## 4 – Manipulating Files And Directories

At this point, we are ready for some real work! This chapter will introduce the following commands:

* cp – Copy files and directories
* mv – Move/rename files and directories
* mkdir – Create directories
* rm – Remove files and directories
* ln – Create hard and symbolic links

These five commands are among the most frequently used Linux commands. They are used for manipulating both files and directories.

Now, to be frank, some of the tasks performed by these commands are more easily done with a graphical file manager. With a file manager, we can drag and drop a file from one directory to another, cut and paste files, delete files, etc. So why use these old command line programs?

The answer is power and flexibility. While it is easy to perform simple file manipulations with a graphical file manager, complicated tasks can be easier with the command line programs. For example, how could we copy all the HTML files from one directory to an- other, but only copy files that do not exist in the destination directory or are newer than the versions in the destination directory? Pretty hard with a file manager. Pretty easy with the command line:

**cp -u \*.html destination**

### Wildcards

Before we begin using our commands, we need to talk about a shell feature that makes these commands so powerful. Since the shell uses filenames so much, it provides special characters to help you rapidly specify groups of filenames. These special characters are

called *wildcards*. Using wildcards (which is also known as *globbing*) allow you to select filenames based on patterns of characters. The table below lists the wildcards and what they select:

*Table 4-1: Wildcards*

**Wildcard Meaning**

\* Matches any characters

? Matches any single character

[*characters*] Matches any character that is a member of the set *characters*

[!*characters*] Matches any character that is not a member of the set

*characters*

[[:*class*:]] Matches any character that is a member of the specified

*class*

Table 4-2 lists the most commonly used character classes:

*Table 4-2: Commonly Used Character Classes*

**Character Class Meaning**

[:alnum:] Matches any alphanumeric character [:alpha:] Matches any alphabetic character [:digit:] Matches any numeral

[:lower:] Matches any lowercase letter

[:upper:] Matches any uppercase letter

Using wildcards makes it possible to construct very sophisticated selection criteria for filenames. Here are some examples of patterns and what they match:

*Table 4-3: Wildcard Examples*

**Pattern Matches**

\* All files

g\* Any file beginning with “g”

b\*.txt Any file beginning with “b” followed by any characters and ending with “.txt”

Wildcards

Data??? Any file beginning with “Data” followed by exactly three characters

[abc]\* Any file beginning with either an “a”, a “b”, or a “c”

BACKUP.[0-9][0-9][0-9] Any file beginning with “BACKUP.”

followed by exactly three numerals

[[:upper:]]\* Any file beginning with an uppercase letter

[![:digit:]]\* Any file not beginning with a numeral

\*[[:lower:]123] Any file ending with a lowercase letter or the numerals “1”, “2”, or “3”

Wildcards can be used with any command that accepts filenames as arguments, but we’ll talk more about that in Chapter 7.

**Character Ranges**

If you are coming from another Unix-like environment or have been reading some other books on this subject, you may have encountered the [A-Z] or the [a-z] character range notations. These are traditional Unix notations and worked in older versions of Linux as well. They can still work, but you have to be very careful with them because they will not produce the expected results unless properly configured. For now, you should avoid using them and use character classes instead.

**Wildcards Work In The GUI Too**

Wildcards are especially valuable not only because they are used so frequently on the command line, but are also supported by some graphical file managers.

* In **Nautilus** (the file manager for GNOME), you can select files using the Edit/Select Pattern menu item. Just enter a file selection pattern with wild- cards and the files in the currently viewed directory will be highlighted for se- lection.
* In some versions of **Dolphin** and **Konqueror** (the file managers for KDE), you can enter wildcards directly on the location bar. For example, if you want to see all the files starting with a lowercase “u” in the /usr/bin directory, enter “/usr/bin/u\*” in the location bar and it will display the result.

Many ideas originally found in the command line interface make their way into the graphical interface, too. It is one of the many things that make the Linux desk- top so powerful.

### mkdir – Create Directories

The mkdir command is used to create directories. It works like this:

**mkdir *directory...***

**A note on notation:** When three periods follow an argument in the description of a com- mand (as above), it means that the argument can be repeated, thus:

**mkdir dir1**

would create a single directory named “dir1”, while

**mkdir dir1 dir2 dir3**

would create three directories named “dir1”, “dir2”, and “dir3”.

