

A Tutorial on the Decibel

This tutorial combines information from several authors, including Bob DeVarney, W1ICW; Walter Bahnzaf, WB1ANE; and Ward Silver, NØAX

Decibels are part of many questions in the question pools for all three Amateur Radio license classes and are widely used throughout radio and electronics. This tutorial provides background information on the decibel and instructions for performing calculations involving decibels.

The Quick Explanation

- The *decibel* (*dB*) is a ratio of two power values. It is computed using logarithms so that very large and small ratios result in numbers that are easy to work with.
- A positive decibel value indicates a ratio greater than one and a negative decibel value indicates a ratio of less than one. Zero decibels indicates a ratio of exactly one. See the table for a list of easily remembered decibel values for common ratios.
- A letter following dB, such as dBm, indicates a specific reference value. See the table of commonly used reference values.
- If given in dB, the gains (or losses) of a series of stages in a radio or communications system can be added together:

$$\text{System Gain (dB)} = \text{Gain}_1 + \text{Gain}_2 + \dots + \text{Gain}_n$$

- Losses and attenuation are equivalent to negative values of gain. i.e. A loss of 3 dB is equivalent to a gain of -3 dB and 10 dB of attenuation is equivalent to a gain of -10 dB

Decibels – the History

The need for a consistent way to compare signal strengths and how they change under various conditions is as old as telecommunications itself. The original unit of measurement was the “Mile of Standard Cable.” It was devised by the telephone companies and represented the signal loss that would occur in a mile of standard telephone cable (roughly #19 AWG copper wire) at a frequency of around 800 Hz. If you were measuring loss in a telephone line in the early 20th century, you might say that it amounted to “5 Miles of Standard Cable.” Since everyone knew how much signal was lost in 1 mile of cable, the effect of a 5-mile loss was easy to understand.

In the 1920s, this unit of measure was replaced by the *Bel* (*B*) in honor of Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone and founder of the Bell Telephone Company. One Bel represented a 10-fold gain or loss of power. This turned out to be too much change for most measurements and calculations, so the *decibel* (*dB*), or 1/10 of a Bel, became the widely used measure of signal change. (The metric prefix *deci-* or *d-* represents 1/10th or multiplication by 0.1.)

Uses of Decibels

Sound intensity or *sound pressure level (SPL)* is also specified in dB. In this case, the reference level of 0 dB corresponds to a pressure of 0.0002 microbars which is the standard threshold for being able to hear a sound. As the sounds get louder, the value of SPL in dB also increases, indicating an increase with respect to the reference level.

SPL in the average home is about 50 dB above the 0 dB threshold that serves as the SPL reference. When a vacuum cleaner one meter away is on, SPL increases to 70 dB. A chainsaw one meter away produces a SPL of 110 dB and the threshold of discomfort from sound intensity is 120 dB.

Since each 10 dB (or 1 Bel) represents a factor of ten difference, 120 dB (12 Bels) represents a pressure 10^{12} times greater than the reference threshold level — a change of a million-million! Our ears respond logarithmically to changes in sound level, which makes the “decibel” a very useful tool of comparison.

Radio and electronic circuits also deal with signal levels that change by many orders of magnitude. Thus, the decibel is a common feature of the technical side of Amateur Radio. For example, received signal strengths on the HF bands are usually reported in S units. Each S unit represents a change in strength of 5 to 6 dB. Although most receiver S meters are not accurately calibrated, it is useful to consider that a change in signal strength of one S unit is a change in signal power of approximately four.

Here are some other places you’ll find the ubiquitous “dee-bee”:

- Filter bandwidth is the width of the frequency range over which signals are attenuated less than 3 dB, or where the filter output is no less than half of the input power.
- Feed line loss is specified in dB per some length (100 feet or 100 meters is common) at a particular frequency.
- Antenna gain is given in dB, usually compared to an isotropic or dipole antenna.
- Power amplifier and preamplifier gain is usually given in dB.

