



An Extended Guide · No. 1595

Making Your "What Must Stay On" List

Deciding what truly
has to keep running

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! Read this first — size for safety, not just comfort

Getting the size right is not only about comfort — it is about safety, too. An undersized unit gets overloaded and pushed harder than it should be: it runs hot, it strains, and a motor that can't get the surge it needs can hum, overheat, and be damaged. So take the size seriously and always leave yourself a margin — a little extra room — rather than sizing right to the edge. And one safety rule never changes: any fuel-burning generator gives off carbon monoxide, an invisible, deadly gas, so it runs **OUTDOORS ONLY**, well away from the house (the safety agencies say at least 20 feet), never in a garage or on a porch even with the door open. A battery or power station makes no exhaust and is safe to use indoors. A good must-run list is a safety document as much as a shopping list — it makes sure the things that keep you safe are never the things that get crowded out.

It all starts with a simple list

Before any watts, before any shopping, backup power begins with one calm question: when the lights go out, what truly has to stay on? This guide helps you answer it, one room at a time.

I'm Bill. The most important step in sizing is also the least technical, and it's the one folks tend to skip. They jump to picking a machine before deciding what it needs to run — and then they're guessing. We'll do it in the right order instead.

No math on these pages, I promise. Just a friendly walk through your home, sorting what matters from what can wait. Get this list right and every number afterward falls into place.

★ We can build the list together

If you'd like company for the walk-through, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. We'll go room by room and decide what stays on — free, with nothing to sell you.

The whole idea, on one page

If you remember only this page, you can build a list worth sizing from.

- ❑ Backup sizing starts with a list of what must stay on — not with a number.
- ❑ Sort every item into three buckets: must, want, and skip.
- ❑ Musts protect safety, food, and water; wants are comfort; skips can wait.
- ❑ Cover heat or cooling, the fridge and freezer, lights, phone, internet, and anything medical.
- ❑ On a well, water is non-negotiable — the well pump is a must.
- ❑ Write the list down, keep it with your home papers, and adjust it by season.

✓ The one-sentence version

Walk the house, decide what truly must stay on, and write it down — the watts and the shopping come later.

Why the list comes first

It's tempting to start by picking a machine. But without a list, any size is a guess — and the list decides far more than the size.

What's on your list sets the size, shapes the hookup, and even points to the kind of unit that fits. A list with a 240-volt well pump leads somewhere very different from a list of a fridge and a few lights. Start here and the rest follows naturally.

This is also the step that's truly yours. I can read a nameplate or coordinate an electrician, but only you know your home, your winters, and your household's needs. That's why the list has to come from you.

✓ The list is the foundation

Every later choice — watts, surge, margin, machine, hookup — rests on this list. Time spent getting it right is never wasted.

Three buckets: must, want, and skip

Sorting is easier with just three piles. Nearly everything in your home drops cleanly into one of them.

Bucket	What goes here	Everyday examples
Must	Safety, food, water	Fridge, heat, meds, pump
Want	Comfort, convenience	TV, extra lights, coffee
Skip	Can wait for power	Dryer, oven, hot tub

Musts get powered first, always. Wants get added only if there's easy room once the musts are covered. Skips wait for the power to come back — and that's perfectly fine for a day or two.

✓ **Most homes have a short must list**

You may be surprised how few things are true musts. A short must list is a good sign — it usually means a smaller, cheaper, easier unit will do the job.

The must-versus-want test

When an item is hard to place, one plain question settles it almost every time.

Ask: if this stayed off for a day, would someone be unsafe, would food spoil, or would we have no water? If the answer is yes, it's a must. If the honest answer is only 'it would be less pleasant,' it's a want.

Be truthful but not stingy. Heat in an Ohio January is a must, not a luxury. A second television is a want. The test isn't about toughing it out — it's about telling real needs apart from nice-to-haves.

✓ When torn, ask what it protects

If an item protects a person, your food, or your water, lean toward must. If it only adds comfort or convenience, it can sit in the want pile without any guilt.

Category one: staying safe

The first and most important group is anything that keeps your household safe and sound during the outage.

- **Heat or cooling:** a furnace blower or boiler circulator in winter; fans or a window air conditioner in a heat wave.
- **Water where it belongs:** a sump pump to keep the basement dry, and a well pump for running water.
- **Light to move safely:** a few lights so no one trips or falls in the dark.
- **A way to call for help:** a charged phone, and the internet if your phone or alarm leans on it.
- **Medical equipment:** anything a household member's health depends on — more on that shortly.

✓ Safety items are never wants

Everything in this group belongs in the must bucket. When you trim the list later to fit a unit, you trim wants — never the things that keep people safe.