### cp – Copy Files And Directories

The cp command copies files or directories. It can be used two different ways:

**cp *item1 item2***

to copy the single file or directory “item1” to file or directory “item2” and:

**cp *item*... *directory***

to copy multiple items (either files or directories) into a directory.

cp – Copy Files And Directories

#### Useful Options And Examples

Here are some of the commonly used options (the short option and the equivalent long option) for cp:

*Table 4-4: cp Options*

**Option Meaning**

-a, --archive Copy the files and directories and all of their attributes,

including ownerships and permissions. Normally, copies take on the default attributes of the user performing the copy.

-i, --interactive Before overwriting an existing file, prompt the user for

##### confirmation. If this option is not specified, cp will silently overwrite files.

-r, --recursive Recursively copy directories and their contents. This

option (or the -a option) is required when copying directories.

-u, --update When copying files from one directory to another, only

copy files that either don't exist, or are newer than the existing corresponding files, in the destination directory.

-v, --verbose Display informative messages as the copy is

performed.

*Table 4-5: cp Examples*

**Command Results**

cp *file1 file2* Copy *file1* to *file2*. **If *file2* exists, it is overwritten**

**with the contents of *file1*.** If *file2* does not exist, it is created.

cp -i *file1 file2* Same as above, except that if *file2* exists, the user is

prompted before it is overwritten.

cp *file1 file2 dir1* Copy *file1* and *file2* into directory *dir1*. *dir1* must already exist.

cp dir1/\* dir2 Using a wildcard, all the files in *dir1* are copied

into *dir2*. *dir2* must already exist.

cp -r *dir1 dir2* Copy the contents of directory *dir1* to directory

*dir2*. If directory *dir2* does not exist, it is created and, after the copy, will contain the same contents as directory *dir1*.

If directory *dir2* does exist, then directory *dir1* (and its contents) will be copied into *dir2*.

### mv – Move And Rename Files

The mv command performs both file moving and file renaming, depending on how it is used. In either case, the original filename no longer exists after the operation. mv is used in much the same way as cp:

**mv *item1 item2***

to move or rename file or directory “item1” to “item2” or:

**mv *item*... *directory***

to move one or more items from one directory to another.

#### Useful Options And Examples

mv shares many of the same options as cp:

*Table 4-6: mv Options*

**Option Meaning**

-i, --interactive Before overwriting an existing file, prompt the user for

##### confirmation. If this option is not specified, mv will silently overwrite files.

-u, --update When moving files from one directory to another, only

move files that either don't exist, or are newer than the existing corresponding files in the destination directory.

-v, --verbose Display informative messages as the move is

mv – Move And Rename Files

performed.

*Table 4-7: mv Examples*

**Command Results**

mv *file1 file2* Move *file1* to *file2*. **If *file2* exists, it is overwritten**

**with the contents of *file1*.** If *file2* does not exist, it is created. **In either case, *file1* ceases to exist.**

mv -i *file1 file2* Same as above, except that if *file2* exists, the user is

prompted before it is overwritten.

mv *file1 file2 dir1* Move *file1* and *file2* into directory *dir1*. *dir1* must

already exist.

mv *dir1 dir2* If directory *dir2* does not exist, create directory *dir2* and move the contents of directory *dir1* into *dir2* and delete directory *dir1*.

If directory *dir2* does exist, move directory *dir1*

(and its contents) into directory *dir2*.

### rm – Remove Files And Directories

The rm command is used to remove (delete) files and directories:

**rm *item*...**

where “item” is one or more files or directories.

#### Useful Options And Examples

Here are some of the common options for rm:

*Table 4-8: rm Options*

**Option Meaning**

-i, --interactive Before deleting an existing file, prompt the user for

##### confirmation. If this option is not specified, rm will silently delete files.

-r, --recursive Recursively delete directories. This means that if a

directory being deleted has subdirectories, delete them too. To delete a directory, this option must be specified.

-f, --force Ignore nonexistent files and do not prompt. This

overrides the --interactive option.

-v, --verbose Display informative messages as the deletion is

performed.

