

Organizing Scanners for Aviation Monitoring
Presented to the Radio Monitoring Net on Tuesday, August 18, 2026
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OVERALL SORTING OPTIONS

Option 1 - Geographically

State
County
City
Local

This option is useful in border areas and places that have several large airports nearby. It can also be helpful for traveling. It is one of the most basic ways to organize a scanner.

When using this method, I find it useful to sort place names alphabetically. You could also go by proximity, but that makes it a little more challenging to find a particular place in a hurry, whereas using the alphabet allows you to decide immediately in which direction to change channels.

Option 2 - By Type of Communication

Airport ATC - Civilian & Military
ARTCC - Civilian & Military
CTAF
Military Operations
Airline Air Operations
Airline Ramp Operations
Airport Operations
Miscellaneous

For most scannists, this is probably the most useful basis for separating frequencies. The principle is similar to organizing public safety channels - separate the busier channels from the slower ones so you miss less. Sorting ATC frequencies by type (local versus Center, etc.) also adds a distance factor to many frequencies.

Straight alphabetical or numerical channel sorting is less useful for Airport ATC frequencies. If you want to follow traffic into or out of the airport, then it makes sense to have Ground Control near the beginning of the scan, followed by Tower, then Approach/Departure (which are usually the same frequencies and their function depends on which way the traffic is moving). At larger airports with airspace that is divided in to sectors, those sectors usually relate to an active runway. It is possible to set up your scanner to follow traffic using a particular runway, although at airports like Albany International, there will be spillover, especially during slow traffic periods when only some controller positions are staffed.

If desired, you can also place the ARTCC Sector frequencies that feed the local controllers at the end of the list after Approach/Departure.

Here is an example using Albany International Airport:

127.500 Clearance Delivery (this is where you can find out which runway will be used and the assigned departure frequency)
121.700 Ground Controller (taxiing operations from ramp to runway)
119.500 Tower (active runways and nearby airspace up to about 1,000 feet)
132.825 Approach/Departure (most used) (vectoring to or from the runway, handoffs to/from Boston Center)
118.050 and 127.15 A/D can follow here
121.350 Boston Center (low altitude sector that overlays most of Albany's local airspace toward the north and west)
132.650 Boston Center (low altitude sector that overlays most of Albany's local airspace toward the south)

Note that Albany Departure also hands off to Syracuse Approach and Bradley Approach. Note also that aircraft can be heard talking to more than one airport on the CTAF frequencies.

Option 3 - Geographically by Type of Communication

This option improves on Option 2 by adding another layer of separation that helps in focusing on specific airports or locations. It can also be useful when traveling as you can change areas as you move and listen to what is closest and therefore probably most relevant.

Again with this method, I prefer alphabetical sorting for the locations, but not for the local ATC channels at each airport.

Option 4 - By Type of Communication, sorted Geographically

I included this option for completeness. I am not sold on its general utility, though.

Option 5 - Multiple Scanners, divided into first 4 options

The more fortunate scannist can add a hard separation between any of the above organizing principles by using separate scanners for locations, frequency uses, or other purposes. For example, I have separate scanners for military UHF aero frequencies. They are far less busy than VHF frequencies and having them in different receivers means missing less traffic.

FINDING SPECIFIC CHANNELS IN THE BASIC SCANNER

Channel Ordering

Every scanner on the market allows you to put whatever frequency you want into any channel. This is especially useful for following local airport traffic, and for separating local and distant traffic.

Banks and Channels

Larger capacity scanners break up their channel memories into fixed-size groups, called Banks. Putting different locations or communication types into separate banks makes your organization clearer. It also provides the advantage of being able to enable or disable scanning of entire locations or categories in a single control operation, instead of enabling and disabling a number of channel lockouts.

Pairing Channels

Civilian and Military ATC frequencies are paired (and often simulcast). There are three possible methods to take advantage of this while keeping your organization consistent.

Method 1 - Adjacent Channel Slots. This is the simplest. Just put each UHF channel right after the corresponding VHF channel.

Method 2 - Parallel Banks. Put VHF channels in one bank, and the corresponding UHF channels in another, with both sets sorted in the same order. This allows for enabling or disabling one set entirely if needed. It also allows for rapidly identifying which channels are paired, especially if the scanner lacks alpha tagging. Direct channel access if available makes it possible to switch directly from one to the other without pausing to recall which channel number to find.

For example, if Bank 1 Channel 1 (Memory 1 or 11) is VHF Tower, and Bank 2 Channel 1 is UHF Tower (Memory 11 or 21), then it's easy to remember "Up 10" and "Down 10" or whatever size increment you need depending on how big the banks are.

Method 3 - Parallel Programming of Multiple Scanners. Program VHF into one scanner, and UHF into another, in the same order and channel slots.

FINDING SPECIFIC CHANNELS IN THE ADVANCED SCANNER

The newest scanner technology is totally based on memory management. They can mimic the older bank-and-channel organization, but are far more flexible (and admittedly complex). The best way to set up these scanners is by computer. Some manufacturers provide free custom software for their scanners, and these are the best to use with the scanners for which they are designed.

Quick Keys

A Quick Key is a number that can be assigned to a memory slot (channel), a group of memories (bank), or an entire set of memories associated with a particular listening target (system). Each level of memory allocation can have its own set of Quick Keys (sort of like having banks of banks).

Quick Keys are accessed the same way as channels in a scanner with Direct Memory Access. Just type the number(s) on the keypad (and sometimes Enter). The scanner also needs to be told which type of QK it is being sent to as the numbers can overlap. Depending on the scanner model, this can be done by using the Function button or by prefixing the number with some other character (like a dot).

Favorite Lists (with and without Quick Keys)

The Uniden SDS series of scanners support Favorite Lists, which can be any organization of frequencies, locations, radio systems, etc. that you can think of. (Whistler scanners have a similar feature called Libraries.)

Within a Favorite List, one can build a configuration based on any or all of the 5 Options described above. Any level or individual memory channel can be locked out if needed (Uniden calls this Avoid).