



An Extended Guide · No. 1658

Generator Exercise and Testing After Install

Make sure it starts when
you actually need it

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! Read this first — carbon monoxide is the real danger

A running generator's exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill in minutes. Never run a generator indoors, in a garage, in a shed, or on a porch, not even with the door open and a fan going. Run it outside only, well away from the house — the safety agencies say at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Put battery-backup carbon-monoxide alarms on each floor and outside the bedrooms. If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, sick, or sleepy, get everyone into fresh air first and ask questions later. Remember that a test run is a real engine making real exhaust, so every practice start gets the same treatment as a storm-night run — outdoors only, at least 20 feet from the house, exhaust pointed away from every window and door, with your carbon-monoxide alarms on and working.

Start here: a generator only helps if it actually starts

A generator is a promise you make to your future self — that when the lights go out, this machine will come to life and carry you through. The only way to keep that promise is to test it, calmly, before you ever need it.

I'm Bill. For 30-plus years I've helped folks around Portage County set up the gear in their homes, and here's a hard truth I've learned: the time a generator lets you down is almost never the day it was installed. It's six months later, in the dark, in a storm, after sitting untouched in the garage the whole time.

Fuel goes stale. A starter battery quietly dies. A hookup no one has practiced turns into a puzzle by flashlight. None of that has to happen. A few minutes of testing every so often is what turns a generator from a hopeful guess into a machine you can count on.

★ This is an easy one to get right

Testing is not hard, and it's exactly the kind of thing I'm glad to walk through with you the first time so it feels routine after that. If you'd like a hand setting up a simple testing habit at your place, call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

The 60-second version

If you read nothing else in this guide, read this page.

- ❑ A generator that sits unused can fail when you need it most — stale fuel, a dead start battery, a hookup no one has practiced.
- ❑ Do a full test after install — ideally with your electrician there for the first transfer — and confirm your must-run circuits actually come on.
- ❑ Practice the startup and shutdown steps until they feel routine: start with no load, then add loads one at a time.
- ❑ Run a portable for a little while every so often, under some load, and keep the fuel fresh and stabilized.
- ❑ Know your standby unit's self-exercise schedule — and check that it actually ran.
- ❑ Every test is still a running engine — outdoors only, 20-plus feet away, exhaust pointed away, CO alarms on.

! A test is not a shortcut around the CO rule

It can feel harmless to 'just start it for a second' by the back door. It isn't. The carbon-monoxide rule applies to a ten-minute test exactly as much as to an all-night run. Same open air, same 20 feet, every time.

Why a generator that sits can let you down

It seems reasonable to think a machine that worked when it was new will work whenever you need it. With a small engine that sits for months, that's often not how it goes.

Gasoline does not keep. Left in a tank or carburetor for months, it breaks down and leaves a gummy varnish behind that clogs the tiny passages an engine needs to start. A generator that ran beautifully in the fall can refuse to catch in a winter storm for exactly this reason.

Batteries fade too. If your generator has electric start, its little battery slowly loses charge as it sits, and cold weather saps whatever is left — so the one morning you push the button, nothing happens. And a hookup you set up once and never used again can be genuinely confusing at 2 a.m. when you're cold and rattled.

Testing solves all three. Running the engine keeps fuel moving and the carburetor clear, keeps an electric-start battery charged, and keeps the steps fresh in your mind. It turns a hopeful guess into a sure thing.

! The storm is the worst time to find a problem

Every problem above is easy to catch and fix on a calm afternoon, and miserable to discover in the dark with the power already out. Testing just moves the discovery to a time and place where it's no big deal.

The first full test, right after install

The best time to prove the whole system works is right after it's installed, while the person who set it up is standing next to you.

If you've had an electrician put in a transfer switch or an interlock, ask to be there for the first real start and transfer. Together you'll start the generator, move the house over to generator power, and watch to confirm that the circuits you care about most — the furnace, the refrigerator, a few lights, the well pump if you have one — actually come to life. Then you'll transfer back to normal power and shut down safely.

