Online Troubleshooting Resources HOWTO

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Online Troubleshooting Resources HOWTO

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This document will direct Linux users to resources available on the Internet that provide access to a vast amount of Linux−related information useful in troubleshooting problems.

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1.Introduction

The traditional means of troubleshooting computer−related problems involves consulting user's manuals, books, friends − probably enticed with goodies − and, when all the former do not yield a solution, calling the technical support service of the vendor of the product in question. And, we all know pleasant and reliably efficacious the latter stratagem is. Unfortunately, this is the norm in the sphere of commercial proprietary products.

In contradistinction, Linux, and related distributions, utilities and applications software, has largely been developed according to the Open Source model, wherein developers have used electronic communication over the Internet − typically in the form of publically−accessible Mailing Lists− to collaborate with their peers in the refinement of the associated source code. Such collaboration has also traditionally involved the online publication of user's manuals, lists of Frequently−Asked−Questions (FAQ's) , knowledge bases, release notes, formal guides such as this document (HOWTO's) and tutorials. In addition, users often assist others through the forum of Usenet and other newsgroups and the posted messages are readily accessible in the form of searchable archives. These linux−related newsgroups are renowned for their high level of user participation. In significant measure, Linux may be considered a product of the Internet.

Considered together, these resources enable access to a large, ever−expanding factual database, and my intent is to encourage and direct the reader to utilize these repositories when faced with an issue not addressed in the documentation that is included with each distribution of Linux. Linux veterans who assist newcomers through the forum of Usenet soon become aware of the frequency with which certain technical questions are

repeatedly posted – questions the answers to which are readily available in one or more of the existent online repositories. So, to diminish the likelihood of being "flamed" in response to your posted question on Usenet or irc , read further!

Armed with a browser, Linux users may rapidly become adept at troubleshooting their systems. The key is knowing how and where to look. My objective is to guide the user – particularly the Linux newbie – in this quest.

1.1 Document updates

The latest version of this document will always be available at http://www.newbielinux.com, my website for Linux newbies.

1.2 Copyright and License

Copyright (c) 1999 , by Howard Mann.

This document is governed by the provisions of the LDP Copying License, the terms of which are detailed here: http://www.linuxdoc.org/copyright.html

1.3 Feedback and Corrections

I always welcome feedback and constructive criticism.In particular, I wish to be notified about any errors in this document and resources deserving of mention, but not presently covered herein. In anticipation, Thanks.

2.HOWTO's and mini–HOWTO's

These documents are associated with the Linux Documentation Project. There is an Index page that I suggest you bookmark in your browser.

These HOWTO's are written by Linux users and are periodically updated by the authors. Many authors provide the latest version at a personal website and a hyperlink to the latter is typically provided in the document . This version may be newer than that available at the **LDP** website. The document may be published online before its inclusion into the **LDP** database.

Note also that other HOWTO's are available, the authors of which have not submitted them to the **LDP**. It is definitely worthwhile trying to find these using an Internet search engine as I describe in a subsequent section.

These documents are particularly useful when you decide to provide or access a new service with your Linux system, or when you embark on a technically complex project. For example, you may have the option of

accessing the 'net with an **ADSL** or **Cable Modem** service – excellent guides are available in the form of HOWTO's.

In addition, authors often include references and links to sites that they have found useful. You may find the information you need at one of these hyperlinked sites rather than in the HOWTO itself. For example, I found Linux Network Drivers , the primary site for information about Network Interface Card drivers , in the **Ethernet HOWTO**.

3.Frequently–Asked–Questions (FAQ's)

A list of FAQ's is a traditional accompaniment to Linux–related applications, utilities, and the like. An FAQ is typically provided online by the developer/s of the product in question, and enterprising users sometimes host an "unofficial" FAQ as well. Search for the latter with an Internet search engine.

The FAQ is the first document to peruse when troubleshooting a particular application. In addition, FAQ's exist for Linux distributions, window managers, and the so–called desktop environments (KDE and Gnome).

For Linux newbies, I provide links to three FAQ's that collectively address *many* of the questions posted to the Usenet newsgroups :

1. The Linux FAQ at http://www.fokus.gmd.de/linux/FAQ/Linux–FAQ.html
2. The XFree86 X – Window System FAQ at http://www.xfree86.org/FAQ
3. The Linux Kernel mailing list FAQ at http://www.tux.org/lkml/

4.Online Support Sections

These sections are typically found at the websites of Linux distributions, and often contain a variety of helpful documents with information not easily encompassed within a FAQ. Look for sections with one or more of the following titles:

- Installation Support
- Knowledge or Solutions Databases.
- Tips and Tricks
- Errata, Fixes and Updates
- White Papers
- Technical Guides
- Hardware Guide or Compatibility List
- Security Information

Some websites provide a site search engine that will facilitate your quest for a solution.