Category two: keeping food

The fridge and freezer almost always make the list — but they also hold their cold for a while, which changes how hard you must run them.

Kept shut, a fridge keeps food safe for about 4 hours, and a full freezer for about 48 hours — about 24 hours if it is half full. Toss any perishables (meat, eggs, leftovers) that sit above 40 degrees for more than 4 hours, and when in doubt, throw it out; never taste to check.

Because both hold cold, you don't have to run them around the clock. You can cycle — run one for a while, then the other — which lets a smaller unit protect your food. Our guide on sizing for the fridge and freezer goes into this in detail.

✓ An appliance thermometer earns its keep

A cheap thermometer in the fridge and another in the freezer let you see, not guess, when it's time to run the unit again — and when a food is still safe.

Category three: staying connected

The internet box, a phone, maybe a computer — small, steady loads, but often your lifeline to family, information, and help.

The modem, router, a phone charger, and a laptop don't draw much and have no real surge. But they're your link to weather updates, medical portals, and loved ones, so for many households they're a genuine must, not a want.

Because they're sensitive to rough power, they pair nicely with a clean inverter or a small battery, and a UPS can bridge the seconds while a generator starts. Our guide on the home office and internet covers this corner of the list.

✓ Small loads, big comfort

Keeping the phone and internet alive costs very little power and buys a lot of peace of mind — an easy addition to almost any list.

Medical needs come first — and deserve a full plan

If anyone's health depends on a device, it belongs at the very top of the list — and backup power is only one layer of the plan.

A CPAP or BiPAP, an oxygen concentrator, a nebulizer, a powered wheelchair, a medication fridge — put every one on the must list. But please don't lean on a generator or battery alone. Treat backup power as one layer among several.

- Keep manufacturer-approved battery backups and car adapters charged and ready.
- Oxygen users: keep backup tanks from your supplier — they need no power at all.
- Register with your utility's medical or priority list before you ever need it.
- Make the plan with your equipment supplier and your doctor, not from a guide.

! In a real emergency, call 911

If someone has trouble breathing, chest pain, confusion, or blue lips, call 911 right away — backup power is never a substitute for emergency care. Our guide on sizing for medical devices covers this gently and in full.

Walk the house, room by room

The surest way to build a complete list is to walk it, not remember it. A list from memory always misses something.

Go room to room and picture the outage. Kitchen: the fridge and freezer. Bedrooms: a lamp, a phone charger, any medical device. Basement: the sump pump, the furnace, the well's pressure tank. Living room: the internet box and a light or two.

Jot each keeper down as you spot it. Walking the house catches the things a kitchen-table list forgets — the freezer in the garage, the pump in the crawlspace, the modem in a closet.

★ Want company on the walk?

I'm glad to walk your home with you and help decide what stays on. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and we'll make a thorough list together, at your own pace.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

The must-run list looks different depending on where you live — and on a well, water and drainage move straight to the top, because they now depend on power.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or a tighter suburban lot, the list is usually short. City water and sewer keep working no matter what the power does, so water never has to go on the list — your musts are food, heat or cooling, light, and staying connected.

- The fridge and freezer, to protect your food.
- Heat in winter (the furnace blower) or cooling in a summer heat wave.
- A few lights, a charged phone, and the internet if you rely on it.
- Any medical device, sitting near the top of the list.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country on a private well, two things change everything: your water and your drainage now run on electricity. The well pump gives you drinking, cooking, and flushing water, and a sump or septic pump keeps things moving — so the water items are simply non-negotiable.

- The well pump is a must — when the power stops, the water stops completely.
- A sump pump, and any septic pump, joins the list, especially during a storm.
- A chest freezer in the garage or barn often belongs on the list too.
- The 240-volt well pump usually sets your whole size — our well-pump and well-and-septic guides go deeper.

★ On a well, water leads the list

If you're on a well, the pump and your drainage anchor everything else. Tell me what your household needs and we'll build a list that puts water first. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042. Our guide on sizing for a well pump goes deeper.

Your list changes with the seasons

A single list can't cover an Ohio year. Heat and cold ask for different things, so it helps to keep two versions.

In winter, heat is the headline must — the furnace blower or the boiler's circulator pump — and a sump pump can matter during a thaw. A long cold-snap outage is exactly when you'll be glad heat made the list.

In summer, cooling and fans move up, and a storm is when a sump pump earns its keep. Through it all, the fridge, the freezer, and — on a well — the pump stay on the list every month of the year.

✓ Keep a winter list and a summer list

Jot both versions on the same page. When the season turns, you already know what your unit needs to cover, with no last-minute scrambling.

