

How to measure memory usage in Linux

By *srlinuxx*

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Whether you are a system administrator or a developer, sometimes you need to consider the use of memory in GNU/Linux processes and programs. Memory is a critical resource, and limited memory plus processes that use a lot of RAM can cause a situation where the kernel goes out of memory (OOM). In this state Linux activates an OOM killer kernel process that attempts to recover the system by terminating one or more low-priority processes. Which processes the system kills is unpredictable, so though the OOM killer may keep the server from going down, it can cause problems in the delivery of services that should stay running.

In this article we'll look at three utilities that report information about the memory used on a GNU/Linux system. Each has strengths and weaknesses, with accuracy being their Achilles' heel. I'll use CentOS 6.4 as my demo system, but these programs are available on any Linux distribution.

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