



An Extended Guide · No. 1240

When It Won't Start: Troubleshooting

Calm, step-by-step fixes
for common no-starts

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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. None of the troubleshooting on the pages ahead is worth doing near an open flame, in a closed space, or if you ever smell gas — fresh air and a phone call come first.

Let's get it running again, calmly

A generator that won't start feels urgent, especially with the power out. Take a breath — most no-starts trace back to one of a short list of simple, common causes, and we'll walk them in order.

I'm Bill, and I've talked a lot of folks through a stubborn generator over the phone, standing in their own driveway. Almost every time, the fix turns out to be something small and ordinary.

This guide walks the basics first, then the usual culprits, then tells you plainly when to stop trying and call a small-engine pro instead. Go in order and resist the urge to skip ahead.

★ Stuck partway through?

If you get partway down this list and you're still stuck, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. I can often talk through the rest with you right over the phone.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you're most of the way to solving it.

- ❑ Walk the basics first, in order: fuel, choke, switch, oil, clear vents.
- ❑ Start with nothing plugged in — add loads only after it's running.
- ❑ Stale fuel after storage is the single most common cause of a no-start.
- ❑ A low-oil shutoff that blocks starting is doing its job, not malfunctioning.
- ❑ If it runs but nothing has power, check breakers, GFCI outlets, and the cords before the generator itself.
- ❑ Gas smell, sparks, or damaged wiring mean stop and call a small-engine pro.

✓ Go in order, resist the urge to skip

It's tempting to jump straight to 'maybe it's the carburetor.' Walking the basics first solves more no-starts, in less time, than any single advanced fix.

Before you touch anything, a quick safety check

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, troubleshooting a generator is perfectly ordinary. Just rule out the rare exception first.

If you smell gasoline, see sparks, notice damaged or melted wiring, or anything about the situation feels off, stop right here. Move away, don't attempt to start it, and call a small-engine pro or me instead.

Assuming none of that applies, the rest of this guide is safe, ordinary troubleshooting — the same steps I'd walk through with you over the phone.

! When in doubt, stop

There's no troubleshooting tip in this guide worth a fire or a shock. If something feels wrong, it's always fine to stop and call.

Walk the basics, in order, every time

Before suspecting anything complicated, confirm these five simple things.

- ☐ Fuel valve is on, and the fuel isn't old or stale.
- ☐ Choke is set correctly for a cold start.
- ☐ Run switch or ignition is in the on position.
- ☐ Oil is full — a low level can trigger the shutoff and block starting.
- ☐ The area around and above the generator is clear.

✓ Do this every single time

Even on a generator you've started a hundred times, this thirty-second walk-through catches most no-starts before you go looking any further.

Fuel: on, fresh, and flowing

More no-starts trace back to fuel than to anything else on this list.

Confirm the fuel valve or petcock is actually open — it's an easy thing to bump or forget. Then look at the fuel itself: if it's been sitting for months, especially over a season of storage, treat it as a suspect even if the tank isn't empty.

If you're not sure how old the fuel is, and the generator won't start, that uncertainty alone is worth acting on — see the next page.

✓ Sniff test, gently

Old gasoline often smells slightly sour or like varnish rather than the sharp smell of fresh fuel. It's not a perfect test, but it's a useful clue.

The choke, the switch, and the low-oil shutoff

Three simple things, each easy to overlook in the moment.

The choke restricts airflow to help a cold engine catch — make sure it's set the way your manual describes for a cold start, and remember to open it back up once the engine is running, per the manual.

The run switch or ignition has to be in the on position, obviously, but it's a surprisingly common miss when you're in a hurry. And if the oil is low, most generators simply won't start at all — that's the low-oil shutoff doing exactly its job, not a malfunction to chase.

✓ Low oil isn't a mystery to solve

If checking the oil solves it, you're done — just remember to top it off with the grade your manual calls for, and check it before every future start.

