

21

FORMATTING OUTPUT



In this chapter, we continue our look at text-related tools, focusing on programs that are used to format text output, rather than changing the text itself. These tools are often used to prepare text for eventual printing, a subject that we will cover in the next chapter. We will cover the following programs in this chapter:

`n1` Number lines

`fold` Wrap each line to a specified length

`fmt` A simple text formatter

`pr` Prepare text for printing

`printf` Format and print data

`groff` A document formatting system

Simple Formatting Tools

We'll look at some of the simple formatting tools first. These are mostly single-purpose programs and a bit unsophisticated in what they do, but they can be used for small tasks and as parts of pipelines and scripts.

nl—Number Lines

The `nl` program is a rather arcane tool used to perform a simple task. It numbers lines. In its simplest use, it resembles `cat -n`.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ nl distros.txt | head
```

1	SUSE	10.2	12/07/2006
2	Fedora	10	11/25/2008
3	SUSE	11.0	06/19/2008
4	Ubuntu	8.04	04/24/2008
5	Fedora	8	11/08/2007
6	SUSE	10.3	10/04/2007
7	Ubuntu	6.10	10/26/2006
8	Fedora	7	05/31/2007
9	Ubuntu	7.10	10/18/2007
10	Ubuntu	7.04	04/19/2007

Like `cat`, `nl` can accept either multiple files as command line arguments or standard input. However, `nl` has a number of options and supports a primitive form of markup to allow more complex kinds of numbering.

`nl` supports a concept called *logical pages* when numbering. This allows `nl` to reset (start over) the numerical sequence when numbering. Using options, it is possible to set the starting number to a specific value and, to a limited extent, its format. A logical page is further broken down into a header, body, and footer. Within each of these sections, line numbering may be reset and/or be assigned a different style. If `nl` is given multiple files, it treats them as a single stream of text. Sections in the text stream are indicated by the presence of some rather odd-looking markup added to the text, as described in [Table 21-1](#).

Table 21-1: `nl` Markup

Markup	Meaning
--------	---------

<code>\:\:\:</code>	Start of logical page header
---------------------	------------------------------

Markup	Meaning
\:\:	Start of logical page body
\:	Start of logical page footer

Each of the markup elements listed in **Table 21-1** must appear alone on its own line. After processing a markup element, `nl` deletes it from the text stream.

Table 21-2 lists the common options for `nl`.

Table 21-2: Common `nl` Options

Option	Meaning
<code>-b style</code>	Set body numbering to <i>style</i> , where <i>style</i> is one of the following: <code>a</code> = Number all lines. <code>t</code> = Number only non-blank lines. This is the default. <code>n</code> = None. <i>pregexp</i> = Number only lines matching basic regular expression <i>regexp</i> .
<code>-f style</code>	Set footer numbering to <i>style</i> . The default is <code>n</code> (none).
<code>-h style</code>	Set header numbering to <i>style</i> . The default is <code>n</code> (none).
<code>-i number</code>	Set page numbering increment to <i>number</i> . The default is 1.

Option	Meaning
--------	---------

-n <i>format</i>	Sets numbering format to <i>format</i> , where <i>format</i> is one of the following: <code>ln</code> = Left justified, without leading zeros. <code>rn</code> = Right justified, without leading zeros. This is the default. <code>rz</code> = Right justified, with leading zeros.
-p	Do not reset page numbering at the beginning of each logical page.
-s <i>string</i>	Add <i>string</i> to the end of each line number to create a separator. The default is a single tab character.
-v <i>number</i>	Set the first line number of each logical page to <i>number</i> . The default is 1.
-w <i>width</i>	Set the width of the line number field to <i>width</i> . The default is 6.

Admittedly, we probably won't be numbering lines that often, but we can use `nl` to look at how we can combine multiple tools to perform more complex tasks. We will build on our work in the previous chapter to produce a Linux distributions report. Since we will be using `nl`, it will be useful to include its header/body/footer markup. To do this, we will add it to the `sed` script from the previous chapter. Using our text editor, we will change the script as follows and save it as *distros-nl.sed*:

```
# sed script to produce Linux distributions report
```

```
1 i\  
\\:\\:~\\:~\  
\  
Linux Distributions Report\  

```

```

\
Name      Ver.  Released\
----      -
\\:\\:
s/^([0-9]\{2\})\([0-9]\{2\})\([0-9]\{4\})$^3-1-2/
$ a\
\\:\
\
End Of Report

```

The script now inserts the `nl` logical page markup and adds a footer at the end of the report. Note that we had to double up the backslashes in our markup because they are normally interpreted as an escape character by `sed`.

Next, we'll produce our enhanced report by combining `sort`, `sed`, and `nl`.

