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What Is The National Electrical Code?

On your way to becoming a licensed electrician, you're going to hear a lot about the National Electrical Code. Here's a primer on what the Code is, how it's formatted, and what you'll need to know as you go through your classes and apprenticeship.

What Is It?

The National Electrical Code (usually written as "NEC") is an extensive collection of definitive guidelines for the safe and secure installation of electrical equipment and electrical wiring in the United States. The Code was originally published in 1897, and has been updated on numerous occasions---usually every three years---since that time.

The Code is published by the National Fire Protection Association (the "NFPA") as part of its National Fire Codes series. The most recent release of the Code is the 2014 Edition, and as a bound book, it is about 1,000 pages long (not a light read!), and is also available in electronic format (see below for links).

What's In It?

As we mentioned, the 2014 NEC is pretty dense. Here's a breakdown of each of the chapters:

- Chapter 1: General (includes definitions and requirements for electrical installations);
- Chapter 2: Wiring and Protection;
- Chapter 3: Wiring Methods and Materials;
- Chapter 4: Equipment for General Use;
- Chapter 5: Special Occupancies;
- Chapter 6: Special Equipment;
- Chapter 7: Special Conditions;
- Chapter 8: Communications Systems; and
- Chapter 9: Tables (which includes 10 annexes).

You can find a complete Table of Contents, along with the subchapters to each chapter, here.

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The Internet Archive has copies available for everyone to view:

https://archive.org/details/nfpa.nec.2014

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You can actually buy a hardcover copy / softbound copy / looseleaf version of the Code on Amazon. However, it may be a good idea to wait before buying it. Your apprenticeship or a class you take may require you to buy a new copy as part of their program, and there's no sense in buying it twice.

Is There An Abridged Version?

Well, yes, but this is something you'll need to know inside and out! That said, there is a handbook available on Amazon, as well as a laminated "Quick-Card".

When Will I Learn It?

If you decide to become a licensed electrician, you will read and learn the NEC during your apprenticeship and your classroom hours.

Kind in mind, there are different versions of the Code (remember, it's updated every three years), and that's because the Code is not actually federal law.

If It's Not Federal Law, What Is It?

Technically, the National Electrical Code is an example of a "uniform code." To understand this, you may have to reach back into your brain for some things you learned in your high school government classes.

If you'll recall, in the United States, both the federal government and the state governments are allowed to make laws. Some laws are made exclusively by the federal government (such as laws related to monetary policy), while other laws are made by each individual state (such as laws related to traffic and the speed limit).

There are some areas of law where it might be helpful to pass federal laws, but the federal government has not chosen to do so, and instead leaves authority to each individual state. In such cases, a "uniform code" is created as a set of "guidelines," and each state can adopt all (or portions of) the Code as they see fit. Sometimes, the states or local jurisdictions will adopt the Code with specific amendments. The National Electrical Code is a set of guidelines that each state (or local jurisdiction) can adopt and apply as they see fit.

Here is an adoption map, courtesy of the National Electrical Manufacturers Association, as to which states have adopted the NEC. You'll also see that each state may have adopted a specific version of the Code (eg, most of Texas uses the 2014 NEC, whereas California still uses the 2011 Code).

Why Doesn’t Every State Adopt The Same Version Of The Code?

That's a great question, which has a complicated answer. Different states have different legislative timetables, different ideas of how strict safety regulations need to be, and different pressures from the local business community.

Why Is The NEC Important?

There are many reasons why it's important to have a set of "best practices." For something as important---and dangerous---as the commercial/industrial/residential use of electricity, it's a good thing when licensed professionals are "all on the same page." Requiring electricians to operate using specific safety codes results in less injury and death related to electrical work.

If I Live In Canada, Do I Need To Follow The Code?

You'll want to check out the Canadian Electrical Code, published by the Canadian Standards Association.

What If I Already Know The Code?

If you've already learned the Code and want to show off, here's your chance! The NEC Challenge tests your knowledge of the Code, and allows you to brag to your fellow electricians. If you're just starting out on your journey to becoming an electrician, you probably won't do too well---but come back a little while down the road and see how you do!