

Using an Iambic Paddle

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This article is for the use of iambic paddles only. Single lever paddles like those made by Vibroplex and others take more mechanical motion to send the Morse characters. I'll prove this later.

For sending Morse at speeds greater than 20 to 30 wpm you will need something other than a straight key or you will get very tired and frustrated. You will also tend to generate more errors. You may or may not have experience sending Morse. If you do not, then let me personally recommend that you start with an iambic paddle and a keyer. Most modern commercial rigs and a number of QRP kits that I know of have a built-in electronic keyer. You should learn to make good use of it if you haven't already.

First let me take the "bug" (mechanical paddle) people aside. You know that it takes a certain force to hit the mechanical paddle and get the lever that sends the dits to move and stay moving long enough to get some number of dits. You will have to kill off the tendency that you have to "hit" the paddle with a lot of force. Be gentle, please. The following steps will help guide you. Please bear with me with the details and don't skip anything.

From personal observations over the years at swapmeets, ham conventions, field day events and other ham gatherings I have noted that I cringe when I see a large number of individuals use an iambic paddle. They "slap" the paddle around like it was a bug. Just a light touch is all it takes if you have it adjusted correctly. If the paddle moves around the table while you are sending then you are using too much force. If you are sending with one hand and holding the paddle in one place with the other, you are doing it wrong. The paddle should not be moving. If it is moving or shifting then you are not using a gentle force on the paddles. The typical paddle has a mass around 2 kg or so and it takes a large force to move it. Take it easy. It isn't going anywhere on its own.

So let's begin. You will need the following items.

- an iambic paddle
- a keyer
- connecting cables
- phone book, dictionary, book or a newspaper.

Let's first have a look at your paddle. Hopefully you can find one used and get it at a good price, if you don't have one already. I have gotten Brown Brothers and Bencher paddles for less than \$30 at swapmeets on the last day when everyone is in a dealing mood and doesn't want to pack up all that stuff left over to take back home. You know the story, they were told not to come back home with anything..... The paddles didn't look pretty

but I spent some elbow grease, paint remover, primer, and paint to get them looking like new again.

Take a good look at the paddle and see how it fits all together. The iambic paddle has two separate movements and sets of contacts which I will call the left side and the right side. Note the adjustments for spacing on the contacts. Play with the adjustments and see if they are clean and operate in a smooth manner. If you are mechanically inclined and working with a used paddle that needs some work then take it apart and clean it up and put it back together. Take notes before you take it apart. Keep a small box to hold all the parts 'cuz Ace Hardware and others may not have a replacement part if you lose it or damage it in anyway. Also there are many manufacturers that are no longer in business to obtain spare parts from. Use common sense on chemicals, etc. Also, do this in one sitting if possible so you don't forget and reassemble the device incorrectly. Keep kids away from the parts unless you are showing them what a wizard you are or showing them how to do some mechanical work.

Also do not use a file, fingernail file, sandpaper, or other abrasive material on the contacts. I use a sheet of typing paper that I slide between the contacts to clean them aperiodically. The sulphur dioxide and other pollutants in the air tarnish the contacts and cause problems while in use. The contacts are either silver or gold plated

and you do not want to remove the material. Hopefully the contacts have not been abused by previous owners if you working with a used paddle.

Now that we have a working paddle let's go and hook it up to the keyer. I will assume that you are right-handed. Just reverse things for left-handed operation. You need a small cable that has two wires and a shield. It should be long enough to reach from where you will have the paddle on the operating desk to where you would like the keyer or rig to be. I have used the audio output cable found in CD drives for computers. It is small and flexible. If you are lucky to have the manual for the keyer then find out the connections needed to the paddle. The following connections are what I used for the AEA keyers and my rigs. Hook the left paddle contact to the tip connection of the stereo plug, the right paddle contact to the ring connection of the stereo plug, and the shield to the ground of the paddle and to the ground connection of the stereo plug. You need shielded cable so that later when you connect this setup to a transmitter you will not have problems with RF getting into the keyer and cause it to malfunction.

Power up the keyer and see if touching the left paddle sends dits and the right paddle sends dahs. If you have a keyer built into the rig, then set the power output to the lowest level and use a dummy load. Historically the reason for the dits on the left paddle and the dahs on the right

paddle is due to the semi-automatic mechanic paddle, a.k.a. bug, first being built in the configuration that gave dits with the left paddle, etc. A number of people do it the opposite way and that is fine. Just be prepared to be unable to walk up to any operating position and use their setup unless they have a keyer that will electronically switch to the opposite paddles for dits and dahs (reverse mode).

