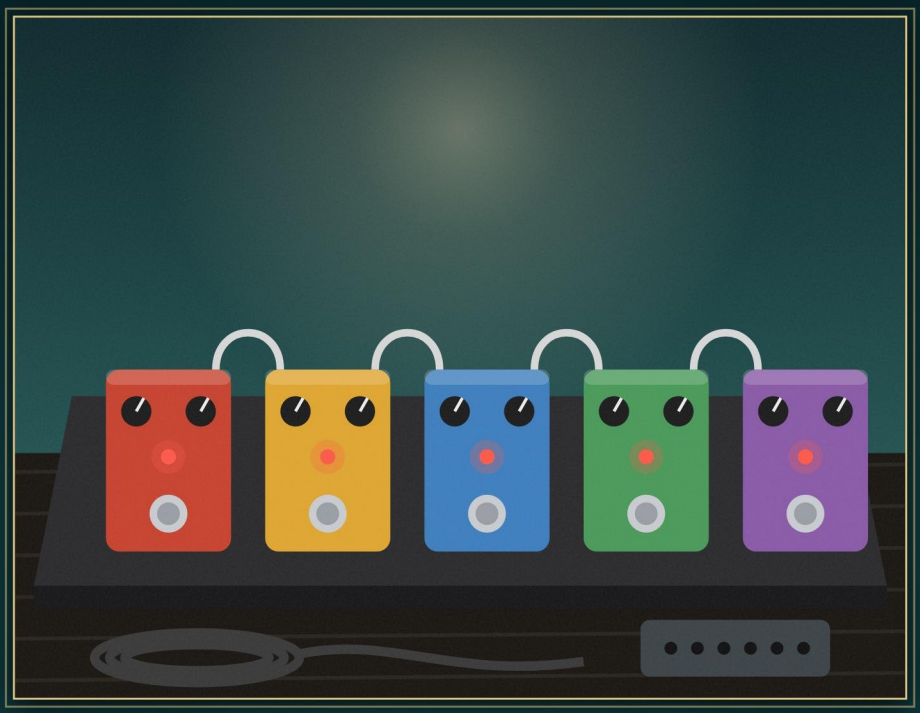
A TRINFINITY GUITAR SHOP GUIDE

Pedals and the Signal Chain

Build a Quieter, Better Pedalboard



Pedal Order, Power and Hunting Down Noise

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Trinfinity Enterprises

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Guitar work notice. A soldering iron is hot enough to burn you and start a fire, solder and flux fumes should not be breathed, and lead solder is toxic. Work where there is good air flow, wear eye protection, wash your hands after, and keep tools and chemicals away from children. Never open or work inside an amplifier or anything that plugs into the wall. Amplifiers can hold a deadly charge even when unplugged. Take that work to a qualified technician. Changes to an instrument can affect its value and its warranty.

Questions and corrections: andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com

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Before You Begin

Players bring me guitars all the time because they think the guitar is making noise. Often the guitar is fine. The hum, hiss or crackle is coming from somewhere between the output jack and the amp: a pedal powered from the wrong supply, a patch cable that is half broken, a long run of cable dulling the sound, or a light dimmer in the next room.

I build and repair guitars at Trinfinity Enterprises, and I have worked on guitars for more than 20 years. This mini guide covers what players most often ask me about pedalboards: what order to put pedals in, how to power them, what true bypass and buffers really do, how cable length changes the sound, and how to hunt down noise one step at a time.

