

Now that we're clear on what the identifier is, we can enumerate a few aspects that make up a really good one:

- Public
- Unchanging
- Unique

In a town or public road, we have a level of trust that the street sign is correct because the local authorities have governance over road signs. Back in our village, we trust Bob is Bob because we can verify him ourselves. But in the digital world, things get pretty tricky – how do you verify someone or something you've never met before? Ask them to- Prove It!

We use these two aspects of authentication almost daily when we log into systems with a user ID (identification) and password (verification). How we verify in the real world can be public, unchanging, and unique because it's very hard to forge a whole person. Or to switch all the street signs in a town. But verification online is trickier. We need to be able to provide verification of who we are to a number of entities, many of whom aren't great at protecting data. And if the same verification is re-used across entities, and one loses it, attackers could gain access to every site where it was used. This is why experts strongly recommend using unique passwords for every website/app. This goes for those challenge questions too. Which can lead to some fun calls with customer service, Oh, the town where I was born? It's: xja*21njaJK) `jjAQ^. At this point in time our father's middle name, first pet's name, town where we were born, school we went to and address history should be assumed public, using them as "secrets" for verification doesn't make sense anymore.

If one site loses your digital verification info, no worries. You only used it for that site and can create new info for the next one. What if you couldn't change your password ever? It was permanent and also got lost during the Yahoo! breach? And it was the one you use at your bank, and for your college and car loans, and your health insurance? How would you feel?

So, with that in mind, you'd probably agree that the best digital verifiers are:

- Private
- Easily changed
- Unique

Your turn

OK, now that you know the difference between identification and verification and the challenges of verification in a digital world, what do you think – Is your SSN a better identifier or verifier?