

Steve Nowak KE8YN/Ø
16717 Hickory St.
Omaha NE 68130-1529
[ke8yn@netzero.net]

Inkjet QSLs the Easy Way

Basic techniques for basic cards.

Ham radio is not just a hobby, but more like a whole collection of hobbies. This means that when one part of the hobby loses a little of its novelty, you can play with a different area. Tired of chatting on the local repeater? Maybe you should work a contest or two, or maybe build some accessories to make life easier in the shack.

In my case, for example, since I tend to concentrate most of my hobby time on public service and disaster communications, chasing DX is not my most common area of involvement. I do enjoy spending time on the low bands, but other duties, kids, etc., compete for the available

time. When I do find the time, though, I enjoy it greatly, but often have a slight problem with a lack of QSL cards even though I do believe that a QSL card is the final courtesy of a good operator. Add to that the fact that my day jobs have involved frequent moves and it should be no surprise that

I do not always have up-to-date QSL cards available. Although over the years I have used my share of stock cards, I admit I prefer to have something just a little different. I have made various efforts to design my own card, although being artistically challenged it takes more than a bit of effort.

When I've had to move or there has been some other change, I've tried to save a few bucks and use up my stock of existing cards by placing stickers over the incorrect information. This is less than optimal, especially for someone like me who has kept his old call and has cards with a /5 and /4 to indicate my (current) home QTH. I hate the idea of throwing out a couple hundred perfectly good, albeit incorrect, QSL cards when busily packing for a move.

On the other hand, I do believe that a QSL card should be accurate. Yes, I've used postcards and other substitutes, but I've always been less than pleased with this approach. Besides, being a cheapskate I realize that postcards are one of the more expensive methods of confirming a contact. The fact of the matter is that I eventually had to admit that I need QSL cards on an occasional

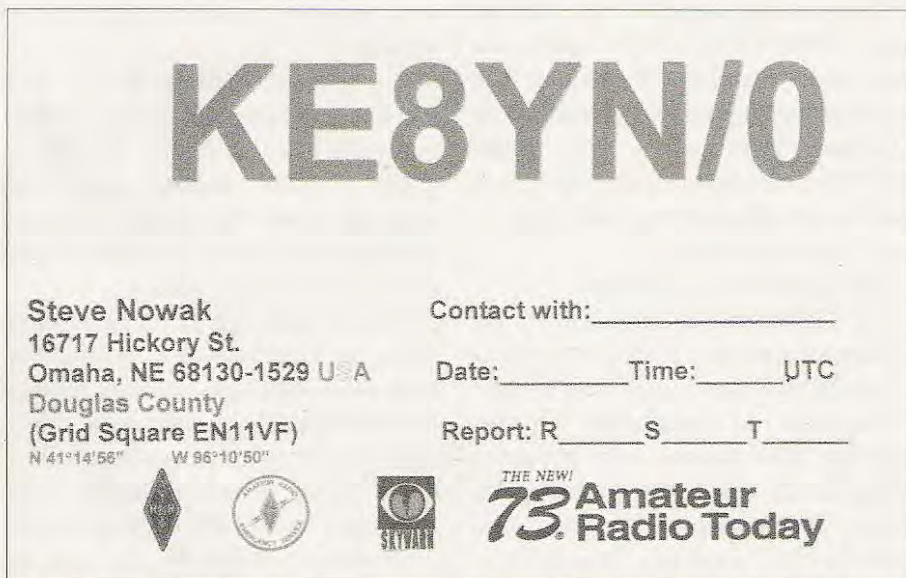


Fig. 1. My basic QSL card for contacts made from the home QTH as designed on my computer. I like to have all of the information on the front of the card so if the other operator mounts cards on the wall, it doesn't have to be moved to read the contact information. If you enter your information by hand, a "Sharpie" type permanent marker works particularly well.

basis rather than stacks of them on a regular basis. I knew there had to be a better way than to throw away a couple of hundred old cards and order a thousand new cards each time I moved.

