

Choosing a Scale

One of the early choices to be made by new model railroaders is which modeling scale to use. Many factors influence this decision. Some make sense, others may not. For instance, many “newbies” go straight into HO-scale, with barely a glance at any of the other scales available, because they have heard that HO is the most popular scale in the U.S. Or that it has the most accessories available, or that it lets you have lots of detail, Etc. Etc.

Yes, HO-scale is all of those things, but some of those same favorable characteristics are largely true of other scales too. Let’s look at some of the advantages, and disadvantages, of the three most popular scales.

N-scale is second in domestic popularity. [N-scale is actually the most popular scale in some Asian, and European, countries, because the homes are smaller.] The selection of N-scale products available, while not as vastly extensive as that of HO, is quite large, indeed there is more available in N-scale than most of us could ever afford to buy. N-scale has the advantage of letting a train turn around in about half the table width required by HO. This makes N-scale, a popular choice for those with limited space available.

One commonly assumed misconception about N-scale is that it is “just too small.” “Too small to detail, too small to do switching, too small to do scratchbuilding, too small to repair, etc.”

None of those things are true for everyone, or even for most people. While N-scale may indeed be too small for some individual modelers to

work with, because of serious issues with that person's eyesight or manual dexterity, the assumption is often more preconception than reality. I have switched scales twice. I started with O-scale, then HO-scale, and now N-scale. At each of those "downsizings" I initially had the strong impression that the new, smaller, scale was "too small." After I had tried it, and worked with it for a while, that "too small" perception changed. Now the new, smaller, scale seemed to be "normal size" to me and the old, larger, scale seemed huge. My point is don't take everything you hear, or read, as absolute universal truth. Model railroading is very much a personal hobby. No two model railroads are exactly alike, because the people that built them are not all exactly alike, they're different. Some of those differences may include issues with eyesight, or manual dexterity, that actually will make working in a small scale impractical for some individuals.

This may, or may not, be true for you, but the only way to know for sure is to personally try out some different scales. Now you don't need to go out and buy a bunch of complete train sets, in various scales, for this experiment. That would be silly, and very expensive. Instead invest a lot less money, and some of your time, in building a simple boxcar kit in several prospective scales, and see for yourself, how well you can handle each size. You may surprise yourself by being able to handle small parts more easily than you thought.

Some tools will help, and, unlike the silly "bunch of complete train sets purchase notion", these tools will be a worthwhile investment, no matter which scale you end up choosing.

Common modeler's tools include an X-acto knife, scale ruler, tweezers, miniature files, a small pair of diagonal pliers and a small pair of needle

nose pliers. Unless you have exceptionally keen vision, you will also need some form of magnifier. I use, and recommend, the Optivisor. This fits on your head and the magnifying lens can fit over eyeglasses, and swings up out of the way when you don't need it. Small clamps are another necessary item, but don't overlook such simple items as clothespins, alligator clips, rubber bands, and binder clips; all of which can be used as clamps.

HO-scale is so popular partly because it has some of the "big, easy to work on" advantage of O-scale; and some of the "it will actually fit into the house" advantage of N-scale. It does have the widest variety of rolling stock and accessories available.

O-scale is the third most popular scale in the U.S. The large locomotives, cars, and structures of O-scale can be good showplaces for fine detail, since those details will be big enough to be easily seen, and appreciated. The downside of O-scale is that turnback loops are larger than those needed in HO or smaller scales. Also, the cost per item tends to be higher.

O-scale also comes in two different varieties; "Three-Rail", and "Two-Rail." The three-rail system uses the center rail as the incoming power rail for the locomotive. The two outside, running, rails are used as the return path for the power. The power in three-rail is A.C. (Alternating Current.)

"Two-Rail uses the same power and control system found in Z, N, HO, S, and G scales. D.C. (Direct Current) power enters from one of the two running rails, and exits through the other rail.

These two types of O-scale trains are incompatible with one another. Each type has its own group of loyal enthusiasts.

One of the most common factors that influences scale choice is the amount of space each individual modeler has available. “Newbies” usually go with a 4’x8’ sheet of plywood as the boundaries of their railroad empire; that is, if they can even fit a 4x8 into some part of their home. If not, then they are more likely to pick a small scale, like N-scale, or Z-scale, from sheer necessity. HO-scale requires at least 4 feet of table width to accommodate an oval of track, and even in that space, 22” radius curves will just barely fit. Wherever possible it’s a good idea to expand a bit beyond 4’ to fit the curve with some extra room.

An alternative, a shelf type layout, can sometimes help with this space problem; assuming you have access to one, or more, walls of the proposed layout room; and ideally, can mount shelves to it without angering the landlord, or your spouse! Shelves don’t have to be bolted to the wall, but it helps with stability if you can do so. Shelf layouts can be switching types, without any need for those space-hungry turnback loops; or, if you can negotiate enough real estate, loops can be added at one, or both, ends. Using this shelf idea can often mean that you can fit a larger scale than would be possible with the traditional oval track arrangement.

Something else that may help is to negotiate a “shared space.” This is an area the railroad occupies only temporarily. Most of the time it is rolled, tilted, or lifted, out of the way, so that the same space can be used for other purposes. Model railroads have been built to roll under a bed, fold up against a wall, be hoisted up just below a garage ceiling,

built into coffee tables or bookshelves, etc. Look carefully around your house and see if a potential “shared space” is available.

(Note: If you are married, check with your loving spouse before beginning construction. She may well have strong feelings on the subject of what is, or is not, “available!”)

Ultimately your choice of scale is going to be a matter of your personal preference. If you have plenty of space available, you can build a model railroad in any scale, including those I have not covered here, Z-scale, S-scale and G-scale. These are all fine scales too, but the cost is generally higher, and the range of available products smaller, in these less-popular scales. That doesn’t mean you can’t model in one of them though. Remember “One size does not fit all.” Pick the one that you feel fits you best!

Traction Fan

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