Musts that are personal to your home

Beyond the common categories, every home has its own non-negotiables. These are worth naming out loud.

- **Medical:** any device a household member's health depends on.
- **Well water:** if you're on a well, all your running water depends on the pump.
- **A basement that floods:** the sump pump becomes a hard must in wet weather.
- **Work or school from home:** the internet and a computer may be essential, not optional.
- **Pets and livestock:** water and warmth for animals count as musts too.

✓ Your list won't match your neighbor's

That's exactly right. A good must-run list is personal. Copying someone else's is how you end up missing your own true needs.

Wants that sneak onto the list

A few big draws feel essential in the moment but really aren't for a short outage — and chasing them inflates your size and cost.

- **The clothes dryer:** laundry can almost always wait a day or two.
- **The electric oven or range:** a microwave or a camp stove usually bridges the gap.
- **A hot tub or pool pump:** comfort, not necessity.
- **A second air conditioner** for a room no one truly has to use during the outage.

! Chasing wants inflates your unit

Every big extra you add pushes you toward a larger, heavier, thirstier, costlier machine than your true essentials need. Cover the musts first, and add a want only when there's easy room to spare.

Write it down and keep it handy

A list in your head isn't a plan — it's a hope. Put it on paper where you and your family can find it.

Write the list out, sorted into must, want, and skip, and keep it in the drawer with your home papers and this guide. Add a note by each big or hardwired item so you remember why it's there and how it connects.

Share a copy with family who might help during an outage, and consider taping a short version inside a kitchen cabinet. When the power goes out is the worst time to be reconstructing the list from memory.

★ I'll help you get it on paper

If writing it all out feels daunting, we can do it together. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and we'll turn your walk-through into a tidy, written list you can keep.

From your list to your numbers

Once the list is set, the numbers are the next step — but they're a separate job, and a much easier one.

With your list in hand, our nameplate guide helps you find the watts for each item, our worksheet guide gives you a page to add them up, and our running-watts-vs-starting guide handles the surge. The list is the hard thinking; the rest is orderly addition.

And you don't have to do that today. A clear, written must-run list is a real accomplishment all on its own — everything else can wait until you're ready.

★ Ready to put numbers to it?

When you are, send me your list and your nameplate photos at (330) 200-8042 and we'll turn it into a size you can trust — calmly, at your pace.

A quick list self-check

Run through these and you'll know your list is ready to size from.

- ☐ Did I walk the whole house, including the basement and garage?
- ☐ Is every safety, food, and water item in the must bucket?
- ☐ Did I put medical needs near the top, and start a fuller plan for them?
- ☐ Do I have a winter version and a summer version?
- ☐ Is the list written down and kept with my home papers?

✓ A blank just points to your next step

If any answer is 'not yet,' that's fine — it simply tells you which corner of the house to revisit, or when to reach for the phone.

Don't leave a life-safety item off

The whole point of the list is that the things which keep you safe are the things that make it on. It's worth one deliberate double-check.

Comforts are easy to remember; the quiet, hardworking safety items are the ones that get overlooked — until the night you need them. So give the must bucket a second, careful read.

! Double-check the life-safety items

Be sure your list includes heat in an Ohio winter, a sump pump if your basement floods, water if you're on a well, and every medical device. These must never be crowded out by comforts.

If a life-safety need is large or hardwired — a well pump, central heat — that's a reason to plan it carefully and get help, never a reason to leave it off the list.

Questions worth asking yourself

A few honest questions sharpen any list.

Q: If the power were out for two days, what would we truly need?

Stretching the outage in your mind pushes comforts down and safety, food, and water to the top. Rural outages especially can run long, so plan as if they will.

Q: Who in the house has needs I should plan around?

Anyone with a medical device, limited mobility, or a health condition. Their needs anchor the top of the list and deserve a plan beyond backup power alone.

Q: What did the last outage teach me?

Think back to what you missed most and what you were glad to have. Real memory beats a generic checklist for building your own list.

Q: What's on my list only out of habit?

A coffee maker or a big television can feel essential but can wait. Being honest here keeps your size, and your cost, sensible.

✓ There's no silly question

If you're unsure whether something belongs, that's normal — call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and we'll place it together.

Common Questions

The list-building questions I hear most, answered plainly.

Q: How long should my list be?

As long as it needs to be and no longer. Most homes' true musts fit on a short list; a sprawling one usually means some wants sneaked into the must column.

Q: Should I include things I'd only run one at a time?

Yes — note them, but mark that they take turns. You can run a microwave, then later a coffee maker, without sizing for both at once. Our managing-loads guide covers taking turns.

