as we have enabled auditing on it. In order to verify this, we connect again with `psql` and issue the following SQL:

```
postgres=# SELECT count(*) FROM audit.logged_actions;
count
-----
1000
(1 row)
```

This confirms that we have indeed logged 1,000 actions. Let's inspect the information that is logged by reading one row of the `logged_actions` table. First, we enable expanded mode, as the query produces a large number of columns:

```
postgres=# \x on
```

Then, we issue the following command:

```
postgres=# SELECT * FROM audit.logged_actions LIMIT 1;
-[ RECORD 1 ]-----+-----
event_id          | 1
schema_name       | public
table_name        | pgbench_accounts
reloid            | 246511
session_user_name | gianni
action_tstamp_tx  | 2017-01-18 19:48:05.626299+01
action_tstamp_stm | 2017-01-18 19:48:05.626446+01
action_tstamp_clk | 2017-01-18 19:48:05.628488+01
transaction_id    | 182578
application_name  | pgbench
client_addr       |
client_port       |
client_query      | UPDATE pgbench_accounts SET abalance = abalance + -758 WHERE aid = 86061;
action            | U
row_data          | "aid"=>"86061", "bid"=>"1", "filler"=>" ", "abalance"=>"0"
changed_fields    | "abalance"=>"-758"
statement_only    | f
```

Always knowing which user is logged in

In the preceding topics, we just logged the value of the user variable in the current PostgreSQL session to log the current user role.

This does not always mean that this particular user was the user that was actually authenticated at the start of the session. For example, a superuser can execute the `SET ROLE TO ...` command to set its current role to any other user or role in the system. As you might expect, non-superusers can only assume roles that they own.

It is possible to differentiate between the logged-in role and the assumed role using the `current_user` and `session_user` session variables:

```
postgres=# select current_user, session_user;
current_user | session_user
-----+-----
postgres    | postgres
postgres=# set role to bob;
SET
postgres=> select current_user, session_user;
current_user | session_user
-----+-----
bob          | postgres
```

Sometimes, it is desirable to let each user log in with their own username and just assume the role needed on a case-by-case basis.

Getting ready

Prepare the required group roles for different tasks and access levels by granting the necessary privileges and options.

How to do it...

Follow these steps:

1. Create user roles with no privileges and with the `NOINHERIT` option:

```
postgres=# create user alice noinherit;
CREATE ROLE
postgres=# create user bob noinherit;
CREATE ROLE
```

1. Then, create roles for each group of privileges that you need to assign:

```
postgres=# create group sales;
CREATE ROLE
postgres=# create group marketing;
CREATE ROLE
postgres=# grant postgres to marketing;
GRANT ROLE
```

1. Now, grant each user the roles they may need:

```
postgres=# grant sales to alice;
GRANT ROLE
```

```
postgres=# grant marketing to alice;
GRANT ROLE
postgres=# grant sales to bob;
GRANT ROLE
```

After you do this, the `alice` and `bob` users have no rights after login, but they can assume the sales role by executing `SET ROLE TO sales`, and `alice` can additionally assume the superuser role.

How it works...

If a role or user is created with the `NOINHERIT` option, this user will not automatically get the rights that have been granted to the other roles that have been granted to them. To claim these rights from a specific role, they have to set their role to one of those other roles.

In some sense, this works a bit like the `su` (set user) command in Unix and Linux systems---that is, you (may) have the right to become that user, but you do not automatically have the rights of the aforementioned user.

This setup can be used to get better audit information, as it lets you know who the actual user was. If you just allow each user to log in as the role needed for a task, there is no good way to know later which of the users was really logged in as `clerk1` when a **USD** \$100,000 transfer was made.

There's more...

The `SET ROLE` command works both ways---that is, you can both gain and lose privileges. A superuser can set their role to any user defined in the system. To get back to your original login role, just use `RESET ROLE`.

Not inheriting user attributes

Not all rights come to users via `GRANT` commands. Some important rights are given via user attributes (`SUPERUSER`, `CREATEDB`, and `CREATEROLE`), and these are never inherited.

If your user has been granted a superuser role and you want to use the superuser powers of this granted role, you have to use `SET ROLE To mysuperuserrole` before anything that requires the superuser attribute to be set.

In other words, the user attributes always behave as if the user had been a `NOINHERIT` user.