```

[me@linuxbox ~]$ sort -k 1,1 -k 2n distros.txt | sed -f distros-
nl.sed | nl

```

Linux Distributions Report

	Name	Ver.	Released
	----	----	-----
1	Fedora	5	2006-03-20
2	Fedora	6	2006-10-24
3	Fedora	7	2007-05-31
4	Fedora	8	2007-11-08
5	Fedora	9	2008-05-13
6	Fedora	10	2008-11-25
7	SUSE	10.1	2006-05-11
8	SUSE	10.2	2006-12-07
9	SUSE	10.3	2007-10-04
10	SUSE	11.0	2008-06-19
11	Ubuntu	6.06	2006-06-01

12	Ubuntu 6.10	2006-10-26
13	Ubuntu 7.04	2007-04-19
14	Ubuntu 7.10	2007-10-18
15	Ubuntu 8.04	2008-04-24
16	Ubuntu 8.10	2008-10-30

End Of Report

Our report is the result of our pipeline of commands. First, we sort the list by distribution name and version (fields 1 and 2), and then we process the results with `sed`, adding the report header (including the logical page markup for `n1`) and footer. Finally, we process the result with `n1`, which, by default, only numbers the lines of the text stream that belong to the body section of the logical page.

We can repeat the command and experiment with different options for `n1`. Some interesting ones are the following:

```
n1 -n rz
```

and the following:

```
n1 -w 3 -s ' '
```

fold—Wrap Each Line to a Specified Length

Folding is the process of breaking lines of text at a specified width. Like our other commands, `fold` accepts either one or more text files or standard input. If we send `fold` a simple stream of text, we can see how it works.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ echo "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog."
```

```
| fold -w 12
```

```
The quick br
```

```
own fox jump
```

ed over the
lazy dog.

Here we see `fold` in action. The text sent by the `echo` command is broken into segments specified by the `-w` option. In this example, we specify a line width of 12 characters. If no width is specified, the default is 80 characters. Notice how the lines are broken regardless of word boundaries. The addition of the `-s` option will cause `fold` to break the line at the last available space before the line width is reached.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ echo "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog."
| fold -w 12 -s
The quick
brown fox
jumped over
the lazy
dog.
```

fmt—A Simple Text Formatter

The `fmt` program also folds text, plus a lot more. It accepts either files or standard input and performs paragraph formatting on the text stream. Basically, it fills and joins lines in text while preserving blank lines and indentation.

To demonstrate, we'll need some text. Let's lift some from the `fmt` info page.

```
`fmt' reads from the specified FILE arguments (or standard input if
none
are given), and writes to standard output.
```

By default, blank lines, spaces between words, and indentation are preserved in the output; successive input lines with different indentation are not joined; tabs are expanded on input and introduced on output.

``fmt'` prefers breaking lines at the end of a sentence, and tries to avoid line breaks after the first word of a sentence or before the last word of a sentence. A "sentence break" is defined as either the end of a paragraph or a word ending in any of ``?!'`, followed by two spaces or end of line, ignoring any intervening parentheses or quotes. Like TeX, ``fmt'` reads entire "paragraphs" before choosing line breaks; the algorithm is a variant of that given by Donald E. Knuth and Michael F. Plass in "Breaking Paragraphs Into Lines", *'Software--Practice & Experience'* 11, 11 (November 1981), 1119-1184.

We'll copy this text into our text editor and save the file as *fmt-info.txt*. Now, let's say we wanted to reformat this text to fit a 50-character-wide column. We could do this by processing the file with `fmt` and the `-w` option.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ fmt -w 50 fmt-info.txt | head
```

``fmt'` reads from the specified FILE arguments (or standard input if none are given), and writes to standard output.

By default, blank lines, spaces between words, and indentation are preserved in the output; successive input lines with different indentation are not joined; tabs are expanded on input and introduced on output.

Well, that's an awkward result. Perhaps we should actually read this text since it explains what's going on.

