

# The PostgreSQL Administrator's Handbook

ARCHITECTURE, OPERATIONS,  
AND PERFORMANCE TUNING  
FOR PRODUCTION SYSTEMS



ARCHITECTURE  
& INTERNALS



SECURITY  
& HARDENING



BACKUP  
& RECOVERY



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# The PostgreSQL Administrator's Handbook

Architecture, Operations, and Performance Tuning for  
Production Systems

Steve T. Team Publications

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# Architecture, Operations, and Performance Tuning for Production Systems

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# Introduction: Why PostgreSQL Administration Matters

At 3:47 a.m. on a Tuesday, a production database server began to grind to a halt. The application was still accepting connections, but every query took ten seconds instead of ten milliseconds. The error logs showed repeated “could not extend file” messages, and the monitoring dashboard told the real story: disk usage had climbed to 97 percent.

The root cause turned out to be a combination of three things that should have been obvious to anyone who knew PostgreSQL well. First, autovacuum had been disabled during a migration six months earlier and never re-enabled. Second, a high-update table with no custom vacuum settings was accumulating dead tuples at an alarming rate. Third, the database administrator had not set up a monitoring alert for disk space, so nobody noticed until the application started failing.

Three hours of emergency work, two panicked Slack messages, and a lot of VACUUM FULL later, the system was back to normal. The PostgreSQL data directory was bloated with dead row versions that could no longer be reclaimed by standard vacuuming because there simply was no free disk space to play with. The team learned a lesson that costs real money: PostgreSQL is not a database you can set up and walk away from.

This book exists to prevent that three in the morning.

PostgreSQL is arguably the most advanced open-source relational database in the world. It has been under active development since 1986, and its codebase reflects decades of careful engineering. It supports complex queries, concurrent transactions, foreign keys, triggers, views, and stored procedures. It runs on every major operating system and cloud platform. It is free and open source under a permissive license. By almost any metric, it is an excellent choice for production workloads ranging from small applications to systems handling millions of transactions per day.

But PostgreSQL's defaults are conservative. The database is designed to be safe and reliable out of the box, which means it trades performance for cor-

rectness in ways that can surprise administrators who are used to proprietary databases with more aggressive default settings. A freshly installed PostgreSQL instance will not deliver optimal performance without configuration. It requires understanding of how its internals work: how processes communicate through shared memory, how MVCC manages concurrent visibility, how the write-ahead log ensures durability, and how autovacuum keeps tables healthy.

This book takes you from that first installation through production-grade operations. It is structured so that you can read it sequentially as a complete course in PostgreSQL administration, or dip into individual chapters when you need to solve a specific problem. Each chapter builds on the concepts introduced earlier, but you should be able to find practical answers without reading every word.

Here is what you will learn, in broad strokes:

**How PostgreSQL works under the hood.** Chapter 1 demystifies the architecture. You will understand why PostgreSQL creates a new operating system process for each connection, how background processes coordinate to keep the database running, and why MVCC means that updates never truly delete rows until vacuum runs. This understanding is not academic. It directly informs every configuration decision you will make later.

**How to install and configure PostgreSQL properly.** Chapter 2 covers installation from packages and source, initializing a cluster, and setting up the foundational configuration files. Chapter 3 goes deep into security: authentication methods, SSL/TLS setup, role design, and row-level security. Chapter 4 is a thorough exploration of `postgresql.conf` parameters, explaining what each one does and how to tune it for your workload.

**How to protect your data.** Chapter 5 covers backup strategies from `pg_dump` logical backups through `pg_basebackup` physical backups to continuous WAL archiving and point-in-time recovery. A backup that has not been tested is not a backup. This chapter includes procedures for actually performing restores so you can verify your strategy works when you need it.

**How to scale reads and ensure availability.** Chapter 6 covers streaming replication and logical replication, the two built-in mechanisms for copying data between servers. Chapter 7 takes this further into high-availability territory, covering Patroni for automated failover, PgBouncer for connection pooling, and HAProxy with Keepalived for load balancing and virtual IP management.

**How to make queries fast.** Chapters 8 and 9 are the heart of performance tuning. You will learn to read EXPLAIN output like a diagnostician reads an X-ray, choose the right index type for your query patterns, and tune memory and I/O parameters for your specific workload. Real examples from production systems show how small changes in configuration can yield dramatic improvements.

