

SIGNALING FOR HELP AND STAYING IN TOUCH

To signal for help, repeat a signal three times: three whistle blasts, a pause, then three more, or SOS with a flashlight. To reach family when networks are jammed, send a text, which Ready.gov says may get through when a call will not.

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Ready.gov warns that mobile phones and computers could be unreliable during disasters, and that electricity could be disrupted. These skills cover two jobs: getting the attention of rescuers when you need help, and reaching your own household when the usual ways fail. For receiving official alerts and broadcasts without power, see emergency radio and alerts.

WHISTLE SIGNALS

Use this when you are lost, hurt, or trapped and need people nearby to find you.

1. Keep a whistle in your kit. Ready.gov lists a “whistle (to signal for help)” in its basic disaster supplies kit.
2. Blow the whistle three times, take a break, then blow three times again (National Park Service).
3. Repeat often. NPS says a whistle saves the energy you would spend yelling.
4. If you are trapped in a collapsed building, Ready.gov says to send a text or bang on a pipe or wall, cover your mouth with your shirt, and use a whistle instead of shouting.

Check: your pattern is in threes. NPS says any signal done three times in a series is a universal distress call (Yosemite National Park).

FLASHLIGHT AND MIRROR SIGNALS

Use a flashlight at night and a mirror in sunlight to signal people farther away, including aircraft.

1. Flash SOS with a flashlight: three quick flashes, three slow, three quick (National Park Service). The US Coast Guard shows the international SOS pattern as three dots, three dashes, three dots (short, long, short).
2. Pause, then repeat. NPS says to use the flashlight wisely, because signaling drains the batteries.
3. In daylight, flash a mirror to alert planes and helicopters in the area. NPS notes that mirrors do not run out of battery.

4. Wear bright clothing so searchers can see you more easily (NPS).

Check: you can flash SOS in the dark without counting out loud.

■ **WARNING**

On the water, the Coast Guard says regulations prohibit displaying visual distress signals except when help is needed because of immediate or potential danger to people on board (USCG). Use distress signals only for real emergencies.

GROUND-TO-AIR SIGNALS

Use this when you are stranded in the open and an aircraft may be searching for you. The FAA's Aeronautical Information Manual gives this code for survivors:

SYMBOL	MESSAGE
V	Require assistance
X	Require medical assistance
N	No or negative
Y	Yes or affirmative
↑ (arrow)	Proceeding in this direction
SOS	Use if in doubt

The FAA's instructions:

1. Pick the one message you need from the table.
2. Lay out the symbol with strips of fabric, pieces of wood, stones, or any material you have.
3. Make as much color contrast as you can between the material and the ground behind it.
4. Make each symbol at least 10 feet high, and lay it out exactly as shown.
5. On snow, make the symbol by dragging, shoveling, or tramping. The dug-out areas look black from the air.
6. Also try to attract attention by radio, flares, smoke, or any other means.

Check: a pilot who has seen your message rocks the wings from side to side.

The same FAA section shows body signals you can make to a circling pilot. Stand in the open against a background that is not confusing, and go through each motion slowly, repeating it until you are sure the pilot understands. See figure 6-2-6 in AIM Chapter 6, Section 2 for the arm positions.

TEXTING INSTEAD OF CALLING

Use this when phone lines are jammed after a disaster.

1. Send a text first. Ready.gov says a text may get through when a call will not, because a text needs far less bandwidth. Texts may also save and send automatically once capacity is available.
2. Keep using texts to save your phone's battery. Ready.gov says texting may be more reliable than calling and can save battery power.
3. Set up a group list on every phone of the people you would need to reach in an emergency (Ready.gov).
4. Make sure everyone in the household, and your out-of-town contact, knows how to text, or knows another way to reach you.
5. If a call is needed, try your out-of-town contact. Ready.gov says a long-distance call may be easier than a call across town, because local lines can be jammed.

Check: everyone in the household has sent a test message to the group list.

KEEPING A PRINTED CONTACT LIST

Use this for the moment your phone is lost, broken, dead, or out of service.

Steps from Ready.gov:

1. Write down phone numbers and email addresses for everyone in your household.
2. Add numbers for schools, childcare, caregivers, and workplaces, plus an out-of-town contact who can help the household reconnect.
3. Add emergency services, utilities, medical providers, veterinarians, and insurance companies.
4. Write down your meeting places: one in your neighborhood, one outside it, and one outside your town.
5. Give everyone a copy to carry in a wallet, backpack, or purse, and post one in a central place such as the refrigerator.
6. Save at least one contact in every phone under "In Case of Emergency" or "ICE."
7. Review and practice the plan at regular household meetings.

