

How do I?

An occasional series

*This week: Behind The Magic Curtain:
What Really Goes On At a VE Session?*



Maybe you just attended a **Volunteer Examiner (VE)** session, earned your Technician License and entered the wonderful world of Amateur Radio.

Or, maybe you have been in the ham radio hobby a long time, you have an Amateur Extra Class license and you are looking for a way to give back to the hobby.

Either way, you may be thinking about becoming a Volunteer Examiner. If so, this ***How Do I...*** article is meant for you. Please read what a real-life VE, who regularly participates in testing sessions, has to say.

The History of Amateur Radio Licensing

What do VEs do? Let's start with licenses. Your amateur radio license is issued by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Radio has been regulated (originally by the US Navy) since 1912. By 1934 the previous boards, divisions, and bureaus had proven unworkable. The FCC was created to maintain order on the air waves.

Starting in 1912, prospective amateur operators could receive a license with no testing at all. Later, starting in 1927, the forerunner of today's volunteer examiners would conduct both a written exam and Morse code exam. If successful, that applicant was called a Temporary Amateur.

In 1951 new license categories were introduced. The new NOVICE class exam could still be administered by a local ham, but upgrades to General class and beyond required a visit in person to the FCC office, usually in a big city such as Philadelphia or Baltimore.

VEs are empowered to process additional transactions with the FCC on behalf of licensed Amateur Radio Operators. Examples include license renewals, address changes, and vanity call sign requests.

Introducing the Volunteer Exam Coordinator

In 1984 the FCC staff stopped administering exams directly. A hybrid public-private partnership was formed in which civilian bodies give the exams and submit the results to the FCC, which issues the actual license. Today there are 14 **Volunteer Exam Coordinators** (VECs) that perform this work.

The largest VEC is the American Radio Relay League (ARRL). The ARRL claims to conduct over half the test sessions annually.

The W5YI Group (also known for selling test preparation materials), is the second largest and the Laurel VEC is the third largest.

The VECs are not-for-profit operations. Under FCC rules they are allowed to charge a fee for testing. This fee is intended to help the VEC recoup its out-of-pocket costs for administering a license exam. There may be expenses, such as room rental, postage, and photocopying costs that need to be covered. The ARRL has charged fifteen dollars and the W5YI group fourteen dollars per applicant for at least as long as I have been in the hobby. The Laurel VEC is ALWAYS free!

The VECs coordinate among themselves so that every group is offering the same tests and following the same procedural rules. The national body in which this coordination takes place is the **National Conference of Volunteer Examiner Coordinators**, or NCVEC. The VECs are members but they are independent.

Who can be a VE?

The FCC made some of these rules and the VECs made the rest of the rules.

- A VE must hold a least a GENERAL class license.
- A VE must apply for and be accredited by the VEC team.
- A VE must be age 18 or older.
- A VE must not be a person whose grant of an amateur station license or amateur operator license has ever been revoked or suspended.
- Most VE teams require their team members to have an Amateur Extra Class license for reasons we shall see later.

What is the make-up a Volunteer Exam Coordinator Team?

The VEC Teams are made up of local ham radio operators. The local teams (almost always part of a local radio club) perform the test sessions.

The local team is headed by a TEAM LEADER. In the ARRL and LARC VECs, their Team Leaders must have Amateur Extra Class licenses.

The Team Leader has the hardest job. This person has to meet with VEC officials, manage the VE team, make sure all the needed materials are at hand, and advertise upcoming test locations. This job carries a lot of responsibility.

The top individual in charge at a VE session is the SESSION MANAGER. This person usually is the Team Leader, but the assignment does not have to be that way.

There may be SUPPORT PERSONNEL present at an exam session. These are people who are not accredited VEs, or who may be younger than age 18, or who have not yet earned their own amateur radio license. They are allowed limited roles but may not sign the paperwork. For example, they may make copies.

A minimum of three accredited VEs are required to conduct a license exam session.

Today there are three classes of amateur radio licenses issued through the Volunteer Exam Coordinator program: TECHNICIAN, GENERAL and EXTRA.

Technicians are not eligible to be VEs. So by definition, if a VE team is conducting a license exam session for a group of Technician License candidates, all VEs would have to hold at least a GENERAL license.

License exam sessions including a General Class candidate or an Extra Class candidate require at least three Amateur Extra Class VEs. For simplicity, most VE teams require all team members to have an Amateur Extra Class license.

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How do I become a VE?

Contact your local VE team. If you know a VEC Team Leader then that person is your go-to person. Otherwise, the NCVEC has a listing of FCC Certified VECs on their website. www.ncvec.org. This listing includes the %big three+ national VECs mentioned earlier, as well as a number of smaller VEC operations that may support smaller geographic areas.

You may wish to perform some due-diligence by searching websites for keywords such as VE, VEC, Ham Radio License Exam, Testing. The NCVEC listing of FCC Certified VECs includes the website URLs for the coordinators.

