



An Extended Guide · No. 1243

Inverter vs. Conventional Generators

Which kind is right for your home

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Hello, and welcome

If you've started shopping for a generator and found yourself staring at two very different kinds — the sleek quiet ones and the big loud ones — and wondered which is right for your home, you're in exactly the right place. This guide sorts it out in plain English.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. I've spent more than 30 years helping folks get comfortable with their technology — patiently, in plain language, and at their own pace. Think of this guide as me sitting at your kitchen table, walking through it with you one step at a time.

In these pages we'll lay the two kinds side by side — how each one is built, which is quieter, which makes cleaner power, which sips less fuel, which weighs less, and which gives you the most watts for your money. We'll see how the choice changes whether you live in town or out in the country on a well, and we'll cover staying safe. No jargon and no sales pitch — just enough to help you choose with confidence.

You do not have to read this all at once, and you certainly don't have to memorize it. Skip to whatever you need, keep it handy, and know that a real person is only a phone call away.

★ How to use this guide

Each page stands on its own. Read one, take what's useful, and come back for the next when you're ready. If a step ever feels fuzzy, that's on my writing — not on you — and you can always call me at (330) 200-8042.

Two kinds, one big question

When you shop for a portable generator, you'll run into two families of machine that look and behave quite differently. Knowing which is which is half the battle.

The first is the **conventional** generator — the big, open-frame kind with a metal cage around it that most people picture when they hear the word. It has been made the same basic way for generations: an engine turning a generator head, sending power straight out to the outlets.

The second is the **inverter** generator — usually a smaller, enclosed unit in a plastic shell, quieter and newer. It does an extra electronic step that the conventional kind doesn't, and that one step is behind almost every difference between them.

Neither one is the "good" kind and the other the "bad" kind. They're different tools for different jobs, the way a compact car and a pickup truck are both fine vehicles for different needs. The rest of this guide is about matching the tool to your job.

✓ A quick way to tell them apart

At the store, the open metal frame with big wheels and a loud reputation is the conventional kind. The closed-up box with a handle on top — often called "suitcase" style — is usually an inverter. When in doubt, the label or a quick call to me settles it.

What's going on inside each one

You don't need to be an engineer to choose well, but a peek under the hood makes every later difference click into place.

A **conventional** generator is beautifully simple. An engine spins a generator head at a steady speed, and the electricity it makes goes straight out to the outlets. To keep that power steady, the engine has to run flat-out the whole time, whether you're powering a whole worksite or a single light bulb. That simplicity is why it's rugged, cheap to build, and loud.

An **inverter** generator starts the same way — an engine makes power — but then adds a clever step. It turns that raw power into steady, battery-style power, then electronically rebuilds it into a smooth, even wave very close to what comes out of your wall. Little computer brains handle all of it.

That extra step costs more to build, but it buys three things at once: cleaner power, because the wave is rebuilt smooth; quieter running, because the engine no longer has to race flat-out; and better fuel economy, for the same reason. Hold on to that idea — nearly every difference ahead traces back to this one design choice.

★ Why this matters to you

You'll never touch the electronics inside. I bring it up only because once you understand that one extra step, you'll understand why an inverter is quiet and clean and a conventional unit is loud and rough — and you can stop taking anyone's word for it.

Quiet vs. loud: the noise difference

For a lot of folks, noise is the deciding factor — and it's the difference people notice first when a generator kicks on next door.

A conventional generator runs its engine **flat-out** from the moment you start it until you shut it down. It doesn't matter if you're running the whole house or a single lamp — the engine roars at full speed the entire time. That's why the old ones have a reputation for drowning out conversation and rattling the neighbors.

An inverter generator is smarter about it. Because of that extra electronic step, it can let the engine **speed up and slow down** to match how much power you're actually using. Running just a few lights and the fridge? The engine settles to a soft hum. This is usually a switch labeled **eco** or **economy** mode.

The result is a real, get-out-of-your-chair difference. An inverter in eco mode is often quiet enough to talk over and kind enough to run on a close-in patio. A big conventional unit is better set well away from the house, where its steady roar won't wear on you or the folks next door.

