

Everything You Need to Know as an Electrical Apprentice

A journeyman's field guide to the tools, the code, and the habits that separate a real electrician from a handyman with a screwdriver.

Author: Jason Mohoska, JS Power LLC Licensed Electrician · Pittsburgh, PA · PA HIC #PA166735

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This guide is written the way a journeyman talks to an apprentice on day one: straight, no fluff, and everything in here is something that will keep you employed, keep you safe, or keep you from hurting someone. Learn it.

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Chapter 1 — Your Tools: Buy Once, Buy Right

You're going to live with these tools every day. Cheap tools break, strip screws, and make you look like you don't know what you're doing. Buy the right brand the first time. Here's what working electricians actually carry and why.

Milwaukee — Power Tools (Cordless Only)

Milwaukee's M18 and M12 lines are the standard on professional jobsites. Red and black — you'll spot them from across the room.

- **What to get:** M18 drill/driver, M18 impact driver, M18 Sawzall, M12 installation drill/driver for tight spaces.
- **Why Milwaukee:** Best battery platform in the trade. The M18 batteries fit dozens of tools, so you build one ecosystem instead of a drawer full of mismatched chargers.
- **The rule:** Cordless only. No corded tools on a modern job — cords are trip hazards and they slow you down. And no DeWalt, no off-brands. Milwaukee or nothing.

Klein — Hand Tools

Klein has been making electrician's hand tools for over 160 years. If it's in an electrician's pouch, it's probably Klein.

- **What to get:** Lineman's pliers (your hammer, wrench, and wire twister in one), wire strippers (self-adjusting or notched — learn to strip without nicking copper), insulated screwdrivers (flat and Phillips), needle-nose pliers, cable ripper.
- **Why Klein:** The steel is right, the grips are right, and they last. A good pair of Klein lineman's will outlast three cheap pairs.
- **Learn this early:** Stripping wire without nicking the copper. A nicked conductor is a future break point and a future service call. Practice until it's clean every time.

Fluke — Test Instruments

When you need to know if something is live, you don't guess. You test. And you test with Fluke.

- **What to get:** Digital multimeter (the yellow holster is iconic for a reason), non-contact voltage tester (NCVT — the pen that lights up and beeps near live voltage), clamp meter for measuring current without disconnecting wires.

- **Why Fluke:** Accuracy you can trust with your life. Because that's literally what you're trusting it with.
- **The habit:** Test before you touch. Every time. No exceptions. Breaker off, NCVT on the wires, meter across the terminals. Then touch. This single habit will save your life more than once.

Ideal, Greenlee, GB (Gardner Bender) — Materials & Specialty

These are the brands behind the stuff that goes in the walls and the specialty tools for the weird jobs.

- **Ideal:** Wire nuts (the color-coded twist-on connectors), Wago-style lever nuts, cable staples, bushings. When you splice two wires together, it's probably with an Ideal connector.
- **Greenlee:** Fish tapes (for pulling wire through finished walls), conduit benders, knockout punches (for cutting clean holes in metal boxes and panels). The specialty stuff that separates electricians from everyone else.
- **GB (Gardner Bender):** Wire connectors, wall plates, cable management. Solid, affordable, everywhere.

What This Means for You

Walk onto any professional job and you'll see Milwaukee red, Klein in the pouches, and a Fluke meter on the hip. That's not coincidence and it's not brand loyalty — it's that these tools work, they last, and other electricians respect them. Show up with the right tools and you start the day ahead.

Chapter 2 — Panels & Devices: Know What's in the Wall

You need to know what you're looking at when you open a panel — and more importantly, what *should* be there versus what some handyman left behind.

Panels & Breakers: Square D, GE, Siemens, Cutler-Hammer

These are the four panel manufacturers you'll see in American homes. Know them by sight.

- **Square D:** The QO line is the gold standard — you'll recognize it by the distinctive breakers with red trip indicator windows. Homeline is their budget line. If a customer has a Square D QO panel, they've got good equipment.
- **GE (General Electric):** Common in older homes and new construction alike. Solid, widely available breakers.
- **Siemens:** Big in new residential construction. Clean design, reliable.
- **Cutler-Hammer (Eaton):** The CH line with the tan handles is recognizable anywhere. BR line is their standard residential.

What a panel should look like: Grey steel enclosure, hinged door, dead-front cover ON — meaning you only see the breaker toggles through their slots, never the bus bars or wiring behind them. That dead-front is there to keep you alive. It stays on. Always.