The number one cause after storage: stale fuel

If this generator has sat for a season or more, start your suspicion here.

Gasoline begins to break down within months, and stale fuel can gum up a carburetor's tiny passages — the small engine's equivalent of clogged arteries. A generator that cranks fine but won't catch, or catches and quickly dies, often points here.

Our fuel-storage guide covers how to keep fuel fresh with a stabilizer or by running the tank dry before storage, so this doesn't happen next time. For right now, though, a gummed carburetor is usually a small-engine shop's job to clean properly.

! Don't keep cranking on stale fuel

Repeatedly cranking an engine that won't catch on old fuel mostly just runs down a battery or tires out an arm. If fresh fuel doesn't solve it quickly, it's time for the next step, not more cranking.

A fouled or worn spark plug

A small, inexpensive part that causes an outsized share of starting trouble.

A spark plug that's fouled with carbon, oily, or simply worn out can make starting hard or cause rough, uneven running once it does catch. It's usually visible once you pull the plug — a healthy one looks clean, with an even light tan or gray color.

If yours looks heavily blackened, wet, or worn, cleaning or replacing it is a simple, inexpensive fix. Our maintenance guide covers the routine check that catches this before it ever causes a no-start.

✓ Check the gap when you replace it

If you replace the plug, your manual will specify the correct gap. A plug installed with the wrong gap can cause the same rough-running symptoms all over again.

A clogged air filter

The engine needs to breathe, and a dirty filter makes that harder than it should be.

A clogged, dust-choked air filter restricts the airflow an engine needs to run properly, which can make starting difficult or cause rough running once it's going. It's one of the simplest things to check and among the easiest to fix.

Pull the filter and look at it in good light. If it's visibly dark, clogged, or damaged, clean or replace it per your manual's instructions — our maintenance guide covers the seasonal rhythm for this.

✓ Keep a spare filter with your supplies

A spare air filter takes up almost no space and means you're never waiting on a part when this turns out to be the culprit.

A tripped breaker or a CO-shutoff lockout

Two different things that can both look like 'it just won't start.'

Many generators have their own small circuit breakers, which can trip from an overload and simply need resetting. Check the generator's own panel, not just your home's breaker box.

If your generator has the automatic carbon-monoxide shutoff, a high CO reading may have triggered a lockout that keeps it from restarting right away. Don't just reset it and move on without understanding why — figure out what caused the CO buildup first, since restarting in the same spot could trigger it again.

! A CO lockout is doing its job

If your generator's CO shutoff has tripped, treat that as a real warning, not a nuisance to override. Check that it's outdoors, far enough away, and that the exhaust is pointed away from the house before trying again.

A dead electric-start battery

If the push-button or key start does nothing at all, the battery is a likely suspect.

Electric-start batteries can lose their charge from sitting, especially over a long winter. If yours does nothing when you press the button — no click, no crank — that's the pattern to expect from a dead or weak battery.

Most generators with electric start still have a recoil (pull) cord as a backup for exactly this situation. Use it to get running now, and deal with charging or replacing the battery afterward.

✓ Keep the recoil cord limber

Give the recoil cord a pull now and then, even when you don't need it, just so you know it's there and working when the battery lets you down.

Start with nothing plugged in

A surprisingly common, surprisingly simple reason for a no-start.

A generator asked to start while something is already plugged in and drawing power has a harder job than one starting with no load at all. If you're troubleshooting a no-start, unplug everything first, get it running, and only then plug things back in, one at a time.

This is also just good practice every time you start a generator, no-start or not — it's easier on the engine and on you.

✓ This one's easy to forget mid-outage

In the rush of an actual outage, it's easy to leave a cord plugged in from last time. Make unplugging everything the very first step of your starting routine, every time.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

A no-start is stressful anywhere, but what's actually at stake — and how you respond — can look different depending on where you live.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, a stubborn generator is a real inconvenience, but you likely have some cushion — nearby help, a hardware store, or simply a shorter outage to wait out.

