

file(1) — Linux manual page

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 FILE(1)

General Commands Manual

FILE(1)**NAME** [top](#)

file – determine file type

SYNOPSIS [top](#)

```
file [-bcdEhiklLNnprsSvzZ0] [--apple] [--exclude-quiet]
    [--extension] [--mime-encoding] [--mime-type] [-e testname]
    [-F separator] [-f namefile] [-m magicfiles] [-P name=value]
file ... file -C [-m magicfiles] file [--help]
```

DESCRIPTION [top](#)

This manual page documents version 5.45 of the **file** command.

file tests each argument in an attempt to classify it. There are three sets of tests, performed in this order: filesystem tests, magic tests, and language tests. The *first* test that succeeds causes the file type to be printed.

The type printed will usually contain one of the words *text* (the file contains only printing characters and a few common control characters and is probably safe to read on an ASCII terminal), *executable* (the file contains the result of compiling a program in a form understandable to some UNIX kernel or another), or *data* meaning anything else (data is usually “binary” or non-printable). Exceptions are well-known file formats (core files, tar archives) that are known to contain binary data. When modifying magic files or the program itself, make sure to *preserve these keywords*. Users depend on knowing that all the readable files in a directory have the word “text” printed. Don't do as Berkeley did and change “shell commands text” to “shell script”.

The filesystem tests are based on examining the return from a *stat*(2) system call. The program checks to see if the file is empty, or if it's some sort of special file. Any known file types appropriate to the system you are running on (sockets, symbolic links, or named pipes (FIFOs) on those systems that implement them) are intuited if they are defined in the system

header file `<sys/stat.h>`.

The magic tests are used to check for files with data in particular fixed formats. The canonical example of this is a binary executable (compiled program) a.out file, whose format is defined in `<elf.h>`, `<a.out.h>` and possibly `<exec.h>` in the standard include directory. These files have a “magic number” stored in a particular place near the beginning of the file that tells the UNIX operating system that the file is a binary executable, and which of several types thereof. The concept of a “magic number” has been applied by extension to data files. Any file with some invariant identifier at a small fixed offset into the file can usually be described in this way. The information identifying these files is read from the compiled magic file `/usr/local/share/misc/magic.mgc`, or the files in the directory `/usr/local/share/misc/magic` if the compiled file does not exist. In addition, if `$HOME/.magic.mgc` or `$HOME/.magic` exists, it will be used in preference to the system magic files.

If a file does not match any of the entries in the magic file, it is examined to see if it seems to be a text file. ASCII, ISO-8859-x, non-ISO 8-bit extended-ASCII character sets (such as those used on Macintosh and IBM PC systems), UTF-8-encoded Unicode, UTF-16-encoded Unicode, and EBCDIC character sets can be distinguished by the different ranges and sequences of bytes that constitute printable text in each set. If a file passes any of these tests, its character set is reported. ASCII, ISO-8859-x, UTF-8, and extended-ASCII files are identified as “text” because they will be mostly readable on nearly any terminal; UTF-16 and EBCDIC are only “character data” because, while they contain text, it is text that will require translation before it can be read. In addition, **file** will attempt to determine other characteristics of text-type files. If the lines of a file are terminated by CR, CRLF, or NEL, instead of the Unix-standard LF, this will be reported. Files that contain embedded escape sequences or overstriking will also be identified.

Once **file** has determined the character set used in a text-type file, it will attempt to determine in what language the file is written. The language tests look for particular strings (cf. `<names.h>`) that can appear anywhere in the first few blocks of a file. For example, the keyword `.br` indicates that the file is most likely a `troff(1)` input file, just as the keyword `struct` indicates a C program. These tests are less reliable than the previous two groups, so they are performed last. The language test routines also test for some miscellany (such as `tar(1)` archives, JSON files).

Any file that cannot be identified as having been written in any of the character sets listed above is simply said to be “data”.

