PostgreSQL 17 Authentication: How `pg_hba.conf` Controls Access Like a Firewall

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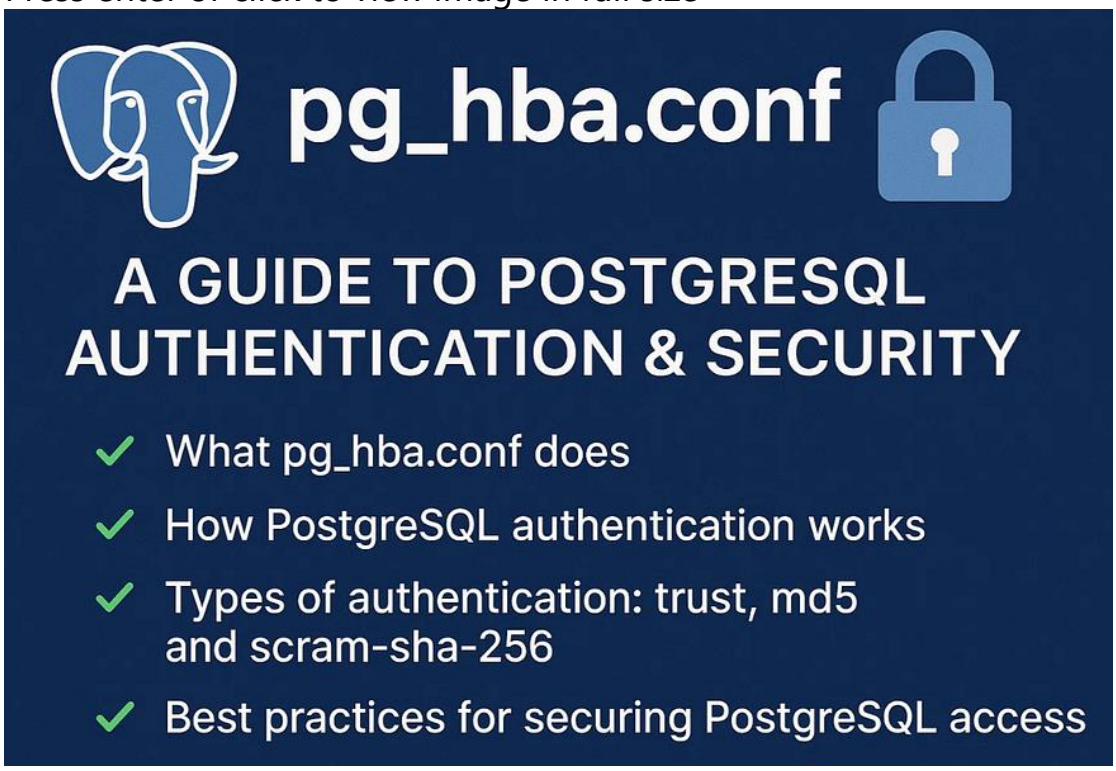

PostgreSQL is one of the most powerful open-source relational databases, but with great power comes great responsibility — especially when it comes to security. ☐

In PostgreSQL 17, **internal authentication** is managed primarily through one file:
☐ `pg_hba.conf` (PostgreSQL Host-Based Authentication)

In this guide, we'll explore:

- ✅ What `pg_hba.conf` does
- ✅ How PostgreSQL authentication works
- ✅ Types of authentication: trust, md5, and scram-sha-256
- ✅ Best practices for securing PostgreSQL access

Let's dive in ☐

☐ What is `pg_hba.conf`?

You can think of `pg_hba.conf` as **PostgreSQL's built-in firewall and access control list (ACL)**.

Whenever any client tries to connect to your PostgreSQL database, PostgreSQL reads this file to answer four questions:

1☐ **Who is trying to connect?** → (User account)
2☐ **Which database are they trying to access?** → (Database name)
3☐ **Where are they connecting from?** → (Host or IP address)
4☐ **How should they authenticate?** → (Authentication method)

If the connection request matches a rule in `pg_hba.conf`, PostgreSQL proceeds to authenticate the user accordingly. If no matching rule exists, the connection is refused.

