How to use Clear-Com - a quick primer

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What is com and what is it for?

Com is the nickname given to the communications system used by technical crews to communicate during shows. Crews get their cues in real time via the com and it is absolutely critical in any production. Frequently, crews do not know the show they are working on, so com is the method by which they are told what to do. A stage manager or someone in each main area (sound, lights, video, etc.) will "call" the show which means to provide those cues to the crews in real time. There is an established method for giving cues that crews expect, and there are some manners with com that should always be adhered to. We will address protocol, and anyone on com is well advised to follow these well established professional guidelines for calling a show and running the crew. Using com properly will help get a tightly cued professional shows without surprises. This primer will cover how to call a show after we address the hardware you will use.

Clear-Com is a brand name (like Kleenex or Xerox) of the most popular and common system used for the crew to communicate with each other during a production. Crew members use these systems during shows to get cues for when things like spotlights or mics are turned on and off, or any other cues. These systems include a headset with mic, a beltpack, and a power supply. Some permanently mounted clear com positions use a base station, which simply replaces a portable beltpack with a permanently mounted unit in locations like the stage manager position just off to one side of the stage. Many headsets and beltpacks can be connected to a single power supply, and these headset/beltpack combo's may even be wireless. Here are what the main items look like...

Headsets can have one or two earmuffs (single or double muff), they can be lightweight headsets which are preferred by soundmen (whereas double muff headsets are preferred by spotlight operators who want to hear the cues and block out the room sound as much as possible). Handsets which look like normal telephones are also used for folks who aren't on com the whole show, but can pick up the handset to listen or talk as needed. Handsets are sometimes used by soundmen who don't wear headsets during a show. If a soundman is using a handset instead of a headset, they will use a light (model FL1) to indicate when they should pick up the handset. This is called a "call light" and all belt packs and base stations have the option of flashing the call light on both the FL1 flasher as well as the call lights on every beltpack.

Most crew members who are on com will be using beltpacks. Beltpacks have a volume control, and two buttons: one button to flash the call light and the other button to talk (activate the mic). In more complicated setups, there is more than one channel that the Clear-Com is on, with for instance one channel having all of the lighting cues and one with all the video cues. All of the same guidelines apply to multi-channel setups as single channel setups. The wall mounted base sta-

tions have the same controls as a beltpack but may include a speaker and a mic input so that the person at the base station doesn't have to have a headset on but can instead just walk over to the base station and immediately talk to the crew. These base stations do include the option to hook up a headset, though.

Those are the major and most common components you will run into as a Clear-Com user. Some setups can get more complicated than this, but generally a system is setup simply with whatever amount of these basic elements are needed connected via standard xlr cable. Any mic cables can be used to properly connect a Clear-Com setup. Whether it's two or three folks, or twenty or thirty folks on com, it all works the same from here on out using the above mentioned parts in whatever quantity you need. A single power supply can allow many units to be on at once for even the most complicated setups. Once the power supply is turned on there is no need to access or adjust it, just turn it on and go.

Who is on com?

There are a few general areas that com is for. Sound, Lights, Spotlights, Flyrail, Video, Props, Carpenters (who deal with the set onstage), and Stage Managers are some of the main folks who will be on com. Band directors may also be on com. Talent is almost never on com, but the clients are sometimes on com, especially in business theatre if they are somewhat involved with the production. While touring broadway gets complicated, even large rock shows may only have lights and spotlights on com. Business theatre may only have two or three total people on com.
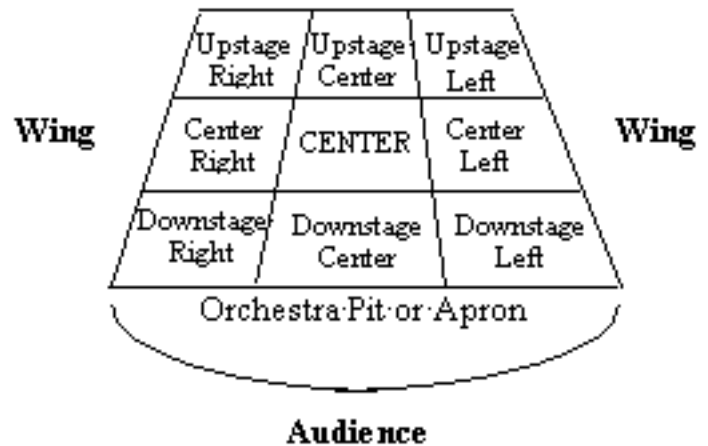
Multi channel com systems exist to keep some areas, like video, separate from other areas since video tends to have lots of cues and it would be too difficult for other crews to get cues on the same channel as video. It would simply be too much talking on one channel. Multiple channels exist to ensure that the crew on each channel can focus in on the cues for them without being distracted by other cues for other areas of production.