OK, now first adjustments. Make sure that all the adjustment components are aligned correctly and ready to be adjusted. With the keyer powered on I take the adjustment on the dit contact closure and move it to narrow the spacing until contact is made and the keyer starts sending a continuous string of dits. Then I back off the adjustment until the dits stop. This is just a small portion of a turn on the typical adjustment. Don't make the spacing too wide as I will explain in a minute. I find that a sheet of 20 pound typing paper just barely fits and there is a slight amount of friction. That's how narrow it is when I make the adjustment. Now some people are going to come along and suggest or demand that you use a wider spacing. I don't think so. If the paddle will hold the adjustment and stop sending when you release pressure on the paddle then it is fine.

Next do the same thing on the opposite side for the dah paddle, and you are just about done. There may be a tension adjustment for either a spring or springs or magnets. Adjust this for the

minimum tension you can get and still have the contacts stay open after you release pressure on either or both paddles.

So with the light touch and the narrow spacing, let's get down to some real exercises. Sit down at the desk you will be using and place your entire arm from the elbow to the wrist on the table in a comfortable position. Some of you may want your arm parallel to the edge of the desk and some at an small angle. I don't think straight into the desk is a good idea. You want to be able to do this for hours on end later in your CW career. Now point your pointing finger straight along the same direction as the rest of the arm. This is the direction I want your paddle to line up with the paddles towards your hand. Extend your thumb straight out and place the paddle with the left paddle just touching it. The thumb should be relaxed and you may want it bent just a little. It's up to you. The index finger should just touch the opposite paddle on the right side of the pair. I use the tip of the finger while the finger is curved. I find my wrist is turned to the left a little so that it is not vertical to the desk surface and the wrist and arm are resting on the table.

With the thumb and index finger touching both paddles and no dits or dahs being sent and with you in a comfortable position I want you to hold this position for a few minutes. Don't take your fingers off the paddles and don't push on them either. Not a word and not a sound for a few

minutes. Think about what you are doing and if there is something that doesn't feel right then adjust your posture, arm position, etc. until you feel comfortable. I don't need 5 minutes from you, but you get the picture. If you can't do this for 5 minutes then how are you going to do it for longer periods of time while talking to someone on the air?

Get ready to send. I assume that you know all the characters and numbers and if not, pick the ones you do know. If you have the manual on the keyer, look and make sure that it is in Mode B. Set the keyer speed to 15 wpm or so and no slower. Apply pressure to the left paddle with your thumb. You should hear a string of dits the entire time you have it depressed. Do this with the right paddle and you hear a string of dahs. Here is the neat part. Hold down both paddles at the same time. This requires a 'squeezing' motion on the part of both fingers, thus the term 'squeeze keying' in some literature and advertising. The sound pattern will alternate continuously between dits and dahs. With both paddles closed lightly, let the pressure off of one of the paddles, but DON'T remove the finger from the paddle. Always touching is the motto. Now bring pressure back on with the finger you let off and get the alternating pattern going again. Now let off with the other paddle, again keeping the finger or thumb touching and get a continuous pattern of dits or dahs. Bring the finger or thumb back. Do this until you get the feel of it. The important thing that I want you to learn is

that you can do this with the thumb and index finger still in contact with the paddles.

Remember when you learned to write? What did your parent(s) or teacher(s) or whoever have you do? They gave you some paper, most likely a Big Chief writing tablet, a pencil and a picture of the alphabet. A sample of the alphabet was usually on the inside cover of the Big Chief pad. You started with the letter A and I don't remember whether it was lower case first or capital. Probably caps first 'cuz you could do those with straight lines. Then you did one or more complete lines of all A's, then B's, etc. Well welcome back kid, we're gonna do the same thing all over.

First do a letter A. This is done with a di-dah sound combination. I'm going to adopt the following notation for the finger pushes. A lower case 'r' means the right paddle and only long enough for one element, the dah. An upper case 'R' means the right paddle for at least two or more elements. Of course you can figure out what a 'l' and 'L' are for the left paddle and sending dit(s).

So an A looks like the combo of 1r with almost no time between the first and the second depression. Try it. You have to gently tap the left paddle and immediately tap the right paddle with a gentle pressure. Never let your finger or thumb come off the paddle if possible. Also make sure you are not sending ET as we aren't trying to phone home just yet. It is important

to not leave a gap larger than the time of a single dit between the dit and the dah. The neat thing about a keyer is that it will always put at least the smallest allowed spacing and you have to react fast enough on the next element so that it doesn't leave some more space. Some keyers will automatically space for a word if you go just a fraction of a dit too long.

