

How Do I...?

An Occasional Series

This week: Operating CW -- Getting up to Speed

I am a CW enthusiast. Since getting my ticket in 1967, I've made thousands of CW QSOs across nearly 300 countries/DX entities from WA3KCP (MD/PA), SV0WOO (Greece) & SV0WXX (Crete) using the same Vibroplex Champion "bug" at 25 words-per-minute. But oh boy, do I still remember those initial, nerve-wracking attempts - referencing my cheatsheet for those challenging letters (dit dah dit dit ... quick, is that "L" or "F"?), scrambling to write everything down despite poor conditions, or dealing with even worse operator's technique than mine, and then in return tapping every dot and dash so carefully but shakily on that beginner's J-43 straight key. But I also remember the more recent thrill of a 40M CW QSO with Dennis K1YPP, the ham / Appalachian Trail thru-hiker whom I'd met earlier that morning in the ATC office with his QRP transceiver-in-a-throat-lozenge-box and matching wire antenna, and now lodged temporarily in the Darlington Shelter lean-to during a thunderstorm! On a daily basis, if you want to practice your CW among kindred spirits at every level of proficiency, even when the bands appear dead, have a listen for (and consider joining at no charge) the ***Straight Key Century Club*** action (SKCC); you will instantly feel at home there!

Learning the Code

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 of various morse code transmission speeds). Beyond learning the code for each letter, number and symbol, it is important to learn the standard formats of a CW QSO. These patterns are easily learned by listening to CW QSOs - during contests, DX pile-ups, traffic handling networks, or ragchews. Not only does this knowledge help you become a proficient operator, you can anticipate an arriving message's content and make it easier on yourself to decode.

Learning CW QSO formats

What does a CW QSO "sound like?" Most QSOs will follow a predictable format, which also helps you copy 100% of the conversation. Contest QSOs generally follow a rigid and fast paced format, where operators are trying to squeeze in many contacts during a limited timeframe.

Similarly, when trying to work a rare station (such as DX, or a PA QSO Party station operating from Elk County), many others are also trying to get through. These are not the times to have a long-winded ragchew conversation!

Here are a few examples of typical CW QSOs:

#1 As sent using Morse Code via ham radio. What that means...

- CQ CQ CQ DE WA3KCP WA3KCP AR	A general request to begin a conversation with anyone who is listening. This request was sent out by WA3KCP, over
- WA3KCP DE SV0WOO SV0WOO K	SV0WOO, a radio station located in Greece, answers, over
SV0WOO DE WA3KCP	WA3KCP acknowledges hearing SV0WOO and begins the conversation.

TU UR 589 QTH PA OP JOHN QSL? BK	Thank you. Your signal strength is 589 (strong) My location is PA My name is John Confirm that you received this info? Back to you
- BK TU WALNUT BOTTOM PA QSO RARE DX HIHI UR 559 OP YIANNIS 73s JOHN DE SV0WOO	Break, Thank you for talking with me from your location in Walnut Bottom PA. Jokingly remarking that two-way radio contacts between Walnut Bottom PA and Greece are infrequent. Your signal strength is 559. Good signal reception but not especially strong. My name is Yiannis. Best wishes to you John from SV0WOO
- BK QSL TU YIANNIS QSO 73 SV0WOO DE WA3KCP SK	Break by me I confirm receiving what you said Thank you Yiannis for the radio contact Best wishes to you SV0WOO from WA3KCP Signing off

The two ham radio operators meet up on-the-air again some day in the future.

#2 As sent using Morse Code via ham radio. What that means...

-SV0WOO DE WA3KCP GM NICE TO CU AGN UR 589 WID QSB BT QTH WALNUT BOTTOM PA BT OP JOHN BT HW CPY? SV0WOO DE WA3KCP K	SV0WOO from WA3KCP Good Morning Nice to see (hear) you again. Your signal strength is 589 with some fading in and out. -pause- My location is Walnut Bottom PA -pause- My name is John -pause- How copy -- Means "Are you receiving my signal Okay?" from WA3KCP, over
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The two ham radio operators meet up once again in the future as part of a Ham Radio competitive contest, also known as Radio Sport.

#3 As sent using Morse Code via ham radio. What that means...

- SV0WOO DE WA3KCP 599 001 BK	The American Ham Radio Operator WA3KCP reaches out for his friend, the Greek Ham Radio Operator, SV0WOO. This is a contest radio contact requiring exchange of signal reports (599) and sequential contact numbers (001) by the two operators.
- SV0WOO DE WA3KCP 5NN TT1 BK	The Greek Ham Radio Operator answers and provides his contest information using time-saving abbreviations in place of numbers. "N" [— •] instead of 9 [— — — — •] "T" [—] instead of 0 [— — — — —].

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

Like most things, the best practice comes from doing. By listening to and making CW QSOs, you will reach the point where the other guys now seem so slow(!), and you realize you're jotting down callsigns and not entire conversations anymore. 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? I am listening for the magic words...

"YES, CW is for ME!"

John Luthy
WA3KCP



Photo 1 The Author mentions a STRAIGHT KEY. This is an example of such a key.



Photo 2 The Author mentions a Vibroplex BUG. This is what he has in mind.