Breaker types you must know:

- **Standard (thermal-magnetic):** Overcurrent protection. The basic breaker. Black body, ON/OFF toggle, plugs onto the bus bar.
- **AFCI (Arc-Fault Circuit Interrupter):** Detects dangerous arcing in wiring — the kind that starts fires inside walls. Has a TEST button on the breaker face. Required by code in living areas (see Chapter 4).
- **GFCI (Ground-Fault Circuit Interrupter):** Trips on ground faults — current leaking where it shouldn't, the kind that shocks people. Trips in about 1/40th of a second. Has a TEST button. Required by code in wet locations (see Chapter 4).
- **Dual-function AFCI/GFCI:** Both protections in one breaker. Used where code requires both — kitchens and laundry areas need this.

What you'll never see in an American panel: European DIN-rail breakers — those slim white modular breakers clipped onto horizontal rails. That's European equipment. If you see it in an American home, something is very wrong.

Wiring Devices: Leviton

Leviton makes the outlets, switches, GFCIs, and dimmers you'll install.

- **Standard duplex receptacle (NEMA 5-15R):** The normal American outlet. Two vertical slots (left slightly larger for neutral), U-shaped ground hole. Tamper-resistant (TR) versions have internal shutters — required by code in homes, marked "TR" on the face.
- **GFCI receptacle:** Has TEST and RESET buttons *between* the two outlets — TEST is usually black, RESET is usually red or black. This is what a real American GFCI looks like. Burn that image into your brain. If what you're looking at doesn't have those buttons in that position, it's not right.
- **Switches:** Single-pole (one location), 3-way (two locations — has a common terminal plus two travelers), 4-way (three or more locations, used with two 3-ways). Always switch the HOT wire, never the neutral.
- **Dimmers:** Must be rated for the load — LED fixtures need LED-rated dimmers or they'll flicker.

Why Brands Matter

When you install a Square D breaker in a Square D panel, it fits. When you install a Leviton GFCI, it meets UL listing and it looks right. Mixing no-name devices into real panels is how you get callbacks, failures, and in the worst case, fires. Use listed equipment from real manufacturers. Every time.

Chapter 3 — Safety Non-Negotiables

Read this chapter twice. Electricity doesn't give second chances.

Fiberglass Ladders Only — Never Aluminum

Aluminum conducts electricity. If you're on an aluminum ladder and touch something live, you are the ground path. This kills electricians.

Your ladder is fiberglass — usually yellow or orange, non-conductive. It costs more than aluminum. Buy it anyway. Your life is worth more than the price difference.

No Jewelry, No Wrist Bands

No rings, no watches, no bracelets, no bands of any kind when you're working. Metal jewelry across two terminals is a welder. Even non-metal bands can catch, snag, or melt. Bare wrists at the panel. Every time.

PPE Basics

- **Safety glasses** when drilling, cutting, or working overhead. Concrete dust and metal shavings don't care about your schedule.
- **Insulated gloves** for panel work. Rated for the voltage you're near.
- **Proper footwear.** Not sneakers. Boots with non-conductive soles.

Lockout/Tagout — The Sequence

Before you touch any wiring:

1. **Breaker OFF.** Open it yourself. Don't trust that someone else did.
2. **Test dead.** Non-contact voltage tester on the wires. Then meter across the terminals.
3. **Then touch.** Not before.

If you skip step 2, you're gambling. Don't gamble with 120 volts — it'll hurt you. Don't gamble with 240 — it'll kill you.

The Mindset

Complacency kills more electricians than ignorance. The dangerous jobs aren't the ones you're scared of — they're the ones you've done a hundred times and stop respecting. Every wire is live until YOU prove it isn't.

Chapter 4 — Code Essentials (NEC 2026)

This is the 2026 National Electrical Code as adopted in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. Code isn't suggestions — it's the legal minimum. Learn where protection is required and you'll never have to guess.

Where GFCI Protection Is Required (NEC 210.8(A))

Every 125V, 15A/20A receptacle in these locations must be GFCI protected — either by a GFCI breaker or a GFCI receptacle:

- **Bathrooms** — all receptacles, no exceptions
- **Kitchens** — all receptacles serving countertops
- **Within 6 feet of any sink** — bar sinks, utility sinks, all of them
- **Garages and accessory buildings**
- **Outdoors** — every outdoor receptacle
- **Crawl spaces**
- **Unfinished basements**
- **Laundry areas**
- **Boathouses**
- **Within 6 feet of bathtubs and shower stalls**
- **Indoor damp and wet locations**

If there's water nearby, it's GFCI. That's the principle. When in doubt, GFCI it.