OK, just like pre-school, kindergarten or the first grade. Time to do a line of A's. Get a watch or clock with a second hand and send an A every two seconds. Not any faster. Do this for 15 seconds to 20 seconds. And repeat until you can do this without a SINGLE error. Remember how you used to complain and say to your parents? "Oh mom, oh dad, this is so easy and so boring. Can't I do something more interesting?" No. Do your homework and no dessert until you finish.....

Now here is the time to tell you something. Did you notice that if you didn't let up on the left paddle very quickly you'd get the letter R? This has to do with an internal memory of the keyer. Here is the way the Mode B works. If the left paddle is still depressed at the half-way point of the dah or later, the keyer will do an automatic 'lock' into memory this fact and after the dah is finished the keyer will go ahead and send an additional dit EVEN if you have released pressure on the left paddle!! This is gonna make the letter R and some other stuff easier to send as we will see later.

OK, now the letter B. The finger combination will be 'rL' where we will hold the left paddle down in order to get the string of dits. I don't any other way to say this. Don't you dare count. Counting is bad. Counting kills. Just remember the sound of the letter B and do just what it takes to sound the letter. If you start counting dits you are dead meat. You'll never get to high speeds. So break the habit now and work on it until you do. Go back to the beginning code CDs or tapes if you must.

Repeat the same exercise we did for the letter A. Send a letter B every two seconds for 15 seconds until you get a perfect sequence. Then go to 30 seconds until you get it perfect.

Now the letter C. The letter C is the first neat one that you get to demo the power of IAMBIC KEYING. Watch someone who was a bug user and maybe even you have the tendency to do this. They will do this combination 'rlrl' for the letter C. You try it. This is a waste of time and energy. You just took four strokes to get one letter. Now try this combo to get C - 'RL'. Hold the right paddle down and then immediately depress the left. Hold the right until after the second dah is half finished or complete and release and immediately release the left paddle at the mid-point or later during the second dah. Work on this until you can send C perfectly.

OK, we did a C with only TWO strokes instead of four. This is the beauty of Iambic Keying with a little help from Mode B. There is a Mode A for

iambic keying that can do the same thing but requires a longer timing and I don't care for it at all. In fact, with Mode B we can send all the letters and numbers with TWO strokes except for the letters X and P.

Now practice on the letter C until you can send one every two seconds for 30 or more seconds without a single error. Practice makes perfect. I find that people who are accomplished musicians make the best students. Know why? They learned very early in life that patience and sticking to something will allow you to do most anything. I don't think it is so much music but the love of doing something well that makes them better at a lot of things.

OK, here is the combo for each of the letters using the K7QO notation for Mode B Iambic Keying. Hopefully I don't have any typos here. Take each letter and learn the combo for doing it. Send the letter for thirty seconds with correct spacing without error and go on to the next one. Afterwards, forget the chart. Just concentrate on the sounds and the feel of sending each character.

- H - L don't count
- I - L don't count
- J - lR don't count, not ever.....
- K - Rl
- L - Lr
- M - R
- N - rL
- O - R don't count :-)
- P - lRl OK, this took three strokes
- Q - Rl
- R - Lr
- S - L
- T - r
- U - Lr
- V - Lr
- X - rLr The other letter that requires three strokes to send.
- Y - Rl
- Z - RL There is no overlap on closures.

Now note that this notation isn't perfect. It relies on you knowing the letters and working out the physical timing.

For the numbers

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| A - lr | 1 - lR Don't count |
| B - rL | 2 - LR Don't count |
| C - RL | 3 - LR Don't count |
| D - rL | 4 - LR Don't count |
| E - l | 5 - L Don't count |
| F - Lr note: hold L down and tap r during the second dit | 6 - rL Don't count |
| G - Rl | 7 - RL Don't count |
| | 8 - RL Don't count |

9 - RL Don't count
 0 - R Don't count

Those puppies take a long time to send at 15 to 20 words per minute. Makes 'em easy if you memorize them by sound and not count the elements. This is the biggest killer of CW operators, the worst habit to obtain and the most difficult to undo. So get to work if you have the bad habit of counting for any letter or number. Think sound sound sound....

I'll leave it as an exercise for the student to figure out the punctuation symbols , . ? and the / (slant symbol). HINT: 3, 2, 3 and 3 strokes.

