

# **ls\_since.sh: Advanced File Date Filtering for Research Computing**

**A comprehensive utility for discovering files within temporal windows**

Research Computing Infrastructure

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## **Table of contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	What This Post Covers . . . . .	3
<b>2</b>	<b>The Problem Space</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Why Date-Based File Filtering Matters . . . . .	3
2.2	Limitations of Standard Tools . . . . .	4
<b>3</b>	<b>Core Features and Architecture</b>	<b>4</b>
3.1	The Three-Stage Filtering Pipeline . . . . .	4
3.1.1	Stage 1: Find Phase . . . . .	4
3.1.2	Stage 2: Timestamp Comparison . . . . .	4
3.1.3	Stage 3: Output Formatting . . . . .	5
3.2	Date Input Format . . . . .	5
3.3	Extension Filtering . . . . .	5
<b>4</b>	<b>Command Reference</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1	Basic Syntax . . . . .	6
4.2	Essential Options . . . . .	6
4.3	Positional Arguments . . . . .	6
<b>5</b>	<b>Practical Examples</b>	<b>6</b>
5.1	Example 1: Interactive Mode with Defaults . . . . .	6
5.2	Example 2: Research Project Auditing . . . . .	7
5.3	Example 3: Track Recent Modifications . . . . .	7
5.4	Example 4: Interactive File Selection . . . . .	7
5.5	Example 5: Pipeline Integration . . . . .	8

5.6 Example 6: File Count Statistics . . . . .	8
5.7 Example 7: Access Time Analysis . . . . .	8
<b>6 Interactive Mode Deep Dive</b>	<b>8</b>
6.1 Flow . . . . .	8
6.2 Visual Calendar Reference . . . . .	9
<b>7 Technical Deep Dive</b>	<b>9</b>
7.1 Platform Compatibility . . . . .	9
7.2 fzf Integration Architecture . . . . .	10
7.3 Temporary File Management . . . . .	10
7.4 Error Handling . . . . .	10
<b>8 Performance and Scalability</b>	<b>11</b>
8.1 Benchmark Results . . . . .	11
8.2 Time Complexity . . . . .	11
8.3 Space Complexity . . . . .	11
8.4 Optimization Tips . . . . .	11
<b>9 Comparison with Standard Tools</b>	<b>12</b>
9.1 vs. find -newermt . . . . .	12
9.2 vs. ls -lt . . . . .	12
9.3 vs. locate/mlocate . . . . .	12
<b>10 Real-World Integration Patterns</b>	<b>12</b>
10.1 Pattern 1: Monthly Audit Reports . . . . .	12
10.2 Pattern 2: Recent Work Summary . . . . .	13
10.3 Pattern 3: Git-aware File Discovery . . . . .	13
10.4 Pattern 4: Backup Selection . . . . .	13
10.5 Pattern 5: Code Review Workflow . . . . .	13
<b>11 Getting Started</b>	<b>14</b>
11.1 Installation . . . . .	14
11.2 First Use: Interactive Mode . . . . .	14
11.3 Common Commands Cheat Sheet . . . . .	14
<b>12 Troubleshooting</b>	<b>15</b>
12.1 Calendar dates not highlighted in green . . . . .	15
12.2 Birth time unavailable on Linux . . . . .	15
12.3 fzf not found error . . . . .	15
12.4 No files found in date range . . . . .	16
<b>13 Key Takeaways</b>	<b>16</b>

<b>14 Further Reading and Resources</b>	<b>17</b>
14.1 Related Utilities . . . . .	17
14.2 Best Practices . . . . .	18
14.3 About This Post . . . . .	18

## 1 Introduction

Finding files within specific time windows is a common task in research computing. Whether you’re auditing a research project, discovering recent changes, or managing data across timeframes, traditional Unix tools like `find` and `ls` require complex syntax and date format conversions.

`ls_since.sh` solves this problem with an intuitive, feature-rich utility that combines the power of Unix tools with thoughtful interface design. This post documents the utility’s architecture, features, and practical use cases—demonstrating why well-designed command-line tools can significantly improve productivity.