How to Use This Guide

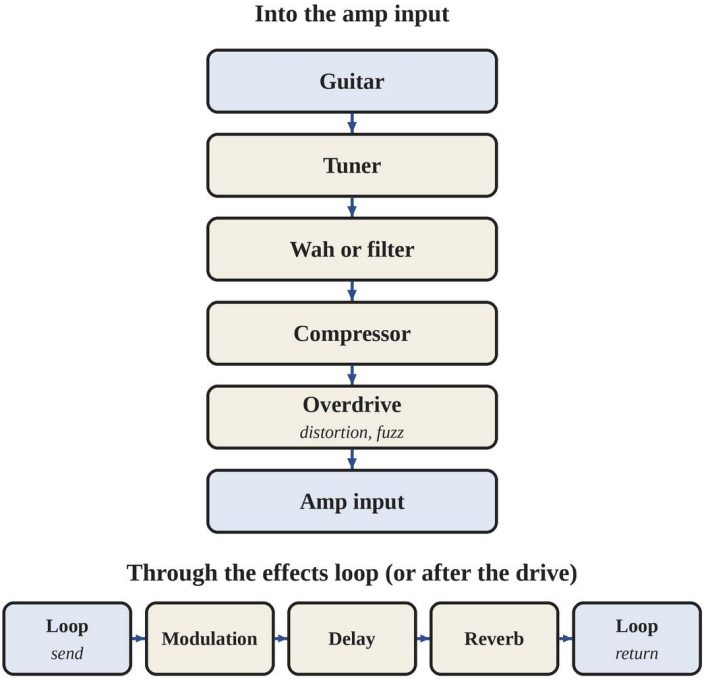
Read Chapters 1 through 4 before you build or rebuild a board. Use Chapters 5 and 6 when something hums, hisses or buzzes, and Chapter 7 when something fails at a gig. The checklist at the back is meant to be used at the bench, one line at a time.

What This Guide Is and Is Not

This guide is about pedals, cables and power supplies made for pedals. It does not cover repairing amplifiers or anything else that plugs into the wall. Amplifiers hold dangerous voltages, even when they are unplugged. Never open one up or try to chase a hum inside it. If the noise is in the amp, take it to a qualified amp technician.

Chapter 1: Pedal Order and Why

There is no law about pedal order. Some of the best sounds ever recorded came from pedals in an unusual order. But there is a common starting order, and it exists for good reasons. Start there, then move things around and trust your ears.



A common starting order. Time-based effects can go in the amp's effects loop or at the end of the chain.

The Common Starting Order

1. **Tuner.** First, so it gets the cleanest, strongest signal from the guitar and tunes accurately. Many tuner pedals also mute the signal while you tune.

2. **Wah and filters.** Early, so they shape the raw guitar signal. A wah after a drive pedal sounds different, more extreme. Some players like that.
3. **Compressor.** Before the drive pedals, so it evens out the picking before the signal gets distorted. After a drive pedal, a compressor also squeezes the noise up.
4. **Overdrive, distortion and fuzz.** The drive pedals go in the middle. When you stack two, try the lower-gain one first and the heavier one second, then swap them and listen.
5. **Modulation.** Chorus, flanger, phaser and tremolo usually go after the drive pedals, so the drive does not smear them.
6. **Delay.** Near the end, so the echoes repeat the finished sound.
7. **Reverb.** Last, because reverb is the sound of the room around everything else.

Why Drive Before Time Effects?

Think about what each pedal does to the next one. A distortion pedal squeezes and clips whatever comes in. If a delay comes first, the distortion clips the echoes too, and they run together into a mush. If the delay comes after, the echoes repeat a clean copy of the distorted note, and they stay clear. The same goes for reverb.

Fuzz First

One rule has good evidence behind it. Many vintage-style fuzz pedals, the Fuzz Face type in particular, have a very low input impedance, and they react to the guitar's pickups and volume knob directly. ElectroSmash's analysis of the Fuzz Face puts its input impedance at only about 5 to 8 kilohms. Put a buffer in front of a fuzz like that and it stops seeing the pickup, and it sounds and feels different. Analog Man, which builds buffers, says vintage fuzzes like the Fuzz Face and Rangemaster can sound

brittle after a buffer and advises putting buffers after them. So if you use a vintage-style fuzz, try it first in the chain, even before the tuner.

The Effects Loop

Many amps have an effects loop: a send jack and a return jack on the back. The loop sits between the amp's preamp, where the amp makes its own distortion, and the power amp. When you drive the amp's preamp into distortion, a delay or reverb in front of the amp gets distorted along with everything else. Putting delay and reverb in the loop puts them after the amp's distortion, the same way the drive-before-time rule works on the board.

- If you get your distortion from pedals and run the amp clean, the effects loop matters less. Delay and reverb can go at the end of the board.
- If you get your distortion from the amp, try modulation, delay and reverb in the loop.
- The amp's manual tells you whether its loop is series or parallel and what level it expects. Follow it.

A Simple Way to Test Order

1. Set the board in the common order.
2. Play a short phrase that uses every pedal you care about.
3. Swap two neighbors and play the same phrase at the same volume.
4. Keep whichever you like better. Move on to the next pair.

Keep the volume the same for every comparison. A louder sound almost always seems better for a moment, even when it is not.