By default, blank lines, spaces between words, and indentation are preserved in the output; successive input lines with different indentation are not joined; tabs are expanded on input and introduced on output.

So, `fmt` is preserving the indentation of the first line. Fortunately, `fmt` provides an option to correct this.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ fmt -cw 50 fmt-info.txt
```

``fmt'` reads from the specified FILE arguments (or standard input if none are given), and writes to standard output.

By default, blank lines, spaces between words, and indentation are preserved in the output; successive input lines with different indentation are not joined; tabs are expanded on input and introduced on output.

``fmt'` prefers breaking lines at the end of a sentence, and tries to avoid line breaks after the first word of a sentence or before the last word of a sentence. A "sentence break" is defined as either the end of a paragraph or a word ending in any of ``.?!'`, followed by two spaces or end of line, ignoring any intervening parentheses or quotes. Like TeX, ``fmt'` reads entire "paragraphs" before choosing line breaks; the algorithm is a variant of that given by Donald E. Knuth and Michael F. Plass in "Breaking Paragraphs Into Lines", *Software--Practice & Experience* 11, 11 (November 1981), 1119-1184.

That's much better. By adding the `-c` option, we now have the desired result.

`fmt` has some interesting options, as described in [Table 21-3](#).

Table 21-3: `fmt` Options

Option	Description
-c	Operate in <i>crown margin</i> mode. This preserves the indentation of the first two lines of a paragraph. Subsequent lines are aligned with the indentation of the second line.
-p <i>string</i>	Format only those lines beginning with the prefix <i>string</i> . After formatting, the contents of <i>string</i> are prefixed to each reformatted line. This option can be used to format text in source code comments. For example, any programming language or configuration file that uses a # character to delineate a comment could be formatted by specifying -p '# ' so that only the comments will be formatted. See the example that follows.
-s	Split-only mode. In this mode, lines will only be split to fit the specified column width. Short lines will not be joined to fill lines. This mode is useful when formatting text such as code where joining is not desired.
-u	Perform uniform spacing. This will apply traditional “type-writer-style” formatting to the text. This means a single space between words and two spaces between sentences. This mode is useful for removing <i>justification</i> , that is, text that has been padded with spaces to force alignment on both the left and right margins.
-w <i>width</i>	Format text to fit within a column <i>width</i> characters wide. The default is 75 characters. Note: <code>fmt</code> actually formats lines slightly shorter than the specified width to allow for line balancing.

The -p option is particularly interesting. With it, we can format selected portions of a file, provided that the lines to be formatted all begin with the same sequence of characters. Many programming languages use the

pound sign (#) to indicate the beginning of a comment and thus can be formatted using this option. Let's create a file that simulates a program that uses comments.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ cat > fmt-code.txt
# This file contains code with comments.

# This line is a comment.
# Followed by another comment line.
# And another.
```

```
This, on the other hand, is a line of code.
And another line of code.
And another.
```

Our sample file contains comments that begin with the string # (a # followed by a space) and lines of “code” that do not. Now, using `fmt`, we can format the comments and leave the code untouched.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ fmt -w 50 -p '# ' fmt-code.txt
# This file contains code with comments.
# This line is a comment. Followed by another
# comment line. And another.
```

```
This, on the other hand, is a line of code.
And another line of code.
And another.
```

Notice that the adjoining comment lines are joined, while the blank lines and the lines that do not begin with the specified prefix are preserved.

pr—Format Text for Printing

The `pr` program is used to *paginate* text. When printing text, it is often desirable to separate the pages of output with several lines of whitespace to

provide a top margin and a bottom margin for each page. Further, this whitespace can be used to insert a header and footer on each page.

We'll demonstrate `pr` by formatting our *distros.txt* file into a series of short pages (only the first two pages are shown).

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ pr -l 15 -w 65 distros.txt
```

```
2016-12-11 18:27      distros.txt      Page 1
```

```
SUSE      10.2    12/07/2006
Fedora     10     11/25/2008
SUSE      11.0    06/19/2008
Ubuntu     8.04    04/24/2008
Fedora      8      11/08/2007
```

```
2016-12-11 18:27      distros.txt      Page 2
```

```
SUSE      10.3    10/04/2007
Ubuntu     6.10    10/26/2006
Fedora      7      05/31/2007
Ubuntu     7.10    10/18/2007
Ubuntu     7.04    04/19/2007
```