How to Calculate Decibels

The “log” of a number is short for “logarithm” and is the answer to the question, “To what value does the logarithm’s base value need to be raised in order to equal the number in question?” When calculating decibels, we use the *common logarithm*, written as *log*, with its base value of 10. (The *natural logarithm* written as *ln*, uses a base value of *e*, which is 2.71828.)

For example, if the number in question is 100, the base value of 10 would have to be raised to the power of 2 to equal 100. i.e. $10^2 = 100$. Thus, the common logarithm of 100 is 2. Similarly, $\log(1000) = 3$, $\log(1/10) = -1$, and so forth. For all decibel calculations, use the common logarithm.

$$\text{dB} = 10 \log \left(\frac{\text{power}}{\text{reference power}} \right)$$

$$\text{dB} = 20 \log \left(\frac{\text{voltage}}{\text{reference voltage}} \right) = 20 \log \left(\frac{\text{current}}{\text{reference current}} \right)$$

Adding Decibels Together

Another useful characteristic of decibels is that gains and losses of stages in a radio system can be added together if they are specified in dB. For example, if you have an antenna with 8 dB of gain connected to a preamplifier with 15 dB of gain, the total gain is simply $8 + 15 = 23$ dB. Similarly, if a power amplifier with 12 dB of gain is connected to a feed line with 1 dB of loss and then to an antenna with 4 dB of gain, the total gain of that combination is $12 - 1 + 4 = 15$ dB. Losses are treated as negative gains.

Converting Decibels to Power Ratios

What if you are given a ratio in dB and asked to calculate the power or voltage ratio? Here are the formulas:

$$\text{power ratio} = \log^{-1} \left(\frac{\text{dB}}{10} \right) \text{ and } \text{voltage ratio} = \log^{-1} \left(\frac{\text{dB}}{20} \right)$$

This can also be written as:

$$\text{power ratio} = 10^{(\text{dB}/10)} \text{ and } \text{voltage or current ratio} = 10^{(\text{dB}/20)}$$

Voltage and Current Ratios

Why is the logarithm of voltage and current ratios multiplied by 20 instead of 10? First, decibels are always about power ratios, so don't think there is a "voltage dB" and a "current dB" that is different from a "power dB." A dB is a dB is a dB. Using the equations $P = V^2/R$ and $P = I^2R$ to substitute for the power values, you'll see that the ratios inside the parentheses of the decibel equation become V^2/V_{ref}^2 and I^2/I_{ref}^2 . These ratios can also be written as $(V/V_{\text{ref}})^2$ and $(I/I_{\text{ref}})^2$.

Logarithms treat exponents specially: $\log(\text{value}^{\text{Exp}}) = \text{Exp} \times \log(\text{value})$. So, in the case of the voltage and current ratios, $\log[(V/V_{\text{ref}})^2] = 2 \log(V/V_{\text{ref}})$. Thus, when using voltage and current ratios, $\text{dB} = 10 \times 2 \log(\text{ratio}) = 20 \log(\text{ratio})$.

Decibel Shortcuts

You don't necessarily need to carry a calculator around with you all the time to work with decibels. You'll find that most of the time you can estimate the dB equivalent of a ratio or the ratio represented by a value in dB. Remembering a few values corresponding to common ratios and some powers of ten from the table of common decibel values will satisfy many ham radio needs!

Table of Common Decibel Values

<i>Power ratio</i>	<i>Decibel value (dB)</i>	<i>Voltage ratio</i>	<i>Decibel value (dB)</i>
0.001	-30	0.001	-60
0.01	-20	0.01	-40
0.1	-10	0.1	-20
0.125	-9	0.125	-18
0.25	-6	0.25	-12
0.5	-3	0.5	-6
0.79	-1	0.707	-1.5
1	0	1	0
1.26	1	1.414	1.5
2	3	2	6
4	6	4	12
5	7	5	14
8	9	8	18
20	13	20	26
50	17	50	34
10	10	10	20
100	20	100	40
1000	30	1000	60

