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The Long and Short of It

Shorts. We avoid them in electronics. We wear them in summer. When William Shakespeare's Polonius said, "Brevity is the soul of wit," it was ironically part of a long speech, but the point is well taken. We admire the person who can pound a nail, complete a round of golf, or live the longest with the fewest strokes. And in traffic nets, such efficiency is treasured as well.

Here are a few operating techniques that can make nets and traffic handling faster and easier.

- (1) When you check in to a phone net, give the NCS's call; listen; then give your call.
- (2) Use standard ITU phonetics to spell out uncommon words or homonyms when conditions call for it.
- (3) Write your own formal messages in the fewest words; use the ARRL Numbered Radiograms.
- (4) When sending a message with voice, pause at the right places so the receiver can interrupt.
- (5) If a net control asks for informal comments, be succinct. Don't ramble. Notes help. Leave the listeners with one good thought.

Being pithy (no, I don't lisp) in what you transmit doesn't mean you have to be less friendly or cordial in your operation. There are times to be relaxed and times to concentrate on efficiency. A good operator should know both. And an STM should know when to be brief, too. So *long*. 73. K9LGU / STM

If it goes without saying. . .

Yes, we can be even more efficient. There are some things we just don't need to say. We need not identify each part of the preamble of a formal message. We know the form. We know what's next. Saying, "The station of origin is. . ." wastes time and five words. There's no comma between the city and state or any other punctuation in the preamble. The way to format the date in a message is simply the month (abbreviated) and day. Like this: AUG 7. Adding the year to the date of a message isn't necessary. If we can't deliver traffic within the year, we're in big trouble.

There's no need for an "X-ray" after an ARRL Numbered Radiogram in the text. The message is self-contained. Likewise, no need for an "X-ray" at the end of the text. We just say, "Break"(and listen) before the signature just as we do just before the text. The receiver already knows what's coming next, so "Break *for the text*" or "Break *for the signature*" tells us more than we need. "Break" is enough.

The receiving station only needs to say, "Roger," to confirm the message – not repeat the whole message back or even the message number.. Of course, we never roger a message unless we have all of it exactly as sent. If we need a fill, we ask efficiently. E.g. "Say again word after. . ."

We can skip saying the other station's call before our own – if we choose. When we identify, we certainly don't need to say "for I.D." Why else would we identify? We don't need to mention the state we're in if we check in frequently to a state-wide net. And (sure, I'll say it again) we should not add an "S" to the traditional abbreviation, "73." It's already plural, so we are just being redundant – and perhaps ungrammatical – when we say something that would mean "best regardses."

I know I've mentioned these things before – and if they go without saying they should -- but "I'm just sayin'. . ." 73 (note: no "S") – K9LGU- STM - WI

Check, please.

“Have your eyes been checked? Naw, they've always been blue.” There's no need for confusion about the group count in a message. Checkered past notwithstanding, checking the check can sometimes best be shown by example. Check this out.

Text: "ARL SIXTY ONE LOVE TO ALL" = Check ARL 6

Text: "CALL ME AT 920 222 5205 X 73" = Check 8 (phone number in three parts. X counts as one)

Text: "ARL SEVEN HOW MANY ELECTRIC GENERATORS ARE AVAILABLE QUERY" = Check ARL 9 (The word, "query," counts as one.)

Text: "PLEASE ASSIGN THREE OPERATORS TO ARC CENTER BY 1300Z" = Check 9 (Letter group, "ARC," and mixed group, "1300Z," count as one each.)

Text: "SEND THIRTY ONE COPIES OF OPERATING AID FSD218 WITH NEXT OPERATOR" = Check 11 ("Thirty-one," is counted as two; mixed group, "FSD218," counts as one.)

Text: "CONTACT RED CROSS AUTHORITY AND OFFER ASSISTANCE OF TWELVE OPERATORS." = Check 10

Text: "ARL EIGHT THREE HTS ARL SEVEN ARL FOURTEEN FLOODING" Check = ARL 9 (Note that the "THREE HTS" fills in the information for "ARL EIGHT.")

In an ICS213 message format, just start the subject line like this: “MSG NR XX in YY GROUPS...” Questions? No, the signature does not count as part of the text. Sure, it can get a little confusing. “Voicemail” is usually one word. “NUMBER 31” counts as two using the figures and three if spelled out “NUMBER THIRTY ONE.” Send your STM a message and ask if the check is correct. Keep counting. It really helps to confirm that the message is accurate, and that's what we do. We're counting on you. Check? 73 - K9LGU /STM-WI

The new NTS Methods and Practices Guidelines are out! They include everything you need to know about traffic handling via voice, digital, and CW. You can find them at

<http://www.arl.org/table-of-contents-nts-methods-and-practices-guidelines>

Introducing Traffic into the NTS

How can I introduce traffic into the NTS?

