Obtaining Your Amateur Radio Operator's License

By Cory Marino, KK7DCI

Amateur radio can be a rewarding hobby, or a serious contribution to public safety. Regardless of your motivation, the first step to getting involved in amateur radio is obtaining your license. While not a particularly difficult process, it's nice to have a simple guide to ensure that you've taken all the necessary steps to getting "on the air". This guide will begin with a checklist as a quick visual overview to keep track of your progress, with each item described in greater detail in the following pages.

Steps to Getting Licensed:

Call Sign:_____

- Open a valid email address
- Register with the FCC and get your FCC Registration Number (FRN):
  - Create an FCC User Account
  - Register Social Security Number with CORES
  - Write your FRN here:_____
- Study and Practice for your exam:
  - Technician
  - General (optional)
  - Amateur Extra (optional)
- Find a Volunteer Examiner (VE) Session:
  - Register for session (if required)
  - Location:_____
  - Date:_____
  - Time:_____
- While waiting for VE Session (optional):
  - Visit local amateur radio club(s)
  - Program frequencies into transceiver
  - Listen to local repeater and simplex frequencies
- Attend VE Session and Take Exam(s), bring:
  - ID
  - FRN (you can bring this page)
  - 2 #2 Pencils
  - Ballpoint Pen
  - Calculator (not phone!)
  - Cash, Check, or Money Order for VE Fee ($15 at time of writing, March 2024)
- Pay FCC Application Fee ($35 at time of writing, March 2024):
  - After receiving confirmation from VEC that you've passed your test, the FCC will email you instructions how to pay your application fee
- Receive your License and Call Sign:
  - Once your application fee has been processed, the FCC will send an email with your new call sign and a link to your official license document. Paper licenses are no longer sent.
  - Your name and call sign will also be added to the official FCC database
  - Write your new call sign at the top of this page as a reminder until you've memorized it.
- Get on the Air!
  - Local repeater nets are great way to make your first "on the air" contact

Detailed Steps:

1. **Open a valid email address**: If you do not already have one, you must open an email address. The specifics of opening an email address are beyond the scope of this guide, but many free email providers (e.g. gmail.com) make it simple to open an account.

2. **Register with FCC: (**adapted from https://www.fcc.gov/new-users-guide-getting-started-universal-licensing-system-uls#REGISTER)

   a. Create an account with the FCC: visit https://apps.fcc.gov/cores/userLogin.do and click on the "register" radio button at the center of the page near the bottom.
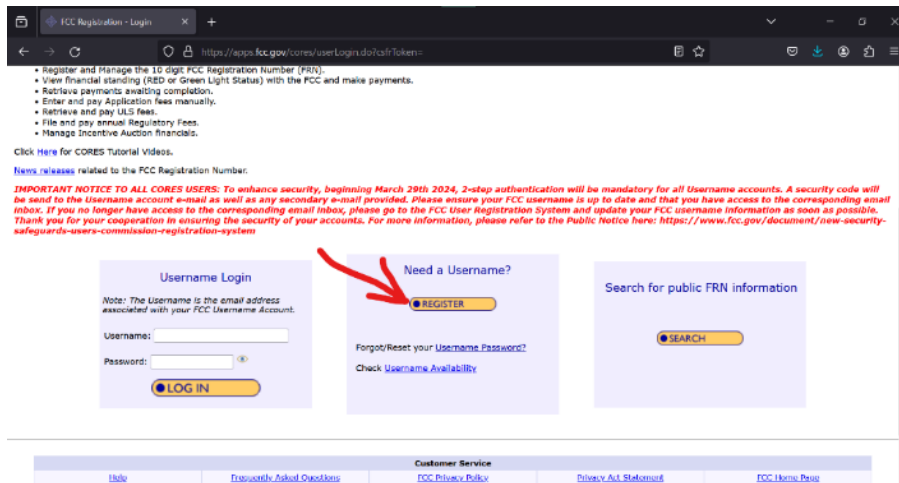

   Figure 1: REGISTER Button in yellow

   On the following page, enter your email address and assign a password that follows the rules shown on the page. Fill in your contact information and choose a security question. After you create your account, you will be sent a confirmation email from the FCC. Click the link in the email to confirm your account.

   b. Register your Social Security Number with CORES: When you confirm your account, log in to CORES using your Username and password, then click on "Register New FRN". You will be prompted to register as an Individual or Business Entity.
      i. **Note: If you are registering as an individual, you will be asked to select either a CORES FRN Registration or Restricted Use FRN. Unless you are registering an FRN to use on Form 323 and Form 323-E, please register a CORES FRN Registration.**
      ii. Fill in the form, then click "submit". If the form was filled out correctly, you will be taken to a confirmation page with your new FRN. **Write it down on the checklist** and print or save the page for your records.

