

Where to get free support and help with your Linux problems

FREE SUPPORT

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Graphical interfaces like GNOME and KDE may make Linux look similar to other operating systems but it's an illusion. Linux has its own way of doing things. If you're an experienced user of another operating system this can become a source of frustration.

Some new users eventually give up because they can't find out how to do something they could do easily using the operating system they are used to. So for a successful first experience with Linux one of the most important things you should do is find out where to go for help when you need it.

It may seem obvious, but if you bought a packaged distribution the first place to look for help is the manual that came with it. A good manual is one way in which distribution vendors can add value and make their product better than their competitors', so the manuals are getting better and better and you'll find a lot of useful information within their pages.

Every distribution also includes online documentation, usually in the form of HTML pages. The content varies, but usually the online help includes distribution-specific FAQs. If you have a common problem this could be the quickest route to finding a solution to it.

If you can't find the answer there, what you'll probably be tempted to do is call your distribution vendor. Unfortunately, the support that's provided with packaged distributions is generally limited to installation. Once Linux is up and running the vendor won't be obliged to help you. But that's no reason to despair. You have the means to access a wealth of help resources. And although your distribution vendor may not answer your question by phone, email or fax you can still visit their website. There, you'll find a lot of extra support material including the latest FAQs, patches and software updates to download.

The fact that you may not qualify for free technical support isn't a disaster because Linux is probably the best documented operating system on the planet. It is certainly the operating system with the most accessible documentation. The open-source nature of Linux means that all the documentation is freely available too. If there is any cause for complaint, it is that there is so much documentation it can be hard to find what

you're looking for. If you have no idea what might be causing your problem you can waste a lot of time reading the wrong documentation.

Every Linux user should know what documentation is available, and a good place to start finding out is <http://www.linux.org/> – the Linux Home Page at Linux Online. Amongst other things, it is a portal to just about everything there is to know about Linux. Click the Support link and you'll see all the different kinds of information resource that are available. If you haven't tried Linux yet you'll even find information about what it is, whether it will run on your computer and how to choose a distribution.

Top of the list of resources you'll find here are links to the Linux Documentation Project (LDP). This is a project with the aim of creating the "official" documentation of Linux. The documentation includes frequently asked questions (FAQs), how-tos covering specific topics and man pages, the help for individual

Linux is a sophisticated and powerful operating system and there's a lot to learn before you can make it do everything you want. If you're a beginner that learning curve can look impossibly steep. If you hit a problem it can seem insuperable.

Fortunately when you use Linux you're not merely a customer of a software supplier: you're part of a community. There's a lot of information, resources and groups of people out there ready to help you out. And like Linux itself, it's all free!

Linux Online Support Centre, with links to all known Linux information resources

Linux Online - Help Center

Location: <http://www.linux.org/help/index.html>

General Info
Distributions
Applications
Hardware
Support
In The Media
Projects
User Groups
Book Store

CLICK HERE for Linux Data Recovery Information

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<http://www.linux.org>

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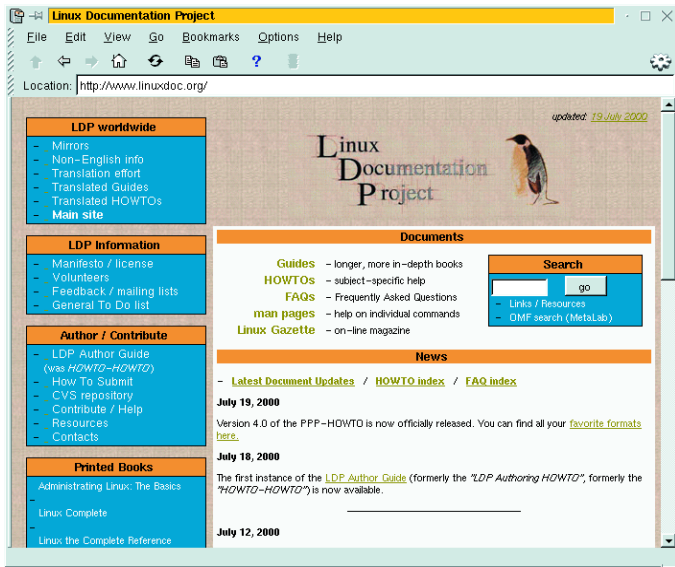
Support Center

Linux information and technical support is available from a wide variety of locations. There are the "official" routes such as the Linux Software Map, Linux Documentation Project, HOWTOs, and FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). There are dozens of published reference materials, from books and print journals to electronic "ezines" available by email and/or various web sites.

In addition, there is a wealth of information that is available from other users -- from personal web sites to numerous Linux-oriented Usenet (news) Groups, mailing lists and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels dedicated to the discussion of Linux.

