

## Railroad Communication Terms

**ABS:** See: Automatic Block Signal System

**Absolute Block:** A length of track that no train is permitted to enter while the track is occupied by another train.

**Absolute Signal:** A block or interlocking signal without a number plate, or designated by an "A" marker. An absolute signal is a signal that cannot be passed when red without stopping and getting permission from the dispatcher. Interlockings are all absolute signals. The other red signals have number plates on them and may be passed at restricted speed. There is always confusion with absolute signals and absolute blocks. The main difference is that an absolute block can only have one train at a time. The absolute signal, though red can be passed with dispatcher permission.

**"A-Head":** Crew members on the ground sometimes say this when they want the engineer to move the train ahead. The letter A is pronounced in a way that makes it easier to understand.

**AMTK:** Amtrak

**Automatic Block Signal System (ABS):** A series of consecutive blocks governed by block signals, cab signals, or both. The signals are activated by a train moving through the block, or by certain conditions that affect the block use.

**Armed:** You may hear the Engineer say this over the radio while setting up a train. This has to do with setting up the FRED on the end of the train before a train can leave. Typically a crew member has to switch something on the FRED, then the receiver in the cab will show it as armed if it's working right.

**Bare Table:** An empty train of intermodal cars.

**Block:** A length of track between consecutive block signals, or between a block signal and the end of block system limits. Also see: "Automatic Block Signal System"

**Block Signal:** A fixed signal at the entrance of a block that governs trains entering and using that block. These signals typically have numbers, and those numbers are sometimes called by crews over the radio, along with the aspect the signal is showing at the time they enter the block.

**Block System:** A block or series of consecutive blocks within ABS, CTC, or interlocking blocks.

**BNSF:** The Burlington, Northern, Santa Fe Railroad. (Sometimes called "BSF" for short)

**C&E:** Conductor & Engineer

**"Clear Block":** When crews call what the signals are indicating as they move along a route, they sometimes simply say "Clear Block" when approaching a signal that gives a clear indication.

**CN:** Canadian National Railroad

**COFC:** Container on a Flat Car.

**CONDR:** Conductor

**Control Operator:** Employee assigned to operate a CTC or interlocking control machine, or authorized to grant track permits.

**CP:** Canadian Pacific Railroad

**CP:** (Followed by name of locations) Stands for Control Point.

**Control Point:** The location of absolute signals controlled by a control operator.

**Controlled Signal:** An absolute signal controlled by a control operator.

**Crossing at Grade:** A crossing that intersects at the same level the track is on.

**Crossover:** This is a set of switches that allows a train to crossover from one track, to a parallel track.

**CSX:** CSX Transportation (Railroad)

**CTC:** Centralized Traffic Control. This is a block system that uses block signal indications to authorize train movements.

**Current of Traffic:** The movement of trains in one direction on a main track, as specified by the rules. A group of trains doing this, is sometimes called a "fleet".

**Detector:** A detector is an electronic device that is sometimes installed along a well used section of track at various intervals. There's all different kinds of detectors, but their basic purpose, is to check each train as it goes through, to see if there's any potentially dangerous defects on the train. Once the train passes all the way through the detector, it will announce on the same road channel that is used for that track, the condition of the train. This announcement will also usually include a milepost point, or station name. Some detectors simply say "No Defect", while others will check for much more, such as overheated parts on wheels, oversize loads, axle counts, speed, and sometimes even outside temperature. Detectors will sometimes announce themselves with just their milepost location when the train first hits it, then give the report after the train goes though. Other times it will just announce after the train has gone through. If there IS a defect somewhere in the train, some detectors will make a high pitch alert

sound as the train is still moving through the detector, then announce what the problem is after it is all the way through.

**Diamond:** This is a point where two tracks cross over each other, usually at a 90 degree angle, or less.

**Dispatcher (DISP):** A person who works in a central, or local office for the railroad, and helps organize how trains will move. Dispatchers may work in an office near the line they help run, or in the case of some larger railroads, such as Union Pacific, they can sometimes be in another state. They may be identified with names or numbers that correspond to the area or line that they run.