This first run does two jobs at once. It proves the installation is right, and it's your first lesson in the steps you'll repeat later on your own. Don't be shy about asking your electrician to go slowly and let you do the switching yourself, with them watching. Our transfer-switch-versus-interlock guide walks through the switching order in more depth.

★ Ask for the walk-through — it's your right

A good installer expects to show you how to run what they put in. If you'd like a friendly, unhurried second run-through afterward, at your own pace and with all your questions welcome, that's exactly the kind of visit I'm glad to make. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

Practice the startup and shutdown steps

The goal is simple: the steps should feel so familiar that you could do them tired, in the dark, without a manual in your hand.

Starting up

Start the engine with no load on it — nothing drawing power yet — and let it run for a moment to warm up and settle into a steady rhythm. Then bring your loads on one at a time, biggest first if anything, pausing between them, rather than switching everything on at once. Adding loads gradually is easier on the engine and lets you notice if something isn't right.

Shutting down

To shut down, do it in reverse: turn your loads back off, let the engine run free of load for a short cool-down, and then stop it. If you're on a transfer switch or interlock, move the house back to normal power in the order your electrician showed you. Never add fuel while the engine is running or still hot.

✓ Write your own steps on an index card

In your own words, jot the start and stop steps on a card and tape it where the generator lives. On a bad night, a simple checklist beats trying to remember, and anyone in the house can follow it.

Exercising a portable generator

A portable doesn't take care of itself, so it needs you to run it every so often to stay healthy and ready.

Every so often — a good habit is once a month or so, and always before storm season — take the portable outside to its safe spot and run it for a little while with some load on it, not just idling empty. A little load keeps the engine working the way it's meant to and helps keep the carburetor clear. Confirm it starts easily, runs smoothly, and holds steady.

- Run it outdoors in its proper spot — 20-plus feet out, exhaust away, alarms on — never in the garage 'just to test it.'
- Put a little load on it, such as a lamp or two and a small appliance, rather than running it empty.
- Keep the fuel fresh: use fuel stabilizer, and use up stored gas within a few months.
- Check the oil before you start, every single time.

✓ Fresh fuel is half the battle

More hard-starting portables come down to old, stale fuel than anything else. Stabilizer and fresh gas, plus an occasional run, prevent most of the trouble before it starts. Our maintenance-for-safety guide goes deeper on fuel and oil.

Standby units that exercise themselves

A permanently installed standby generator is the one kind that largely tests itself — but 'largely' is not 'completely,' and your job isn't finished.

Most standby units are set to run themselves briefly on a schedule — often weekly or monthly — starting up, running for a few minutes to stay limber and keep the battery charged, then shutting down on their own. It's a genuinely nice feature. But it only helps if it's actually happening, and if someone notices when it stops.

- Find out your unit's exercise schedule — the day and time it runs — and roughly how long it runs.
- Now and then, be home when it's due, and confirm you hear it start and stop as expected.
- Watch for any warning light or a message the unit shows when something is wrong.
- A self-exercise usually doesn't power your house — so still do a real under-load test now and then, as below.

! Self-exercise is not the same as a real outage test

A short self-run proves the engine turns over. It does not always prove the transfer works and your circuits come on under real load. Once in a while, test the whole chain the way a true outage would use it.

Keep a simple log

You don't need anything fancy — a notebook or a note on the fridge is plenty. A few dates in one place tell you at a glance whether you're actually ready.

Many generators have an hour meter that counts how long the engine has run. That number is your friend: it tells you when maintenance is due and gives you an honest picture of how much life the machine has seen. Jot it down when you test, along with the date and anything you noticed.

- The date of each test or exercise run, and how it went.
- The hour-meter reading, if your unit has one.
- When you last changed the oil, air filter, or spark plug.
- When you added fresh fuel or stabilizer.

✓ The log is really a memory aid

Nobody remembers in November whether they tested in September. A one-line note settles it, and it makes any maintenance visit — mine or a small-engine shop's — faster and cheaper because the history is right there.

Test your CO alarms and CO shutoff too

Testing day is the perfect time to check the safety gear that protects you while the generator runs — because those are exactly the parts you never want to discover are dead.