Chapter 2: True Bypass, Buffers and Cable Length

This is the most argued-about topic on any pedalboard, and the physics behind it is simple. Once you understand what a cable does to a guitar signal, the true bypass argument mostly settles itself.

Cable Is a Capacitor

A guitar cable has two conductors separated by insulation, and that makes it a small capacitor. Capacitance across a passive guitar pickup rolls off some of the treble. The longer the cable, the more capacitance, and the darker the sound.

Manfred Zollner, in his reference work on the physics of the electric guitar, puts typical guitar cable at about 100 picofarads per meter (about 30 per foot), with typical cables at 300 to 600 picofarads and very long runs reaching about 1,500. Cables vary a lot by make, so these are ballpark numbers, not specs for any one cable. If you want to know your own cable's number, the maker sometimes publishes it.

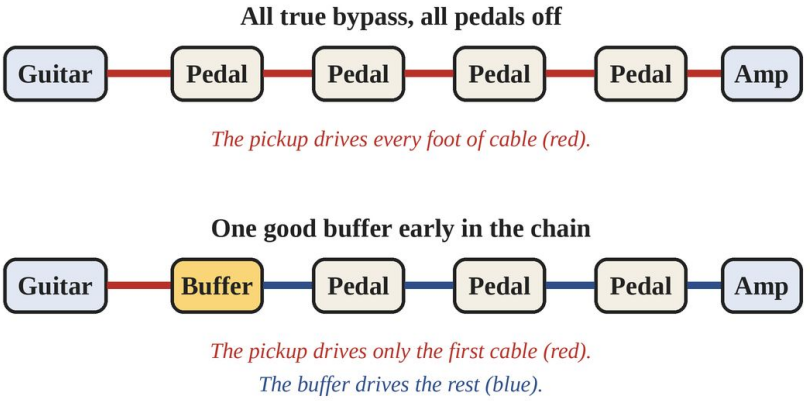
The key point is that capacitance adds up. The cable from the guitar to the board, every patch cable, the wiring inside each true bypass pedal and the cable to the amp all count, when nothing in between is buffering the signal.

True Bypass and Buffered Bypass

True bypass means that when a pedal is off, its footswitch connects the input jack straight to the output jack with plain wire. The circuit is out of the path completely.

Buffered bypass means that when the pedal is off, the signal still goes through a small circuit called a buffer.

A **buffer** takes the weak signal from a passive guitar and drives the next cable for it, so the cable cannot drag down the pickup. It has a high input impedance, so it barely loads what is before it, and a low output impedance, so it can push a signal down a long cable without losing treble.



With every true bypass pedal off, the pickup drives all of the cable. One buffer early on takes over the rest.

What the Makers Say

BOSS says treble loss becomes noticeable at around 18 feet of cable, that real rigs often total 40 feet or more, and that a buffer can drive about 100 feet after it with little loss. BOSS also builds a buffer into all its pedals, so it has a stake in the answer. Even so, the same BOSS article admits that vintage-style germanium fuzz pedals usually sound best with the guitar plugged straight into them, and suggests putting the buffered pedal in the middle or at the end of the chain in that case. Analog Man, which sells a buffer, advises keeping buffered pedals to one or two, because extra ones

can dull the presence and feel. Fender's article on true bypass suggests one buffer at the start of a true bypass chain.

These companies come at it from different directions and land in about the same place.

What I Tell Players

- **Short, simple rig:** a guitar, two or three pedals and short cables. True bypass is fine and a buffer may not add anything.
- **Big board or long cables:** put one good buffer, or one buffered pedal, early in the chain, after any vintage-style fuzz.
- **Do not stack buffers.** One or two is plenty.
- **Keep cables as short as the stage allows.** Use the shortest patch cables that reach.

Test It Yourself

Plug the guitar into the amp with one short cable and play a clean chord. Then run through the whole board with every pedal off and play the same chord at the same volume. If the second sounds duller, a single buffer near the start of the chain will likely bring the top end back.

Cables Themselves

Most noise and dropout problems I trace on a board come down to cables and jacks, not pedals.

- Wiggle each plug in its jack while the signal is running. Crackle or dropout means a bad cable or a dirty or loose jack.
- Cheap patch cables with molded plugs often fail inside the plug where you cannot see it.
- Keep spare cables in the case. A bad cable is the fastest fix there is, if you have a spare.