Where AFCI Protection Is Required (NEC 210.12)

All 120V, 15A/20A branch circuits supplying outlets in these rooms need AFCI protection:

- Bedrooms, living rooms, family rooms, dining rooms, dens, libraries, sunrooms, recreation rooms, closets, hallways, kitchens, laundry areas, and finished basements.

In plain English: basically the entire finished interior of the house **except** bathrooms, garages, unfinished basements, and outdoors (those are GFCI territory, above).

Kitchens and laundry areas need BOTH — that's what dual-function AFCI/GFCI breakers are for.

Panel Rules

- **Dead-front covers stay ON.** You see breaker toggles through the slots. You do not see bus bars, ever, in a finished installation.
- **Panel doors shut** when work is complete.

- **Breakers must match the panel manufacturer.** Square D breakers in a Square D panel. Not "classified" knockoffs unless they're actually UL-listed for that panel.

Box Rules

- **Residential boxes are flush-mounted.** The front edge sits flush with the finished drywall. Not recessed, not sticking out.
- **Cover plates go ON when the work is done.** Every device, every box, every time. An open box with exposed terminals is not a finished job — it's a hazard and a code violation (NEC 314.25).
- **All splices happen inside boxes.** Never bury a splice in a wall without a box. Never leave wire nuts floating free.
- **Ceiling fans need fan-rated boxes** (NEC 314.27(D)) — marked "Acceptable for Fan Support" with a weight rating. A standard light box will not hold a fan. This is how fans end up on the floor.

Wire Colors — Know Them Cold

Residential 120/240V (what you'll see 95% of the time): | Color | Meaning |
|---|---| | Black | Hot (120V to neutral) | | Red | Second hot — 240V circuits, 3-way travelers, smoke alarm interconnect | | White or gray | Neutral (grounded conductor) | | Bare copper or green | Ground (never carries current in normal operation) |

Commercial 277/480V (only in commercial settings): | Color | Meaning |
|---|---| | Brown / Orange / Yellow | Hot conductors | | Gray | Neutral | | Green | Ground |

European colors — NEVER in American work: Brown (hot) / blue (neutral) / green-yellow (ground). If you see these in an American building, stop and figure out what's going on before you touch anything.

Romex (NM-B) jacket colors tell you the gauge at a glance: - White jacket = 14 AWG → 15A circuits - Yellow jacket = 12 AWG → 20A circuits - Orange jacket = 10 AWG → 30A circuits

Chapter 5 — Common Mistakes to Never Make

Every item on this list is something a real electrician flagged on a real job. Learn from other people's mistakes instead of making your own.

1. Working on open boxes with bare hands

If the box is open and the terminals are exposed, the circuit is not safe to touch with bare hands. Breaker off, tested dead, then work. An open box with live terminals and your fingers in it is how people get hurt.

2. Leaving boxes open as "finished"

Cover plates go on. Every time. An open device box with exposed terminals is a code violation (NEC 314.25) and it looks unprofessional. The customer sees that and wonders what else you left unfinished.

3. Installing non-American hardware

European DIN-rail breakers, round-pin sockets, UK-style outlets — none of it belongs in an American building. If the hardware doesn't match NEMA standards, don't install it. And if you're documenting your work (photos, videos), make sure what's shown is real American equipment. Customers and inspectors notice.

4. Space heaters on power strips

A 1,500-watt space heater draws 12.5 amps — nearly a full 15-amp circuit. **No power strip is rated for that.** Plug a space heater into a power strip and the strip overheats, melts, and starts a fire. This is one of the leading causes of winter house fires.

The rules for space heaters: - **Always plug directly into a wall outlet.** Never a power strip. Never an extension cord. - **3-foot clearance** from curtains, furniture, bedding — anything that burns. - **Turn it off** when you leave the room or go to sleep. - Ideally on a **dedicated or lightly-loaded circuit.**

When you tell a customer this, make sure they understand it's not a suggestion — it's the difference between staying warm and burning the house down.

5. Saying one thing and showing another

If you tell a customer "your power strip melted" but you're pointing at a wall outlet, you've lost them. What you say and what you show have to match — whether that's in person, in a photo, or in a video. Describe what's actually in front of you.

6. AFCI where GFCI belongs (and vice versa)

Bathroom? GFCI. Bedroom? AFCI. Kitchen countertop? GFCI. Living room? AFCI. Mixing them up means the protection doesn't match the hazard. When in doubt, check Chapter 4.

