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Beginning the Linux Command Line

Learn how to put the command line to work to manage files, administer users and groups, install new software, run network services, and create basic shell scripts.

Sander van Vugt

Apress®

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About the Author



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About the Technical Reviewer



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Introduction

This book is for anyone who wants to master Linux from the command line. When writing it, I had in mind system administrators, software developers, and enthusiastic users who want to get things going from the Linux command line. For beginning users, this may be a daunting task, as Linux commands often have many options documented only in `man` pages that are not that easy to understand.

This book is distribution agnostic. That is, while writing it, I've checked all items against Ubuntu, Red Hat, and SUSE. Since most distributions are quite similar to one of these three, this book should help you with other distributions as well. There is only one item in the book that is not distribution agnostic: the Appendix, which explains how to install OpenSUSE. I've chosen to cover installation of just one distribution, because if you don't have any Linux installed yet, you probably don't care what you install. If you do care what distribution to work with, you probably have it installed already.

The book begins with an introduction to exactly what I'm talking about when discussing Linux and its different appearances: the distributions. In Chapter 1, you'll also find essential information on how to log on to the computer and how to find out more about the way a command should be used. Chapter 2 follows with some essential Linux commands. After reading this chapter, you'll already start to feel at ease on the Linux command line; among other things, it teaches you how to work with files and directories and how to communicate with other users. Chapter 3 moves the focus to one of the most important tasks you'll perform when working with Linux: working with files. In this chapter, you'll learn not only how to copy files and make directories, but also how to mount devices to your Linux system.

Working with Linux from the command line means working with text files. In Chapter 4, you'll learn about the tools that are at your disposal to do this. You'll get familiar with some of the classic tools, such as `find` and `grep`, and also with some of the more advanced tools, such as `awk` and `sed`. Following that, in Chapter 5 you'll learn more about partitions, logical volumes, and other advanced file system management tasks. After reading this chapter, you'll start feeling at ease on the Linux command line. Chapters 6 and 7 move on to two other essential subjects: the management of users and permissions.

Chapter 8 covers a topic that seems to be handled differently by all the Linux distributions: software management. This chapter teaches you about generic ways to install and manage software packages, such as `rpm` and `dpkg`, and also about some of the distribution-specific ways to deal with these tasks, such as `apt-get`, `rpm`, and `zypper`. Chapters 9 and 10 cover tasks that are important for system administration. In these chapters, you'll learn how to manage processes and how to handle logging on your computer.

By the time you reach Chapters 11 and 12, you're ready to explore network-related tasks. In these chapters, you'll learn how to configure a network interface and how to set up the Samba and NFS file services. Chapters 13 and 14 cover two advanced but useful topics: kernel

management and shell scripting. After you finish the last chapter, you'll have all the knowledge you need to work with Linux from the command line.

There are exercises available for this book as well, which you can download from www.sandervanvugt.com/exercises. These exercises provide an excellent solution for learning Linux in a classroom environment.

I hope you enjoy reading this book and that it prepares you for getting things done from the Linux command line!



Starting Linux Command-Line Administration

To unleash the full power of Linux, as a Linux administrator you will spend most of your time typing commands on the Linux command line, the so-called shell prompt. For someone who is new to the command line, the things that advanced users do there may look like magic. In this chapter, you'll learn about the following topics:

- History of the Linux operating system
- What is open source?
- What are distributions?
- Logging in to Linux
- Command basics: working with commands, options, and arguments
- Using piping and redirection
- Getting help with `--help` and `man`
- Working with the shell

Linux Distributions

For someone new to Linux, the operating system may appear a little bit strange. For instance, exactly what Linux are we talking about? Due to its open source character, there are different versions (the so-called distributions) of Linux. After some Linux history, this chapter teaches you about the differences and similarities between these distributions.

Linux History

Linux started around 1991 all because the Finnish student Linus Torvalds wasn't too happy with Minix, the educational version of the UNIX operating system that he had to work with at the University of Helsinki. In particular, the ability of the kernel (which is the heart of the operating system) of this Minix distribution didn't please him much. He decided to create a better kernel and gave it the name Linux.

Possibly the smartest thing that Torvalds did when starting his initiative was decide not to do it alone. To find other people who wanted to work with him, he posted a message on

Usenet, a major platform in those days that could be used to exchange information with other people and get help from other people.

The initiative by Torvalds didn't stand on its own. Many other software developers had already started initiatives to create free software for the UNIX operating system. The only thing that really was missing at that moment was a kernel that was stable enough to go into production.