- Gold plating and exotic copper do not change the sound in any way anyone has shown. Length and capacitance do. My book *Chasing Tone* goes into those claims.

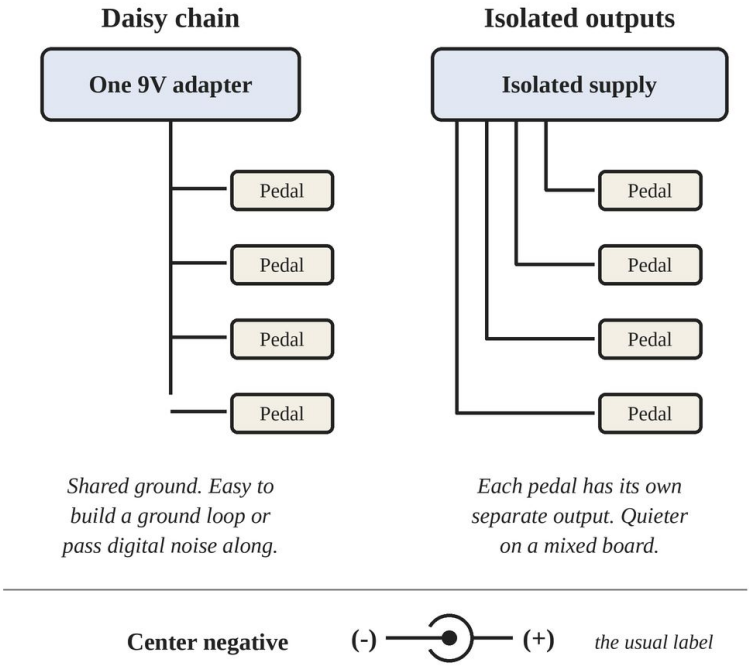
Chapter 3: Powering Your Pedals

Bad power causes more pedalboard noise than anything else. It can also kill a pedal in a second. Getting power right is mostly a matter of reading three things on each pedal: the voltage, the polarity and the current.

Read the Label

Look next to the power jack on each pedal, or in its manual. You will usually find three things.

What it says	What it means
9V DC	The voltage and type the pedal wants. Most compact pedals use 9 volts DC, but some use 12, 18 or more
A symbol with a dot in a C	The polarity. If the minus sign connects to the center dot, it is center negative
A number in mA	The current the pedal draws, in milliamps



Daisy chain and isolated supplies, and the polarity symbol for center negative.

Voltage and Polarity

Most compact pedals use 9 volts DC with a center-negative barrel plug. That has been the common pedal standard for decades, but it is not universal. Some pedals want center positive, some want 12 or 18 volts, and some vintage-style fuzz pedals use a different ground arrangement entirely. Always check the label and the manual.

Caution The wrong voltage or the wrong polarity can damage a pedal the moment you plug it in. Never use a laptop charger, a phone charger or a random wall adapter just because the plug fits. Many of them have the same size plug and the wrong voltage or polarity.

More voltage is not a free upgrade. Some pedals are built to take 18 volts for more headroom, and the maker says so. Many are not. Never run a pedal above the voltage its maker lists.

Current: Milliamps

Every pedal draws some current, listed in milliamps (mA). Simple analog pedals draw very little. ElectroSmash measured its germanium Fuzz Face build at about 2.5 mA. Digital delays, reverbs and multi-effects can draw hundreds of milliamps.

A power supply output also has a rating in milliamps. The output's rating must be equal to or more than the pedal's draw. If a pedal draws more than the output can give, the voltage sags, and the pedal can act up, make noise or not start at all. Leave some room. Do not plan a board where every output is right at its limit.

Daisy Chains and Isolated Supplies

A **daisy chain** is one adapter with a cable that splits to several plugs. Every pedal shares the same supply and the same ground. It is cheap, and on a small board of simple analog pedals it can work fine. Its weak points are noise and current. Digital pedals can push noise back onto the shared line, and mixing pedals with different needs on one chain is how ground loops and hum get started. The adapter also has to supply the total current of every pedal on the chain. Strymon's white paper on pedal power explains the noise part plainly: two pedals on the same supply

form a ground loop, and digital pedals draw current that changes at audio frequencies, so some of that noise can find its way back through the signal grounds into your sound.

