top Cheatsheet

By Dejan Panovski • Updated on Mar 19, 2026 • Download PDF

Quick reference for monitoring processes, CPU, and memory usage with top in Linux

The `top` command displays a real-time view of running processes, CPU load, and memory usage. This cheatsheet covers startup options, interactive key commands, sorting, filtering, and display customization.

Startup Options

Common command-line flags for launching `top`.

`top`	Start top with default settings
`top -d 5`	Set refresh interval to 5 seconds
`top -n 3`	Exit after 3 screen updates
`top -u username`	Show only processes owned by a user
`top -p 1234,5678`	Monitor specific PIDs
`top -b`	Batch mode (non-interactive, for scripts and logging)
`top -b -n 1`	Print a single snapshot and exit
`top -H`	Show individual threads instead of processes

Interactive Navigation

Key commands available while `top` is running.

`q`	Quit top
`h or ?`	Show help screen
`Space`	Refresh the display immediately
`d or s`	Change the refresh interval
`k`	Kill a process (prompts for PID and signal)
`r`	Renice a process (change priority)
`u`	Filter by user
`n or #`	Set the number of displayed processes
`W`	Save current settings to `~/.toprc`

Sorting

Change the sort column interactively.

`P`	Sort by CPU usage (default)
`M`	Sort by memory usage
`N`	Sort by PID
`T`	Sort by cumulative CPU time
`R`	Reverse the current sort order
`< / >`	Move the sort column left / right
`F or O`	Open the field management screen to pick a sort column

Display Toggles

Show or hide parts of the summary and task list.

`l`	Toggle the load average line
`t`	Cycle through CPU summary modes (bar, text, off)
`m`	Cycle through memory summary modes (bar, text, off)
`1`	Toggle per-CPU breakdown (one line per core)
`H`	Toggle thread view (show individual threads)
`c`	Toggle between command name and full command line
`V`	Toggle forest (tree) view
`x`	Highlight the current sort column
`z`	Toggle color output

Filtering and Searching

Narrow the process list while top is running.

`u`	Show only processes for a specific user
`U`	Show processes by effective or real user
`o / O`	Add a filter (e.g., `COMMAND=nginx` or `%CPU>5.0`)
`Ctrl+O`	Show active filters
`=`	Clear all filters for the current window
`L`	Search for a string in the display
`&`	Find next occurrence of the search string

Summary Area Fields

Key metrics in the header area.

`load average`	System load over 1, 5, and 15 minutes
`us`	CPU time in user space
`sy`	CPU time in kernel space
`ni`	CPU time for niced (reprioritized) processes
`id`	CPU idle time
`wa`	CPU time waiting for I/O
`hi / si`	Hardware / software interrupt time
`st`	CPU time stolen by hypervisor (VMs)
`MiB Mem`	Total, free, used, and buffer/cache memory
`MiB Swap`	Total, free, used swap, and available memory

Batch Mode and Logging

Use `top` in scripts or for capturing snapshots.

`top -b -n 1`	Print one snapshot to stdout
`top -b -n 5 -d 2 > top.log`	Log 5 snapshots at 2-second intervals
`top -b -n 1 -o %MEM`	Single snapshot sorted by memory
`top -b -n 1 -u www-data`	Snapshot of one user's processes
`top -b -n 1 -p 1234`	Snapshot of a specific PID

Related Guides

Full guides for process monitoring and management.

top Command in Linux	Full `top` guide with examples
ps Command in Linux	List and filter processes
Kill Command in Linux	Send signals to processes by PID
Linux Uptime Command	Check system uptime and load average
Check Memory in Linux	Inspect RAM and swap usage