**Distant Signal:** A fixed signal outside a block system that governs the approach to a block signal, interlocking signal, or switch point indicator. A distant signal does not indicate conditions that affect track use between the distant signal and block or interlocking signals, or between the distant signal and switch point indicator. A distant is identified by a "D".

**DRGW:** Denver & Rio Grande Western. In a roundabout way, this railroad was merged into Union Pacific. You can still see D&RGW units on UP trains sometimes.

**Dual Control Switch:** A power operated switch, movable point frog, or derail, that can also be operated by hand.

**DT:** Double Track

**Electric Switch Lock:** An electrically controlled lock that restricts the use of a hand operated switch or derail.

**ENG:** Engine

**ENGR:** Engineer

**Fill (Fill Work):** This is when a local, or switch crew may, or may not stop at a certain point along the line, to pickup and/or set out cars at that spot. This could be an interchange, yard, private customer, or whatever.

**Fixed Signal:** A signal that is fixed to a location permanently and that indicates a condition affecting train movement.

**Flag Man:** Any employee providing flag protection.

**Flat Wheel (Flat Spots):** Sometimes the wheels on engines or cars can lockup and slide along the rail. This will leave a flat worn-down spot on the wheel. You can sometimes hear these banging on cars when a train goes by.

**Foreman:** Employee in charge of work.

**FRED:** Stands for Flashing Rear End Device. These gizmos took the place of cabooses. They are mounted on the coupler of the last car in a train, and data on the train's air pressure is sent via radio to the head end. There's usually a flashing beacon also mounted on the unit.

**FRT:** Freight

**"Good Power":** This is a term used to describe when a crew is happy with the way the engines on a train are performing.

**Head End:** The front of the train.

**HER:** Head End Restriction

**"Highball!":** This is the traditional railroad way of saying it's OK to start moving the train.

**"Highball your roll-by":** When a train passes maintenance personal on the ground, or other trains sitting along its route, the people may watch the moving train as it passes, and "highball their roll-by". This is just a way of saying that everything looks OK on the train.

**Hook:** While switching cars, crew members will sometimes say: "xx amount of cars ti'll a hook". They are just telling the Engineer how much further until the cars couple.

**Hot Box Detector:** See: Detector

**Hot Shot:** This is a name used to sometimes describe trains that are scheduled to be fast moving. This can include trains carrying perishables, trailer trains of UPS shipments, or other commodities.

**Hump Yard:** Some larger yards are known as "hump yards". These yards have a system that allows the cars being sorted into the yard, to be shoved up to the top of a small hump at the end of the yard, and then the cars are let run freely down the hump, and into the various tracks they need to be on. When it's decided what track a car needs to be on in the yard, an operator in a tower tells the computer, and the computer automatically sets all the track switches correctly, so the car will roll to that track. The computer also controls what's called "retarders". These control the speed at which the car is rolling as it starts its decent down the hump.

**IC:** Illinois Central Railroad

**IM:** Intermodal

**Interchange:** This is usually used to describe a point where two different railroads connect with each other.

**Interlocking:** (Interlocking Plant or "Plant" for short) This is basically a way to describe a set of switches in a certain section of track. It can be as simple as a crossover that goes from one track to the next, or multiple switches at the head of a yard or interchange.

**Interlocking Limits:** The tracks between outer opposing absolute signals of an interlocking.

**Interlocking Signals:** The fixed signals of an interlocking that governs trains using interlocking limits.

**"In the Hole":** When a train needs to be cleared off the main track and into a siding for another train, they sometimes refer to this as being "put in the hole".

**Junction (JCT):** This is an old name used in railroading. These days it could be just about any type of named spot along a railroad right-of-way, from an interchange with another railroad, to a set of switch crossovers.

**"Kick":** When crews are switching cars in a yard, they sometimes get the cars to roll into the various tracks they want them to go to, by using the momentum a car has as it rolls by itself. As the Engineer shoves the cut of cars ahead, the crew person on the ground will pull the pin and say "Kick" over the radio, letting the Engineer know he can slow the train abruptly so the car/cars that have been uncoupled will continue rolling on their own.