An **isolated supply** gives each pedal its own separate output, as if each had its own adapter. That keeps one pedal's noise and ground from reaching the others. On a board with digital pedals, or with more than a few pedals, an isolated supply is the quietest way to go. It costs more, and it is worth it.

Matching Outputs to Pedals

1. List every pedal on the board with its voltage, polarity and current draw.
2. Add up the current. Compare it with the supply's outputs, one by one.
3. Put the high-draw digital pedals on the high-current outputs the supply maker labels for them.
4. Check any pedal that needs a different voltage or polarity. Use the output or the adapter cable the supply maker specifies for it. Polarity reversing cables exist, but only use one when the pedal maker and supply maker say it is right for that pedal.
5. Keep the list with the board. When you add a pedal, update it.

Batteries

Batteries are clean, quiet power with no ground loops, which is one reason some players still use them in a fuzz or a single pedal. They also run down, and a pedal on a dying battery sounds different and can fail in the middle of a song. If you use batteries, unplug the input cable when you are done, since on many pedals the input jack switches the battery on, and change them before a gig, not during.

Chapter 4: Laying Out the Board

A well-laid-out board is quieter, easier to fix in a hurry and less likely to fail at a gig. Plan it on paper or on the floor before anything gets stuck down.

Plan Before You Stick

1. Lay every pedal on the floor in signal order, the way you will use them.
2. Put the pedals you step on most along the front edge, where your foot reaches them easily.
3. Leave room for the power supply, usually under the board or at the back.
4. Measure each gap and buy patch cables to fit. Shorter is better, but leave enough slack that no plug is pulling on a jack.
5. Plug everything in and play it for a while before you fasten anything down.

Signal and Power Cables

Power cables carry current that can put hum into signal cables lying right next to them. Keep them apart where you can.

- Run power cables on one side or under the board, and signal cables on the other.
- Where a power cable has to cross a signal cable, cross them at a right angle instead of running them side by side.
- Keep the power supply’s wall cord and any transformer away from the input end of the board and from wah and fuzz pedals.
- Tie down extra cable length with reusable ties. Do not coil a long power cable tightly next to the signal path.

Fastening

Hook-and-loop tape is the usual way to hold pedals down. Clean the bottom of each pedal before you stick it on. Some pedal makers put rubber feet or screw holes on the bottom, so check before you peel anything off. On a valuable or vintage pedal, think twice before you put adhesive on it.

The Input and Output

Put a short, good-quality cable between the guitar and the board's first pedal, or use a cable you trust. The cable from the board to the amp carries the whole board's sound, so use a good one, and keep a spare of each in the case.

Label Everything

A strip of tape on each power cable at the supply end, marked with the pedal's name, saves a lot of time when something goes wrong in a dark room. Keep the power list from Chapter 3 tucked in the lid of the case.

Chapter 5: Hunting Down Noise: Hum, Hiss and Buzz

Noise has a voice. Before you start pulling cables, listen to it and give it a name. The kind of noise tells you where to look.

What you hear	What it usually is	Where to look first
Low, steady hum, a deep tone	Ground loop or power problem	Power supply, daisy chain, amp and other gear on different outlets
Hum that changes when you turn or move the guitar	Single-coil pickups picking up a field from nearby electrical gear	Lights, dimmers, screens, the amp itself (Chapter 6)
Hum that stops when you touch the strings	The guitar's shielding or grounding	The guitar (a repair shop or my wiring book)
Steady hiss, like air	High gain, a noisy pedal, or level set wrong between pedals	Drive and compressor settings, gain staging
Whine or whistle that changes with a digital pedal	Digital noise on shared power	Move that pedal to its own isolated output
Crackle, pops or cutting out	Bad cable, dirty or loose jack, worn switch	Wiggle test every cable and jack
Buzz only in one spot in the room	A field from something nearby	Turn, move, and find the source

The Step-by-Step Method

Change one thing at a time. If you change three things at once and the noise goes away, you will not know which one fixed it.

1. **Guitar straight to the amp.** One short cable you trust, no pedals. Is the noise there? If yes, the problem is the guitar, the amp, the cable or the room. If no, it is on the board.

