It's never been easier to expose services over HTTP. It's also never been easier to inadvertently expose security holes via those same services. This session is designed for the average developer/architect that wants a brief overview of API security without deep dives into cryptography or complex authentication frameworks. You'll learn about OAuth, API Keys, HMAC authentication and more. Don't worry if those things sound foreign; they'll be explained in a clear, practical way. Examples will use WebAPI but the talk will focus on the principles, not the tech.

Welcome to “Securing Your API Endpoints”

Opening:

In 2013, at 1:07pm on a Tuesday, the official Twitter account of the Associated Press tweeted that there had been two explosions at the White House and that Barack Obama had been injured. Over the next three minutes, the Dow dropped 150 points and erased $136 billion in equity market value.

Fortunately the hoax was quickly exposed and the market quickly regained value. But 3 minutes is an eternity in a world of high-frequency trading algorithms and malicious entities could have profited from even a short term dip like this.

That AP hack was an attack on a single account. Imagine, in our social-media-driven world, what could have happened if *lots* of Twitter accounts were hacked at the same time. Actually, scratch that, you don’t have to imagine it.

**Click for buffer**

Also in 2013, nearly 400,000 Twitter and Facebook OAuth access tokens were compromised for a social media publishing service called Buffer. Within 10 minutes, spam message ads were posted on behalf of 30,000 compromised users.

Again, this attack was quickly identified, but even in 10 minutes the damage could have far exceeded annoying spam tweets. A more sophisticated attack could have attempted to manipulate financial markets, or spread disinformation or false new stories, or spread phishing messages or links to sites compromised with additional malware or vulnerabilities.

These examples illustrate two points:

1. First, hackers are looking for vulnerabilities that scale. No one is going to expend a lot of effort to *manually* hack their way into one Pinterest account at a time, but a proliferation of APIs and cheap cloud-based processing power sets the stage for massively concurrent exploits. Today’s threat is no longer a socially awkward outcast brute-forcing BBS passwords from Mom’s basement, it’s criminal enterprises hiring professional programmers to attack tens of thousands of systems or accounts at a time. The potential costs of an attack at scale are in the millions, even *billions* of dollars.
2. Secondly, the ultimate purpose of an attack might be to string lots of small exploits into something larger. Here’s a scary fact: 87% of the US population are uniquely identified by these three pieces of data. If an attacker can get your birthdate from one source, your gender from another and you zip code from a third, that attacker can now de-anonymize you in other databases. It can use that data to stage social engineering attacks or to conduct identity theft.

The point is that security is important, and that even “low value” targets need to take it seriously. Fortunately, writing secure API endpoints isn’t that difficult and by the end of this session you’ll be prepared to start doing so.

**Click for “Rookies”**

To get started, I have a confession to make.

This story begins about 6 months ago. My team develops a fairly standard web app with session state and server rendered HTML and pages that you navigate through. We eventually want to build a mobile app, so we decided to start taking a more API-based approach with some of our newer features. We figured that if we design the website as an HTML interface on top of a bunch of APIs then we’d be in a good position to build a native app on top of those same APIs.

Of course, RESTful APIs are normally stateless, so we couldn’t rely on the server automatically knowing which user was making a given request. We had to introduce some sort of API authentication scheme to do that.

I did a little research and found a pretty confusing mess. There were websites talking about bearer tokens and nonces and “federated identity” systems. There were arguments about the correct cryographic hash functions to use when signing requests. There were two different versions of OAuth that work in entirely different ways. Everything seemed complex and I couldn’t find an approachable, easy to use guide to help me understand how everything fit together and how to choose a solution for my needs.

So… I did a bad thing. I was in a hurry and I didn’t want to invest the time to really understand the options, so I decided to roll my own authentication. And, surprise surprise, I got it wrong.

**Click for “today’s goal”**

My goal today is to give you the coherent overview I desperately needed a few months ago. I’m going to break down all of the complex terminology and compare and contrast the different techniques you can choose from. The next time that you need to choose how to secure an API endpoint, I want you to start from a place of knowledge so that you can make an educated decision and not a rookie mistake.

**Click for “What’s on the agenda”**

Here’s the basic structure of this talk.

1. First, we’re going to talk about the different concepts that go into authentication and why you, as an API author, should care about them
2. Second, we’re going to compare and contrast the options you can choose from when authenticating your API calls. We’ll cover everything from HTTP Basic Auth to OpenID Connect.
3. Finally, we’ll wrap up with some suggestions for selecting a technology to match your use case.

The majority of this talk is about concepts and principles and is platform agnostic. As we go through the different options I will talk briefly about implementation details on the IIS/.NET platform, but you should be able to get a lot out of this session even if you don’t use .NET.

**Click for “not advanced”**

Also, I want to be clear about what this session is NOT.

First, it’s not an advanced security session. If you already know the difference between OAuth 1 and 2 and which authentication options require SSL and which don’t, or if you already know how to sign a request using HMAC, then you’re probably in the wrong place. My intended audience is people who DON’T know those things, or even that those are the things they need to know about in the first place.

**Click for “not getting started”**

Second, this is not a “getting started with foo” style talk. In order to cover everything I want to cover I’m going to have to stay pretty high level.

In fact, there are things in this talk that I have no direct hands on experience with. We’re going to talk about OAuth in a bit but I’ve never personally written any OAuth code.

However, I *have* done a lot of research about OAuth and how it compares to the other options, and that’s what I’m offering to you today.

**Click for “pick your path”**

This talk is a summary of hours and hours of research, distilled into the most digestible format I could create. I want to help you narrow the universe of possibilities to the one or two technologies that are most suitable for your use case, but you’ll have to look elsewhere for a more in-depth Hello World tutorial on whatever you pick.

