

Chapter 2. Basic Commands and Directory Hierarchy



This chapter is a guide to the Unix commands and utilities that will be referenced throughout this book. This is preliminary material, and you may already know a substantial amount of it. Even if you think you're up to speed, take a few seconds to flip through the chapter just to make sure, especially when it comes to the directory hierarchy material in [2.19 Linux Directory Hierarchy Essentials](#).

Why Unix commands? Isn't this a book about how Linux works? It is, of course, but Linux is a Unix flavor at heart. You'll see the word *Unix* in this chapter more than *Linux* because you can take what you learn straight over to Solaris, BSD, and other Unix-flavored systems. I've attempted to avoid covering too many Linux-specific user interface extensions, not only to give you a better background for using the other operating systems, but also because these extensions tend to be unstable. You'll be able to adapt to new Linux releases much more quickly if you know the core commands.

NOTE

For more details about Unix for beginners than you'll find here, consider reading The Linux Command Line (No Starch Press, 2012), UNIX for the Impatient (Addison-Wesley Professional, 1995), and Learning the UNIX Operating System, 5th edition (O'Reilly, 2001).

2.1 The Bourne Shell: `/bin/sh`

The shell is one of the most important parts of a Unix system. A *shell* is a program that runs commands, like the ones that users enter. The shell also serves as a small programming environment. Unix programmers often break common tasks into little components and use the shell to manage tasks and piece things together.

Many important parts of the system are actually *shell scripts*—text files that contain a sequence of shell commands. If you've worked with MS-DOS previously, you can think of shell scripts as very powerful *.BAT* files. Because they're important, [Chapter 11](#) is devoted entirely to shell scripts.

As you progress through this book and gain practice, you'll add to your knowledge of manipulating commands using the shell. One of the best things about the shell is that if you make a mistake, you can easily see what you typed to find out what went wrong, and then try again.

There are many different Unix shells, but all derive several of their features from the Bourne shell (`/bin/sh`), a standard shell developed at Bell Labs for early versions of Unix. Every Unix system needs the Bourne shell in order to function correctly, as you will see throughout this book.

Linux uses an enhanced version of the Bourne shell called `bash` or the “Bourne-again” shell. The `bash` shell is the default shell on most Linux distributions, and `/bin/sh` is normally a link to `bash` on a Linux system. You should use the `bash` shell when running the examples in this book.

NOTE

You may not have `bash` as your default shell if you're using this chapter as a guide for a Unix account at an organization where you're not the system administrator. You can change your shell with `chsh` or ask your system administrator for help.

2.2 Using the Shell

When you install Linux, you should create at least one regular user in addition to the root user; this will be your personal account. For this chapter, you should log in as the regular user.

2.2.1 The Shell Window

After logging in, open a shell window (often referred to as a *terminal*). The easiest way to do so from a GUI like Gnome or Ubuntu's Unity is to open a terminal application, which starts a shell inside a new window. Once you've opened a shell, it should display a prompt at the top that usually ends with a dollar sign (\$). On Ubuntu, that prompt should look like `name@host:path$`, and on Fedora, it's `[name@host path]$`. If you're familiar with Windows, the shell window will look something like a DOS command prompt; the Terminal application in OS X is essentially the same as a Linux shell window.

This book contains many commands that you will type at a shell prompt. They all begin with a single \$ to denote the shell prompt. For example, type this command (just the part in bold, not the \$) and press ENTER:

```
$ echo Hello there.
```

NOTE

Many shell commands in this book start with #. You should run these as the superuser (root). These commands usually require extra caution.

Now enter this command:

```
$ cat /etc/passwd
```

This command displays the contents of the `/etc/passwd` system information file and then returns your shell prompt. Don't worry about what this file does right now; you'll learn all about it later, in [Chapter 7](#).

2.2.2 cat

The `cat` command is one of the easiest Unix commands to understand; it simply outputs the contents of one or more files. The general syntax of the `cat` command is as follows:

```
$ cat file1 file2 ...
```

When you run this command, `cat` prints the contents of `file1`, `file2`, and any other files that you specify (denoted by `...`), and then exits. The command is called `cat` because it performs concatenation when it prints the contents of more than one file.

2.2.3 Standard Input and Standard Output

We'll use `cat` to briefly explore Unix input and output (I/O). Unix processes use I/O *streams* to read and write data. Processes read data from input streams and write data to output streams. Streams are very flexible. For example, the source of an input stream can be a file, a device, a terminal, or even the output stream from another process.

To see an input stream at work, enter `cat` (with no filenames) and press ENTER. This time, you won't get your shell prompt back because `cat` is still running. Now type anything and press ENTER at the end of each line. The `cat` command repeats any line that you type. Once you're sufficiently bored, press CTRL-D on an empty line to terminate `cat` and return to the shell prompt.

The reason `cat` adopted an interactive behavior has to do with streams. Because you did not specify an input filename, `cat` read from the *standard input* stream provided by the Linux kernel rather than a stream connected to a file. In this case, the standard input was connected to the terminal in which you ran `cat`.

NOTE

Pressing CTRL-D on an empty line stops the current standard input entry from the terminal (and often terminates a program). Don't confuse this with CTRL-C, which terminates a program regardless of its input or output.

Standard output is similar. The kernel gives each process a standard output stream where it can write its output. The `cat` command always writes its output to the standard output. When you ran `cat` in the terminal, the standard output was connected to that terminal, so that's where you saw the output.

Standard input and output are often abbreviated as *stdin* and *stdout*. Many commands operate as `cat` does; if you don't specify an input file, the command reads from *stdin*. Output is a little different. Some commands (like `cat`) send output only to *stdout*, but others have the option to send output directly to files.

There is a third standard I/O stream called standard error. You'll see it in [2.14.1 Standard Error](#).

One of the best features of standard streams is that you can easily manipulate them to read and write to places other than the terminal, as you'll learn in [2.14 Shell Input and Output](#). In particular, you'll learn how to connect streams to files and other processes.

2.3 Basic Commands

Now let's look at some more Unix commands. Most of the following programs take multiple arguments, and some have so many options and formats that an unabridged listing would be pointless. This is a simplified list of the basic commands; you don't need all of the details just yet.

2.3.1 ls

The `ls` command lists the contents of a directory. The default is the current directory. Use `ls -l` for a detailed (long) listing and `ls -F` to display file type information. (For more on the file types and permissions displayed in the left column below, see [2.17 File Modes and Permissions](#).) Here is a sample long listing; it includes the owner of the file (column 3), the group (column 4), the file size (column 5), and the modification date/time (between column 5 and the filename):

```
$ ls -l
total 3616
-rw-r--r--  1 juser  users    3804 Apr 30  2011 abusive.c
-rw-r--r--  1 juser  users    4165 May 26  2010 battery.zip
-rw-r--r--  1 juser  users  131219 Oct 26  2012 beav_1.40-13.tar.gz
-rw-r--r--  1 juser  users    6255 May 30  2010 country.c
drwxr-xr-x  2 juser  users    4096 Jul 17  20:00 cs335
-rwxr-xr-x  1 juser  users    7108 Feb  2  2011 dhry
-rw-r--r--  1 juser  users   11309 Oct 20  2010 dhry.c
-rw-r--r--  1 juser  users      56 Oct  6  2012 doit
drwxr-xr-x  6 juser  users    4096 Feb 20  13:51 dw
drwxr-xr-x  3 juser  users    4096 May  2  2011 hough-stuff
```

You'll learn more about the `d` in column 1 of this output in [2.17 File Modes and Permissions](#).

