

## Installfest FAQ

### 1. What is an Installfest?

An installfest is a special type of LUG meeting where people bring computers to the meeting and get help installing, updating, or tweaking their Linux installation.

However, this is sort of a superficial explanation. While on the surface it appears to just be an event where experienced Linux users help newer folks get Linux running, underneath an Installfest is a community building event.

Because of the formal presentations and other things going on at a regular meeting, attendees have limited time for talking to other people - usually just before and after the meeting, which may not fit into everyone's schedule. At an Installfest, however, the whole meeting is essentially a social event with a specific purpose of getting all of the machines up and running. Some liken it to an old-fashioned barn-raising, where the whole community pitches in toward a common cause, but where there is also plenty of opportunity to meet new people, swap stories and generally get to know one another.

### 2. What goes on at an Installfest?

One or more people at the LUG acts as the facilitator - arranging for the location, making sure that there is sufficient equipment for connecting to the Internet, copies of current distributions, and so on. This all sort of happens 'behind the scenes' to the first time Installfest attendee - they typically arrive and everything is just there, ready.

The MLUG Installfests (like other meetings) are held in a classroom at the WCTC in Pewaukee. Picture a typical classroom, about 30 by 45, with maybe a dozen 2x6 tables and twice as many chairs. People bring copies of the latest popular distributions, such as Red Hat, SuSE, Mandrake, Debian, and so on, and these are laid out on one of the front tables.

Also at the head of the room is the wireless (and wired) networking gear. When you do an install, you're going to want to connect to the Internet, either to get updates, look for a specific driver, or just poke around for an answer to a question that pops up during the meeting. Someone has taken it upon themselves to set up a hub, including wireless access, and bring appropriate cabling.

Once in a while, someone brings cookies. <s>

People arrive. Some of these people are experienced folks who have come to help, goof around, chat with old pals, and give their friends who use the "wrong" distribution a hard time. Others come to watch and learn, although they don't have a machine themselves.

And then there are the folks who have come with a machine. This machine may be in one of many states:

- This machine may be barren of all operating systems, just waiting for some brand new bits.
- It may already have an operating system on it, and the owner wants to replace that OS with Linux. The determination of which operating system is going to be replaced is an exercise left to the reader.
- It may already have an operating system on it, and the owner wants to install Linux on the computer as well. The existing operating system might be Windows, or it might be a different distribution of Linux. This situation of having more than one OS on the machine is called a "Dual Boot" machine, and lots of people do it.
- It may already be running Linux, but need some tweaking or updating; perhaps the owner is looking for help getting a particular piece of hardware running or software optimized.

At this point, the event becomes somewhat of a free-for-all. Someone will set down a machine on a table, and other folks will be drawn to it, asking what the owner wants to accomplish, and, if they're able to, those folks will offer to help. Sometimes they can help to a certain point, and then will mingle, looking for someone else that knows more about <problem area>.

This continues on for several hours, until all the machines are set up to their owner's satisfaction (pretty common), until everyone is totally stumped (rare) or until building security kicks everyone out of the room (even rarer).

### 3. How do I participate in an Installfest?

As the song goes, "Come as you are." Bring a machine if you want. If you want to bring something else (like equipment or software), participate on the LUG's mailing list before and offer to do so, asking what might be in short supply.

If you're going to bring a machine, be self-contained. Don't just bring a CPU and assume everything else will be waiting for you. Bring a monitor, keyboard and mouse (if you're bringing a desktop), a power cord, a power strip or extension cord, and an Ethernet cable. If you're going to burn CDs, bring some blanks.

### 4. I have a Windows machine. Can I get Linux installed on it and still keep Windows on it and still access all of my old data?

Probably.

This situation is known as a “Dual Boot” and many, many people who are just getting started with Linux prefer to do this. First, I'll describe how this works, then I'll explain what you need to do in order to come prepared for this scenario.

How it works:

When a computer starts up, it looks for a chunk of code on the hard disk called a 'boot loader'. If there is more than one operating system installed on your computer, these are all displayed as part of the process of the boot loader running, and you get to choose which OS you want to run during that particular session. When you install Linux on a computer that already has Windows on it, in a dual-boot scenario, the Linux installation modifies the boot loader so that the next time you turn the computer on, both Windows and Linux will show up as choices for you to make.

During a Linux installation, the installation program examines the computer to determine if there is already an operating system on the hard disk. If there is, the installation program will ask whether you want to wipe the hard disk completely clean and install Linux on the computer from scratch (replacing the existing operating system and data completely), or if you want to install Linux in free space on the hard disk., leaving the existing OS on the machine as well.

Since Linux configures a hard disk in a different fashion than Windows, there are some technical issues about how to handle the free space and make sure that Linux can be installed on it. There is also the issue of whether or not you have enough free space to begin with <s>.

How to prepare before coming to Installfest:

First, back up your data. If you have a program that can make a complete copy of your whole hard disk, such as Norton Ghost, you should avail yourself of that as well. These are computers, after all - just little bits of electricity floating around - and as such, something bad “could” happen. So make sure you have a copy, just in case.

Second, make sure you have enough disk space. You'll need at a minimum a gigabyte of free space, but you'll probably be happier with two or three, depending on which distribution you want to install and what programs on that distribution you want. If you don't have enough, consider spending a bit of time cleaning up your hard disk and deleting all that junk that's accumulated over the years.

Third, think about which distribution you will want to install. Check out <http://www.distrowatch.com> for some ideas.

Fourth, evaluate your hardware to make sure it's on the hardware compatibility list for the distro you're interested in. Most major vendors have HCLs on their website. For example, SuSE's is [http://hardwaredb.suse.de/index.php?LANG=en\\_US](http://hardwaredb.suse.de/index.php?LANG=en_US). Check out [www.lfriendly.com](http://www.lfriendly.com) for other ideas.

Finally, back up your data. Did I mention that?

5. Any other tips?

Bring a sense of humour and perspective. 99% of Linux installs go pretty smoothly these days, but there's always the odd duck - a motherboard with an unusual BIOS, a video card that no one supports, or some RAM that's flaky. Just as with any other operating system, there's the off chance that the install won't be perfect - remember that these are volunteers who are giving up several hours of their Saturday to help out. Don't come to an Installfest with the intention of demanding help “or else!” People will do their darnedest to figure out a problem install - in fact, the tougher the problem, the more likely you'll get the 'top guns' to your side. But copping an attitude is a sure-fire way to find yourself alone, scratching your head.

And once you've got your box set up, wander around and meet other folks, and offer to help if you have the ability to do so. There are very few people who know it all, but nearly everyone knows something that someone else doesn't - so there's a good chance that even if you feel like a newbie, you have some knowledge to offer someone else.

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