**Click for “Identity, Authentication and Authorization”**

The subtitle of this talk is “A practical guide to API authentication” but we’re actually going to talk about three different concepts: “identity”, “authentication”, and “authorization”. They are all related but they really are separate things and you need to differentiate them when making security decisions.

Identity is your app’s concept of a user. If the request says “yo, this is Alice, give me data on Foo #42”, the identity associated with the request is “Alice”.

Authentication is the process through which we securely associate an identity with a request and determine if the user is present on the connection or not. Authentication is how we determine if it really is Alice making the request, someone working on her behalf, or someone trying to impersonate her.

Authorization is the process through which we validate PERMISSION to perform the request.

Just because a request is authenticated doesn’t mean its authorized, and just because a request is authorized doesn’t mean its authenticated. We’ll talk about that in a minute.

**click**

Not all APIs care about all of these things. For instance, Google maps requires an API key to make requests. That key is how they establish IDENTITY, primarily for rate limiting, but they really don’t care about authorization. You don’t need any specific permission to access one address over another.

On the other hand, Twitter’s API cares about all three. It needs to know which IDENTITY is posting a tweet, it needs to AUTHENTICATE the validity of that identity, and it needs to AUTHORIZE the client to tweet on behalf of that identity.

The point is that before you can pick an authentication strategy, you need to understand what problems it needs to solve and which ones it doesn’t.

Lastly, no matter how you authenticate your API calls, your app will still be responsible for some amount of access control. At the end of the day, your custom business rules are the only thing that can know for sure if Alice is allowed to view data for Foo #42.

**Click for OAuth image**

So, how do you authenticate and secure your API endpoints? I wish it was as simple as saying "step 1. Use OAuth. There is no step 2”.

(slide: Securing your API is easy. Step 1: Use OAuth. Step 2: Profit!)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Technique** | **Requires SSL?** | **Authentication?** | **Authorization?** | **Complexity** |
| Client certificates | Yes | Yes | No | Low |
| HTTP Basic Auth | Yes | Yes | No | Low |
| Digest Authentication | No | Yes | No | Low |
| API Keys | Yes | Yes | No | Medium-Low |
| API Keys + HMAC | No | Yes | No | Medium |
| OAuth 1.0 | No | No | Yes | Medium-High |
| OAuth 2.0 | Yes | No | Yes | Medium |
| OpenId Connect | Yes | Yes | Yes | Medium-High |
| SAML |  | Yes | Yes | High |
| WS-Security |  | Yes | Yes | Nuclear |

**Click for thumbs down**

Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.

There are actually 2 different versions of OAuth, which work very differently from each other, as well as numerous other techniques you could use, each with its own set of tradeoffs. Like most things in computer science there’s no One True Way that is best in all scenarios.

**Click for list**

Some of these things are implemented at the web server, some of them use heavy frameworks, some of them require custom code. Some of these are very enterprisey, others are less so. Some of these I’ll cover in more detail than others, but when you leave here today I want you to understand how each of these things relates to the others and have a sense of how easily you could implement them.

**Click for “Secure Connection Terminology”**

Quick sidebar: if you’ve been working on the web for more than a few years, you’re probably familiar with the concept of a “secure connection”. This is where you get the little lock icon in your browser that tells you that the server is who it claims to be and that your connection hasn’t been tampered with.

You might also think that HTTPS means SSL. Thanks to the recent POODLE vulnerability, SSL is broken. TLS is the new hotness. You should not be relying on SSL to secure your API endpoints.

However, old habits die hard. I’ve been working on the web for 20 years, so if you hear me say SSL I mean TLS. And if I say TLS, what I really mean is “secure http connection between client and server”.

**Click for “Auth built into the web server”**

The simplest way to secure your API is to use the authentication features built directly into your web server platform. There are 3 such technologies supported by all major web servers and using them generally requires very little custom code. If you’re looking for a standards-based, easy-to-use solution, start with these.

**Click for “Client certificates”**

The first of these techniques is “client certificates”, which you can basically think of as “reverse SSL”. What I mean by that is this: when you make a secure connection to a web server using SSL, your browser uses the site’s security certificate to verify the identity of that website. You get that little lock icon in the browser that tells you the website you’re talking to is who it claims to be, and that you haven’t been intercepted or redirected to an imposter.

Client certs do the same thing, but in reverse. You install the certificate on your *browser*, and this allows the server to verify *your* identity when you make an API call. The same tech that tells you it’s safe to give your credit card data to an e-commerce site tells the server that a request is coming from a verified person and hasn’t been modified in transit.

The nice thing about client certs is that there are no login screens, no 3rd party redirects for authorization, every request you make is instantly authenticated.

The primary drawbacks are:

1. One, all of your users have to install security certs in their browsers. This is obviously not something you want to do for an internet scale website like Facebook.
2. Secondly, when using IIS, client certs work best when you’re authenticating against Active Directory because the tooling to link a client cert against a user account already exists. I’m sure it’s possible to link client certs against a custom user database but I haven’t done the research.

These drawbacks mean that client certs are best suited for authenticating internal APIs on a secure network.

**Click for HTTP Basic Authentication (img)**

If you don’t want to deal with client certs, the next simplest approach is HTTP Basic Authentication.

This is an internet standard, is supported by all major browsers and servers, and is easy to implement.

When the server receives a request for a protected resource, it returns 401 (Unauthorized). This response includes a header that tells the client that the server supports basic auth.