☐ Where is `pg_hba.conf` Located in PostgreSQL?

When you're managing a PostgreSQL server, one of the most critical files you'll encounter is `pg_hba.conf` — the Host-Based Authentication configuration file that controls who can connect, from where, and how.

But where exactly is this file located? Let's break it down for you:

□ Default Location of `pg_hba.conf`

By default, PostgreSQL stores the `pg_hba.conf` file inside the server's **data directory**. This data directory is where PostgreSQL keeps all of its internal files, configurations, and database data files.

On most Linux-based installations (such as RHEL, CentOS, or Rocky Linux), if you're using PostgreSQL 17installed from the official PostgreSQL repository, the typical path will be:

```
/var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf
```

✅ Here:

- `/var/lib/pgsql/17/data/` is your data directory.
- `pg_hba.conf` is located right inside that folder.

□□ How to View the File

To view or edit the file, you typically need to switch to the `postgres` user (the dedicated PostgreSQL service account) and use any text viewer or editor:

```
sudo su - postgres
cat /var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf
```

Or to edit:

```
sudo vi /var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf
```

□ Verify the Exact Path on Your Server

Since different Linux distributions and custom PostgreSQL installations might store data in different directories, you can safely retrieve the actual path PostgreSQL is using by running:

```
SHOW hba_file;
```

Example output:

```
/var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf
```

✅ This ensures you're always editing the correct file.

□ Checking Active Authentication Methods

If you want to quickly see which authentication methods are currently configured, you can filter the file using `grep`:

```
cat /var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf | grep -i method
```

Or more simply:

```
grep -i method /var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf
```

This will return lines that mention the word “method”, helping you focus directly on the authentication configurations (like `trust`, `md5`, `scram-sha-256`, etc.).

□ Don’t Forget: Reload Configuration After Changes

After editing `pg_hba.conf`, PostgreSQL won't automatically pick up your changes until you reload the configuration:

```
SELECT pg_reload_conf();
```

Or from shell:

```
sudo systemctl reload postgresql-17
```

> ☐ This safely applies your changes without requiring a full server restart.

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✅ Quick Summary

🔧 Action	📍 Command
Check default file path	`/var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf`
Switch to postgres user	`sudo su - postgres`
View file contents	`cat /var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf`
Locate exact file	`SHOW hba_file;`
Filter for methods	`grep -i method /var/lib/pgsql/17/data/pg_hba.conf`
Apply changes	`pg_reload_conf()` or `` `systemctl reload postgresql-17` ``

> ☐ ***Pro Tip**: Always double-check your file path using `SHOW hba_file;` — especially on custom installations, Docker containers, or managed cloud PostgreSQL services.*

☐ The Structure of `pg_hba.conf` in PostgreSQL: How Access Rules Work

In PostgreSQL, your first line of defense for controlling who can access your database is a single file: `pg_hba.conf`. But to use it effectively, you need to fully understand its structure and how each column defines the rules for database access.

Let's break it down in simple terms:

☐ The 5 Columns of `pg_hba.conf`

Every rule inside `pg_hba.conf` follows a consistent five-column structure:

```
# TYPE  DATABASE  USER  ADDRESS  METHOD
```

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Each column plays a crucial role:

Column	Description
TYPE	The type of connection: `local` (Unix socket) or `host` (TCP/IP)
DATABASE	The database name this rule applies to, or `all` for any database
USER	The PostgreSQL user(s) this rule applies to, or `all` for any user
ADDRESS	The client's IP address (for `host` connections)
METHOD	The authentication method used (e.g. `trust`, `md5`, `scram-sha-256`, etc.)

☐ Let's Look at Each Column in Detail

1☐ TYPE — Connection Type

- `local`: Unix-domain socket connections (typically for connections from the same server).
- `host`: TCP/IP connections (for remote or network-based connections).
- `hostssl`: TCP/IP connections encrypted with SSL.
- `hostnossl`: TCP/IP connections without SSL encryption.