**How to keep PostgreSQL healthy over time.** Chapter 10 covers maintenance: autovacuum mechanics, transaction ID wraparound prevention, bloat detection, and statistics collection. These are the tasks that prevent the slow degradation that plagues databases left unattended.

**How to extend PostgreSQL's capabilities.** Chapter 11 covers declarative partitioning for managing large tables, essential built-in extensions like `pg_stat_statements` and `pg_cron`, and specialized extensions including `pgvector` for vector similarity search, TimescaleDB for time-series data, and PostGIS for geospatial queries. It also covers new features in PostgreSQL 18, including virtual generated columns, the `uuidv7()` function, and temporal constraints.

**How to automate and modernize.** Chapter 12 covers automation with Ansible and Terraform, managed PostgreSQL services on AWS RDS, Azure Database for PostgreSQL, and Google Cloud SQL, and upgrade strategies from minor to major version migrations using `pg_upgrade` and logical replication.

Throughout the book, you will find practical exercises labeled as hands-on labs. These are designed to be run against a local PostgreSQL installation so you can practice the skills you are learning. The code examples use PostgreSQL 18 syntax where it differs from PostgreSQL 17, with notes about version compatibility.

This book assumes you have basic SQL knowledge and some familiarity with Linux system administration. You do not need prior database administration experience, but you should be comfortable reading and writing SQL queries and navigating a Unix-like command line. Where the book introduces new concepts, it explains them in plain language before moving to more advanced material.

PostgreSQL has a reputation for being reliable and standards-compliant, and that reputation is earned. But reliability at scale requires active administration. The goal of this book is to give you the knowledge and confidence to manage PostgreSQL in production with the same rigor that its developers bring to every release.

Let us begin.

# Chapter 1: Understanding PostgreSQL Architecture

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## Initializing the Database Cluster with initdb

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## Understanding postgresql.conf and Its Include Chain

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## Configuring pg\_hba.conf for Access Control

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## Setting Up PostgreSQL as a System Service

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## Hands-on Lab: Install and Configure PostgreSQL

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# Chapter 3: Authentication, Security, and Role Management

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## Authentication Methods: trust, peer, md5, scram-sha-256, and Certificate-Based

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## Designing a Secure pg\_hba.conf Strategy

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## Setting Up SSL/TLS for Encrypted Connections

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## Roles, Privileges, and the Principle of Least Privilege

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## Row-Level Security and Data Encryption at Rest

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## Hands-on Lab: Security Configuration

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## WAL and Checkpoint Tuning for Write Workloads

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## Connection Management and `max_connections`

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## Autovacuum Parameters and When to Override Defaults

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## Query Planner Settings and Cost Parameters

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# Chapter 5: Backup Strategies and Point-in-Time Recovery

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## Backup Strategy Fundamentals: RPO, RTO, and Method Selection

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## Logical Backups with `pg_dump` and `pg_restore`

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## Physical Backups with `pg_basebackup`

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## Continuous Archiving and Point-in-Time Recovery (PITR)

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## Testing Restores: The Backup That Isn't Tested Is Not a Backup

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# Chapter 6: Replication and Data Distribution

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## Detecting and Managing Table and Index Bloat

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## Statistics Collection: ANALYZE and Beyond

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## Routine Maintenance Tasks and Scheduling

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## **Hands-on Lab: Maintenance and Vacuum Tuning**

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## **Chapter 10 Summary**

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# Chapter 11: Partitioning, Extensions, and Advanced Features

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## Declarative Partitioning: Range, List, and Hash Strategies

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## Partition Maintenance: ATTACH, DETACH, and Automated Management

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## Essential Built-in Extensions: pg\_stat\_statements, pg\_cron, pg\_trgm

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## Specialized Extensions: pgvector, TimescaleDB, PostGIS, Citus

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## **New Features in PostgreSQL 18: uuidv7(), Virtual Generated Columns, and More**

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## **Hands-on Lab: Partitioning and Extensions**

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## **Chapter 11 Summary**

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# Chapter 12: Automation, Cloud Deployments, and Upgrades

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## Automating PostgreSQL Administration with Ansible and Terraform

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## Managed PostgreSQL: AWS RDS, Azure Database for PostgreSQL, GCP Cloud SQL

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## Minor Version Upgrades: The Simple Path

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## Major Version Upgrades: pg\_upgrade and Logical Replication Migration

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## Troubleshooting Common Production Issues

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## Hands-on Lab: Cloud Deployment and Upgrade

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## Chapter 12 Summary

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# Conclusion

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# References

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