I had tried a few methods of generating QSL cards on my computer in the past but was less than thrilled with the results. In some cases I was satisfied with the design but not satisfied with my ability to produce them on anything heavier than typing paper. I tried copying the results onto card stock by use of a photocopier. This seemed fairly economical but I was limited to a single color (black) for the type and any graphics or illustrations I wished to include, although I could use a variety of colored papers to make the cards more interesting.

When I got a color printer I explored the idea of printing cards in color. While this might not be the most advantageous method for people who are big-time contesters, the price of ink is relatively reasonable (especially if you refill your own cartridges) if you only plan on printing small quantities. I had one major problem, though, in that I had a very low success rate in getting the cards cut to the size that I wished. For some reason, my ten matched thumbs ensured that the cards would be cut uneven, misaligned, or in some other manner less than acceptable. My elementary school teachers were never able to adequately correct my deficiencies in penmanship or my ability to cut and paste correctly.

Like many of the great ideas I've had, the one for the computer-generated cards was shelved on several occasions. Instead, periodically I bit the bullet and sent an order off for another stack of cards, many of which found their way into the trash rather than into the mail.

I suspect that many other hams are in a similar situation. We are a particularly mobile society, with many of us enduring moves as a part of our career path. Then there are those who have decided to take advantage of the vanity call system and have changed callsigns. Finally, with the restructuring of the ham radio license system, many of us upgraded in the past year,

including some who elected to change their callsign to reflect their new status.

This year, as the bands opened up I began working more DX stations, particularly from the car. I began to think of how neat it would be to not only replenish the stock of QSL cards but also to have some special QSL cards specifically for mobile operations. Like most hams, practicality is not my defining virtue, but even I had to admit that this presented a few problems. If a minimum order of cards lasts me for quite some time, then a double order would indeed represent overkill. The idea of using the computer to generate the cards once again seemed to be worth entertaining.

While visiting that great American institution (Wal-Mart), I came across a possible approach that might meet my needs. In the stationery aisle was a product labeled "Glossy Photo Quality Postcards for Ink Jet Printers." This product, manufactured by Avery labels (product number 3248) included ten sheets, each of which could be used to print two post cards. The sheets were perforated so that once the printing was completed, the cards could be easily separated. Since the cards included a border that extended beyond the card edge itself, if desired I could print all the way to the edge of the card. The package also included twenty envelopes. I prefer to use envelopes for direct mail in most cases to keep the cards as neat as possible. Since inkjet-printed cards would not be waterproof, this seemed especially important to ensure that the cards arrived in acceptable fashion.

I took the package home and began to play around with various ideas. I mentally sketched an idea as to what I wished to include. Since I tend to write my columns and articles in my mind, this is my preferred approach, but more practical people may want to jot their ideas down on a sheet of paper. I blatantly stole ideas from the QSL cards I've received over the years, picking and choosing the best of other people's ideas. Here are some of the items that I considered:

1. General layout. I like to have

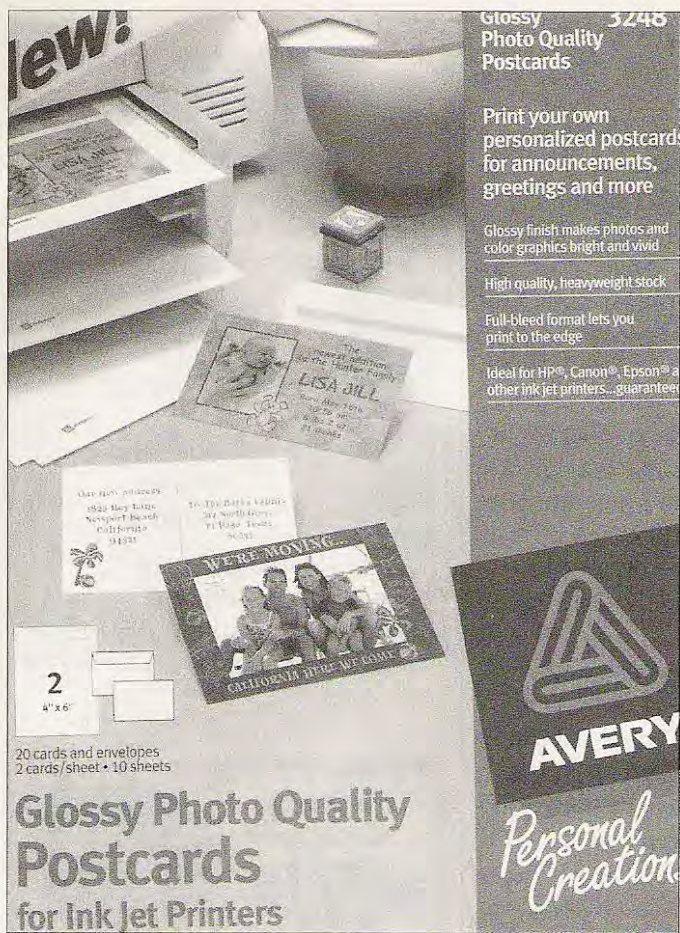


Photo A. Avery's Glossy Photo Quality Postcards for Ink Jet Printers.

everything on the front of the card so that the information can be read if the card is tacked to a wall. This also leaves the back free for comments or a personal note to the other operator.

2. Callsign. Although I like graphics, I prefer that the callsign be the most prominent feature of the QSL card. To me the callsign is the key feature, since it defines who I am on the air. Like many hams, people with whom I talk on a regular basis could pass me on the street without knowing who I was. My face and name may not be important, but to other hams my callsign sure is. In my case, since I have chosen to keep the same call I've had for a number of years, I like to indicate the callsign area in which I am currently living, so I want my cards to read KE8YN/4.

3. Demographic information. While this may seem obvious, it's a good idea to make a list as to what information you are going to include. Obviously name and address are important, but don't forget to include your country! I

also include the county (or parish or borough) and my grid square since some hams focus on working stations based on these. If you don't know your grid square, you can find it by getting a maidenhead map, or by looking up your own callsign on [http://www.qrz.com].

4. Logos. Are you active in ARES or RACES? How about MARS or S K Y W A R N ? Maybe there's a significant nonham interest you have such as Scouting. If so, you can add the appropriate logos to your card to make it more personal.

While you may choose to scan these in yourself, a little bit of Web surfing may save you some time. The league's Web page [http://www.arrl.org] has a section for logos and pictures relevant

to the ARRL. Check the Web pages relating to your favorite activity to see if they have the logo you seek. If you place the cursor on the picture and press the right mouse button, you should see a dialogue box with one choice being "Save Picture As." Scroll down to that choice and click the left mouse button. This will let you save the picture as a file that you can insert into your QSL card later.

5. Other graphics. If you or a family member is artistically inclined, you can use a scanner to import a sketch, drawing, photo, or other art form and incorporate it into your design. Digital cameras have become quite reasonable, and for small-size pictures even the basic ones can provide a satisfactory image. While standard photographs can be scanned, the digital photograph can be directly imported into the design. Incidentally, many word processing or other programs have a selection of "clip art" pictures included, and you can purchase CD-ROMs of clip art very reasonably at office supply stores, discount stores, etc. You may find the graphic you seek in these locations.

6. Contact information. You'll need to include space for the other station's callsign, their signal report, and of course the date and time of the contact. Some people like this in a table or box format, others as a fill-in-the-blank.

Steve Nowak

1011 Peacock Ave NE
Palm Bay, FL 32907-1371

USA

Brevard County
Grid Square EL98QA

Date UTC	Time UTC	Station	Mode	RST

Comments:

Fig. 2. Since much of the time the only DX time I get is when I'm on the road, it only seemed appropriate to have a separate card for mobile operations. For this card I used a table to format the contact information. The large comments box is to remind me to always add a brief personal note.

7. Station information. You may want to include a description of your station equipment. We hams all love to compare our toys, so the type of rig you're using or the specifics of the antenna can be important, or at least interesting. If you're only printing a few cards at a time, it is very easy to change the station description if you change equipment.

