

Overview

RYA Certificates of Competence are some of the most useful and credible of all yachting qualifications. They thoroughly test the skipper's ability, and can therefore appear daunting to potential candidates. But well-prepared skippers with the right experience needn't worry. With practice and preparation, you should be able to relax sufficiently to let your skills shine through any exam nerves.

This guide will help prepare you, whether you are taking the Yachtmaster Coastal or Yachtmaster Offshore exam.

Yachtmaster Coastal and Yachtmaster Offshore – What's the Difference?

The definition of a Yachtmaster is: 'A yachtsman or woman competent to skipper a cruising yacht on any passage that can be completed without the use of astronavigation'.

Yachtmasters should be able to enter any well-charted harbour for the first time, with sufficient depth, by day or night. A Yachtmaster Coastal has 'the knowledge needed to skipper a yacht on coastal cruises, but does not necessarily have the experience needed to undertake longer passages'.

In other words, the theory is the same for both, but less practical experience and skill is required for the Yachtmaster Coastal exam.



Pre-exam Experience

As with any exam, the more practice you have beforehand, the more confident you will feel. Before your exam, be more adventurous than the usual weekend trip to your favourite anchorage. Enter some new harbours to refine your pilotage. Attempt the occasional night entry and be aware of the problems.

There is no requirement for you to attend an RYA course before your exam. However, it is often worth receiving some tuition, if only to find out your strengths and weaknesses. Many centres offer an exam preparation service.

What Happens During an Exam?

Your RYA examiner will meet you on-board and talk you through the plan for the day. They understand that you could be nervous and will do their best to allay your fears and make sure you are clear about what they want you to do. They are there to find out what you can do, rather than pick holes.

You will be asked to undertake a short passage, but you may have to plan a longer one. In general, you should skipper the yacht in your normal style. If this means putting the kettle on every half hour, then do it!

Navigation

You must know your position reasonably accurately throughout the exam, but don't make the mistake of being so busy plotting fixes that you forget to look around you. Often, a quick glance on deck will confirm your position from a buoy or transit.

Make sure you know how to use a GPS, but there is no need to over-navigate.

You will usually be given practical problems involving tidal streams and heights. Make life easy for yourself and look them up beforehand – it's not cheating. Practice a few tidal calculations so you are happy with the methods you are going to use.

Boat Handling

You need to know how your boat will react, its turning circle and any predictable quirks to its handling. There will be some close quarters manoeuvring, usually in a harbour, to demonstrate your skills at berthing and leaving pontoons, piles or moorings. Sailing yachts will complete this section under power, but make sure you practice manoeuvring under sail too, picking up mooring buoys and short tacking.

Your examiner isn't looking for first-time-every-time success, but you will need to demonstrate competence and a good understanding of how the boat reacts at slow speed. Don't hesitate to change sails or reef, if you think it is necessary for the task.

Experience in a variety of conditions will be your biggest help in these situations.

Man Overboard

Exams almost always include a man overboard recovery exercise. The multitude of methods for this can be confusing, but pick one that works for you and your boat. However it's done, you must end up with the yacht stopped next to the man in the water. If you're sailing, check with your examiner whether you should handle the boat with or without the engine.

Safety

Make sure you understand and follow safety procedures, and give a safety brief. If you decide that harnesses should be worn at night, take your own advice.

Meteorology

Listen to the forecast before your exam and be prepared for questions about the current weather and how this might affect a passage plan. Understand how weather systems influence sea conditions and how to plan based on this knowledge. The type of boat and strengths of your crew can have a bearing on decisions based on the weather, so your examiner may ask you to consider various possibilities. There is rarely a definitive answer, so it is your informed opinions that are required.

Skippering Ability

This is where your experience and knowledge will really show. Whether you are fully in command of the yacht is the most important assessment that your examiner will make.

A good skipper leads the crew and communicates with them, making sure they understand what is going on and listening to them when they have something to say. They do not shout a stream of commands, leaving their crew in a quivering mess. Quiet competence instils confidence, helping your crew feel safe in the knowledge that the right decisions are being made.

So, are you ready for your exam?