

A bit of Do, Don't and Why for the HF beginner.

Two dozen things about ham radio your mother never told you.

by

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So, you've learned your radio privileges now include HF, but now what do you do? HF can be intimidating to a new operator, but it can also be a fun place. Hams new to HF want to know how to be a good HF operator. Everyone has to learn somewhere, so we thought a quick bit of reading might be a good start. There are a few important ground rules with HF, some are in accordance with national and international laws, some are founded in tradition, and they're all founded in good reason. What you do on HF can affect or interfere with communications halfway around the globe! Just like driving, there are laws and conventions that keep the traffic running smoothly. In the following paragraphs we will try to illustrate a few pointers that every HF operator (both new and experienced) should keep in mind when on the 'short-waves.' Albeit numbered, the points are not in any specific sequence, so their order does not suggest degrees of importance. The numbering is more for reference purposes in case you wish to review or refer to a specific point(s).

- **1)** A ham ticket is a privilege, not a right. Just like driving, there are rules that must be observed. They are there to protect the usefulness of the radio spectrum and vis-à-vis the safety of all persons using it. Radio is a recreation 99% of the time to a ham, but it can be a critical life-safety device to others. Please treat it with care and respect.
- **2)** On HF, it is very important to listen before attempting to transmit. (AKA: listen, listen, listen!) There are a lot of frequencies that are assigned to nets, calling, and other categories of traffic. Always listen for a minute before you transmit.
- **3)** Okay, so you listened and didn't hear anything, but before assuming the frequency is not occupied, ask if frequency is in use. You can't always hear both sides on HF, in fact it's very common! Someone could be working a station in your skip zone, but they are outside of your skip zone.
- **4)** A simple 'This is {your callsign}, is this frequency in use?' works wonders. Listen for about 10 seconds for any reply or existing traffic. Repeat this procedure two or three times and if nothing is heard, there is a high probability the frequency is vacant.
- **5)** This of course begs the question your receive conditions are such that you can hear a reply if it was there. If your noise floor is S-5 or S-7 (as can often be the case with urban living) and there's a station or stations below this level, you won't hear them and therefore you might still be barging onto an occupied frequency. This illustrates the importance of doing everything we possibly can to keep our operating conditions as ideal and clean as

possible. Put a little work into setting up a good antenna with minimal receive noise, it will pay off with lots of good DX!

- **6)** It is inevitable you will eventually inadvertently QRM an ongoing QSO. When this happens, simply apologize quickly to the parties involved and move to another frequency or wait quietly until the frequency is relinquished. Do not try to start a round table chat unless you are specifically invited to join in.
- **7)** Keep proper spacing from other stations. (4 kHz minimum for phone.) To QRM another station is both rude and violates the terms and conditions of your privileges. Remember, we are allowed zero emissions beyond the band edge. That means you can't use 14.350MHz for USB! You're side band would occupy 14.350 to 14.353, possibly 14.354. This means you must keep your 'dial indicated' frequency several kHz away from the band edge. For LSB, the reverse is true, stay at least four kilohertz above the band edge. For AM or FM (as in 10m) your signal occupies spectrum in BOTH directions, so the same rules apply. This also applies to the sub-sections within the band itself. You cannot allow your 'phone' signals to bleed into a non-phone section of the band.
- **8)** It is illegal to communicate with a pirate station. If you encounter a pirate do not lecture them. You may not communicate with them in any way, this is the law! Do not give them an audience. This also applies to any station deliberately causing QRM or attempting to interfere with the operation of other stations. The best way to deal with these people is to ignore them. Pretend they're not there. Do not speak about their interference to your contact. Do not acknowledge their presence in any way. Do not react to anything they say. Denied an audience, these stations disappear very quickly. This simple yet effective procedure is the best means with which to deal with this problem. It has worked for generations, so please follow it and it will continue to do so.
- **9)** Before replying to a CQ, be sure you are allowed to operate on that frequency, in that mode, and with that station. Some classes of license have more privileges than others. Many nations have different band plans than ours. Some allow operation in areas and modes we are not, and conversely, we are permitted to operate in spectrum and modes where others may not. Albeit few and far between, there are a few countries that have forbidden their operators from communicating with certain other countries. With the advent of the internet, third party traffic is pretty rare these days, however, some countries do not allow it.
- **10)** The best thing to keep in mind when on any band (HF or otherwise) is to keep everything as polite as possible. After technical considerations, courtesy is your paramount concern. If all operators treat other operators with the same courtesy and respect they would like to receive, the bands will remain a fun and relaxing place to be.