Decibel values for ratios not in this table can often be calculated by using the property $(a \times b)$ in dB = (a) in dB + (b) in dB. Here are some examples:

- dB value of 25 = dB value of (5×5) = dB value of 5 + dB value of 5 = 7 + 7 = 14 dB
- dB value of 40 = dB value of (20×2) = dB value of 20 + dB value of 2 = 13 + 3 = 16 dB
- dB value of 0.2 = dB value of (0.1×2) = dB value of 0.1 + dB value of 2 = -10 + 3 = -7 dB
- dB value of 0.005 = dB value of (0.01×0.5) = dB value of 0.01 + dB value of 0.5 = -20 + (-3) = -23 dB

Special Decibel Abbreviations

You will often see the abbreviation dB followed by a letter. That means the value was calculated using a specific reference value. The letter indicates that the value is “decibels with respect to...” followed by the reference value. For example, you will frequently see power levels given in dBm. The lower case “m” stands for milliwatt (mW), with 0 dBm corresponding to the reference power of 1 mW. 10 dBm would be 10 times that or 10 mW. -6 dBm would be ¼ mW. In other words, dBm is another way of referring to power. It can make life a bit easier if you’re doing system calculations. There are a number of other common abbreviations that specify certain reference levels and several are listed in the table.

Table of Decibel Reference Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Reference value
dBm	one milliwatt (1 mW)
dBW	one watt (1 W)
dBV	one volt (1 V)
dB μ V	one microvolt (1 μ V)
dBi	gain of an isotropic antenna
dBd	maximum gain of a half-wave dipole in free space
dBFS	full-scale value
dBc	carrier power

An example of calculating *Effective Radiated Power* or *ERP* helps explain how dBm is used. Say we have a transmitter that supplies 100 W, a feed line that has 3 dB loss and an antenna gain of 6 dB. What is our ERP? Instead of having to use the decibel formula three times: convert the power to dBm, do the additions and subtractions, then convert back.

Start by converting 100 W to dBm: $100\text{ W} = 100,000\text{ mW} = 10^5\text{ mW}$, so the *transmitter power output (TPO)* is +50 dBm. Then we lose 3 dB in the coax, so we are down to +47 dBm (+50 minus the 3 dB loss). Finally, we gain 6 dB at the antenna for a net result of +53 dBm (+47 plus 6 dB gain). Since 3 dB represents a doubling of power, the resulting ERP is $50\text{ dBm} + 3\text{ dB} = 100\text{ W} \times 2 = 200\text{ W}$.

It is important to stress that while decibels represent change, dBm represents a particular power level. It's like saying, "I have so many watts of power." All the same rules of decibels apply when using dBm. How many dBm is 5 W of power? First, 1 W is 1000 mW or +30 dBm and 10 times that is 10 W, or +40 dBm. Half of 10 W = 5 W which is the same as +40 dBm – 3 dB or +37 dBm. Thus 5 W equals +37 dBm. You can find online calculators that convert between dBm and watts, such as the one at www.everythingrf.com/rf-calculators/watt-to-dbm.

Decibels and Power Examples

Let's suppose you have an amateur transmitter that has an output power of 10 watts, but you would like a little more power to make contact with a distant station. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, after adjusting your transmitter you measure the output power again and find it is now generating 20 watts. How many dB increase is this?

Step 1: Use the 10 W signal as the reference. Divide 20 W by 10 W to find the power ratio of $20\text{ W} / 10\text{ W} = 2$.

Step 2: Find the logarithm of the power ratio. $\log(2) = 0.3$

Step 3: Multiply this result by 10 = $10 \times 0.3 = 3\text{ dB}$

Your adjustments increased the power of your signal by 3 dB! When power is doubled, there is a 3 dB increase. This is true no matter what the actual power levels are. For example, increasing power from 50 to 100 W is a ratio of 2 and a 3 dB increase.

Now suppose you use an amplifier to increase your output power to 1000 watts. Choose the reference power to be 10 W again, and divide the new power by the reference.

