

Five Common Mistakes New Hams Make

In this Shack Talk article, we'll take a look at some common mistakes new radio amateurs sometimes make. This short list comes from working with a gaggle of new hams over the years and trying to help them get started in ham radio.

1. Programming the radio incorrectly

The typical amateur radio is loaded with features. The capabilities of these radios are amazing but they add additional complexity to the radio. Typically, a new Technician is focused on getting a VHF or UHF radio programmed up for use on the local repeaters. Remember **FOT (Frequency, Offset and Tone)** all have to be set properly to access a repeater. See my article [Hey, Why Can't I Access the Repeater?](#) for more information on that topic.



Programming your transceiver can usually be done from the keypad, but using a spreadsheet-like software utility and USB cable makes loading a long list of channels much easier! You'll probably want to program your local repeaters and standard simplex frequencies for your area.

You'll probably want to load up the memory channels with a bunch of local repeater and simplex frequencies. The best way to do this is to use the software and programming cable for the radio. Sometimes these are included with the rig, sometimes they are optional and have to be purchased separately. If you can find someone in your area that has the same model of radio, ask them for their programming file. It can save a lot of time and effort.

2. Failing to speak clearly into the microphone

With most radios, you need to hold the microphone (or handheld radio) a few inches from your mouth. You need to speak clearly and aim your voice at the mike. Handheld radios usually have a little hole in the plastic where the microphone picks up the sound. Make sure you are talking at that hole, not some other place on the radio.



Be aware of where the tiny FET mic port is located on your HT and speak across that area with the radio a few inches from your mouth. Ask for audio reports and adjust your distance and voice volume accordingly.

Some radios are more sensitive than others when it comes to audio level. And it is possible to have too much audio, so ask other hams for a signal report. Ask specifically about your audio level...loud enough, too loud? For most of us, that's the only way we are going to find out how we sound.

3. Expecting magic from an HT

Handheld transceivers (HTs) are awesome! They pack so much radio into such a small device: typically, 2m/70cm transmit, wideband receive, memories, scanning, CTCSS, DTMF, built-in battery and rubber duck antenna. No doubt an HT is handy, but it is a “pipsqueak” of a radio...5 watts output power and a compromised antenna. By itself, such a radio is limited in range to a few miles depending on local terrain. They really shine when operating through a repeater or from a high elevation.

Maybe it's because we are all used to good cellphone coverage that we expect the same thing from our handheld radios. A key difference is that Verizon, AT&T and Sprint have tons of cellphone towers spread across the region which provide that good coverage. Ham radio has quite a few repeaters available to us but not densely spaced. So don't expect the HT to hit every repeater in your state...it won't.

What to do? Be aware of the repeaters that provide the best coverage for where you are located and use them. Upgrade the antenna on your HT. If you are operating inside a car, use an external antenna on the roof. For additional tips, see my [FM VHF Operating Guide](#).

4. Not listening enough

Hemingway said ["I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."](#) This is true in ham radio. Dial around on the bands and listen to what's going on. Try to figure out who the best radio operators are and follow their example. You can learn a lot about operating procedures just by listening.

On VHF/UHF, find some of your local nets and listen in. (Just do an internet search for "ham radio" "net" "your city name".) Nets are scheduled on the air meeting with a wide variety of purposes, everything from public service to technical discussions. You don't have to check into the net, just give it a listen and see what you can learn.

5. Not getting on the air.

I kept this one for last but it is the most important one on the list.



Get on the air! Don't wait, do it now. The longer you delay the less likely you are to become engaged with the ham community in your area.

Some new hams get their license, buy a radio, stuff it into the closet and never get on the air. Big mistake. One reason is that they got into ham radio for use in case of a major calamity. "When the stuff hits the fan, I'll get the radio out." Of course, that will be too late...you'll be sitting there reading the manual trying to figure out how to contact someone. You really need to get familiar with the radio well before a disaster happens.

Another reason new hams don't get on the air is that it's overwhelming. Where do I start? Who do I talk to? Good questions. You might start by talking with a local ham you know. Ask them to get on a quiet simplex frequency and just chat with you. I've done this for new folks...it's just a safe way to get some air time.

One challenge we have is that many repeaters are pretty darn quiet. It is common to not have anyone listening and not much chatter on a repeater. For example, my UHF repeater sometimes sits there all day long without anyone talking on it. So if you just get on the repeater and say your call sign, you might not get a reply. Don't take it personally.

What can you do? Well, listen a lot. Put your radio on scan and try to find frequencies that have activity. Find out when the local nets are scheduled and listen then. When you feel comfortable, go ahead and check into the net. When you do find a repeater or simplex frequency that seems active, go ahead and make a call. Don't be afraid to say "This is KC1XYZ looking for a signal report. Anyone around?" You are more likely to get a response if you make a specific request.

For some additional ideas on getting started, see [I Got My License, Now What?](#)

Thanks for reading another Shack Talk article. I hope to work you on the ham bands soon.

73, Bob KØNR