

Understanding the National Electrical Code

The National Electrical Code (NEC) is a set of guidelines written to govern the installation of wiring and equipment in commercial buildings and residential areas. These guidelines were developed to ensure the safety of humans as well as property against fires and electrical hazards. Understanding the National Electrical Code is important from the cable manufacture engineer and distributor, to the designer and installer. Anyone involved in specifying cable to installation of cable should be aware of the basics of the code.

In 1987, the National Electrical Code introduced some major changes that had a major impact on the wire and cable industry. The code now has listing requirements for communication and power-limited circuit cable. These requirements developed fire resistance levels for cable. The code covers initiation of fire by electronic cable as well as flame spread characteristics of the cable.

Code Organization

The NEC code book is made up of nine chapters, with each chapter divided into separate articles pertaining to specific subjects. There are about five articles that pertain to communication and power-limited cable. Each article describes wire and cable construction, material use, cable markings, installation environments and applications.

Article Categories

There are four articles that cover communication, power-limited and CATV wiring. There is another category that deals strictly with optical fiber. The following is a list of those articles and the applications or systems they cover:

Article 725 - Class 1, Class 2, Class 3, Remote-control, Signaling and Power-Limited circuits

Article 760 - Fire Protective Signaling Systems

Article 770 - Fiber Optic Systems

Article 800 - Communication Circuits

Article 820 - Community Antenna Television

Article Overviews

The NEC code can be somewhat confusing to the novice who has not studied the code in depth. In most cases, within an article, a listing will allow for a higher listed cable to be substituted for lower listed cable. And some listings from one article may be substituted for another article listing with possible restrictions. This section will briefly cover the basis of the code to try to make things clearer for you. However, you should consult the NEC book for exact specifications, wording, and accuracy of the code. This is not in any way an exact excerpt from the code.

Article 725

Article 725 covers Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3 remote control and signaling cables as well as power-limited tray cable. Power-limited tray cable can be used as a Class 3 or Class 2 cable. Cable listed multi-purpose, communications, or power-limited fire protective can be used for Class 2 and Class 3 applications. A Class 3 listed cable can be used as a Class 2 cable.

Article 760

Article 760 covers power-limited fire protective cable. Cable listed as power-limited fire protective cable can also be used as Class 2 and Class 3 cable. Cable listed as communications and Class 3 can be used as power-limited fire protective cable with restrictions to conductor material and type, gauge size and number of conductors.

Article 770

Article 770 covers fiber optic cable. This article covers three general types: non-conductive, conductive, and composite. Non-conductive type refers to cable containing no metallic members and no other electrically conductive materials. Conductive type refers to cable containing non-current carrying conductive members such as metallic strength members, etc. Composite type refers to cable containing optical fibers and current carrying electrical conductors. Composite types are classified according to the type of electrical circuit that the metallic conductor is designed for.

Article 800

Article 800 covers multi-purpose and communication cable. Multi-purpose cable is the highest listing for a cable and can be used for communication, Class 2, Class 3, and power-limited fire protective cable. Communication cable can be used for Class 2 and Class 3 cable and also as a power-limited fire protective cable with restrictions.

Article 820

Article 820 covers community antenna television and RF cable. CATV cable may be substituted with multi-purpose or communication listed coaxial cable.

Designation and Environmental Areas

Not only does listing by circuit types have to be adhered to, but installation in various environments have to also be considered. The NEC has designated four categories for various environments. These will be listed from the highest to the lowest listing. A higher listing can be used as a substitute for a lower listing.

Plenum - This listing is suitable for use in ducts, plenums, and other space used for environmental air without conduit and has adequate fire-resistant and low-smoke producing characteristics. It can also be used for applications below.

Riser - This listing is suitable for use in a vertical run, in a shaft or from floor to floor, and has fire-resistant characteristics capable of preventing the carrying of fire from floor to floor. It can also be used for applications below.

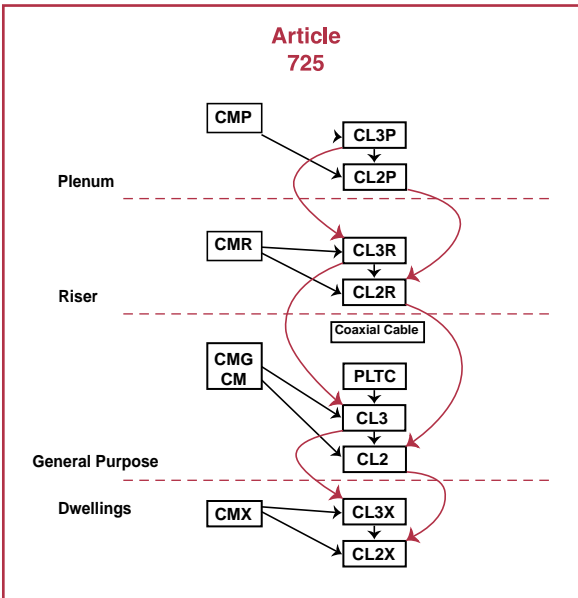
General Purpose - This listing is suitable for general-purpose use, with the exception of risers, ducts, plenums, and other space used for environmental air, and is resistant to the spread of fire. It can also be used for all applications below.

Restricted Applications - This listing is for limited use and is suitable for use in dwellings and for use in raceways and is flame retardant. Restricted use is limited to non-concealed spaces of 10 feet or less, fully enclosed in conduit or raceway, or cable with diameters less than .25" for a residential dwelling.

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National Electrical Code Substitution Chart

The following charts explain the NEC cable hierarchy and will give you a "picture" view of how each fits together. The charts are broken down into 4 categories. Each chart allows you to examine each NEC article. Following the arrows will allow you to find what listing can be substituted for others. Also note restrictions in which case you will have to review the NEC code in order to see if your cable is applicable.



Type CM- Communication Wires and Cables
 Types CL2 and CL3- Class 2 and Class 3 Remote-Control Signaling, and Power-Limited Cables
 Type FPL- Power Limited Fire-Alarm Cables
 Type MP- Multipurpose Cables
 Type PLTC- Power Limited Tray Cables
 Type CATV- Community Antenna Television Systems

A → B Cable A shall be permitted to be used in place of Cable B

Final Considerations

The National Electrical Code is widely accepted as the suggested regulations governing the proper installation of wire and cable in the United States. The code is revised every three years to keep safety in the forefront in wire and cable manufacturing and installation. Even though the code is generally accepted, each state, county, city and municipality has the option to adopt all of the code, part of the code, or develop one of its own. The local inspectors have final authority of your installation. Therefore, the NEC is a good reference when questions arise about the proper techniques for a particular installation, but local authorities should be contacted for verification.

When choosing cable for your installation there are four guidelines to follow to keep problems to a minimum:

1. The application and environment determines which type of cable you can use and what rating it should have. Make sure the cable you're installing meets the proper ratings for your application.
2. If you will be substituting a cable with another, you must have a cable that is rated higher than what the code calls for. Check with your local inspector as to what is allowed in your local area.
3. The NEC code is a general guideline that can be adopted in whole or in part. Your local state, county, city, or municipal approved code is what you must follow. Contact your local authorities for verification of the code in your area.
4. The local inspector or fire marshal has the final authority to approve or disapprove any installation of cable based on the National Electric Code or on the local code.

If you remember these four guidelines, you should have fewer complications and headaches when installing cable in your area. Remember to always work closely with your local authorities.