✓ Decibels, in plain terms

Loudness is measured in decibels, and lower numbers mean quieter — but the scale is tricky, so a small number difference can sound like a big one. Rather than chase the figures, trust your ears: if quiet matters to you, the inverter is almost always the calmer choice.

Clean power vs. rougher power

This is the difference that matters most if you'll be plugging in a nice television, a computer, or anything with a sensitive circuit board.

Electricity from your wall flows in a smooth, regular wave. Modern electronics — TVs, computers, tablets, game consoles, newer appliances with digital controls — expect that smooth wave and can act up if they don't get it.

A conventional generator puts out **rougher, choppier** power with little spikes in it. For a work light, a drill, or a space heater, that's perfectly fine — those things don't care one bit. But for delicate electronics, that rougher power can, over time, cause trouble.

An inverter generator rebuilds its power into that same smooth wave you get from the wall. Engineers measure how smooth power is — they call it **total harmonic distortion**, or THD — and inverter units score very well, clean enough that the makers are comfortable recommending them for sensitive gear. In plain terms: plug in your good TV or laptop without worry.

★ The one-line version

If your main goal is backing up the fridge, some lights, the phones, the internet, and the television, clean power is a genuine, practical reason to lean inverter. A conventional unit can still run those things — many people do — but the inverter is the gentler, worry-free choice for electronics.

Fuel use and how long a tank lasts

How thirsty a generator is — and how long it'll run on a tank — often comes down to the same design difference behind the noise.

Because a conventional generator's engine runs flat-out no matter the load, it burns fuel at a fairly steady, thirsty rate whether you're using all of its power or a little. That matters most in a long outage, when the gas stations may be closed and every gallon counts.

An inverter generator, running in eco mode, throttles the engine down to match a light load — so when you're only powering the essentials, it sips fuel and a tank stretches much further. Under a heavy load the two get closer, since the inverter's engine has to work hard too. Its big advantage is at the light loads most homes actually run.

One honest note: a **bigger tank** can outlast a thriftier engine. A large conventional unit with a big fuel tank might run a long while simply because it holds more gas. So think about both the sipping and the tank size together, not just one.

✓ Both kinds like fresh fuel

Whichever you choose, gasoline goes stale in a few months. A splash of fuel stabilizer, a rotated supply, or a propane-capable unit keeps you ready. There's a full fuel-and-runtime guide in this series if you'd like to dig in.

Weight and moving it around

A generator only helps if you can actually get it where you need it — so weight and portability are worth an honest look.

The small, quiet inverter units everyone pictures are often light enough to carry in one hand, with a handle on top like a suitcase. That's a big part of their charm: easy to lift into the car for a tailgate, easy to tuck in a closet, easy for one person to set out on the patio.

Conventional generators tend to be **heavier** — that open metal frame and bigger engine add up. The good news is that most mid-size and larger ones come with real wheels and a fold-down handle, so you roll them like a wheelbarrow rather than lift them. On grass or gravel, though, a heavy one can still be a two-person job.

There's a middle ground worth knowing: **larger** inverter units exist too, and once they get big they gain weight and wheels just like a conventional unit. The featherweight advantage belongs to the small inverters, not to inverters in general.

✓ Ask who will actually move it

Picture the real person setting it out at 2 a.m. in a storm. If that's you and lifting is hard, favor a lighter unit or one with sturdy wheels — and remember it still has to end up 20 feet from the house. I can help you weigh the trade-off.

What each one costs per watt

Dollar for dollar, the two kinds are priced differently — and knowing why helps you spend wisely instead of over- or under-buying.

For the same amount of power, a **conventional** generator almost always costs less than an inverter. All those clever electronics inside the inverter cost money to build, and you pay for them. So if you measure strictly by watts-per-dollar, the conventional kind wins — sometimes by a wide margin.

What you're buying with the inverter's higher price is the quiet, the clean power, and the better fuel economy at light loads. For many folks — especially those backing up electronics in a close neighborhood — that's money very well spent. For others, it's paying for things they don't need.

