

What experience do I need before taking the exam?

The official answer is: 50 days, five days as skipper, 2,500 miles, five passages over 60 miles, including two overnight and two as skipper, and up to half of this can be done on non-tidal waters. The RYA Sail Cruising Logbook (G15) and Motor Cruising Logbook (G18) include the full requirements and syllabi. Remember, the exam is essentially a test of ability to take charge of a yacht so your experience as skipper is the most important. The mileage requirement is quite high and encourages candidates to skipper in a variety of weather conditions to a range of harbours and anchorages. A Yachtmaster® should be able to enter any well-charted harbour for the first time, with sufficient depth, by day or night. The only way to gain confidence is by practice, particularly at night when skill is required in picking out navigation lights and buoys against a background of shore lights. Before taking the exam, be more adventurous than the usual weekend trip to your favourite anchorage. For example, try some new harbours that require a good knowledge of tidal heights. Attempt the occasional night entry and be aware of the problems. Most Yachtmaster® examinations involve some night sailing.

Do I need any other certificates before the Yachtmaster® exam?

Before the exam you need the restricted (VHF only) Radio Operator's Certificate or Short Range Certificate (SRC) and a First Aid certificate. You stand a better chance of passing if you have attended previous RYA courses, but these are not vital.

What happens during an exam?

Having prearranged a date, the examiner will meet you on board your boat. All exams are nerve-racking, even for highly experienced or professional skippers. Talking to the examiner and making sure you understand what is required will help you unwind. The examiner understands that the first hour or two is hard and will emphasise that the idea is to find out what you can achieve rather than pick holes. You will be asked to undertake a short passage, although you may have to plan a longer one. Discuss with the examiner what you are being asked to do. 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 more or less accurately throughout the exam. Good skippers spend time on deck observing. A common mistake is to be busy plotting fixes when a glance on deck would confirm the boat's position from a navigation buoy or transit. You should know how to use a GPS, but remember that marks are not awarded for over-navigating. The test usually involves practical problems involving tidal streams and tidal heights. It isn't cheating to have looked them up beforehand. There are sufficient variables on the day without having to worry about numbers that can be looked up the week before. Run through a few tidal calculations to ensure that you are happy with the methods you are going to use to calculate heights and streams.

Boat handling

The exam involves boat handling under sail and engine and you should understand exactly how your boat is going to react. The handling under engine is usually done in a harbour and often involves some sort of berthing and unberthing on pontoons, piles or moorings. Practise so you know your turning circle. Does it have a predictable kick astern? Can you turn in a confined space?

Similarly, practise manoeuvring under sail, picking up mooring buoys and short tacking. Don't hesitate to change sails or reef if you think the boat has unsuitable sails for the task ahead. The examiner is not looking for first-time success every time but you do need to demonstrate a good understanding of how the boat reacts at slow speed. Again, experience in a variety of conditions is the key to success.

Man overboard

The exam will almost always include some kind of simulated man overboard recovery. Nearly every month yachting magazines suggest new ideas for this manoeuvre and there are as many methods as there are yachting books. You have to discover a system that works for you and your boat. It might involve a tack or a gybe, but it must end up with the yacht stopped next to the man in the water. Clarify with the examiner whether he expects you to handle the boat with or without the engine.

Safety

Most candidates understand safety procedures and are safety conscious. Do remember that if you've decided that harnesses should be worn at night you should follow your own advice.

Meteorology

Listen to the forecast before the examination. You will be asked questions about the present weather situation and this might affect a passage plan. You need to understand how weather systems influence sea conditions and how to make yachting plans based on this knowledge. Frequently, decisions based on the weather include other variables, such as type of boat and strength of crew, so the examiner might ask you to consider a number of possibilities. Your opinions based on experience are required; there is rarely a definitive answer.

Ability as a skipper

The most important assessment on the day is whether you are fully in command of the yacht. Being in charge is not about shouting or giving a stream of commands. It is about leading the crew, communicating with them, making sure that they understand what is going on and listening to them when they have something to tell you. It is a quality sensed by the crew when they feel safe and confident that the correct decisions are being made. Even the best skippers make mistakes, but the overall impression is one of quiet competence. The examiner is looking for this ability, which is based on experience and knowledge; hence the requirement for skippered passages before taking the exam.

Pre-exam training

Before attempting the exam, even if you have worked through the RYA courses, it is often worth receiving some tuition, if only to find out your strengths and weaknesses. Many centres offer this service. Discuss your requirements with them – you may decide to take the test on a school boat, in which case they can help you arrange the exam.

www.rya.org.uk

www.dy-akademie.de