OPTIONS

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--apple

Causes the **file** command to output the file type and creator code as used by older MacOS versions. The code consists of eight letters, the first describing the file

type, the latter the creator. This option works properly only for file formats that have the apple-style output defined.

-b, --brief

Do not prepend filenames to output lines (brief mode).

-C, --compile

Write a *magic.mgc* output file that contains a pre-parsed version of the magic file or directory.

-c, --checking-printout

Cause a checking printout of the parsed form of the magic file. This is usually used in conjunction with the **-m** option to debug a new magic file before installing it.

-d

Prints internal debugging information to stderr.

-E

On filesystem errors (file not found etc), instead of handling the error as regular output as POSIX mandates and keep going, issue an error message and exit.

-e, --exclude *testname*

Exclude the test named in *testname* from the list of tests made to determine the file type. Valid test names are:

apptype EMX application type (only on EMX).

ascii Various types of text files (this test will try to guess the text encoding, irrespective of the setting of the 'encoding' option).

encoding Different text encodings for soft magic tests.

tokens Ignored for backwards compatibility.

cdf Prints details of Compound Document Files.

compress Checks for, and looks inside, compressed files.

csv Checks Comma Separated Value files.

elf Prints ELF file details, provided soft magic tests are enabled and the elf magic is found.

json Examines JSON (RFC-7159) files by parsing them for compliance.

soft Consults magic files.

simh Examines SIMH tape files.

tar Examines tar files by verifying the checksum of the 512 byte tar header. Excluding this test can provide more detailed content description by using the soft magic method.

text A synonym for 'ascii'.

--exclude-quiet

Like **--exclude** but ignore tests that **file** does not know about. This is intended for compatibility with older versions of **file**.

--extension

Print a slash-separated list of valid extensions for the file type found.

-F, --separator *separator*

Use the specified string as the separator between the filename and the file result returned. Defaults to `':'`.

-f, --files-from *namefile*

Read the names of the files to be examined from *namefile* (one per line) before the argument list. Either *namefile* or at least one filename argument must be present; to test the standard input, use `-` as a filename argument. Please note that *namefile* is unwrapped and the enclosed filenames are processed when this option is encountered and before any further options processing is done. This allows one to process multiple lists of files with different command line arguments on the same **file** invocation. Thus if you want to set the delimiter, you need to do it before you specify the list of files, like: `"-F @ -f namefile"`, instead of: `"-f namefile -F @"`.

-h, --no-dereference

This option causes symlinks not to be followed (on systems that support symbolic links). This is the default if the environment variable `POSIXLY_CORRECT` is not defined.

-i, --mime

Causes the **file** command to output mime type strings rather than the more traditional human readable ones. Thus it may say `'text/plain; charset=us-ascii'` rather than `"ASCII text"`.

--mime-type, --mime-encoding

Like **-i**, but print only the specified element(s).

-k, --keep-going

Don't stop at the first match, keep going. Subsequent matches will be have the string `'\012- '` prepended. (If you want a newline, see the **-r** option.) The magic pattern with the highest strength (see the **-l** option) comes first.

-l, --list

Shows a list of patterns and their strength sorted descending by *magic*(4) strength which is used for the matching (see also the **-k** option).

-L, --dereference

This option causes symlinks to be followed, as the like-named option in *ls*(1) (on systems that support symbolic

links). This is the default if the environment variable `POSIXLY_CORRECT` is defined.

-m, --magic-file *magicfiles*

Specify an alternate list of files and directories containing magic. This can be a single item, or a colon-separated list. If a compiled magic file is found alongside a file or directory, it will be used instead.

-N, --no-pad

Don't pad filenames so that they align in the output.

-n, --no-buffer

Force stdout to be flushed after checking each file. This is only useful if checking a list of files. It is intended to be used by programs that want filetype output from a pipe.

-p, --preserve-date

On systems that support *utime(3)* or *utimes(2)*, attempt to preserve the access time of files analyzed, to pretend that **file** never read them.

-P, --parameter *name=value*

Set various parameter limits.