2. **Try another guitar** on the same cable and amp. If the noise goes away, the first guitar is the source.
3. **Add the board back with every pedal off.** Is the noise there now?
4. **Unplug the power** to all the pedals and run the true bypass pedals with no power. If the hum stops when the power is unplugged, look at the power supply and how the pedals are connected to it.
5. **Add pedals one at a time,** powered, starting at the guitar end. When the noise shows up, the last pedal you added, its cable or its power output is your suspect.
6. **Swap the suspect's cable,** then move it to another power output. If the noise follows the pedal, the pedal may need service.
7. **Turn on each pedal** one at a time and listen. A pedal that hisses when it is on but is quiet when off is usually set with too much gain or too little output level.

Ground Loops

A ground loop happens when two pieces of gear are grounded through two different paths, such as the amp's power cord and a pedal supply plugged into a different outlet, and also connected to each other through the signal cable. A small current flows around that loop and shows up as a steady low hum.

- Plug the amp and the pedal power supply into the same outlet strip.
- Use an isolated pedal supply, so each pedal is cut off from the others' grounds.
- If you run into a recording interface or a second amp, a dedicated isolation box made for audio can break the loop on the signal side.

Safety Never cut off, bend back or bypass the ground pin on an amplifier's power cord, and never use a two-prong ground-lifting adapter on an amp to stop a hum. The ground pin is there to keep you from being shocked if something fails inside the amp. If the hum is inside the amp, take it to a qualified amp technician. Never open an amp yourself.

Gain Staging and Hiss

Every pedal adds a little noise, and every drive pedal makes the noise before it louder. A little hiss is normal with high gain. To keep it down:

- Set each pedal so its level when on matches the level when off, unless you mean to boost.
- Use the least gain that gets the sound you want.
- Put a compressor before drive pedals, not after, or it will bring the noise up.
- If you use a noise gate, it usually goes after the drive pedals, or in a loop around them if the gate is built for that.

Chapter 6: Single Coils, Dimmers and the Room

Single-coil pickups pick up more than strings. A single coil is a coil of wire around a magnet, and any changing magnetic field nearby makes a small voltage in that coil, the same way a vibrating string does. Power wiring, transformers, motors and some lighting all make fields like that. The result is a hum that comes and goes as the player moves.

How to Tell It Is the Room

- The hum changes when you turn the guitar or step to a different spot.
- A humbucker on the same guitar is much quieter than the single coil.
- On a Strat-style guitar, the in-between switch positions are quieter than the single positions. Those positions combine two coils, and on many guitars the middle pickup is wound and magnetized in reverse to cancel hum in those positions.
- The noise is still there with no pedals in the chain.

Common Sources

Source	What to try
Light dimmers	Turn the dimmer all the way up or off, or switch to lights with no dimmer
Some LED and fluorescent fixtures and their drivers	Turn them off one at a time and listen
Computer screens, laptops on chargers, phone chargers	Move them away or turn the guitar so it faces a different way
The amp itself, especially its transformer	Stand a few feet from the amp and turn until the hum drops
Pedal power supplies and wall adapters	Move them away from the guitar end of the board
Refrigerators, heaters, fans, shop tools	Move away, or turn them off during recording

Dimmers are one of the worst offenders, and a lot of homes have them. Many dimmers work by chopping up the power going to the light many times a second. That makes buzz that a single coil picks up readily, often worst when the dimmer is set partway. Rotate the guitar slowly near the amp and listen for the quietest direction. Players who record at home often find one spot in the room where the single coil goes quiet.

What a Shop Can Do

Some noise is the guitar's own doing. If the hum stops when you touch the strings or the metal jack, the guitar's grounding or shielding may need work. Shielding the control cavity with conductive paint or foil tied to ground can help with buzz, though it will not stop the hum a single coil picks up from the field itself. Noiseless or stacked single-coil pickups and humbuckers cancel much of that. Those are guitar jobs, and my book *Guitar Wiring and Soldering* covers grounding and shielding if you do your own wiring.

What Not to Do

- Do not lift the ground on the amp's power cord. See the safety box in Chapter 5.
- Do not open the amp. Amplifiers can hold a deadly charge even when unplugged.
- Do not crank a noise gate so hard that it chops off the ends of notes. Find the source first.

Chapter 7: Quick Fixes at the Gig

Things fail at the worst time. A few habits and a small kit will get most boards working again in a couple of minutes.

