

Linux employs a virtual memory system in which the operating system can function as if it had more memory than it really does. This kind of memory overcommission functions in two ways:

- Many programs do not actually use all the memory they are given permission to use. Sometimes, this is because child processes inherit a copy of the parent's memory regions utilizing a COW (Copy On Write) technique, in which the child only obtains a unique copy (on a page-by-page basis) when there is a change.
- When memory pressure becomes important, less active memory regions may be swapped out to disk, to be recalled only when needed again.

Such swapping is usually done to one or more dedicated partitions or files; Linux permits multiple swap areas, so the needs can be adjusted dynamically. Each area has a priority and lower priority areas are not used until higher priority areas are filled.

In most situations, the recommended swap size is the total RAM on the system. You can see what your system is currently using for swap areas with:

1	\$ cat /proc/swaps				
2	Filename	Type	Size	Used	Priority
3	/dev/sda9	partition	4193776	0	-1
4	/dev/sdb6	partition	4642052	0	-2

and current usage with:

1	\$ free					
2		total	used	free	shared	buffers
3	Mem:	4047236	3195080	852156	0	818480
4	Swap:	8835828	0	8835828		1430940

The only commands involving swap are **mkswap** for formatting a swap file or partition, **swapon** for enabling one (or all) swap area, and **swapoff** for disabling one (or all) swap area.

At any given time, most memory is in use for caching file contents to prevent actually going to the disk any more than necessary, or in a sub-optimal order or timing. Such pages of memory are never swapped out as the backing store is the files themselves, so writing out to swap would be pointless; instead, dirty pages (memory containing updated file contents that no longer reflect the stored data) are flushed out to disk.

It is also worth pointing out that Linux memory used by the kernel itself, as opposed to application memory, is never swapped out, in distinction to some other operating systems.

✓ Complete

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