

cp Cheatsheet

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Quick reference for copying files and directories with cp in Linux

The `cp` command copies files and directories in Linux. This cheatsheet covers copy syntax, recursive copy, overwrite control, attribute preservation, and practical patterns.

Basic Syntax

Core command forms for copy operations.

<code>cp [OPTIONS] SOURCE DEST</code>	Copy one file to destination
<code>cp [OPTIONS] SOURCE... DIRECTORY</code>	Copy multiple sources into a directory
<code>cp -r [OPTIONS] SOURCE DEST</code>	Copy directory recursively
<code>cp -- FILE DEST</code>	Copy file whose name starts with -

Copy Files

Common file copy commands.

<code>cp file.txt /tmp/</code>	Copy file to another directory
<code>cp file.txt newname.txt</code>	Copy and rename in same directory
<code>cp file1 file2 /backup/</code>	Copy multiple files to a directory
<code>cp *.log /var/log/archive/</code>	Copy files matching pattern
<code>cp /src/file.txt /dest/newname.txt</code>	Copy and rename to another directory

Copy Directories

Copy entire directory trees.

<code>cp -r dir/ /dest/</code>	Copy directory recursively
<code>cp -r dir1 dir2 /dest/</code>	Copy multiple directories
<code>cp -r /src/dir /dest/dir-new</code>	Copy and rename directory
<code>cp -r dir/. /dest/</code>	Copy directory contents only (not the directory itself)

Overwrite Behavior

Control what happens when the destination already exists.

<code>cp -i file.txt /dest/</code>	Prompt before overwrite
<code>cp -n file.txt /dest/</code>	Never overwrite existing file
<code>cp -f file.txt /dest/</code>	Force overwrite without prompt
<code>cp -u file.txt /dest/</code>	Copy only if source is newer than destination

Preserve Attributes

Keep timestamps, ownership, and permissions when copying.

<code>cp -p file.txt /dest/</code>	Preserve mode, ownership, and timestamps
<code>cp -a dir/ /dest/</code>	Archive mode — preserve all attributes, copy recursively
<code>cp --preserve=timestamps file.txt /dest/</code>	Preserve only timestamps
<code>cp --preserve=mode file.txt /dest/</code>	Preserve only permissions

Useful Patterns

Common real-world `cp` command combinations.

<code>cp file.txt{,.bak}</code>	Quick backup via brace expansion
<code>cp -v file.txt /dest/</code>	Verbose output
<code>cp -rv dir/ /dest/</code>	Verbose recursive copy output
<code>find . -name '*.conf' -exec cp -t /backup/ {} +</code>	Copy matched files with <code>find</code>
<code>cp -a /src/. /dest/</code>	Mirror directory preserving all attributes

Troubleshooting

Quick checks for common copy errors.

Note: `cp -t` in the `find` example is GNU-specific and may not be available on non-GNU systems.

omitting directory	Add <code>-r</code> to copy directories
Permission denied	Check source read permission and destination write permission
No such file or directory	Verify source path with <code>ls -l source</code>
Destination file overwritten	Use <code>-i</code> or <code>-n</code> to protect existing files
Attributes not preserved	Use <code>-a</code> or <code>-p</code> to preserve ownership and timestamps

Related Guides

Use these guides for detailed copy workflows.

[Linux cp Command: Copy Files and Directories](#)

Full **cp** guide with examples

[How to Copy Files and Directories in Linux](#)

Overview of all copy tools

[mv Cheatsheet](#)

Move and rename files

[rsync Cheatsheet](#)

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