If you need to give or get cues, you will be on com, other than that you should be off of the com loop. Let's take a look at how to call a show and Clear-Com manners. The next section is the most important for anyone who will pick up a headset and get on com.

Protocol - How to call a show (The Rules!)

Knowing that crews are likely to not know the show, they must get their information **in real time** during the show or rehearsal via the com. Crews expect to get the information in a specific way, and this way is an established standard. Use this standard when on com and every crew will know what to do.

- Know stage directions and correct terminology. Know upstage, downstage, stage right, stage left, etc. Know when something from the fly system is flown up it is called "out" and when something is brought in (down) on the fly system it is called "in".

- The two words you need to know now are "**warning**" and "**GO**". When calling a show, it is best to warn people in advance before a cue is coming up, and then use the word "GO" when you want that cue to occur. These two words are the key to a tightly cued show.

	Upstage Right	Upstage Center	Upstage Left	
Wing	Center Right	CENTER	Center Left	Wing
	Downstage Right	Downstage Center	Downstage Left	

Orchestra Pit or Apron

Audience

example: "warning for house lights out and sound cd track 1" "ok, house lights out and sound cd track 1, GO"

- **Always say the name of the position you are talking to first, tell them what you want to happen second, finally using the command "GO" when you want the cue to happen.**

example: "spotlights, warning for a person entering from downstage left" "ok, spotlights, pick him up, GO"

Positions may be Sound, Houselights, Lights, Spotlights, Video, Rail (short for flyrail), etc. Refer to them that way, not by the persons name or any other way. With multiple spotlights, it is customary to number them and refer to them as spot 1 and spot 2 etc.

You can call a single cue at one time,

example: "rail, warning to fly in the "winter scene" backdrop" "ok, rail, "winter scene" drop in, GO"

or you can call multiple cues together with a single "GO".

example: "warning, rail - screen in, lights - down center stagewash up, and sound - wireless mics 8 and 9 up" " ok, rail, lights, and sound GO"

- Mics on beltpacks are able to be turned always on by pushing the mic button twice. **ONLY** the person calling the show should have the mic on during the whole show. Other people on the com loop should *not* leave their mics on during a production.. (yes, you can use the mic in "push to talk" mode, the default, to ask questions related to the cues). Clear-Com is not for chit chat and any extra talking increases the likelyhood that cues will be missed. Save the conversation for after the show. Com is for calling cues only, and only the person calling the show should be talking except for relevant questions from the crew clarifying the cues. It is imperative to keep extra talking and noise out of the com.

- If you are on com and need to talk to someone, identify yourself!

example: "lights, this is sound, you lost a par can on the down left boom"

Relatedly, when you are done talking shut off the mic before putting down the headset. Leaving a mic on and then putting down your headset makes a loud and terrible slamming noise for everyone else on com. This is an important one, turn that mic off first.

- Never yell into the com, and if you are going to yell to someone onstage turn that mic off first!

