



The Amateur in You, Part 1

What have you been pondering?



Third-party communication

There might come a time when you'll have to operate your station in behalf of another, possibly unlicensed, person, such as a family member, a neighbor, or maybe even a church leader. Well, it turns out that amateur radio provides a method for you to legally handle that kind of operation, which we call **third-party communication**. However, many, if not most, ham radio operators either don't really know how to perform third-party communication, or find it a little awkward, since it's not an operating mode they use every day. I'm hoping that this discussion might help you feel a little more confident about handling third-party operation.



In amateur radio, the term *third-party communication* arose from the need for a telegraph operator to send a message to another telegraph operator in behalf of an unlicensed person, such as a supervisor, or even a government official, especially during war, a crisis, or other emergency. The **first party** is you, the licensed control operator making the call. The **second party** is the operator you're contacting, who is the licensed control operator answering the call. The **third party** is the unlicensed (or under-licensed) person for whom the first party is making the call.

Today, US rules governing third-party communication ([Part 97.115.b](#)) have broadened and loosened since those early days, so that the second-party operator never even needs to speak with the first-party operator at all. There are three basic rules that govern third-party communication, although there are other rules that also cover their details. The three are

1. *You, the first party, are the licensed control operator, and must maintain control of your station during the communication*
2. *You must be in close enough proximity to your station to take control of it, should anything go wrong with it*
3. *You must be awake*

The following example illustrates how to carry out a third-party communication, assuming your call sign is **KI7ABC**, and you're trying to reach **KI7XYZ**:

- You've turned on the radio, set it to the appropriate frequency, and handed the mic to your unlicensed friend.
- Your unlicensed friend calls out to the second party, giving your call sign; maybe saying something like **KI7XYZ, this is KI7ABC**.
- The second party responds with **This is KI7XYZ, go ahead**.
- Your unlicensed friend and the second party can then talk back-and-forth on the air at will.



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- Every ten minutes, your unlicensed friend says **KI7ABC** and the second party says **KI7XYZ**.
- At the conclusion of the conversation, the second party should say something like **Nice talking with you. KI7XYZ.** and your unlicensed friend says something like **Yeah, nice talking with you, too! KI7ABC.**
- Your unlicensed friend turns the mic back to you, and you turn off your radio.

Notice that during this entire conversation, not once did you need to say anything, not your call sign, no introduction, not the words "third-party", nothing. Your unlicensed friend did all the talking at your station, and that's good enough. A few hams who are unfamiliar with third-party communication might feel uneasy about this procedure, and will step in and announce his or her call sign or say something to seemingly legitimize the communication, such as "for third-party traffic," and that's alright too; it's just not necessary, and frankly a little controlling.



There is one small exception to what I just said, that you should probably be aware of. The unlicensed person must not have been a ham who has had his or her licensed revoked or suspended. How will you know whether the unlicensed person has ever had that happen? Likely, you won't know, but if you happen to find out, just be aware of the rule.

I also mentioned that one of the rules say that you must be present in case something goes wrong with your station. Well, what can go wrong? Your station could get off-frequency, it can lose battery power, its antenna could come loose, and a host of other possibilities. Also, the unlicensed person could suffer a sudden health problem or unwittingly violate the rules, and start singing or swearing. In those cases, it's up to you, the licensed control operator, to take control of the situation.

Finally, I mentioned that you, the licensed control operator, must be awake. Ok, that makes sense, but what if you're unconscious, due to an accident or health problem of your own? Well, that's the definition of an *emergency*, and a different set of rules ([Part 97.111.b.4](#)) take over.

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