7. Aluminum ladders

Covered in Chapter 3, but it bears repeating because apprentices keep making this mistake: aluminum conducts. Fiberglass doesn't. This isn't a preference — it's physics.

8. Wrong tools for the job

Corded drill when you should be cordless. Wrong screwdriver chewing up terminal screws. Dull strippers nicking conductors. The right tool isn't about brand loyalty — it's about doing the job correctly without damaging anything.

9. Skipping the test

"I turned the breaker off, it's fine." No. Test it. NCVT, then meter. Every time. The one time you skip it will be the one time someone mislabeled the panel.

10. Rushing the finish

The last 10% of the job — cover plates, cleanup, testing every device — is what the customer actually sees and what the inspector actually checks. A rushed finish undoes good rough-in work. Slow down at the end.

Chapter 6 — Professional Standards

Tools and code knowledge get you in the door. These habits keep you employed and get you referrals.

Clean Work

- Vacuum or sweep up when you're done. The customer didn't hire you to leave drywall dust everywhere.
- Coil your cords. Put your tools back in the bag. Leave the room cleaner than you found it.
- Label the panel when you add or change breakers. A labeled panel is professional. An unlabeled panel is a mystery for the next person.

Correct Materials

Use the right device for the location. GFCI where GFCI is required. AFCI where AFCI is required. Listed equipment from real manufacturers. No substitutes, no "this is close enough." Close enough starts fires.

Code-Compliant Every Time

There's no "it's just a small job" exception to the code. A receptacle swap in a bathroom needs GFCI protection whether it's a \$200 job or a \$2,000 job. Do it right regardless of the invoice amount.

How You Talk to Customers

- Explain what you're doing in plain language. "Your breaker is tripping because the circuit is overloaded" beats "you've got a thermal-magnetic overcurrent condition."
- Show them the problem when you can. People trust what they can see.
- Give them the safety rules that apply to their situation — space heater rules, GFCI test buttons, when to call you back.
- Never badmouth the last electrician's work to the customer. Fix it, note it on the invoice, move on.

Keep Learning

The code updates every three years. Products change. AFCI requirements expand, new device types appear, the 2026 NEC isn't the same as the 2020. Read the code changes when they come out. Take the continuing ed seriously. The electricians who stop learning are the ones still wiring like it's 1995.

The Bottom Line

Show up on time. Do code-compliant work. Use the right materials. Clean up after yourself. Test before you touch. That's 90% of being a good electrician. The other 10% is caring enough to do all of that on every single job, even the small ones, even when nobody's watching.

Quick-Reference Tables

GFCI Locations (NEC 210.8(A)) — Dwelling Units

Location	GFCI Required?
Bathrooms	YES — all receptacles
Kitchen countertops	YES — all receptacles serving countertop
Within 6 ft of any sink	YES
Garage / accessory buildings	YES — all receptacles
Outdoors	YES — all receptacles
Crawl space	YES
Unfinished basement	YES
Laundry area	YES
Boathouse	YES
Within 6 ft of tub/shower	YES

Location	GFCI Required?
Bedrooms	NO (AFCI instead)
Living / dining rooms	NO (AFCI instead)
Hallways / closets	NO (AFCI instead)

AFCI Locations (NEC 210.12) — Dwelling Units

Location	AFCI Required?
Bedrooms	YES
Living / family / dining rooms	YES
Kitchens	YES
Hallways, closets	YES
Laundry areas	YES
Finished basements	YES
Dens, libraries, sunrooms, rec rooms	YES
Bathrooms	NO (GFCI instead)
Garages	NO (GFCI instead)
Outdoors	NO (GFCI instead)
Unfinished basements	NO

Kitchens and laundry areas need BOTH → use dual-function AFCI/GFCI breakers.

Wire Colors at a Glance

Application	Hot	Neutral	Ground
	Black (red = 2nd hot)	White	

Application	Hot	Neutral	Ground
Residential 120/240V			Bare copper or green
Commercial 277/480V	Brown / Orange / Yellow	Gray	Green

Approved Brand Cheat Sheet

Category	Brand(s)
Power tools (cordless only)	Milwaukee
Hand tools	Klein
Test instruments	Fluke
Materials / specialty tools	Ideal, Greenlee, GB (Gardner Bender)
Panels & breakers	Square D, GE, Siemens, Cutler-Hammer
Outlets, switches, GFCIs, dimmers	Leviton
Ladders	Fiberglass only — never aluminum

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This guide is for educational purposes. Always follow the current NEC as adopted in your jurisdiction and consult local amendments. When in doubt, ask your journeyman — that's what they're there for.
