

YM Exam Preparation

Langkawi Sailing School has prepared these notes to ensure candidates for the Yachtmaster Exam are fully briefed and familiar with what is required. 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 Requirements.

A specific amount of experience is required prior to taking a Yachtmaster exam. 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.

Yachtmaster Offshore

50 days at sea, at least 5 days of which he or she should have been skipper. The minimum mileage requirement is 2,500 miles and five passages of over 60 miles should have been completed, two of which should have been overnight and two as skipper. Half of these requirements may have been done in non-tidal waters.

Yachtmaster Coastal

30 days, 2 days as skipper, 800 miles, 12 night hours (if you hold the Coastal Skipper course certificate this is reduced to 20 days, 2 days as skipper, 400 miles, 12 night hours). Half the qualifying sea time must be conducted in tidal waters.

The requirements and syllabi for the exam are covered in 'The RYA Sail Cruising Log Book (G15). Whilst it is not a requirement that candidates should have completed the Coastal Skipper / Yachtmaster theory course, the chances of passing the practical exam without having done this or had equivalent training are very unlikely.

Prior to taking the exam candidates should have VHF or SRC radio operators certificate and a First-Aid certificate, both of these can be obtained by attending a one-day course for each.

The Exam

Your RYA examiner will meet you onboard 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!

The exam will take place over a period of eight hours for the Yachtmaster Offshore and six hours for the Yachtmaster Coastal; it is bound to be a nerve-racking experience even for very experienced skippers. The Examiner is there to confirm you are at a level to be awarded the Certificate. He is not there to trick you or ask you to do anything you have not done before or would be expected to be able to do as a yacht Skipper. I often explain to candidates that my main criteria is whether at the end of the exam I feel that I would trust the candidate to take my family out for a day's sailing. I do however expect the candidate to know collision regulations, sound signals and lights and shapes. An ability to work out tidal heights quickly and effectively is essential as is accurate navigation with and without the help of GPS.

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.

Man Overboard

The exam will always involve a man overboard simulated recovery. The examiner will always make it clear as to whether or not he would like this exercise to be done under engine or sail. Usually the examiner will tie a coiled rope to a fender, throw it overboard followed with a shout of 'man overboard'. The examiner will expect the candidate to take over the controls of the boat and bring the boat to a halt alongside the fender and rope so that a crewmember can retrieve them with a boat hook.

The multitude of methods for this can be confusing, but pick one that works for you and your boat and crew. 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.

The only criteria is that it should be done quickly, with the boat under control at all times and without running over the fender and rope.

Marina Boat Handling

The candidate will be asked to turn the vessel round in a confined space and take the boat out of and into a marina berth in ahead or astern. Bringing the boat alongside a pontoon is also required as is leaving a pontoon with the use of a 'spring' if necessary.

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.

Using all the equipment

Whilst it is important that candidates should be familiar with all the functions of a GPS, during the exam I would expect the candidate to demonstrate his or her abilities as skipper by being 'on deck' as much as possible and where necessary to keep out of shallow water to make use of 'clearing bearings' and the

echo sounder rather than the GPS.

On the basis that it is often more important to know where you are not, than where you are, a navigational tool often overlooked in daylight and good visibility is the hand bearing compass.

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?

Pre-exam training

Even if a candidate has completed all the relevant RYA courses it is a very good idea to go to a school and complete a Yachtmaster preparation course, this would usually be over 5 days with the exam on the last day. Not only will your skills be improved but you will also become familiar with the 'examination area'.

The Yachtmaster exam sounds daunting, but it is well worth the effort. Once you have passed you will be in possession of the most highly respected sailing qualification in the world.

How to increase your chances of passing the RYA Yachtmaster exam

Whilst it is very important to do a Yachtmaster preparation course at an RYA Training Centre, there is a lot more that you can do yourself to ensure a successful outcome to your exam.

Firstly it is important to realise that the preparation course is over 6 days with the exam included in that time, your instructor will have 4-5 days to get you up to speed depending on the number of candidates. This is an intensive training session specifically designed to prepare you for the Yachtmaster Exam. There is no fixed syllabus and training is tailored to suit the individual needs of the candidate. This is not designed to turn you into an RYA Yachtmaster, but to hone your skills which you have already gained elsewhere. Your Instructor will de-brief you regularly on your progress and discuss with you, your weak and strong points. If you or the instructor does not think you are ready for the Exam at the end of the week and you need more training, then we will put together a training action plan for you.

It makes sense therefore to learn as much as possible before your preparation course.

Revision - Your examiner will test you on lights & shapes, sound signals, weather, rules of the road and buoyage. All of this you will have learnt in your Coastal Skipper / Yachtmaster Theory course, but you will not remember them well enough to pass the Yachtmaster practical exam and there will not be enough time to revise them during your Yachtmaster preparation course. **Learn them inside out before you arrive!!!!**

Traditional Navigation – Many candidates have learnt traditional navigation during a theory course and since then have been totally reliant on GPS for their navigation, the first time that they have actually drawn a tidal vector, a DR and an EP or a fix on a paper chart when out on the water is on their Yachtmaster preparation course. Under the pressure of being examined they cannot remember as to how many arrows go on each line or where the arrows should be. This will immediately show the examiner that the candidate is probably using traditional navigation for the first time that week, and it is unlikely that the examiner will pass the candidate when he or she has shown that their navigational skills are not even up to Day Skipper standard. In order to ensure that you get this vitally important part of the exam right on the day I suggest that candidates practice using traditional navigational techniques whenever possible during the months and / or years before taking the Yachtmaster exam. It should not be a chore, it is fun and it really does work!

Passage Planning - The examiner will ask you to produce a passage plan for an imaginary passage. What the examiner is looking for is to find out if you understand tidal gates and heights; he will **NOT** expect to see a plan that involves sailing against a tidal stream.

On the day – Be well prepared for your exam, make sure the boat is clean and tidy and have your log book, First Aid and VHF certificates ready to show the examiner and a passport size photograph with your name printed on the back ready to give the examiner. In addition make certain that your application form for the exam is fully completed, you should have either a cheque made out to The Royal Yachting Association or credit card authorization already made out for the exam fee. The Yachtmaster Offshore exam fee for 2012 is 231.00 pounds; the Yachtmaster Coastal exam fee is 190.00

pounds. If all of this done before the examiner arrives it may well impress him or her and start your exam on a positive note.

If during your Yachtmaster preparation course you have been shown the correct way of doing a particular exercise don't under the pressure of being examined revert to your way of doing it, just because you feel more comfortable doing it the way you have always done it. The examiner would prefer to see you trying to do it the correct way not very well than a way that is considered to be incorrect.

Gybing - both accidentally, without warning or badly executed is the single most frequent cause for Yachtmaster exam failure. When sailing with the wind more than 30 degrees abaft the beam **always** have a gybe preventer fitted. **Never** gybe without giving the crew loud and adequate warning and don't put the wheel over to take the stern of the boat through the wind until the crew have the mainsail sheeted in. Remember this is a sail cruising exam **not** a sail racing exam!! There is no hurry, safety is paramount.

Conclusion Having conducted a large amount of YM preps and Exams over the years. The same still applies those that are prepared and have done their homework will be successful.

Try to go out and enjoy the experience.

Good luck!!