2.3.2 cp

In its simplest form, `cp` copies files. For example, to copy *file1* to *file2*, enter this:

```
$ cp file1 file2
```

To copy a number of files to a directory (folder) named *dir*, try this instead:

```
$ cp file1 ... fileN dir
```

2.3.3 mv

The `mv` (move) command is like `cp`. In its simplest form, it renames a file. For example, to rename *file1* to *file2*, enter this:

```
$ mv file1 file2
```

You can also use `mv` to move a number of files to a different directory:

```
$ mv file1 ... fileN dir
```

2.3.4 touch

The `touch` command creates a file. If the file already exists, `touch` does not change it, but it does update the file's modification time stamp printed with the `ls -l` command. For example, to create an empty file, enter this:

```
$ touch file
```

Then run `ls -l` on that file. You should see output like the following, where the date and time ❶ indicate when you ran `touch`:

```
$ ls -l file
```

```
-rw-r--r-- 1 juser users 0 May 21 18:32❶ file
```

2.3.5 rm

To delete (remove) a file, use `rm`. After you remove a file, it's gone from your system and generally cannot be undeleted.

```
$ rm file
```

2.3.6 echo

The `echo` command prints its arguments to the standard output:

```
$ echo Hello again.
```

```
Hello again.
```

The `echo` command is very useful for finding expansions of shell globs ("wildcards" such as `*`) and variables (such as `$HOME`), which you will encounter later in this chapter.

2.4 Navigating Directories

Unix has a directory hierarchy that starts at `/`, sometimes called the *root directory*. The directory separator is the slash (`/`), *not* the backslash (`\`). There are several standard subdirectories in the root directory, such as `/usr`, as you'll learn in [2.19 Linux Directory Hierarchy Essentials](#).

When you refer to a file or directory, you specify a *path* or *pathname*. When a path starts with / (such as */usr/lib*), it's a *full* or *absolute* path.

A path component identified by two dots (..) specifies the parent of a directory. For example, if you're working in */usr/lib*, the path .. would refer to */usr*. Similarly, *../bin* would refer to */usr/bin*.

One dot (.) refers to the current directory; for example, if you're in */usr/lib*, the path . is still */usr/lib*, and *./X11* is */usr/lib/X11*. You won't have to use . very often because most commands default to the current directory if a path doesn't start with / (you could just use *X11* instead of *./X11* in the preceding example).

A path not beginning with / is called a *relative path*. Most of the time, you'll work with relative pathnames, because you'll already be in the directory you need to be in or somewhere close by.

Now that you have a sense of the basic directory mechanics, here are some essential directory commands.

2.4.1 cd

The *current working directory* is the directory that a process (such as the shell) is currently in. The `cd` command changes the shell's current working directory:

```
$ cd dir
```

If you omit *dir*, the shell returns to your *home directory*, the directory you started in when you first logged in.

2.4.2 mkdir

The `mkdir` command creates a new directory *dir*:

```
$ mkdir dir
```

2.4.3 rmdir

The `rmdir` command removes the directory *dir*:

```
$ rmdir dir
```

If *dir* isn't empty, this command fails. However, if you're impatient, you probably don't want to laboriously delete all the files and subdirectories inside *dir* first. You can use `rm -rf dir` to delete a directory and its contents, but be careful! This is one of the few commands that can do serious damage, especially if you run it as the superuser. The `-r` option specifies *recursive delete* to repeatedly delete everything inside *dir*, and `-f` forces the delete operation. Don't use the `-rf` flags with globs such as a star (*). And above all, always double-check your command before you run it.

2.4.4 Shell Globbing (Wildcards)

The shell can match simple patterns to file and directory names, a process known as *globbing*. This is similar to the concept of wildcards in other systems. The simplest of these is the glob character *, which tells the shell to match any number of arbitrary characters. For example, the following command prints a list of files in the current directory:

```
$ echo *
```

The shell matches arguments containing globs to filenames, substitutes the filenames for those arguments, and then runs the revised command line. The substitution is called *expansion* because the shell substitutes all matching filenames. Here are some ways to use * to expand filenames:

- o `at*` expands to all filenames that start with `at`.
- o `*at` expands to all filenames that end with `at`.

- `*at*` expands to all filenames that contain `at`.

If no files match a glob, the shell performs no expansion, and the command runs with literal characters such as `*.` For example, try a command such as `echo *dfkdsafh`.

NOTE

If you're used to MS-DOS, you might instinctively type `.*` to match all files. Break this habit now. In Linux and other versions of Unix, you must use `*` to match all files. In the Unix shell, `*.*` matches only files and directories that contain the dot (`.`) character in their names. Unix filenames do not need extensions and often do not carry them.*

Another shell glob character, the question mark (`?`), instructs the shell to match exactly one arbitrary character. For example, `b?at` matches `boat` and `brat`.

If you don't want the shell to expand a glob in a command, enclose the glob in single quotes (`' '`). For example, the command `echo '*'` prints a star. You will find this handy for a few of the commands described in the next section, such as `grep` and `find`. (You'll learn more about quoting in [11.2 Quoting and Literals](#).)

NOTE

It is important to remember that the shell performs expansions before running commands, and only then. Therefore, if a `` makes it to a command without expanding, the shell will do nothing more with it; it's up to the command to decide what it wants to do.*

There is more to a modern shell's pattern-matching capabilities, but `*` and `?` are what you need to know now.

2.5 Intermediate Commands

The following sections describe the most essential intermediate Unix commands.

2.5.1 `grep`

The `grep` command prints the lines from a file or input stream that match an expression. For example, to print the lines in the `/etc/passwd` file that contain the text `root`, enter this:

```
$ grep root /etc/passwd
```

The `grep` command is extraordinarily handy when operating on multiple files at once because it prints the filename in addition to the matching line. For example, if you want to check every file in `/etc` that contains the word `root`, you could use this command:

```
$ grep root /etc/*
```

Two of the most important `grep` options are `-i` (for case-insensitive matches) and `-v` (which inverts the search, that is, prints all lines that *don't* match). There is also a more powerful variant called `egrep` (which is just a synonym for `grep -E`).

`grep` understands patterns known as *regular expressions* that are grounded in computer science theory and are very common in Unix utilities. Regular expressions are more powerful than wildcard-style patterns, and they have a different syntax. There are two important things to remember about regular expressions:

- `.` matches any number of characters (like the `*` in wildcards).
- `.` matches one arbitrary character.

NOTE

*The `grep(1)` manual page contains a detailed description of regular expressions, but it can be a little difficult to read. To learn more, you can read *Mastering Regular Expressions*, 3rd edition (O'Reilly, 2006), or see the *regular expressions chapter* of *Programming Perl*, 4th edition (O'Reilly,*

2012). If you like math and are interested in where regular expressions come from, look up *Introduction to Automata Theory, Languages, and Computation*, 3rd edition (Prentice Hall, 2006).

2.5.2 less

The `less` command comes in handy when a file is really big or when a command's output is long and scrolls off the top of the screen.

To page through a big file like `/usr/share/dict/words`, use the command `less /usr/share/dict/words`. When running `less`, you'll see the contents of the file one screenful at a time. Press the spacebar to go forward in the file and the `b` key to skip back one screenful. To quit, type `q`.

NOTE

The `less` command is an enhanced version of an older program named `more`. Most Linux desktops and servers have `less`, but it's not standard on many embedded systems and other Unix systems. So if you ever run into a situation when you can't use `less`, try `more`.

You can also search for text inside `less`. For example, to search forward for a word, type `/word`, and to search backward, use `?word`. When you find a match, press `n` to continue searching.

As you'll learn in [2.14 Shell Input and Output](#), you can send the standard output of nearly any program directly to another program's standard input. This is exceptionally useful when you have a command with a lot of output to sift through and you'd like to use something like `less` to view the output. Here's an example of sending the output of a `grep` command to `less`:

```
$ grep ie /usr/share/dict/words | less
```

Try this command out for yourself. You'll probably use `less` like this a lot.