- Work through this guide's basics calmly; you're rarely racing a clock.
- A local small-engine shop or hardware store is usually a short drive away if you get stuck.
- A smaller inverter-style unit has fewer systems to troubleshoot, which often makes the fix simpler.
- If a neighbor also has a generator, a second pair of eyes can help you spot something you missed.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out on a well, a no-start is more than an inconvenience — it can mean no water at all, and help may be farther away and slower to arrive.

- Keep a small spares kit on hand — a spark plug, an air filter, fuel stabilizer — since a parts run may take a while.
- Being farther from a small-engine shop makes it worth learning this guide's basics well before you actually need them.
- If the generator feeds a well pump, treat a no-start as urgent and work through this guide promptly rather than waiting it out.
- Consider stored drinking water as a backup for the time it takes to get a stubborn generator running again.

★ Talk me through it

If you're stuck out at the house and the basics haven't solved it, call me at (330) 200-8042. I can often help you sort out what's next right over the phone.

It runs, but nothing in the house has power

A different problem from a no-start — and usually not the generator's fault at all.

If the engine is running smoothly but nothing is getting power, the issue is often downstream of the generator itself — in the breakers, the outlets, the cords, or the hookup.

- Check the generator's own circuit breakers and any GFCI buttons — reset if tripped.
- Check household GFCI outlets too; a tripped one can cut power to a whole run of outlets.
- Inspect the cord itself for damage, and try a different cord if you have one.
- If you're using an interlock or transfer switch, confirm it's set to the generator position, not utility.

✓ Test with something simple first

Plug in a single lamp or a phone charger before assuming the worst. It's a fast way to tell whether the problem is the generator's output or something further down the line.

Match the symptom to the likely fix

A quick-reference table for the most common patterns.

Symptom	Likely cause
Cranks but won't catch	Old fuel, choke setting, or a fouled spark plug
Won't crank at all	Switch position, low oil, or a dead battery
Starts, then dies quickly	Stale fuel or a clogged air filter
Runs rough or surges	Air filter or spark plug
Runs fine, but no power out	Breakers, GFCI, cords, or the hookup

✓ **Start with the likeliest, not the hardest**

Work left to right, checking the simplest and most common cause first. Most of the time, you won't need to go any further than that.

When to stop and call a small-engine pro

Most no-starts are simple. A few genuinely aren't, and it's worth knowing the difference.

If you've walked the basics, checked fuel, the spark plug, and the air filter, and it still won't start — or run right — that's a reasonable point to call in a small-engine shop rather than guessing further.

Stop immediately, without troubleshooting further, for any smell of gasoline, visible sparks, damaged or exposed wiring, or anything that simply feels uncertain or unsafe. I can talk you through the basics on this list, but carburetor work and engine repair are a small-engine shop's job, not a phone-call fix.

! There's no prize for pushing through

A generator is a tool, not a test of willpower. Calling a pro after a reasonable, calm attempt is the smart choice, not a defeat.

Common mistakes while troubleshooting

A few habits that make a no-start harder to solve, not easier.

- **Skipping straight to complicated fixes** before ruling out fuel, the switch, and the oil.
- **Cranking repeatedly on old fuel** instead of trying fresh fuel first.
- **Flooding the engine** by leaving the choke on too long once it's running.
- **Ignoring a low-oil shutoff** and assuming the generator itself is broken.
- **Troubleshooting near an open flame or lit cigarette** while checking the fuel system.

! Patience beats force

Yanking harder on a pull-cord, or forcing anything that resists, is far more likely to hurt you or the machine than to fix the actual problem.

A simple checklist to keep nearby

Print this page and keep it with the generator's manual.

- ☐ Fuel valve on, fuel not old.
- ☐ Choke set for a cold start.
- ☐ Run switch or ignition on.
- ☐ Oil level full.
- ☐ Area clear, nothing plugged in.
- ☐ If it won't catch: try fresh fuel, then check the spark plug.
- ☐ If it won't crank: check the switch, oil level, then the battery.
- ☐ If it runs but there's no power: check breakers, GFCI, cords, hookup.

