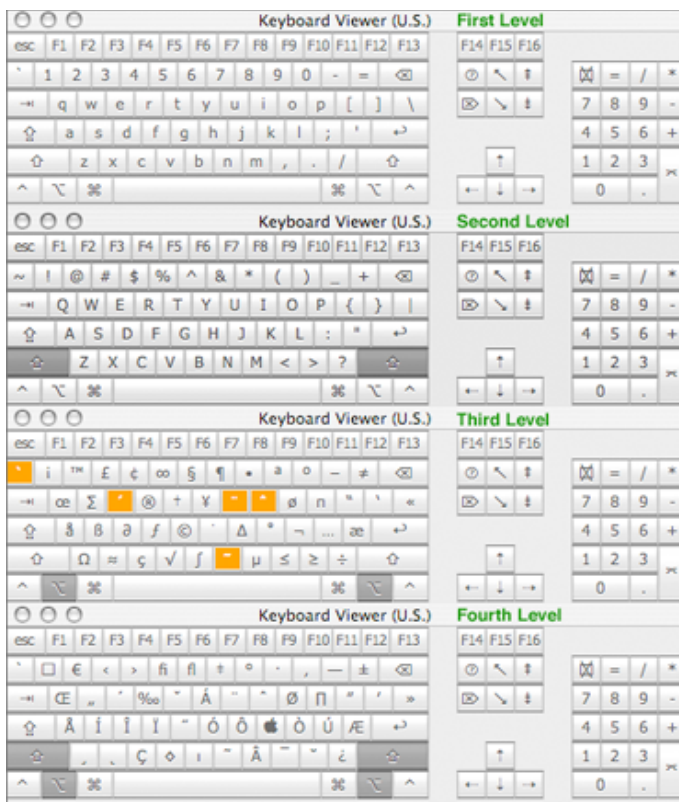


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Typing Special Characters in Linux



There are many aspects of Apple's Mac OS that I dislike, but there are others that I like very much. Ever since I switched from Apple to Linux I have searched for an Apple-like way of entering special characters. "Special characters" are any characters that are not visible on your physical keyboard. For my needs this is mostly characters that are associated with typesetting and graphic design such as em and en dashes, "curly" quotes, copyright symbols and things of that sort. Special characters can also be characters from outside of your primary language.

Apple Mac OS

In the Apple world these characters are available in a manner similar to how the SHIFT key makes uppercase letters and a small group of other characters available. Most computer users and even typewriter users are familiar with how the SHIFT key makes an alternate keyboard available. The Apple OS by default includes two additional alternate keyboards. The OPTION/ALT key and the combination of the SHIFT and OPTION/ALT keys activate these alternate keyboards. All together these modifier keys make it possible for each key on the keyboard to represent four different characters.

Linux Operating Systems

It comes as no surprise that Linux offers not one but many ways to enter special characters. Here's a list of the few that I am familiar with starting with the most inefficient:

Character Map

Use a graphic Unicode Character Map application.

Switch Keyboard Layout

Switch your keyboard layout to that of a different language or configuration with a special key or a button within your desktop interface.

Unicode Code Entry

Press a special 'insert' key and enter the Unicode entity.

Compose Key

Press a special 'compose' key and press two or four other keys that correspond to an individual character.

Dead Keys

Press a special key that activates 'dead keys'. Dead keys are keys that represent accent characters that can be combined with the basic latin alphabet to output accented

characters.

Third Level

This is the Linux world's name for the Apple Special Character method. Includes dead keys just like the Apple method.

Third Level Advantages

What's great about the Third Level method is that it includes the cross-platform defacto standard of dead keys while also providing a way to access other analphabetic and symbol characters. What's bad about this method is the perfectly meaningless name associated with it. It's not even consistent with itself since it provides a fourth as well as a third keyboard layout. Maybe I'll come up with a better name by the time I finish this post.

How Third Level Works

Third Level works in the exact same manner as I described the Apple method above except that you are not stuck using the Option/Alt key. Generally, Linux uses the alt key for a lot of key shortcuts, so taking advantage of that dust-covered Windows key might be a better choice. The Fourth Level is activated by combining your defined key with the SHIFT key, just like Apple.

How to Use Third Level in Ubuntu/Gnome

In Ubuntu using Gnome you can go to the Main Menu > System > Preferences > Keyboard

In the Keyboard Preferences window go to the Layouts tab.

Click the '+' button to add an additional keyboard layout.

Under 'Country' select United States.

Under 'Variants' select USA Macintosh. Click the 'Add' button.

You should now have at least two keyboard layouts in your 'Layouts' list. Specify USA Macintosh as your default keyboard layout.

Click the 'Other Options' button.

In the resulting window look for Third level choosers and under that choose a key that you would like to function as the modifier. I recommend using the Windows key if you have one. Lots of Linux programs use the Alt key in a manner similar to the Ctrl key, and making it the Third Level chooser could conflict with those shortcuts. When finished click the 'Close' button.

Back on the 'Keyboard Preferences' window, click the 'Apply System-Wide...' button and then 'Close.'

Your keyboard should now have a third and fourth level keyboard layout including dead keys in a manner similar to the Apple OS.

If you want, it can be very handy to have the Keyboard Indicator Gnome Panel Item available. From this panel item you can switch between different keyboard layouts as well as summon a diagram of your keyboard that displays where to find the many different characters you now have available.

I hope you have found this article helpful. Let me know if there are any aspects of the above that I have misrepresented. My goal with the above information is to provide some basic information on a topic that seems to be rarely discussed. Maybe the Linux experts already know these options as a given, but there are a lot of new users that are probably in the dark.

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[Jasper Spaans](#)

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Thanks a million for this hint, I'll be jobhopping from an OS X to a linux shop shortly, and was not able to find this info anywhere else until I found your post.

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