Keep a Small Kit in the Case

- A spare guitar cable and two spare patch cables
- A spare power cable for each plug size and polarity on the board
- A fresh 9-volt battery for a tuner or a pedal that can run on one
- A small flashlight
- Tape and a marker
- The power list from Chapter 3

When the Sound Cuts Out

1. Check the tuner. Many tuners mute the signal when they are on.
2. Check the volume knob on the guitar and the amp.
3. Plug the guitar straight into the amp with the spare cable. If it works, the board is the problem.
4. Look at the LEDs. A pedal with no light may have lost power. Check its power plug.
5. Swap the patch cables one at a time, starting from the guitar end.
6. If one pedal is the problem and it is true bypass, you can pull it out of the chain and connect its neighbors with one patch cable.

When a Pedal Will Not Turn On

- Check the power plug is fully seated. Barrel plugs work loose.

- Move it to a different output on the supply.
- Make sure the output matches the pedal's voltage and polarity.
- On a battery pedal, make sure there is a cable in the input jack. Many pedals only switch the battery on when a cable is plugged into the input.

When a New Noise Shows Up

- Ask what changed. A new pedal, a new cable, a different outlet or a different room?
- Plug the amp and the board into the same outlet strip.
- Turn the guitar and look for a dimmer or screen nearby.
- Go back to the step-by-step method in Chapter 5 when you have time.

After the Gig

Write down what failed and what fixed it. Replace the bad cable or plug at home instead of putting it back in the case. A problem that happened once usually happens again.

Pedalboard Checklist

Building or Changing the Board

- ☐ Every pedal listed with voltage, polarity and current draw
- ☐ Supply outputs checked against each pedal's draw, with room to spare
- ☐ Digital and high-draw pedals on their own isolated outputs
- ☐ Any pedal with a different voltage or polarity on the right output or cable
- ☐ Pedals laid out in signal order and played before fastening
- ☐ Vintage-style fuzz first; one buffer early in the chain on a big board
- ☐ Shortest patch cables that reach, with no strain on the jacks
- ☐ Power and signal cables kept apart, crossing at right angles
- ☐ Power cables labeled at the supply end
- ☐ Spare guitar cable, spare patch cable and the power list in the case

When Something Is Wrong

- ☐ Name the noise: hum, hiss, whine, crackle or buzz
- ☐ Guitar straight to amp with one good cable
- ☐ Another guitar tried on the same rig
- ☐ Board added back with all pedals off
- ☐ Pedals added one at a time from the guitar end
- ☐ Suspect cable swapped, suspect pedal moved to another output
- ☐ Amp and pedal supply on the same outlet strip

☐ Dimmers, screens and chargers checked; guitar turned to find the quiet spot

☐ Never lift the amp's ground; never open the amp

Power Worksheet

Pedal	Volts	Polarity	mA draw	Supply output
Total				

Glossary

Buffer. A small circuit that drives the next cable so the guitar's pickups do not have to.

Capacitance. The ability to store a little electric charge. In a cable, it rolls off treble.

Center negative. A barrel power plug whose center pin is the negative side.

Daisy chain. One adapter feeding several pedals through a split cable.

Effects loop. Send and return jacks on an amp, between its preamp and power amp.

Gain staging. Setting the level of each pedal so noise does not build up.

Ground loop. Two ground paths between connected gear, which causes a steady hum.

Impedance. Resistance to an alternating signal like a guitar's.

Isolated supply. A pedal power supply with separate outputs that do not share a ground.

Milliamp (mA). One thousandth of an amp, the unit for a pedal's current draw.

Picofarad (pF). A very small unit of capacitance.

True bypass. A switch that connects input to output with plain wire when the pedal is off.

Acronyms

AC. Alternating current

DC. Direct current

LED. Light-emitting diode

mA. Milliamp

pF. Picofarad

Sources

The pages below were read for my book *Chasing Tone* in 2026, and the BOSS and Strymon pages were read again in November 2026. Web addresses change; if one stops working, search the site for the title.

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- ElectroSmash, Fuzz Face Analysis, and You Can Build the Perfect Germanium Fuzz Face.

About This Book

Pedals and the Signal Chain is a Trinfinity Guitar Shop Guide from Trinfinity Enterprises in Dayton, Nevada, alongside *Chasing Tone*, *Guitar Wiring and Soldering* and the other guitar books. It covers pedal order, true bypass and buffers, cable length, power, board layout and noise. Always follow the voltage, polarity and current printed on your own pedals and in their manuals. Amplifier repair is not covered; take it to a qualified technician. If you find something that has changed or needs correcting, please write to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.