Begin by preparing a message in NTS format. That's easy. Look at the famous "pink card," operating aid FSD-218, to find the proper form, an example, and answers to most of your questions. (There's a copy at <http://www.arrl.org/files/file/Public%2520Service/fsd218.pdf>.) or ask me for one.

Remember to use an accurate and complete name and address as well as a phone number for the addressee. Street names work best if they are spelled out. Seventh Street works better than 7th St.

Consider using the ARL Numbered Radiograms with your own text. They can say a lot in a few words. Keeping the text to less than thirty words can make passing the message easier, but even "night messages" have been known to survive the NTS.

Of course, you can list your traffic on any of the section nets – the Badger Weather Net, Badger Emergency Net, Wisconsin Side Band Net, Wisconsin Novice Net, Wisconsin Slow Speed Net, either session of the Wisconsin Intrastate Net, or Sunday's Wisconsin ARES/RACES HF Net. The net control station will find someone to take your message and get it on its way. But what happens if you don't have HF privileges?

As a technician class licensee, your best route could be to contact a local Ham who can take your traffic and pass it along to a section net. Many two-meter repeaters across the state have operators who monitor and are capable of handling traffic. Ask on your local nets. Ask at your local club meetings. Try the Tuesday ARES/RACES Digital Net on Winlink or the ARES/RACES VHF Net on the WECOMM system. Use the Internet to check the list of hams from your area who check into the section nets. Look at the QNI Roster on the Wisconsin Section page of the ARRL web site. Or request the list via Email or hard copy from your STM.

Keep the NTS working. Send a greeting to an old friend, a birthday message to a distant relative, or congratulations to someone you admire. Send a thank-you note for a QSO, for some advice, or to anyone who has helped you in your Ham career. It's not only a good test of the system. It's fun. It's easy. It's excellent training. 73 – K9LGU/ STM WI

Keeping Organized in Deployment

You're deployed. You know your supervisor, your task, and how long you're expected to be there. If you're assigned to an EOC, shelter, or other specific point, you'll want to pay special attention to organizing your work space. There are a lot of simple things you can do to make your service easier.

- (1) Keep the desk as clean as possible. You need room to place forms, your log, and references. Spilled coffee does not look professional on a radiogram.
- (2) Familiarize yourself with the equipment. Know how to adjust it. Is there a telephone? Learn how to get an outside line. Computer terminal? Learn how to log in and how to save your work. Save it often.
- (3) Establish a special place for formal messages and *keep them in order*. You may need to refer to previous messages especially for replies individually or on the second part of the ICS-213 form.
- (4) Learn the names and positions of your colleagues. Know how to route each incoming message.
- (5) Log your activities, your contacts, operator changes, assignments, strike teams, and task forces. When in doubt, write it out. And do it neatly in a consistent way. ICS-214 is a handy form or a simple line-by-line log will work. Print carefully so others (and even you) can read it later. Documentation is essential.
- (6) Know where the extra forms, pads, pens, and pencils are. Locate the nearest trash receptacle.
- (7) Speak clearly but not too loud into your microphone. Especially in an EOC, you won't want to disturb others. Keep your headphones handy. Local noise levels change.
- (8) Know where the restroom is and about how long it takes to get there and back. Check the lighting at your post **before** it gets dark. Use down time to straighten up and prepare for contingencies. Review NTS and ICS-213 formats. Ask yourself, "What if..."
- (9) Pace yourself. When we're under stress, we tend to speak faster. Don't. Be methodical and precise.

Let's hope we're not deployed in serious circumstances, but if we are we can be ready. – 73
K9LGU/STM

Try it; you'll like it.

How do we keep our interest? Change. We handle messages in diverse modes – but they can all do the job. If you're practiced and comfortable on voice, now might be the time to try your hand at CW or some other digital mode. Traffic handling protocol varies a bit but learning the QN signals and characters for a double dash or a new line in a message can be satisfying. Knowing where and how to send a radiogram via WINLink, packet, or any of the many digital modes is another weapon against adverse conditions, another tool of your traffic trade.

If you haven't listened to the Badger Weather Net or tuned in to a session of the Wisconsin Slow Speed Net, check 'em out. Sure, voice communication and informal conversations are fun, and they work well at times, but perhaps it's time to broaden your horizons, try a new traffic trick or two. Try it; you'll like it. And keep the change.

What *doesn't* change is what we are training ourselves to do --- accurately, I say again **accurately** – pass messages. There is no excuse for accepting a message when you haven't copied it correctly. If there is any question at all about any part of the message – preamble, addressee, text, signature, op note, etc. – the receiver must ask for clarification or confirmation. Is it what you heard or what you think you heard? There is no shame in asking for a repeat. It's the sign of a good operator. Since the service we offer is exact transfer of messages, not having them exact on reception is defeating the purpose. Please pay close attention and question anything you suspect may be unclear or in error. We pride ourselves in precision. If it's worth doing – it's worth doing well. 73 – K9LGU/STM

Listening while sending

What about QSK, VOX, and breaks? And what if my VOX breaks? And what if my break-in is broken? And what if it's only half full?