In this example, we employ the `-l` option (for page length) and the `-w` option (page width) to define a “page” that is 65 columns wide and 15 lines long. `pr` paginates the contents of the *distros.txt* file, separates each

page with several lines of whitespace, and creates a default header containing the file modification time, filename, and page number. The `pr` program provides many options to control page layout, which we'll see in [Chapter 22](#).

printf—Format and Print Data

Unlike the other commands in this chapter, the `printf` command is not used for pipelines (it does not accept standard input) nor does it find frequent application directly on the command line (it's mostly used in scripts). So why is it important? Because it is so widely used.

`printf` (from the phrase *print formatted*) was originally developed for the C programming language and has been implemented in many programming languages including the shell. In fact, in `bash`, `printf` is a builtin.

`printf` works like this:

```
printf "format" arguments
```

The command is given a string containing a format description, which is then applied to a list of arguments. The formatted result is sent to standard output. Here is a trivial example:

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ printf "I formatted the string: %s\n" foo
I formatted the string: foo
```

The format string may contain literal text (like “I formatted the string:”), escape sequences (such as `\n`, a newline character), and sequences beginning with the `%` character, which are called *conversion specifications*. In the preceding example, the conversion specification `%s` is used to format the string “foo” and place it in the command’s output. Here it is again:

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ printf "I formatted '%s' as a string.\n" foo
I formatted 'foo' as a string.
```

As we can see, the `%s` conversion specification is replaced by the string “foo” in the command’s output. The `%s` conversion is used to format string data. There are other specifiers for other kinds of data. [Table 21-4](#) lists the commonly used data types.

Table 21-4: Common `printf` Data Type Specifiers

Specifier	Description
d	Format a number as a signed decimal integer.
f	Format and output a floating-point number.
o	Format an integer as an octal number.
s	Format a string.
x	Format an integer as a hexadecimal number using lowercase a to f where needed.
X	Same as x but use uppercase letters.
%	Print a literal % symbol (i.e., specify %%).

We’ll demonstrate the effect each of the conversion specifiers on the string `380`.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ printf "%d, %f, %o, %s, %x, %X\n" 380 380 380 380
380 380
380, 380.000000, 574, 380, 17c, 17C
```

Because we specified six conversion specifiers, we must also supply six arguments for `printf` to process. The six results show the effect of each specifier.

Several optional components may be added to the conversion specifier to adjust its output. A complete conversion specification may consist of the following:

%[flags][width][.precision]conversion_specification

Multiple optional components, when used, must appear in the order specified earlier to be properly interpreted. **Table 21-5** describes each.

Table 21-5: `printf` Conversion Specification Components

Component	Description
<i>flags</i>	<p>There are five different flags:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">#: Use the <i>alternate format</i> for output. This varies by data type. For <code>o</code> (octal number) conversion, the output is prefixed with <code>0</code>. For <code>x</code> and <code>X</code> (hexadecimal number) conversions, the output is prefixed with <code>0x</code> or <code>0X</code>, respectively.0 (zero): Pad the output with zeros. This means that the field will be filled with leading zeros, as in <code>000380</code>.- (dash): Left-align the output. By default, <code>printf</code> right-aligns output.' ' (space): Produce a leading space for positive numbers.+ (plus sign): Sign positive numbers. By default, <code>printf</code> only signs negative numbers.
<i>width</i>	A number specifying the minimum field width.

Component	Description
<i>.precision</i>	For floating-point numbers, specify the number of digits of precision to be output after the decimal point. For string conversion, <i>precision</i> specifies the number of characters to output.

Table 21-6 lists some examples of different formats in action.

Table 21-6: `printf` Conversion Specification Examples

Argument	Format	Result	Notes
380	"%d"	380	Simple formatting of an integer.
380	"%#x"	0x17c	Integer formatted as a hexadecimal number using the “alternate format” flag.
380	"%05d"	00380	Integer formatted with leading zeros (padding) and a minimum field width of five characters.
380	"%05.5f"	380.00000	Number formatted as a floating-point number with padding and five decimal places of precision. Since the specified minimum field width (5) is less than the actual width of the formatted number, the padding has no effect.

Argument	Format	Result	Notes
380	"%010.5f"	0380.00000	By increasing the minimum field width to 10, the padding is now visible.
380	"%+d"	+380	The + flag signs a positive number.
380	"%-d"	380	The - flag left-aligns the formatting.
abcdefghijkl	"%5s"	abcd- fghijk	A string formatted with a minimum field width.
abcdefghijkl	"%.5s"	abcde	By applying precision to a string, it is truncated.

Again, `printf` is used mostly in scripts where it is employed to format tabular data, rather than on the command line directly. But we can still show how it can be used to solve various formatting problems. First, let's output some fields separated by tab characters.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ printf "%s\t%s\t%s\n" str1 str2 str3
```

