

# How to Operate Sweepstakes (and Other Contests)

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[The following article is based on the author's eham.net article 4191, available at [www.eham.net/articles/4191](http://www.eham.net/articles/4191). — Ed.]

This article is for those readers who would like to give contesting a try but might be a little intimidated by the fast talking and sending. Here's a secret — *everybody feels that way at first!* Since trying to explain all contesting is impossible in a single page, this discussion covers how to operate in the upcoming ARRL Sweepstakes (see page 83, this issue). Many of the techniques discussed here apply equally well to other contests, so once you learn them, you'll be ready for almost every other contest! (A calendar of major contests is provided elsewhere in this section.)

The annual ARRL CW Sweepstakes runs on the first full weekend in November, from 2100Z Saturday until 0300Z Monday (or 5 PM Saturday to 10 PM Sunday Eastern Time) on 160 through 10 meters (but not on 30, 17 or 12 meters). Phone Sweepstakes is held on the third full weekend of November with the same UTC start and end times.

### The CW Contest

Let's start with the CW Sweepstakes. While you might recoil in horror at the high code speeds, tune high in the bands and there will be some folks going nice and slow. Don't be afraid to jump in there and give 'em a call. I *guarantee* your code speed will double with just a few hours at the key. Here's how it works:

- 1) You hear somebody calling CQ SS CQ SS de W1AW
- 2) Send your call *once* — KX9X. Don't send their call and don't send yours more than once. If they don't copy your call on the first try, they'll send AGN or ? or just CQ again. So call 'em again. If they're going too fast, send QRS and they'll slow down.
- 3) If they hear you, they'll send something like this: KX9X 107 U W1AW 36 CT. What the heck does that mean? It's called the "exchange" — what stations send to each other during each contest QSO.
  - KX9X is your call to let you know they're talking to you
  - 107 is the "serial number," the number of the contact in the contest for them (their next contact will be 108, etc)
  - U (for Unlimited) is their entry category — also called precedence — there are A, B, M, Q, S and U categories. See the Sweepstakes rules at [www.arrl.org/contests](http://www.arrl.org/contests) for a description of each category.
  - Then they send their call
  - 36 is the last two digits of the first year they were licensed — it's called a "check"
  - CT means Connecticut, their ARRL Section. There are 80 sections — some are states, others aren't, all are two or three letters and the abbreviations are given in the contest rules. Be sure to log the right abbreviation — Missouri's abbreviation is MO, not MI or MS!
- 4) If you don't copy it all the first time, it's perfectly okay to send QRS PSE, AGN which means "Slow down, send it again, please."
- 5) If you do get it — way to go! Here's what you send in return:
  - Their call
  - The number this contact is in the contest for you — if it's your first send "1" and pat yourself on the back
  - Your category (see above)
  - Your call

- The last two digits of the first year you were licensed — if you got your license last year, it's 07, for example
  - Your section (see above)
- 6) If they don't get it, they may say...with a question mark, maybe...
    - AGN — send everything all over again
    - NR — repeat just the serial number a couple of times
    - PREC or just PR — repeat your category; "precedence" refers to the similar part of radiogram headers
    - CALL — repeat your call (this is rare)
    - CK — repeat the two digits of the year, your check
    - SEC or QTH — repeat your section
  - 7) If you find yourself flustered in the middle of the contact, try making a "cheat sheet" with the exchange written out. They may ask *you* to QRS, you speed demon, so do it with a smile!
  - 8) If they copy everything, they'll say a short TU (for thanks) or R (for Roger) or QSL (for received okay) and then just send their CQ or maybe just their call, and away you both may go.

- 9) Sometimes, it just doesn't work out due to QRM (interference) or QRN (static) or QSB (fading) or the cat could cough up a hairball on the rug requiring immediate action. Don't take it personally; just go find somebody else to call. It's a no-fault deal.

10) If you get tired of "Searching and Pouncing," then tighten your belt, mop your brow, cock your hat at a jaunty angle and call CQ! It's easy — don't have a cow, man, just call CQ SS CQ SS DE KX9X KX9X and listen, repeat if necessary. Soon you'll get an answer. Just play back the above steps with you as the call-ee.

What about Sweepstakes Phone? The phone bands are considerably more crowded than CW. A single phone QSO takes up more, at least six times more, bandwidth than a CW signal! More non-contest activity is present, such as the nets, rag chews, and scheduled contacts with which you need to coexist. Please work around the other band occupants — contesters or not.

Some folks have picked up the bad habit of using "the last two" to call a station, meaning using just the last two letters of your call. Please use your entire call sign. Nine times out of 10, the other station will copy all of it the first time. And use standard phonetics, such as those at [www.arrl.org/FandES/field/forms/fsd220.html](http://www.arrl.org/FandES/field/forms/fsd220.html).

Signal quality is much more of an issue on phone. Before the contest, have a friend check your signal at full power — is the audio clear and splatter-free? If not, take steps to make it so — you will make more contacts and cause fewer problems on adjacent frequencies. When you do make a contact, first take a deep breath, then give your whole exchange clearly as you exhale, repeating nothing. If the other station needs a "fill," they'll ask you.

Otherwise, Phone Sweepstakes is a lot like CW Sweepstakes. The exchanges are identical, the scoring is the same, and it's a lot of fun — the hours will fly by. Keep a simple paper log the first time out to make it easy — you can worry about entering it on a computer later. There are complete rules and instructions for operating and scoring and sending in the log on the ARRL Web site, [www.arrl.org/contests](http://www.arrl.org/contests). (This insert also includes an article on how to submit your log.) Come spring of 2009, you can click on over to the contest results and wonder-of-wonders, there your call will be with the mighty titans just a few lines away.

Why sit on the sidelines? Go for it!