Q: Do I include hardwired things like the furnace?

Definitely. Hardwired musts belong on the list; they just need a transfer switch or interlock rather than a cord. Note them so your electrician can plan the hookup.

Q: What if my must-run list feels too big to power?

That's useful information, not a failure. It may point toward taking turns, a soft starter, a bigger unit, or trimming a want or two. We can sort out the options together.

★ Let's right-size the list

If your list feels heavy, send it to me at (330) 200-8042 and we'll find the calm path — what to keep, what can take turns, and what a sensible unit covers.

Bringing it all together

You've done the most important step in the whole process: a written list, sorted into must, want, and skip, tuned to your home and your season.

Cover safety, food, and water first; add comforts only if there's room; keep a winter version and a summer version; and write it all down where your family can find it. That list is the foundation everything else is built on.

From here, our nameplate and worksheet guides help you put numbers to it, and our running-watts-vs-starting guide shows how the surge fits in. Take it one calm step at a time.

★ Let's build your list together

If you'd rather not stare at a blank page, that's exactly what I'm here for. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and we'll decide what stays on — free, with nothing to sell you.

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 deciding what truly has to stay on 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

Must, Want, or Skip

Three buckets for everything in the house

	What it is	Examples
Must	Keeps you safe	Fridge, heat, meds
Want	Nice to have	TV, extra lights
Skip	Can wait	Dryer, oven, tub

Power the musts first; add wants only if there's easy room.

Building Your List

Four steps, and not a watt in sight



No watts yet – this step is all about what matters.

Winter List vs. Summer List

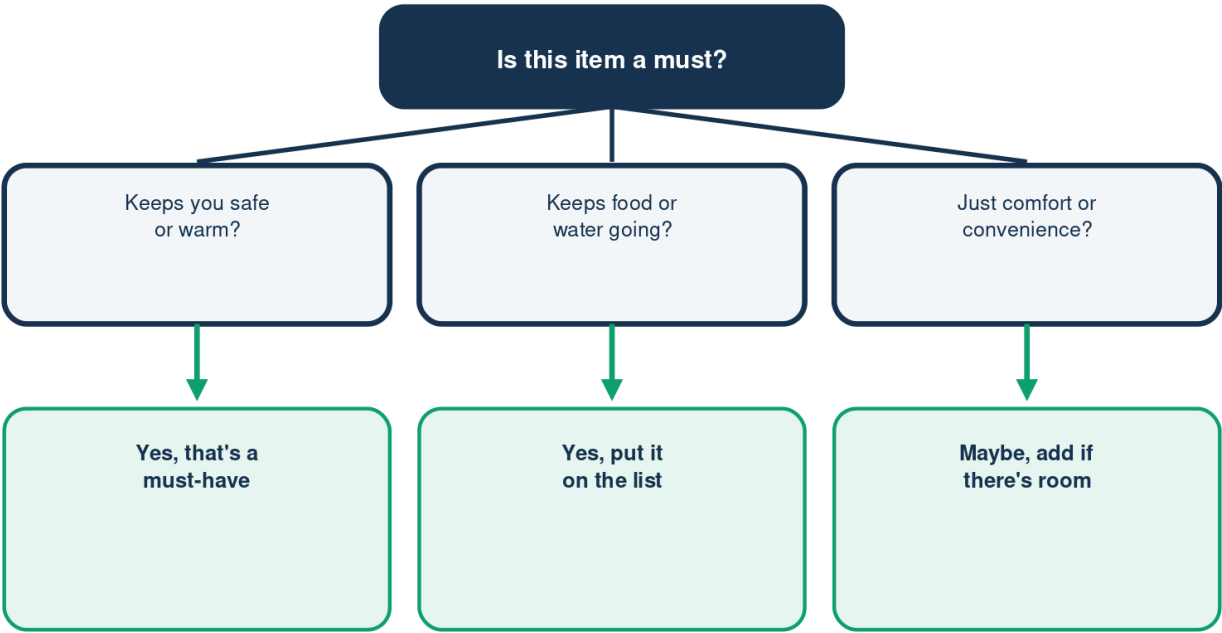
What changes with the season, and what never does

	Winter adds	Summer adds
Staying comfortable	Furnace blower	Fans, window AC
Weather risk	Sump in a thaw	Sump in a storm
On both, always	Fridge & freezer	Fridge & freezer
On a well	Well pump	Well pump

The fridge, freezer, and any well pump stay on all year.

Is This Item a Must?

Let what it protects point the way



When unsure, treat safety, food, and water as musts.

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.

— *Bill*



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