Open Source

Right from the start, Torvalds released his software as open source software—that is, software whose computer code is freely available to anyone. This open source initiative fitted well into many other open source programs that were a part of the GNU initiative. The acronym GNU stands for GNU is Not UNIX, which means that this is about software written for the UNIX platform but doesn't use UNIX licensing. This GNU initiative was a part of the Free Software Foundation (FSF), which wanted to create free software for a better operating system experience.

When it came to licensing, Torvalds released his software under the GPL. In those days, GPL stood for GNU Public License, but nowadays it means General Public License. The details of this license are quite complex, but in essence it means that software released under the GPL can be used and modified by anyone, as long as the person modifying this software makes sure that his or her modifications will be released under the GPL as well. In brief: once software has a GPL, it will always stay GPL software. This prevents companies from making small modifications and then taking the software out of GPL and selling it for a lot of money.

The First Distributions

Apart from the Linux kernel, lots of other programs were available under the GPL as well. In the early days, people who wanted to start using Linux had to go on the Internet and download these software programs themselves. Often, after downloading them, they even had to compile them for themselves. This compilation process was necessary to convert the program files, which were published as source code files only, to executable programs that users could execute on their computer.

Software compilation is not very easy to do, and for that reason, different people started to create collections that consisted of the Linux kernel and some other useful programs. One of the first persons to do so was Patrick Volkerding, who started his Slackware distribution in 1993. In those days, this distribution consisted of different software categories, all put together on no fewer than 43 diskettes. Volkerding was perhaps the first who made a successful Linux distribution that started to get used on servers all around the world.

Linux Turning Mainstream

The years between 1993 and 1998 marked the rise of the Linux operating system. One of the most important reasons for this is that it provided a very affordable alternative for the expensive UNIX operating system that was used on many mission-critical server systems. Due to this popularity, during this period the most important Linux distributions were created.

Whereas Slackware was just a collection of software programs with an installation program that made working with Linux easy, other Linux distributions soon started to add value to the open source software. Some did this by adding commercial support to their software

collection, others by creating programs and adding that to their distribution, and some hired developers to optimize the open source programs. The result is that nowadays hundreds of Linux distributions are available for new Linux users. Of all these Linux distributions, only some really matter. In this book, I've focused on the three most important distributions: Red Hat, SUSE, and Ubuntu. By focusing on these three only, I am not making a statement about the quality of the other distributions; however, it makes sense to focus on these three as they make up more than 90% of the Linux market. Following are short descriptions of these three distributions.

Red Hat

North Carolina-based Linux distribution Red Hat had a major role in bringing Linux to the data center of many companies. The reason for the success of Red Hat was that this distributor added support for Linux. At one level, this is support of different hardware and software programs, which means that users of the supported hardware and software programs were guaranteed that they would work on Linux. Red Hat also added help for Linux users, available as a commercial added value to Linux.

Because Red Hat offered Linux with support, companies started putting aside their old flavors of UNIX and replacing them with the much cheaper Linux. This made Red Hat the most important Linux distributor for many years; only recently have SUSE and Ubuntu posed a threat to the commercial success of Red Hat in the enterprise environment.

Currently, there are three product lines related to Red Hat. The most important of these is Red Hat Enterprise Linux (RHEL), which consists of two server versions and a desktop version. RHEL is a commercial product, so it is not available as a free download. It is open source software, however, but the only reason you can't download it for free is because Red Hat has added the Red Hat logo to the RHEL software, and this is something that users have to pay for.

Red Hat also founded the Fedora open source project. Basically, you can see this as the development environment for RHEL. Most new software components are first used and tested in Fedora, and if they are successful there, they will make it into RHEL as well. Fedora Linux is available for free download at www.redhat.com/fedora.

Since the only thing that is not free in Red Hat Enterprise Linux is the Red Hat logo, the CentOS (Community ENTERprise Operating System) distribution offers Red Hat Enterprise Linux software from which the Red Hat logo has been removed. This sounds illegal, but it isn't, as Red Hat is completely open source software. So if you want the stability of Red Hat Enterprise Linux, but don't want to pay for it, CentOS provides a good alternative. You can download CentOS at www.centos.org.

SUSE

The SUSE Linux distribution was founded in Germany. It became popular quite fast because from the beginning SUSE Linux came with lots of software packages. SUSE was one of the first distributions that only sold their distribution and just delivered a demo system as freely available software, thus trying to make money out of it.

In 2004, Utah-based network software company Novell purchased SUSE and developed it into an enterprise-ready Linux distribution that could compete with Red Hat, which in that period still dominated the market.