8. Comments. I often like to write a few words to the other ham, so a space for comments is helpful.

There are many computer programs that can be used to develop your QSL cards, but I decided to use a word processing program since these are so common. Many computers come preloaded with Microsoft Office, so I decided to use Word, Microsoft's word processing program. If you use a different word processor, most of the procedures I describe will be similar. The one advantage of Microsoft Word is that Avery makes a software add-on for Word called Avery Label Wizard that can be downloaded at no charge from their Web site [<http://www.avery.com>]. There are multiple versions available, so make sure that you choose the one appropriate for your version of Microsoft Word.

The downloaded file is self-extracting. Once it is run, the Avery Label Wizard becomes a choice in the Tools menu of Microsoft Word and formats your work to fit the size and shape of the card. In some versions, the #3248 card is not shown on the list of supported formats. Instead, choose product number 8389, which is the exact same product as it is packaged and sold without the envelopes.

If you do not use the Avery Label Wizard, there are several other methods to use to properly format your QSL card. Enclosed in the package with the card stock is a page that has the borders and margins indicated. This can be used to set up your particular program to print properly on the card stock. It may be useful to make a couple of extra copies of this page so that you can test your layout once it is completed. I have found that in some cases the printer may see some things slightly different than the view on the screen, and extra copies will allow you to tweak the layout to make sure that it is just perfect.

The directions that come with the cards recommend that you set the page up as a table. This works out pretty well for many people in most postcard applications. If you want to have a table or box for the station, date, time, and signal report, I recommend that you not choose this option. I have yet to find a way to permit me to put a table inside another table. It probably is possible, but if it takes too many steps, I just tend to look for an easier and more logical approach.

In my case, I decided to set up a page which matched the layout of one of the two cards on the sheet. I figured that I could print one card, reverse the form, and then feed the other end through the printer. In this way, if I wish to customize the card with equipment information or type in the contact information, I can print each card separately. In order to do this, I initially set the left, right, and top margins at 1.25 inches and the bottom margin at 5.75 inches. After printing a test I realized that I would have to modify the margins slightly, which is why the test page can be so useful. In my case all of the margins needed to be readjusted except for the bottom one. The large bottom margin is actually the second card, of course, but that causes the card stock to be ejected by the printer when the top card is done printing.

One of the things I like about this approach is that I can make changes between the two cards, such as one for a mobile card and the other for confirmation with my fixed station. If I save the basic layout of the card as a template, I can type in the actual contact information or specify which equipment was used for that particular contact. On the other hand, if you run more than two cards at a time, particularly if you plan on filling in information with a pen, you may wish to take a slightly different approach and the Label Wizard may be the best bet.

As I mentioned, I do like the fact that the Avery cards come with envelopes, which helps ensure the delivery of a cleaner card to the other station. It would be possible, of course, to design a postal card format for the other side

and mail the card at the lower postal rate. If you are using the card for DX confirmation, though, and send your cards through the ARRL's outgoing QSL bureau, the envelope would not be essential. For same-country use, and if you are really ambitious, you might elect to take the process one step further and use the computer to address and even embellish the envelope. You might choose to add a graphic or a statement about ham radio to the return address. If your handwriting is as notoriously bad as mine is, you may wish to offer the postal service a legible address for a better chance at delivery. I recommend using the bar code printer to add the ZIP code of the recipient, since this will allow the envelope to be routed most quickly. If your software doesn't offer this, the post office system will usually read a typed envelope and add the bar code as it is being sorted, but I figure that every step I can handle myself is usually better.

While using this technique was inspired by the need to make a relatively small number of QSL cards, even active operators may want to design their own cards and then forward them to a printer. I've been told that printing QSL cards is somewhat of a specialty, so you may be advised to pick your printer with care. Many QSL printers are ham radio operators themselves, so they understand what a QSL card is and how we use them. Keep in mind that multicolor QSL cards can be significantly more expensive than single-color cards.

I recently found a printer that will print 200 cards for only \$17. If you do, you may need to modify the margins just a bit, since standard printed QSL cards are three and a half inches by five and a half inches, just slightly smaller than the Avery cards. You might consider designing your own card and having a quantity printed in a single color from your design, but for special contacts printing up a full-color version of the card.

Hopefully these ideas will be helpful to you. If we meet on the air and I talked you into designing your own card, make a note on the card when you send it!