**Light Engines:** Name given for movements involving engines only, and no cars.

**"Get the lineup":** A term used to describe having a set of switches or signals setup to allow a train through a certain section of track.

**"Good Run":** A way to describe how a crew has done a good job moving a train quickly through a certain section of track.

**Local:** This is what railroads usually call a train that works a small area. Locals usually originate and return to the same point daily.

**Main Track:** A track that extends through yards and between stations, that must not be occupied without authority or protection.

**Marker:** This is another name for the End of Train Device. See: FRED

**Milepost (MP):** Railroads measure points along each line by using mileposts. These aren't necessarily put at each mile, or even a consistent distance apart, but they use them to indicate the position of various points along a given line.

**Milepost Cab:** This is a shuttle company that specializes in moving crews to and from trains in vans. I believe BNSF uses them quite a bit.

**MoW (MW):** Maintenance of Way. This is the maintenance department for a given railroad.

**MT:** Main Track

**NO:** Number

**NS:** Norfolk Southern Railroad

**OK:** Correct

**OPR:** Operator

**ORIG:** Originating

**PBX:** Some railroads have equipment included in their radio system that allows employees to make phone calls using their radios. These work simplex, in the way that the person using the radio, can only talk, or listen, not do both at the same time. These frequencies can be monitored just like any other frequency.

**Plant:** See: Interlocking.

**Pilot:** An employee assigned to a train to assist an Engineer or Conductor, who is unfamiliar (or unqualified) for the portion of railroad the train will operate on. This is kind of the same way a river, or harbor pilot works.

**Power:** Another name for engines.

**Proceed Indication:** Any block signal indication that allows a train to proceed without stopping.

**Protect:** This may have a few meanings, depending on the situation and the railroad. It may mean that a train crew, MoW person is supposed to "protect" at a crossing for some reason. Maybe because the crossing signals aren't working. It can also have this meaning... When a crew protects a train they are throwing out bad orders found by the car department. When Protection is mentioned, that is the car department blue flagging and locking the track, so they can work the cars.

**PSGR:** Passenger

**"Push the Button":** You might hear this called out by the Engineer on the radio when they're getting a train ready to hit the main. When a crew member is setting up the FRED on the end of the train, it has to be armed once in place. The Engineer is telling them to do this, so he can check to see if it's working on the receiver in the cab.

**RECD:** Received

**Renzenberger Cab (Carry-All):** This is a company that is contracted to shuttle crews around to trains for various railroads, such as Union Pacific.

**Reverse Movement:** A movement that's opposite of the authorized direction.

**RoW:** Right of Way. This is a name used by railroads in describing the property the track runs on.

**Saw-By:** This is when two trains going opposite directions pass each other on a single track mainline, by one train going into a siding.

**SF:** Santa Fe Railway. This railroad technically doesn't exist anymore, since it was merged into BNSF. But it often takes a long time for railroaders to break old habits, and various lines or interchanges can sometimes be called the name of the old railroad for years after they're gone. Engines and cars can also remain in the old railroad's paint scheme and number for years also.

**"Shove":** This is the traditional way of saying the engine is pushing the cars.

**Siding:** A track connected to the main track and used for meeting or passing trains.

**Signal Aspect:** The appearance of a fixed or cab signal.

**Signal Indication:** The action required by the signal aspect.

**SP:** Southern Pacific Railroad. This railroad technically doesn't exist anymore, since it was merged into Union Pacific. But it often takes a long time for railroaders to break old habits, and various lines or interchanges can sometimes be called the name of the old railroad for years after they're gone. Engines and cars can also remain in the old railroad's paint scheme and number for years also.

**Special Agent:** This is a name sometimes used for police officers that a given railroad employs to protect the railroad and its employees.

**Special Instructions:** Instructions contained in the timetable, or given on train orders.

**Spring Switch:** A switch with a spring mechanism that returns the switch points to the original position after they are trailed through.

