

head Cheatsheet

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Quick reference for showing the first lines or bytes of files and limiting command output with head in Linux

The `head` command prints the beginning of files or standard input, with the first 10 lines shown by default. This cheatsheet covers line and byte counts, multiple files, output headers, pipelines, and GNU-specific options.

Basic Syntax

Core `head` command forms.

<code>head FILE</code>	Show the first 10 lines of a file
<code>head -n 20 FILE</code>	Show the first 20 lines
<code>head -c 100 FILE</code>	Show the first 100 bytes
<code>command head -n 10</code>	Limit piped output to 10 lines
<code>head -- -notes.txt</code>	Read a file whose name starts with <code>-</code>

Select Lines

Control how many lines are printed.

<code>head -n 5 /etc/passwd</code>	Show the first 5 lines
<code>head -n 1 data.csv</code>	Print the header row of a CSV file
<code>head -n 100 app.log</code>	Preview the first 100 log entries
<code>head -n -5 FILE</code>	Show all lines except the last 5 (GNU)
<code>head -n 2 FILE1 FILE2</code>	Show the first 2 lines of each file

Select Bytes

Read a fixed number of bytes instead of lines.

<code>head -c 100 FILE</code>	Show the first 100 bytes
<code>head -c 2K FILE</code>	Show the first 2048 bytes
<code>head -c 1MB FILE</code>	Show the first 1,000,000 bytes
<code>head -c -512 FILE</code>	Show all bytes except the last 512 (GNU)
<code>head -c 512 disk.img > header.bin</code>	Save the first 512 bytes to a file

Multiple Files and Headers

Control the file-name headers shown with multiple inputs.

<code>head FILE1 FILE2</code>	Show 10 lines from each file with headers
<code>head -n 5 *.log</code>	Show the first 5 lines of every matched log
<code>head -q FILE1 FILE2</code>	Suppress file-name headers
<code>head -v FILE</code>	Always print a file-name header
<code>head -n 5 FILE1 - FILE2</code>	Read files and standard input in sequence

Pipelines

Combine `head` with other text-processing commands.

<code>ls -t head -n 5</code>	Show the 5 most recently modified entries
<code>sort -nr scores.txt head -n 10</code>	Show the 10 highest numeric values
<code>grep 'ERROR' app.log head -n 20</code>	Show the first 20 matching errors
<code>tail -n +20 FILE head -n 11</code>	Extract lines 20 through 30
<code>head -n 20 FILE wc -w</code>	Count words in the first 20 lines

Useful Options

Common GNU `head` flags and long forms.

<code>-n NUM, --lines=NUM</code>	Print the first NUM lines
<code>-c NUM, --bytes=NUM</code>	Print the first NUM bytes
<code>-q, --quiet</code>	Never print file-name headers
<code>-v, --verbose</code>	Always print file-name headers
<code>-z, --zero-terminated</code>	Read and write NUL-delimited items (GNU)
<code>--help</code>	Show command help
<code>--version</code>	Show the installed version

Use `head -n 5` instead of the obsolete `head -5` syntax in scripts.

NUL-Delimited Input

Handle file names containing spaces, newlines, or other special characters.

<code>find . -type f -print0 head -z -n 5</code>	Select the first 5 NUL-delimited paths
<code>find . -type f -print0 head -z -n 5 xargs -0 -r ls -l</code>	Pass the first 5 paths safely to <code>ls</code>
<code>printf 'one\two\0' head -z -n 1</code>	Print the first NUL-delimited item

The `-z` option is specific to GNU `head`.

Troubleshooting

Quick checks for common `head` issues.

Only 10 lines are shown	This is the default; set the count with <code>-n NUM</code>
File-name headers appear	Multiple files trigger headers; add <code>-q</code> to suppress them
Binary output looks garbled	Redirect byte output to a file or inspect it with <code>hexdump</code>
<code>head -n -5</code> fails	Negative counts are a GNU feature and are not portable
Upstream command reports a broken pipe	<code>head</code> exits after collecting enough input; some producers report the closed pipe

Related Guides

Use these guides and cheatsheets for complete text-processing workflows.

head Command in Linux	Full guide to lines, bytes, files, and pipelines
tail Cheatsheet	Read the end of files and follow logs
cat Cheatsheet	Display and combine file contents
sort Cheatsheet	Order lines before selecting top results
wc Cheatsheet	Count lines, words, and bytes