

My CW Academy Journey

How a ham with dyslexia achieved his goals
with the help of a series of CW courses.



Gerard van de Graaf, PA2G

In October 2019, I started taking an in-person CW course, but the weekly visits to the clubhouse for training stopped due to COVID-19. It was still possible to follow the training on the Rotterdam, Netherlands repeater on Monday evenings, and later with a software-defined radio. Still, I did not find such solutions adequate. Initially, I kept track of my practice, but it fell off compared to my time at the club. I am dyslexic, and in that CW course, I struggled to translate what I heard into readable characters in my head and even more so on paper. However, one of my rules is not to give up.

During the summer of 2020, I read an article about the CWops organization (<https://cwops.org>), and I found it fascinating. At the end of August 2020, I contacted Joe Fischer, AA8TA, who was the CWops Advisor and Manager at the time. Joe coordinated and scheduled the advisors in consultation with the courses. Within 24 hours, I was admitted to the CW Academy course that started a week later. The same day, I received a pleasant and interesting email from my CW Academy Advisor, Duncan Fiskin, G3WZD, from which an amicable correspondence flowed. None of my questions went unanswered.

Starting Out

The CW Academy beginner course was held via Zoom. Course materials and other information were provided via email. A functioning computer, internet connection, and signal key were required to participate. We had to be willing to spend 60 minutes a day practicing via an online CWops Morse code

trainer (<https://morsecode.world/international/trainer/trainer.html>). The training sessions didn't have to be in 1-hour blocks. They could be broken down into 30- or 10-minute blocks as long as we practiced daily.

The first lesson started at a fast pace. I was reassured that by the fifth session, the pace would no longer be a problem, which was true. The beginner course developed quickly, and by lesson 12 or 13, I was using the signal key. I looked forward to every class on Monday and Thursday nights and learned so much without even realizing it. Duncan was a very encouraging instructor.

Duncan suggested I participate in the weekly slow speed contest (SST) on Friday evenings, which were hosted by the K1USN Radio Club (<http://k1usn.com/sst.html>). During the SST, we made CW contacts with a speed of 12 to 20 WPM. It was a good first step toward strengthening my self-confidence with CW.

The beginner course lasted 2 months, which flew by. I passed and immediately registered for the fundamental course. I emailed another CW Academy Advisor at the time, Los Angeles Section Traffic Manager Kate Hutton, K6HTN, and Joe to ask if I could take the fundamental course with Duncan because he had read up on dyslexia and was a good motivator for me. Kate and Joe handled my request and allowed me to take the fundamental course with Duncan. In the meantime, I participated in the SST on Friday evenings, repeated the beginner classes at least 5 days a week, and used other Morse code learning tools — specifically Learn CW

Online (LCWO; <https://lcwo.net>) and Morse Code Ninja (<https://morsecode.ninja>) — to practice. LCWO allows you to practice, stay fluent, and improve your speed if you don't have a practice set at your disposal. Morse Code Ninja is another resource that allows you to practice numbers, call signs, and more. There are so many great resources on Morse Code Ninja that you will always find something different to practice or improve on.

The fundamental course began in January 2021. From the first day, the camaraderie within the class was great. We all got along very well and helped and supported each other. At the fourth lesson, another advisor, Theo Kindts, PA3HEN, was introduced to the course so Duncan could split the group in half and we could get more attention when carrying out our assignments. Everyone developed and improved because of the individual attention. In the end, we all passed and were encouraged to continue practicing.

During the intervening period between courses, I continued to increase my signaling speed and make sure the content was accurate, often using other CW training resources such as *RufzXP* (www.rufzxp.net) and QRQ (<http://fkurz.net/ham/qrq.html>). I worked very hard on this and received much-needed feedback from Theo and Duncan.

CW Academy: A Brief History

CWops began in December 2009, and in May 2011, Jay Temple, W5JQ; Rob Brownstein, K6RB, and Jack Ritter, W0UCE (SK), conceived the idea for CW Academy, which officially launched in August of that year. The first intermediate-level class included 47 students and 11 advisors. By the end of 2012, there were more than 200 students, and the following year, there were around 300. In April 2013, the beginner- and advanced-level courses were added. In May 2018, the fundamental-level course was added. CW Academy is free and supported by an all-volunteer organization.