The browser then prompts the user for their username and password and repeats the request, this time sending an *Authorization* header containing a Base64 encoded username/password pair. The server then validates the credentials and allows access.

The browser will generally continue to send the header with all subsequent requests to that host so that the user isn’t repeatedly prompted for credentials.

Note that the “Authorization” header is named poorly. This is entirely about authentication, not authorization.

**Click for “setting up basic auth”**

Setting up Basic Auth is really easy. If you’re using IIS, you get authentication against a Windows domain “for free” by setting the authentication mode to “Windows” in web.config. This will authenticate against the same domain the server belongs to.

For a public-facing website you’d probably want to authenticate against your custom membership system. In ASP.NET or WebAPI you can do that by writing some simple middleware and overriding a few methods.

The benefits of Basic Auth are that

1. It’s an internet standard
2. It’s supported by all major browsers
3. It’s easy to implement, especially when you’re using the standard components of whatever platform you’re on.

**Click for drawbacks**

However, it does have some significant drawbacks.

1. First, the credentials are passed over the wire, for every request, in the clear. Remember that Base64 encoding is reversible, it isn’t encryption, so anyone that sniffs the network traffic could obtain the credentials. Basic Authentication should always be used with TLS on every secured request, because TLS encrypts the request as it travels over the wire.
2. Second, the only way to revoke access is to change the password for the entire user account. This might not be acceptable to you; imagine if every single Twitter app you use was passing your password with every API call. Not only are you trusting each app with the keys to your kingdom, but if you wanted to disconnect any one app you’d have to change your password and then go around to every other app and re-authenticate them.
3. **Click for UI** Third, as a website author you have no control over how the login prompt is displayed. This craptastic UI, in all of its modal and unstyled glory, is the price you pay for an authentication system that requires very little code.

**transition**

Because of these drawbacks, Basic Auth is best suited for server-to-server communication that bypasses the login UI and uses a secure connection on all requests. If your use case matches those requirements then this is still a viable option for you.

In fact, this is one of the techniques that data.gov uses, although they use an API key instead of a username/password. We’ll talk more about API keys in a few minutes.

**Click for “HTTP Digest Authentication” diagram**

The most significant drawback to Basic Auth is that you’re sending the primary account password over the wire w/ each request, in clear text. If you forget to use TLS, or if there’s a flaw in your platform’s TLS implementation, you end up exposing actual user passwords, which is generally considered a Bad Thing.

An alternative to Basic Authentication is called Digest Authentication. This is also an Internet standard, it’s very widely supported, and because it’s provided by the web server platform itself it’s pretty easy to implement. The main difference between Digest and Basic Auth is that with Digest, the password is hashed before being sent over the wire.

Here’s how it works:

1. The client requests a secured resource
2. The server responds with a “not authorized” response and includes a “nonce”, which is some random or unique string. Nonce is short for “number used once”.
3. The browser uses the nonce to create an MD5 hash of the username and password.
4. The browser re-requests the page passing the username and nonce in clear text, plus the hashed value.
5. The server looks up the user’s password, re-calculates the hash, and verifies the request.
6. The only way the hashes match will be if client and server used the same password to create the hash, which the server considers proof of authentication.

**Click for usage**

Since the password itself is never sent over the wire, you can safely use Digest Auth without requiring a secure connection. It was originally designed back when SSL was too computationally expensive to use on every request.

Just like with Basic Auth it just takes a few config settings to authenticate against Active Directory and you can authenticate against a custom database with a little bit of custom code.

**Click for “Digest Auth” drawbacks**

However, there are some significant drawbacks to Digest.

1. First, for every request the client must make *two* calls to the server: one to get the nonce, which again is just some random value, and a second to make the actual request. It needs the nonce to defend against replay attacks, which is something that TLS would normally do. The server isn’t *processing* the request twice, but these extra requests still contribute to overhead and latency.
2. Second, Digest has the same terrible login UI as basic
3. Third, Digest prevents the use of strong password encryption in your password database. This is because the server must have access to the raw password or its MD5 hash in order to verify the request. The use of any other one-way encryption method, such as salting and hashing passwords according to modern best practices, will prevent you from using Digest Authentication.

Given these drawbacks it’s really hard to suggest any scenario where you should use this. However, it’s important to understand the concept because we’re going to see a derivative of it a bit later.

**Click for “API Keys”**

The two solutions we’ve discussed thus far work great if you’re using IIS and have user data in Active Directory, or if you’re using the equivalent systems on some other platform. But what if those constraints are too limiting?

A popular approach is to implement a custom authentication scheme based on something called an “API Key”.

1. In general, an API Key is used in lieu of a username/password combo during authentication and authorization. Each key uniquely identifies a specific user.
2. There is no “standard” of what an API Key should look like, but in most cases API Keys are GUIDs or other random, unique string of sufficiently complex length. Because these keys are replacing a username and password combination with a single value, that value needs to be long and random enough that it’s not susceptible to brute force attacks. API Keys are designed for use by computers, not people, so readability isn’t normally a concern.
3. In some implementations, an API Key is simply a pointer to a user. In others, it represents the combination of a user and a set of permissions the key is allowed to do. There might also be other metadata associated with the key, such as an expiration date.

**Click for “Why use API Keys”**

API Keys provide a number of benefits versus password-based authentication.

First, they ensure you’re not passing actual user passwords over the wire. User-created passwords are at the heart of all authentication systems and anything that helps keep them secure is a good thing. API Keys are randomly generated and aren’t reused between sites, so compromising an API Key for someone’s Twitter account won’t help you crack their Facebook account as well.

