

How (and why) to become a Ham Radio Operator - Page 1

Let's start with the "Why" ...

Ham Radio's motto is "When all else fails". That's because, when all of the normal communication systems stop working, Ham Radio is still in operation, helping people, conveying messages, and, sometimes, even saving lives.

In times of emergency, both land-line and cellular phone systems are subject to being overloaded to the point of inoperability because they are designed for only a small percentage of the handsets keyed to their systems to be used at any one time. If a large number of users try to access the system, it locks up. In addition, the government has the ability to limit access to the phone systems to only government phones in emergencies, locking out all civilian use.

Thus, in any wide-spread emergency, the phone systems will be useless to most people. And the phone system may also be unusable in some local emergencies. Remember the Boston Marathon bombing? The first thing the local authorities did in that incident was to turn off the local cell phone system, in case the terrorists had set off the bomb by remote cell-phone control, and had another one ready to be detonated.

In these circumstances, Ham Radio will be the only operating communication system available to you and me.

And, aside from its emergency communication function, Ham Radio is full of interesting and knowledgeable folks from all walks of life, who are, with very few exceptions, decent, honest and helpful. So, if you care to look further into the possibilities, you will find a wide world of good friends and interesting activities in Ham Radio.

Now you see that there are plenty of good reasons to become a Ham Radio Operator!

And next, on to the "How" ...

First, there are three things you must do to get your Ham Radio license -

- 1) Register with the FCC
- 2) Study for the test
- 3) Take (and pass) the test

1) Register with the FCC

The FCC requires that anyone who holds a radio license be registered with them. Your FCC registration number will be needed on the forms used by the people doing the license testing, and any time you communicate with the FCC, such as when you change your address, request a vanity call sign, or renew your license.

To register, go to the FCC registration web page <<https://apps.fcc.gov/coresWeb/publicHome.do>>. Click on "Register", and enter in your information. A Social Security number is required for this registration. There is no charge, however.

At the end of the registration process the web site will give you your official registration number (called an "FRN"). Be sure to note your FRN, Password, and Security Question answer, and keep these somewhere that they won't get lost.

2) Study for the test

Ham Radio has three levels of licensing - Technician, General, and Extra. It is assumed that you will be taking the entry-level test, for the Technician license. The test will consist of 35 multiple-choice questions selected from a pool of about 400 questions covering the FCC rules, radio operating procedures, terminology, and technical aspects of Ham Radio. You must correctly answer 26 of the questions to pass the test. Note that Morse Code is no longer required.

There are two schools of thought on how to study for the test -

One concept says to just memorize the test questions, pass the test, and learn the details of Ham Radio operations later. This is OK if you intend to follow up by getting involved with Ham Radio people, clubs and activities. There are many things you should know about Ham Radio operations, and the test questions aren't really designed to teach you anything about radios or how to operate them. But, if you intend to dig into Ham Radio and learn about it, this method is fine.

The other concept is to join a class which will take you through the 400 questions and teach you the background for each one, giving you a beginner's level of knowledge about many aspects of Ham Radio. If you do not intend to get involved with Ham Radio beyond the emergency communication function, this is the recommended course of action, because some understanding of radios and procedures is essential for emergency communications, where accuracy, clarity and brevity, as well as knowledge of how set up and operate your radio, are all critical.

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The memorization method requires that you study on your own, and then, when you feel you are ready, go take the test. The question pool is available for download on the web, if you want to read and memorize it. Just search for "Technician Question Pool". There is no charge to download the question pool.

Another (and easier) memorization method is to take practice tests on-line, until you consistently get good passing rates, then go take the test. A couple of web sites offering free practice tests are <www.qrz.com>, and <www.eham.net>. Look for "Resources", then "Practice Amateur Radio Exams" or "Ham Exams". At first, you will miss most of the questions, because this is all strange new stuff for you. But, as you take more tests, you will gradually see all of the questions in the pool multiple times, and remember the correct answers. When you are consistently scoring 85% or above, you are ready for the real thing.

The class method usually requires that you find and join a class to study with. Some of the local Ham Radio clubs offer these classes at various times during the year. You will need to contact them to find out if there is an upcoming class, and the details about attending. A list of local Ham clubs is at the bottom of this document.

You can also take advantage of KB6NU's "No-Nonsense, Technician Class License Study Guide". It follows the same method as the class concept, but you do it on your own. You can download this study guide from KB6NU's Ham Radio Blog at <<http://www.kb6nu.com/study-guides/>>. There is no charge for the Guide.

3) Take the test

The FCC allows certain licensed Hams to administer license tests to applicants via a Volunteer Examiner (VE) program.

Some of the local Ham Radio clubs have groups of registered VEs, and offer tests. Two of the clubs conduct test sessions every month. Other clubs offer the tests intermittently. The list of local Ham clubs gives you more info.

The Voice of Idaho Amateur Radio Club has their tests on the first Saturday of each month, at the Food-2-Store - 521 E 3rd St. in Meridian, starting at 10:30 AM. Contact Doug Rich at (208) 571-4608 or <d@w7dvr.com> for more information.

The Snake River Amateur Radio Club has their tests on the third Saturday of each month, at the Nampa Fire Training Facility - 300 W Railroad St., Nampa, starting at 9:00 AM. Contact Jeremy Hall at (208) 800-0100 or <hall.jeremy@gmail.com> for more information.

There is a charge for taking the test, to cover the associated expenses. It is typically no more than \$15.00.

4) Get on the air!

After you pass the test, it can take up to two weeks for your paperwork to be processed. The FCC will post your computer-selected Call Sign in your record when the process is complete. As soon as your Call Sign appears, you are officially a New Ham and can get on the air! It's recommended to listen for a while to hear how people conduct themselves on the air, so you won't be nervous the first time you give out a call.

There are tons of web sites devoted to Ham Radio - a Google search for "Ham Radio" brings up about 14,000,000 hits! So the resources for you to learn more are huge. Take advantage of this wealth of information to continue to gather knowledge, and get on the air to refine your radio operating techniques. Make some new Ham friends to help you with the questions you will have. Learn the NATO Phonetic Alphabet for accurately relaying call signs, spelling, abbreviations and numerals. Join one of the Ham Radio clubs near you and go to their meetings. And have fun!

Ham Radio Clubs in the Treasure Valley area (Info as of 05/2016)

Club Name, Location	Meeting Schedule	Test Schedule	Web Site
Snake River ARC - Nampa	3rd Wednesday, 7:30pm	3rd Saturday	www.k7si.org/
Idaho Society of Radio Amateurs	3rd Tuesday, 7:00pm		www.israboise.org/
Central Idaho ARC - McCall	1st Thursday, 7:00pm		www.ciarc.org/
Treasure Valley Radio Assn - Payette	2nd Thursday, 7:30pm	Almost every month	www.k7oji.us/
Boise County ARC - Boise	1st Monday, 8:00pm		www.wa9wsj.com
Voice of Idaho - Boise	2nd Wed, 7:00pm	1st Saturday	www.voiceofidaho.org/
Lewis & Clark ARC - Nampa	2nd Tuesday, 7:00pm	3rd Sat (not in summer)	www.k7lcd.org/
Valley Wide REACT - Boise	3rd Wed, 7:00pm		www.vwreact.org/