Name	Default	Explanation	
bytes	1M	max number of bytes to read from	file
elf_notes	256	max ELF notes processed	
elf_phnum	2K	max ELF program sections	processed
elf_shnum	32K	max ELF sections processed	
elf_shsize	128MB	max ELF section size processed	
encoding	65K	max number of bytes to determine	encoding
indir	50	recursion limit for indirect	magic
name	100	use count limit for name/use	magic
regex	8K	length limit for regex searches	

-r, --raw

Don't translate unprintable characters to `\ooo`. Normally **file** translates unprintable characters to their octal representation.

-s, --special-files

Normally, **file** only attempts to read and determine the type of argument files which *stat(2)* reports are ordinary files. This prevents problems, because reading special files may have peculiar consequences. Specifying the **-s** option causes **file** to also read argument files which are block or character special files. This is useful for determining the filesystem types of the data in raw disk partitions, which are block special files. This option also causes **file** to disregard the file size as reported by *stat(2)* since on some systems it reports a zero size

for raw disk partitions.

-S, --no-sandbox

On systems where libseccomp (<https://github.com/seccomp/libseccomp>) is available, the **-S** option disables sandboxing which is enabled by default. This option is needed for **file** to execute external decompressing programs, i.e. when the **-z** option is specified and the built-in decompressors are not available. On systems where sandboxing is not available, this option has no effect.

-v, --version

Print the version of the program and exit.

-z, --uncompress

Try to look inside compressed files.

-Z, --uncompress-noreport

Try to look inside compressed files, but report information about the contents only not the compression.

-0, --print0

Output a null character ‘\0’ after the end of the filename. Nice to *cut*(1) the output. This does not affect the separator, which is still printed.

If this option is repeated more than once, then **file** prints just the filename followed by a NUL followed by the description (or ERROR: text) followed by a second NUL for each entry.

--help Print a help message and exit.

ENVIRONMENT [top](#)

The environment variable **MAGIC** can be used to set the default magic file name. If that variable is set, then **file** will not attempt to open *\$HOME/.magic*. **file** adds “.mgc” to the value of this variable as appropriate. The environment variable **POSIXLY_CORRECT** controls (on systems that support symbolic links), whether **file** will attempt to follow symlinks or not. If set, then **file** follows symlink, otherwise it does not. This is also controlled by the **-L** and **-h** options.

FILES [top](#)

<i>/usr/local/share/misc/magic.mgc</i>	Default compiled list of magic.
<i>/usr/local/share/misc/magic</i>	Directory containing default magic files.

EXIT STATUS [top](#)

file will exit with 0 if the operation was successful or >0 if an error was encountered. The following errors cause diagnostic

messages, but don't affect the program exit code (as POSIX requires), unless **-E** is specified:

- A file cannot be found
- There is no permission to read a file
- The file type cannot be determined

EXAMPLES

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```
$ file file.c file /dev/{wd0a,hda}
file.c:      C program text
file:        ELF 32-bit LSB executable, Intel 80386, version 1 (SYSV),
             dynamically linked (uses shared libs), stripped
/dev/wd0a:    block special (0/0)
/dev/hda:     block special (3/0)

$ file -s /dev/wd0{b,d}
/dev/wd0b:    data
/dev/wd0d:    x86 boot sector

$ file -s /dev/hda{,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10}
/dev/hda:     x86 boot sector
/dev/hda1:    Linux/i386 ext2 filesystem
/dev/hda2:    x86 boot sector
/dev/hda3:    x86 boot sector, extended partition table
/dev/hda4:    Linux/i386 ext2 filesystem
/dev/hda5:    Linux/i386 swap file
/dev/hda6:    Linux/i386 swap file
/dev/hda7:    Linux/i386 swap file
/dev/hda8:    Linux/i386 swap file
/dev/hda9:    empty
/dev/hda10:   empty

