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tmux default key bindings: the Ctrl-b prefix reference (through tmux 3.7b)

Every default tmux binding lives under the Ctrl-b prefix, organised into key tables for the prefix, root, copy mode and vi copy mode. This is the full 3.7b default set, verified against source, plus what changed since 3.4, clipboard integration, and how to remap.

9 min read · 9 sources

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tmux's entire keyboard vocabulary hangs off a single prefix key, **Ctrl-b** by default: you press and release it, then press one command key, and the command fires in whatever table is active. The defaults have been remarkably stable for over a decade — a 2014 dump of the bindings matches the current list almost line for line[3] — but recent releases (3.5 through the in-development 3.8) have quietly added keys, and one default is about to flip. This reference covers the full default set as of the current stable release **tmux 3.7b (1 July 2026)**, verified against the actual `key-bindings.c` source at that tag[1] and the man page[2]. If your installed tmux is older, run `tmux -V` and check the "What has changed" section at the end.

C-b	88	3.7b	10 ms
Default prefix	Default prefix-table bindings (3.7b)	Current stable	Default escape-time since 3.5
press, release, then key	counted from source	1 Jul 2026	was 500 ms

How the prefix and key tables work

Bindings live in **key tables**, and the active table decides what a key means[2][6]:

- **prefix** — the default table, active whenever you are not in a mode. Almost everything below lives here.
- **root** — bindings with `-n` that fire without the prefix, mostly mouse events (`WheelUpPane`, `MouseDown3Pane`…) and the new 3.8 `Tab`/`S-Tab` switcher. Mouse bindings only do anything when the `mouse` option is on.
- **copy-mode** and **copy-mode-vi** — navigation and selection inside copy mode; which one applies is set by `mode-keys` (see below).

Three keys are worth memorising before anything else[2][6]:

- `C-b ?` — list all key bindings (runs `list-keys -N`); arrow keys scroll, `q` exits.
- `C-b :` — open the tmux command prompt; `source-file ~/.tmux.conf` reloads config.
- `C-b C-b` — send a literal Ctrl-b through to the application (essential inside nested tmux or screen sessions).

A few mechanics: the `-r` flag marks a binding repeatable, and the `repeat-time` option (default **500 ms**) lets you keep pressing it without re-hitting the prefix — this is why resize keys work as "hold and press"[2]. Since 3.5 a `prefix-timeout` option cancels a half-entered prefix instead of hanging[4].

Sessions

BINDING	ACTION
`C-b d`	Detach the current client (session keeps running)
`C-b D`	Choose a client to detach from a list
`C-b s`	Choose a session interactively (tree)
`C-b ( / )`	Switch to previous / next client
`C-b L`	Switch to the last-used session
`C-b $`	Rename the current session
`C-b C-z`	Suspend the tmux client itself (bring back with `fg`)

The equivalent shell commands live outside the prefix: `tmux new -s name` creates a named session, `tmux ls` lists them, `tmux attach -t name` reattaches, and `tmux kill-server` ends everything[1][8]. Sessions are the whole point of tmux: detach, walk away, and the work survives an SSH drop.

Windows

BINDING	ACTION
`C-b c`	Create a new window

BINDING	ACTION
`C-b ,`	Rename the current window
`C-b n / p`	Next / previous window
`C-b l`	Toggle to the previously selected window
`C-b 0`–`9`	Select window by number
`C-b w`	Choose a window from a list
`C-b f`	Search windows by name (or content with `find-window -Z`)
`C-b '`	Prompt for a window index
`C-b .`	Move the current window (prompt for index)
`C-b &`	Kill the current window (asks for confirmation)
`C-b M-n / M-p`	Next / previous window with an activity alert

Windows are tmux's "tabs"; the status line at the bottom lists them. `C-b &` and `C-b x` (pane kill) both ask `(y/n)` before destroying anything — a deliberate safety prompt that has been there since the early days[1].

Panes and layouts

BINDING	ACTION
`C-b %`	Split the pane left/right (horizontal split)
`C-b "`	Split the pane top/bottom (vertical split)
`C-b ↑ ↓ ← →`	Move to the pane in that direction
`C-b o`	Cycle to the next pane
`C-b ;`	Toggle to the previously active pane
`C-b z`	Zoom the pane to full window (toggle)
`C-b x`	Kill the current pane (confirms first)
`C-b { / }`	Swap the pane with the previous / next one
`C-b !`	Break the pane out into its own window
`C-b q`	Briefly show pane numbers; press a number to jump
`C-b Space`	Cycle through the preset layouts
`C-b M-1` … `M-7`	Set a layout directly: even-horizontal, even-vertical, main-horizontal, main-vertical, tiled, main-horizontal-mirrored, main-vertical-mirrored
`C-b E`	Spread panes out evenly
`C-b C-o` / `M-o`	Rotate panes forward / backward

BINDING	ACTION
`C-b Ctrl+↑↓←→`	Resize the pane by 1 cell (repeatable)
`C-b Alt+↑↓←→`	Resize the pane by 5 cells
`C-b m` / `M`	Mark the current pane / clear the marked pane

The mirrored layouts (`M-6`, `M-7`) only exist since 3.5[4]. And note the mnemonic trap: `%` **splits horizontally (left/right),** `"` **splits vertically (top/bottom)** — the opposite of what the quote marks suggest visually, and the single most common beginner mistake.