2.5.3 pwd

The `pwd` (print working directory) program simply outputs the name of the current working directory. You may be wondering why you need this when most Linux distributions set up accounts with the current working directory in the prompt. There are two reasons.

First, not all prompts include the current working directory, and you may even want to get rid of it in your own prompt because it takes up a lot of space. If you do so, you need `pwd`.

Second, the symbolic links that you'll learn about in [2.17.2 Symbolic Links](#) can sometimes obscure the true full path of the current working directory. You'll use `pwd -P` to eliminate this confusion.

2.5.4 diff

To see the differences between two text files, use `diff`:

```
$ diff file1 file2
```

Several options can control the format of the output, and the default output format is often the most comprehensible for human beings. However, most programmers prefer the output from `diff -u` when they need to send the output to someone else because automated tools can make better use of it.

2.5.5 file

If you see a file and are unsure of its format, try using the `file` command to see if the system can guess:

```
$ file file
```

You may be surprised by how much this innocent-looking command can do.

2.5.6 find and locate

It's frustrating when you know that a certain file is in a directory tree somewhere but you just don't know where. Run `find` to find *file* in *dir*:

```
$ find dir -name file -print
```

Like most programs in this section, `find` is capable of some fancy stuff. However, don't try options such as `-exec` before you know the form shown here by heart and why you need the `-name` and `-print` options. The `find` command accepts special pattern-matching characters such as `*`, but you must enclose them in single quotes (`' * '`) to protect the special characters from the shell's own globbing feature. (Recall from [2.4.4 Shell Globbing \(Wildcards\)](#) that the shell expands globs *before* running commands.)

Most systems also have a `locate` command for finding files. Rather than searching for a file in real time, `locate` searches an index that the system builds periodically. Searching with `locate` is much faster than `find`, but if the file you're looking for is newer than the index, `locate` won't find it.

2.5.7 head and tail

To quickly view a portion of a file or stream of data, use the `head` and `tail` commands. For example, `head /etc/passwd` shows the first 10 lines of the password file, and `tail /etc/passwd` shows the last 10 lines.

To change the number of lines to display, use the `-n` option, where *n* is the number of lines you want to see (for example, `head -5 /etc/passwd`). To print lines starting at line *n*, use `tail +n`.

2.5.8 sort

The `sort` command quickly puts the lines of a text file in alphanumeric order. If the file's lines start with numbers and you want to sort in numerical order, use the `-n` option. The `-r` option reverses the order of the sort.

2.6 Changing Your Password and Shell

Use the `passwd` command to change your password. You'll be asked for your old password and then prompted for your new password twice. Choose a password that does not include real words in any language and don't try to combine words.

One of the easiest ways to create a good password is to pick a sentence, produce an acronym from it, and then modify the acronym with a number or some punctuation. Then all you need to do is remember the sentence.

You can change your shell with the `chsh` command (to an alternative such as `ksh` or `tcsh`), but keep in mind that this book assumes that you're running `bash`.

2.7 Dot Files

Change to your home directory, take a look around with `ls`, and then run `ls -a`. Do you see the difference in the output? When you run `ls` without the `-a`, you won't see the configuration files called *dot files*. These are files and directories whose names begin with a dot (`.`). Common dot files are `.bashrc` and `.login`, and there are dot directories, too, such as `.ssh`.

There is nothing special about dot files or directories. Some programs don't show them by default so that you won't see a complete mess when listing the contents of your home directory. For example, `ls` doesn't list dot files unless you use the `-a` option. In addition, shell globs don't match dot files unless you explicitly use a pattern such as `.*`.

NOTE

You can run into problems with globs because `. *` matches `.` and `..` (the current and parent directories). You may wish to use a pattern such as `.[^.]*` or `.??*` to get all dot files except the current and parent directories.

2.8 Environment and Shell Variables

The shell can store temporary variables, called *shell variables*, containing the values of text strings. Shell variables are very useful for keeping track of values in scripts, and some shell variables control the way the shell behaves. (For example, the `bash` shell reads the `PS1` variable before displaying the prompt.)

To assign a value to a shell variable, use the equal sign (`=`). Here's a simple example:

```
$ STUFF=blah
```

The preceding example sets the value of the variable named `STUFF` to `blah`. To access this variable, use `$STUFF` (for example, try running `echo $STUFF`). You'll learn about the many uses of shell variables in [Chapter 11](#).

An *environment variable* is like a shell variable, but it's not specific to the shell. All processes on Unix systems have environment variable storage. The main difference between environment and shell variables is that the operating system passes all of your shell's environment variables to programs that the shell runs, whereas shell variables cannot be accessed in the commands that you run.

Assign an environment variable with the shell's `export` command. For example, if you'd like to make the `$STUFF` shell variable into an environment variable, use the following:

```
$ STUFF=blah
$ export STUFF
```

Environment variables are useful because many programs read them for configuration and options. For example, you can put your favorite `less` command-line options in the `LESS` environment variable, and `less` will use those options when you run it. (Many manual pages contain a section marked `ENVIRONMENT` that describes these variables.)

2.9 The Command Path

`PATH` is a special environment variable that contains the *command path* (or *path* for short). A command path is a list of system directories that the shell searches when trying to locate a command. For example, when you run `ls`, the shell searches the directories listed in `PATH` for the `ls` program. If programs with the same name appear in several directories in the path, the shell runs the first matching program.

If you run `echo $PATH`, you'll see that the path components are separated by colons (`:`). For example:

```
$ echo $PATH
/usr/local/bin:/usr/bin:/bin
```

To tell the shell to look in more places for programs, change the `PATH` environment variable. For example, by using this command, you can add a directory `dir` to the beginning of the path so that the shell looks in `dir` before looking in any of the other `PATH` directories.

```
$ PATH=dir:$PATH
```

Or you can append a directory name to the end of the `PATH` variable, causing the shell to look in `dir` last:

\$ **PATH=\$PATH:dir**

NOTE

Be careful when modifying the path because you can accidentally wipe out your entire path if you mistype \$PATH. If this happens, don't panic! The damage isn't permanent; you can just start a new shell. (For a lasting effect, you need to mistype it when editing a certain configuration file, and even then it isn't difficult to rectify.) One of the easiest ways to return to normal is to close the current terminal window and start another.

2.10 Special Characters

When discussing Linux with others, you should know a few names for some of the special characters that you'll encounter. If you're amused by this sort of thing, see the "Jargon File" (<http://www.catb.org/jargon/html/>) or its printed companion, *The New Hacker's Dictionary* (MIT Press, 1996).

Table 2-1 describes a select set of the special characters, many of which you've already seen in this chapter. Some utilities, such as the Perl programming language, use almost all of these special characters! (Keep in mind that these are the American names for the characters.)

Table 2-1. Special Characters

Character	Name(s)	Uses
*	asterisk, star	Regular expression, glob character
.	dot	Current directory, file/hostname delimiter
!	bang	Negation, command history
	pipe	Command pipes
/	(forward) slash	Directory delimiter, search command
\	backslash	Literals, macros (<i>never</i> directories)
\$	dollar	Variable denotation, end of line
'	tick, (single) quote	Literal strings
`	backtick, backquote	Command substitution
"	double quote	Semi-literal strings
^	caret	Negation, beginning of line
~	tilde, squiggle	Negation, directory shortcut
#	hash, sharp, pound	Comments, preprocessor, substitutions
[]	(square) brackets	Ranges

Character	Name(s)	Uses
{ }	braces, (curly) brackets	Statement blocks, ranges
—	underscore, under	Cheap substitute for a space

NOTE

You will often see control characters marked with a caret; for example, ^C for ctrl-c.