If the person you are trying to call on com isn't responding, use the call light function to flash the little call light on their beltpack to get their attention. Asking for them on com over and over again won't work, just flash the call light and ask for them so that the others on com know who you are looking for

example: "looking for lights on com, please"

Relatedly, if you are a crew member going off of com for any reason, inform everyone when you leave and when you come back on again.

example: "video going off com, I have to adjust a projector"

- As a point of manners, it is typical to let folks know if they are done for an extended period of time. For instance, if the spotlights won't be used during a particular section of the show, it is typical to inform them. Also, after a person has finished their last cue, let them know if they are released.

example: "spotlights, you will not be needed for the next twenty minutes until the band comes back on the upstage platform."   or

example: "props, that was your last move in the show tonight. thanks"
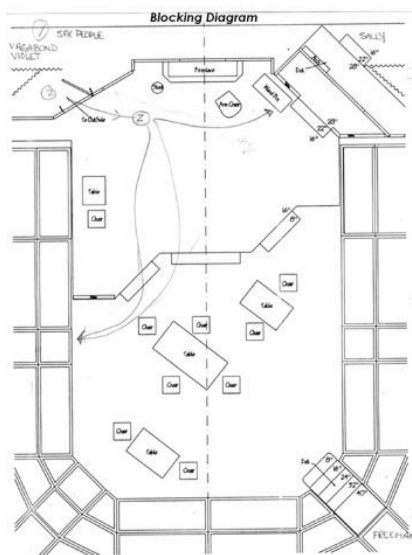
For the crew, remember that it is possible that a client could be listening in to the com. Inappropriate language, talking about the talent or client, general chit chat, and so forth is bad form and to be avoided at all costs. Always assume that the client can hear the com. For clients who are on the com, you are presumably there to help cue the show. Using proper mic etiquette and avoiding chit chat are two ways to keep the crew fo-

cused on their jobs, and to help ensure the successful execution of the production. The Clear-Com is the critical link between all the components of the production, it must be respected as a means of delivering technical information to the crews.

Professional shows of the largest sizes, like touring broadway, still call all of the cues even with competent technical crews who know the shows well. Com is an integral part of their production method. In shows where the crew doesn't know the show, the proper use of com is even more critical. Using com and these guidelines, you can have a tightly run professional show. Mic etiquette, keeping the com about the cues only, and using proper theatre terminology will mean any crew anywhere will be able to execute the cues as called. Using theatre terminology that stage crews are trained to respond to will mean cues will be correctly understood and executed. Warnings given before GO cues mean that the crew is in place and ready to perform the cue at the word GO and not scrambling into place late. If you want a cue to be executed at a specific time, warn the crew so they will be in place and ready at your word GO. Give cues in real time only, although warnings are welcome. Crews should not be given information about cues far in advance (other than warnings) as that tends to be more confusing than helpful. One cue at a time properly called will get you a tightly run production. Calling cues on com should be very similar to the way that GPS based navigation systems provide driving directions, with warnings and then prompts at turns for a driver who isn't otherwise familiar with the route.

The role of the person calling the show

Stage managers usually have books (prompt book) marked up with all of the cue information which is used for calling the show. In brief, a three ring binder which can open flat with one sided pages of the show script are the basis. As pages are flipped, the blank back of a page can be used for show notes while you read the script on the other page. Warnings and GO cues alike are all marked in the book so that as the show happens all cues can be

given to the crew. This book includes the information about the show, where folks enter and exit the stage, when cues happen, etc. Many stage managers use different color markers or tabs to note different kinds of cues (ie: sound cues are blue, light cues are yellow, etc.). These books are complete and specific in their cue information (for instance a cue won't say bring up mics, won't say bring up three mics, but will specifically say bring up mics 4, 5, and 6). It is the role of the person who calls the show to have this amount of detail and organization in order to properly call the show. **The show cannot run more smoothly or tightly than it is called by the stage manager**. With this single person calling the show from a detailed prompt book a professional production can be achieved.

These guidelines get you acquainted with the hardware as well as the basics of it's usage. Common sense and good manners will get you the rest of the way. The crew needs to be able to understand and take these cues to execute them properly and on time. The person calling show sets the tone for the com, and bears the responsibility for calling the show correctly. The crew is always advised to "not go off on their own", which is to say that they will not do something unless it is called on the com. They will follow cues given on the com exactly as given, no more or less (for example, if the stage manager calls for a mic to be turned on, the mic will stay on until a cue is given to turn the mic off). Nothing will be done unless the cue is called. This is why detailed and specific cueing is important.

Have a good show, keep the chatter to a minimum, and enjoy your com! GO!