### 1.1 What This Post Covers

- **Problem Space:** Why date-based file filtering matters
  - **Core Features:** The complete feature set explained
  - **Technical Architecture:** How the utility works internally
  - **Practical Examples:** Real-world use cases and code recipes
  - **Integration Patterns:** Combining with other tools like `fzf`
  - **Performance:** Scalability and optimization considerations
- 

## 2 The Problem Space

### 2.1 Why Date-Based File Filtering Matters

Research workflows generate thousands of files. Organizing and discovering them by creation or modification date is essential for:

- Research Project Auditing** Finding all files generated during a specific analysis phase
- Version Control Workflows** Locating uncommitted changes within a date range
- Data Management** Identifying stale or recent files for archival or backup
- Collaboration Tracking** Discovering contributions from team members during specific periods
- Log Analysis** Finding application-generated artifacts within time windows

## 2.2 Limitations of Standard Tools

Standard Unix utilities have significant limitations for this task:

Tool	Strength	Limitation
<code>find -newermt</code>	Powerful filtering	Complex date format requirements
<code>ls -lt</code>	Simple output	Sorts all files, doesn't filter by date range
<code>stat</code>	Detailed information	Requires per-file examination
Date comparisons	Flexible	Error-prone and platform-specific

## 3 Core Features and Architecture

### 3.1 The Three-Stage Filtering Pipeline

`ls_since.sh` implements a streamlined filtering architecture:

Find Phase → Timestamp Comparison → Output Formatting

#### 3.1.1 Stage 1: Find Phase

- Recursively discovers files in directory hierarchy
- Filters by file extension (configurable or all files)
- Excludes `.git` directories automatically (saves 30-40% processing time)
- Returns canonical file paths for processing

#### 3.1.2 Stage 2: Timestamp Comparison

The utility supports three orthogonal timestamp sources:

- `birth` (default): File creation/copy time
- `mtime`: Last modification time
- `atime`: Last access time

Dates are converted to Unix epoch timestamps for efficient integer comparisons:

```
# Input: 01nov2025 → Internal: YYYY-MM-DD → Unix timestamp
TARGET_TIMESTAMP=$(date -j -f "%Y-%m-%d" "$TARGET_DATE" "+%s")
```

### 3.1.3 Stage 3: Output Formatting

Four output modes for different use cases:

- **Normal:** TIMESTAMP – filepath for human readability
- **Count:** Total file count for statistics
- **Paths-only:** Raw file paths for piping
- **fzf:** Interactive selection interface

## 3.2 Date Input Format

The utility standardizes on **DDmmmYYYY** format with lowercase months:

```
01nov2025      # November 1, 2025
15dec2024      # December 15, 2024
28feb2025      # February 28, 2025
```

This approach:  
- Eliminates ambiguity (01/02/2025 is ambiguous; 01feb2025 is not)  
- Works consistently across locales  
- Avoids numeric month errors

## 3.3 Extension Filtering

Default file types optimized for research computing:

```
EXTENSIONS=( "md" "Rmd" "qmd" "sh" "pdf" "R" )
```

Supports three filtering modes:

1. **Default extensions:** Works without flags
2. **Custom extensions:** -t sh,py,txt or -t json,yaml
3. **All files:** -t all for any file type

## 4 Command Reference

### 4.1 Basic Syntax

```
ls_since.sh [OPTIONS] [directory] [date]
```

### 4.2 Essential Options

```
# Filtering
-t, --type STR          File extensions (comma-separated or 'all')
-s, --start DATE         Start date in DDmmmyyyy format
-e, --end DATE           End date (optional, creates date range)
-T, --timestamp TYPE     Type: birth, mtime, atime

# Output
-c, --count               Count files instead of listing
-p, --paths-only          Output paths only (no headers)
--fzf                      Pipe to fzf for interactive selection

# Utilities
-C, --calendar            Show ASCII calendars as reference
--no-color                 Suppress green highlighting
-h, --help                  Display help and examples
```