$ file -i file.c file /dev/{wd0a,hda}
file.c:       text/x-c
file:         application/x-executable
/dev/hda:     application/x-not-regular-file
/dev/wd0a:    application/x-not-regular-file
```

SEE ALSO

[top](#)

hexdump(1), *od*(1), *strings*(1), *magic*(4)

STANDARDS CONFORMANCE

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This program is believed to exceed the System V Interface Definition of FILE(CMD), as near as one can determine from the vague language contained therein. Its behavior is mostly compatible with the System V program of the same name. This version knows more magic, however, so it will produce different (albeit more accurate) output in many cases.

The one significant difference between this version and System V is that this version treats any white space as a delimiter, so that spaces in pattern strings must be escaped. For example,

```
>10      string  language impress      (imPRESS data)
```

in an existing magic file would have to be changed to

```
>10      string  language\ impress      (imPRESS data)
```

In addition, in this version, if a pattern string contains a backslash, it must be escaped. For example

```
0        string      \begindata      Andrew Toolkit document
```

in an existing magic file would have to be changed to

```
0        string      \\begindata      Andrew Toolkit document
```

SunOS releases 3.2 and later from Sun Microsystems include a **file** command derived from the System V one, but with some extensions. This version differs from Sun's only in minor ways. It includes the extension of the '&' operator, used as, for example,