2.11 Command-Line Editing

As you play with the shell, notice that you can edit the command line using the left and right arrow keys, as well as page through previous commands using the up and down arrows. This is standard on most Linux systems.

However, it's a good idea to forget about the arrow keys and use control key sequences instead. If you learn the ones listed in **Table 2-2**, you'll find that you're better able to enter text in the many Unix programs that use these standard keystrokes.

Table 2-2. Command-Line Keystrokes

Keystroke	Action
CTRL-B	Move the cursor left
CTRL-F	Move the cursor right
CTRL-P	View the previous command (or move the cursor up)
CTRL-N	View the next command (or move the cursor down)
CTRL-A	Move the cursor to the beginning of the line
CTRL-E	Move the cursor to the end of the line
CTRL-W	Erase the preceding word
CTRL-U	Erase from cursor to beginning of line
CTRL-K	Erase from cursor to end of line
CTRL-Y	Paste erased text (for example, from CTRL-U)

2.12 Text Editors

Speaking of editing, it's time to learn an editor. To get serious with Unix, you must be able to edit text files without damaging them. Most parts of the system use plaintext configuration files (like the ones in */etc*). It's not difficult to edit files, but you will do it so often that you need a powerful tool for the job.

You should try to learn one of the two de facto standard Unix text editors, vi and Emacs. Most Unix wizards

are religious about their choice of editor, but don't listen to them. Just choose for yourself. If you choose one that matches the way that you work, you'll find it easier to learn. Basically, the choice comes down to this:

- If you want an editor that can do almost anything and has extensive online help, and you don't mind doing some extra typing to get these features, try Emacs.
- If speed is everything, give vi a shot; it "plays" a bit like a video game.

Learning the vi and Vim Editors: Unix Text Processing, 7th edition (O'Reilly, 2008) can tell you everything you need to know about vi. For Emacs, use the online tutorial: Start Emacs, press CTRL-H, and then type T. Or read *GNU Emacs Manual* (Free Software Foundation, 2011).

You might be tempted to experiment with a friendlier editor when you first start out, such as Pico or one of the myriad GUI editors out there, but if you tend to make a habit out of the first thing that you use, you don't want to go down this route.

NOTE

Editing text is where you'll first start to see a difference between the terminal and the GUI. Editors such as vi run inside the terminal window, using the standard terminal I/O interface. GUI editors start their own window and present their own interface, independent of terminals. Emacs runs in a GUI by default but will run in a terminal window as well.

2.13 Getting Online Help

Linux systems come with a wealth of documentation. For basic commands, the *manual pages* (or *man pages*) will tell you what you need to know. For example, to see the manual page for the `ls` command, run `man` as follows:

```
$ man ls
```

Most manual pages concentrate primarily on reference information, perhaps with some examples and cross-references, but that's about it. Don't expect a tutorial, and don't expect an engaging literary style.

When programs have many options, the manual page often lists the options in some systematic way (for example, in alphabetical order), but it won't tell you what the important ones are. If you're patient, you can usually find what you need to know in the man page. If you're impatient, ask a friend—or pay someone to be your friend so that you can ask him or her.

To search for a manual page by keyword, use the `-k` option:

```
$ man -k keyword
```

This is helpful if you don't quite know the name of the command that you want. For example, if you're looking for a command to sort something, run:

```
$ man -k sort
```

```
--snip--
```

```
comm (1)          - compare two sorted files line by line
qsort (3)          - sorts an array
sort (1)           - sort lines of text files
sortm (1)          - sort messages
tsort (1)          - perform topological sort
```

--snip--

The output includes the manual page name, the manual section (see below), and a quick description of what the manual page contains.

NOTE

If you have any questions about the commands described in the previous sections, you may be able to find the answers by using the `man` command.

Manual pages are referenced by numbered sections. When someone refers to a manual page, the section number appears in parentheses next to the name, like `ping(8)`, for example. **Table 2-3** lists the sections and their numbers.

Table 2-3. Online Manual Sections

Section	Description
1	User commands
2	System calls
3	Higher-level Unix programming library documentation
4	Device interface and driver information
5	File descriptions (system configuration files)
6	Games
7	File formats, conventions, and encodings (ASCII, suffixes, and so on)
8	System commands and servers

Sections 1, 5, 7, and 8 should be good supplements to this book. Section 4 may be of marginal use, and Section 6 would be great if only it were a little larger. You probably won't be able to use Section 3 if you aren't a programmer, but you may be able to understand some of the material in Section 2 once you've read more about system calls in this book.

You can select a manual page by section, which is sometimes important because `man` displays the first manual page that it finds when matching a particular search term. For example, to read the `/etc/passwd` file description (as opposed to the `passwd` command), you can insert the section number before the page name:

```
$ man 5 passwd
```

Manual pages cover the essentials, but there are many more ways to get online help. If you're just looking for a certain option for a command, try entering a command name followed by `--help` or `-h` (the option varies from command to command). You may get a deluge (as in the case of `ls --help`), or you may find just what you're looking for.

Some time ago, the GNU Project decided that it didn't like manual pages very much and switched to another format called *info* (or *texinfo*). Often this documentation goes further than a typical manual page does, but it is sometimes more complex. To access an info manual, use `info` with the command name:

```
$ info command
```

Some packages dump their available documentation into */usr/share/doc* with no regard for online manual systems such as *man* or *info*. See this directory on your system if you find yourself searching for documentation. And of course, search the Internet.

2.14 Shell Input and Output

Now that you're familiar with basic Unix commands, files, and directories, you're ready to learn how to redirect standard input and output. Let's start with standard output.

To send the output of *command* to a file instead of the terminal, use the *>* redirection character:

```
$ command > file
```

The shell creates *file* if it does not already exist. If *file* exists, the shell erases (*clobbers*) the original file first. (Some shells have parameters that prevent clobbering. For example, enter *set -C* to avoid clobbering in *bash*.)

You can append the output to the file instead of overwriting it with the *>>* redirection syntax:

```
$ command >> file
```

This is a handy way to collect output in one place when executing sequences of related commands.

To send the standard output of a command to the standard input of another command, use the pipe character (*|*). To see how this works, try these two commands:

```
$ head /proc/cpuinfo
```

```
$ head /proc/cpuinfo | tr a-z A-Z
```

You can send output through as many piped commands as you wish; just add another pipe before each additional command.

2.14.1 Standard Error

Occasionally, you may redirect standard output but find that the program still prints something to the terminal. This is called *standard error* (*stderr*); it's an additional output stream for diagnostics and debugging. For example, this command produces an error:

```
$ ls /fffffffff > f
```

After completion, *f* should be empty, but you still see the following error message on the terminal as standard error:

```
ls: cannot access /fffffffff: No such file or directory
```

You can redirect the standard error if you like. For example, to send standard output to *f* and standard error to *e*, use the *2>* syntax, like this:

```
$ ls /fffffffff > f 2> e
```

The number 2 specifies the *stream ID* that the shell modifies. Stream ID 1 is standard output (the default), and 2 is standard error.

You can also send the standard error to the same place as stdout with the *>&* notation. For example, to send both standard output and standard error to the file named *f*, try this command:

```
$ ls /fffffffff > f 2>&1
```


2.14.2 Standard Input Redirection

To channel a file to a program's standard input, use the < operator:

```
$ head < /proc/cpuinfo
```

You will occasionally run into a program that requires this type of redirection, but because most Unix commands accept filenames as arguments, this isn't very common. For example, the preceding command could have been written as `head /proc/cpuinfo`.

2.15 Understanding Error Messages

When you encounter a problem on a Unix-like system such as Linux, you *must* read the error message. Unlike messages from other operating systems, Unix errors usually tell you exactly what went wrong.