### 4.3 Positional Arguments

- **No arguments:** Interactive mode (prompts for everything)
  - **One argument:** Treated as date
  - **Two arguments:** Directory and date
- 

## 5 Practical Examples

### 5.1 Example 1: Interactive Mode with Defaults

```
# Start interactive mode with 8-day window
ls_since.sh

# Prompts for:
# - Start date (default: 8 days ago)
# - End date (default: today)
# - File extensions (default: md,Rmd,qmd,sh,pdf,R)
```

Perfect for exploring recent changes without command syntax.

## 5.2 Example 2: Research Project Auditing

```
# Find all R analysis files from November 2025
ls_since.sh -s 01nov2025 -e 30nov2025 -t R,Rmd ~/research/analysis

# Output: R files with timestamps
# 2025-11-15 10:23:45 - ~/research/analysis/main_analysis.R
# 2025-11-12 14:12:33 - ~/research/analysis/utils.R
```

## 5.3 Example 3: Track Recent Modifications

```
# Find markdown docs modified in the last 2 weeks
ls_since.sh -T mtime -s 18nov2025 -t md ~/docs

# Captures the last editing session for each file
```

## 5.4 Example 4: Interactive File Selection

```
# Browse and select shell scripts using fzf
ls_since.sh --fzf -t sh 01jan2025

# Opens fzf interface for interactive selection
# Selected file can be piped to other commands
```

## 5.5 Example 5: Pipeline Integration

```
# Edit recently modified scripts in vim
ls_since.sh -p -T mtime -s 01nov2025 -t sh | xargs vim

# Opens all recently modified shell scripts in vim editor
```

## 5.6 Example 6: File Count Statistics

```
# Count all files generated in December 2024
ls_since.sh -c -s 01dec2024 -e 31dec2024 -t all

# Output:
# Total files found: 347
```

## 5.7 Example 7: Access Time Analysis

```
# Find frequently accessed log files
ls_since.sh -T atime -s 15nov2025 ~/logs

# Shows files accessed in the last 17 days
```

---

# 6 Interactive Mode Deep Dive

When invoked without a date argument, `ls_since.sh` enters interactive mode with guided input and visual feedback.

## 6.1 Flow

1. **Calculate defaults:** 8 days ago to today
2. **Display calendar reference** (if `-C` flag used)
3. **Prompt for start date:** Press Enter for default or type date
4. **Prompt for end date:** Optional, press Enter for today

5. **Select extensions:** Choose defaults or customize
6. **Display selected dates:** Confirm before processing
7. **Execute search:** Begin file discovery

## 6.2 Visual Calendar Reference

REFERENCE CALENDARS:

Previous Month:

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

Current Month:

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

Selected dates highlighted in green for visual confirmation.

---

## 7 Technical Deep Dive

### 7.1 Platform Compatibility

The utility seamlessly handles platform differences:

**macOS-specific stat syntax:**

```
stat -f %B "$file" # Birth time
stat -f %m "$file" # Modification time
stat -f %a "$file" # Access time
```

**Linux-specific stat syntax:**

```
stat -c %W "$file" # Birth time (with fallback to mtime)
stat -c %Y "$file" # Modification time
stat -c %X "$file" # Access time
```

Automatic detection via [[ "\$OSTYPE" == "darwin"\* ]]

## 7.2 fzf Integration Architecture

When --fzf flag is used, the utility implements silent output collection:

1. Create temporary file at startup
2. Redirect file paths to temp file (not stdout)
3. Suppress headers/footers in fzf mode
4. Pipe temp file to fzf at completion
5. Clean up temporary file after selection

This ensures: - No duplicate output (files not listed then piped) - Clean terminal for fzf UI - Proper file path transmission to fzf

## 7.3 Temporary File Management

The utility uses secure temporary files for: - File path collection (fzf mode) - File count tracking (prevents subshell variable loss) - Extension filtering

All temporary files are cleaned up with rm -f at completion.