If you have a problem with a newly installed distribution, look here first as bugs and their fixes are typically posted here. You may find a detailed guide that will help you accomplish a task such as upgrading your kernel or the version of the XFree86 X − Window System you are using.

I recommend you spend some time at the website familiarizing yourself with what is available.

5.Usenet Newsgroup Archives

The ability to search for and retrieve information from archived posts to the linux−related (Usenet) newsgroups represents a powerful means of troubleshooting in Linux.

Search engines permit one to search the archives by stipulating the forum, keywords, authors, dates, language and combinations thereof. Because the number of linux−related newsgroups is large, the likelihood of finding useful information is high.

I would like to relate a brief anecdote to demonstrate the efficacy of this approach. The first time I attempted to build a kernel, I was presented with this error message when I invoked a "make" command:

```
make[1]: as86: Command not found
make[1]: *** [bootsect.o] Error 127
make[1]: Leaving directory `/usr/src/linux/arch/i386/boot'
make: *** [zImage] Error 2
```

I had no idea what **as86** was, but I entered it as the keyword in the **SUBJECT** field of the Power Search utility at **deja.com** (see below) , and was presented with a large number of posts from folks who had encountered the same problem. Respondents had provided the reason and solution: I did not have an assembler/linker necessary to create machine code, and the **bin86** package provided it. I downloaded and installed a RPM package of the latter and was on my way. This entire process took about 10 minutes (I do have an ADSL connection to the 'net !) .

There are two websites that provide access to Usenet archives using a search engine as described in the following sections.

5.1 Power Search at deja.com

This is the pre−eminent site for all things Usenet, and the **Power Search** utility is at : http://www.deja.com/home_ps.shtml. Spend some time at this site learning how to use the search engine effectively, including an appreciation of the Search Language nuances. In particular, note the value of using the **wildcard** symbol. You will be repaid time and again for your efforts. I typically enter the following for a "routine" search:

```
LANGUAGE : English
SUBJECT :  try different keywords, thinking of a subject line you would use for a post.
FORUM    :  *linux* or comp.os.linux.*
```

There is another nice interface to the **Power Search** utility at : http://www.exit109.com/~jeremy/news/deja.html. Customize this page to your liking (I like the " DejaClassic" option), and then choose " Save Settings."

You may also be interested in using the **DejaSearch utility**, available at : http://homemade.hypermart.net/dejasearch/ , that will print out the retrieved posts in one HTML file for your perusal. By using this, you will not have to page back and forth in your browser.

5.2 Searchlinux.com (CNET Linux Help)

This is a relatively new site with many of the same features as deja.com. It has "basic" and "advanced" search options. The latter does not have as many options as the **Power Search** feature at deja.com. It has a nice one−click option whereby one may view one's own posts and associated replies. It is found at : http://www.searchlinux.com

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6.Internet Search Engines

I frequently use a Search Engine to retrieve helpful or necessary information from the 'net. These engines catalogue pages from commercial, personal and academic websites, as well as Mailing Lists and the like.

Of course, there are a large number of available Search Engines, and I suggest you try several before giving up on a particular quest. Research has shown that any one of them catalogues but a small portion of existent web pages. It is worthwhile becoming very familiar with the operational details of at least one non−directory engine to maximize the efficiency and efficacy of your search efforts. You probably already have a favorite − I like **Google.com**, and will discuss it in a little more detail.

6.1 Google.com

This engine has several novel features that are described at : http://www.google.com/why_use.html. In particular, the engine often returns the most useful pages first ; in fact, I have often found that the first listed page contains the information I need. Because it caches web pages, it is relatively fast at displaying requested items. It has a so−called **GoogleScout (TM)** feature that provides additional relevant links with each item returned.

In addition, it has a specialized Linux search engine at : http://www.google.com/linux that I use as my primary Internet search tool. It searches the database of linux−related pages at **Google.com** further promoting search efficiency. Try it− I am confident you will bookmark it immediately.

7.Mailing List Archives

As you might expect, there are a very large number of linux−related Mailing Lists that enable developers and users to communicate and collaborate on projects. These Lists cover every conceivable aspect of Linux, from the technical arcana of kernel development to the relatively unfocused discussion of issues at the newbie level. Subscribers to a particular Mailing List are generally very knowledgeable in the List's topic, and detailed and useful information is often retrievable. The communications are publically accessible through Internet search engines and in the form of online Mailing List Archives. You will typically see archived pages when you conduct a search using an Internet search engine.

Not all Mailing Lists are associated with an online archive, but this is increasingly the case. Similarly, not all archives have an associated search engine.

Initially, try locate the Mailing List Archive you are interested in by typing a keyword/s and "mailing list archive" in an Internet search engine.

For a listing of linux−related Mailing Lists, peruse websites such as the **Linux Resource Exchange** at : http://www.linuxrx.com/Lists/Lists.perl and the **Linux Online Mailing Lists** at: http://www.linux.org/help/lists.html.