Currently, there are two directions in SUSE Linux. SUSE Linux Enterprise is the commercial software that offers support, and it exists in three different flavors: SUSE Linux Enterprise

Server, SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop, and SUSE Linux Enterprise Real Time, a tuned version that allows financial companies to process real-time transactions. With SUSE Linux Enterprise Desktop, Novell has some success in bringing Linux to the enterprise desktop, whereas Red Hat, for example, still focuses on server versions. Interestingly, the SUSE Linux Enterprise products (with the exception of SUSE Linux Enterprise Real Time) are freely downloadable at www.novell.com/downloads.

Apart from the SUSE Linux Enterprise products, there is OpenSUSE, which is a fully open source product. This version also offers a stable Linux distribution, but at the same time is used as a development platform for new software. You can download OpenSUSE at www.opensuse.org.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a relatively new Linux distribution. It has become quite successful because its founder, the South African millionaire Mark Shuttleworth, made it an extremely user-friendly distribution and even gives away CDs with the Ubuntu Desktop for free. Anyone can order as many CDs of this distribution he or she likes from www.ubuntu.com.

Apart from the Ubuntu Desktop, Ubuntu has a server edition as well, which due to the success of the desktop version has become quite popular (though not yet as popular as the Red Hat and SUSE server versions). Both versions of Ubuntu Linux are available for free; customers who are interested in getting support can purchase it from Canonical, a separate company that specializes in Ubuntu support.

Remarkable about Ubuntu Linux is the fact that there is a new software release every 6 months. By looking at the name of the distribution, you can see when it was released; for instance, Ubuntu 9.04 was released in April 2009. As enterprise users normally don't like upgrading their operating system every 6 months, there is also a Long Term Support (LTS) version that currently is released every 18 months. The special thing about this version is the extended period of support that is offered. For desktops this is 5 years, and for servers its 7 years.

Note This book focuses on Red Hat, SUSE, and Ubuntu Linux. You will notice, however, that 98% of the commands and configuration files covered in this book are available on other Linux distributions as well. This means that no matter what Linux distribution you use, the information in this book will be useful for you.

Logging In and Out

Before you can do anything on a Linux computer, you have to log in. In this section, you'll learn about usernames and different ways you can use to make yourself known to your Linux computer.

Different Login Interfaces

Before starting to work on your Linux computer, you need to tell it who you are. To help you with this, Linux offers you a login prompt. This can be either a graphical or a nongraphical prompt. If you are working on a Linux desktop, you are likely to see a graphical environment. If, however, it is a server you are working from, you'll just see a shell login prompt.

In Linux, there often is a choice between different solutions. This means there is not just one unified graphical login prompt, but many, depending on the distribution that you are using and on the graphical environment that you have installed. You will notice that the graphical login screen for that reason will be different between the distributions. In Figure 1-1, you can see what it looks like on SUSE Linux.

