

The Net Control Station (NCS)
Adapted from Waller County Ares Training

You will always have one station in control of a formal net, and that station is known as the “Net Control Station”, or NCS. This operator will be acting as a sort of traffic cop, deciding who speaks, in what order to pass messages and directing all the ‘traffic’. The NCS is critical to the success of a net.

It is good practice to have a “Backup Net Control Station” or BNCS at the same location as NCS or even better at a different location. Backup Net Control must be available and ready to pick up NCS responsibilities in the event that something, such as power or radio failure causes the NCS to go off air. The BNCS who becomes the new NCS should get a volunteer to serve as a new BNCS.

To begin your NCS training, I can not stress enough the best thing is to **listen** to as many formal nets as you can. The following is a list of basic prerequisites the ARRL recommends to determine if you have what it takes to become a good NCS operator.

- A clear speaking voice – someone who talks as though they have a mouth full of marbles won’t do.
- Fluency in the language – if you have a thick accent or cannot use the language precisely, it may make it difficult for others to understand you.
- The ability to handle mental and physical stress for long periods. Information and demands will be coming at you from all directions all at once, sometimes for hours on end. Can you handle it without losing your composure or your voice?
- The ability to listen and comprehend in a noisy and chaotic environment. Can you tune out all the distractions and focus only on the job at hand?
- Good hearing – If you have a hearing loss that makes it tough to understand human voices, NCS of a voice net is not the job for you. Hams with limited hearing problems may elect to act as NCS for a digital mode net, according to one’s abilities.
- The ability to write legibly what you hear as you receive it.
- Knowledge and practiced use of ITU Phonetics.

Basic techniques for a successful net control station

When asking for reports, listen carefully! It is easy to miss critical information when operating under stress.

Note on your worksheet as many calls as you can before you acknowledge anyone. Then acknowledge all stations heard by call, and yield the frequency to any station that reported emergency traffic. Clear all emergency traffic first, then priority traffic, and then handle the routine messages.

Pair up stations to pass traffic on another frequency whenever possible, especially if the frequency has been busy and the messages will be lengthy.

Use the fewest words that will completely say what you mean to say, and control the tone of your voice. Use a calm tone, and others will tend to remain calm also.

Remember that you are dealing with volunteers; you cannot expect compliance but only ask for their cooperation. As the NCS you should expect trained net members to:

- Report to net control when they become available.
- Ask for clearance before using the frequency.
- Answer promptly when called by net control.
- Use tactical call signs if assigned.
- Follow established net protocol.
- Use ITU Phonetics appropriately.

You may need to explain what you are doing calmly, and give some training at some point during the net if untrained members are not following the protocol. Never criticize someone on the air!

A few more hints

- If the net is a scheduled net, start on time.
- Use a script when possible.
- Be friendly, yet in control.
- Ask specific questions – give specific instructions.
- Have pencil/paper ready, write down ALL calls.
- Read your owner's manual, know your radio before an emergency occurs.
- Know how to use your microphone.
- When there is a "double" listen to see if you can identify either station by call sign or by their voice.
- During check-ins, recognize participants by name whenever possible.
- Frequently identify the name and purpose of the net.
- Don't be afraid to ask for assistance if you need it.
- If the net is an emergency operation, tell listeners where to go for other nets, such as a resource net.
- You will make mistakes, but don't be afraid to acknowledge a mistake.
- Don't think "on the air".
- Keep transmissions as short as possible.
- Transmit only facts.
- Avoid becoming a source for general information about an event – remember you are just the net control station, not a public information officer.
- When necessary, use ITU phonetics, and send all numbers as individual numbers.
- For voice nets, use plain English – Q signals are for CW.
- If the net has been quiet for more than ten minutes, check on operator status.
- BNCS should also be keeping a list of the stations that have checked in.

And finally

Remember one of your functions and duties as a NCS is to keep a current list of stations checking in, where they are, their assignments, and what capabilities they have.

I recommend that periodically all Net participants listen for and record the stations checking in as if they were NCS or BNCS. This is good practice at picking out the call signs and good preparation for becoming an NCS.