So the honest question isn't "which is cheaper," it's "what am I paying for, and do I need it?" A quiet, clean unit for the essentials is worth the premium to a lot of people. Raw watts for a workshop or a big job are cheaper in the conventional aisle.

★ Don't just chase the lowest sticker

The cheapest price isn't always the cheapest to live with — a loud, thirsty unit you dread running, or a too-small one that can't do the job, is no bargain. Tell me what you want to power and your budget, and I'll help you find the sweet spot. That's a five-minute phone call at (330) 200-8042.

When you need the most raw watts

There's one job where the conventional generator really pulls ahead: when you simply need a lot of power for the least money.

Big **open-frame conventional** generators reach into high wattages that the quiet little inverters can't touch — and they do it for a lot less money per watt. If you're running a workshop full of tools, a rugged job site, or a whole house full of big appliances, that raw muscle is exactly what you want.

They're also the natural pick when you need heavy **240-volt** loads — the kind that run a well pump, a water heater, or central air. Many large conventional units include a 120/240-volt outlet built for exactly that, at a price that's hard to match.

Inverters can reach big wattages too — **larger** inverter units exist, some with 120/240-volt output — but you'll pay more for the same watts. You'd choose one of those when you want the most power **and** the quiet and clean power. If you just need the most watts and don't mind the noise, conventional is the value winner.

! Big power means a bigger conversation

Once you're talking about running 240-volt equipment or wiring into the house, you've moved past "plug in a cord" and into work that needs a licensed electrician and a proper transfer switch. It's very doable — it's just a bigger project. More on that a few pages ahead.

The inverter's trick: pairing two units

Here's a handy ability most inverter generators have that conventional ones don't — the option to team two of them together.

Many inverter units are **parallel-capable**, which means you can join two matching units with a special cord or kit and have them work as one, sharing the load. Two small units clicked together make roughly as much power as one bigger one.

Why is that nice? A few reasons. You can **buy one now and add a twin later** when your budget allows, instead of buying big up front. Two lighter units are **easier to carry** than one heavy one. And on a small day, you can run just one to save fuel, then add the second when you need more.

One important limit, so you're not caught out: pairing two units gives you **more 120-volt power, not 240 volts**. So two little inverters paired together still can't run a 240-volt well pump — that takes a single unit with true 120/240-volt output. It's a common and costly misunderstanding, so I want you to know it up front.

✓ If you think you might grow into it

Planning to start small and maybe expand? Buy a unit that's clearly labeled parallel-capable, and if you can, note the exact kit or matching model it needs so a second one lines up later. There's a full guide on pairing units in this series.

The two kinds, side by side

Here's everything we've covered in one quick table you can glance at whenever you need a reminder.

	Inverter	Conventional
Noise	Quiet, adjusts to load	Loud, runs flat-out
Power quality	Clean, smooth wave	Rougher, some spikes
Fuel use	Thrifty at light load	Steady, thirstier
Weight	Small ones very light	Heavier, usually wheeled
Cost per watt	Higher	Lower
Most watts for money	No	Yes
Big 240V loads	Larger units only	Common, affordable
Pair two together	Often yes	No

Read down the two columns and a picture forms: the inverter is the quiet, clean, grab-and-go choice, and the conventional is the raw-power, best-value choice. Neither column is all wins — which is exactly why the right answer depends on you, not on the machine.

If you live in town: city and suburb

Most of my customers here in town — in Kent, Ravenna, Streetsboro, Aurora — live close to their neighbors and on city water, and that shapes which kind of generator makes the most sense.

In a close neighborhood, **noise is a real consideration** — not just for your own comfort, but for the folks whose bedroom window is thirty feet from your driveway. During a long outage, a generator that roars flat-out day and night wears on everyone. This is where the inverter's quiet is a genuine gift.

Because you're on city water, you don't have the well-pump worry that country folks do, so you rarely need the big 240-volt muscle a conventional unit is prized for. A small-to-midsize inverter usually covers the whole in-town wish list: the **refrigerator and freezer**, some **lights**, the **furnace blower** or a fan, and the **phones, internet, and TV**.