While you're at it, press the test button on every carbon-monoxide alarm in the house and confirm it sounds. Check that each alarm still has good batteries and hasn't passed the replacement date printed on it. Our guides on CO alarms and their placement go deeper, but a monthly press of the button is the habit that matters most.

If your generator has an automatic CO shutoff — the built-in sensor that stops the engine if carbon monoxide climbs too high nearby — your manual will tell you whether and how to confirm it's working. That sensor is a wonderful backstop, and it's worth knowing it's alive. Just remember it never replaces good placement.

! Safety gear you never test is just a hope

An alarm with a dead battery and a shutoff you've never confirmed give you a false sense of safety, which is worse than none. Roll them into the same testing habit as the generator itself, so they're all proven together.

The seasonal test before storm season

Beyond your regular runs, there's one test worth making a small ritual: the one you do just before the season when you're most likely to need the generator.

Ahead of the stormy stretch of the year — for most of us that's late fall, before winter really sets in — do a full, honest test. Start it, run it under load, confirm your must-run circuits come on, check the oil and fuel, and press every CO alarm's test button. Think of it the way you'd think of checking the furnace before the first cold snap.

Tie it to something you'll remember — when you change the clocks, when you check the smoke alarms, or the weekend you put the patio furniture away. Attaching it to a habit you already have is the surest way it actually gets done year after year.

✓ One good test beats ten good intentions

The seasonal test is the single most valuable one you'll do all year, because it lands right when the machine is about to matter most. If you do only one test a year, make it this one.

A test is still a running engine

It's easy to treat a quick test as somehow different from a real run. To the carbon monoxide coming out of the exhaust, there is no difference at all.

Every rule from our carbon-monoxide guide applies to a test exactly as it applies to a storm-night run. Take the generator to its proper outdoor spot, at least 20 feet from the house, exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Do not test it in the garage, on the porch, or just outside the back door 'because it's only for a minute.'

That 'only for a minute' is exactly the shortcut that turns testing — something meant to keep you safe — into a danger of its own. Carbon monoxide can build to dangerous levels within minutes in or near an enclosed space, and a test run is still minutes of a real engine making real exhaust.

! No test is worth a shortcut on placement

If it's raining or cold and the safe spot feels inconvenient, that is never a reason to test closer to the house. Reschedule the test, or bundle up and do it right. The exhaust does not care that it's only a test.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Where you live shapes how easy it is to remember to test — and exactly what you most need to prove works before the next outage.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town, outages tend to be shorter and less frequent, which is a blessing — but it also means the generator can sit for a long time between real uses, and it's easy to forget it's even there until you need it.

- Because you rarely lose power, put testing on the calendar — it won't happen on its own the way it does for folks who use theirs often.
- A quieter, shorter test still counts — even a monthly run in your safe spot keeps the fuel and battery healthy.
- Confirm the few circuits you truly care about come on — often the fridge, the furnace, and some lights.
- Keep testing outdoors and 20-plus feet out, even on a small lot where that takes a little planning.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, outages come more often and last longer, and far more rides on the generator — the well pump that brings your water and the furnace that keeps the pipes from freezing simply have to work.

- Prove the well pump and furnace actually run on generator power, under load, well before you're depending on them.
- Because runs are long and often overnight, test that the machine holds steady for a good while, not just that it starts.
- Keep more fresh, stabilized fuel on hand, and run the unit often enough that it never sits for months.
- Farther from help means a failed start is a bigger deal — a reliable testing habit matters even more.

★ Let's prove yours is ready together

Whether it's a small in-town setup or a rural place leaning hard on a well pump, I'm glad to run a full test with you and make sure the things you count on truly come on. Call (330) 200-8042.

Common testing mistakes

A handful of easy-to-avoid mistakes account for most of the generators that disappoint their owners. Knowing them is half the battle.