3. **Study and Practice for your Exam:**
   a. Study: There are many study guides available to help prepare for your licensing exam. Of particular interest is this one from Dan Romanchik, KB6NU. Besides being a well-designed document that covers every single question in the Technician exam, it includes the URLs of several websites with practice exams.
   b. Practice Exams: Once you've worked through the whole study guide, consider taking practice exams from one of the sites given in the guide. Use the results to determine which subjects to revisit in the study guide. Once you regularly score 75% or better, check off the "Technician" box on the front checklist.
       i. If you regularly score 90% or better on the "Technician" exam, consider studying for higher license levels. The study guides for these exams are not free, but the practice exams are. Once you regularly score 75% or better on these, check them off as well.
4. **Find a VE Session:**
   a. The American Radio Relay League (ARRL) has a user friendly search page for VE Sessions throughout the United States, http://www.arrl.org/find-an-amateur-radio-license-exam-session.
   b. Sometimes the schedule of regular VE Sessions changes, so be sure to check in with the person named in the "contact" field of the session you are interested in. This page will also note if you need to register. Once you've chosen (and registered, if required) a VE Session, write the details in the checklist.
5. **Waiting for the VE Session:** In addition to staying sharp with practice exams, consider doing the following:
   a. Visit a local Amateur Radio Club: Again, the ARRL is a valuable resource. Search their page for a club in your area: http://www.arrl.org/find-a-club. HAM Radio clubs are an excellent way to find out about activities and resources in your area. Oftentimes, the VE's who will be administering your exam will also be members of the local club and can help answer any questions you have about getting your license. Also, club members will know about local repeaters and when "nets" take place on them. We will talk more about nets later in this guide.
   b. Program frequencies into your transceiver: If you've already got a transceiver, find the frequencies of local repeaters and simplex channels and program them into it. Some radios are very user-friendly and allow simple programming using the front buttons. Others are easier to program using a computer and a programming cable. Either way, if you program your radio now, you'll be able to begin using it as soon as you get your license.
   c. Listen to local repeaters and simplex frequencies: While a license is required to transmit signals on the HAM Radio frequencies, anybody is allowed to receive them. Once you've found the local frequencies, tune in to listen to local traffic. If you visited a local club, you'll probably hear some of the call signs of members you met. It's especially helpful to listen in during nets, you will hear how a structured, disciplined role call is conducted and get information about local events related to HAM Radio.

6. **Attend VE Session and take exam(s):** Today's finally the day! Double check that you have everything you need:
   a. Valid photo ID or two forms of non-photo ID
   b. FRN: The easiest way to make sure you have it is to bring the front checklist with you. Otherwise, make sure you have it written down and ready to copy to the forms that the VE Team will have you fill out.
   c. 2 #2 Pencils: Make sure that you have two sharpened pencils with good erasers.
   d. Ballpoint Pen: Despite it being the 21st century, some of the forms that the VE Team will have you fill out are in triplicate. This means that you'll have to press extra hard to make a mark on all three copies, so leave that fancy fountain pen at home.
   e. Calculator: Bring a simple calculator with you, you will not be able to use your phone during the exam. A scientific calculator should be more than capable of handling any problems you need to solve on any of the exams.
   f. Cash, Check, or Money Order for VE Fee: Once again, despite it being the 21st century, don't rely on being able to use your credit card or Venmo to pay your VE Fee. Cash is still king, but if you have a checkbook, they can accept checks. The author has no experience with money orders, but they are also accepted.
      i. NOTE: Your fee covers the session, regardless of how many exams you take. While you can only take each exam once in a session, you can take upgrade tests if you pass the previous exam in that same session. For example, if you pass the Technician exam, you can take the General exam during the same session without having to pay an additional fee. The same applies to the Amateur Extra if you've passed the General exam.
   g. Take and Submit the Exam: Once you've filled out the forms, the VE Team will administer your exam. Take your time and answer the questions carefully, your preparation will pay off now. After you've finished, the VE Team will score your exam and inform you of the results. If you've passed, they will issue you a Certificate of Successful Completion of Examination (CSCE). Congratulations, you've passed your exam! The VE Team will submit all the necessary paperwork to the FCC.
7. **Pay FCC Application Fee ($35 at time of writing, March 2024):**
   a. Once the FCC processes the paperwork that the VE Team submitted on your behalf, you will receive an email from the FCC detailing how to pay your application fee. This fee was not charged when the author received his license, so you will have to pay close attention to the instructions.
8. **Receive your License and Call Sign:**
   a. Once your application fee has been processed, the FCC will send an email with your new call sign and a link to your official license document. Paper licenses are no longer sent, so you will need to print out a copy to post at your station.
   b. Write your call sign at the top of the front checklist to remind you what it is until you have it memorized. The more often you use it while operating, the more quickly you will memorize it. Many operators also label their equipment with their call sign, this performs double duty of reminding new operators of their call sign and helping return equipment to the proper owner if it gets lost or mixed up with other equipment.

c. Your call sign will also be added to the FCC license database. This database is the official record of your license status.

9. **Get on the Air!**
   a. Many clubs and emergency communications organizations hold regular nets on local repeaters. A net is comparable to a short meeting that occurs on the air. One station/operator is "net control" and oversees the net. They announce the beginning of the net, tell relevant announcements, call for visitors to check in, conduct a member rollcall, and close the net. Unless you have joined a club before getting your license, you will probably check in during the visitors' portion.