

# Chapter 12. Shell variables

In this chapter we learn to manage environment **variables** in the shell. These **variables** are often needed by applications.

## 12.1. \$ dollar sign

Another important character interpreted by the shell is the dollar sign **\$**. The shell will look for an **environment variable** named like the string following the **dollar sign** and replace it with the value of the variable (or with nothing if the variable does not exist).

These are some examples using \$HOSTNAME, \$USER, \$UID, \$SHELL, and \$HOME.

```
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo This is the $SHELL shell
This is the /bin/bash shell
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo This is $SHELL on computer $HOSTNAME
This is /bin/bash on computer RHELv4u3.localdomain
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo The userid of $USER is $UID
The userid of paul is 500
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo My homedir is $HOME
My homedir is /home/paul
```

## 12.2. case sensitive

This example shows that shell variables are case sensitive!

```
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo Hello $USER
Hello paul
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo Hello $user
Hello
```

## 12.3. creating variables

This example creates the variable **\$MyVar** and sets its value. It then uses **echo** to verify the value.

```
[paul@RHELv4u3 gen]$ MyVar=555
[paul@RHELv4u3 gen]$ echo $MyVar
555
[paul@RHELv4u3 gen]$
```

## 12.4. quotes

Notice that double quotes still allow the parsing of variables, whereas single quotes prevent this.

```
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ MyVar=555
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo $MyVar
555
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo "$MyVar"
555
[paul@RHELv4u3 ~]$ echo '$MyVar'
$MyVar
```

The bash shell will replace variables with their value in double quoted lines, but not in single quoted lines.

```
paul@laika:~$ city=Burtonville
paul@laika:~$ echo "We are in $city today."
We are in Burtonville today.
paul@laika:~$ echo 'We are in $city today.'
We are in $city today.
```

## 12.5. set

You can use the **set** command to display a list of environment variables. On Ubuntu and Debian systems, the **set** command will also list shell functions after the shell variables. Use **set | more** to see the variables then.

## 12.6. unset

Use the **unset** command to remove a variable from your shell environment.

```
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ MyVar=8472
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $MyVar
8472
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ unset MyVar
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $MyVar

[paul@RHEL4b ~]$
```

## 12.7. \$PS1

The **\$PS1** variable determines your shell prompt. You can use backslash escaped special characters like **\u** for the username or **\w** for the working directory. The **bash** manual has a complete reference.

In this example we change the value of **\$PS1** a couple of times.

```
paul@deb503:~$ PS1=prompt
prompt
promptPS1='prompt '
prompt
prompt PS1='> '
>
> PS1='\u@\h$ '
paul@deb503$
paul@deb503$ PS1='\u@\h:\W$'
```

To avoid unrecoverable mistakes, you can set normal user prompts to green and the root prompt to red. Add the following to your **.bashrc** for a green user prompt:

```
# color prompt by paul
RED='\[\033[01;31m\]'
WHITE='\[\033[01;00m\]'
GREEN='\[\033[01;32m\]'
BLUE='\[\033[01;34m\]'
export PS1="${debian_chroot:+($debian_chroot)}$GREEN\u$WHITE@$BLUE\h$WHITE\w\$ "
```

## 12.8. \$PATH

The **\$PATH** variable is determines where the shell is looking for commands to execute (unless the command is builtin or aliased). This variable contains a list of directories, separated by colons.

```
[[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $PATH
/usr/kerberos/bin:/usr/local/bin:/bin:/usr/bin:
```

The shell will not look in the current directory for commands to execute! (Looking for executables in the current directory provided an easy way to hack PC-DOS computers). If you want the shell to look in the current directory, then add a `.` at the end of your `$PATH`.

```
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ PATH=$PATH:.
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $PATH
/usr/kerberos/bin:/usr/local/bin:/bin:/usr/bin:.
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$
```

Your path might be different when using `su` instead of **`su -`** because the latter will take on the environment of the target user. The root user typically has `/sbin` directories added to the `$PATH` variable.

```
[paul@RHEL3 ~]$ su
Password:
[root@RHEL3 paul]# echo $PATH
/usr/local/bin:/bin:/usr/bin:/usr/X11R6/bin
[root@RHEL3 paul]# exit
[paul@RHEL3 ~]$ su -
Password:
[root@RHEL3 ~]# echo $PATH
/usr/local/sbin:/usr/local/bin:/sbin:/bin:/usr/sbin:/usr/bin:
```

## 12.9. env

The **`env`** command without options will display a list of **exported variables**. The difference with **`set`** with options is that **`set`** lists all variables, including those not exported to child shells.

But **`env`** can also be used to start a clean shell (a shell without any inherited environment). The **`env -i`** command clears the environment for the subshell.

Notice in this screenshot that **`bash`** will set the **`$SHELL`** variable on startup.

```
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ bash -c 'echo $SHELL $HOME $USER'
/bin/bash /home/paul paul
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ env -i bash -c 'echo $SHELL $HOME $USER'
/bin/bash
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$
```

You can use the **env** command to set the **\$LANG**, or any other, variable for just one instance of **bash** with one command. The example below uses this to show the influence of the **\$LANG** variable on file globbing (see the chapter on file globbing).

```
[paul@RHEL4b test]$ env LANG=C bash -c 'ls File[a-z]'\nFilea Fileb\n[paul@RHEL4b test]$ env LANG=en_US.UTF-8 bash -c 'ls File[a-z]'\nFilea FileA Fileb FileB\n[paul@RHEL4b test]$
```

## 12.10. export

You can export shell variables to other shells with the **export** command. This will export the variable to child shells.

```
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ var3=three\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ var4=four\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ export var4\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $var3 $var4\nthree four\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ bash\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $var3 $var4\nfour
```

But it will not export to the parent shell (previous screenshot continued).

```
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ export var5=five\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $var3 $var4 $var5\nfour five\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ exit\nexit\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo $var3 $var4 $var5\nthree four\n[paul@RHEL4b ~]$
```

## 12.11. delineate variables

Until now, we have seen that bash interprets a variable starting from a dollar sign, continuing until the first occurrence of a non-alphanumeric character that is not an underscore. In some situations, this can be a problem. This issue can be resolved with curly braces like in this example.

```
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ prefix=Super
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo Hello $prefixman and $prefixgirl
Hello  and
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$ echo Hello ${prefix}man and ${prefix}girl
Hello Superman and Supergirl
[paul@RHEL4b ~]$
```

## 12.12. unbound variables

The example below tries to display the value of the **\$MyVar** variable, but it fails because the variable does not exist. By default the shell will display nothing when a variable is unbound (does not exist).

```
[paul@RHELv4u3 gen]$ echo $MyVar

[paul@RHELv4u3 gen]$
```

There is, however, the **nounset** shell option that you can use to generate an error when a variable does not exist.

```
paul@laika:~$ set -u
paul@laika:~$ echo $Myvar
bash: Myvar: unbound variable
paul@laika:~$ set +u
paul@laika:~$ echo $Myvar

paul@laika:~$
```

In the bash shell **set -u** is identical to **set -o nounset** and likewise **set +u** is identical to **set +o nounset**.