So for most in-town homes, the inverter is the natural fit — quiet enough to be a good neighbor, clean enough for your electronics, and just the right size. You give up some raw watts-per-dollar, but you likely don't need them.

! Apartments and condos are a special case

If you're in an apartment or condo with no safe outdoor spot well away from windows, a fuel generator of either kind usually isn't practical — and running one on a balcony or in a garage is dangerous. A quiet battery "power station" that charges from the wall is often the better tool. I can help you weigh it.

If you're in the country on a well

Out in the townships — Atwater, Rootstown, Deerfield, Palmyra — many of my customers are on a private well, and that one fact changes the inverter-versus-conventional question more than anything else.

Here's why: when the power goes out, so does your water, because the **well pump** can't run without electricity. No faucets, no showers, no flushing. For a lot of country homes, backing up that pump is the whole reason to own a generator — and it's a job the small, quiet inverters simply cannot do.

! The honest truth about well pumps

Most home well pumps run on 240 volts, and the small, quiet inverter generators most folks picture put out only 120 volts — so they cannot run the pump at all. For a well you need a larger inverter unit with a 120/240-volt outlet, sized to your pump, and a proper way to connect it. Pairing two little units together does not fix this — two 120-volt units still only make 120 volts. I'll help you get the right size, and bring in a licensed electrician for the hookup.

So the well changes your choice. You have two honest paths: a **large inverter** unit with true 120/240-volt output — quieter and cleaner, but pricier — or a **conventional** generator big enough for the pump, which gives you that 240-volt muscle for less money. Either way you'll want a licensed electrician to wire it in safely.

What a small inverter **can** still do for a country home is real and worth having: the **refrigerator and freezer, lights, phones and internet**, a fan or space heater. Some folks even keep a small quiet one for those essentials and a bigger unit for the pump. And no matter what you buy, store a few days of drinking water and fill a bathtub before a big storm — a generator that can't start the pump still can't make water.

The safety talk: carbon monoxide

Whichever kind you choose — inverter or conventional — both burn fuel, and both give off carbon monoxide. This one safety rule is exactly the same for both, and it never bends.

Every generator that burns gasoline or propane makes carbon monoxide, or "CO" — a gas you cannot see or smell. It is the one real danger with a generator, and it is completely avoidable. More people are hurt by running a generator in the wrong place than by anything else, so please read this page twice.

Outside only — no exceptions

Never run a generator indoors, and that includes the garage, the basement, a shed, a carport, or a covered porch — even with the door up or a window open. CO pools and seeps into the house. The only safe place is outdoors, in the open air.

At least 20 feet away, exhaust pointed away

Set the generator at least 20 feet from the house, and turn it so the exhaust blows **away** from any door, window, or vent. Don't tuck it against the wall to hide it or keep it dry — give it room to breathe and let the fumes drift off.

Alarms are your safety net

Put working carbon-monoxide alarms on every level of your home and near the bedrooms, and use ones with a battery backup so they work when the power is out. Test them now, before storm season, not during it.

Which kind for which need

Let's turn all of this into a simple framework. Most people fall into one of three groups, and each has a clear best answer.

You want quiet backup for the essentials and your electronics. Fridge, lights, phones, internet, TV, maybe a CPAP — and you'd like it quiet and gentle on your gear. That's the **inverter's** sweet spot, hands down. This is most in-town homes.

You want the most raw watts for the least money, or you've got big, rugged jobs. A workshop, a job site, a barn, a house full of large appliances, and you don't mind the noise. That's the **conventional** generator's home turf — the value-and-muscle winner.

You want to back up the whole house in a storm, including 240-volt loads. Then you need real wattage: a **large conventional** unit, or a **large inverter** if you also want quiet and clean power — plus a licensed electrician to wire it in. We'll spend the next page on this one.

★ Not sure which group you're in?

That's the most common call I get, and it takes about ten minutes to sort out. Tell me what you'd want running in an outage and where you live, and I'll tell you which kind — and roughly what size — makes sense. Call me at (330) 200-8042.

Backing up the whole house in a storm

When folks say they want to "run the whole house," they're describing the biggest job a portable generator takes on — and it deserves its own page.