By inserting `\t` (the escape sequence for a tab), we achieve the desired effect. Next, here are some numbers with neat formatting:

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ printf "Line: %05d %15.3f Result: %+15d\n" 1071
3.14156295
32589
```

Line: 01071	3.142	Result:	+32589
-------------	-------	---------	--------

This shows the effect of minimum field width on the spacing of the fields. Or how about formatting a tiny web page?

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ printf "  
<html>\n\t<head>\n\t\t<title>%s</title>\n\t</head>\n\t<body>\n\t\t<p>%s</p>\n\t</body>\n</html>\n" "Page Title" "Page  
Content"  
<html>  
    <head>  
        <title>Page Title</title>  
    </head>  
    <body>  
        <p>Page Content</p>  
    </body>  
</html>
```

Document Formatting Systems

So far, we have examined the simple text-formatting tools. These are good for small, simple tasks, but what about larger jobs? One of the reasons that Unix became a popular operating system among technical and scientific users (aside from providing a powerful multitasking, multiuser environment for all kinds of software development) is that it offered tools that could be used to produce many types of documents, particularly scientific and academic publications. In fact, as the GNU documentation describes, document preparation was instrumental to the development of Unix.

The first version of UNIX was developed on a PDP-7 which was sitting around Bell Labs. In 1971 the developers wanted to get a PDP-11 for further work on the operating system. In order to justify the cost for this system, they proposed that they would implement a document formatting system for the AT&T patents division. This first formatting program was a reimplementaion of McIlroy's *roff*, written by J. F. Ossanna.

Two main families of document formatters dominate the field: those descended from the original *roff* program, including *nroff* and *troff*, and

those based on Donald Knuth’s TEX (pronounced “tek”) typesetting system. And yes, the dropped *E* in the middle is part of its name.

The name *roff* is derived from the term *run off* as in, “I’ll run off a copy for you.” The `nroff` program is used to format documents for output to devices that use monospaced fonts, such as character terminals and typewriter-style printers. At the time of its introduction, this included nearly all printing devices attached to computers. The later `troff` program formats documents for output on *typesetters*, devices used to produce “camera-ready” type for commercial printing. Most computer printers today are able to simulate the output of typesetters. The *roff* family also includes some other programs that are used to prepare portions of documents. These include `eqn` (for mathematical equations) and `tbl` (for tables).

The TEX system (in stable form) first appeared in 1989 and has, to some degree, displaced `troff` as the tool of choice for typesetter output. We won’t be covering TEX here, both because of its complexity (there are entire books about it) and because it is not installed by default on most modern Linux systems.

TIP

For those interested in installing TEX, check out the `texlive` package, which can be found in most distribution repositories, and the `LyX` graphical content editor.

groff

`groff` is a suite of programs containing the GNU implementation of `troff`. It also includes a script that is used to emulate `nroff` and the rest of the *roff* family as well.

While *roff* and its descendants are used to make formatted documents, they do it in a way that is rather foreign to modern users. Most documents today are produced using word processors that are able to perform both the composition and the layout of a document in a single step. Prior

to the advent of the graphical word processor, documents were often produced in a two-step process involving the use of a text editor to perform composition, and a processor, such as `troff`, to apply the formatting. Instructions for the formatting program were embedded into the composed text through the use of a markup language. The modern analog for such a process is the web page, which is composed using a text editor of some kind and then rendered by a web browser using HTML as the markup language to describe the final page layout.

We're not going to cover `groff` in its entirety, as many elements of its markup language deal with rather arcane details of typography. Instead, we will concentrate on one of its *macro packages* that remains in wide use. These macro packages condense many of its low-level commands into a smaller set of high-level commands that make using `groff` much easier.