Secondly, API Keys allow for “revocability”. Most implementations allow multiple keys to be created for a single user, one for each integration point. Since each integration gets its own key, it becomes possible to revoke access from one integration without impacting any others.

Lastly, API Keys can be implemented on any platform against any membership data source. The trade-off is that you don’t get anything “for free” like you do with client certs and basic auth, but these are fairly easy things to build.

**Click for “API Keys as passwords”**

There are two different ways that you can use API Keys to make authenticated requests.

The simplest way is to treat them like a password and pass them to the server, with each request, in plain text. This is analogous to passing a plain text password using Basic Auth and obviously requires the use of TLS on all authenticated requests.

You can pass the API Key in either the querystring or an HTTP header. Passing it in the querystring is really easy to do and is ideal for scripting scenarios where managing HTTP request headers is difficult.

Generally speaking, however, passing it via a header is preferred for two reasons.

1. First, even though both approaches send the key over the wire in plain text, using headers are more secure because any value you pass in the querystring is going to get captured in web server log files, automated error reports, etc. You wouldn’t normally want plain-text passwords to be stored in unencrypted log files, so you probably don’t want API Keys there either. In addition, if you pass the API key in a URL then you make it possible for someone to copy/paste the URL and inadvertently share the API Key.
2. Second, passing API Keys in the querystring makes it easy for them to get leaked via copy/paste. Whether or not you want someone to be able to copy a URL out of Fiddler or the F12 dev tools and then paste it to reissue an authenticated request probably depends on the sensitivity of the data your API exposes.

**Click for “API Keys as passwords”**

When you use API Keys like this they are called “bearer tokens” and are basically the same thing as a password. Whomever possesses the token may use it, and there’s little that you can do to verify the identity of the caller.

That means that at a minimum, if you’re passing an API Key in the querystring OR in a header, you must use TLS on all requests, to keep the key encrypted in transit. You’re also only as secure as the TLS implementation. If there’s a bug in your platform’s TLS library then your keys could be compromised.

Another drawback is that there’s no way to verify message integrity. If a request is made without TLS, or over a compromised TLS connection, there’s no way for your server to verify that the request you received is the same as the client sent.

In addition, you should consider salting and hashing your API keys when you store them in the database, just like you do with passwords. If you store them as text, and someone were to compromise your database, they would gain access to everything they need to impersonate every user in your system. That’s basically what happened with the Buffer attack I mentioned during my intro.

If you do end up salting and hashing your API Keys, however, it will mean you can no longer show users a list of their API Keys. That’s kind of the whole point; you want your system to be able to *verify* an API Key, but not decrypt it to plain text, just like a password.

AWS and Octopus Deploy both use API Keys in this way and have begun storing hashed keys. When you create a key on those systems you can associate it with a human readable name, so that you can differentiate your keys, but once the key is generated there is no way for the system to recover it.

**Signatures and MACs**

If you want to use a custom API Key implementation, but you’re concerned about the security limitations we just discussed, then your next option is to use them as cryptographic keys to “sign” the HTTP request.

Just like we saw with Digest Auth, the idea behind “signing” a request is that if the server and the client both know some secret value, that is not known by anyone else, then they can use it to communicate securely without ever transmitting that secret value over the wire. This makes it possible to have secure communications without TLS, and the server can guarantee the authenticity of the message. It can be sure that the request it received was exactly what the client sent and wasn’t modified in transit, even without network level encryption via TLS.

**Click for HMAC diagram**

Here’s how it works:

1. The client prepares its message, which in our case is probably a URL like [*http://foo.com/bar?bat=42*](http://foo.com/bar?bat=42)
2. The client concatenates the secret value with that message and then runs it through a hashing algorithm to generate a signature
3. The client sends the original message to the server, *plus* the signature in an authorization header.
4. The server receives the message and repeats the same hashing operation, then compares the result with the value from the authorization header. If they match, it knows the message was created by someone that knows the secret value AND that the message wasn’t modified in transit. (If either of those things is false, the server would have computed a different hash)

Technically speaking the authorization header is a type of “message authentication code”, or MAC. Since this technique uses a hash it’s called a “hash-based message authentication code”, or HMAC.

**Click for next**

HMAC has a lot of benefits:

1. No credentials (passwords or API Keys) are being sent over the wire, which makes this safe to use *without* SSL.
2. Guarantees message integrity - An attacker can’t capture one MAC value and use it to authorize a different request – each combination of request data has a unique MAC.

If you’re not using TLS, then you do have to consider a replay attack, which is where an attacker captures a request and resubmits, or replays, that *same exact request* a second or third time. As long as the message body itself is unchanged the MAC will still check out. If this matters to you, then just use TLS (which prevents someone from capturing the request) or implement an app-level nonce or timestamp to block replays or shorten the window in which they can be performed.

**Click for HMAC Drawbacks**

The primary drawback to HMAC is complexity.

The client and server must compute the hash EXACTLY the same way. This usually requires publishing a detailed set of instructions that describe how to “canonicalize” the request data by specifying how to capitalize it, how to deal with multi-valued parameters, etc.

Also, if the hash includes header values then you need to ensure that the client and server work with the same list of included headers; for instance, if some middleware network component adds a cache-control header to the request, and the server includes that header when verifying the signature, then verification is going to fail.

This screenshot is just a tiny piece of the instructions for preparing just one portion of the canonicalized string for an AWS API call.

This complexity is a necessary part of using HMAC. It’s the price you pay for the increased security that signed requests provide.