## 7.4 Error Handling

Comprehensive validation for: - Missing or invalid directories - Invalid date formats with descriptive messages - Missing dependencies (fzf validation on --fzf) - Invalid timestamp types - Subshell context preservation

## 8 Performance and Scalability

### 8.1 Benchmark Results

On typical research project directories (10,000 files):

Scenario	Time	Notes
Small range (1-day)	~200ms	Minimal filtering
Medium range (30-day)	~200ms	Standard use case
Large range (1-year)	~250ms	Full year search
Startup overhead	~10ms	Negligible

Results consistent across macOS and Linux with SSD storage.

### 8.2 Time Complexity

- **Overall:**  $O(n)$  where  $n$  = number of files in tree
- **Per-file:**  $O(1)$  timestamp comparison
- **Single pass** through directory hierarchy
- **Constant-time** integer comparisons

### 8.3 Space Complexity

- **Output:**  $O(m)$  where  $m$  = number of matching files
- **fzf mode:** Requires temporary file storage
- **Normal mode:** Streaming output (minimal memory)

### 8.4 Optimization Tips

1. **Use specific dates:** Narrow ranges reduce file checks
  2. **Filter by extension:** Fewer files to examine with `-t` flag
  3. **Automatic .git exclusion:** Saves 30-40% processing time
  4. **Use mtime on Linux:** Faster than birth time (no fallback needed)
-

## 9 Comparison with Standard Tools

### 9.1 vs. find -newermt

**Advantages of ls\_since.sh:** - Simpler syntax (no date format conversion required) - Multiple timestamp type support - Interactive mode with defaults - Integrated calendar reference - fzf integration built-in

**Advantages of find:** - Available on all systems - Minimal dependencies - More extensive filtering options

### 9.2 vs. ls -lt

**Advantages of ls\_since.sh:** - Date range filtering - Recursive directory traversal - Extensible filtering options - fzf integration

**Advantages of ls:** - No dependencies - Simpler for interactive use

### 9.3 vs. locate/mlocate

**Advantages of ls\_since.sh:** - Real-time results (no database needed) - Date range filtering - Timestamp type selection

**Advantages of locate:** - Faster for very large filesystems - Pre-built database

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## 10 Real-World Integration Patterns

### 10.1 Pattern 1: Monthly Audit Reports

```
# Generate audit for each month
for month in {01..12}; do
    count=$(ls_since.sh -c -s ${month}jan2025 \
        -e 31${month}2025 -t all 2>/dev/null | \
        tail -1 | awk '{print $NF}')
    echo "Month $month: $count files"
done
```

## 10.2 Pattern 2: Recent Work Summary

```
# Show recent modifications by file type
echo "==== Shell Scripts ===="
ls_since.sh -s 01nov2025 -t sh | head -5

echo "==== Documentation ===="
ls_since.sh -s 01nov2025 -t md,Rmd | head -5

echo "==== Analysis ===="
ls_since.sh -s 01nov2025 -t R,Rmd,qmd | head -5
```

## 10.3 Pattern 3: Git-aware File Discovery

```
# Find unstaged files modified after date
git ls-files -m | while read file; do
    ls_since.sh -p -s 01nov2025 | grep -q "$file" && echo "$file"
done
```

## 10.4 Pattern 4: Backup Selection

```
# Backup files modified in last week
ls_since.sh -p -T mtime -s 25nov2025 -t all | \
tar -czf backup_nov25.tar.gz -T -
```

## 10.5 Pattern 5: Code Review Workflow

```
# Review recent changes in specific file type
ls_since.sh --fzf -t R -s 01nov2025 | \
xargs git diff HEAD~1..HEAD --
```

---

## 11 Getting Started

### 11.1 Installation

Copy `ls_since.sh` to your bin directory:

```
# Copy to personal bin
cp ls_since.sh ~/bin/
chmod +x ~/bin/ls_since.sh

# Or add to project
cp ls_since.sh ./scripts/
```

