

How Many Watts For Your Money?

Home entertainment equipment, whether it be a low-cost portable phonograph or a \$2,000 high fidelity component system, usually carries a wattage rating of output. Theoretically, the higher the number of watts, the greater the ability of the amplifier section to handle difficult musical passages without distorting.

While it's possible to enjoy the music produced by one or two-watt transistor radio or tape recorder, component and console manufacturers frequently advertise systems producing 500 watts or more of power.

In fact, the race among manufacturers to claim higher wattage ratings has caused the Federal Trade Commission to step in. A rule regarding amplifier ratings is expected shortly.

The problem is that, unlike a light bulb, an amplifier doesn't feed the same amount of power constantly to your loudspeakers. On quiet musical passages, for example, the power output may be no more than that from the transistor radio, but on loud ones -- particularly those that come up suddenly -- the power output may rise to 20, 50 or more watts per stereo channel.

When shopping for amplifiers, receivers, stereo compacts or consoles -- in fact, for any stereo equipment -- make sure you're comparing the same kind of watts. A scrupulous manufacturer will tell you which rating system he uses, usually with one of these sets of initials:

RMS — The system proposed by the Federal Trade Commission and favored by most high fidelity component manufacturers, this is the most rigid rating system. It measures continuous power output with a test tone.

IHF — Developed originally by high fidelity manufacturers, this system measures average music output rather than continuous, on the theory that most of us listen to music rather than test tones. It results can run as much as 100% over RMS.

EIA — Favored primarily by manufacturers of stereo consoles and phonographs, this system measures peak power output, which can be as much as 100% above the IHF figure.

IPP — Instantaneous Peak Power is the most liberal of all the rating systems in general use, and can turn 10 watts of RMS power into 80 or more watts IPP.

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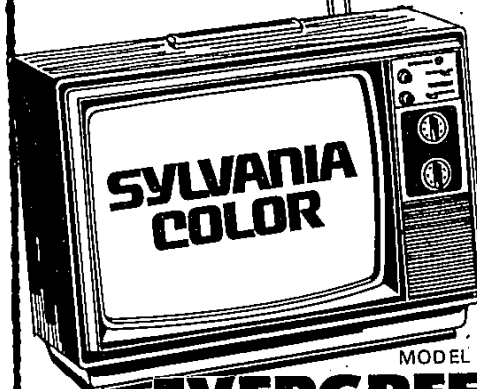
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