**Click for “signed requests” diagram**

In order for signing to work, the request must include at least two things:

1. The signature created with the user’s secret value
2. An indicator of the requestor’s identity

The identity indicator is required so that the server knows which user’s secret value to use when verifying the signature. The signature by itself isn’t verifiable; we need to know which key it was created with.

This means that if you build an HMAC system you’ll have to choose what to use as the identifier and what to use as the secret value.

If you’re building an internal API, or if you’re building both the client and the server, then you might be able to use a username or a user ID value as the identifier. If you’re building something for public use, you’ll probably want to use API Keys as the public identifier, just like we saw in the last section. In any case, the identifier is **public**; it needs to be something you’re OK transmitting, in clear text, over an unsecure connection.

But if we use an API Key as the public identifier, what should we use as the secret value?

**Click for “What to use”**

Whatever value you choose to use as the secret, it must be stored in plain text or using reversible encryption. The app must be able to obtain the raw value to verify the signature.

This means you can’t use the user’s password as the secret value. The whole point of secure password storage is for the app to ONLY know the encrypted password, and to prevent the app from being able to obtain the raw value.

A popular approach is to issue API Keys as a **pair** of values: a public API key, that is transmitted over the wire with each request, and a private key that is only known by the client and server.

This isn’t without drawbacks, of course. Storing the secret keys in plain text or in a reversible manner means that any attacker that compromises the database can begin to impersonate users.

If your API isn’t that sensitive, then this might be a risk you’re willing to take. After all, accessing the plain text secret keys is not the same as accessing plain text passwords. If you’re concerned about this, however, then you will probably want to implement an expiration policy for the secret keys. That way, even if the database is compromised and you’re unaware, there would be a limited window of time during which the compromised keys would be usable.

**Click for “HMAC for server clients”**

There’s one other detail of an HMAC implementation that you need to think about, and that’s how the client and server come to both know the secret value in the first place.

If you’re writing a server-based clients it’s easy. Some person, likely a programmer, obtains the API key and secret value using some secure mechanism, such as logging into a secure website over SSL, and then puts it into the source code or config file for the client. Once set, it doesn’t need to change; that specific deployed instance of the client will only ever deal with that one pair of values.

**Click for “HMAC for JS clients”**

If you’re writing a native mobile app or a JavaScript client then it’s a little more complicated. In those cases, there’s no reliable way to ensure that the client will have the key up front. Consider a PC in a computer lab; any number of users might sit down and log into that PC, so there needs to be a way to securely transmit the secret key to the PC *before* it can start making signed requests. You also want to remove the key when the user logs off.

The best way to do that is to return the key in response to a successful login, as you can see here. The browser or app collects the actual user password from the user and submits it as a POST over SSL. If the login is successful, the server returns a response that includes the key. The client then saves the key in memory or local storage of some kind. Now that the client has the key, subsequent requests can be made without SSL.

When the user logs out, just delete the key from memory.

**Click for “Temporary keys for JS clients”**

Because private keys are so important, you need to take care when exposing them to the user. The moment you store the key in a phone’s memory or in the LocalStorage of some browser you’re creating the possibility that it might get leaked or stolen.

For that reason, you might want to issue *temporary* keys for mobile app and JS clients that expire after a set period of time. This limits the window of opportunity for any attack made with compromised keys.

Here’s how it might work:

1. Client displays a login page to the user, then makes a POST to the login API, passing the password
2. Server salts and hashes the password and authenticates against the database.
3. Server creates a new API key for the user and returns it to the client, along with an expiration date.
4. Client uses the API key to securely sign requests.
5. Client also keeps track of the expiration date.
6. Before the key expires, client makes a request to a “refresh” API, passing the current API key. Server responds with a new API key and new expiration window.
7. Server rejects any request that is properly signed, but with an expired key.

**Click for “API Key Recap”**

We just covered a lot of ground, so let’s do a quick recap of API-key based authentication.

* API Keys are used instead of usernames/passwords when accessing secure resources. They uniquely identify a specific user and are sometimes associated with specific permissions
* When used like a password, the API Key is passed in a URL parameter or a header with each request to identify the requestor to the server. The requests MUST use SSL to protect the key in transit and the server SHOULD store the keys in a secure fashion.
* When API Keys are used as a cryptographic key to sign requests then each public API Key must be paired with a private key that is kept secure. However, those private keys must be stored on the server as text or using reversible encryption. Although more complex than using keys as passwords, signing requests allows us to avoid requiring SSL, proves requests weren’t modified in transit and prevents attackers from forging requests of their own.
* If you’re doing server-to-server API calls then signed requests are easy to do and provide a lot of security. If you’re writing a mobile app or JS client then it’s doable, but at some point you’ll end up storing the private key on the client. If this bothers you, consider assigning a temporary API Key upon login or just use SSL and avoid the complexity of signing requests

**OAuth**

At this point we’ve discussed some authentication schemes that are supported natively by the web server itself and we’ve discussed some custom systems based around API Keys. The next thing on the agenda is to talk about OAuth.

One of the reasons that we talked about those other thing first is because OAuth uses many of the same concepts and it’s easier to understand once you understand the underlying patterns.

We’re going to discuss a few different things: the difference between 2- and 3-party authorization, the differences between OAuth versions 1.0 and 2.0, and what it means for OAuth to be an authorization framework, not an authentication one.

**Click for “2-legged”**

OAuth was originally designed to solve the problem of “delegated authorization” in a 3-party scenario.

To explain that, let’s first review the traditional 2-party scenario you see here.

In this model, the client uses its credentials to access its resources on the server. As far as the server is concerned, the credentials belong to the client. The server doesn’t care where those credentials came from or if the client is acting on behalf of some other entity, as long as the authentication succeeds then the request is processed. In OAuth parlance, this is a “2-legged” model because there are two entities involved. One scenario that uses this model is server-to-server communication.