Check: each person can show you their paper copy right now. For a full plan, see how to make a family emergency communication plan.

GMRS AND FRS RADIOS

Use these short-range two-way radios to talk within your household or neighborhood when phones are down.

FCC rules define the Family Radio Service (FRS) as short-distance two-way voice communication between low-power hand-held radios (47 CFR 95.503). The General Mobile Radio Service (GMRS) is for individual licensees and their families, including voluntary help to the public during emergencies and natural disasters (47 CFR 95.1703). The FCC authorizes Personal Radio Services without an individual license unless that service's own rules require one (47 CFR 95.305), and GMRS rules do.

1. Read your radio's manual to see whether it works on FRS or GMRS.
2. For GMRS, get an individual license before you transmit. Under 47 CFR 95.1705, you must be at least 18 and pay the FCC's application and regulatory fees.
3. Note the term: a GMRS license normally runs ten years from the date it is granted or renewed.
4. Decide who in the family will use it. A licensee may let immediate family members operate the station; the rule lists spouse, children, grandchildren, stepchildren, parents, grandparents, stepparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and in-laws.
5. Agree on a channel with your household and practice a short check-in before you need it.

Check: everyone who will use the radio has made a test call to another family radio. The rule also lets a licensee allow anyone to operate the station if it is necessary to send an emergency message.

GETTING AN AMATEUR RADIO LICENSE

Use this if you want two-way radio with more range and a way to help with emergency communications. FCC rules name emergency communications as part of the amateur service's purpose (47 CFR 97.1).

1. Pick a license class. Each class requires passing exam elements (47 CFR 97.501): Technician, Element 2; General, Elements 2 and 3; Amateur Extra, Elements 2, 3, and 4.
2. Find an exam session. Each exam is given by a team of at least 3 volunteer examiners (VEs) at a session coordinated by a Volunteer Examiner Coordinator (VEC) (47 CFR 97.509).
3. Take the exam. When you pass an element, the examiners give you a certificate (CSCE) and send your application to the coordinator.
4. Wait for your license grant to appear in the FCC's ULS database before you transmit (47 CFR 97.5).
5. Note the term: an amateur license is normally granted for 10 years (47 CFR 97.25).

Check: you have a call sign in the FCC database before you key the microphone.

■ SOURCE

FCC rules let an amateur station use any means of radio communication at its disposal for essential communications tied to the immediate safety of human life or protection of property when normal communication systems are not available (47 CFR 97.403).

PRACTICE LIST

SKILLS

- ☐ Whistle signals: three blasts, pause, three blasts
- ☐ Flashlight SOS and mirror signals
- ☐ Ground-to-air signals: V, X, N, Y, arrow, SOS
- ☐ Texting instead of calling, with a group list set up
- ☐ Printed contact list in every wallet and on the fridge
- ☐ GMRS and FRS radios: know which you have, license if GMRS
- ☐ Amateur radio license: class picked and exam session found

TRACK

Survival skills

SHEET

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REVIEWED

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COMPILED FROM THESE SOURCES

1. Ready.gov, Build a Kit
2. Ready.gov, Earthquakes
3. Ready.gov, Create Your Family Emergency Communication Plan (PDF)
4. National Park Service, Outdoor Emergency Plan (PDF)
5. National Park Service, Yosemite Wilderness Safety
6. US Coast Guard, A Boater's Guide to the Federal Requirements for Recreational Boats (2023)
7. FAA, Aeronautical Information Manual, Chapter 6, Section 2 (Fig. 6-2-6, Ground-Air Visual Code)
8. 47 CFR 95.305, Authorization to operate Personal Radio Services stations

- 9.** 47 CFR 95.503, Definitions, FRS
- 10.** 47 CFR 95.1703, Definitions, GMRS
- 11.** 47 CFR 95.1705, GMRS individual licenses
- 12.** 47 CFR 97.1, Amateur radio service basis and purpose
- 13.** 47 CFR 97.5, Station license required
- 14.** 47 CFR 97.25, License term
- 15.** 47 CFR 97.403, Safety of life and protection of property
- 16.** 47 CFR 97.501, Qualifying for an amateur operator license
- 17.** 47 CFR 97.509, Administering VE requirements

Every safety claim on this sheet links to its primary source.