☐ Example:

```
host    all    all    127.0.0.1/32    md5
```

This rule applies to any client connecting via TCP/IP (host).

2□ DATABASE — Which Databases the Rule Applies To

- You can specify:
- A specific database name.
- The keyword `all` to apply the rule to every database.
- `pguser` to match databases named the same as the connecting user.
- `replication` to control replication connections.

☐ Example:

```
host    dvdrental    all    127.0.0.1/32    md5
```

This rule allows connections only to the `dvdrental` database.

3□ USER — Who Can Connect

- You can list:
- A single PostgreSQL username.
- Multiple usernames separated by commas.
- The keyword `all` for any user.

☐ **Example:**

```
host    all    appuser,readonlyuser    127.0.0.1/32    md5
```

This allows only `pguser` and `readonlyuser` to connect.

4□ ADDRESS — The Client's IP Address or Subnet

- For `host` rules, this defines:
- The client IP address (`127.0.0.1` for localhost).
- The subnet (`192.168.11.0/24` for entire network ranges).
- `0.0.0.0/0` for all IPv4 addresses.
- `::1/128` for IPv6 localhost.

☐ **Example:**

```
host    all    all    192.168.11.0/24    md5
```

This allows connections from any client in the `192.168.11.x` subnet.

5□ METHOD — Authentication Method

- **trust** — No password required (not secure for production).

- **reject** — Always deny access.
- **md5** — Use MD5 password-based authentication.
- **scram-sha-256** — More secure, recommended for PostgreSQL 10+.
- **peer** — Use system user identity (for `local` connections).
- **password** — Send password in clear text (rarely used anymore).

☐ **Example:**

```
host    all    all    127.0.0.1/32    scram-sha-256
```

Requires SCRAM-based authentication.

□ Full Example Rule

Let's look at a full rule:

```
host    all    all    127.0.0.1/32    md5
```

☐ This means:

- ✓ Allow connections over TCP/IP (`host`)
- ✓ For **all databases**
- ✓ From **all users**
- ✓ Only from **localhost (127.0.0.1)**
- ✓ Using **MD5 password authentication**

□□ Important Notes

- Rules are evaluated **top-down** — PostgreSQL applies the first rule that matches.
- Always place more restrictive rules first.
- After modifying `pg_hba.conf`, reload the configuration:

```
SELECT pg_reload_conf();
```

Or via shell:

```
sudo systemctl reload postgresql-17
```

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✅ Summary Table

Column	Example	Meaning
TYPE	host	TCP/IP connections
DATABASE	all	Applies to all databases
USER	all	Applies to all users
ADDRESS	127.0.0.1/32	Localhost only
METHOD	md5	Requires MD5 password

☐ **Pro tip:** `pg_hba.conf` is one of the most powerful access control tools in PostgreSQL. Mastering its structure is key to securing your database.

□ PostgreSQL Authentication Methods Explained (for Beginners & DBAs)

PostgreSQL gives you full control over who can access your database, from where, and with which credentials. This flexibility is managed using the `pg_hba.conf` file, where you configure your **authentication methods**.

Let's explore the most common authentication methods in PostgreSQL — when to use them, how to configure them, and how to test connections.

□ 1□ Trust Authentication — "No Password Mode"

Summary:

- ✓ No password required
- ☐ Extremely risky for production — use only in local development or isolated environments

How it works:
With `trust` authentication, PostgreSQL simply trusts any client connecting that matches the rule. No password is ever requested.

Example Configuration in `pg_hba.conf`:

```
host    all    all    127.0.0.1/32    trust
```

- This rule allows *any* user to connect to *any* database from `127.0.0.1` (localhost), without providing a password.

Testing the Connection:

```
psql postgres -h 127.0.0.1 -U postgres
```

☐ You will not be prompted for a password.

What happens if remote clients try?

```
psql postgres -h <remote_IP> -U postgres
```

☐ Result:

```
FATAL: pg hba.conf rejects connection for host "<remote IP>", user "postgres",
database "postgres"
```

☐ **Important Note:**
Never use `trust` in production environments unless you're 100% certain the machine is isolated and fully protected.

