

Use of ":" (was: Re: mtab very long)

Source: <http://linux.derkeiler.com/Mailing-Lists/Debian/2005-05/2878.html>

From: Paul Smith (psmith_at_nortel.com)

Date: 05/25/05

To: debian-user@lists.debian.org

Date: 25 May 2005 08:28:40 -0400

%% Maurits van Rees <maurits@vanrees.org> writes:

```
mvr> maurits@mauritsvanrees:~$ : > temp
```

```
mvr> Does anyone know any other uses for this ':' command?
```

The most common usage these days is in conjunction with :=, like this:

```
 : ${TMPDIR:=/tmp}
```

The := form assigns the value if the variable is empty, but it *also* substitutes the value. Adding ":" to the front makes that value a no-op.

If you need to write scripts compatible with older versions of the shell, then there are places where you need empty statements. For example, in traditional Bourne shells you can't have an empty case entry, so if you need it to do nothing, like:

```
case $foo in
  bar) : do nothing ;;
  *) echo "bad value: $foo"; exit 1 ;;
esac
```

Also, older shells didn't have the "not" operator for program exit codes, and you can't have an empty clause in an if-statement, so if you wanted to do something when a program failed you needed to write it:

```
if someprogram; then
  : success
else
  echo "someprogram failed!"
  exit 1
fi
```

HTH!

Debian-User: Use of ":" (was: Re: mtab very long)

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Paul D. Smith <psmith@nortel.com> HASMAT--HA Software Mthds & Tools
"Please remain calm...I may be mad, but I am a professional." --Mad Scientist

These are my opinions---Nortel Networks takes no responsibility for them.

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