- **Never testing at all** — assuming that because it worked on install day, it'll work forever.
- **Testing with no load** — proving it starts, but never proving it can actually carry your house.
- **Leaving stale fuel in it** — the number-one reason a portable won't start when you finally need it.
- **Ignoring the start battery** — an electric-start unit with a dead battery is no easier to start than a stubborn pull-cord.
- **Testing in the garage or by the door** — turning a safety habit into a carbon-monoxide risk.
- **Never practicing the transfer** — so the switching order becomes a puzzle at the worst possible moment.

! The two most dangerous words are 'probably fine'

'It's probably fine' is what we tell ourselves to skip the test. Replace it with 'let's be sure.' A generator you've actually tested is the only kind you can truly count on.

Your simple testing routine

Pull it all together into a rhythm you'll actually keep. None of this is hard — it just has to happen.

- ❑ After install: a full test with the installer, confirming your must-run circuits come on under load.
- ❑ Monthly or so: a short run in your safe outdoor spot, under a little load, with an oil check first.
- ❑ Before storm season: a full, honest test — under load, circuits confirmed, oil and fuel checked.
- ❑ Every test: press each CO alarm's button, and confirm the CO shutoff if your unit has one.
- ❑ Always: keep a one-line log with the date, the hour-meter reading, and anything you noticed.

✓ Anchor it to something you already do

Tie the monthly run to paying a bill or checking the smoke alarms, and the big test to changing the clocks. Habits that lean on other habits are the ones that stick.

Prove the circuits you truly depend on

Confirming the engine starts is only half of a real test. The other half is confirming that the things you actually need will run on generator power.

It's a quiet heartbreak to fire up the generator in an outage and find that the one circuit you cared about — the well pump, the furnace, the medical equipment on the nightstand — isn't on the list the electrician wired to it, or won't run alongside everything else you've switched on. The time to learn that is a calm afternoon, not a freezing night.

So during a real under-load test, walk the house. Confirm the furnace kicks on, water flows if you're on a well, the fridge hums, and any essential device powers up. If something's missing or the generator struggles when too much runs at once, that's a conversation to have with your electrician now, while there's no pressure.

★ Medical gear deserves its own test

If someone in the home relies on powered medical equipment, a generator is one layer of the plan, never the whole plan — keep the manufacturer's battery backups too. I'm glad to help you test that the equipment runs on generator power, though I don't give medical advice. Call (330) 200-8042.

The two things that quietly fail: fuel and the battery

If a generator is going to let you down after sitting, it's almost always one of these two. A little attention keeps both ready.

Keeping fuel fresh

Gasoline left sitting breaks down and gums up an engine. Treat stored gas with fuel stabilizer, use it up within a few months, and know that ethanol-free gas stores better if you can get it. Some folks prefer to run a portable dry before long storage so no stale fuel is left in the carburetor — your manual will guide you. Propane, by contrast, stores for years without going stale, which is one of its quiet advantages.

Keeping the battery ready

If your generator has electric start, its battery slowly loses charge as it sits and weakens in the cold. Running the unit helps keep it topped up; a maintenance charger can help for units that sit a long time. And keep the pull-cord recoil starter in good shape as a backup, so a weak battery never leaves you stranded.

✓ Our maintenance guide goes deeper here

Fuel, oil, filters, and spark plugs all get the full treatment in our maintenance-for-safety guide. This page is just the testing-day reminder: check the fuel, keep the battery ready, and you've headed off most no-start trouble.

Myths people believe — and the truth

A few comforting beliefs keep folks from testing. Here's the honest version of each.

Myth	Fact
'It worked when it was installed, so it's fine.'	Fuel, batteries, and memory all fade with time. Only a test proves it's still ready.
'Starting it proves it works.'	Starting is half of it. You also have to prove it carries your circuits under load.
'My standby unit tests itself, so I'm covered.'	Its self-run keeps it limber, but you still confirm it ran and test a real transfer.
'A quick test by the door is harmless.'	It's a real engine making real CO. Test only in your safe outdoor spot.
'Old fuel is good enough.'	Stale fuel is the top reason a portable won't start. Keep it fresh and stabilized.

! Comfortable beliefs are the expensive kind

Every myth above lets you skip a little work today and pay for it on the worst night of the year. When a belief argues against testing, test anyway.

