

- Because the RTS and CTS frames are short, a collision involving an RTS or CTS frame will last only for the duration of the short RTS or CTS frame. Once the RTS and CTS frames are correctly transmitted, the following DATA and ACK frames should be transmitted without collisions.

You are encouraged to check out the 802.11 applet in the textbook's companion Web site. This interactive applet illustrates the CSMA/CA protocol, including the RTS/CTS exchange sequence.

Although the RTS/CTS exchange can help reduce collisions, it also introduces delay and consumes channel resources. For this reason, the RTS/CTS exchange is only used (if at all) to reserve the channel for the transmission of a long DATA frame. In practice, each wireless station can set an RTS threshold such that the RTS/CTS sequence is used only when the frame is longer than the threshold. For many wireless stations, the default RTS threshold value is larger than the maximum frame length, so the RTS/CTS sequence is skipped for all DATA frames sent.

Using 802.11 as a Point-to-Point Link

Our discussion so far has focused on the use of 802.11 in a multiple access setting. We should mention that if two nodes each have a directional antenna, they can point their directional antennas at each other and run the 802.11 protocol over what is essentially a point-to-point link. Given the low cost of commodity 802.11 hardware, the use of directional antennas and an increased transmission power allow 802.11 to be used as an inexpensive means of providing wireless point-to-point connections over tens of kilometers distance. [Raman 2007] describes such a multi-hop wireless network operating in the rural Ganges plains in India that contains point-to-point 802.11 links.

6.3.3 The IEEE 802.11 Frame

Although the 802.11 frame shares many similarities with an Ethernet frame, it also contains a number of fields that are specific to its use for wireless links. The 802.11 frame is shown in Figure 6.13. The numbers above each of the fields in the frame represent the lengths of the fields in *bytes*; the numbers above each of the subfields in the frame control field represent the lengths of the subfields in *bits*. Let's now examine the fields in the frame as well as some of the more important subfields in the frame's control field.

Payload and CRC Fields

At the heart of the frame is the payload, which typically consists of an IP datagram or an ARP packet. Although the field is permitted to be as long as 2,312 bytes, it is

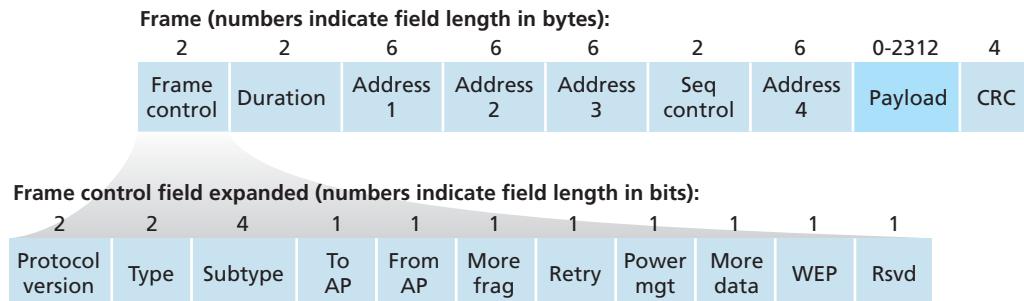


Figure 6.13 ♦ The 802.11 frame

typically fewer than 1,500 bytes, holding an IP datagram or an ARP packet. As with an Ethernet frame, an 802.11 frame includes a 32-bit cyclic redundancy check (CRC) so that the receiver can detect bit errors in the received frame. As we've seen, bit errors are much more common in wireless LANs than in wired LANs, so the CRC is even more useful here.

Address Fields

Perhaps the most striking difference in the 802.11 frame is that it has *four* address fields, each of which can hold a 6-byte MAC address. But why four address fields? Doesn't a source MAC field and destination MAC field suffice, as they do for Ethernet? It turns out that three address fields are needed for internetworking purposes—specifically, for moving the network-layer datagram from a wireless station through an AP to a router interface. The fourth address field is used when APs forward frames to each other in ad hoc mode. Since we are only considering infrastructure networks here, let's focus our attention on the first three address fields. The 802.11 standard defines these fields as follows:

- Address 2 is the MAC address of the station that transmits the frame. Thus, if a wireless station transmits the frame, that station's MAC address is inserted in the address 2 field. Similarly, if an AP transmits the frame, the AP's MAC address is inserted in the address 2 field.
- Address 1 is the MAC address of the wireless station that is to receive the frame. Thus if a mobile wireless station transmits the frame, address 1 contains the MAC address of the destination AP. Similarly, if an AP transmits the frame, address 1 contains the MAC address of the destination wireless station.

