

# Effective Field Day Operating

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Operating at [Field Day](#) is a lot different than operating a home station—and that's more than half the fun. It's also one of the main reasons Field Day exists, so that you get some practice under more stressful conditions than at home. The first Field Day in 1930 was held specifically to test amateurs' ability to communicate in emergencies and after disasters. After all, it became part of the amateur service's Basis and Purpose in Part 97.1(a)—our very first rule!

You want to be effective under those conditions, of course. Because the circumstances are so different than operating from home, you'll have to learn some new techniques and approaches to operating. Having participated in more than fifty Field Days, here are some suggestions to make you a more effective communicator. I learn something new every time, and you will too.

## Field Day vs. Other Contests

Is Field Day a contest? It all depends on how your group approaches it. It's not part of the regular ARRL Contest Program, but if you are trying to get a higher score than that club across town, it sure feels competitive! The scoring rules provide a great yardstick for evaluating your performance, so if you want to treat it like a contest, go for it.

The first thing you must be aware of is the big difference from a regular contest for which fixed stations have been carefully constructed and optimized. I've operated at some very capable Field Day stations, but most aren't as big and powerful as at home. The usual Field Day situation on HF is to run 100W or less using antennas that are usually just a fraction of a wavelength above ground, particularly on 40, 80, and 160 meters. On VHF/UHF, it's a lot easier to install antennas at a wavelength or more above the ground, but the antennas are often smaller in order to be portable.

***TIP:** On CW, SSB, and digital modes like FT4 and FT8, most VHF/UHF signals will be horizontally polarized. Use vertical polarization for FM simplex.*

## Propagation—Get Ready

Knowing what to expect from propagation will also pay big benefits on Field Day since you won't be able to rely on a big station to power your way through. Summertime propagation is often quite different from even late spring.

**TIP:** Listen for a few days before Field Day to get an idea of when the bands are open. Use a propagation prediction service or prepared tables to plan for the best times and bands. Check out logs from previous years to see when stations were making contacts.

Use the different types of propagation to your advantage and be prepared for what you're likely to encounter.

**TIP:** On VHF, remember that you'll be operating during prime sporadic-E season, so be prepared to take advantage of those openings on 6 and 2 meters. On HF, things may get started slowly because of the high absorption during summer around local noon. Practice NVIS (Near Vertical Incidence Skywave) operating during these hours. The bands will probably pick up in the afternoon. In the evening, 40 meters is often open coast-to-coast. Later on, 80 and 75 meters can provide lots of contacts.

## Learning to Use Unfamiliar Equipment

Using low power and smaller, lower antennas relies more on the operator to get through and make contacts on the HF bands. You may be operating your own equipment, but frequently it's someone else's radio or spare radio dedicated to portable operating.

**TIP:** Before beginning to operate, spend a few minutes learning the controls and configuration of the new radio and any accessories. Receiver controls like filter bandwidth, RF gain, attenuation/preamp, and noise blanker/reduction are very important. Don't be afraid to ask how to use the radio correctly!

If you are the equipment owner, be available to help other operators learn to use it. After all, you want to avoid damage to the equipment or having to figure out how another operator may have scrambled the various settings and selections!

**TIP:** Bring a copy of the operating manual or download the PDF version to your phone. Use sticky notes to show where the most important sections are. If you have preferred settings, label front-panel controls with colored tape and make a list of any menu items that are likely to need adjustment.

Avoid creating interference to your group's stations and to other Field Day stations. Before the contest, check for clicks, splatter, and over-driving audio inputs for digital modes. A clean signal is a more effective signal. Even if the radio meets FCC rules, several stations at the same location really put a premium on signal cleanliness, particularly wide-band noise.

## Know How to Log Contacts

Even more confusing than new equipment, learning how to use someone else's logging

computer and software can be a challenge. Make sure the entire group knows what software will be in use. If there is a free or evaluation version, encourage them to download and use it for practice. Cheat sheets of what keys perform what function are very helpful! Make sure you have the latest version that includes the latest ARRL/RAC sections.

***TIP:** Just like unfamiliar equipment, watch the previous operator use the software before you start operating. If the software has the ability to record the operator calls, be sure you “log in” before starting to operate.*

The Field Day exchange is very simple: Category and ARRL/RAC Section as defined by the [Field Day rules](#). One of the most common mistakes, though, is entering (or attempting to enter) an incorrect section abbreviation.

***TIP:** New operators should get some tutoring to be sure they know what they are supposed to enter, particularly the many state/province abbreviations that begin with M: MA, MB, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MS, MT. Ontario has four sections: GH, ONE, ONS, and ONN. California’s Los Angeles section is abbreviated LAX, while Louisiana is just LA. A cheat sheet is pretty handy!*

## Operator Comfort

Operating outside can be surprisingly challenging. The weather can be too hot in the day and too cold at night, to say nothing of rain, bugs, wind, and so on. Be prepared! Check out your kit in advance and don’t wait until Game Day to find out your tent is missing the rain fly.