For a moment, let's consider the humble `man` page. It lives in the `/usr/share/man` directory as a `gzip`-compressed text file. If we were to examine its uncompressed contents, we would see the following (the `man` page for `ls` in section 1 is shown):

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ zcat /usr/share/man/man1/ls.1.gz | head
```

```
.\" DO NOT MODIFY THIS FILE! It was generated by help2man 1.47.3.
.TH LS "1" "January 2018" "GNU coreutils 8.28" "User Commands"
.SH NAME
ls \- list directory contents
.SH SYNOPSIS
.B ls
[\fI\,OPTION\,\fR]... [\fI\,FILE\,\fR]...
.SH DESCRIPTION
.\" Add any additional description here
.PP
```

Compared to the `man` page in its normal presentation, we can begin to see a correlation between the markup language and its results.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ man ls | head
```

```
LS(1)          User Commands          LS(1)
```

NAME

ls - list directory contents

SYNOPSIS

```
ls [OPTION]... [FILE]...
```

The reason this is of interest is that man pages are rendered by `groff`, using the `mandoc` macro package. In fact, we can simulate the `man` command with the following pipeline:

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ zcat /usr/share/man/man1/ls.1.gz | groff -mandoc -T  
ascii | head
```

```
LS(1)          User Commands          LS(1)
```

NAME

ls - list directory contents

SYNOPSIS

```
ls [OPTION]... [FILE]...
```

Here we use the `groff` program with the options set to specify the `mandoc` macro package and the output driver for ASCII. `groff` can produce output in several formats. If no format is specified, PostScript is output by default.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ zcat /usr/share/man/man1/ls.1.gz | groff -mandoc |  
head
```

```
%!PS-Adobe-3.0
```

```
%%Creator: groff version 1.18.1
```

```
%%CreationDate: Thu Feb 5 13:44:37 2009
```

```
%%DocumentNeededResources: font Times-Roman
%%+ font Times-Bold
%%+ font Times-Italic
%%DocumentSuppliedResources: procset grops 1.18 1
%%Pages: 4
%%PageOrder: Ascend
%%Orientation: Portrait
```

We briefly mentioned PostScript in the previous chapter and will again in the next chapter. PostScript is a *page description language* that is used to describe the contents of a printed page to a typesetter-like device. If we take the output of our command and store it to a file (assuming that we are using a graphical desktop with a *Desktop* directory), an icon for the output file should appear on the desktop.

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ zcat /usr/share/man/man1/ls.1.gz | groff -mandoc >
~/Desktop/ls.ps
```

By double-clicking the icon, a page viewer should start up and reveal the file in its rendered form, as shown in [Figure 21-1](#).

What we see is a nicely typeset man page for `ls`! In fact, it's possible to convert the PostScript file into a *Portable Document Format* (PDF) file with this command:

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ ps2pdf ~/Desktop/ls.ps ~/Desktop/ls.pdf
```

The `ps2pdf` program is part of the `ghostscript` package, which is installed on most Linux systems that support printing.

