

## Linux Lessons: Text Editors in Linux

“Text editors still remain a critical tool in the hands of a Linux user.”

by Pete Choppin

Before the GUI, everything was text-based. It was the era of the command line, where text configuration files were as prolific as Windows system files. Everything was done by keyboard, and the mouse was as unknown as the Universal Serial Bus.

Then came X—the graphic user interface (GUI). Users could now execute the same commands that were entered from the command line, but through icons on the screen and through boxes they called *windows*. The keyboard now took a step down and the mouse took over as the preferred input device. It started with Apple and users ate it up like candy... eye candy.

So why is it that text editors still remain a critical tool in the hands of a Linux user? Essentially, the basic foundation of the Linux operating system has always been, and still remains, built on configuration files. These configuration files are what make everything happen behind all the icons and windows in a GUI. Whenever you change a setting in Linux from the GUI, you are indirectly editing a text file. And many seasoned Linux users prefer to edit these configuration files directly instead of through the GUI.

Text editors range from having a simple to a complex type of interface, and menu-driven application options are there for a more convenient way to organize files. Linux enthusiasts will be very excited to find out that there are a lot of text editors to choose for a Linux operating system.

### In the Beginning There Was VI

Most system administrators use the [VI text editor](#). VI is a very simple and basic editor. It is the default text editor of a Linux operating system. If the system needs to have a configuration file edited, the system will automatically call the VI editor. A good example would be the task of scheduling a service by use of a cron job. The system calls the cron job for modification in a VI editor environment. It is harder to learn this editor, but a good system administrator should have patience in learning this. VI is fast, very accessible and it is found on just about every version of Linux.

Figure 1. Screenshot of VI text editor.

### And Then There Was Pico

Another editor commonly used by long-time Linux users is the [Pico](#) text editor (Pine COmposer). This is a simple-to-use text editor that is included in the Pine e-mailer. Pico is great for quick edits and is easy to understand. One drawback of Pico is that you are not able to download it as a sole entity. Thus, you would have to install Pine if you wanted to use Pico. Not all Unix-like operating systems support Pico, so it can be a disadvantage. Some versions of Linux do not even include Pico anymore as a text editor.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the Pico text editor.

## The Emacs Text Editor

[Emacs](#) is the extensible, customizable, self-documenting real-time display editor. What makes Emacs so user friendly is that it is well documented and supports many languages. Emacs also includes many extensions that allow you to further enhance the text editor. The Emacs text editor is one of the most widely used among system administrators. It has a good grip of the Linux environment. This powerful text editor is second only to VI in terms of popularity.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Emacs text editor.

## Finally JOE

Another familiar text editor available for Linux is [JOE](#) (Joe's Own Editor)—a full-featured terminal-based screen editor. Like Pico, it is also a package application that needs to be installed. People like me who grew up with the Wordstar word processor should have a reason to be happy about Joe, because the commands and interface of the Joe text editor are similar to Wordstar. So from a DOS-based experience, there will be no hassle learning Joe.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the JOE text editor.

## Wrap Up

It is important to understand that there is no right or wrong choice when picking out a Linux text editor. The choice you make should factor in your ability to function within that editor, ease of use, desired functionality and overall "feel," among other things.

Text editors are considered to be lightweight application programs that are very essential to Linux. They are small and simple enough to use for modifications of configuration files needed to run different services. Users do have many choices for Linux text editors. There are so many editors available under Linux, and deciding which one to use really comes down to user preference.