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How to Install a Desktop (GUI) on an Ubuntu Server

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Introduction

Want to add a desktop environment after you install Ubuntu Server? It can be easily installed.

By default, Ubuntu Server does not include a Graphical User Interface (GUI). A GUI takes up system resources (memory and processor) that are used for server-oriented tasks. However, certain tasks and applications are more manageable and work better in a GUI environment.

This guide will show you how to install a desktop (GUI) graphical interface on your Ubuntu server.

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HOW TO INSTALL GUI ON UBUNTU SERVER



Prerequisites

- A server running Ubuntu Linux Server
- Access to a user account with **sudo** or **root** privileges
- The **apt-get** package manager, included by default

Update Repositories and Packages

Start by updating the repositories and package lists:

```
sudo apt-get update && sudo apt-get upgrade
```

Press **Y** and hit **Enter** when asked if you want to continue.

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```
dejan@ubuntu_server:~$ sudo apt-get update && sudo apt-get upgrade
[sudo] password for dejan:
Hit:1 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic InRelease
Get:2 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-updates InRelease [88.7 kB]
Get:3 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-backports InRelease [74.6 kB]
Get:4 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-security InRelease [88.7 kB]
Get:5 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-updates/main amd64 Packages [617 kB]
Get:6 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-updates/main Translation-en [229 kB]
Get:7 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-updates/universe amd64 Packages [936 kB]
Get:8 http://archive.ubuntu.com/ubuntu bionic-updates/universe Translation-en [274 kB]
Fetched 2,306 kB in 10s (229 kB/s)
Reading package lists... Done
Reading package lists... Done
Building dependency tree
Reading state information... Done
Calculating upgrade... Done
The following packages will be upgraded:
  apport apt-utils bash cloud-init console-setup console-setup-linux debconf debconf-i18n
  gcc-8-base initramfs-tools initramfs-tools-bin initramfs-tools-core keyboard-configuration
  landscape-common language-selector-common libapt-inst2.0 libapt-pkg5.0 libgcc1 libglib2.0-0
  libglib2.0-data libidn11 libldap-2.4-2 libldap-common libnss-systemd libnuma1 libpam-modules
  libpam-modules-bin libpam-runtime libpam-systemd libpam0g libparted2 libpci3 libplymouth4
  libseccomp2 libstdc++6 libsystemd0 libudev1 libunistring2 libx11-6 libx11-data libxcb1
  linux-firmware login netplan.io nplan open-iscsi open-vm-tools parted passwd pciutils plymouth
  plymouth-theme-ubuntu-text python-apt-common python3-apport python3-apt python3-debconf
  python3-distro-info python3-distupgrade python3-gi python3-httplib2 python3-problem-report
  python3-update-manager snapd systemd systemd-sysv ubuntu-minimal ubuntu-release-upgrader-core
  ubuntu-server ubuntu-standard udev ufw uidmap unattended-upgrades update-manager-core ureadahead
76 upgraded, 0 newly installed, 0 to remove and 0 not upgraded.
Need to get 101 MB of archives.
After this operation, 370 kB disk space will be freed.
Do you want to continue? [Y/n]
```

This ensures you are working with the most recent software updates.

Next, install the **tasksel** manager utility:

```
sudo apt-get install tasksel
```

Now it is time to install a desktop environment.



Note: **Tasksel** is a utility for installing multiple related packages at once. See the [documentation](#) for more details.

Select a Display Manager

A display manager is an application that starts the display server, launches the desktop, and manages user authentication. The default **GDM3** (used with [KDE-Plasma](#)) is a resource-

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By default, only one display manager can manage a server. They can run simultaneously only if configured to manage different servers. This article assumes that you will be using a single default display manager.

To install a specific display manager, use the **apt-get** package manager:

To install SLiM:

```
sudo apt-get install slim
```

To install LightDM:

```
sudo apt-get install lightdm
```

The **SDDM** display manager can be installed from the **tasksel** menu during the KDE installation.

Choose a GUI for Your Server

GNOME is the default GUI for most Ubuntu installations and is (loosely) based on the Apple ecosystem.

KDE is another popular GUI, (loosely) based on the Microsoft ecosystem. If you want to have the look and feel of a regular Ubuntu system, choose one of these desktop environments.

GNOME

To install GNOME, start by launching **tasksel**:

```
tasksel
```

A colorful interface will launch. Use the arrow key to scroll down the list and find **Ubuntu desktop**.

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You can choose to install one or more of the following predefined collections of software.

Choose software to install:

```
[ ] Lubuntu minimal installation (Qt part)
[ ] Lubuntu Qt Desktop (Qt part)
[ ] Mail server
[ ] PostgreSQL database
[ ] Print server
[ ] Samba file server
[ ] Ubuntu Budgie desktop
[*] Ubuntu desktop
[ ] Ubuntu MATE minimal
[ ] Ubuntu MATE desktop
[ ] Audio recording and editing suite
[ ] Ubuntu Studio desktop
[ ] Ubuntu Studio minimal DE installation
[ ] Large selection of font packages
[ ] 2D/3D creation and editing suite
[ ] Photograph touchup and editing suite
[ ] Publishing applications
[ ] Video creation and editing suite
[ ] Vanilla GNOME desktop
[ ] Xubuntu minimal installation
[ ] Xubuntu desktop
[ ] OpenSSH server
[ ] Basic Ubuntu server
```

<OK>

Use the **Space** key to select it, press **Tab** to select **OK** at the bottom, then press **Enter**.

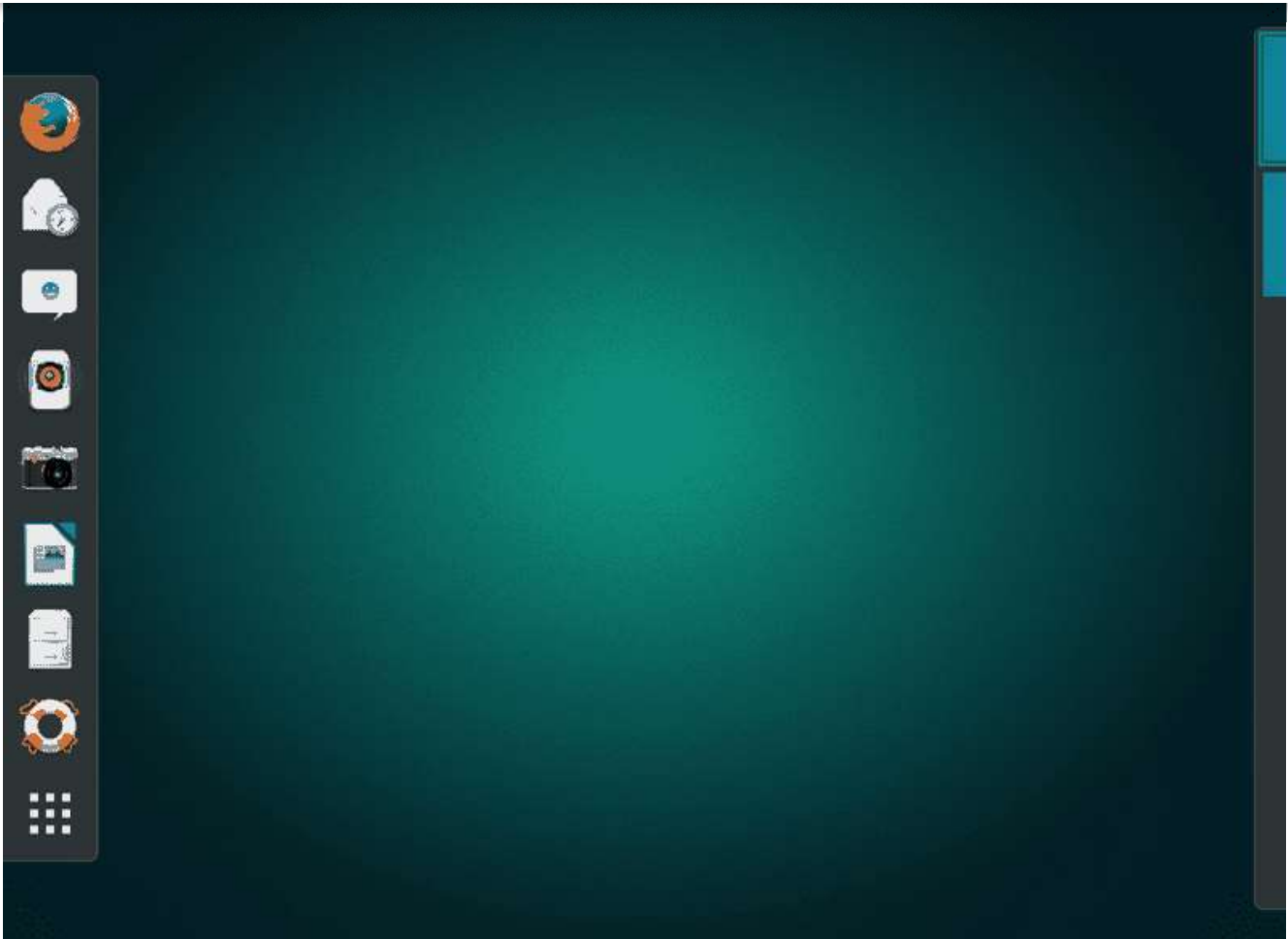
The system will install the software and reboot, giving you a graphical login screen generated by your default display manager. In our case, it's SLiM.

Enter your **login credentials**. Use **F1** to switch between GUIs if you have multiple interfaces installed.

Below is a typical GNOME UI environment.

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Note: If you are running Arch Linux, learn [how to install and customize GNOME on Arch Linux](#).

KDE Plasma

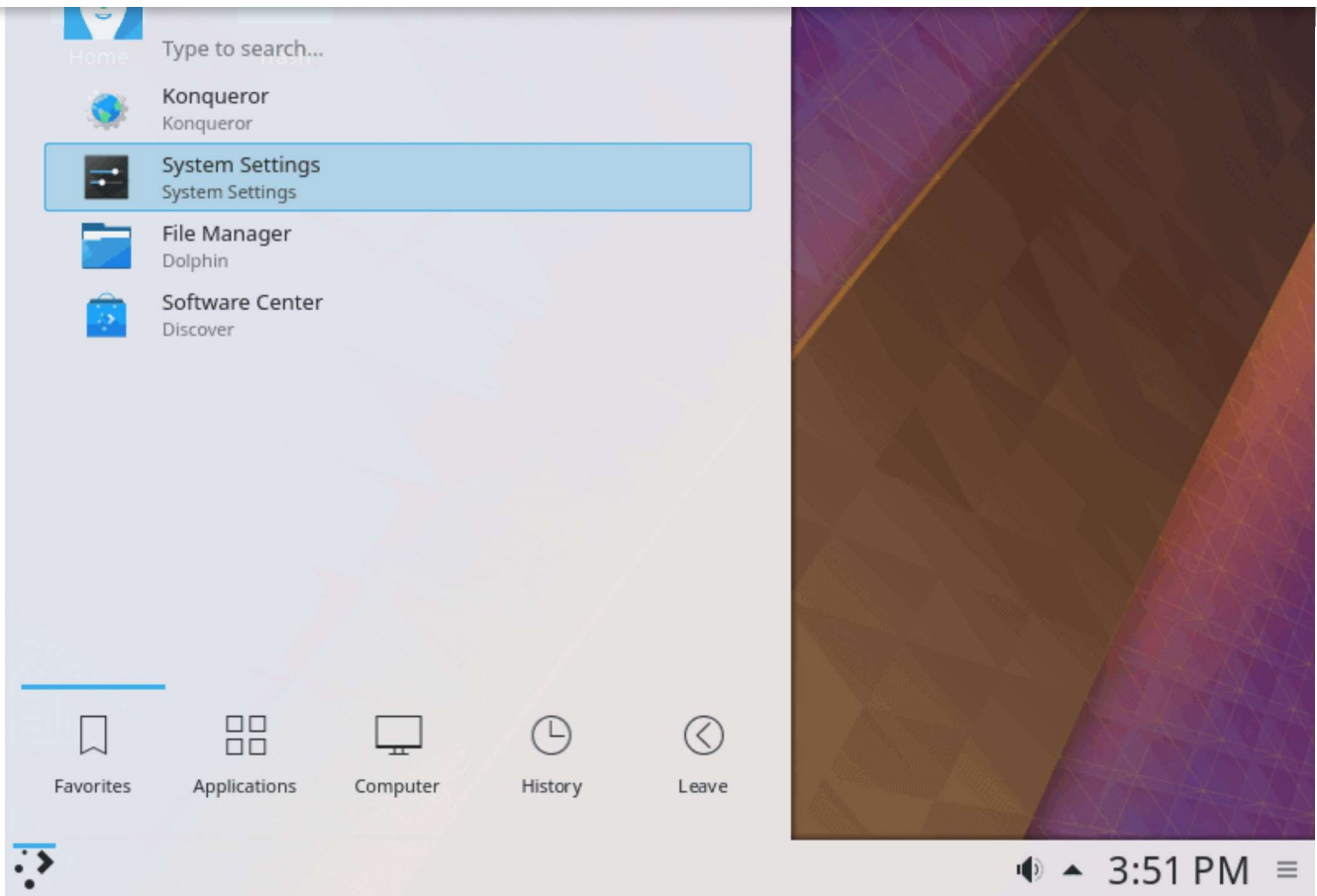
To install KDE Plasma, use the following Linux command:

```
sudo apt-get install kde-plasma-desktop
```

You may be prompted during the installation to select a default display manager. Use the arrow keys to make a selection, then press **Enter**.

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Launch KDE Plasma with the command:

```
sudo service display_manager start
```

Instead of **display_manager**, type the name of the display manager you have installed (e.g., SLiM, lightDM, SDDM). Enter your credentials and log in.



Note: These traditional Ubuntu Server GUI applications require substantial system resources. They may impact the functionality of your server. If you need to maximize your server resources, consider one of the lighter GUI applications listed below.

Mate Core Server Desktop

Mate is a popular and lightweight graphical interface. Install it by executing the following command:

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Wait for tasksel to complete the action. Once complete, launch the desktop interface with the command:

```
sudo service display_manager start
```

Instead of **display_manager**, type the name of the display manager you have installed (e.g., SLiM, lightDM, SDDM). You'll be prompted to log in.



To exit the GUI, open the command line and enter:

```
sudo service display_manager stop
```

Note: You may need to press **Ctrl-Alt-F1** to get back to the server's command

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Lubuntu Core Server Desktop

Lubuntu is a very lightweight GUI. Use this application if you need a graphical interface, but want to minimize the impact on system memory and processor.

To install Lubuntu, enter the following:

```
sudo tasksel install lubuntu-core
```

Alternately, you can install from the **tasksel** menu with the command:

```
tasksel
```

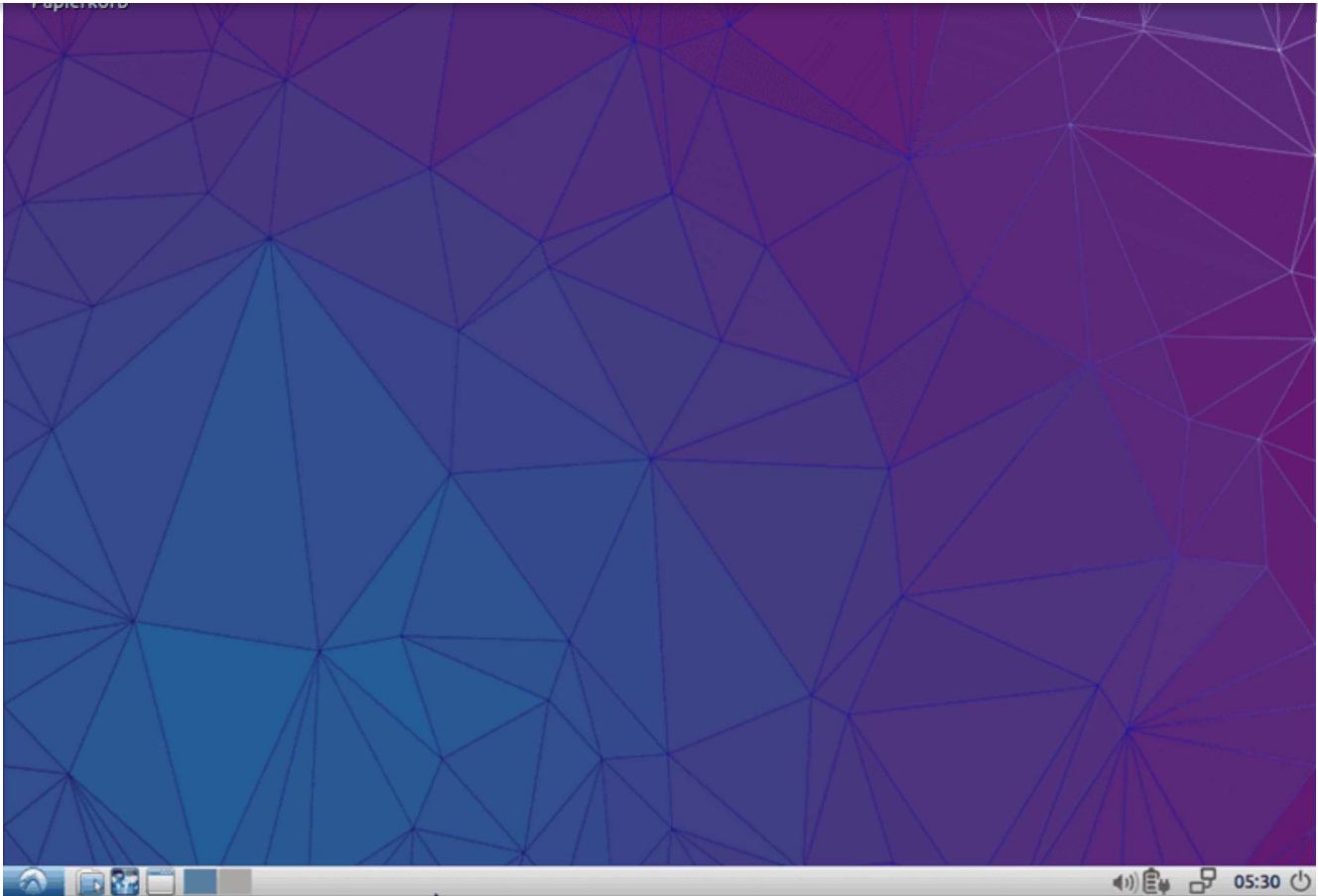
Use the arrow keys to highlight the Lubuntu GUI you want to use. Press the **Space** bar to select, then **Tab** to the **OK** button and press **Enter**.

Launch the GUI with:

```
sudo service display_manager start
```

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Exit the GUI by opening a terminal window and entering the following:

```
sudo service display_manager stop
```

Xubuntu Server Core Desktop

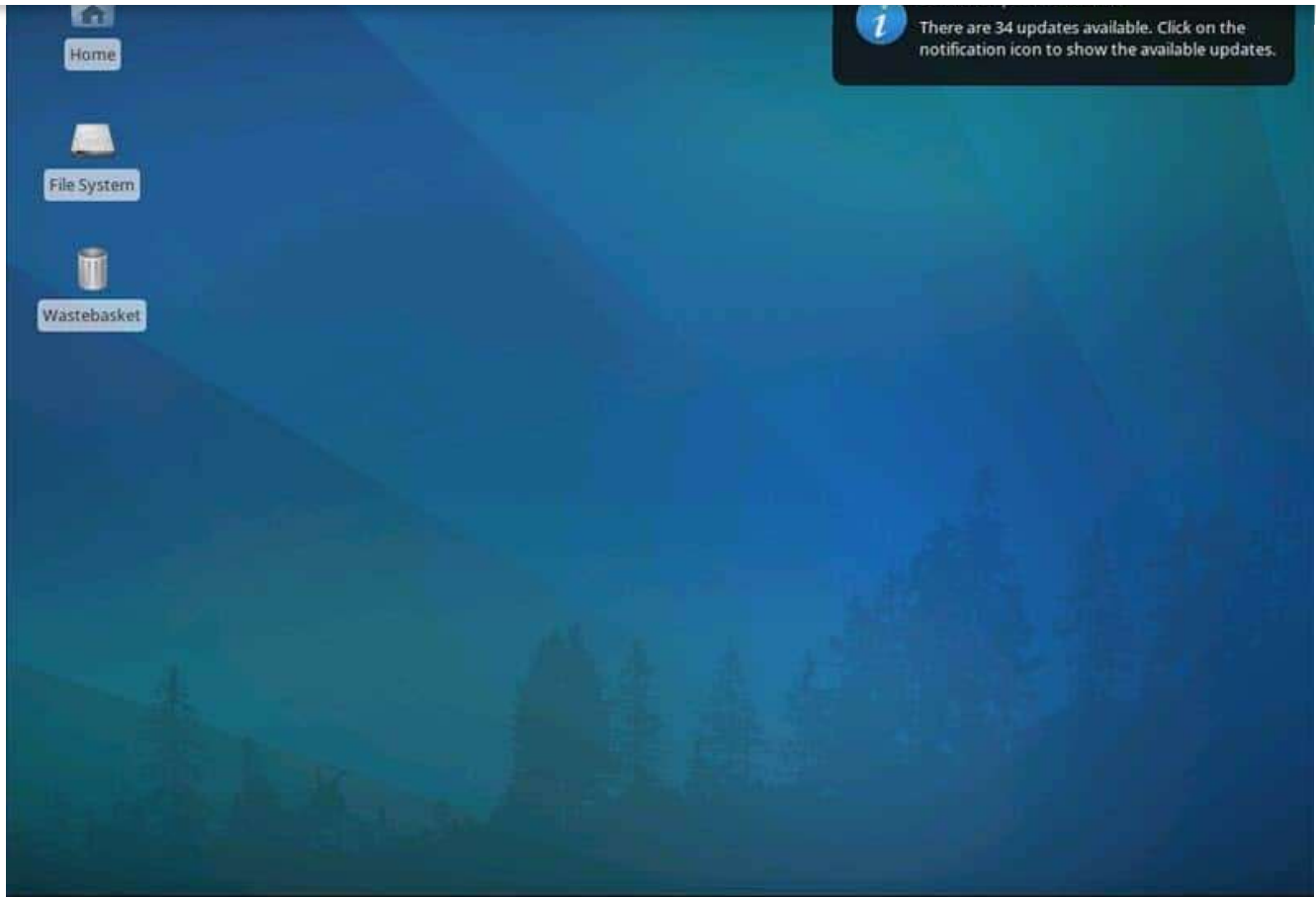
Xubuntu is a derivative of Ubuntu that uses the Xfce desktop environment.

Install Xubuntu by entering the following:

```
sudo taskel install xubuntu-core
```

Launch it by entering:

```
sudo service display_manager start
```

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Xfce Desktop

The Xfce desktop environment can be used by itself. It's designed to be responsive, lightweight and user-friendly.

Install Xfce with the following:

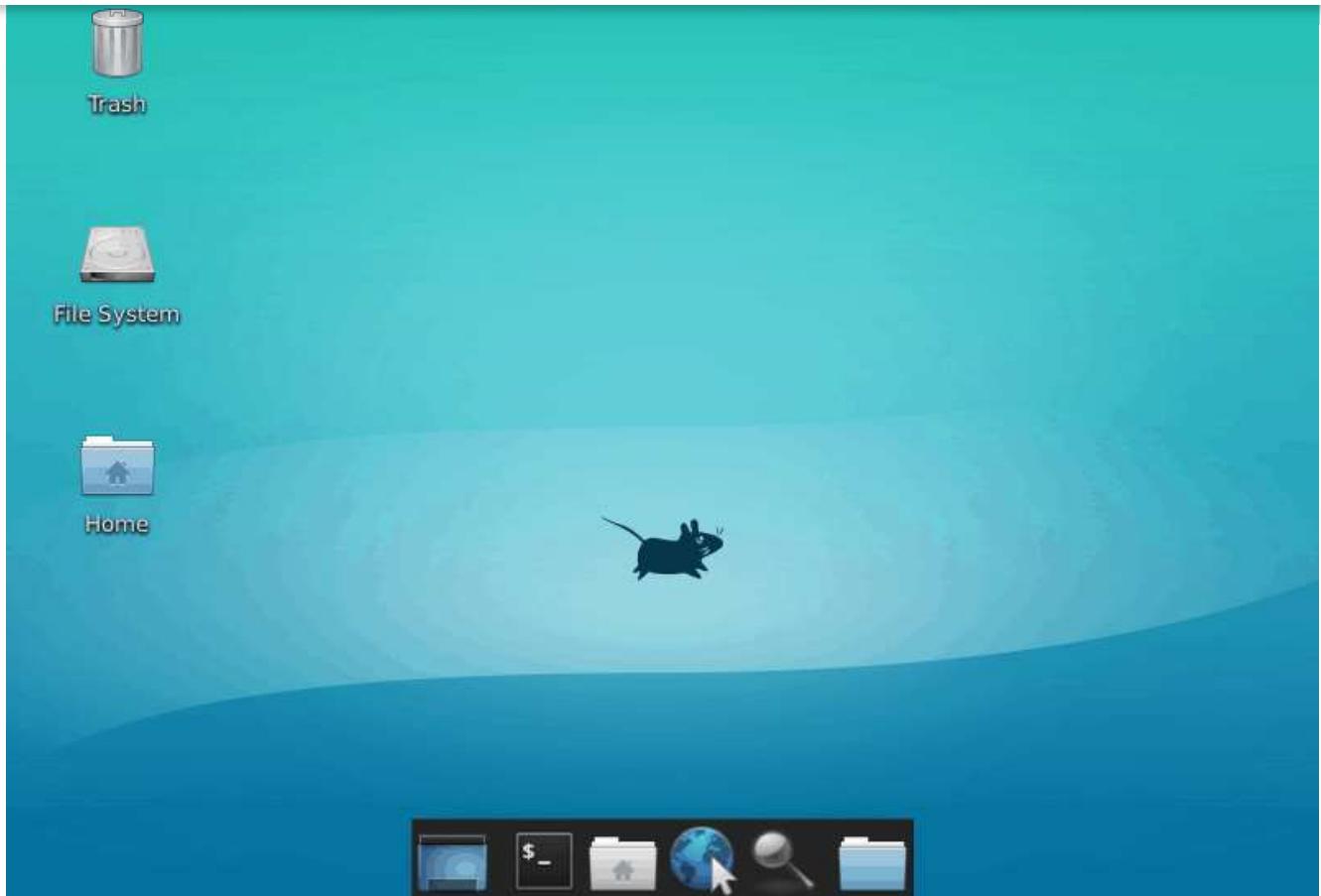
```
sudo apt-get install xfce4 slim
```

Launch Xfce by entering:

```
sudo service slim start
```

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Note: The Xfce GUI is compatible with the SLiM display manager only.

Switching Between GUIs

If you have several GUIs installed you can select which one to use. Once you start your display manager, you will be prompted to log in. However, that screen also allows you to pick which GUI you want to enable.

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The image above represents SLiM's login screen. Switch between GUIs by pressing **F1**. The interface will toggle between sessions (or GUIs). Log in once you toggle to the GUI of your choice.

Conclusion

There are many GUI desktops available for Ubuntu Server. Most can be installed using the **apt -get** package manager or the **tasksel** tool, as detailed in this guide.

If you've worked extensively with conventional operating systems, it can be challenging to have to work in a command-line interface. Fortunately, Ubuntu – like many Linux systems – is open-source, thus there are many GUIs available.

Was this article helpful?

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