*Table 4-9: rm Examples*

**Command Results**

rm *file1* Delete *file1* silently.

rm -i *file1* Same as above, except that the user is prompted for confirmation before the deletion is performed.

rm -r *file1 dir1* Delete *file1* and *dir1* and its contents.

rm -rf *file1 dir1* Same as above, except that if either *file1* or *dir1* do

not exist, rm will continue silently.

**Be Careful With rm!**

Unix-like operating systems such as Linux do not have an undelete command. Once you delete something with rm, it's gone. Linux assumes you're smart and you know what you're doing.

Be particularly careful with wildcards. Consider this classic example. Let's say you want to delete just the HTML files in a directory. To do this, you type:

rm \*.html

which is correct, but if you accidentally place a space between the “\*” and the “.html” like so:

rm \* .html

the rm command will delete all the files in the directory and then complain that there is no file called “.html”.

**Here is a useful tip.** Whenever you use wildcards with rm (besides carefully checking your typing!), test the wildcard first with ls. This will let you see the

rm – Remove Files And Directories

files that will be deleted. Then press the up arrow key to recall the command and replace the ls with rm.

### ln – Create Links

The ln command is used to create either hard or symbolic links. It is used in one of two ways:

**ln *file link***

to create a hard link, and:

**ln -s *item link***

to create a symbolic link where “item” is either a file or a directory.

#### Hard Links

Hard links are the original Unix way of creating links, compared to symbolic links, which are more modern. By default, every file has a single hard link that gives the file its name. When we create a hard link, we create an additional directory entry for a file. Hard links have two important limitations:

1. A hard link cannot reference a file outside its own file system. This means a link cannot reference a file that is not on the same disk partition as the link itself.
2. A hard link may not reference a directory.

A hard link is indistinguishable from the file itself. Unlike a symbolic link, when you list a directory containing a hard link you will see no special indication of the link. When a hard link is deleted, the link is removed but the contents of the file itself continue to exist (that is, its space is not deallocated) until all links to the file are deleted.

It is important to be aware of hard links because you might encounter them from time to time, but modern practice prefers symbolic links, which we will cover next.

#### Symbolic Links

Symbolic links were created to overcome the limitations of hard links. Symbolic links work by creating a special type of file that contains a text pointer to the referenced file or

directory. In this regard, they operate in much the same way as a Windows shortcut though of course, they predate the Windows feature by many years ;-)

A file pointed to by a symbolic link, and the symbolic link itself are largely indistinguish- able from one another. For example, if you write something to the symbolic link, the ref- erenced file is written to. However when you delete a symbolic link, only the link is deleted, not the file itself. If the file is deleted before the symbolic link, the link will con- tinue to exist, but will point to nothing. In this case, the link is said to be *broken*. In many implementations, the ls command will display broken links in a distinguishing color, such as red, to reveal their presence.

The concept of links can seem very confusing, but hang in there. We're going to try all this stuff and it will, hopefully, become clear.

### Let's Build A Playground

Since we are going to do some real file manipulation, let's build a safe place to “play” with our file manipulation commands. First we need a directory to work in. We'll create one in our home directory and call it “playground.”

#### Creating Directories

The mkdir command is used to create a directory. To create our playground directory we will first make sure we are in our home directory and will then create the new directory:

[me@linuxbox ~]$ **cd**

[me@linuxbox ~]$ **mkdir playground**

To make our playground a little more interesting, let's create a couple of directories inside it called “dir1” and “dir2”. To do this, we will change our current working directory to playground and execute another mkdir:

[me@linuxbox ~]$ **cd playground**

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mkdir dir1 dir2**

Notice that the mkdir command will accept multiple arguments allowing us to create both directories with a single command.

#### Copying Files

Next, let's get some data into our playground. We'll do this by copying a file. Using the

cp command, we'll copy the passwd file from the /etc directory to the current work- ing directory:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **cp /etc/passwd .**

Notice how we used the shorthand for the current working directory, the single trailing period. So now if we perform an ls, we will see our file:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l**

total 12

drwxrwxr-x 2 me me 4096 2008-01-10 16:40 dir1

drwxrwxr-x 2 me me 4096 2008-01-10 16:40 dir2

-rw-r--r-- 1 me me 1650 2008-01-10 16:07 passwd

Now, just for fun, let's repeat the copy using the “-v” option (verbose) to see what it does:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **cp -v /etc/passwd .**

`/etc/passwd' -> `./passwd'

The cp command performed the copy again, but this time displayed a concise message indicating what operation it was performing. Notice that cp overwrote the first copy without any warning. Again this is a case of cp assuming that you know what you’re are doing. To get a warning, we'll include the “-i” (interactive) option:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **cp -i /etc/passwd .**

cp: overwrite `./passwd'?