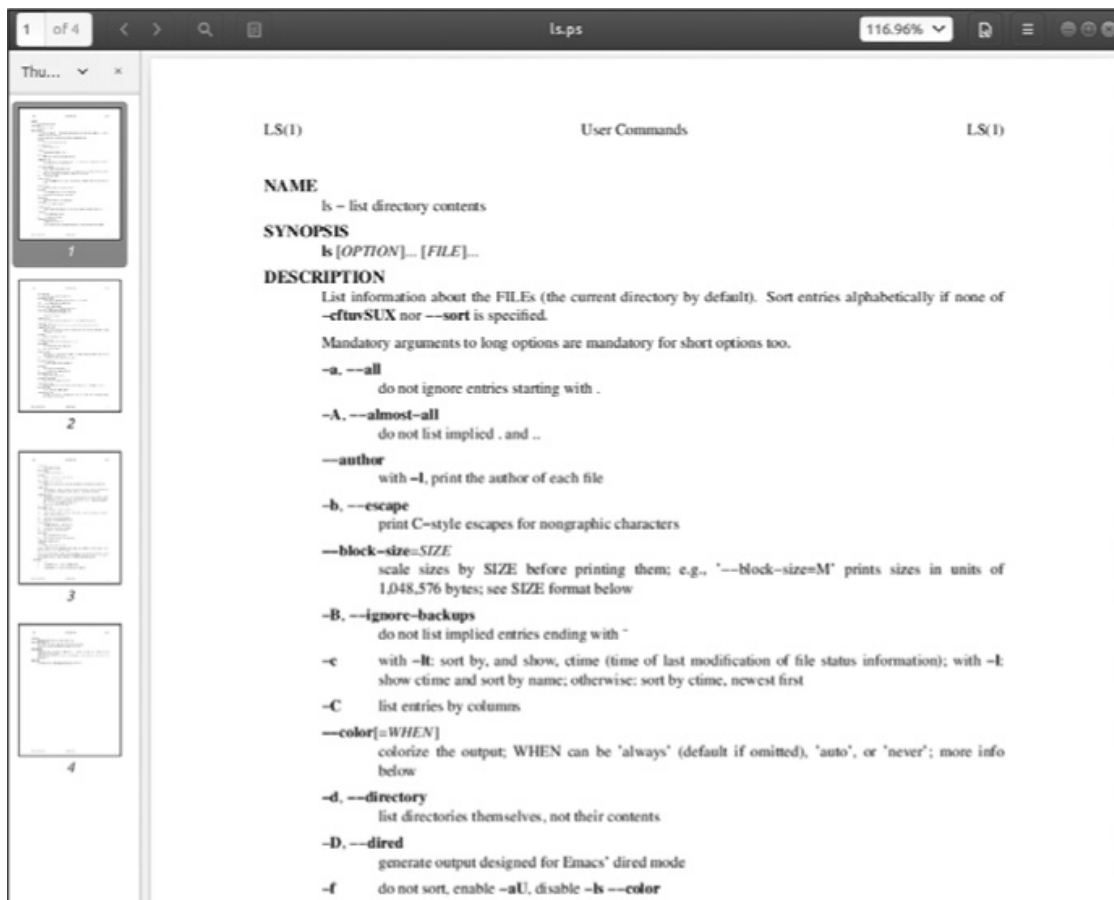


Figure 21-1: Viewing PostScript output with a page viewer in GNOME

TIP

Linux systems often include many command line programs for file format conversion. They are often named using the convention of format2format. Try using the command `ls /usr/bin/*[:alpha:]]2[:alpha:]]*` to identify them. Also try searching for programs named formattoformat.

For our last exercise with `groff`, we will revisit our old friend *distros.txt*. This time, we will use the `tbl` program, which is used to format tables to typeset our list of Linux distributions. To do this, we are going to use our earlier `sed` script to add markup to a text stream that we will feed to `groff`.

First, we need to modify our `sed` script to add the necessary markup elements (called *requests* in `groff`) that `tbl` requires. Using a text editor, we will change *distros.sed* to the following:

```
# sed script to produce Linux distributions report
```

```
1 i\  
.TS\  
center box;\br/>cb s s\  
cb cb cb\  
l n c.\br/>Linux Distributions Report\  
=\  
Name      Version    Released\  
-  
s/([0-9]{2})\([0-9]{2})\([0-9]{4})$/3-1-2/  
$ a\  
.TE
```

Note that for the script to work properly, care must be taken to see that the words *Name Version Released* are separated by tabs, not spaces. We'll save the resulting file as *distros-tbl.sed*. `tbl` uses the `.TS` and `.TE` requests to start and end the table. The rows following the `.TS` request define global properties of the table, which, for our example, are centered horizontally on the page and surrounded by a box. The remaining lines of the definition describe the layout of each table row. Now, if we run our report-generating pipeline again with the new `sed` script, we'll get the following:

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ sort -k 1,1 -k 2n distros.txt | sed -f distros-  
tbl.sed | groff -t -T ascii
```

