



My CW Journey

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From zero to on-the-air in Morse Code

RYAN RAGER · AF4O

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I. Why does CW still matter?

In this day and age





Effective comms with very low power & minimal gear

- CW signals punch through where voice cannot
- A few watts and a wire antenna can work the world
- Ideal for portable, backpack, and emergency operating
- Gear footprint can be tiny — a small radio, a key, batteries
- More personal, deliberate communication



Very efficient use of bandwidth per station

- CW occupies roughly 100–150 Hz of bandwidth per signal
- SSB voice occupies roughly 3,000 Hz (3 kHz)
- ~30× more stations fit in the same slice of spectrum
- Better signal-to-noise ratio in narrow filters
- More QSOs possible on a crowded band

II. When & why I started

Down the CW rabbit hole





Personal motivations

- Wanted a new challenge in the hobby
- Looking for operating advantages on portable ops
- Desire to learn a skill few others have
- Something that demands serious practice



The moment(s) that nudged me over the edge

- Initial eye-opener: watching Tom NY4I working a satellite station at Field Day using CW
- The final push: right after my Hamvention trip I worked my first SOTA activation on phone (SSB), but realized how little gear I'd need to do the same on CW and make plenty contacts
- That was my "tipping" point

III. My starting point

Day zero





Had no prior experience or training

- Never learned Morse Code prior
- Fully starting from scratch





Initial misconceptions and bad decisions

- I quickly memorized the dits and dahs right out of the gate
 - That is the worst thing you can do when first learning CW
- Memorizing dits & dahs builds a mental translation layer that you'll spend months trying to undo
- CW must be learned by sound — not by visual symbols



Hindsight - I should have asked for guidance first

- A 10-minute conversation with an experienced CW op would have saved me months
- Input on method, pace, and resources up front
- Instead, I burned up time on the wrong approach
- Don't be afraid to ask before you start

IV. My steps to getting on the air

A practical path





POTA hunting - the easiest way to get on air with CW

- Activators are almost always patient and helpful
- Exchanges are short and predictable
- Online spotting networks make finding stations trivial (POTA.app)
- Low stakes, low pressure – perfect for your first contacts
- You'll build up confidence fast



Hunting Route 66 and 13 Colonies is easy too

- Annual on-air events with predictable special-event stations
- Short, repeatable exchanges
- Great way to build confidence – and certificates 😊
- I got a full sweep for Route 66 in CW last year
 - At the time, all I knew were my call sign, state, 5NN and `?`



Learn your callsign first

- What it sounds like – at any speed (12 wpm or 28 wpm)
- How to send it cleanly
- This is the single most-sent thing you'll ever use
- Get it locked in by sound before anything else



Learn to send your state

- Two-letter abbreviation in Morse code
- Example: F L = ..-. .-..
- Very useful for POTA / special event exchanges
- Quick win – only two letters to learn



Learn numbers (for an RST)

- Most common exchanges: 559, 599, or just 5NN
 - 5NN makes use of a "cut number" – N replaces 9 to save time
- Readability / Strength / Tone
- Practice the number set early – they show up constantly



POTA CW hunter script

- Listen for activator sending **CQ POTA DE [call] K**
- Send [***your call***] once at a speed you are accurate at sending
- They reply: **GD [your call] UR 5NN [their state] BK**
- You send: **BK TU UR 5NN 5NN [your state] BK**
- They send: **TU 73 E E**
- You send: **E E**
- Log the QSO and move on to the next activator!

V. Minimum gear to start

What you actually need



Keying device

- Straight key – classic, slow, deliberate
- Paddles (iambic) – dual lever, used with a keyer
- Single lever paddle – simpler than dual, faster than straight
- Which is the right device to start with??
- No single right answer – but pick one that interests YOU and commit to it



Radio with key/paddle port

- Most modern HF rigs have a built-in keyer and key jack
- Huge plus: a radio that lets you turn the break-in (QSK) on and off
- Full break-in lets you hear between digits – useful, but distracting at first
- Semi break-in is “mentally friendlier” when you're starting out

VI. Early stumbling blocks

And how to avoid them





DO NOT memorize letters/numbers by dot/dash symbols

- This is the single biggest mistake new learners make
- Learning visually creates a translation layer in your head that is ok for learning to send, but you will get left in the dust when trying to head copy.
 - Processing dits and dahs in your head will cap your copy speed at about 10wpm
 - Learn each character by its sound – its rhythm – from the start of your learning

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There's more than 26 letters and 10 numbers

- Punctuation: ? / .
- Prosigns
- Q codes
- Common abbreviations
- The full operating vocabulary is much wider than the alphabet



Prosigns, cut numbers, Q codes, abbreviations

- Prosigns: procedural signals sent as run-together letters (BT, BK, SK)
- Cut numbers: shortened number characters (N=9, T=0, A=1)
- Q codes: three-letter shortcuts that act as questions or statements
- Abbreviations: TU, 73, GM, GA, GE, ES, DE, FB
- Learn these alongside letters – not after

VII. Learning resources to consider

Courses, sites, and tools





Training course options

- Long Island CW Club (LICW) – structured live classes via Zoom, for all levels
- CW Academy (CWops) – 8 week semester-based, beginner to advance; 16 classes
- CW Innovations – focused programs, smaller cohorts
- Whichever you pick: commit the time daily/weekly
- CW rewards consistency, not cramming



Websites & apps

- LCWO.net — Koch-method browser trainer
- MorseTrainer.info — online drills
- BetterICR — instant character recognition practice
- YouTube channels:
 - Ham Radio Duo
 - Thomas W. K4SWL
 - K4ARK Portable Radio **
 - Evan T. K2EJT
 - N7KOM Portable Radio **





Learning Tools

- V-band adapter — works with PC, Mac, iPad, mobiles (\$25)
 - Hamradio.solutions/vband
 - Didahdit.com
 - Morse Invaders
- My Key Mouse — CWMorse.us USB adapter
- Vail CW adapter
- Avoid the cheap eBay/Amazon knockoffs — they are total junk and fall apart quickly

Appendix

Reference content



Prosigns

- AR ·— ·— · End of message
- SK · · ·— ·— End of contact / sign-off
- BT — · · · — Break / new paragraph
- KN — · — — · Go ahead, specific station only
- AS ·— · · · Wait / stand by
- BK — · · · — ·— Break (informal)



Q codes

- QRL — Is this frequency in use?
- QRZ — Who is calling me?
- QSL — I acknowledge receipt
- QRM — Man-made interference
- QRN — Natural / atmospheric noise
- QSY — Change frequency
- QRP — Low power (≤ 5 W)
- QRO — High power
- QRF — Try sending with your left foot