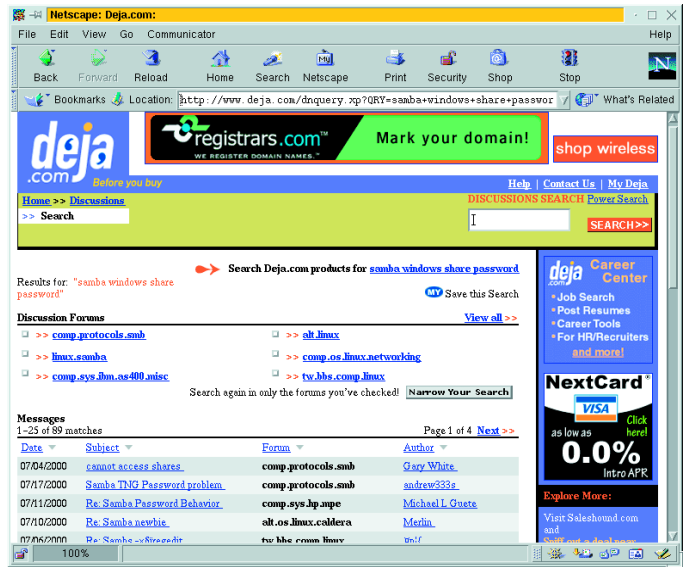
- [Getting Started](#)
- [Linux Documentation Project \(LDP\)](#)
 - [HOWTOs](#)
 - [Mini-HOWTOs](#)
 - [Project Guides](#)
 - [FAQs](#)
 - [Linux Man Pages](#)
 - [Unmaintained HOWTOs](#)
 - [Unmaintained MINI-HOWTOs](#)
- [Other HOWTOs](#)
 - [CD Writing, Epson Color Stylus, Project Japanese extensions, Laptop, Masquerading Proxy Server, Netaltalk](#)
- [Other Mini-HOWTOs](#)

<http://www.linux.org/help/index.html>



[left] The Linux Documentation Project – the “official” documentation of Linux

[right] [deja.com](http://www.deja.com)'s Usenet search engine will locate the answer to most common problems



INFO

- The Linux Home Page at Linux Online* – <http://www.linux.org/>
- The Linux Documentation Project* – <http://www.linuxdoc.org/>
- Deja.com Usenet search* – <http://www.deja.com/usenet>
- Linux Support* – <http://www.linuxsupport.ab.ca/>
- LinPeople*: *Linux Internet Support Cooperative* – <http://www.linpeople.org/>
- LinuxHelp on the Undernet* – <http://linuxhelp.dyndns.org/>
- MandrakeUser.org* – <http://www.mandrakeuser.org/>
- Linux Winmodem Support* – <http://www.linmodems.org>
- Winmodems Linux information page* – <http://www.o2.net/~gromitkc/winmodem.html>
- Virtual Dr* – <http://www.virtual-dr.com/>
- Linux Support Services* – <http://www.linux-support.net/>
- Linux Free Support* – <http://www.linuxfreesupport.com>

commands which you can read by typing “man command” in a console window. If you installed Linux from a CD-ROM there's a fair chance that much of this documentation is already present on your system.

The LDP also includes guides such as the Linux Installation and Getting Started Guide by Matt Welsh, the Linux System Administrator's Guide by Lars Wirzenius and the Linux Network Administrator's Guide by Olaf Kirch. The Guides are complete books that provide in-depth coverage of a topic. Like all the LDP material they are available for download in a variety of formats: text files, html pages or pdf documents. It's also possible to buy printed copies of most of this documentation in books like Linux, the Complete Reference published by Walnut Creek CD-ROM. One advantage of reading the documentation online, of course, is that you can be sure you are seeing the latest, most up-to-date version.

This type of documentation is all very well but it may not have the exact answer to your specific problem. When you are just trying to get something to work it's tempting just to ask somebody else for the solution. Newsgroups are ideal for this, but for the sake of everyone involved they should not be your first resort. Many of the people who regularly frequent newsgroups get tired of answering the same old questions and if you ask something that they know is written down somewhere you may be told to go and read the ***** manual (RTFM.) You'll have a much better chance of receiving a helpful or sympathetic response if it's obvious from your question that you've done your homework first.

If you've not visited a newsgroup before, it's a good idea to check previous messages to see if your problem has been brought up before and been answered. A good way to do this is to use [deja.com](http://www.deja.com)'s Usenet search tool at <http://www.deja.com/usenet>. Just type in some keywords that you'd expect to appear in discussions relating to your problem and the search engine will pull out the most recent messages that include them. There's a wealth of valuable information contained in Usenet and browsing the mes-

sage archives will more often than not turn up a solution to your problem. If it doesn't, [deja.com](http://www.deja.com) even allows you to post a message to a newsgroup online, which is great if you haven't set up a newsreader.

Even if a search at [deja.com](http://www.deja.com) doesn't produce the answer to your question it will certainly help you to identify the most appropriate newsgroup to post your question in. There are a great many newsgroups devoted to discussion about Linux including a complete hierarchy of groups with names starting with “linux”. Some of the groups that will be useful to new users with a problem are listed in the panel. For the full list see the Linux Home Page or search the list of groups displayed by your newsreader.