- To understand address 3, recall that the BSS (consisting of the AP and wireless stations) is part of a subnet, and that this subnet connects to other subnets via some router interface. Address 3 contains the MAC address of this router interface.

To gain further insight into the purpose of address 3, let's walk through an inter-networking example in the context of Figure 6.14. In this figure, there are two APs, each of which is responsible for a number of wireless stations. Each of the APs has a direct connection to a router, which in turn connects to the global Internet. We should keep in mind that an AP is a link-layer device, and thus neither "speaks" IP nor understands IP addresses. Consider now moving a datagram from the router interface R1 to the wireless Station H1. The router is not aware that there is an AP between it and H1; from the router's perspective, H1 is just a host in one of the subnets to which it (the router) is connected.

- The router, which knows the IP address of H1 (from the destination address of the datagram), uses ARP to determine the MAC address of H1, just as in an ordinary Ethernet LAN. After obtaining H1's MAC address, router interface R1 encapsulates the datagram within an Ethernet frame. The source address field of this frame contains R1's MAC address, and the destination address field contains H1's MAC address.

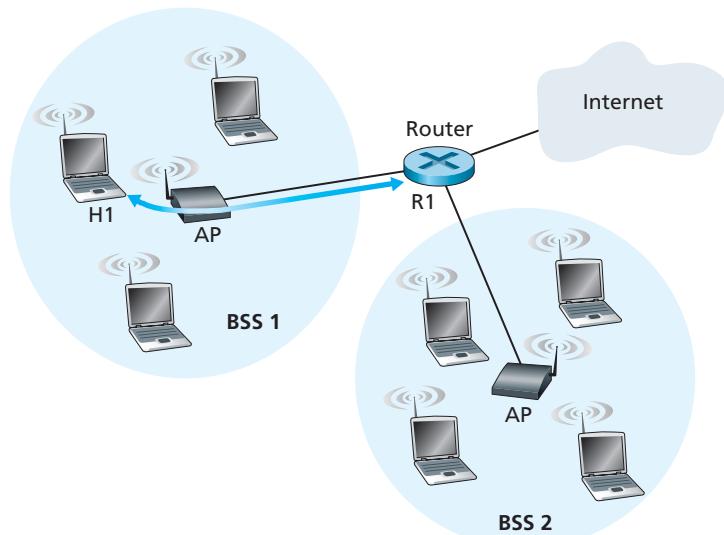


Figure 6.14 ♦ The use of address fields in 802.11 frames: Sending frames between H1 and R1

- When the Ethernet frame arrives at the AP, the AP converts the 802.3 Ethernet frame to an 802.11 frame before transmitting the frame into the wireless channel. The AP fills in address 1 and address 2 with H1's MAC address and its own MAC address, respectively, as described above. For address 3, the AP inserts the MAC address of R1. In this manner, H1 can determine (from address 3) the MAC address of the router interface that sent the datagram into the subnet.

Now consider what happens when the wireless station H1 responds by moving a datagram from H1 to R1.

- H1 creates an 802.11 frame, filling the fields for address 1 and address 2 with the AP's MAC address and H1's MAC address, respectively, as described above. For address 3, H1 inserts R1's MAC address.
- When the AP receives the 802.11 frame, it converts the frame to an Ethernet frame. The source address field for this frame is H1's MAC address, and the destination address field is R1's MAC address. Thus, address 3 allows the AP to determine the appropriate destination MAC address when constructing the Ethernet frame.

In summary, address 3 plays a crucial role for internetworking the BSS with a wired LAN.

Sequence Number, Duration, and Frame Control Fields

Recall that in 802.11, whenever a station correctly receives a frame from another station, it sends back an acknowledgment. Because acknowledgments can get lost, the sending station may send multiple copies of a given frame. As we saw in our discussion of the rdt2.1 protocol (Section 3.4.1), the use of sequence numbers allows the receiver to distinguish between a newly transmitted frame and the retransmission of a previous frame. The sequence number field in the 802.11 frame thus serves exactly the same purpose here at the link layer as it did in the transport layer in Chapter 3.

Recall that the 802.11 protocol allows a transmitting station to reserve the channel for a period of time that includes the time to transmit its data frame and the time to transmit an acknowledgment. This duration value is included in the frame's duration field (both for data frames and for the RTS and CTS frames).

As shown in Figure 6.13, the frame control field includes many subfields. We'll say just a few words about some of the more important subfields; for a more complete discussion, you are encouraged to consult the 802.11 specification [Held 2001; Crow 1997; IEEE 802.11 1999]. The *type* and *subtype* fields are used to distinguish the association, RTS, CTS, ACK, and data frames. The *to* and *from* fields are used to define the meanings of the different address fields. (These meanings change