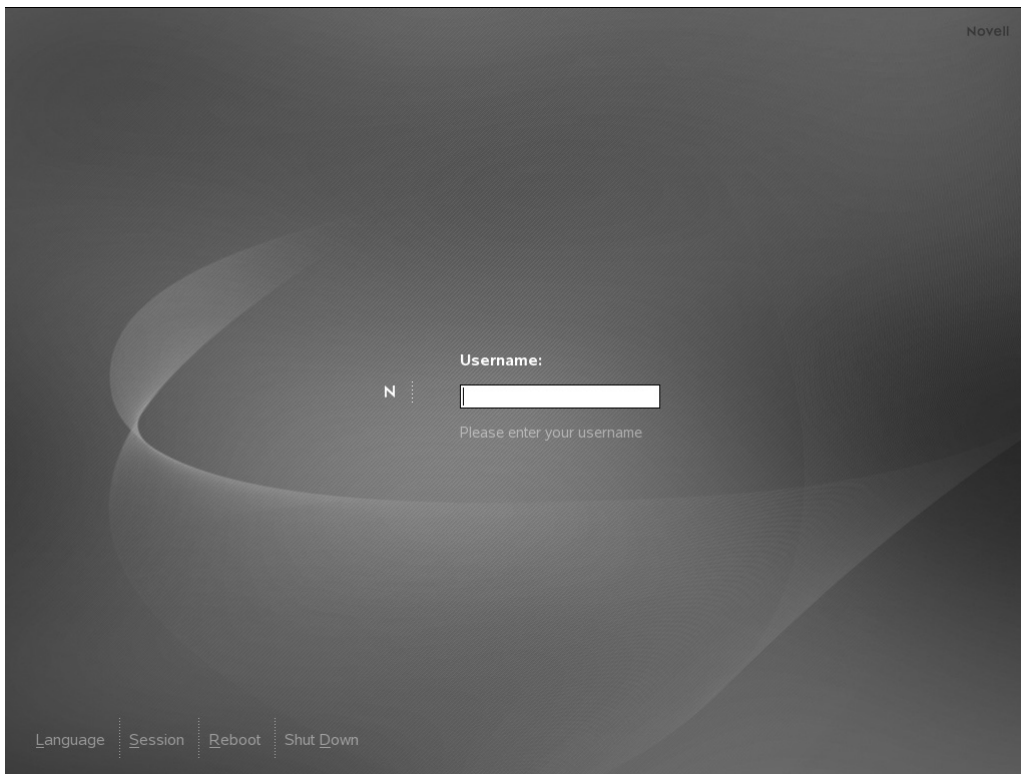


Figure 1-1. *The graphical login screen on SUSE*

When working with a graphical environment, it is the graphical environment that provides you with the login screen. More specifically, it is the `xdm` process that starts the graphical login screen. So what you see in Figure 1-1 is really the result of this `xdm` process.

If you are working on a server, the graphical environment doesn't matter and is normally not started by default. That is because the graphical environment consumes resources, and these resources on server systems are better reserved for other purposes. Therefore, servers normally offer a text-based login prompt only. In Figure 1-2, you can see what this sort of login prompt looks like.

```

Loading keymap i386/qwerty/us.map.gz           done
Loading compose table winkeys shiftctrl latin1.add done
Start Unicode mode                             done
Loading console font lat9w-16.psfu -m trivial G0:loadable done
Starting auditd                                 done
Starting RPC portmap daemon                    done
Importing Net File System (NFS)                unused
Mount SMB/ CIFS File Systems                  unused
Starting cupsd                                 done
Checking/updating CPU microcode                done
Starting mail service (Postfix)                done
Starting CRON daemon                           done
Starting nfsboot (sm-notify)                   done
Starting Name Service Cache Daemon             done
Starting ZENworks Management Daemon           done
Starting powersaved:                           done
Starting SSH daemon                            done
Executing suseRegister (looking for new update channels): done
Starting service gdm                           done
Master Resource Control: runlevel 5 has been   reached
Skipped services in runlevel 5:                smbfs nfs

Welcome to SUSE Linux Enterprise Server 10 SP2 (i586) - Kernel 2.6.16.60-0.21-default (tty1).

nuuk login:

Welcome to SUSE Linux Enterprise Server 10 SP2 (i586) - Kernel 2.6.16.60-0.21-default (tty1).

nuuk login: _

```

Figure 1-2. *The text-based login prompt*

There are other ways of connecting to a Linux machine as well. If you are a server administrator, your server will probably be installed in an air-conditioned cold server room that you enter only if really necessary. Therefore, as a server administrator, you may use a remote access tool like PuTTY to get shell access to the server. In Figure 1-3, you can see what the PuTTY login screen looks like.

Note PuTTY is the de facto standard for accessing Linux machines from a Windows desktop. You can download PuTTY for free from www.putty.org. To use it, you need SSH on your Linux computer as well. SSH is covered in detail in Chapter 11.

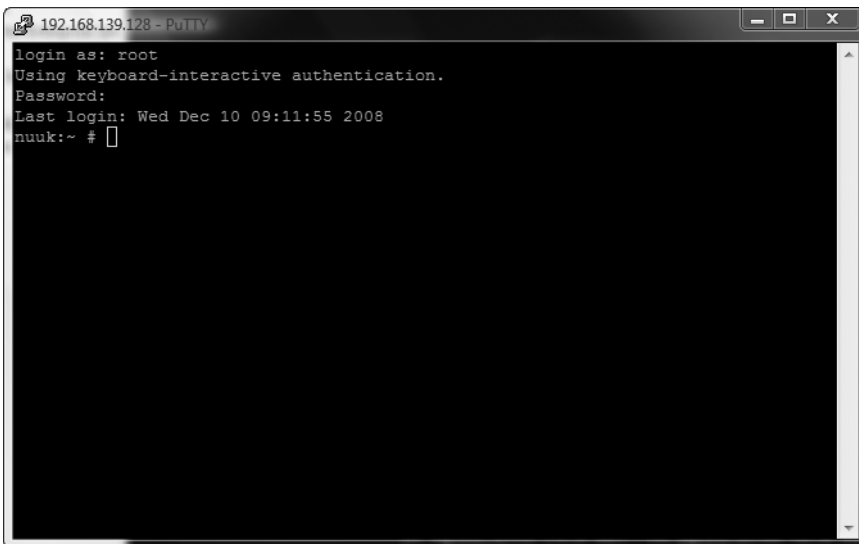


Figure 1-3. PuTTY is the *de facto* standard for accessing a Linux console remotely from a Windows workstation.