2.15.1 Anatomy of a UNIX Error Message

Most Unix programs generate and report the same basic error messages, but there can be subtle differences between the output of any two programs. Here's an example that you'll certainly encounter in some form or other:

```
$ ls /dsafsda

ls: cannot access /dsafsda: No such file or directory
```

There are three components to this message:

- The program name, `ls`. Some programs omit this identifying information, which can be annoying when writing shell scripts, but it's not really a big deal.
- The filename, `/dsafsda`, which is a more specific piece of information. There's a problem with this path.
- The error `No such file or directory` indicates the problem with the filename.

Putting it all together, you get something like “`ls` tried to open `/dsafsda` but couldn't because it doesn't exist.” This may seem obvious, but these messages can get a little confusing when you run a shell script that includes an erroneous command under a different name.

When troubleshooting errors, always address the first error first. Some programs report that they can't do anything before reporting a host of other problems. For example, say you run a fictitious program called `scumd` and you see this error message:

```
scumd: cannot access /etc/scumd/config: No such file or directory
```

Following this is a huge list of other error messages that looks like a complete catastrophe. Don't let those other errors distract you. You probably just need to create `/etc/scumd/config`.

NOTE

Don't confuse error messages with warning messages. Warnings often look like errors, but they contain the word `warning`. A warning usually means something is wrong but the program will try to continue running anyway. To fix a problem noted in a warning message, you may have to hunt down a process and kill it before doing anything else. (You'll learn about listing and killing processes in [2.16 Listing and Manipulating Processes](#).)

2.15.2 Common Errors

Many errors that you'll encounter in Unix programs result from things that can go wrong with files and processes. Here's an error message hit parade:

No such file or directory

This is the number one error. You tried to access a file that doesn't exist. Because the Unix file I/O system doesn't discriminate between files and directories, this error message occurs everywhere. You get it when you try to read a file that does not exist, when you try to change to a directory that isn't there, when you try to write to a file in a directory that doesn't exist, and so on.

File exists

In this case, you probably tried to create a file that already exists. This is common when you try to create a directory with the same name as a file.

Not a directory, Is a directory

These messages pop up when you try to use a file as a directory or a directory as a file. For example:

```
$ touch a
$ touch a/b
touch: a/b: Not a directory
```

Notice that the error message only applies to the `a/b` part of `a/b`. When you encounter this problem, you may need to dig around a little to find the path component that is being treated like a directory.

No space left on device

You're out of disk space.

Permission denied

You get this error when you attempt to read or write to a file or directory that you're not allowed to access (you have insufficient privileges). This error also shows when you try to execute a file that does not have the execute bit set (even if you can read the file). You'll read more about permissions in [2.17 File Modes and Permissions](#).

Operation not permitted

This usually happens when you try to kill a process that you don't own.

Segmentation fault, Bus error

A *segmentation fault* essentially means that the person who wrote the program that you just ran screwed up somewhere. The program tried to access a part of memory that it was not allowed to touch, and the operating system killed it. Similarly, a *bus error* means that the program tried to access some memory in a particular way that it shouldn't. When you get one of these errors, you might be giving a program some input that it did not expect.

2.16 Listing and Manipulating Processes

Recall from [Chapter 1](#) that a *process* is a running program. Each process on the system has a numeric *process ID* (PID). For a quick listing of running processes, just run `ps` on the command line. You should get a list like this one:

```
$ ps
PID TTY STAT TIME COMMAND
520 p0 S 0:00 -bash
545 ? S 3:59 /usr/X11R6/bin/ctwm -W
```

```

548  ? S    0:10 xclock -geometry -0-0
2159  pd SW  0:00 /usr/bin/vi lib/addresses
31956 p3 R    0:00 ps

```

The fields are as follows:

- **PID.** The process ID.
- **TTY.** The terminal device where the process is running. More about this later.
- **STAT.** The process status, that is, what the process is doing and where its memory resides. For example, S means sleeping and R means running. (See the `ps(1)` manual page for a description of all the symbols.)
- **TIME.** The amount of CPU time in minutes and seconds that the process has used so far. In other words, the total amount of time that the process has spent running instructions on the processor.
- **COMMAND.** This one might seem obvious, but be aware that a process can change this field from its original value.

2.16.1 Command Options

The `ps` command has many options. To make things more confusing, you can specify options in three different styles—Unix, BSD, and GNU. Many people find the BSD style to be the most comfortable (perhaps because it involves less typing), so we’ll use the BSD style in this book. Here are some of the most useful option combinations:

ps x	Show all of your running processes.
ps ax	Show all processes on the system, not just the ones you own.
ps u	Include more detailed information on processes.
ps w	Show full command names, not just what fits on one line.

As with other programs, you can combine options, as in `ps aux` and `ps auxw`. To check on a specific process, add its PID to the argument list of the `ps` command. For example, to inspect the current shell process, you could use `ps u $$`, because `$$` is a shell variable that evaluates to the current shell’s PID. (You’ll find information on the administration commands `top` and `lsof` in [Chapter 8](#). These can be useful for locating processes, even when doing something other than system maintenance.)

2.16.2 Killing Processes

To terminate a process, send it a *signal* with the `kill` command. A signal is a message to a process from the kernel. When you run `kill`, you’re asking the kernel to send a signal to another process. In most cases, all you need to do is this:

```
$ kill pid
```

There are many types of signals. The default is `TERM`, or terminate. You can send different signals by adding an extra option to `kill`. For example, to freeze a process instead of terminating it, use the `STOP` signal:

```
$ kill -STOP pid
```

A stopped process is still in memory, ready to pick up where it left off. Use the `CONT` signal to continue running the process again:

```
$ kill -CONT pid
```

NOTE

Using `ctrl-c` to terminate a process that is running in the current terminal is the same as using `kill` to end the process with the `INT` (interrupt) signal.

The most brutal way to terminate a process is with the `KILL` signal. Other signals give the process a chance to clean up after itself, but `KILL` does not. The operating system terminates the process and forcibly removes it from memory. Use this as a last resort.

You should not kill processes indiscriminately, especially if you don't know what they're doing. You may be shooting yourself in the foot.

You may see other users entering numbers instead of names with `kill`; for example, `kill -9` instead of `kill -KILL`. This is because the kernel uses numbers to denote the different signals; you can use `kill` this way if you know the number of the signal that you want to send.

2.16.3 Job Control

Shells also support *job control*, which is a way to send `TSTP` (similar to `STOP`) and `CONT` signals to programs by using various keystrokes and commands. For example, you can send a `TSTP` signal with `CTRL-Z`, then start the process again by entering `fg` (bring to foreground) or `bg` (move to background; see the next section). But despite its utility and the habits of many experienced users, job control is not necessary and can be confusing for beginners: It's common for users to press `CTRL-Z` instead of `CTRL-c`, forget about what they were running, and eventually end up with numerous suspended processes hanging around.

HINT

To see if you've accidentally suspended any processes on your current terminal, run the `jobs` command.

If you want to run multiple shells, run each program in a separate terminal window, put noninteractive processes in the background (as explained in the next section), or learn to use the `screen` program.

2.16.4 Background Processes

Normally, when you run a Unix command from the shell, you don't get the shell prompt back until the program finishes executing. However, you can detach a process from the shell and put it in the "background" with the ampersand (`&`); this gives you the prompt back. For example, if you have a large file that you need to decompress with `gunzip` (you'll see this in [2.18 Archiving and Compressing Files](#)), and you want to do some other stuff while it's running, run a command like this one:

```
$ gunzip file.gz &
```

The shell should respond by printing the PID of the new background process, and the prompt should return immediately so that you can continue working. The process will continue to run after you log out, which comes in particularly handy if you have to run a program that does a lot of number crunching for a while. (Depending on your setup, the shell might notify you when the process completes.)