```
+-----+  
| Linux Distributions Report |  
+-----+  
| Name      Version    Released |  
+-----+  
| Fedora    5      2006-03-20 |  
| Fedora    6      2006-10-24 |
```

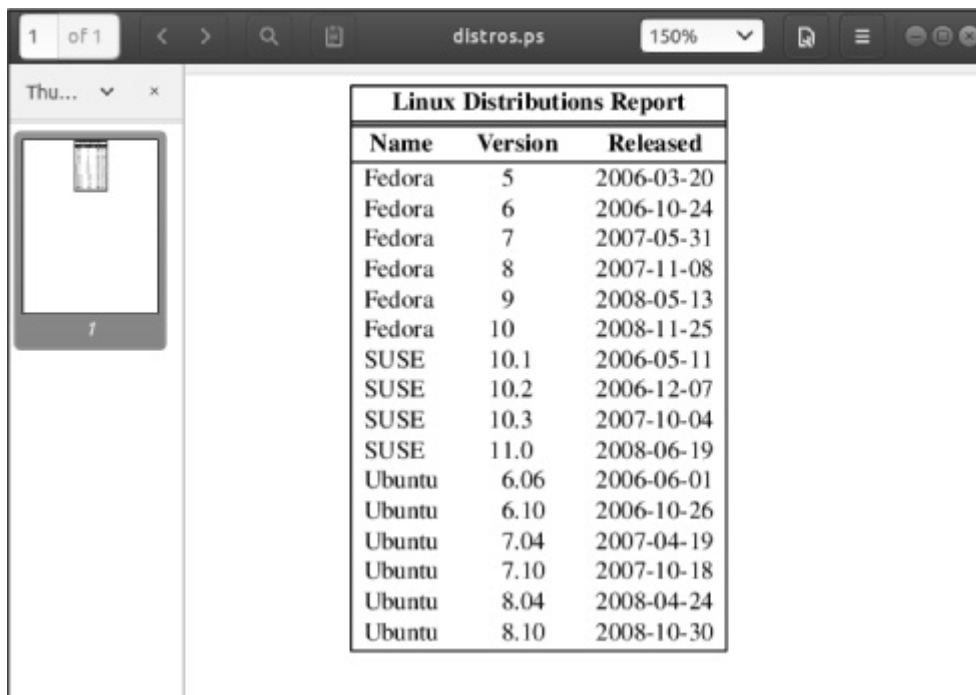

Fedora	7	2007-05-31	
Fedora	8	2007-11-08	
Fedora	9	2008-05-13	
Fedora	10	2008-11-25	
SUSE	10.1	2006-05-11	
SUSE	10.2	2006-12-07	
SUSE	10.3	2007-10-04	
SUSE	11.0	2008-06-19	
Ubuntu	6.06	2006-06-01	
Ubuntu	6.10	2006-10-26	
Ubuntu	7.04	2007-04-19	
Ubuntu	7.10	2007-10-18	
Ubuntu	8.04	2008-04-24	
Ubuntu	8.10	2008-10-30	

+-----+

Adding the `-t` option to `groff` instructs it to preprocess the text stream with `tbl`. Likewise, the `-T` option is used to output to ASCII rather than the default output medium, PostScript.

The format of the output is the best we can expect if we are limited to the capabilities of a terminal screen or typewriter-style printer. If we specify PostScript output and graphically view the output, we get a much more satisfying result, as shown in [Figure 21-2](#).

```
[me@linuxbox ~]$ sort -k 1,1 -k 2n distros.txt | sed -f distros-  
tbl.sed |  
groff -t > ~/Desktop/distros.ps
```



The screenshot shows a PDF viewer window titled 'distros.ps' at 150% zoom. On the left is a sidebar with a thumbnail of the document. The main content area displays a table with the following data:

Linux Distributions Report		
Name	Version	Released
Fedora	5	2006-03-20
Fedora	6	2006-10-24
Fedora	7	2007-05-31
Fedora	8	2007-11-08
Fedora	9	2008-05-13
Fedora	10	2008-11-25
SUSE	10.1	2006-05-11
SUSE	10.2	2006-12-07
SUSE	10.3	2007-10-04
SUSE	11.0	2008-06-19
Ubuntu	6.06	2006-06-01
Ubuntu	6.10	2006-10-26
Ubuntu	7.04	2007-04-19
Ubuntu	7.10	2007-10-18
Ubuntu	8.04	2008-04-24
Ubuntu	8.10	2008-10-30

Figure 21-2: Viewing the finished table

Summing Up

Given that text is so central to the character of Unix-like operating systems, it makes sense that there would be many tools that are used to manipulate and format text. As we have seen, there are! The simple formatting tools like `fmt` and `pr` will find many uses in scripts that produce short documents, while `groff` (and friends) can be used to write books. We may never write a technical paper using command line tools (though there are some people who do!), but it's good to know that we could.