xargs Build commands from input

CONCEPTS

xargs turns stdin into arguments: cmd a b c, not cmd fed through its stdin. It packs as many as fit per run.

Producer find, grep, git ls-files
↓ -print0 / lines
xargs split into items
↓ batch -n / -s
Command runs once per batch
↓ -P parallel
Exit status 0, 123, 124..127

Default splitting is on blanks and newlines, and quotes and backslashes are interpreted. Names with spaces break unless you use -0 or -d.

Without -r, GNU xargs runs the command once even on empty input (rm with no args, for example).

BASICS

`<producer> | xargs <cmd>`
Append input items to a command

`xargs <cmd> < <file>`
Read items from stdin redirect

`xargs -a <file> <cmd>`
Read items from a file

`xargs -n <n> <cmd>`
At most n items per run

`xargs -L <n> <cmd>`
At most n input lines per run

SPLITTING INPUT

`xargs -0 <cmd>`
Items are NUL-separated

`xargs -d '\n' <cmd>`
Items split on newlines only

`xargs -d <char> <cmd>`
Split on any single character

`find <dir> -print0 | xargs -0 <cmd>`
Pipe file names safely

`grep -rlZ <re> . | xargs -0 <cmd>`
Pipe grep matches safely

SPLITTING INPUT (cont.)

`git ls-files -z | xargs -0 <cmd>`
Run on tracked files

PLACING ARGUMENTS

`xargs -I {} <cmd> {}`
Substitute each item at {}

`xargs -I % <cmd> %.bak`
Choose another placeholder

`xargs -I {} sh -c '<script> "$1"' _ {}`
Run a small script per item

`xargs -n 1 sh -c '<script> "$1"' _`
Script without a placeholder

`xargs -I {} mv {} <dir>/{}`
Move items into a directory

-I implies one line per run and overrides -n. Leave it out when batching is faster.

PARALLEL AND CONTROL

`xargs -P <n> <cmd>`
Up to n runs at once

`xargs -P $(nproc) -n 1 <cmd>`
One job per CPU core

`xargs -r <cmd>`
Do nothing if input is empty

`xargs -t <cmd>`
Print each command to stderr

`xargs -p <cmd>`
Prompt y/n before each run

With -P, outputs of parallel runs can interleave. Write to per-item files or lock if order matters.

COMMON USES

`find . -name '*.log' -print0 | xargs -0 rm`
Delete found files

`find . -type f -print0 | xargs -0 grep -l <re>`
Grep many files

`cat <urls> | xargs -n 1 -P 8 curl -sO`
Download in parallel