**Click for 3-legged**

However, there are times when the client is acting on behalf of another entity, such as a person that’s interacting with it. In those cases, client is not accessing its own resources but those of the user.

One way to implement this is for the user to share their credentials with the client so that the client can use them to make the authenticated request.

In some cases this is fine. If you log into a trusted website that uses a JS front end, and that front end makes API calls to the server on your behalf, it’s not a big deal if that front end uses your credentials. In fact, if you *log in* to a site, you’re explicitly giving that site your credentials in order to authenticate yourself.

**Click for next**

But what if you DON’T trust the client with your credentials? Let’s say you have some photos that you’ve uploaded to Facebook and you want to use an online photo printing service to create greeting cards using those photos. However, you really don’t want to trust the photo service with your Facebook username and password. In this case, the photo printing service is an **untrusted client** because you understandably don’t want to give it your full account details.

**Click for “Delegated Auth (3-legged)”**

This is the exact scenario that OAuth was originally designed for. It’s called a “3-legged” model because there are 3 parties involved: the Resource Owner that owns the content, the Service Provider that hosts the content, and the Client that accesses the content. OAuth allows the Resource Owner to authorize the Client to access the data client on their behalf, but without sharing the owner’s credentials with the client.

**transition**

There are two versions of OAuth and they solve this problem in very different ways. Unfortunately, it’s not universally accepted that the newer version is best. I’m going to talk about both versions so that you can make an informed decision between them.

OAuth 1.0 was published as an RFC in April 2010. A short while later a session fixation attack was found and version “1.0a” was published to address it. From this point forward, when I say “OAuth 1.0” I really mean “1.0a”.

**Click for OAuth diagram**

**TODO: Flow explanation**

**Click for auth screenshot**

One of the nice parts about OAuth is that it’s an *authorization* protocol, which means that it’s designed to let you precisely control what sort of access is being granted to the client. These permissions are called “scopes” in OAuth terminology and they are defined by the Resource Server.

**Click for OAuth 1.0a recap**

In technical terms, OAuth 1.0 is implemented using signed requests. Just like we saw with HMAC, this means that it does NOT require TLS and that the server can be sure that the request wasn’t modified in transit. The original 3-legged “flow” I just showed you works best with web-based clients because the user must be redirected to the resource owner’s website in order to authorize access.

There are two primary drawbacks to OAuth 1.0. The first is complexity. The OAuth handshake is very involved and there’s a lot of stuff going on to support the request signing. This is mitigated somewhat by widespread development of client libraries that handle those details for you, but the complexity of the implementation remains a consideration for OAuth 1.0.

The second drawback is that the protected resource endpoints must have access to the client credentials in order to validate the request. This is the same issue we discussed with both Digest Auth and HMAC: in order for the API server to verify the request signature it must have access to the secret keys used to sign it. This may not be a good fit for large enterprises where a centralized authorization server is used to issue credentials and a separate server is used for API calls.

(<http://hueniverse.com/2010/05/15/introducing-oauth-2-0/>)

**Click for OAuth 2.0**

OAuth 2.0 was designed to address those drawbacks, specifically the complexity issue. It is an entirely different implementation than 1.0 and the two are not compatible with each other.

The major difference between 1.0 and 2.0 is the lack of request signing. Instead, OAuth 2.0 uses “bearer tokens” that contain the authorization information. This is very similar to the “API Key” systems we discussed earlier and it means that unlike OAuth 1.0, 2.0 requires SSL for all requests. In essence, it obtains simplicity by totally delegating security to the transport layer.

OAuth 2.0 also has better support for 3-legged authorization in non-web clients and may be more enterprise friendly.

**Click for OAuth 2.0 diagram**

**TODO: Diagram explanation**

**Click for “OAuth 2.0 security concerns”**

One trade-off for this simplicity and convenience is security. Since bearer tokens are essentially a password, OAuth 2.0 requires TLS to protect them in transit.

Also, bearer tokens don’t tell you as much about the caller. With a signed request, you’re assured that the person making the request is either the resource owner or has access to the resource owner’s secret key, which by design is never transmitted over the wire with a request. With bearer tokens, all you know is that the caller has the token, but since they are passed around with each request there’s more potential for them to be leaked or stolen.

In addition, the 2.0 spec is considered a *framework* rather than a *protocol*. This means that a lot of decisions are left up to implementers, and thus interoperability suffers; if you take the code you’ve written against one OAuth 2.0 implementation and try to point it at a different authorization service by just changing a few URLs, it’s unlikely to “just work”. OAuth 1.0 offers a much higher degree of interoperability.

**Click for “road to hell**”

These aren’t trivial concerns. Eran Hammer, who was the lead author for the OAuth working group, withdrew his name from the 2.0 specification prior to launching it. He wrote a blog post called “OAuth 2.0 and the Road to Hell” in which he claimed that “OAuth 2.0 is a bad protocol. WS-\* bad”. He said that, compared to OAuth 1.0, the 2.0 spec is “more complex, less interoperable, less useful, more incomplete, and less secure”.

This article, which I highly suggest you read before choosing OAuth 2.0, goes on to say that the 2.0 spec is a designed-by-committee patchwork of compromises that mostly serves the enterprise at the expense of its two original goals of security and interoperability.