You may also find Mailing List archives at the following locations :

1. The website of the distribution of Linux you use.
2. The website/s of the Window Manager and/or Desktop Environment you use.
3. The website dedicated to the application or project in question.
4. **The Mail Archive** at : http://www.mail−archive.com/lists.html
5. **Mailing List Archives** at : http://www.uwsg.indiana.edu/hypermail/
6. **Linux Mailing List Archives** at : http://kernelnotes.org/lnxlists/
7. **Tux Mailing List Archives** at : http://www.tux.org/hypermail/

This is not a complete listing of archives and you may find additional sites with an Internet search engine. But, this should certainly get you going.

8.Online User's Manuals

Some of the major Linux distributions and Window Managers/Desktop Environments publish their user's manual online. If the entire manual is not online, installation and configuration guides are typically found at the relevant website . This also applies to major applications like the **Gimp** (GNU Image Manipulation Program).

So, for those users who do not have the printed manual, a wealth of installation and configuration guidance is generally available online.

9.Online Unix Tutorials

As Linux is a Unix−like operating system, a general familiarity with fundamental Unix concepts such as the Unix directory hierarchy and file permissions is essential. Fortunately, there are many Unix tutorials online that collectively cover everything a user might need to know to use Linux. I suggest you bookmark the following as an online reference library :

1. A large well−organized reference at : http://www.dicamp.univ.trieste.it/du96/unix/TOC.html
2. Unixhelp at http://www.ucs.ed.ac.uk/~unixhelp/servers.html
3. Unix is a Four Letter Word... at http://www.linuxbox.com/~taylor/4ltrwrd/title.html

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10.Miscellaneous Resources

In this section, I provide a number of links to websites that I have found useful while learning to use Linux. This is an eclectic collection, but keep these handy.

10.1 Release Notes and Available Documentation related to the XFree86 X – Window Server.

This documentation accompanies each version of XFree86, and is available at: http://www.xfree86.org/. Whenever you have trouble with your X environment, peruse the notes applicable to your videocard/chipset. These typically provide details about the configuration of the X – window system relative to your card, and will enumerate any "options" you have to include in the `XF86Config` file that governs X.

10.2 GNU Texinfo pages

A great collection of pages is available at : http://www.geek−girl.com/unix.html#texinfo. Included are links to pages on the following:

- **Bash** – The Bourne−again shell
- **Configure** – used when compiling programs from source code
- **G++** – the GNU C++ compiler
- **Gcc** – the C compiler
- **Libc** – the GNU C library
- **Make** – a program for directing recompilation

Note that some of these are included in the "docs" that come with Linux distributions. In general, these are detailed technical documents of particular interest to developers. However, if like me, you are not a programmer, you may peruse the introductory sections of these documents to get insight, for example, into those `configure`and `make` commands you use when installing applications from source code.

10.3 GNU Software and Manuals

Many important programs that are frequently utilized by the Linux user are GNU utilities – for example, the **tar** (archive) and **gzip** (compression) programs. Descriptions of these programs are located at : http://www.gnu.org/software/software.html#DescriptionsOfGNUSoftware and online manuals for many of these are found at : http://www.gnu.org/manual/manual.html.

These manuals typically provide a lot more information than is found in the corresponding **man** page on your system. For example , compare the **man** page and online manual for the **tar** utility.

10.4 Glossary of Linux–related terms

This online guide at : http://www.firstlinux.com/guide/ has a nice collection of terms and definitions, sorted alphabetically. Go here if you encounter a term that you have not seen before or do not understand.

10.5 An online dictionary of computer and technology terms

The **Webopedia** website at : http://www.pcwebopedia.com/ consists of a large online dictionary of computer–related terms and a search engine that provides links to documents that discuss each item in more detail. For example, I used this site to learn the differences between **ISA** and **PCI** buses.

10.6 A detailed Guide to Personal Computers

The Topic Index to this voluminous hardware guide at : http://www.PCguide.com/topic.html will give you a great idea of the contents of this website. I used it quite frequently when first installing Linux and configuring the X Window System. I learnt a lot about videocards and monitors, including the concepts of screen resolution, color depth etc., useful when troubleshooting X – display problems.

10.7 Gary's Encyclopedia

Gary Momarison's website at http://members.aa.net/~swear/pedia/index.html contains a very large number of sorted Linux–related links. You may use the "find" function in your browser to find links in a particular category. Peruse this website to appreciate what it has to offer.

11.Concluding Comments

If you are a Linux newbie, you may want to create a **Troubleshooting** folder in your browser's bookmark list, into which you put the hyperlinks I have included in this document, as well as those pertinent to the distribution of Linux and the Window Manager/Desktop Environment you use.

As you use these links , you will quickly become adept at troubleshooting online.

Cheers and happy searching !