

BREAK TAGS

From a Cook County ARES training article — 04/26/2006

Delivered by KI5MA

Tonight's training deals with "Break Tags," an organized way to access a busy net. The generally accepted way to access an amateur radio net, whether a public service net or an emergency net, is to: first wait for a break in channel use--that is, an opening; then, state your callsign, or perhaps your callsign suffix; and finally, when invited by the net control station, advise him/her of the specifics of your traffic.

In the generally accepted net access protocol, stating your callsign is sufficient to alert the net control station that you have traffic waiting for the net. However, when a net is busy, there may be a number of stations who desire to access the net around the same time. Net control may hear several callsigns in succession (or even on top of one another), and may not know how to prioritize the traffic, without interrogating each station, in turn, as to the nature of that station's traffic. This can be a time-consuming procedure, and while net control is gathering information from the several stations about their traffic, higher priority traffic, such as a medical emergency, may be waiting.

A potential solution to this problem comes in the form of "Break Tags", which are short, one-word traffic indicators which may be injected into an opening in a net, instead of the station's callsign, to alert net control of the nature and priority of waiting traffic. When a net is busy, information as to the nature and priority of the traffic is likely to be more important to the net control station than the identity of the stations holding the traffic. Station IDs can be settled later. If net control hears several break tags in close succession, he or she can select the highest priority traffic to handle first. It is not even necessary to record the lower-priority traffic, since the stations holding the lower priority traffic can simply wait until the high priority traffic has been handled. They can attempt to access the net again later, perhaps, but not necessarily at the explicit invitation of net control.

So what might be a suitable Break Tag? An obvious one is "Emergency", which should be reserved for situations directly and imminently affecting health or safety of people. {The November 16 issue of the ARRL's ARES E-Letter (edited by Rick Palm W1CE)} [An ARRL ARES E-Letter] had an article by Connecticut Section Emergency Coordinator Rod Lane N1FNE, recommending the following tags and their definitions.

However, these are not the only tags that might be useful. The "Break Tag" as an organized training concept is relatively new in amateur radio, and emergency communications groups may need to develop their own protocols pending broader consensus regarding best practices.

There are currently seven one-word Break Tags. They are:

- "answer,"
- "question,"
- "info,"
- "priority,"
- "medical,"
- "emergency" and your
- call sign.

Rod admonishes us that Break Tags "are to be used only when the operator's traffic will be appreciated by net control and results in more efficient communication.

They are to be used wisely, as net control is directed to stop and turn over the net to the breaker. The message that follows a break should be as short as possible."

"Answer": To be used when you have the definitive answer to a question currently being discussed on the air.

"Question": To be used when the answer of a question can't wait; for example, when the mayor is standing next to you and requesting you to get information using your radio. Another use of 'Question' would be to ask when a meeting being discussed is going to start, provided you can't wait for some reason until the communication breaks on it's own for you.

"Info": To be used when information needs to be transmitted rapidly but is not related to what is being said on the air; for example; if an event, that net control needs to know about is going to happen in the next few seconds or if waiting for the end of an exchange will negate the value of the information.

It can also be used to indicate you have information of interest to add, sometimes used to indicate you have an answer to a question asked on the air. It is preferable to use 'Answer' if more appropriate but not necessary as 'Answer' is the more precise of the two Tags. Info has become the most popular tag and has almost become the 'generic' Break Tag. Although 'Info' is most often used pertaining to the subject currently being discussed, it may also be used to pass information such as a net about to start or a traffic jam or road closure.

"Priority": To be used to report an important but non-life threatening situation such as a fender-bender that just happened.

"Medical": To be used to report a minor medical incident that affects the operator in some way; for example, having to leave his/her post for a few minutes to walk someone with a minor cut over to a med tent.

"Emergency": Only to be used to report an ongoing life or property threatening or damaging incident.

Your Call Sign: An indication that the operator has traffic that can wait and does not require the cessation of the ongoing exchange. This tag is an expectation to be put on hold and in queue for transmission.