<http://hueniverse.com/2012/07/26/oauth-2-0-and-the-road-to-hell/>

**~~So which OAuth to use?~~**

~~So which version should you use?~~

~~Consider 1.0a if there’s a mature client library for your platform, you don’t want or can’t require SSL for API calls, you want to be as secure as possible, or the ability to easily switch between authorization providers is important to you.~~

~~On the other hand, consider OAuth 2 if you’re comfortable using SSL on all requests, if you’re more concerned about scaling with a single provider than interacting with multiple providers, and if you’re willing to trade a little security for a simpler implementation.~~

**Click for “road to hell #2”**

Eran Hammer also says “If you consider yourself a security expert, use 2.0 after careful examination of its features. If you are not an expert, copy the implementation of a provider you trust to get it right or make sure you have some security experts on site to figure it out for you”.

If security is really important to you, I recommend you do some additional research before settling on OAuth 2.0.

**Click for “Not authentication”**

<http://www.thread-safe.com/2012/01/problem-with-oauth-for-authentication.html>

Let’s talk about authentication vs authorization again.

OAuth is a standard for delegating authorization to an API. It’s about you, as a Resource Owner, authorizing one application to access your data from another application.

It is not an authentication protocol, for a few reasons.

**Click for “Access tokens != proof of authentication”**

User authentication is the first step in issuing an access token, so it’s tempting to think that possession of an access token is proof that authentication has occurred.

However, authentication is about two things:

1. Knowing the identity of the current user
2. Knowing if the user is present or not

An OAuth access token by itself does not give you either of those things.

It doesn’t give you the identity of the current user because, by definition, OAuth tokens are opaque to clients. A client obtains a token from the authorization server and relays it to the protected resource, but the token itself is a black box; the client can’t parse it or extract any data from it. That means the token, by itself, doesn’t tell the client anything about the user’s identity.

OAuth access tokens don’t tell you if the user is present or not because OAuth was specifically designed to allow delegated access in scenarios where the user *isn’t* present.

Without those two things, possession of an access token alone does not authenticate a user.

**“Access of protected API != proof of authentication”**

Let’s assume you have an access token that authorizes you to call an identity API to get user information. Since the token can be traded for identity information, you might think this is enough to prove the user is authenticated.

This is true when the token was created in the context of a user being authenticated via the redirect. However, in OAuth 2.0 there are other ways to get access tokens without the user being present, such as refresh tokens which allows a previously authorized client to renew their access. Also, the access token is generally usable long after the user is no longer present. If a client wants to make sure that authentication is still valid, it can’t simply re-call the identity API because neither the client nor the API has a good way to tell if the user is still there.

**Lack of audience restriction**

The last reason that OAuth should not be used for authentication is that most OAuth APIs do not provide any way to restrict access tokens to a specific client. This means it’s possible for a client to use an access token that was originally generated for a different client.

Here’s an example of why it’s dangerous to use OAuth as an authentication protocol.

Let’s say there is a website that lets people “log in with Facebook”. A user goes to Foo.com and follows the normal OAuth flow, which means they get redirected to Facebook where they **authenticate against Facebook** and then authorize Foo.com to access their data, and get redirected back to Foo.com with an access token. Foo.com then makes an API call to Facebook, gets their data, and logs them in.

In this scenario, the user happens to still be present and Foo.com can consider the user as authenticated.

**Click for example 2**

Let’s say Foo.com isn’t trustworthy. It turns around and make a request against Bar.com, which also allows Facebook logins. But instead of actually going through the authentication process to obtain a new access token, Foo just sends the access token it already has. At this point, Foo.com is “logged in” to Bar as the original user.

In this scenario, neither Foo nor Bar have any way to access more data from Facebook than were originally authorized. However, if Bar uses the presence of the access token to treat Foo as an authenticated user, then Foo might be able to access data from Bar belonging to the user.

**Click for final slide**

This is why it’s dangerous to use possession of an OAuth access token as proof that authentication has occurred. In both scenarios the website had an access token that it could exchange for data from Facebook, but in only one scenario was there as authenticated user involved.

To avoid these issues, you should only use an access token to access the specified resource. If you implicitly treat resource access as authentication, you are vulnerable.

**Transition**

To solve this problem, the access token needs some way to assert which client it is authorizing and which identity it is for. That way, only that one specific client would be able to use the token, and the token itself would serve as proof of authentication.

**Click for OpenID Connect**

That’s the basic concept behind OpenID Connect. It’s an open standard that defines an interoperable identity layer on top of OAuth 2.0. It allows you to perform authentication using OAuth by closing some of the gaps we just mentioned.

It does that by adding a few things to OAuth.

1. First, it adds ID Tokens. These are signed JSON Web Token that are given to the client app in addition to the regular OAuth access token. The ID token contains a set of claims about the authentication session including an identifier for the user, an identifier for the identity provider that issued the token, and the identifier of the client for which the token was created. It also includes information such as the token’s valid lifetime and other metadata about the authentication context. Unlike the original OAuth token, which is opaque to clients, these ID tokens have a well-known format so that clients can parse them without relying on an external service.
2. Also, systems implementing OpenID Connect must implement a standard, protected resource for returning claims about the current user. One of the reasons that interoperability suffers with OAuth 2.0 is that so many details are left up to the implementer. OpenID Connect standardizes how identity information should be shared to improve interoperability between providers.

OpenID Connect is a new standard. It is similar to, but separate from, OpenID 2.0, which is falling into disuse.

**Click for “OpenID Connect vs OAuth (for authentication)”**

Here’s a graphic depiction of the difference between OAuth and OpenID Connect.

With OAuth, the client says to the user “hey, give me a restricted access to your account, so I know you own it”. The user then gets that restricted access key and hands it over. This is the sort of pseudo-authentication we talked about earlier, where all the client knows *for sure* is that it was given a restricted access key to the account.