**SSW:** Once part of the Southern Pacific system, engines wearing SSW can still be seen on Union Pacific trains every so often. Probably not for long though.

**Station:** A place designated by name in a timetable for the railroad. This does NOT have to be a place where trains stop, not does there have to be any actual physical station.

**"Steel Train"** BNSF runs trains that consist of cars carrying coil steel only. These trains mostly run back and forth from the Chicago, IL area, to a steel processing plant called POSCO in Pittsburg, CA.

**"Stop and Flag:** Under "stop and flag" a road crossing where the signals have been reported to have failed, this rule would apply. This could also be a broken gate or flashers working continuously. A signal maintenance person can be on the scene and provide "protection" at the crossing for the train also. You can also "flag" your train into a block system. You would then open a switch and wait 5 minutes for a train, if none appears you can enter the block. Line 15 appears on some track warrants. "Flag protection not required against following trains on the same track." In this case the crew would just open the switch and go out on the main line.

**Sub:** (Sub Division) Railroad territories are often broken down into Divisions, and Sub Divisions, or "Subs".

**SUPT:** Superintendent

**Switcher:** A smaller type of engine that usually just works yards, or urban areas. But they sometimes work small road trains also. A good example of a switcher would be an EMD SW1200, or EMD MP15.

**Switch Point Indicator:** A light indicator used during movement over certain switches to show that switch points fit properly.

**Symbol:** The larger railroads usually have "symbols" assigned to each train now days. This consists of a series of numbers and letters that explain what the train is and where it's going. Each railroad has its own way of doing things, but typically, the symbol will have one letter that designates what kind of train it is basically, then a series of 6 letters, the first 3 being the departure spot's code, and the second 3 being the destination spot's code. It will then sometimes have a number that indicates the date it began its trip on the end of the symbol.

**"That'll do!":** This is the traditional railroad way for a crew member to tell the Engineer he can stop moving the train.

**"There's a hole in them":** A crew may say this on the radio while switching cars, or preparing the train for departure. This means that according to the air gauges, one of

the air hoses are not connected, or an angle cock is open and the engine is pumping air into the atmosphere.

**Timetable:** A publication that railroads put out, that shows essential information for traveling over the railroad.

**TOFC:** Trailer on a Flat Car

**Tower:** Where there is a complex series of switches, or a spot where two or more railroads intersect each other, there may be a tower, or "Interlocking Tower" that houses personnel, and equipment to run those sections of track, and also organize how the trains move through the area. With the advent of electronic systems in railroading, the Interlocking Tower is quickly becoming extinct in America though. Very small numbers still exist.

**Track Bulletin:** A notice of conditions affecting train movement.

**Track Warrant Control (TWC):** A method to authorize train movements or protect men and machines working along a main track, within specified limits in a territory designated by a timetable.

**Trainmaster:** This is a type of supervisor that's in charge of operations over a certain section of the railroad. Or in the case of a small railroad, sometimes the operations of the whole railroad.

**Trainmen:** Conductors, assistant conductors, brakemen, yard engine foremen, switchmen, and yard helpers.

**TWC:** See: Track Warrant Control

**Unit Train:** This is used to describe a train that has only one type of car and commodity. This could be anything from coal, to grain.

**UP:** Union Pacific Railroad

**Utility Man (U-Man):** Railroads will sometimes have employees drive around in trucks, and help the train crews in various ways. Sometimes they can drive ahead and align switches, so the crews won't have to stop the train. Or they can inspect a train before the crew brings the engines to move it.

**WC:** Wisconsin Central Railroad

**Window:** When trains are operating through a busy section of track, they may have to wait for a "window" to cross over, or use, a certain section of track along their route.

**Xing:** A road or pedestrian crossing.

**X-Over:** See: "Crossover"

**Yard:** A system of tracks, other than main tracks and sidings, used for making up trains, storing cars, and other equipment.

**Yard Limits:** A portion of main track designated by yard limit signs and timetable special instructions, or a track bulletin.

**YL:** Yard Limits

**Yardmaster:** This is the person that's in charge of a certain yard on the railroad.