The dark side of running background processes is that they may expect to work with the standard input (or worse, read directly from the terminal). If a program tries to read something from the standard input when it's in the background, it can freeze (try `fg` to bring it back) or terminate. Also, if the program writes to the standard output or standard error, the output can appear in the terminal window with no regard for anything else running there, meaning that you can get unexpected output when you're working on something else.

The best way to make sure that a background process doesn't bother you is to redirect its output (and possibly input) as described in [2.14 Shell Input and Output](#).

If spurious output from background processes gets in your way, learn how to redraw the content of your terminal window. The `bash` shell and most full-screen interactive programs support CTRL-L to redraw the entire screen. If a program is reading from the standard input, CTRL-R usually redraws the current line, but pressing the wrong sequence at the wrong time can leave you in an even worse situation than before. For example, entering CTRL-R at the `bash` prompt puts you in reverse isearch mode (press ESC to exit).

2.17 File Modes and Permissions

Every Unix file has a set of *permissions* that determine whether you can read, write, or run the file. Running `ls -l` displays the permissions. Here's an example of such a display:

```
-rw-r--r--❶ 1 juser somegroup 7041 Mar 26 19:34 endnotes.html
```

The file's *mode* ❶ represents the file's permissions and some extra information. There are four parts to the mode, as illustrated in Figure 2-1.

The first character of the mode is the *file type*. A dash (-) in this position, as in the example, denotes a *regular* file, meaning that there's nothing special about the file. This is by far the most common kind of file. Directories are also common and are indicated by a `d` in the file type slot. (3.1 Device Files lists the remaining file types.)

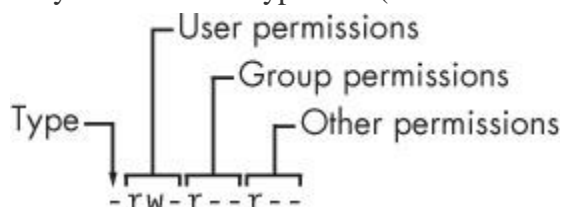


Figure 2-1. The pieces of a file mode

The rest of a file's mode contains the permissions, which break down into three sets: *user*, *group*, and *other*, in that order. For example, the `rw-` characters in the example are the user permissions, the `r--` characters that follow are the group permissions, and the final `r--` characters are the other permissions.

Each permission set can contain four basic representations:

r	Means that the file is readable.
w	Means that the file is writable.
x	Means that the file is executable (you can run it as a program).
-	Means nothing.

The user permissions (the first set) pertain to the user who owns the file. In the preceding example, that's `juser`. The second set, group permissions, are for the file's group (`somegroup` in the example). Any user in that group can take advantage of these permissions. (Use the `groups` command to see what group you're in, and see 7.3.5 Working with Groups for more information.)

Everyone else on the system has access according to the third set, the other permissions, which are sometimes called *world* permissions.

NOTE

Each read, write, and execute permission slot is sometimes called a permission bit. Therefore, you may hear people refer to parts of the permissions as "the read bits."

Some executable files have an `s` in the user permissions listing instead of an `x`. This indicates that the

executable is *setuid*, meaning that when you execute the program, it runs as though the file owner is the user instead of you. Many programs use this *setuid* bit to run as root in order to get the privileges they need to change system files. One example is the *passwd* program, which needs to change the */etc/passwd* file.

2.17.1 Modifying Permissions

To change permissions, use the *chmod* command. First, pick the set of permissions that you want to change, and then pick the bit to change. For example, to add group (g) and world (o, for “other”) read (r) permissions to *file*, you could run these two commands:

```
$ chmod g+r file
```

```
$ chmod o+r file
```

Or you could do it all in one shot:

```
$ chmod go+r file
```

To remove these permissions, use *go-r* instead of *go+r*.

NOTE

Obviously, you shouldn't make files world-writable because doing so gives anyone on your system the ability to change them. But would this allow anyone connected to the Internet to change your files? Probably not, unless your system has a network security hole. In that case, file permissions won't help you anyway.

You may sometimes see people changing permissions with numbers, for example:

```
$ chmod 644 file
```

This is called an *absolute* change because it sets all permission bits at once. To understand how this works, you need to know how to represent the permission bits in octal form (each numeral represents a number in base 8 and corresponds to a permission set). See the *chmod(1)* manual page or *info* manual for more.

You don't really need to know how to construct absolute modes; just memorize the modes that you use most often. [Table 2-4](#) lists the most common ones.

Table 2-4. Absolute Permission Modes

Mode	Meaning	Used For
644	user: read/write; group, other: read	files
600	user: read/write; group, other: none	files
755	user: read/write/execute; group, other: read/execute	directories, programs
700	user: read/write/execute; group, other: none	directories, programs
711	user: read/write/execute; group, other: execute	directories

Directories also have permissions. You can list the contents of a directory if it's readable, but you can only access a file in a directory if the directory is executable. (One common mistake people make when setting the permissions of directories is to accidentally remove the execute permission when using absolute modes.)

Finally, you can specify a set of default permissions with the *umask* shell command, which applies a

predefined set of permissions to any new file you create. In general, use `umask 022` if you want everyone to be able to see all of the files and directories that you create, and use `umask 077` if you don't. (You'll need to put the `umask` command with the desired mode in one of your startup files to make your new default permissions apply to later sessions, as discussed in [Chapter 13](#).)

2.17.2 Symbolic Links

A *symbolic link* is a file that points to another file or a directory, effectively creating an alias (like a shortcut in Windows). Symbolic links offer quick access to obscure directory paths.

In a long directory listing, symbolic links look like this (notice the `l` as the file type in the file mode):

```
lrwxrwxrwx 1 ruser users 11 Feb 27 13:52 somedir -> /home/origdir
```

If you try to access *somedir* in this directory, the system gives you */home/origdir* instead. Symbolic links are simply names that point to other names. Their names and the paths to which they point don't have to mean anything. For example, */home/origdir* doesn't even need to exist.

In fact, if */home/origdir* does not exist, any program that accesses *somedir* reports that *somedir* doesn't exist (except for `ls somedir`, a command that stupidly informs you that *somedir* is *somedir*). This can be baffling because you can see something named *somedir* right in front of your eyes.

This is not the only way that symbolic links can be confusing. Another problem is that you can't identify the characteristics of a link target just by looking at the name of the link; you must follow the link to see if it goes to a file or directory. Your system may also have links that point to other links, which are called *chained symbolic links*.

2.17.3 Creating Symbolic Links

To create a symbolic link from *target* to *linkname*, use `ln -s`:

```
$ ln -s target linkname
```

The *linkname* argument is the name of the symbolic link, the *target* argument is the path of the file or directory that the link *points* to, and the `-s` flag specifies a symbolic link (see the warning that follows).

When making a symbolic link, check the command twice before you run it because several things can go wrong. For example, if you reverse the order of the arguments (`ln -s linkname target`), you're in for some fun if *linkname* is a directory that already exists. If this is the case (and it quite often is), `ln` creates a link named *target* inside *linkname*, and the link will point to itself unless *linkname* is a full path. If something goes wrong when you create a symbolic link to a directory, check that directory for errant symbolic links and remove them.

Symbolic links can also cause headaches when you don't know that they exist. For example, you can easily edit what you think is a copy of a file but is actually a symbolic link to the original.

WARNING

Don't forget the `-s` option when creating a symbolic link. Without it, `ln` creates a hard link, giving an additional real filename to a single file. The new filename has the status of the old one; it points (links) directly to the file data instead of to another filename as a symbolic link does. Hard links can be even more confusing than symbolic links. Unless you understand the material in [4.5 Inside a Traditional Filesystem](#), avoid using them.

