

Whistle code

Train whistles are used to communicate to other railroad workers on a train or to railroad workers in the yard. Different combinations of long and short whistles each have their own meaning. They are used to pass instructions, as a safety signal, and to warn of impending movements of a train. Despite the advent of modern radio communication, many of these whistle signals are still used today. (See also [Train horn \(Common horn signals\)](#).)

Signals illustrated below are for North American railroads, an "o" for short sounds, and "-" for longer sounds.

Sequence	Meaning
Succession of short sounds	Used when an emergency exists, or if persons or livestock are on the track.
—	When train is stopped. The air brakes are applied and pressure is equalized.
— —	Train releases brakes and proceeds.
o o	Acknowledgment of any signal not otherwise provided for.
o o o	When train is stopped: means backing up, or acknowledgment of a hand signal to back up.
o o o o	Request for a signal to be given or repeated if not understood.
— o o	Warning that a second section of a timetabled train is following.
— o o o	Instruction for flagman to protect rear of train.
— — — —	Flagman return from the west or south.
— — — — —	Flagman return from the east or north.
— — o —	Train is approaching public grade crossing(s). This is known as <i>Rule 14L</i> in almost all railroad operating rules.
— o	Inspect the brake system for leaks or sticking brakes.

[\[edit\]](#)

Other whistle codes

Not all railroads use exactly the same whistle signals or assign the same meanings. Some railroads will use their own variations of the above. A few

of the signals are obsolete because the workers they were used to communicate with (such as flagman) are now obsolete.

In [Norway](#), for example, the following whistle signals are used:

- **One short:** Stand by or general acknowledgment.
- **Two short:** Apply/increase manual brakes.
- **Three short:** Apply manual brakes to stop the train as soon as possible.
- **One long:** Approaching railroad station or blind curve.
- **One long, one short:** Decrease manual brakes. When repeated, decrease brakes fully.
- **One long, two short:** Prepared for change of tracks, crossing and/or other situations that necessitates a gentle approach.
- **Multiple short:** Danger.

In [Finland](#), the following are some of the signals used:

- **One short:** Engine is starting forward.
- **Two short:** Engine about to run backwards.
- **One long, one short:** Warning, used before arriving to a crossing.
- **Three long:** Danger.

Live Steam Railroading Whistle and Hand Communications Signals

Engine Whistle Signals:

o indicates short sound. - indicates long sound.

- o Apply brakes, stop.
- - Release brakes, proceed.
- o o o Trainmen protect rear of train. (stand with red flag a safe distance from the train)
- - - - Trainmen return to train.

- o o Answer to any signal not provided for.
 - o o o When train is standing, back up.
 - o o o o Call for signals.
 - - o - Grade Crossing.
 - Approaching a station or junction. (One really long signal)
 - o o Approaching other trains.
- Succession of short signals warning to people or animals on the track.

Communication Signals:

To be given by the trainman with a whistle. Engineer and trainman will insure they understand the signals and answers before leaving the station.

- o o When standing, start.
- o o When running, stop.
- o o o When standing, back up.
- o o o When running train has parted.
- o o o o When running, reduce speed.
- When running, look back for hand signal.

Hand Signals for Train Movement:

The hand, or flag, moved the same as the lanterns as illustrated gives the same indication

Swung at right angles to track

STOP



Slight horizontal movement at arm's length at right angle to track

REDUCE SPEED



Raised and lowered vertically

PROCEED



Swung slowly in a circle at right angle to track

BACK UP



Held at arm's length above head, when equipment is standing

RELEASE AIR BRAKES



Swung horizontally above the head when standing

APPLY AIR BRAKES



Locomotive Horn Signals

Ever wondered why the UP locomotives running on the track just down the block from your house always sound their horns four times when approaching your street? Or heard a whole series of short whistle blasts and wondered what they meant?

Basically, horns are sounded for safety reasons – to warn of approaching trains. The following list "translates" some of the horn signals you might hear. The "o" indicates short sounds and "=" is for longer sounds.

The General Code of Operating Rules (GCOR) contains information on horn use. These rules are frequently updated, and for the most up to date information, the sources of record are the GCOR, General Orders,

Subdivision General Orders and Superintendent Bulletins.

Sound	Indication
Succession of short sounds	The whistle is sounded in an attempt to attract attention to the train. It is used when persons or livestock are on the track at other-than-road crossings at grade.
=	When train is stopped. The air brakes are applied and pressure is equalized.
= =	Train releases brakes and proceeds.
o o	Acknowledgment of any signal not otherwise provided for.
o o o	When train is stopped: means backing up, or acknowledgment of a hand signal to back up.
o o o o	A request for a signal to be given or repeated if not understood.
= o o o	Instruction for flagman to protect rear of train.
= = = =	The flagman may return from west or south.
= = = = =	The flagman may return from east or north.

<p>= = o = =</p>	<p>Train is approaching public crossings at grade with engine in front. Signal starts not less than 15 seconds but not more than 20 seconds before reaching the crossing. If movement is 45 mph or greater, signal starts at or about the crossing sign, but not more than 1/4 mile before the crossing if there is no sign. Signal is prolonged or repeated until the engine completely occupies the crossing(s).</p> <p>In addition, this signal is used when approaching private crossings if pedestrians or motor vehicles are at or near the crossing. (In the states of California, Idaho and Montana, the whistle is sounded at all crossings, public and private.)</p>
<p>o =</p>	<p>Inspect the brake system for leaks or sticking brakes.</p>
<p>= o</p>	<p>Train is approaching men or equipment on or near the track, regardless of any whistle prohibitions.</p> <p>After this initial warning, "o o" sounds intermittently until the head end of train has passed the men or equipment.</p>

Horn Signals: A Proven Safety Precaution

On April 27, 2005, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), which enforces rail safety regulations, published the Final Rule on the Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings. Effective June 24, 2005, the Final Rule requires that locomotive horns be sounded at all public grade crossings 15-20 seconds before entering a crossing, but not more than one-quarter mile in advance.

The pattern for blowing the horn remains two long, one short, and one long sounding to be repeated as necessary until the locomotive clears the crossing. Locomotive engineers will retain the authority to vary this pattern as necessary for crossings in close proximity and will be allowed to sound the horn in emergency situations.

A ban on locomotive horns in Florida was ordered removed by the FRA after it was shown that the accident rate doubled during the ban. The new Final Rule preempts any state or local laws regarding the use of the train

horn at public crossings. The Final Rule also provides public authorities the option to maintain and/or establish quiet zones provided certain supplemental or alternative safety measures are in place and the crossing accident rate meets FRA standards. Read more about the [FRA Rule on the Use of Locomotive Horns](#).