Step 1: Use the 10-W signal as the reference. Divide 1000 W by 10 W to find the power ratio of $1000 \text{ W} / 10 \text{ W} = 100$.

Step 2: Find the logarithm of the power ratio. $\log(100) = 2$

Step 3: Multiply this result by 10 = $10 \times 2 = 20 \text{ dB}$

Your amplifier has increased the power of your signal by 20 dB!

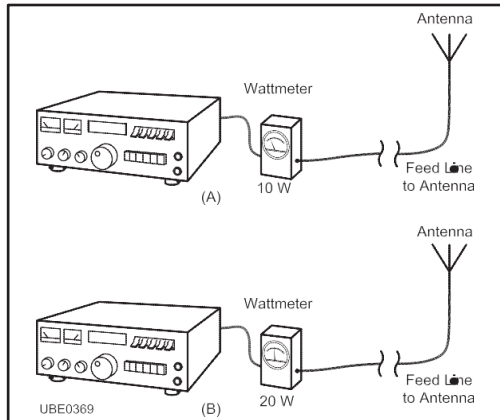


Figure 1 — The output power from a transmitter is 10 watts. After making some adjustments to the transmitter tuning, you measure the power and find it has increased to 20 watts. The text describes how to calculate the decibel increase that occurred.

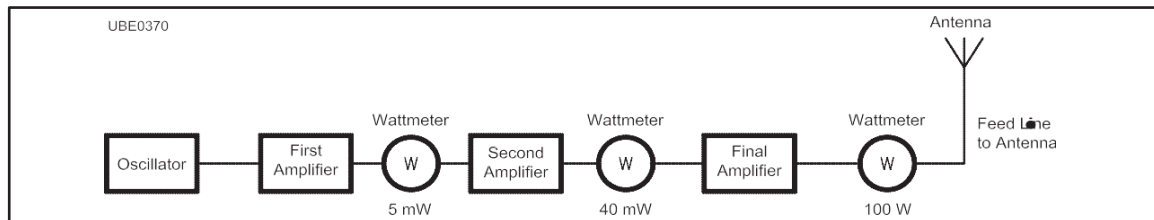


Figure 2 — A simple amateur transmitter amplifies the signal from an oscillator and then feeds that signal to an antenna. It uses several amplifier stages. The input power to one of those stages is 5 milliwatts and the output from that stage is 40 milliwatts. The text describes how to calculate the gain of that amplifier stage.

Whenever you multiply or divide the reference power by a factor of 2, you will have a 3 dB change in power. You might guess, then, that if you multiplied the power by 4 it would be a 6 dB increase. If you multiplied the power by 8 it would be a 9 dB increase. You would be right in both cases!

Suppose the power in part of a circuit such as the one shown in **Figure 2** measures 5 milliwatts and in another part of the circuit it measures 40 mW. Using the 5 mW value as the reference power, how many decibels greater is the 40-mW power?

$$\text{dB} = 10 \log(40 / 5) = 10 \log(8) = 10 \times 0.9 = 9 \text{ dB}$$

What happens if the power decreases? We can continue with the problem above, and measure the actual power arriving at the antenna. In this station, the final amplifier supplies 100 W to a long length of coaxial cable connecting the transmitter to the antenna. Because

some power is lost in this cable, we measure only 75 watts at the antenna. This time we'll use the 100 W amplifier output as our reference. We want to compare the power at the antenna with the transmitter output power.

$$\text{dB} = 10 \log (75 / 100) = 10 \log (0.75) = 10 \times -0.125 = -1.25 \text{ dB}$$

The negative sign tells us that we have less power than our reference due to the feed line loss.