Questions worth asking

A few plain questions that clear up most of the confusion I hear about testing.

Q: How often should I really test it?

A short run monthly or so is a fine habit for a portable, plus a full under-load test before storm season. A standby unit self-exercises, but still test a real transfer now and then.

Q: Do I have to put a load on it, or is starting enough?

Put a load on it. Starting proves the engine runs; only a load proves it can actually power your house. Add loads one at a time.

Q: Can I test it in the garage if I leave the door open?

No — never. A test is a running engine making carbon monoxide. Test only in your safe outdoor spot, 20-plus feet out, exhaust pointed away.

Q: What if it won't start when I test it?

That's the test doing its job — far better now than in a storm. Check the fuel and oil first; if it's still stubborn, a small-engine shop can sort it out while there's no pressure.

★ There's no silly question here

Testing is one of those things that feels awkward until someone shows you once, and then it's simple forever. I'm glad to be that someone. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most from folks working through this guide, answered plainly.

Q: How long should a test run last?

Long enough to warm up, run under load, and settle — a good stretch rather than a few seconds. Before storm season, let it run a while so you know it holds steady.

Q: Will testing wear the generator out faster?

No — the opposite. Occasional running under load keeps the engine, carburetor, and battery healthy. Sitting unused is far harder on a generator than sensible testing.

Q: My standby generator ran on its own last week — do I still test it?

Yes. That self-run keeps it limber, but it doesn't always prove the transfer and your circuits under real load. Test the whole chain occasionally.

Q: Should I test after any repair or new hookup?

Absolutely. Any time the setup changes — a repair, a new transfer switch, a new circuit added — do a fresh full test so there are no surprises later.

! Read it again if it's been a while

This guide is worth revisiting once a year, or any time a new generator, a new hookup, or a new season changes what you're counting on.

Bringing it all together

Testing comes down to a simple promise: never let the first real run of the season be the one you're depending on.

A generator that's tested is a generator you can trust. Run it, load it, confirm your circuits, keep the fuel fresh and the battery ready, press your CO alarms, and jot a line in your log. That's the whole habit, and it pays you back every time the lights flicker.

This guide stays in its lane on purpose. The deeper how-to for oil, filters, and fuel lives in our maintenance-for-safety guide; the first-start walk-through for a brand-new unit has its own guide; and the exact switching order for your hookup is covered in our transfer-switch-versus-interlock guide. Together they turn a machine in the garage into real peace of mind.

★ Let's build your testing habit together

On a visit I'll run a full test with you, confirm your must-run circuits, check your alarms, and help you set up a simple log and schedule you'll actually keep. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

If you remember only one thing

Out of everything in this guide, one idea matters more than all the rest combined.

Don't wait for the outage to find out. Test it before you need it — started, loaded, and proven — so the storm is just weather, not a gamble. And test it the safe way every time: outdoors, 20-plus feet out, exhaust pointed away, alarms on.

! Say it back to yourself

Test before you need it. Prove it under load. Keep the fuel fresh and the battery ready. And every test runs outdoors, well away, exhaust pointed away. That's the whole habit.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made generator testing and exercising feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do the licensed electrical or gas work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