Whole-home backup means real power: not just the fridge and a few lights, but the **furnace, the well pump or water heater, maybe central air**, and several circuits at once. That's high wattage, and it usually includes those 240-volt loads a small inverter can't touch.

You have two good options. A **large conventional** generator gives you the most watts for your money — the value pick. A **large inverter** unit with 120/240-volt output does the same job while staying quieter and cleaner, for a higher price. Both can do it; it's the quiet-and-clean-versus-value trade-off again, just at a bigger size.

The part that's the same either way: connecting a generator to your house wiring must be done through a proper **transfer switch** or interlock, installed by a licensed electrician. Never let anyone "back-feed" power through a dryer or range cord — it's dangerous to you and to the utility crews working the lines. This is the one place I always bring in a pro.

! This is a plan, not an impulse buy

Whole-home backup is worth doing right: the correct size unit, a proper hookup, and a clear list of what runs at once. Rushing it leads to a generator that trips, or an unsafe connection. I'm glad to help you plan the whole thing and coordinate the electrician so you have one point of contact.

The honest truth: neither wins for everyone

If you came to this guide hoping I'd crown one kind the winner, here's the honest answer — it depends, and that's genuinely good news.

It's good news because it means you're not choosing between a "right" and a "wrong" generator. You're matching a tool to your life. The quiet, clean inverter and the powerful, affordable conventional are both excellent at what they do — they just do different things.

Where people go wrong is buying on one number alone. Chasing the lowest price can land you with a loud, thirsty unit you hate to run. Chasing the quietest unit can land you paying for watts you'll never use, or with one too small for the well. The trick is to start with **your** needs, not the machine's specs.

So here's the whole guide boiled down: figure out what you want to power, whether quiet matters where you live, and whether you're facing a 240-volt load like a well. Those three answers point straight at the right kind. Everything else is detail.

★ Both can be the right answer

I've helped folks who were thrilled with a tiny quiet inverter, and folks thrilled with a big rugged conventional unit — because each one fit that person. There's no shame in either choice. The only mistake is guessing. Let's not guess — call me at (330) 200-8042.

Quick answers to common questions

A handful of questions come up almost every time someone's deciding between the two. Here are the short, honest answers.

Q: Can a conventional generator run my TV and computer?

Usually yes, but its power is rougher, which can stress sensitive electronics over time. If electronics are your main job, the inverter is the safer, worry-free choice.

Q: Is an inverter always the better generator?

No. It's quieter and cleaner, but you pay more per watt, and the small ones can't handle big 240-volt loads. For raw power on a budget, conventional wins.

Q: Can I make one quiet enough by putting it far away?

Distance helps any generator, and you must keep either kind at least 20 feet out anyway. But a conventional unit will still be the louder machine at that distance.

Q: Which lasts longer or is more reliable?

Both last for years with basic care. Conventional engines are mechanically simpler; inverters have more electronics. Buy a trusted brand either way and keep up the oil and fuel.

Q: Can I start small and add power later?

With many inverters, yes — pair a second matching unit. Conventional units don't pair, so buy the size you need from the start.

If your question isn't here, it's not a silly one — give me a call and we'll talk it through.

What to check before you buy either kind

Once you've settled on which kind fits, these are the things that actually matter when you're standing in the aisle or scrolling a website.

- **Enough watts for your list, with headroom** — sized to what you want to run at once, plus a little extra. Bigger isn't automatically better; it's heavier and thirstier.
- **A carbon-monoxide shutoff** — a built-in sensor that kills the engine if CO builds up. Worth having on either kind; look for a safety-standard label.
- **The right outlets** — regular household plugs for sure, and a 120/240-volt twist-lock outlet if you'll ever back up a well pump or house circuits.
- **Parallel-capable** — if you picked an inverter and might add a twin later, make sure it allows it.
- **Wheels and a handle** — especially on the heavier conventional units. Can you actually move it where it needs to go?
- **A trusted brand and warranty** — buy from a real store, not a stranger online, so help is there if you need it.

There's a full buyer's-checklist guide in this series if you'd like to go deeper — or just call me and we'll narrow it down together in ten minutes.