Responding to the prompt by entering a “y” will cause the file to be overwritten, any other character (for example, “n”) will cause cp to leave the file alone.

#### Moving And Renaming Files

Now, the name “passwd” doesn't seem very playful and this is a playground, so let's change it to something else:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv passwd fun**

Let's pass the fun around a little by moving our renamed file to each of the directories and back again:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv fun dir1**

to move it first to directory dir1, then:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv dir1/fun dir2**

to move it from dir1 to dir2, then:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv dir2/fun .**

to finally bring it back to the current working directory. Next, let's see the effect of mv on directories. First we will move our data file into dir1 again:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv fun dir1**

then move dir1 into dir2 and confirm it with ls:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv dir1 dir2** [me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l dir2** total 4

drwxrwxr-x 2 me me 4096 2008-01-11 06:06 dir1 [me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l dir2/dir1**

total 4

-rw-r--r-- 1 me me 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun

Note that since dir2 already existed, mv moved dir1 into dir2. If dir2 had not ex- isted, mv would have renamed dir1 to dir2. Lastly, let's put everything back:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv dir2/dir1 .**

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **mv dir1/fun .**

#### Creating Hard Links

Now we'll try some links. First the hard links. We’ll create some links to our data file like so:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln fun fun-hard** [me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln fun dir1/fun-hard** [me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln fun dir2/fun-hard**

So now we have four instances of the file “fun”. Let's take a look our playground direc- tory:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-14 16:17 dir1 |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-14 16:17 dir2 |
| -rw-r--r-- 4 me | me | 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun |
| -rw-r--r-- 4 me | me | 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun-hard |

One thing you notice is that the second field in the listing for fun and fun-hard both contain a “4” which is the number of hard links that now exist for the file. You'll remem- ber that a file will aways have at least one link because the file's name is created by a link. So, how do we know that fun and fun-hard are, in fact, the same file? In this case, ls is not very helpful. While we can see that fun and fun-hard are both the same size (field 5), our listing provides no way to be sure. To solve this problem, we're going to have to dig a little deeper.

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l**

total 16

When thinking about hard links, it is helpful to imagine that files are made up of two parts: the data part containing the file's contents and the name part which holds the file's name. When we create hard links, we are actually creating additional name parts that all refer to the same data part. The system assigns a chain of disk blocks to what is called an *inode*, which is then associated with the name part. Each hard link therefore refers to a specific inode containing the file's contents.

The ls command has a way to reveal this information. It is invoked with the “-i” option:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -li**

total 16

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 12353539 drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-14 16:17 dir1 |
| 12353540 drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-14 16:17 dir2 |
| 12353538 -rw-r--r-- 4 me | me | 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun |

12353538 -rw-r--r-- 4 me me 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun-hard

In this version of the listing, the first field is the inode number and, as we can see, both fun and fun-hard share the same inode number, which confirms they are the same file.

#### Creating Symbolic Links

Symbolic links were created to overcome the two disadvantages of hard links: Hard links cannot span physical devices and hard links cannot reference directories, only files. Sym- bolic links are a special type of file that contains a text pointer to the target file or direc- tory.

Creating symbolic links is similar to creating hard links:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln -s fun fun-sym** [me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln -s ../fun dir1/fun-sym** [me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln -s ../fun dir2/fun-sym**

The first example is pretty straightforward, we simply add the “-s” option to create a symbolic link rather than a hard link. But what about the next two? Remember, when we create a symbolic link, we are creating a text description of where the target file is rela- tive to the symbolic link. It's easier to see if we look at the ls output:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l dir1**

total 4

-rw-r--r-- 4 me me 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun-hard

lrwxrwxrwx 1 me me 6 2008-01-15 15:17 fun-sym -> ../fun

The listing for fun-sym in dir1 shows that it is a symbolic link by the leading “l” in the first field and that it points to “../fun”, which is correct. Relative to the location of fun-sym, fun is in the directory above it. Notice too, that the length of the symbolic link file is 6, the number of characters in the string “../fun” rather than the length of the file to which it is pointing.