✓ Post it, don't just file it

A checklist folded into a drawer doesn't help you at 2 a.m. in a storm. Tape a copy near the generator itself.

A small spare-parts kit prevents most of this

A few inexpensive items on a shelf save a lot of mid-outage frustration.

A spare spark plug, a spare air filter for your model, and a bottle of fuel stabilizer cover a surprising share of the causes in this guide. None of them cost much, and all of them keep for a long time on a shelf.

Keep them with the generator's manual, so everything you need for basic troubleshooting is in one place when you need it, not scattered around the garage.

✓ Check the fit before you need it

Confirm the spare parts actually match your model's part numbers ahead of time, not during an outage when it's too late to swap them.

Preventing the next no-start

Nearly everything in this guide is easier to prevent than to fix.

Regular oil checks, a seasonal look at the air filter and spark plug, and exercising the generator under load every so often catch most of these problems long before they turn into a no-start. Our maintenance guide covers that whole rhythm.

And since stale fuel is the single biggest cause of a no-start after storage, a stabilizer and a rotation plan — or simply running the tank dry before a long stretch of storage — solves the most common problem before it starts. Our fuel-storage guide walks through both approaches.

★ Let's build a routine you'll actually keep

A little regular care prevents most of the troubleshooting in this guide from ever being necessary. I'm glad to help you set up a simple routine on a visit. Call (330) 200-8042.

Common Questions

The troubleshooting questions I hear most often, answered plainly.

Q: Why won't my generator start after sitting all summer?

Stale fuel is the most likely cause. Gasoline breaks down within months and can gum up the carburetor. Try fresh fuel first; if that doesn't solve it, the carburetor may need a proper cleaning.

Q: Is it normal for a generator not to start if the oil is low?

Yes — most generators have a low-oil shutoff that deliberately prevents starting when oil is low, to protect the engine. Top off the oil and it should start normally.

Q: I smell gas — what should I do?

Stop immediately. Move away from the generator, don't attempt to start it, and call a small-engine pro or me. A fuel smell is one of the few things in this guide that means stop, not keep troubleshooting.

Q: How long should I try before giving up and calling someone?

If you've calmly worked through this guide's basics and the usual culprits without success, that's a reasonable point to call a small-engine shop rather than keep guessing.

Q: Can I fix a clogged carburetor myself?

It's possible with the right know-how, but it's genuinely a small-engine shop's job for most folks. I can help you figure out whether that's likely the problem, but the repair itself belongs with a pro.

★ There's no silly troubleshooting question

If you're standing in the driveway unsure what to try next, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. Talking it through together is exactly what I'm here for.

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 getting a stubborn generator running again 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.