As of November 2022, more than 10,000 students have registered for CW Academy, and of those, 85% have graduated. Currently, Bob Carter, WR7Q; Roland Smith, K7OJL, and Andrew Bunker, N7AST, manage and support CW Academy. — *Bob Carter, WR7Q*

Moving Up

In April 2021, the intermediate course began. This time, Hanz van de Pol, YL3JD, was the instructor. It soon became clear that Hanz was a passionate instructor who wanted to help everyone with CW and motivate them. Again, there was mutual respect and willingness to help each other within the group. We had a lot of fun learning from Hanz and other students about related radio hobby competitions and activities.



A CW Academy course via a video telecommunications conference. Pictured are (top, left to right) Hanz van de Pol, YL3JD; David Palma, CT7AUP; Gerad van de Graaf, PA2G; (middle, left to right) Leon Novak, S55AC; Marian Marencik, OM5MI; Neno Greblicki, 9A6ZE, and (bottom) Manos Chalaris, SV1DAY.

Although I initially had trouble with the head copy, Hanz was relentless about us repeating the exercises to form words and sentences and turning them into new sentences. Each student repeated this exercise with signals so that they would signal new sentences for the next student, who would then repeat the process. This was an effective learning method for the group. We continued to improve, created a readability signal strength tone report, and developed how to send our call signs and the time and date. It was a great experience.

Even after passing the intermediate course, we continued practicing with Hanz every week until the advanced course started. Most of us, including myself, went on summer vacation. However, we all managed to log in twice a week to practice. During the fundamental course, we started a WhatsApp group chat that we still used during the intermediate course to communicate daily. We were fully committed to practicing, with humor and fun mixed in, which is the key to success. A few group members became so skilled that they could become CW Academy instructors at some point.

We emailed Joe and Kate to see if we all could enroll in the advanced course together. Hanz led the course, and CW Academy was happy to honor our request. We were grateful for that. It's not often that I look forward to taking courses, but I was looking forward to the advanced course beginning at the end of August.

October 21, 2021, was our last lesson of the CW Academy advanced course, and the whole group of newfound friends completed this wonderful journey with flying colors. I never expected to achieve such a good pace with my dyslexia, sending 25 to 29 WPM. I must keep pushing myself out of my comfort zone. I still have a long way to go, but the CW fundamentals are there. I hope to meet more enthusiastic and driven CW amateurs from other countries.

Resources for Learning and Practicing Morse Code

Here are just a few of the online resources that can help you master Morse code.

www.morserino.info The Morserino is a full-featured device that you can build from a kit. Learn and practice Morse code on the built-in paddle, or connect an external paddle or straight key.

https://qsobot.online In conjunction with the Morserino, you can practice having real contacts with this website as the other end of the contact. It also has a number training game in which the site picks a number 1 – 100, and you have to guess it, based on clues of “higher” or “lower.” You have to be very good with your keying, or the site will ask you to send again. Many find this a great way to work on their sending, without the pressure of talking with someone else.

https://morsecode.ninja Kurt Zoglmann, ADØWE, has made thousands of hours of practice sets at all speeds. You select the speed and the content, and the site redirects you to a YouTube video for the practice. Many CW enthusiasts will listen to the phrase, pause the video, send the phrase on their key, and then resume the video. This is a good way to practice sending and receiving at the same time.

https://hamradio.solutions/vband This is another great site. Multiple people who want to practice together can do it over the internet. Either use your computer keyboard as a straight key/paddle, or plug your key in with a USB adapter.

https://morse.mdp.im Mark Percival, KC4T, has made this interactive game and news headline website. It pulls news headlines and plays them at different speeds. He has also made some games to make practicing more enjoyable.

— Michael Fluegemann, KE8AQW

All photos courtesy of CW Academy.

Gerard van de Graaf, PA2G, is a rotating expert at Air Liquide and was a Marine Engineer. He has been a shortwave listener since 1990 and was first licensed in 1992. In addition to operating, Gerard enjoys spending his free time with his family and grandson, deep-sea diving, sailing, and touring by road bike. He can be reached at bastiaan104@gmail.com.

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