Converting Decibels and Percentage

Sometimes we need to know percentage instead of a decibel value. Here are the formulas to make those conversions. First, to calculate the decibel equivalent of a power or voltage percentage:

$$\text{dB} = 10 \log \left(\frac{\text{Percentage Power}}{100\%} \right)$$

$$\text{dB} = 20 \log \left(\frac{\text{Percentage Voltage}}{100\%} \right)$$

And to convert from percentages to decibels:

$$\text{Percentage Power} = 100\% \times \log^{-1} \left(\frac{\text{dB}}{10} \right)$$

$$\text{Percentage Voltage} = 100\% \times \log^{-1} \left(\frac{\text{dB}}{20} \right)$$

Here's a practical application. Suppose you are using an antenna feed line that has a signal loss of 1 dB. You can calculate the amount of transmitter power that's actually reaching your antenna and how much is lost in the feed line.

$$\text{Percentage Power} = 100\% \times \log^{-1} \left(\frac{-1}{10} \right) = 100\% \times \log^{-1} (-0.1) = 79.4\%$$

That means 79.4% of your power is reaching the antenna and 20.6% is lost in the feed line. Here are some other examples of converting between percentages and decibels:

$$\text{A power ratio of } 20\% = 10 \log (20\% / 100\%) = 10 \log (0.2) = -7 \text{ dB}$$

$$\text{A voltage ratio of } 150\% = 20 \log (150\% / 100\%) = 20 \log (1.5) = 3.52 \text{ dB}$$

$$-3 \text{ dB represents a percentage power} = 100\% \times \log^{-1} (-3 / 10) = 50\%$$

$$4 \text{ dB represents a percentage voltage} = 100\% \times \log^{-1} (4 / 20) = 158\%$$

Using a Calculator with Decibels

You will need a calculator that includes the \log and the 10^x function to work with decibel values. (The 10^x function is sometimes labeled as \log^{-1} or accessed with the Inv key followed by \log . Read your calculator's manual if you are not clear about how to use these functions). Be sure that your calculator is set to calculate common logarithms and not natural logs.

Here are step-by-step instructions to use the scientific calculator that comes with the *Windows* operating system to calculate the ratio of 20 watts to 10 watts in decibels:

Step 1: If necessary, click c to clear the calculator, then enter 20.

Step 2: Click $/$ to start the division, then enter 10, and click $=$. The display will show a value of 2. Step 3: Click \log . The display will show a value of 0.301...

Step 4: Click $*$, then enter 10, and click $=$. The display will show a value of 3.01... This is the value of the ratio $20/10 = 2$ in dB.

Similarly, to convert the value of 3 dB back to a power ratio, follow these steps:

Step 1: Enter 3, then click $/$, enter 10, and click $=$. The display will show a value of 0.3.

Step 2: Click 10^x . The display will show a value of 1.995... This is the value of the ratio with a decibel value of 3.

There are also many online converters that calculate decibels, such as this useful web page at Crown Audio: www.crownaudio.com/en-US/tools/calculators#db.

Note that the inverse log (written as \log_{10}^{-1} or just \log^{-1}) is sometimes referred to as "antilog." Most calculators use the inverse log notation. On scientific calculators the inverse log key may be labeled LOG^{-1} , ALOG , or 10^x , which means "raise 10 to the power of this value." Some calculators require a two-button sequence such as INV then LOG .

To convert 9 dB to a power ratio using LOG^{-1} :

Step 1: Enter 9, then click $/$, enter 10, and click $=$. The display will show a value of 0.9.

Step 2: Click LOG^{-1} . The display will show a value of 7.94. This is the ratio with a decibel value of 9.

To use the 10^x method:

Step 1: Enter 9, then click $/$, enter , and click $=$. The display will show a value of 0.9.

Step 2: Click 10^x . The display will show a value of 7.94.

There is a shortcut that uses the X^Y function of a calculator to find the power ratio for any value of dB. Raise the value 1.26 to the decibel value. For example, to find the power ratio corresponding to a decibel value of 12 dB, enter 1.26 into the calculator, press the x^y key, enter 12, and press the $=$ key. The result is a power ratio of 16.01. This is easy to do with most calculators and you do not have to use the INV LOG or LOG^{-1} function.