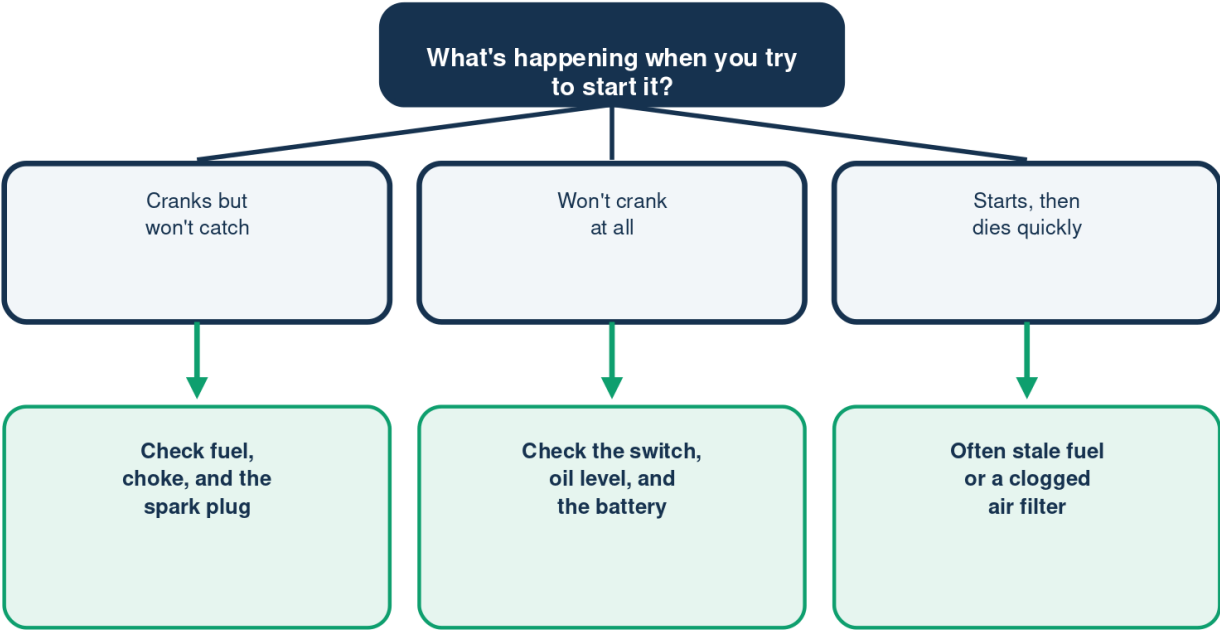
When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day,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

Why Won't It Start?

A calm decision guide for the most common symptoms

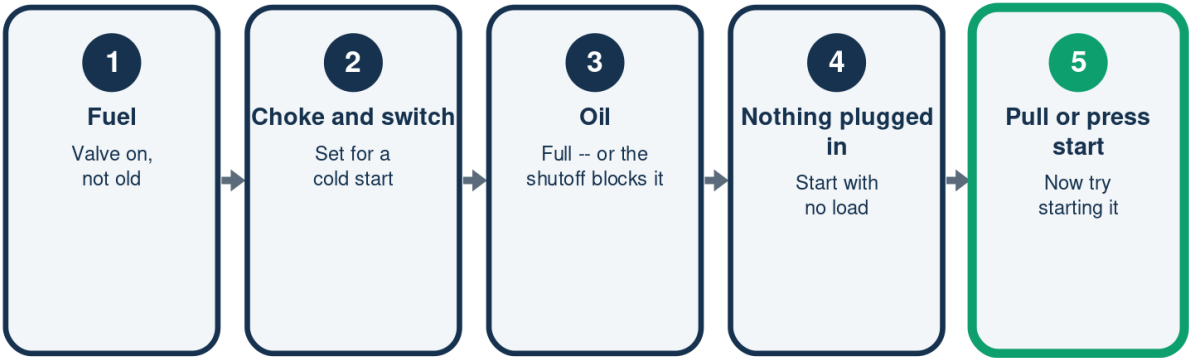


Gas smell, sparks, or damaged wiring? Stop and call a small-engine pro.

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

Walk the Basics, In Order

Five simple checks before anything else



In order, every time -- most no-starts stop here.

Common Culprits, At a Glance

The usual reasons a generator won't start

	How common	What helps
Stale fuel	The #1 cause	Fresh fuel, run dry next time
Fouled spark plug	Very common	Clean or replace it
Clogged air filter	Common	Clean or replace it
Dead battery	Common on electric start	Use the recoil

Most no-starts trace back to one of these four.

Runs, But Nothing Has Power?

Work through these before assuming the worst

	What might be off	Quick fix
Breakers	A tripped switch	Reset it firmly
Outlets / GFCI	A tripped GFCI button	Press reset
The cord	Damage or a bad end	Try a different cord
The hookup	Switch not set right	Check the position

If it's still dark after this, it's a good time to call.



Need a Real Person?

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You just have to remember you can call.
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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.

— *Bill*



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