IRC channels

A more immediate way to communicate with other Linux users is through Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Many IRC channels are used by members of the Linux developer community to discuss their work but there are a few that are intended for newcomers and which try to create a friendly environment where you can get help if you need it. These channels now have their own web sites where you can find out more about them, and which are being developed into repositories of useful information for people who are getting going under Linux. They are worth a look.

For a start try the Linux Support Project (<http://www.linuxsupport.ab.ca/>). This project started as an IRC support channel for beginners, advanced users and system administrators, but it is now developing into a major online resource. A search engine provides access to over 12,000 documents and new sections of the site are opening all the time.

Also worth a visit is the Linux Internet Support Cooperative (<http://www.linpeople.org/>). This group provides 24-hour support via IRC on irc.linpeople.org channel #LinPeople, for new and experienced users alike. Another IRC channel worth trying is #linuxhelp on the Undernet, whose website is at <http://linux-help.dyndns.org/>.

Yet another way to contact other Linux users and even meet up with them in person is to join a user group. There's a user group section elsewhere in this magazine which contains information about how to contact local groups in the UK. Many Linux user groups hold regular meetings, but all have a web page and those that don't have meetings enable members to communicate by means of mailing lists.

Besides those run by local user groups there are many other mailing lists devoted to various aspects of Linux, although few are intended to be used by beginners looking for technical help. If you like the idea of using a mailing list to seek advice and information check your distribution vendor's website as there are a number of mailing lists that cater for users of a specific distribution. There's an unofficial support mailing list for Red Hat Linux users at egroups.com (<http://www.egroups.com/groups/redhat>). Mailing lists run by egroups are convenient if you're concerned about receiving dozens of mail messages a day because you can have the discussion sent to your mailbox in digest form or even browse it online at egroups' website.

If you don't want to plough through reams of documentation and aren't keen on participating in discussions via newsgroups, mailing lists or IRC channels you might like to try some of the free support sites that are available on the web. If you're using the popular Linux-Mandrake distribution try visiting MandrakeUser.org (<http://www.mandrakeuser.org/>) which promises to answer questions about Linux-Mandrake and questions about GNU/Linux in general.

Some support sites cater for very specific problem areas. If you're trying to get a Windows software modem such as a Winmodem to work under Linux there are two websites you should definitely visit. The Linux Winmodem Support site is at <http://www.linmodems.org>. Another good site packed with useful information is the snappily-named "Winmodems are not modems; Linux information page" which can be found at <http://www.o2.net/~gromitkc/winmodem.html>. These sites are testimony to the fact that where there is a need, Open Source developers find a way.

There are free support websites that are less specialised in nature and which are worth trying with more general problems. One that has been

Some helpful Linux newsgroups

- comp.os.linux.alpha** – discussion about Linux on Digital Alpha machines.
- comp.os.linux.answers** – disseminates the latest Linux FAQs, HOWTOs, and READMEs.
- comp.os.linux.apps** – discussion about Linux applications.
- comp.os.linux.hardware** – discussion of Linux hardware compatibility issues.
- comp.os.linux.networking** – discussion about networking and communications issues.
- comp.os.linux.powerpc** – discussion relating to Linux on Power PC.
- comp.os.linux.setup** – discussion about Linux installation and setup issues.
- comp.os.linux.x** – discussion relating to the X Windows System.
- alt.os.linux.caldera** – discussion about Caldera's Open Linux distribution.
- alt.os.linux.slackware** – discussion about the Slackware distribution.
- linux.debian.user** – discussion about the Debian distribution
- linux.redhat.*** – a set of newsgroups related to Red Hat's distribution
- linux.samba** – discussion related to using Samba
- linux.wine.users** – discussion for users of WINE
- uk.comp.os.linux** – discussion group for Linux users in the UK

around for quite a long time and has a good record for coming up with appropriate solutions is the Virtual Dr at <http://www.virtualdr.com/>. Some free support websites are advertising-funded or exist to draw attention to a paid-for business-oriented support service. An example is Linux Support Services at <http://www.linux-support.net/>. This site is operated by a company that provides commercial support for US companies using Linux. The free support is provided by volunteers, and comes with no guarantees.

For UK residents one to try might be Linux Free Support, which you'll find at <http://www.linuxfreesupport.co.uk>. A service provided by Linuxsure (<http://www.linuxsure.com>) which provides professional evaluation, migration, integration and support services to paying customers, it supports all distributions and applications and promises a guaranteed response from certified experts. The service seems to live up to these claims as our test query was answered in a few minutes. Go on, give it a try.

With all these information and support resources at your disposal it would be surprising indeed if you couldn't find an answer to your Linux problem. It might take a little while, and involve a bit of work, but that's all it will cost you. If you need a reply within a guaranteed time and are prepared to pay for it then companies like Linuxsure or your distribution vendor will have a support plan to suit your needs. But that's not the subject of this article.

[left] linuxhelp on the undernet – Linux help using IRC

[middle] The Virtual Dr, offering support for all popular operating systems

[right] Free Linux support for all UK users