That's a lot of questions. Let me deal with the first one. As I mentioned last month, using VOX or frequent breaks while sending a message is an excellent way to save time and insure that the message is being copied exactly. I don't advocate multi-tasking while traffic handling, but during the sending of a message – stop and listen. It allows the receiver a chance to interrupt and clarify or confirm part of the message. Sometimes, it prevents an entire message from being sent again in error. Sometimes, it allows confirmation of a message sooner.

As my loving XYL has often lovingly said, “If you'd just listen. . .” and – of course – she's right. If we just take those few seconds to listen between our transmissions we can detect interference on frequency, hear someone trying to interrupt, or get confirmation that the message is getting through precisely as it should. Yes, you can learn a lot just by listening.

At the very least, it's a good idea to listen between the preamble and the addressee, at the first break (just before the text), and at the break at the end of the text. As for those technical problems, just going from transmit to receive a few times in the course of the message will pay off. The more we can listen, the better we will be at doing what we do. 73 –
K9LGU/STM WI

Making Conversation

FAQ # 205 What do you say after the signal report? Sure there are the usual topics of interest. You're talking with another amateur, so you can compare radios, antennas, locations, and license history. You might share some theories about propagation and band use. Lots of accessories such as microphones, software, keys and keyers, digital connections, and test equipment can be worthy of discussion.

You'll find some areas of agreement – “Yep. That's the way the shortwave ratios.” And you may discover other points of view. “ I've heard the stories about NVIS propagation, but I've always found. . .” You may even share more personal notes about your family, your pets, your work. Want to become an interesting conversationalist? Listen more. Ask plenty of questions about the other operator and *really listen* to the answers.

Another broad area of discussion may be operating interests. Hams are a diverse bunch. Want to help with communications during a disaster? ARES/RACES has a place for you. From brass pounders to EME enthusiasts, from experimenters to designers and builders, from contesters to traffic handlers – there's a lot of interest.

My point is this. They overlap. (No, not the operators' tummies over their belts – I mean their interests.) A Ham who experiments with antennas can try them on a traffic net. Someone who finds success in digital DX-ing can apply those skills in a contest – or to pass formal traffic. Learning to speak clearly and use phonetics properly can help a DX station find you in a pile-up as well as support accurate handling of a radiogram. Keeping your equipment in good shape pays off in emergency readiness and in more enjoyable ragchewing.

Everything's related. It's all relative. Relatives? I could tell tales, but – like my third floor – that's another story. 73 – K9LGU/STM

Message Numbers

FAQ # 206 Just how important is a message number? Who decides on the number? Where does it come from? Does it ever change? What if my number's up?

All good questions. Message numbers are very important for reference, for documentation, for filing and to insure accuracy. A message number, assigned by the originating station stays with the message all the way to delivery. It doesn't change.

When someone refers to the message, they do it by message number – exactly. They don't guess. They confirm it with the sender as the message is relayed if there is any question at all about the message number.

In an EOC, it really helps to have message numbers to assist in locating or responding to a specific message. If there is a reply to the message, the message number is an easy way to refer to it without repeating the entire original message. If there is need for a service message, the correct message number allows the originator to find the message and resolve any problems with it.

So how does the originating station assign a message number? There are a number of possibilities. Some digital systems automatically assign a random number. A station operator might just start with Number 1 at the beginning of each year and continue the sequence to the end. An op might start renumbering with the start of each month or with the beginning of an event such as the opening of a shelter or the start of EOC operations in a deployment. The number comes from the station – even if the operator changes at an EOC or some other assignment, it's the *station's* message number.

There are a few guidelines for message numbering, and they're easy to follow. Numbers should not be unnecessarily long and should not include letters, punctuation, or symbols. They shouldn't start with a zero. Each message gets its own number and they should be in sequence.

When a sender of an NTS message voices it, the operator starts by actually saying the word "Number." This tells the receiver that passing the message has started. Of course, after saying "Number" the sender doesn't have to use the proword "figures" since that's what a number is. In an ICS213 format message, the message number fits well at the beginning of the subject line (again, actually saying the word number) and is followed on that line by the precedence and group count.

The right message number has value. If, for example, a message is not delivered, a service message which refers to the wrong message number isn't much help to the originator. If a message requesting some logistic support is followed by another request replacing it, the message number as well as the time and date will be essential. And don't argue with 1-3-5-7-9. The odds will be against you. 73 – K9LGU/STM