Here is something that I found to be interesting and I had never seen done anywhere. Here are the number of strokes it takes to send each letter using a straight key.

| | | |
|---------------|------|--|
| One Stroke | --- | E and T |
| Two Strokes | --- | A, I, N, and M |
| Three Strokes | --- | K, O, S, U, W, R, D, and G |
| Four Strokes | --- | B, C, F, H, J, L, P, Q, V, X, Y, and Z |
| Five Strokes | ---- | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 0 (zero) |

So if I asked you to send the entire alphabet and all the numerals, you would have to work the key a total of $2 + 8 + 24 + 48 + 50$ which is 132 key

closures. No wonder you get tired after sending a long session with a straight key.

Now let's graduate to the old 'bug'. Historically the bug was invented before we had a lot of digital designers around who weren't making the big bucks in computers.

| | | |
|---------------|-----|------------------------------------|
| One Stroke | --- | E, I, S, H, 5, T |
| Two Strokes | --- | A, B, D, M, N, U, V, 4, 6 |
| Three Strokes | --- | F, G, K, L, O, R, W, X, Z, 3, 7 |
| Four Strokes | --- | C, J, P, Q, Y, 2, 8 |
| Five Strokes | --- | 1, 9, 0 (zero) |

Again, totaling up the number of strokes we get $6 + 18 + 33 + 28 + 15$ giving us the winning number of 90 motions. This is quite a savings over 132 strokes required for the straight key. Timing-wise it gave the operator considerable more accurate timing on the dits. There is still a limit of human capabilities to send by hand each long element rapidly.

Then came along the first electronic keyer. Now let's again go through our counting exercise but this time using only a single lever paddle used with an electronic keyer. Some of the better CW ops that I know still only use a single lever paddle. I can see that it closely approximates a bug in operation and it would be a much simpler transition to the new technology with a rapid learning curve. Here is the count that I get.

One Stroke --- E, H, I, M, O, S,
T, 0 (zero), and 5

Two Strokes --- A, B, D, G, J, N,
U, V, W, Z, 1, 2,
3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9

Three Strokes --- F, K, L, P, Q, R, X,
and Y

Four Strokes --- C

Wow!! That saved a lot. Totaling up the damages we get $9 + 36 + 24 + 4$ for a total of 73 which again is a reduction from the previous two methods that involved 132 and 90 strokes for their respective totals.

And then came the dual iambic paddles and more sophisticated keyers.

One Stroke --- E, H, I, M, O, S,
T, 0 (zero), and 5

Two Strokes --- A, B, C, D, F, G,
J, K, L, N, Q, R, U,
V, W, Y, Z, 1, 2, 3,
4, 6, 7, 8 and 9

Three Strokes --- P and X

Now we have $9 + 50 + 6$ for a total of 65 strokes with again a savings in strokes.

So look at the totals again 132, 90, 73, and 65 for each of the methods of sending Morse. With the Iambic Keying you can save over 50 per cent of the work of using a straight key. Something to think about and wow your friends and neighbors with.

I have been criticized as making a serious error at this point by others on the web. The above figures are for the alphabet and numbers being used for the analysis. The criticism that I am getting relates to the distribution of the letters as used in plain english text. Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you that that distribution does not apply to every day QSOs on the air. Radio amateurs tend to abbreviate as much as possible and use Q-signals also, plus the technical terms with their abbreviations tend to bias the distribution of characters and numbers. And the experience of one or both operators greatly effects the length and content of each QSO. All bets are off if the operator(s) are using a keyboard which is the typical case at speeds above 40WPM. So the actual savings may vary from QSO to QSO, but my point in this writing is to show how and why the key and paddles evolved as they have. All for the sake of efficiency and reduction of effort on the part of the operator. I'd like to see less retention and more operating, else the art of Morse will die and if we can't work together then what is the goal? IMHO.

OK, now it's time to start practicing. Here I'm leaving you on your very own to do the work. Now I asked you to get a phone directory, dictionary or newspaper or book. The reason? I want you to randomly open it to a page and start sending line by line. If you make a mistake, you have to start over with that line. Do this for about 15 minutes at a time and take a break. Do this for at least 30 minutes a day for

a week. I know it's hard work but when you get to the point that you can do this in your sleep then you will forever be able to get on the air and sent flawless CW day in and day out without breaking into a sweat. Get a copy of QST and send all the calls you see for more practice.

OK, graduation time. If you have followed the above instructions and practiced dutifully, you are ready to get on the air daily. Of course, read the ARRL Operators Manual and review all on air procedures that you need. And hopefully I will work you on one of the FISTS calling frequencies and I will be impressed with your skills, then we can work on your speed.

dit dit