The ARRL has perhaps the most VE training resources. You may search for ARRL VEC Volunteer Examiner Manual PDF and download a copy without cost. Or, you may wish to purchase a printed and soft-cover bound version. The ARRL online store sells this printed manual as Item Number 1328, currently listed at \$10.00. Other booksellers may have this printed manual listed as ISBN:978-0-87259-132-5.



õ ARRL Item 1328.1õ õ õ .



õ ARRL Item 1173 ↓

You may be interested in obtaining a copy of the FCC Part 97 Rules and Regulations. The ARRL online store sells this printed soft-cover book as Item 1173 listed at \$7.95. Other booksellers may have this printed manual listed as **ISBN:978-1-62595-076-5**

The ARRL VE Certification process requires applicants to pass a written, open book exam. Once you have passed their certification exam you will receive written confirmation and VE credentials announcing you are now a ARRL VE!

If you want to become a W5YI or LARC VE, they will take interest in the ARRL certification you earned and may have their own certification procedures. Once you pass and attend an exam session or two as an observer/support person, you may be invited to join their team.

What does the VE Exam Team do?

The magic begins with the team's arrival at the testing location 60-90 minutes prior to the scheduled exam start time. Signage often needs to be put up and the testing room needs to be prepared for the upcoming test. This may involve moving furniture.

VE Exam Team Roles

TEAM LEADER		
SESSION MANAGER		
OBSERVER1	OBSERVER2	OBSERVER3
GREETER		
ID CHECKER		
RULES READER		
GRADER1	GRADER2	GRADER3
FORM 605 SIGNER		
CSCE MARKER		
PHOTO COPIER		
OTHER SUPPORT PERSONNEL		

The team needs a photocopier. Many teams travel with their own copier. A computer and internet access is nice, but not necessary.

GREETER - someone needs to greet candidates. If the team requires pre-registration, the Greeter will confirm the applicant's name, find their folder number and guide them to their seat. Make them feel welcome. If on-site registration is allowed, the applicant will need to go to the registration table, provide ID and a Federal Registration Number (FRN). Once registration is complete the applicant can proceed to the testing area.

ID CHECKER. Whether done in the test area or at the registration table, three VEs must verify ID for each candidate. The actual VEs do not have to be same ones for the entire session, but three people have to check ID and initial the forms. While doing that ID check, verify the FCC form 605 (license application) has the correct name, address, and is signed.

RULES READER. When ready to begin the exam session someone has to read the rules to the assembled group.

OBSERVERS -- During the exam: three VEs must Observe the session. They may answer questions, or carry completed exams to the graders, but their primary function is observing to ensure the integrity of the exam session.

GRADERS: three Graders are required.

- GRADER 1 identifies the exam used and the correct answer key, grades and records the score and initials the test.
- GRADER 2 confirms the findings of GRADER1, initials the form and passes to GRADER 3.
- GRADER 3 double checks everything and returns the paperwork to the folder. GRADER 3 may also ensure that Form 605 has been signed by three VEs. GRADER3 then takes the folder to the CSCE MARKER (or this could be a separate job).

FORM 605 SIGNER. For a small exam session, the Graders may sign the Form 605. For a larger session, such as testing at a ham fest, the process is smoother if there are multiple Graders and Form 605 Signers. For example -- If there are 4 versions of the Technician Exam in use, there are 4 GRADER 1s-1 for each version. GRADER 2 and GRADER 3 can perform their work faster so let GRADER 2 and GRADER 3 sign the Form 605 and have a 3rd VE sign to complete the signature requirement. This can be an efficiency improvement instead of passing the paperwork back to GRADER 1 and slowing the process.

CSCE MARKER. This can be done by GRADER 3, but try to have a designated CSCE MARKER. This individual can a.) sign as VE3 if needed. b.) triple check the Form 605 and all paperwork, circle the appropriate blocks on the CSCE and either give it to a runner to have the candidate sign the CSCE or deliver the good or bad news to the candidate themselves.

PHOTOCOPIER. Once the candidate signs the CSCE, the folder goes to the PHOTOCOPIER who copies the paperwork. The CSCE goes back to the candidate who may then leave.

The **TEAM LEADER** needs to stay out of the fray as much as possible and be readily available to troubleshoot. They may elect to be the PHOTOCOPIER or a **RUNNER**, but should never serve as a **GRADER**.

Seven is the New Three. Make that Nine is the New Three

So, while the FCC and VEC rules say three VEs are required for a session, seven really is a more practical count and nine VEs looks even better for busy exam sessions where six or more candidates may wish to be tested.

Summary

Being a VE can be a lot of fun and rewarding, for the right person. Those who remember the Alka-Seltzer television advertisement from the 1970s will recall the powerful catch-phrase TRY IT, YOU'LL LIKE IT.

With so many study materials available online, exam sessions conducted by convenient local Volunteer Examiners and the elimination of all Morse Code requirements to receive an amateur license, the Amateur Radio licensing process is easier and less stressful than ever.

Catch ~~ya~~ on the air!