Copy mode and paste buffers

BINDING	ACTION
`C-b [`	Enter copy mode (scroll and select)
`C-b PgUp`	Enter copy mode one page up
`C-b ]`	Paste the most recent buffer
`C-b #`	List paste buffers
`C-b =`	Choose a buffer to paste from a list
`C-b -`	Delete the most recent buffer

Which copy-mode key set you get is decided by the `mode-keys` option: **emacs by default, unless** `EDITOR` **or** `VISUAL` **contains "vi", in which case vi keys are used**[2][7]. The two tables are genuinely different:

	copy-mode (emacs)	VS	copy-mode-vi
Start selection	C-Space	·	Space
Copy & exit	C-w	·	Enter (y to add)
Rectangle toggle	R	·	v or C-v
Exit	Esc / q	·	q
Search	C-r / C-s (incremental)	·	/ and ?
Next / prev match	n / N	·	n / N
Top / bottom of history	M-< / M-→	·	g / G
Page up / down	M-v / C-v	·	C-b / C-f
Line start / end	C-a / C-e	·	0 / $

Both tables also bind arrows, Home/End, PgUp/PgDn and the mouse. From tmux 3.7b key-bindings.c.

A genuine gotcha, flagged by community cheat sheets: in the vi table `v` **toggles rectangle selection — it does not begin a selection like vim does**; `Space` starts the selection, `Enter` copies and exits, `q` cancels [6]. Since 3.7, copy mode can show line numbers (`copy-mode-line-numbers` with `default`/`absolute`/`relative`/`hybrid` modes) [4] [5].

Getting text out: buffers vs the system clipboard

Copying in tmux fills a **paste buffer** inside tmux — `C-b ]` pastes from it, `C-b =` picks one from history. That is a third clipboard, separate from your terminal's selection and the OS clipboard [9]. Getting text to the real clipboard is where two defaults quietly matter:

- `set-clipboard` defaults to `external` (since tmux 2.6, when the `external` state was added). With `external` or `on`, tmux packages copied text as an **OSC 52** escape sequence to the outside terminal, which sets the system clipboard. This works over SSH without X11 forwarding, provided the terminal supports OSC 52 — kitty, iTerm2, Alacritty, WezTerm, Ghostty and Windows Terminal do; **VTE terminals (GNOME Terminal, XFCE Terminal) do not** and may print garbage, in which case the wiki recommends `set -s set-clipboard off` [9].
- The distinction: `external` lets tmux push text out but forbids applications inside tmux from setting the clipboard; `on` also lets any app inside a pane create paste buffers and set the clipboard — the wiki flags this as a real security consideration for untrusted commands, since even `sudo`/`su` doesn't stop it [9].

The old-school alternative is piping to a clipboard tool — since 3.2 the `copy-command` option sets this once for all copy bindings (`set -s copy-command 'xclip -selection clipboard -i'` on X11, `wl-copy` on Wayland, `pbcopy` on macOS) instead of rebinding `y` per platform [9]. Modern guides also note that `reattach-to-user-namespace`, the old macOS fix, has been unnecessary since tmux 2.6 (2017) [9]. And with `mouse on`, drag-selecting text copies on release to the tmux buffer and, with `set-clipboard` on, to the system clipboard — hold **Shift** while dragging to use the raw terminal selection instead [9].

Command prompt, menus, mouse and misc

- `C-b :` command prompt, `C-b /` describe what a key does, `C-b C` browse and edit options interactively (`customize-mode`), `C-b i` show window info, `C-b t` show a big clock, `C-b ~` show the server message log, `C-b r` redraw the client [1] [6].
- `C-b <` and `C-b >` open the built-in window and pane menus — context menus of the same actions, useful with the mouse [1].
- Mouse: with `mouse on`, `WheelUpPane` enters copy mode and scrolls, `MouseDown3Pane` (right-click) opens the pane menu, and border dragging resizes panes — all `-n` root-table bindings [1]. Right-click menus and their bindings are the one area that has grown fastest in recent releases [3].

KEY FINDING

Press `C-b ?` inside any tmux to see *your* actual bindings — including anything your distro or dotfiles have overridden. It is the fastest way to check a key before assuming the default.