***TIP:** Dress in layers with all the necessary sunscreen, bug repellent, sunglasses, etc. in your Field Day kit.*

Just like at a big contest station, remember that the operator will be sitting at the radio for hours. Tables tend to be camping or picnic tables, which are not the optimum height for radio operating. Make sure the tables and chairs will keep the operator relatively comfortable.

***TIP:** Avoid the low-slung fabric fold-up chairs in the operating tent. They are great for listening to a concert but TERRIBLE for operating at a table. Bring metal or wood folding chairs with a solid seat. A seat pad is also recommended. Nothing’s worse than a sore back or butt at Field Day!*

Another commonly overlooked issue is noise. Not electrical noise but acoustic noise! Noise from wind and [portable generators](#), conversations from visitors and non-operating operators, and audio from the other stations can all be very distracting. Pay attention to noise when locating the stations. Remind everyone to be quiet around the operators.

**TIP:** Use [a headset with a boom mic](#) since a small radio speaker may not have enough audio oomph outside. So that visitors can hear what you're doing, a communication speaker that can switch between speaker-only, headphones-only, and speaker-and-headphones is quite handy. A simple splitter to share the audio can also work.

## Operating Style and Courtesy

The question of “courteous vs. efficient” seems to come up every year. Speaking as a longtime ham, on the radio, being efficient is what makes an operator courteous. That is what good radio practice is all about—getting the message through with a minimum of extra transmissions. Field Day has always been a training exercise, so practice your best operating techniques. Minimize unnecessary words and phrases as if you were in a real emergency. Especially if signals are weak or in heavy QRM, extra information only makes it harder to understand, no matter what mode.

**TIP:** *If you don't need to say it, don't send it.*

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### Here's a brisk, efficient Field Day QSO:

Me: CQ Field Day, CQ Field Day November-Zero-Alpha-Xray N-Zero-A-X

**TIP:** *A snappy 2-by-2 CQ, nothing but the CQ and my call sign, no “from” or ending “Field Day” or “over.”*

You: Whiskey-One-Alpha-Whiskey

**TIP:** *Just one complete call, no repeats, no “over,” don't start with my call—I already know it! Repeat your call if I don't respond in a second or two.*

Me: Whiskey-One-Alpha-Whiskey, 1 Alpha, Missouri

**TIP:** *Give the contacted station and the exchange, no “you are,” no “thank you,” no “over,” no “please copy.”*

You: N-Zero-A-X, 2-Delta, Connecticut

**TIP:** *Give my call if there is any question about who you're responding to. Otherwise it's not necessary, and don't repeat my exchange.*

Me: Thanks, N-Zero-A-X

**TIP:** *Acknowledge and give my call for the next station to respond.*

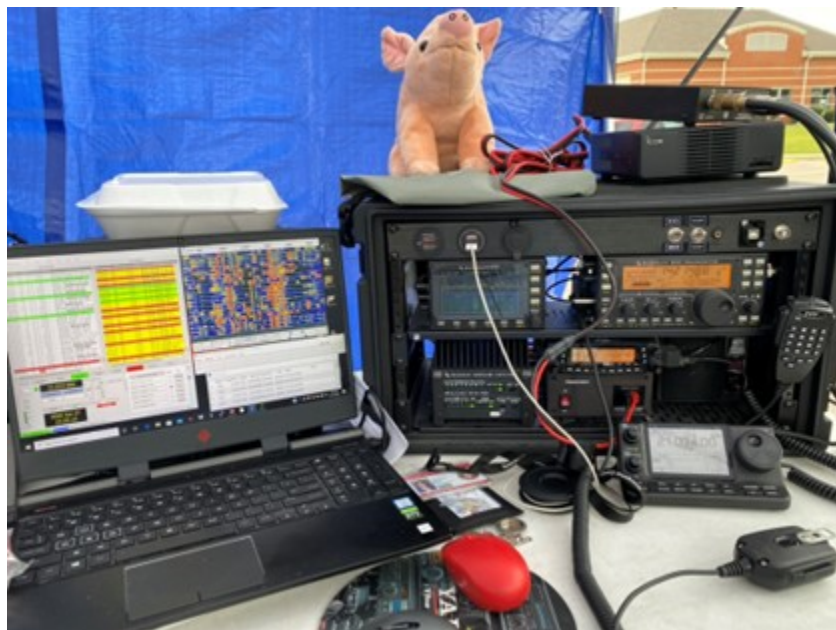
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That's what courtesy looks like on the air. We're not holding the door for each other at the store or passing the salt! If you need a repeat, just ask: "What's your section?" or "What's your category?" If you need a repeat of a call sign, use standard phonetics. (Save the funny ones like "Fuzzy Rabbit" for late night 75 meter fun.) It looks much the same on CW. One nice thing about [FT8](#) is that it is definitely efficient!

***TIP:** New operators often get flustered or have a bit of mic fright, so help them out with a script showing exactly what to say and when to say it. Sit with them and guide them along, pointing to each step, reminding them to breathe.*

## That's a Wrap!

Basically, it boils down to understanding what you'll be doing, being prepared, and honing your technique to get the job done with a minimum of fuss and bother. That's what the good operators do! I hope you'll find yourself enjoying the benefits of good operating during Field Day, too.



(Image/[Elizabeth Klinc, KE8FMJ](#))