Portable vs. Standby Testing

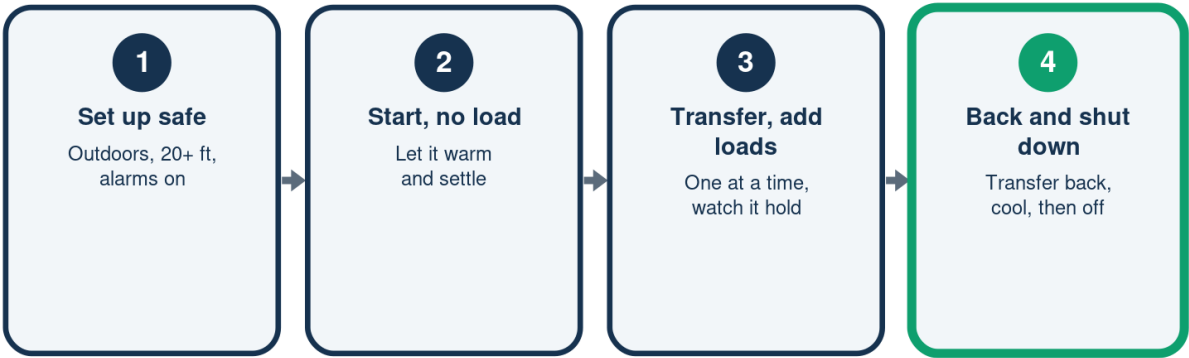
Two machines, two testing habits

	Portable	Standby
How often	Monthly-ish run	Auto on schedule
Who starts it	You, by hand	It starts itself
Under load	Add a few loads	Confirm transfer
Fuel to watch	Fresh, stabilized	Fuel line supply
Main risk	Stale fuel	Missed self-test

Both kinds need a real under-load test now and then -- not just a quick start.

A Good Test Run

The same safe steps, every time



Start light, load gradually, shut down clean -- outdoors and well away throughout.

What to Check Each Test

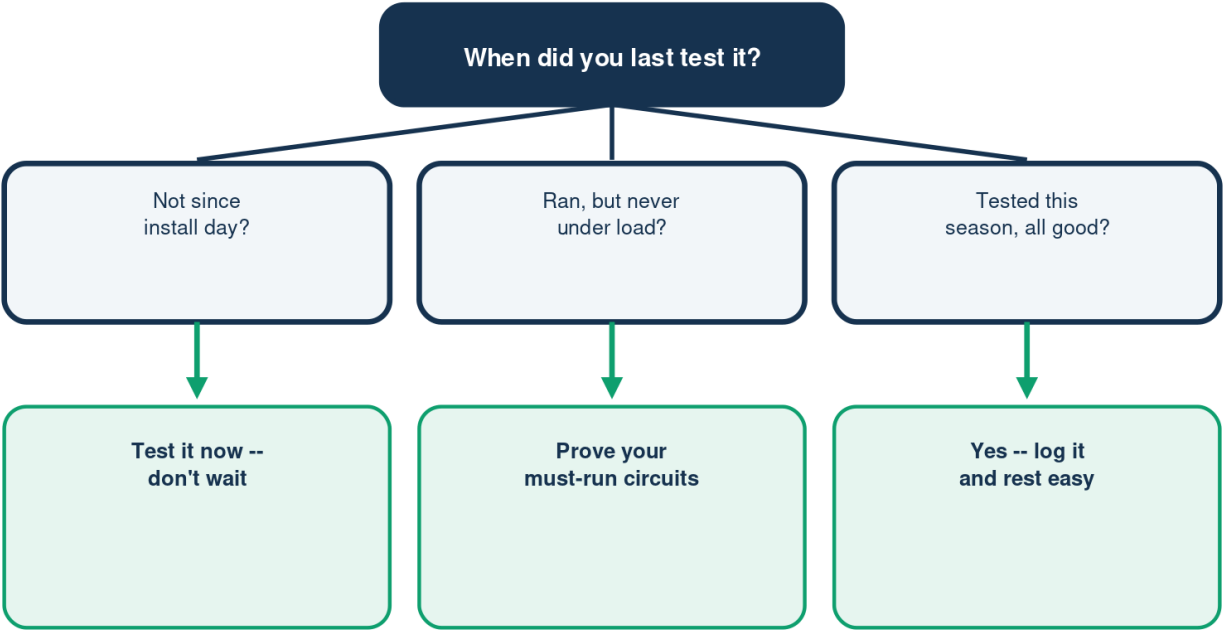
A quick pass that turns hoping into knowing

	Check	Why
Oil level	Low oil	wrecks the engine
It starts	Proves it'll	go in a storm
Fuel is fresh	Old fuel	gums it up
Loads come on	Your must-run	circuits work
Alarms sound	Your CO early	warning works

A few minutes on these beats a nasty surprise in the dark.

Is It Ready for the Next Outage?

Let the calendar and a real test decide



A generator you never test this season is one you are only hoping will start.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.



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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

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