As you can see, there are many ways to connect to a Linux machine. In all cases, you do need to provide user credentials. The next section gives more information about that.

Working with a User Account

To log in to a Linux machine, you need a user account name and a password. You should already know what username to use if you installed the machine yourself. If someone else installed the machine for you, ask him or her what username you should use. This username will also have a password. At the login prompt, you need to provide the username and password to make yourself known to the machine. This procedure is also known as *authentication*.

Note There are alternatives to passwords for authentication. For instance, you may use a smart card to authenticate on your machine. However, this is not very common, and for this reason, in this book I will focus on password authentication.

When authenticating for the first time, you have to decide what user account to use. You can authenticate as a normal user, but you can authenticate with the account of the system administrator as well. The username for this account is `root`. On every Linux computer, there is a user with the name `root`, and this user account has no restrictions. The user `root` really is almighty. If you are a system administrator, it makes sense to authenticate as `root`; after

all, you need to do system administration, and for that purpose you need all the permissions there are. If, however, you are a normal user, you shouldn't make a habit of logging in as root by default. Just log in with your normal user account, and use `su` or `sudo` to become root when needed. In Chapter 2, you'll learn how to do this. At this time, just make sure that you are authenticated.

Command-Line Basics

The command line is important, because a system administrator can do anything from it. Linux has many, many commands, more than you will ever know, and new commands are added on a regular basis. All of these commands, though, share a common way of working. In this section, you'll learn about common elements that you will encounter in any Linux command. First, you'll learn about the common structure that every Linux command has. Next, we'll talk about characters that you can and can't use in Linux commands. Figure 1-4 shows what a command line looks like, when started as a terminal from a graphical environment.

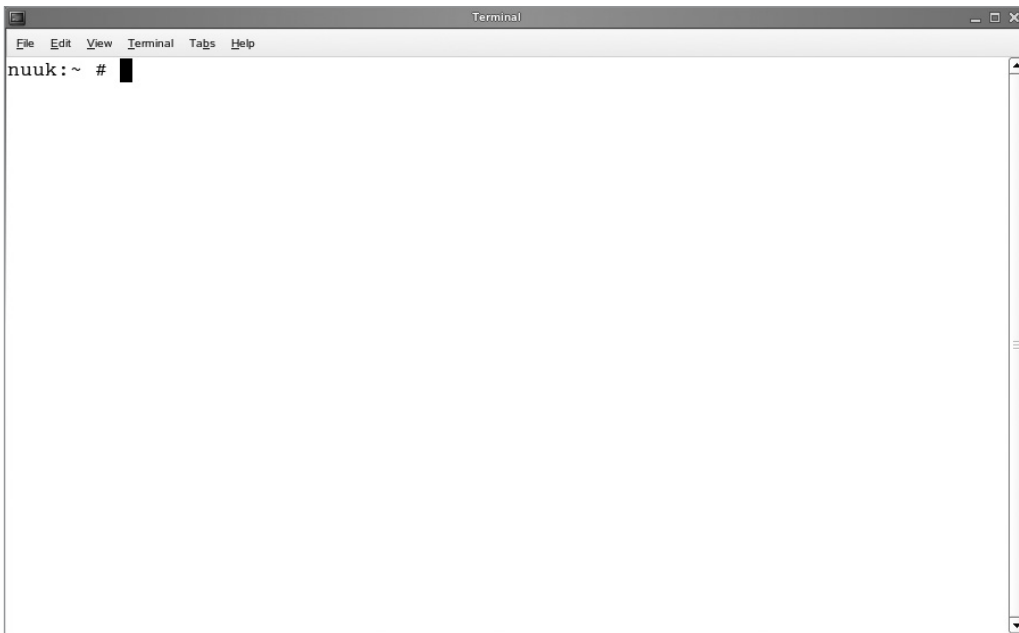


Figure 1-4. *The command line as seen from a terminal window*

The command line offers you a prompt that consists of different parts. The first part of the prompt, as you can see in Figure 1-4, is the name of the computer you are working on. In this case, the computer name is `nuuk`. Next, the prompt refers to the current directory in the file system where the user is at right now. In Figure 1-4, you can see a `~` sign instead of the name of a directory. This sign refers to the home directory, which is the folder in the file system where the user can store his or her personal files. Last, the `#` sign in this prompt

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