



GETTING STARTED IN “O” GAUGE TRAINS

A Primer

By Jeff Jacobs of the Maine3Railers

Many manufacturers besides Lionel currently produce O gauge or “Lionel-style” trains: MTH, Williams, Weaver, and Atlas to name a few. They all interchange pretty well and can be mixed except that each company’s track is made a little differently and requires adapters to mix the brands.

Lionel of course is the standard and you can’t go wrong buying all your parts from them. However the other companies have been innovative and “raised the bar” in the hobby so it is wise to look at their offerings as well. To pick one brand alone limits the fun you can achieve.

The beginner can buy everything needed to get going in a “starter set” but, as you might expect, some compromises are made to get everything into the box for an attractive price - more on that in a minute. To have trains running, the minimum needed is: (1) track, (2) a locomotive and (3) a power supply (transformer). Beyond those 3 items, rolling stock (cars, cabooses etc), operating accessories and scenic details just increase the fun. The great part of the hobby is growing the railroad empire by adding items in the future. Sets begin at about \$150 from discount shops and go up in price as more cars and track are added or the locomotive is more detailed or the transformer is larger. There are a lot of sets in the \$200-\$250 bracket. The high end sets cost as much as \$500 and up.

Everybody wants to get a deal, so what about discount shops? They offer the lowest price (but don’t forget shipping costs) and are found on the Internet these days. The downside is that you don’t have a local place to return something, which isn’t working. Regardless of claims, it is quite possible to buy a new a loco, which develops a problem after a couple hours and needs more help than “Grampa” can provide. Having said that, many of the little shops no longer have a service dept. in-house so what is the advantage? They will help you send the item back to the manufacturer and do the interfacing for you. These days the little shops are drying up fast however, especially in rural areas.

Although I don’t wish to endorse any dealer, a typical large ‘on-line’ store is **Charles Ro Supply Company** in Malden Mass. You can also visit them in person at 60 Cross St.

Look at their web site – www.charlesro.com, then use that as a springboard to ‘surf’ to their competitors. You will see quite a variety, plus many sale items. Remember to focus on their “O” offerings.

Also, there are two magazines that focus on “O” gauge model railroading, The first is **Classic Toy Trains**, <http://ctt.trains.com>, and the second is **O Gauge Railroading**, <http://www.ogaugerr.com>. These are published about monthly and can be found at most magazine stands. These magazines are chock full of great articles, layouts, and advertisers dedicated to the hobby. Both are great resources.

You can now consider whether to buy a “set” or individual pieces. Careful shopping will tell you if the set will save money. The advantage to ‘separate pieces’ is that you get what you want, not a generic assortment. Experienced hobbyists do not buy sets (except as gifts), because they don’t want the compromised items within the sets. The transformer tends to be minimal, there are only a few cars and the locos are real basic. By basic, I mean they do not have sounds, lights, fine detail, and smoke like their costly counterparts. The sets do not offer wireless remote control either, but a beginner can live without that feature.

So the parts required are: track, the hands down winner here is Lionel’s new “Fastrack.” It is kid friendly, found in all stores, is rugged, and looks realistic. It is not cheap at about \$4 for a 10” piece. A set will often bundle up about 12 pieces to make a small oval. The next part is a transformer: the ‘set’ minimum is 40 watts at 18volts AC. It will run one train and a couple lighted buildings. The other end of this spectrum is a 400-watt dual control model with all kinds of buttons and meters costing about \$400. In the middle is something for about \$75 with about 100 watts of power at 18volts AC - a logical starting point. Next we have the cars: a small set has 2 cars and a caboose. Alternatively, these can be bought on-line at shops or eBay. Building the RR Empire ‘car by car’ can be a fun and interesting experience. All of the O gauge cars hook up to each other. Last, and most significant, you need an engine or locomotive to pull things: the 2 main categories are Steam and Diesels, the latter generally costing less. This article won’t go into the many details available, but you ‘get what you pay for’ so read the details of each item and ask questions of experienced hobbyists (M3R club members) if you don’t understand the jargon. I will say that the Williams engines have a reputation for being ‘reliable runners’ without the elaborate sounds and smoke features - this keeps their cost down. Atlas engines are smooth, strong, and reliable. Lionel engines are available in a variety of quality, markings, and price. MTH engines are mid-priced with many neat features. A plain diesel will cost \$125 and up.

So if you’re doing the math, an oval of track with a good transformer and an engine will cost about \$250. You can see that the sets have an ‘edge’ price wise, but the quality will be better from the individual components. Choose your poison!

There is no end to what can be spent on the hobby, each car averaging \$40, so there is never a ‘total cost for everything’ magic number. Every hobbyist goes at it one-item-at-a-time though, so it is simply a progressive expense and not a one shot cash outlay.

I hope this gets you started, but everyone’s tastes are different so don’t feel constrained by others’ thinking. Model railroading is about imagination; so let yours take off in this exciting hobby.

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