How I can help

Choosing between an inverter and a conventional generator is exactly the kind of decision where a little friendly, no-pressure guidance saves you money and second-guessing — and that's what I do for folks around Portage County.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech right here in Portage County. I'm a tech-help person, not a power company and not a pushy salesman — I help folks pick the right gear, set it up, and feel confident using it. With generators, that means helping you choose a unit that fits your home and your budget, showing you how to run it safely, and getting your internet, TV, and devices happily back on once the power's flowing.

For the parts that involve your home's wiring — a 240-volt well pump, a whole-home transfer switch — I'm not a licensed electrician, so I'll coordinate with one and handle the rest. You get one friendly point of contact for the whole project, whichever kind of generator you choose.

Three easy ways to get help

- **An in-home visit** — a flat \$99 first visit. I come to you, here in Portage County, and every visit is 30-day come-back-free.
- **Remote help** — a flat \$49 screen-share, up to two hours, for the things I can sort out without coming over (it's free for Support Plan members).
- **A Support Plan** — \$39 a month for folks who'd like me on call all year.

A simple way to decide

Answer these few questions and the right kind of generator will usually be obvious. Tick the boxes that apply to you.

- ☐ I want it quiet — close neighbors, or I just don't like the noise. (Leans inverter.)
- ☐ I'll be running sensitive electronics — a good TV, a computer, medical gear. (Leans inverter.)
- ☐ I want the most watts for the least money, and noise doesn't bother me. (Leans conventional.)
- ☐ I have a 240-volt well pump, or want to run big appliances. (Needs a large unit — conventional, or a large inverter.)
- ☐ I want to back up much of the whole house in a storm. (Large unit plus an electrician.)
- ☐ I'd like to start small and maybe add power later. (Leans a parallel-capable inverter.)
- ☐ I need to lift and carry it myself. (Leans a lighter inverter, or one with good wheels.)

Most folks find their checks cluster on one side, and that's their answer. If yours are split, that's exactly the ten-minute conversation I love to have — and there's no charge for a quick phone call to point you the right way.

The short version

If you remember nothing else from this guide, remember these:

- There are two kinds: the quiet, clean, fuel-thrifty inverter, and the loud, powerful, budget-friendly conventional. Both are good tools.
- An inverter wins for quiet backup and sensitive electronics — most in-town homes. A conventional wins for the most raw watts per dollar and big, rugged jobs.
- The small quiet inverters can't run a 240-volt well pump; that takes a large inverter with 120/240-volt output or a conventional unit, plus an electrician.
- Whole-home backup means a big unit of either kind and a proper transfer switch wired in by a pro — never a back-fed cord.
- Both burn fuel, so both run outside only, 20 feet from the house, exhaust away, with working CO alarms indoors. And I'm a phone call away.

Inverter vs. Conventional at a Glance

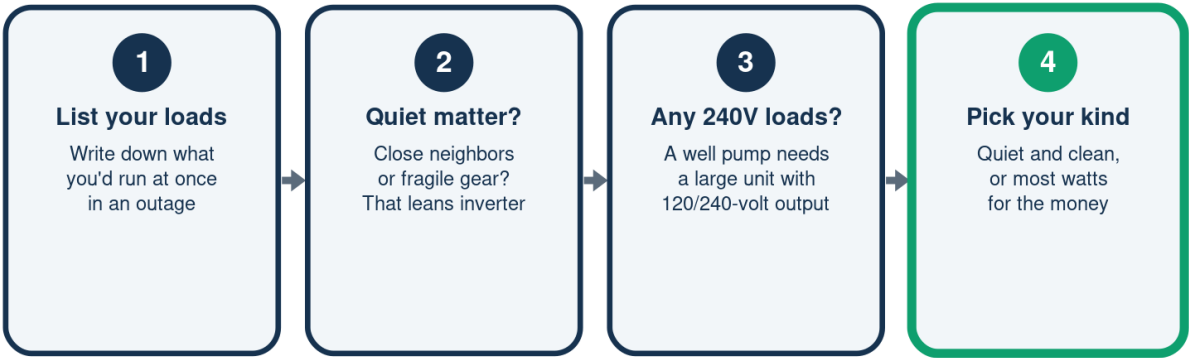
Two kinds of generator, side by side

	Inverter	Conventional
Noise	Quiet, adjusts	Loud, flat-out
Power	Clean, smooth	Rougher
Fuel use	Thrifty (light)	Steady, thirsty
Weight	Small ones light	Heavier, wheeled
Cost per watt	Higher	Lower
Big 240V loads	Larger units only	Common, cheaper
Pair two up	Often yes	No

Quiet, clean, grab-and-go, or the most raw watts for the money.