□ 2□ MD5 Authentication — “Password with MD5 Hashing”

Summary:

- ✓ Password required
- ✓ Uses MD5 hashing to store & verify passwords
- ☐ Safer than `trust`, but older and less secure than modern alternatives

How it works:
PostgreSQL stores user passwords hashed with MD5, and verifies them on login.

Example Configuration in `pg_hba.conf`:

```
host    all    all    127.0.0.1/32    md5
```

- Requires clients to supply a password.

Testing the Connection:

```
psql postgres -h <remote_IP> -U postgres
```

☐ Result:
You'll be prompted for a password:

```
Password for user postgres:
```

⚠ MD5 Considerations:

- MD5 is widely supported but considered outdated.
- Modern security best practices prefer stronger hashing methods like SCRAM.

☐ 3☐ SCRAM-SHA-256 Authentication — "Modern, Recommended Approach"

Summary:

- ✓ Strong, salted password hashing
- ✓ Supported since PostgreSQL 10 (default in PostgreSQL 13+)

- ✅ Recommended for production use

Why SCRAM?
SCRAM-SHA-256 (Salted Challenge Response Authentication Mechanism) uses modern hashing algorithms, adding stronger protection against password leaks and attacks.

🔐 How to Set Up SCRAM Authentication

Step 1☐: Enable SCRAM Password Encryption

Inside your PostgreSQL session:

```
SET password_encryption = 'scram-sha-256';
```

✅ This tells PostgreSQL to store future passwords using SCRAM-SHA-256.

Step 2☐: Set (or reset) the User Password

For example, to update the `postgres` user:

```
ALTER USER postgres WITH PASSWORD 'your_password';
```

☐ The new password is now hashed with SCRAM-SHA-256.

Step 3☐: Update `pg_hba.conf` to Require SCRAM

```
host    all    all    <your_IP>/32    scram-sha-256
```

- Replace `<your_IP>` with the client's IP address or subnet.

Step 4☐: Reload Configuration

```
SELECT pg_reload_conf();
```

or from shell:

```
sudo systemctl reload postgresql-17
```

Testing SCRAM Authentication:

```
psql postgres -h <remote_IP> -U postgres
```

☐ You'll be prompted for a password just like MD5 — but now using strong SCRAM-based verification.

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🚀 Quick Comparison Table

Method	Password?	Security Level	Use Case
`trust`	❌	🚫 Low	Only dev/test
`md5`	✅	⚠️ Medium	Legacy systems
`scram-sha-256`	✅	✅ High	Recommended production

☐ **Best Practice:** Always use `scram-sha-256` for production systems on PostgreSQL 17 for better password security.

□ Best Practices for PostgreSQL Authentication

- ☐ Always prefer `scram-sha-256` for production.
- ☐ Avoid `trust` outside of isolated dev machines.
- ☐ Review `pg_hba.conf` regularly as part of security audits.
- ☐ Reload configuration after changes (no downtime required).
- ☐ Restrict IP addresses carefully in the `ADDRESS` field.

□ Why PostgreSQL Authentication Is So Powerful

Unlike many databases, PostgreSQL gives you full flexibility to:

- ☐ Control every incoming connection
- ☐ Define granular user/database rules
- ☐ Combine with SSL/TLS encryption
- ☐ Prevent unauthorized access at the connection level

Properly configured `pg_hba.conf` is your **first line of defense** before authentication even happens.

□ Conclusion

PostgreSQL's internal authentication via `pg_hba.conf` is simple, powerful, and incredibly flexible — but only when used correctly.

- ✓ Use `scram-sha-256` for production-grade password security.
- ✓ Keep `pg_hba.conf` clean, specific, and locked down.
- ✓ Reload configuration after edits, no restart needed.
- ✓ Remember: Database security starts before the connection even begins!

☐ PostgreSQL 17 continues to deliver serious enterprise-grade security — but only if you configure it properly. Master `pg_hba.conf` and you master your database perimeter.