

Article 800 of the National Electrical Code (NEC), also known as NFPA 70, covers requirements for low-voltage communications cables. The NEC requires that cables used in premises, both commercial and residential, be “listed for the purpose” by a Nationally Recognized Test Laboratory (NRTL, pronounced “nurtle”). Other countries have similar requirements. UL (Underwriters Laboratories Inc.) is the most recognized listing agency in the US. UL 444 is the overall specification used to identify the requirements for listed communications cables. Many of the fire resistance test procedures called out in UL 444 are written by UL. However, other laboratories, such as ITS (Intertek Testing Services) and CSA (Canadian Standards Association), can also provide listing compliance to the NEC.

Five levels of fire resistance are specified. These are outlined below, from most stringent to least. The ratings are hierarchical, i.e., from a fire resistance standpoint, a higher rating can be substituted for any lower rating, but not vice versa.

Furthermore, according to the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) specification CSA-C22.2 No. 214 Appendix A, substitutions are allowed as detailed in the CSA Equivalent column below. Again, it is important to remember that the ratings are hierarchical, i.e., from a fire resistance standpoint, a CMR can be substituted for an FT4, but not vice versa.

NEC Marking	CSA Equivalent	Common Term	Test	Comments
CMP	FT6	Communications Plenum	NFPA 262	Cable must have resistance to flame spread and reduced smoke generating properties. These cables are approved for placement in air handling ducts and chambers (plenums) without the use of fireproof conduit. The purpose is to lessen the transmission of fire and <i>visible</i> smoke to unaffected parts of the building. Toxic or corrosive elements of the smoke are not measured.
CMR	N/A	Communications Riser	UL1666	Cable must not transmit flame from one floor to another when placed vertically in a building shaft (riser)
CMG	FT4	Communications General Purpose	CSA C22.2 No. 0.3-M (Vertical Tray)	Cable may not transmit flame for more than 4 ft, 11 in. It shall not penetrate floors or ceilings, i.e., may only be used within a single floor.
CM	N/A	Communications General Purpose	UL 1685 (Vertical Tray) or CSA C22.2 No. 0.3-M	Cable may not transmit flame to the top of the tray. It shall not penetrate floors or ceilings, i.e., may only be used within a single floor.
CMX	FT1	Communications Limited Use	UL 1581 VW-1 (Vertical Flame)	For residential use, but can only be installed in one and two-family (duplex) housing units. Often rated with optional UL requirements for outdoor use. ¹

¹ These “outdoor” requirements are limited to some cold temperature properties and UV resistance. They do not qualify a cable to be substituted for an Outside Plant cable. For example, they have no protection against the intrusion of water, which can destroy a cable’s transmission properties and physically degrade a cable as well. The purpose of the “outdoor” rating is to ensure the cable can withstand outdoor exposure in the short run between the Network Interface Unit and the point of entry into the interior of the home.