

su Cheatsheet

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Quick reference for switching users and running commands with su in Linux

The `su` command lets you switch to another user account or run commands with another user's privileges. This cheatsheet covers login shells, one-off commands, environment handling, and the most common `su` patterns you will use on Linux systems.

Basic Syntax

Core `su` command forms.

<code>su</code>	Switch to root using the current shell environment
<code>su -</code>	Switch to root with a full login shell
<code>su username</code>	Switch to another user
<code>su - username</code>	Switch to another user with a login shell
<code>su --help</code>	Show available options

Login Shell vs Current Shell

Choose whether to keep the current environment or start a clean login session.

<code>su</code>	Keep most of the current environment
<code>su -</code>	Load the target user's login environment
<code>su - username</code>	Change to the target user's home directory and shell
<code>whoami</code>	Confirm the current effective user
<code>pwd</code>	Check whether the working directory changed

Run a Command as Another User

Use `-c` to run a single command without starting a full interactive shell.

<code>su -c 'whoami'</code>	Run a single command as root
<code>su -c 'id' username</code>	Run a command as another user
<code>su -c 'ps aux'</code>	Run a quoted command with spaces
<code>su -c 'cd /tmp && pwd' username</code>	Run a compound shell command
<code>su -c 'echo \$HOME' username</code>	Check the target user's home in a non-login shell

Shell and Environment

Adjust the shell or preserve the caller's environment when needed.

<code>su -s /bin/bash username</code>	Use Bash as the target shell
<code>su -s /usr/bin/zsh username</code>	Use Zsh as the target shell
<code>su -p</code>	Preserve the current environment
<code>echo \$HOME</code>	Check the current home directory
<code>echo \$SHELL</code>	Check the current shell

Root Access Patterns

Compare common root-shell workflows.

<code>su</code>	Prompt for the root password
<code>su -</code>	Prompt for the root password and start a login shell
<code>sudo su -</code>	Use <code>sudo</code> to start a root login shell
<code>sudo -i</code>	Start a root login shell without calling <code>SU</code> directly
<code>exit</code>	Leave the current <code>SU</code> shell

Troubleshooting

Quick checks for common `su` issues.

Authentication failure	Verify the target user's password, not your own
<code>su: user username does not exist</code>	Confirm the account exists with <code>id username</code>
This account is currently not available	Check the target shell in <code>/etc/passwd</code> ; service accounts often use <code>/usr/sbin/nologin</code>
<code>su</code> keeps the old PATH	Use <code>SU -</code> to start a clean login shell
Root access fails on Ubuntu	The root account may be locked; use <code>sudo -i</code> instead

Related Guides

Use these guides when working with users, passwords, and privilege escalation.

su Command in Linux	Full <code>SU</code> guide with examples and <code>sudo</code> comparison
sudo Command in Linux	Run commands with elevated privileges
How to Change User Password in Linux	Set or reset passwords
useradd cheatsheet	Create and manage user accounts
How to Add User to Group in Linux	Manage group membership