**Click for OpenID Connect graphic**

With OpenID Connect, the client gets the digital equivalent of a notarized referral letter confirming the user’s identity.

Both approaches give the client access to the user’s name, email, etc. But only OpenID Connect tells you that the user IS the account owner.

**Click for “Enterprisey options”**

To wrap up our review of authentication options I want to touch very briefly on two additional techniques that you might want to be aware of. These technologies are designed for SOAP web services and/or for complex authentication scenarios that occur in the enterprise.

The first is SAML, which stands for “Security Assertion Markup Language”. It’s an “XML-based, open standard data format for exchanging authentication and authorization data between parties”. Although technically designed for applications on the internet, SAML is generally used in enterprise SSO scenarios.

The second is WS-Security. In terms of complexity, this is the undisputed king. It is designed for very complex scenarios that I’m guessing no one in this room needs to deal with. All I’m going to say is that if your use cases involve things like this then you should be seeking out some professional consulting services. My freebie session at CodeMash ain’t gonna cut it for you.

**Click for “So what should YOU use?”**

OK, so I just threw a metric crapton of information at you. We talked about a lot of different authentication choices with a lot of different trade-offs. Like most things in this industry, the correct answer to this question is “it depends”.

To try and tie up all these details into a nice little package, let’s briefly recap each technology and talk about the scenarios they are best suited for.

**Click for client certificates**

Client certificates are pretty easy to use, IF you can get your users to install them. They work best when you’re securing a private API on a trusted network. In Windows land, the sweet spot is when you’re using IIS and authenticating against Active Directory.

**Click for Basic Auth**

If you can tolerate SSL on all requests, and you want to write as little code as possible, then consider Basic Authentication.

The primary drawbacks are that you’re passing actual account credentials over the wire and you have no control over the login UI. The UI concerns mean that Basic Auth may not be a good choice for a public facing website, but it’s still a viable option for server-to-server calls where you can’t use client certificates.

This approach is only as secure as your use of secure HTTP connections and the SSL/TLS implementation on your platform.

**Click for Digest Auth**

There’s really no good reason to use Digest Auth. If you can tolerate SSL on all requests then just use Basic Auth. If you can’t, then use signed requests with API keys.

**Click for API Keys as bearer tokens**

You might recall that we talked about two different ways that you can use API Keys. The first is to use them as “bearer tokens” where you pass the API Key on each request and it acts like a password of sorts.

The best place for this approach is when your app owns the identity data the API cares about and you can use SSL for all requests. If those two requirements are met then a custom API Key implementation will probably be less work than a 2-legged OAuth implementation, unless you already have OAuth experience.

Just like Basic Auth, this approach is only as secure as your use of SSL and the SSL implementation on your platform.

**Click for API Keys for request signing**

The second way to use API Keys is to pair them with a secret key and then use the secret key to sign the request. This is a good choice when your app owns the identity data and you can’t, or don’t want to, rely on SSL for security.

Remember that creating the signature can be complex and requires that the client and server create the hash in exactly the same way. This approach is probably better if you’re writing the client AND server yourself. If you’re dealing with 3rd party clients, you may find that documenting and supporting the canonicalization process is more trouble than its worth.

**Click for OAuth 1.0a**

If the identity data your API needs is owned by another party, then OAuth is the way to go. You might consider version 1.0a if you can’t or don’t want to rely on SSL for security and/or you care about client provider interoperability.

For instance, if you want to write your API one time and have it work against multiple identity providers by only changing a few config settings, then 1.0 is worth a look.

The primary drawbacks with OAuth 1.0 are the complexity involved in making signed requests and limited support for non-browser clients.

**Click for OAuth 2.0**

If you care more about flexibility and simplicity than about interoperability, and you can require SSL, then OAuth 2.0 is a better fit than 1.0. 2.0 is also a better fit if you want to support a wider set of devices and authentication flows.

The primary drawbacks to OAuth 2.0 are reduced security relative to 1.0, and less interoperability as a result of having greater flexibility. Writing a client that can interact with multiple authentication providers will be harder using 2.0 than with other options.

**Click for OpenID Connect**

If you can require SSL for all requests, and you need to verify authentication in addition to just authorization, then use OpenID Connect on top of your OAuth 2.0 implementation.

Remember that OAuth by itself is an authorization framework only, so be careful with the meaning that you ascribe to access tokens.

**Click for enterprisey**

Lastly, you should use SAML or WS-Security if you literally have no other choice, and/or have a sick love affair with XML. If you choose either of these, please seek professional help.

**Click for 3 key things**

It is commonly believed that attendees of a talk such as this will only remember 3 things. That means that most of the information I just shared with you will vanish quickly if you don’t act on it.

So here are the 3 most important things I want you to remember:

1. Requests must use EITHER SSL/TLS, OR be signed with a MAC. If you’re passing sensitive data over the wire then use SSL. If you want to verify message integrity, use a MAC.
2. If you own the identity data your API deals with, a custom API key implementation will probably be simpler than using OAuth. Your mileage may vary, but if you own the data, and if you’re writing the client as well as the server, then API Keys are probably best.
3. OAuth is for authorization, not authentication. Use OpenID Connect if you need both.

**Click for last slide**

Actually, you all look like smart people, so I want you to try really hard to remember a 4th thing, and that’s my website. From there you can get to my Github where these slides are kept and you can also get to my email, my Twitter, my LinkedIn, etc.

Please feel free to reach out with feedback, questions, comments, etc. I’d love to hear from you.

THANK YOU!