With all of these warnings regarding symbolic links, why would anyone bother to use them? Because they offer a convenient way to organize and share files, as well as patch up small problems.

2.18 Archiving and Compressing Files

Now that you've learned about files, permissions, and possible errors, you need to master `gzip` and `tar`.

2.18.1 gzip

The program `gzip` (GNU Zip) is one of the current standard Unix compression programs. A file that ends with `.gz` is a GNU Zip archive. Use `gunzip file.gz` to uncompress `<file>.gz` and remove the suffix; to compress it again, use `gzip file`.

2.18.2 tar

Unlike the zip programs for other operating systems, `gzip` does not create archives of files; that is, it doesn't pack multiple files and directories into one file. To create an archive, use `tar` instead:

```
$ tar cvf archive.tar file1 file2 ...
```

Archives created by `tar` usually have a `.tar` suffix (this is by convention; it isn't required). For example, in the command above, `file1`, `file2`, and so on are the names of the files and directories that you wish to archive in `<archive>.tar`. The `c` flag activates *create mode*. The `r` and `f` flags have more specific roles.

The `v` flag activates verbose diagnostic output, causing `tar` to print the names of the files and directories in the archive when it encounters them. Adding another `v` causes `tar` to print details such as file size and permissions. If you don't want `tar` to tell you what it's doing, omit the `v` flag.

The `f` flag denotes the file option. The next argument on the command line after the `f` flag must be the archive file for `tar` to create (in the preceding example, it is `<archive>.tar`). You *must* use this option followed by a filename at all times, except with tape drives. To use standard input or output, enter a dash (`-`) instead of the filename.

Unpacking tar files

To unpack a `.tar` file with `tar` use the `x` flag:

```
$ tar xvf archive.tar
```

In this command, the `x` flag puts `tar` into *extract (unpack) mode*. You can extract individual parts of the archive by entering the names of the parts at the end of the command line, but you must know their exact names. (To find out for sure, see the table-of-contents mode described shortly.)

NOTE

When using extract mode, remember that `tar` does not remove the archived `.tar` file after extracting its contents.

Table-of-Contents Mode

Before unpacking, it's usually a good idea to check the contents of a `.tar` file with the *table-of-contents mode* by using the `t` flag instead of the `x` flag. This mode verifies the archive's basic integrity and prints the names of all files inside. If you don't test an archive before unpacking it, you can end up dumping a huge mess of files into the current directory, which can be really difficult to clean up.

When you check an archive with the `t` mode, verify that everything is in a rational directory structure; that is, all file pathnames in the archive should start with the same directory. If you're unsure, create a temporary directory, change to it, and then extract. (You can always use `mv * .` if the archive didn't create a mess.)

When unpacking, consider using the `p` option to preserve permissions. Use this in extract mode to override your `umask` and get the exact permissions specified in the archive. The `p` option is the default when working as the superuser. If you're having trouble with permissions and ownership when unpacking an archive as the

superuser, make sure that you are waiting until the command terminates and you get the shell prompt back. Although you may only want to extract a small part of an archive, `tar` must run through the whole thing, and you must not interrupt the process because it sets the permissions only *after* checking the entire archive.

Commit *all* of the `tar` options and modes in this section to memory. If you're having trouble, make some flash cards. This may sound like grade-school, but it's very important to avoid careless mistakes with this command.

2.18.3 Compressed Archives (.tar.gz)

Many beginners find it confusing that archives are normally found compressed, with filenames ending in `.tar.gz`. To unpack a compressed archive, work from the right side to the left; get rid of the `.gz` first and then worry about the `.tar`. For example, these two commands decompress and unpack `<file>.tar.gz`:

```
$ gunzip file.tar.gz
```

```
$ tar xvf file.tar
```

When starting out, you can do this one step at a time, first running `gunzip` to decompress and then `tar` to verify and unpack. To create a compressed archive, do the reverse; run `tar` first and `gzip` second. Do this frequently enough, and you'll soon memorize how the archiving and compression process works. You'll also get tired of all of the typing and start to look for shortcuts. Let's take a look at those now.

2.18.4 zcat

The method shown above isn't the fastest or most efficient way to invoke `tar` on a compressed archive, and it wastes disk space and kernel I/O time. A better way is to combine archival and compression functions with a pipeline. For example, this command pipeline unpacks `<file>.tar.gz`:

```
$ zcat file.tar.gz | tar xvf -
```

The `zcat` command is the same as `gunzip -dc`. The `-d` option decompresses and the `-c` option sends the result to standard output (in this case, to the `tar` command).

Because it's so common to use `zcat`, the version of `tar` that comes with Linux has a shortcut. You can use `z` as an option to automatically invoke `gzip` on the archive; this works both for extracting an archive (with the `x` or `t` modes in `tar`) and creating one (with `c`). For example, use the following to verify a compressed archive:

```
$ tar ztvf file.tar.gz
```

However, you should try to master the longer form before taking the shortcut.

NOTE

A .tgz file is the same as a .tar.gz file. The suffix is meant to fit into FAT (MS-DOS-based) filesystems.

2.18.5 Other Compression Utilities

Another compression program in Unix is `bzip2`, whose compressed files end with `.bz2`. While marginally slower than `gzip`, `bzip2` often compacts text files a little more, and it is therefore increasingly popular in the distribution of source code. The decompressing program to use is `bunzip2`, and the options of both components are close enough to those of `gzip` that you don't need to learn anything new. The `bzip2` compression/decompression option for `tar` is `j`.

A new compression program named `xz` is also gaining popularity. The corresponding decompression program is `unxz`, and the arguments are similar to those of `gzip`.

Most Linux distributions come with `zip` and `unzip` programs that are compatible with the zip archives on Windows systems. They work on the usual `.zip` files as well as self-extracting archives ending in `.exe`. But if you encounter a file that ends in `.Z`, you have found a relic created by the `compress` program, which was once the Unix standard. The `gunzip` program can unpack these files, but `gzip` won't create them.

2.19 Linux Directory Hierarchy Essentials

Now that you know how to examine files, change directories, and read manual pages, you're ready to start exploring your system files. The details of the Linux directory structure are outlined in the Filesystem Hierarchy Standard, or FHS (<http://www.pathname.com/fhs/>), but a brief walkthrough should suffice for now.

Figure 2-2 offers a simplified overview of the hierarchy, showing some of the directories under `/`, `/usr`, and `/var`. Notice that the directory structure under `/usr` contains some of the same directory names as `/`.