```
>16      long&0x7fffffff >0          not stripped
```

SECURITY [top](#)

On systems where libseccomp (<https://github.com/seccomp/libseccomp>) is available, **file** enforces limiting system calls to only the ones necessary for the operation of the program. This enforcement does not provide any security benefit when **file** is asked to decompress input files running external programs with the **-z** option. To enable execution of external decompressors, one needs to disable sandboxing using the **-S** option.

MAGIC DIRECTORY [top](#)

The magic file entries have been collected from various sources, mainly USENET, and contributed by various authors. Christos Zoulas (address below) will collect additional or corrected magic file entries. A consolidation of magic file entries will be distributed periodically.

The order of entries in the magic file is significant. Depending on what system you are using, the order that they are put together may be incorrect. If your old **file** command uses a magic file, keep the old magic file around for comparison purposes (rename it to */usr/local/share/misc/magic.orig*).

HISTORY [top](#)

There has been a **file** command in every UNIX since at least Research Version 4 (man page dated November, 1973). The System V version introduced one significant major change: the external list of magic types. This slowed the program down slightly but made it a lot more flexible.

This program, based on the System V version, was written by Ian Darwin (ian@darwinsys.com) without looking at anybody else's source code.

John Gilmore revised the code extensively, making it better than the first version. Geoff Collyer found several inadequacies and provided some magic file entries. Contributions of the '&' operator by Rob McMahon, (cudcv@warwick.ac.uk), 1989.

Guy Harris, (guy@netapp.com), made many changes from 1993 to the present.

Primary development and maintenance from 1990 to the present by Christos Zoulas (christos@astron.com).

Altered by Chris Lowth (chris@lowth.com), 2000: handle the **-i** option to output mime type strings, using an alternative magic file and internal logic.

Altered by Eric Fischer (enf@pobox.com), July, 2000, to identify character codes and attempt to identify the languages of non-ASCII files.

Altered by Reuben Thomas (rrt@sc3d.org), 2007-2011, to improve MIME support, merge MIME and non-MIME magic, support directories as well as files of magic, apply many bug fixes, update and fix a lot of magic, improve the build system, improve the documentation, and rewrite the Python bindings in pure Python.

The list of contributors to the 'magic' directory (magic files) is too long to include here. You know who you are; thank you. Many contributors are listed in the source files.

LEGAL NOTICE [top](#)

Copyright (c) Ian F. Darwin, Toronto, Canada, 1986-1999. Covered by the standard Berkeley Software Distribution copyright; see the file COPYING in the source distribution.

The files `tar.h` and `is_tar.c` were written by John Gilmore from his public-domain `tar(1)` program, and are not covered by the above license.

BUGS [top](#)

Please report bugs and send patches to the bug tracker at <https://bugs.astron.com/> or the mailing list at (file@astron.com) (visit <https://mailman.astron.com/mailman/listinfo/file> first to subscribe).

TODO [top](#)

Fix output so that tests for MIME and APPLE flags are not needed all over the place, and actual output is only done in one place.

This needs a design. Suggestion: push possible outputs on to a list, then pick the last-pushed (most specific, one hopes) value at the end, or use a default if the list is empty. This should not slow down evaluation.

The handling of `MAGIC_CONTINUE` and printing `\012` between entries is clumsy and complicated; refactor and centralize.

Some of the encoding logic is hard-coded in `encoding.c` and can be moved to the magic files if we had a `!charset` annotation.

Continue to squash all magic bugs. See Debian BTS for a good source.

Store arbitrarily long strings, for example for `%s` patterns, so that they can be printed out. Fixes Debian bug #271672. This can be done by allocating strings in a string pool, storing the string pool at the end of the magic file and converting all the string pointers to relative offsets from the string pool.

Add syntax for relative offsets after current level (Debian bug #466037).

Make `file -ki` work, i.e. give multiple MIME types.

Add a zip library so we can peek inside Office2007 documents to print more details about their contents.

Add an option to print URLs for the sources of the file descriptions.

Combine script searches and add a way to map executable names to MIME types (e.g. have a magic value for `!mime` which causes the resulting string to be looked up in a table). This would avoid adding the same magic repeatedly for each new hash-bang interpreter.

When a file descriptor is available, we can skip and adjust the buffer instead of the hacky buffer management we do now.

Fix `"name"` and `"use"` to check for consistency at compile time (duplicate `"name"`, `"use"` pointing to undefined `"name"`). Make `"name"` / `"use"` more efficient by keeping a sorted list of names. Special-case `^` to flip endianness in the parser so that it does not have to be escaped, and document it.

If the offsets specified internally in the file exceed the buffer size (`HOWMANY` variable in `file.h`), then we don't seek to that offset, but we give up. It would be better if buffer managements was done when the file descriptor is available so we can seek around the file. One must be careful though because this has performance and thus security considerations, because one can slow down things by repeatedly seeking.

There is support now for keeping separate buffers and having offsets from the end of the file, but the internal buffer management still needs an overhaul.

AVAILABILITY [top](#)

You can obtain the original author's latest version by anonymous FTP on [ftp.astron.com](ftp://ftp.astron.com/pub/file/file-X.YZ.tar.gz) in the directory [/pub/file/file-X.YZ.tar.gz](ftp://ftp.astron.com/pub/file/file-X.YZ.tar.gz).

COLOPHON [top](#)

This page is part of the [file](#) (a file type guesser) project. Information about the project can be found at <http://www.darwinsys.com/file/>. If you have a bug report for this manual page, see [\(<http://bugs.gw.com/my_view_page.php>\)](http://bugs.gw.com/my_view_page.php). This page was obtained from the project's upstream Git read-only mirror of the CVS repository [\(<https://github.com/glensc/file>\)](https://github.com/glensc/file) on 2024-06-14. (At that time, the date of the most recent commit that was found in the repository was 2024-06-10.) If you discover any rendering problems in this HTML version of the page, or you believe there is a better or more up-to-date source for the page, or you have corrections or improvements to the information in this COLOPHON (which is *not* part of the original manual page), send a mail to man-pages@man7.org

GNU

April 7, 2024

FILE(1)

Pages that refer to this page: [dh_installmanpages\(1\)](#), [dh_strip\(1\)](#), [ippeveprinter\(1\)](#), [pmcd\(1\)](#), [scr_dump\(5\)](#), [term\(5\)](#), [suffixes\(7\)](#), [symlink\(7\)](#)

HTML rendering created 2024-06-26 by [Michael Kerrisk](#), author of [The Linux Programming Interface](#).

For details of in-depth Linux/UNIX system programming training courses that I teach, look [here](#).

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