tail Cheatsheet

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Quick reference for viewing the end of files, following logs, and using tail with lines, bytes, and pipelines in Linux

The `tail` command shows the end of files and can keep watching them as new lines arrive. This cheatsheet covers the most common line, byte, follow, and log-monitoring patterns you will use in daily Linux work.

Basic Syntax

Core `tail` command forms.

`tail FILE`	Show the last 10 lines of a file
`tail -n 20 FILE`	Show the last 20 lines
`tail -f FILE`	Follow a file as new lines are appended
`tail -c 200 FILE`	Show the last 200 bytes
`command | tail`	Show the end of piped output

Show the Last Lines

Common line-based usage patterns.

`tail /var/log/syslog`	Show the last 10 lines of a system log
`tail -n 50 /var/log/nginx/access.log`	Show the last 50 log lines
`tail -5 file.txt`	Short form for the last 5 lines
`tail -n 1 file.txt`	Show only the last line
`tail -n +5 file.txt`	Start printing from line 5

Follow Logs in Real Time

Monitor changing files without reopening them.

`tail -f /var/log/auth.log`	Follow a log file live
`tail -n 100 -f app.log`	Show recent lines, then keep following
`tail -F /var/log/nginx/error.log`	Follow by filename and survive log rotation
`sudo tail -f /var/log/secure`	Follow a root-owned log file
`tail -f --pid=1234 app.log`	Stop following when PID 1234 exits

Bytes and Starting Positions

Switch from lines to byte counts or start offsets.

`tail -c 500 file.bin`	Show the last 500 bytes
`tail -c 2K file.log`	Show the last 2 KiB
`tail -n +2 file.csv`	Skip the first line, useful for headers
`tail -n +20 file.txt`	Print from line 20 to the end
`tail -c +101 file.txt`	Print starting from byte 101

Multiple Files

Inspect or follow more than one file at a time.

`tail file1.log file2.log`	Show the last 10 lines from each file
`tail -n 20 file1.log file2.log`	Show the last 20 lines from each file
`tail -f /var/log/syslog /var/log/auth.log`	Follow multiple log files live
`tail -q file1 file2`	Suppress file headers
`tail -v file1 file2`	Always show file headers

Pipelines and Combos

Use `tail` with other text-processing tools.

`dmesg | tail -n 20`	Show the most recent kernel messages
`ps aux | sort -nk 3 | tail -5`	Show processes with the highest CPU usage
`grep ERROR app.log | tail -n 20`	Show the latest matching error lines
`tail -n +20 file.txt | head -n 11`	Extract lines 20 through 30
`journalctl -u nginx | tail -n 50`	Show the latest service log lines

Troubleshooting

Quick checks for common `tail` confusion.

`No new output appears with -f`	Confirm the file is still being written to and you are watching the correct path
`Output stops after log rotation`	Use `tail -F` to follow the filename instead of the old file descriptor
`Permission denied`	Check file ownership and run with the correct user or `sudo` if needed
`Need only one field or last value`	Combine `tail` with `awk` or `cut` after confirming the file format
`Wrong starting line with +N`	Remember `tail -n +N` starts printing at line `N`, not after it

Related Guides

Use these guides for full logging and text-processing workflows.

tail Command in Linux	Full `tail` guide with examples
head Command in Linux	Show the first lines of files
less Command in Linux	Scroll, search, and follow file output
grep Command in Linux	Filter matching log lines
linux wc Command	Count lines and bytes in files