When creating symbolic links, you can either use absolute pathnames:

**ln -s /home/me/playground/fun dir1/fun-sym**

or relative pathnames, as we did in our earlier example. Using relative pathnames is more desirable because it allows a directory containing symbolic links to be renamed and/or moved without breaking the links.

In addition to regular files, symbolic links can also reference directories:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ln -s dir1 dir1-sym**

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l**

total 16

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir1 |
| lrwxrwxrwx 1 me | me | 4 2008-01-16 14:45 dir1-sym -> dir1 |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir2 |
| -rw-r--r-- 4 me | me | 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun |
| -rw-r--r-- 4 me | me | 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun-hard |
| lrwxrwxrwx 1 me | me | 3 2008-01-15 15:15 fun-sym -> fun |

#### Removing Files And Directories

As we covered earlier, the rm command is used to delete files and directories. We are go- ing to use it to clean up our playground a little bit. First, let's delete one of our hard links:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir1 |
| lrwxrwxrwx 1 me | me | 4 2008-01-16 14:45 dir1-sym -> dir1 |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir2 |
| -rw-r--r-- 3 me | me | 1650 2008-01-10 16:33 fun |
| lrwxrwxrwx 1 me | me | 3 2008-01-15 15:15 fun-sym -> fun |

That worked as expected. The file fun-hard is gone and the link count shown for fun is reduced from four to three, as indicated in the second field of the directory listing. Next, we'll delete the file fun, and just for enjoyment, we'll include the “-i” option to show what that does:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **rm fun-hard**

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l**

total 12

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **rm -i fun**

rm: remove regular file `fun'?

Enter “y” at the prompt and the file is deleted. But let's look at the output of ls now. No- ticed what happened to fun-sym? Since it's a symbolic link pointing to a now-nonexis- tent file, the link is *broken*:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir1 |
| lrwxrwxrwx 1 me | me | 4 2008-01-16 14:45 dir1-sym -> dir1 |
| drwxrwxr-x 2 me | me | 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir2 |
| lrwxrwxrwx 1 me | me | 3 2008-01-15 15:15 fun-sym -> fun |

Most Linux distributions configure ls to display broken links. On a Fedora box, broken links are displayed in blinking red text! The presence of a broken link is not, in and of it- self dangerous but it is rather messy. If we try to use a broken link we will see this:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l**

total 8

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **less fun-sym**

fun-sym: No such file or directory

Let's clean up a little. We'll delete the symbolic links:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **rm fun-sym dir1-sym**

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **ls -l**

total 8

drwxrwxr-x 2 me me 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir1

drwxrwxr-x 2 me me 4096 2008-01-15 15:17 dir2

One thing to remember about symbolic links is that most file operations are carried out on the link's target, not the link itself. rm is an exception. When you delete a link, it is the link that is deleted, not the target.

Finally, we will remove our playground. To do this, we will return to our home directory and use rm with the recursive option (-r) to delete playground and all of its contents, in- cluding its subdirectories:

[me@linuxbox playground]$ **cd**

[me@linuxbox ~]$ **rm -r playground**

**Creating Symlinks With The GUI**

The file managers in both GNOME and KDE provide an easy and automatic method of creating symbolic links. With GNOME, holding the Ctrl+Shift keys

while dragging a file will create a link rather than copying (or moving) the file. In KDE, a small menu appears whenever a file is dropped, offering a choice of copy- ing, moving, or linking the file.

### Summing Up

We've covered a lot of ground here and it will take a while to fully sink in. Perform the playground exercise over and over until it makes sense. It is important to get a good un- derstanding of basic file manipulation commands and wildcards. Feel free to expand on the playground exercise by adding more files and directories, using wildcards to specify files for various operations. The concept of links is a little confusing at first, but take the time to learn how they work. They can be a real lifesaver.

### Further Reading

A discussion of symbolic links: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolic_link>

**Screenshots:**