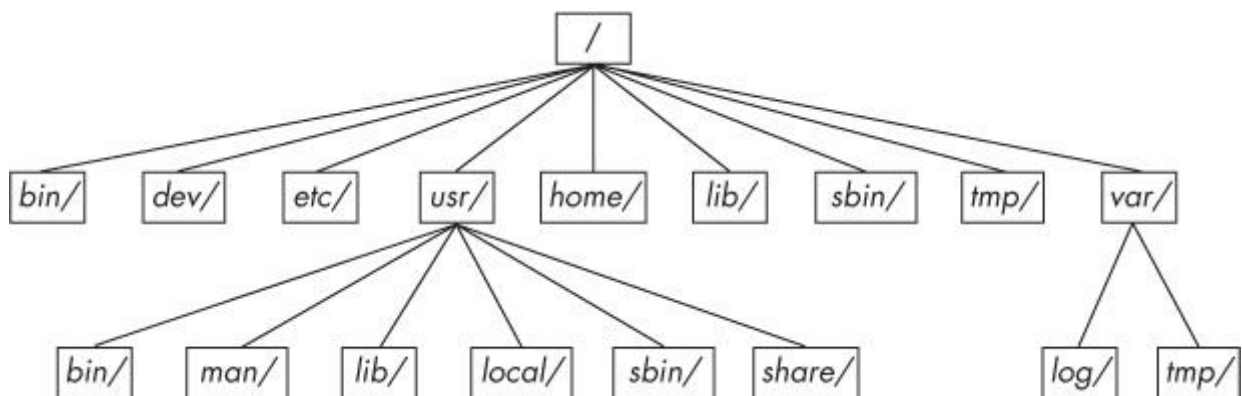


Figure 2-2. Linux directory hierarchy

Here are the most important subdirectories in root:

- **/bin** Contains ready-to-run programs (also known as executables), including most of the basic Unix commands such as `ls` and `cp`. Most of the programs in `/bin` are in binary format, having been created by a C compiler, but some are shell scripts in modern systems.
- **/dev** Contains device files. You'll learn more about these in **Chapter 3**.
- **/etc** This core system configuration directory (pronounced *EHT-see*) contains the user password, boot, device, networking, and other setup files. Many items in `/etc` are specific to the machine's hardware. For example, the `/etc/X11` directory contains graphics card and window system configurations.
- **/home** Holds personal directories for regular users. Most Unix installations conform to this standard.
- **/lib** An abbreviation for library, this directory holds library files containing code that executables can use. There are two types of libraries: static and shared. The `/lib` directory should contain only shared libraries, but other `lib` directories, such as `/usr/lib`, contain both varieties as well as other auxiliary files. (We'll discuss shared libraries in more detail in **Chapter 15**.)
- **/proc** Provides system statistics through a browsable directory-and-file interface. Much of the `/proc` subdirectory structure on Linux is unique, but many other Unix variants have similar features. The `/proc` directory contains information about currently running processes as well as some kernel parameters.
- **/sys** This directory is similar to `/proc` in that it provides a device and system interface. You'll read more about `/sys` in **Chapter 3**.
- **/sbin** The place for system executables. Programs in `/sbin` directories relate to system management, so regular users usually do not have `/sbin` components in their command paths. Many of the utilities found here will not work if you're not running them as root.

- **/tmp** A storage area for smaller, temporary files that you don't care much about. Any user may read to and write from **/tmp**, but the user may not have permission to access another user's files there. Many programs use this directory as a workspace. If something is extremely important, don't put it in **/tmp** because most distributions clear **/tmp** when the machine boots and some even remove its old files periodically. Also, don't let **/tmp** fill up with garbage because its space is usually shared with something critical (like the rest of **/**, for example).
- **/usr** Although pronounced "user," this subdirectory has no user files. Instead, it contains a large directory hierarchy, including the bulk of the Linux system. Many of the directory names in **/usr** are the same as those in the root directory (like **/usr/bin** and **/usr/lib**), and they hold the same type of files. (The reason that the root directory does not contain the complete system is primarily historic—in the past, it was to keep space requirements low for the root.)
- **/var** The variable subdirectory, where programs record runtime information. System logging, user tracking, caches, and other files that system programs create and manage are here. (You'll notice a **/var/tmp** directory here, but the system doesn't wipe it on boot.)

2.19.1 Other Root Subdirectories

There are a few other interesting subdirectories in the root directory:

- **/boot** Contains kernel boot loader files. These files pertain only to the very first stage of the Linux startup procedure; you won't find information about how Linux starts up its services in this directory. See [Chapter 5](#) for more about this.
- **/media** A base attachment point for removable media such as flash drives that is found in many distributions.
- **/opt** This may contain additional third-party software. Many systems don't use **/opt**.

2.19.2 The /usr Directory

The **/usr** directory may look relatively clean at first glance, but a quick look at **/usr/bin** and **/usr/lib** reveals that there's a lot here; **/usr** is where most of the user-space programs and data reside. In addition to **/usr/bin**, **/usr/sbin**, and **/usr/lib**, **/usr** contains the following:

- **/include** Holds header files used by the C compiler.
- **/info** Contains GNU info manuals (see [2.13 Getting Online Help](#)).
- **/local** Is where administrators can install their own software. Its structure should look like that of **/** and **/usr**.
- **/man** Contains manual pages.
- **/share** Contains files that should work on other kinds of Unix machines with no loss of functionality. In the past, networks of machines would share this directory, but a true **/share** directory is becoming rare because there are no space issues on modern disks. Maintaining a **/share** directory is often just a pain. In any case, **/man**, **/info**, and some other subdirectories are often found here.

2.19.3 Kernel Location

On Linux systems, the kernel is normally in **/vmlinuz** or **/boot/vmlinuz**. A *boot loader* loads this file into memory and sets it in motion when the system boots. (You'll find details on the boot loader in [Chapter 5](#).)

Once the boot loader runs and sets the kernel in motion, the main kernel file is no longer used by the running system. However, you'll find many modules that the kernel can load and unload on demand during the course of normal system operation. Called *loadable kernel modules*, they are located under **/lib/modules**.

2.20 Running Commands as the Superuser

Before going any further, you should learn how to run commands as the superuser. You probably already know that you can run the `su` command and enter the root password to start a root shell. This practice works, but it has certain disadvantages:

- You have no record of system-altering commands.
- You have no record of the users who performed system-altering commands.
- You don't have access to your normal shell environment.
- You have to enter the root password.

2.20.1 sudo

Most larger distributions use a package called `sudo` to allow administrators to run commands as root when they are logged in as themselves. For example, in [Chapter 7](#), you'll learn about using `vipw` to edit the `/etc/passwd` file. You could do it like this:

```
$ sudo vipw
```

When you run this command, `sudo` logs this action with the `syslog` service under the `local2` facility. You'll also learn more about system logs in [Chapter 7](#).

2.20.2 /etc/sudoers

Of course, the system doesn't let just *any* user run commands as the superuser; you must configure the privileged users in your `/etc/sudoers` file. The `sudo` package has many options (that you'll probably never use), which makes the syntax in `/etc/sudoers` somewhat complicated. For example, this file gives `user1` and `user2` the power to run any command as root without having to enter a password:

```
User_Alias ADMINS = user1, user2
```

```
ADMINS ALL = NOPASSWD: ALL
```

```
root ALL=(ALL) ALL
```

The first line defines an `ADMINS` user alias with the two users, and the second line grants the privileges. The `ALL = NOPASSWD: ALL` part means that the users in the `ADMINS` alias can use `sudo` to execute commands as root. The second `ALL` means "any command." The first `ALL` means "any host." (If you have more than one machine, you can set different kinds of access for each machine or group of machines, but we won't cover that feature.)

The `root ALL=(ALL) ALL` simply means that the superuser may also use `sudo` to run any command on any host. The extra `(ALL)` means that the superuser may also run commands as any other user. You can extend this privilege to the `ADMINS` users by adding `(ALL)` to the `/etc/sudoers` line, as shown at ❶:

```
ADMINS ALL = (ALL) ❶ NOPASSWD: ALL
```

NOTE

Use the `visudo` command to edit `/etc/sudoers`. This command checks for file syntax errors after you save the file.

That's it for `sudo` for now. If you need to use its more advanced features, see the `sudoers(5)` and `sudo(8)` manual pages. (The actual mechanics of user switching are covered in [Chapter 7](#).)

2.21 Looking Forward

You should now know how to do the following at the command line: run programs, redirect output, interact with files and directories, view process listings, view manual pages, and generally make your way around the user space of a Linux system. You should also be able to run commands as the superuser. You may not yet know much about the internal details of user-space components or what goes on in the kernel, but with the basics of files and processes under your belt, you're on your way. In the next few chapters, you'll be working with both kernel and user-space system components using the command-line tools that you just learned.