What has changed across recent releases

The core prefix bindings have been frozen since roughly tmux 2.x[3]; almost all recent churn is additive. Binding-relevant changes[3][4][5]:

13 Feb 2024 — **tmux 3.4**
SIXEL images, OSC 133 prompt marks, styled menus (no prefix changes)

27 Sep 2024 — **tmux 3.5**
escape-time cut to 10 ms, prefix-timeout added, mirrored layouts with new M-6 / M-7 bindings

26 Nov 2025 — **tmux 3.6**
pane scrollbars (option, not a key); copy-mode C-l recentred vertically

26 Jun 2026 — **tmux 3.7**
Floating panes bound to * (new-pane); copy-mode line numbers; C-[cancels like Esc; C-l recentres; C-h help in modes

1 Jul 2026 — **tmux 3.7b**
Bug-fix release; defaults unchanged

In development — **tmux 3.8**
mouse option now defaults to on; new C-b g bindings for floating-pane move/resize; Tab / S-Tab window and session switcher

Two things worth noting for anyone upgrading: a running tmux server keeps the old behaviour until fully restarted (`tmux kill-server` or reboot)[5], and **3.8 will change a long-standing default — `mouse` flips from off to on**[3]. If you have relied on the mouse being inert, that is the release to watch.

Customising: the common remaps

Bindings are changed with `bind-key` / `unbind-key` in `~/.tmux.conf` (or `$XDG_CONFIG_HOME/tmux/tmux.conf` since 3.2)[7]. The canonical prefix change, from the ArchWiki[7]:

BASH

```
unbind C-b
set -g prefix C-a
bind C-a send-prefix
```

Other patterns that come up constantly:

BASH

```
# vi keys in copy mode and at the prompt
set -g mode-keys vi
set -g status-keys vi

# repeatable custom binding, table-scoped
bind -r H resize-pane -L 5
bind -T copy-mode-vi y send -X copy-pipe-and-cancel

# reload config on the fly (then press C-b : source-file ~/.tmux.conf)
bind r source-file ~/.tmux.conf \; display "Reloaded!"
```

`bind -T <table>` targets a specific key table, `-n` binds without a prefix (root table), and `-r` makes a key repeatable within `repeat-time` (500 ms)[2]. `tmux lsk -N | less` prints every binding with its note; `tmux lsk -T copy-mode-vi` dumps just one table[6]. The full 3.7b prefix table, verbatim from source[1]:

▼ **The complete 3.7b prefix-table binding list**

```
C-b send-prefix            C-o rotate-window         C-z suspend-client
Space next-layout          ! break-pane              " split-window (vertical)
# list-buffers             $ rename-session          % split-window -h
& kill-window (confirm)    ' prompt window index     * new floating pane (3.7+)
( switch-client -p         ) switch-client -n        , rename-window
- delete-buffer            . move-window             / describe key binding
0-9 select-window          : command-prompt          ; last-pane
= choose-buffer            ? list-keys               D choose-client
E spread panes             L switch-client -l        M clear marked pane
[ copy-mode                ] paste-buffer            c new-window
d detach-client            f find-window             i display-message
l last-window              m mark pane               n next-window
o next pane                C customize-mode          p previous-window
q display-panes            r refresh-client          s choose-tree (sessions)
t clock-mode               w choose-tree (windows)   x kill-pane (confirm)
z resize-pane -Z           { swap-pane -U            } swap-pane -D
~ show-messages            PPage copy-mode -u        Up/Down/Left/Right select pane
M-1..M-7 preset layouts    M-n/M-p alert windows     M-o rotate-window -D
S-Up/Down/Left/Right pan view (refresh-client ±10)   DC recentre view
M-Up/Down/Left/Right resize by 5    C-Up/Down/Left/Right resize by 1
< window menu              > pane menu
```

Bottom line

Learn the ten that carry a day's work — `c`, `n`, `p`, `%`, `"`, arrows, `d`, `[`, `]`, `z` — and treat `C-b ?` as your built-in reference. The defaults have not moved in a decade; the only genuinely new keys are `*` (floating panes, 3.7) and the coming 3.8 `Tab` switcher and `C-b g` floating-pane bindings, plus the mouse-default flip. When copied text does not reach the system clipboard, check `set-clipboard` (default `external`, OSC 52) before rebinding anything — the terminal, not tmux, is usually the missing link. And remember that a server started before an upgrade keeps old behaviour until it is killed, and that the man page shipped with your distro build is always the final authority for that version[2][9].

SOURCES

1 tmux 3.7b key-bindings.c — the default bindings, verbatim
https://raw.githubusercontent.com/tmux/tmux/3.7b/key-bindings.c

2 tmux(1) man page — DEFAULT KEY BINDINGS and options
https://www.man7.org/linux/man-pages/man1/tmux.1.html

3 tmux CHANGES — 3.4 through in-development 3.8
https://raw.githubusercontent.com/tmux/tmux/master/CHANGES

4 tmux release notes, 3.4–3.7b
https://www.tmux.info/releases

5 What's New in tmux 3.7 — floating panes, copy-mode changes
https://www.tmux.info/docs/whats-new

6 tmux cheat sheet — copy mode, paste buffers, commands
https://tmuxcheatsheet.dev/

7 ArchWiki: tmux — key bindings, mode-keys default, prefix remap
https://wiki.archlinux.org/title/Tmux

8 tmux.info cheatsheet — session, window, pane tables
https://www.tmux.info/docs/cheatsheet

9 tmux wiki: Clipboard — set-clipboard, OSC 52, copy-command
https://github.com/tmux/tmux/wiki/Clipboard

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