Choosing in Four Steps

From your needs to the right kind



Your needs point to the kind; call Bill if you're split.

Which Kind Fits You Best?

Match the generator to the job

	Inverter	Conventional
Best for	Quiet backup	Raw power, value
Electronics	Gentle, clean	Works, rougher
Neighbors	Barely hear it	They'll hear it
Well pump	Large units only	Common, cheaper
Job site	Light-duty	Rugged, roomy
Your budget	Pay for quiet	Best value

In town and electronics lean inverter; big loads and budget lean conventional.

Which Kind Is Right for You?

Start with the job you need done

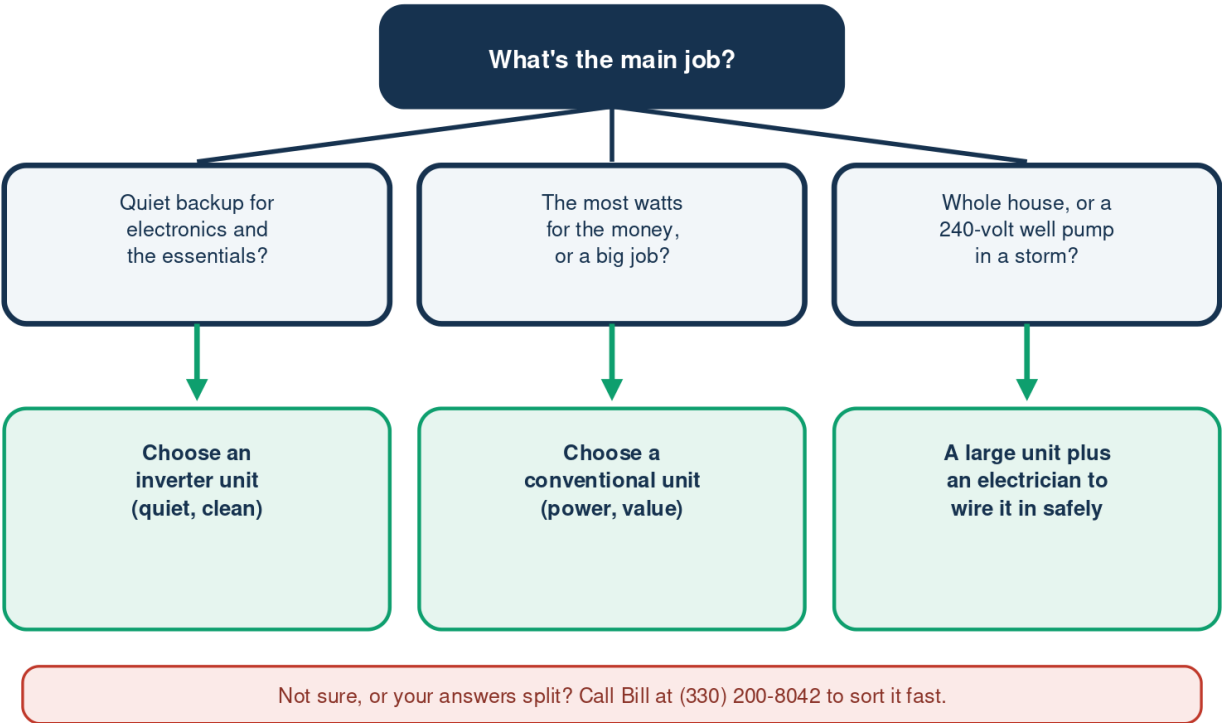


Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.



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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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