

How Do I...?

An Occasional Series

This week: Operating CW -- Use Morse Code? Are you talking to ME?

I am a CW enthusiast - "CW" as in a "Continuous Wave" transmission sending Morse Code. While it is great fun to explore the popular digital modes, and it is very enjoyable to have a long-winded ragchew on the mike, I still spend most of my time operating in the CW band segments to chase DX, awards, contests, ragchews, and provide on-the-air practice to rising CW Stars!

What's CW's appeal?

Does anything here sound familiar?

- Are you suffering from unfilterable "local QRM" because you're "always shouting" into the mike?
- Perhaps you are still suffering poor band conditions, without having higher power or digital modes as a workaround?
- Do you still get a kick from being the only one in the room who understands that "mysterious" coded message?
- When you just want to have some ham radio fun... then say these words:

"YES, CW is for ME!"

- Are you still nervous and anxious about reaching your Morse Code capabilities?
- Do you want the challenge of firing your own synapses instead of staring at a screen? Or OK, maybe sometimes you DO want the machine to decode messages for you?
- When you want to push your ham-radio-self in long neglected, or perhaps new ways... then say these words:

"YES, CW is for ME!"

- Want to become more adept at succinct, efficient communication?
- Or other times, want an interesting and free flowing conversation without "local QRM?"
- When you want to advance your ham radio skills in traffic handling, contesting, or just to become a more focused communicator... then say these words:

"YES, CW is for ME!"

What stuff does it take to get started?

You have the choice of which type of key to use, if any:

- The straight key (ex J-43), where you tap the key vertically to form each dot and dash;
- The "cootie" or "sideswiper" with its side-to-side motion forming each dot and dash individually; or
- The "bug" with its side-to-side motion forming a string of dots in one direction and each dash individually in the other direction.
- There is also the paddle-type, side-to-side automatic keyer which generates the string of dots or dashes for you.
- Or, you can set up virtual keyers with various memory banks in many of today's radios (such as the Icom IC-7300), or using computer-based software that interacts with these radios.

So you can have it your way - operate CW in the "purist's" sense where your signal reflects your individual "fist," or as "just another digital mode" where a machine generates, decodes and displays the communication for you. Each of these options has an appropriate place!

How to (re)learn Morse Code?

Though no longer a necessary licensing requirement, Morse Code training is available through many resources, particularly ARRL (www.arrl.org). ARRL offers resources online, such as "Learning Morse Code" in their robust **Learning, Education and Training** section, and holds on-the-air code practice (see www.arrl.org for frequencies, days and times for various morse code transmission speeds).

When I was studying to get my novice ticket in 1967, I remember playing 33-1/3 RPM vinyl records with code practice, and tapping into my Heathkit code oscillator on the J-43 telegraph straight key. But best of all, you can always monitor the slower CW QSOs in the Novice bands for lots of practice copying different operators' fists, under varying atmospheric conditions. As you listen-in on more and more CW contacts, their pattern starts to become more familiar, just like the code characters themselves!

Where to gain CW QSO experience, gently?

Once you've "mastered" Morse Code (!) and are ready to make some contacts, certainly you'll be most comfortable starting with your CW Elmers. But don't overlook frequencies where you'll likely find kindred spirits, such as the Novice band segments and the **Straight Key Century Club (SKCC)** "hangouts." I wish I had a beer for every time I encountered one of the 23,000+ SKCC members ready for another QSO, even when the rest of the band was quiet! I routinely contact some SKCC friends from France and Italy. These days, I like to spend time on SKCC frequencies contacting especially the rising CW Stars as they gain experience, lose their jitters, and develop their unique "fists." The SKCC organization is very welcoming and well organized, sponsoring on-air activity events that sincerely encourage CW operators regardless of code speed or CW contest proficiency. The website's **"CW Beginner's Corner"** is a fabulous resource. Membership is worth every penny. Yes, it's free! (www.skccgroup.com)

How to make a proper CW QSO?

Once the characters themselves become familiar, listening to live QSOs might be the most beneficial, and fun, way to advance. Tuning across the CW band segments offers plenty of real-life examples of "fists" - both good and bad! Ditto operating proficiencies!

ARRL offers guides for proper CW communication, such as "Making Your First Contact" in their online "***Learning, Education and Training***" web pages.

SKCC's "***CW Beginner's Corner***" is a wonderfully encouraging and robust resource, one that I won't attempt to replicate here.

A CW QSO tends to follow a predictable format, whether dictated by contest rules or by general operating conventions, so once you become familiar with these protocols, you can anticipate an arriving message's content and make it easier on yourself to decode.

Afraid you'll have to learn to spell in foreign languages?

No, the typical CW QSO follows a standard format based on a hybrid of languages, terms and abbreviations. Contest rules and good DXing practices dictate the very abbreviated content of "quicky" QSOs. But I have to add, I enjoy learning languages as much as operating CW. The other day I monitored a CW QSO in French! It's been fun to add CW shortcuts to my "Ham Terms Language List" - French: BJR = bonjour; Russian: DSW = das vidanya. (It strikes me how so many DX stations speak/spell better English than we speak their languages.)

Human vs. machine CW?

With digital modes making machine-to-machine communication commonplace, it is the human element involved with successfully sending and decoding a CW message that appeals to me the most! I love the challenge of completing a QSO with a weak station - using my radio's digital signal processing filters to be sure, but relying on my ears, fist and operating experience to know when to listen, when to pounce, and what to say.

Every CW operator has a unique "fist," much like the accent or inflection in the spoken voice, which I think the human processor can accommodate better than a machine!

After working the RTTY mode for the first time, I realized how different was this experience - watching a screen display each character one by one as "the machine" processes and decodes them - my fingers, ears, and brain were not involved! Judging by my RTTY experience, I am ready to pit my CW decoding skills against the machine (IC-7300)! I think I could've made some of those tougher contacts more easily in my human/CW world!

Will the purist accept the machine?

I, the CW purist, have not yet explored the world of computer-generated CW, but I will. I can easily see how this may be the most effective way to run a contest, with computer generated QSOs and realtime contest logging. For starters, I do foresee using the IC-7300 CW memories in a future contest, as I did the RTTY memories in the recent Japanese & WAE contests. I do wonder how this will settle in my CW Soul?

••• —•— (**SK = End of Conversation**)

But I still maintain that once you are familiar with Morse Code characters, the flow of typical CW QSOs, and the filtering available in today's software-defined radios, with CW you WILL make those challenging QSOs with rare stations in pile-ups and contests. And you WILL grin from ear to ear as you realize those half-hour CW ragchews are showing up in your logbook with "frequency" (heh-heh)!

Besides, CW is fun! I'll be on the air with my good ol' Vibroplex Champion bug ...
Would you care to join us? Let me hear you say these words:

"YES, CW is for ME!"

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