- **11)** Use plain language whenever you can; there is no need for slang at all other than the Q-code if necessary or RST etc. Use phonetics only when required, once the other station has copied your call correctly, you no longer need to keep saying it with phonetics. Save your voice for the next contact. You're going to need it.
- **12)** Let your contacts know if you are new to HF radio. They will make you feel welcome and will overlook your inexperience. They might also offer you some valuable pointers which may ultimately make you a better operator.
- **13)** Learn what frequencies on each band are established net or DX calling windows or known DX frequencies, [eg: IOTA.]
- **14)** Understand split operation. If a station is calling 'CQ and listening up 5 & 10' it means they are not listening on the same frequency on which they are transmitting. They're tuning a receive frequency about 5 to 10kHz higher than their TX freq. This is one method of controlling pile-ups.
- **15)** Avoid sensitive topics. {i.e. politics and religion} Keep the QSO positive and interesting. Never lecture or condemn anyone on air. If they are causing deliberate interference, remember point 8. Nobody wants to hear people arguing over the air, it's a waste of spectrum. No one wants to listen to someone 'soap boxing.' If you want to pontificate, try a public speaking club.
- **16)** Respect the human rights code. Never slander or libel others on the air. Idle gossip is never good form. Don't propagate rumours. Give everyone the first benefit of doubt. 99.999999% of radio operators are really nice folks. Remember the golden rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated.
- **17)** Avoid the use of alcohol when operating. Luckily this is a rarity, but every few years you may hear someone on the air who's obviously intoxicated. This is both dangerous and unwise from many perspectives. You could damage your gear by not noticing a problem due to your diminished awareness. You may violate the terms of your license. You may say or do things you would not do otherwise. You could be causing interference and not realize it. No matter how you look at it, it's simply not appropriate and it can be very dangerous.
- **18)** As a new operator, learn and adhere to the existing long-established operating practices. They are conventions that have evolved over the years for good reasons. You wouldn't race a car through a parking lot even though there may not 'technically' be a speed limit. These operational conventions are there because they keep everything

running smoothly and help avoid or minimize problems. Stick with the rules and observe conventions and you too will soon be a well seasoned HF'er!

- **19)** Avoid calling public safety nets [i.e.] Hurricane net or Maritime net unless you can be of use or are requested. These nets pass specific and sometimes critical traffic. If they need stations in a specific area or a certain kind of assistance they'll ask for it.
- **20)** Be patient with everyone. We are all different. If you feel challenged or uncomfortable, then politely sign clear. Avoid confrontation. If you don't know the correct protocol for a certain situation, get some advice from an experienced operator.
- **21)** Look for an Elmer! Ask for help. There are lots of seasoned HF operators who would be more than happy to get you going in the right direction. Your local club meetings are likely filled with guys (and gals!) with many years of experience. If you can't make it out to a meeting, ask on some local repeaters. Help is everywhere!
- **22)** Listen and check in with local nets. It's a great way to get your feet wet and meet some active HF operators in your area.
- **23)** Listen to some contesting and make a few contacts. The contacts are short and sweet and a great way to practice using your rig. Also, if there's a problem on your signal, someone will likely point it out to you.
- **24)** Give honest signal reports. There's no shame in getting a 3/3 or a 2/1. It's radio, and you're not going to be booming in everywhere all the time. Some operators seem to be offended if they receive a report less than a 5/9. There are others who have to have the contact repeat their call numerous times, get it wrong the first few, and still give out a 5/9. This is a common problem and is perhaps due to many not understanding the proper way to evaluate a received signal. It would be a benefit to all hams if everyone reviewed this simple procedure. A report is of no value to anyone if it is not accurate.

With a bit of care, forethought and consideration your HF experience can be lots of fun. Remember: Ham radio is both a lady's and gentleman's hobby. Be on your best behaviour and treat all others with courtesy and you'll have many years of happy DX. It doesn't take long before you accumulate and occasionally 'bump into' a long list of 'radio-friends' from every corner of the globe. Who knows, you may even be invited to the far corners of the world for an eyeball QSO.

Happy DX!