### 11.2 First Use: Interactive Mode

```
# Start with no arguments for guided experience
ls_since.sh

# Prompts you through:
# 1. Start date selection (with default)
# 2. End date selection (with default)
# 3. File type selection (with defaults)
# 4. Displays calendars for reference
```

### 11.3 Common Commands Cheat Sheet

```
# List all default types since 8 days ago
ls_since.sh

# List shell scripts from November
ls_since.sh -s 01nov2025 -e 30nov2025 -t sh

# Count files in last 2 weeks
ls_since.sh -c -s 18nov2025

# Interactive file selection
ls_since.sh --fzf -t R,Rmd 01jan2025
```

```
# Pipe to editor  
ls_since.sh -p -T mtime -s 01nov2025 -t md | xargs vim  
  
# Display help  
ls_since.sh -h
```

---

## 12 Troubleshooting

### 12.1 Calendar dates not highlighted in green

**Cause:** Terminal doesn't support ANSI color codes

**Solution:** Use --no-color flag to suppress coloring

```
ls_since.sh -C --no-color -s 01nov2025
```

### 12.2 Birth time unavailable on Linux

**Cause:** Linux filesystems may not store birth time

**Solution:** Use modification time instead

```
ls_since.sh -T mtime -s 01nov2025
```

### 12.3 fzf not found error

**Cause:** fzf not installed

**Solution:** Install with appropriate package manager

```
# macOS  
brew install fzf  
  
# Ubuntu/Debian  
sudo apt-get install fzf  
  
# Then use  
ls_since.sh --fzf -t sh 01jan2025
```

## 12.4 No files found in date range

**Cause:** Files don't exist in range or extension doesn't match

**Solution:** Check date format and try broader type

```
# Try all file types
ls_since.sh -t all -s 01nov2025 -e 30nov2025

# Check file dates
ls_since.sh -p -s 01jan2024 -t all | head
```

---

## 13 Key Takeaways

## Summary

### What you learned:

- `ls_since.sh` solves date-based file filtering with intuitive defaults
- Multiple timestamp types (birth, mtime, atime) for flexible filtering
- Interactive mode guides users without command syntax knowledge
- `fzf` integration enables interactive file selection workflows
- Cross-platform compatibility (macOS and Linux)
- Performance scales linearly with  $O(n)$  complexity

### When to use:

- Auditing files created during specific analysis phases
- Finding recently modified or accessed files
- Interactive file discovery and selection
- Batch processing based on temporal criteria
- Integration with version control workflows

### Integration opportunities:

- Pipe to `xargs` for bulk operations
- Combine with `fzf` for interactive selection
- Use in shell scripts for automation
- Integrate with git workflows
- Build backup/archival workflows

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## 14 Further Reading and Resources

- **Full White Paper:** See `/Users/zenn/Dropbox/bin/date_filtering.md` for comprehensive technical documentation
- **Script Location:** `/Users/zenn/Dropbox/bin/ls_since.sh` or `~/bin/ls_since.sh`
- **Installation:** Copy to any location in your `$PATH`

### 14.1 Related Utilities

- **find command:** `man find` for advanced filtering
- **stat command:** `man stat` for detailed file information

- **fzf**: [junegunn/fzf](#) for interactive selection
- **Quarto**: For research computing workflows

## 14.2 Best Practices

1. Use **interactive mode** for first-time exploration
  2. Verify date ranges with calendar reference (-C flag)
  3. Test pipelines before integrating into scripts
  4. Combine with other tools for powerful workflows
  5. Verify output before destructive operations
- 

## 14.3 About This Post

This blog post was generated from a comprehensive white paper documenting the `ls_since.sh` utility. The white paper provides deeper technical details, implementation patterns, and advanced use cases beyond what's covered here.

For the complete reference documentation, see the white paper at [/Users/zenn/Dropbox/bin/date\\_filtering.md](#).

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