



PORTS AND YACHTING DIRECTORATE

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Transport Malta

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Good Seamanship

The Ports and Yachting Directorate, Transport Malta, reminds all Mariners, Masters, Skippers, Owners and Operators of Vessels of the fundamental importance of good seamanship in the safe and responsible operation of vessels within Maltese waters.

Good seamanship is not confined to compliance with individual rules or regulations. It is the application of knowledge, competence, experience, sound judgement, prudence and common sense to the operation and navigation of a vessel, having proper regard to the circumstances and conditions prevailing at the time.

In its broadest sense, good seamanship means doing what a competent and prudent mariner would reasonably be expected to do in the same circumstances to prevent danger and maintain the safety of the vessel, persons on board and other users of the sea.

What Constitutes Good Seamanship

Good seamanship begins before a vessel puts to sea and continues until the vessel is safely secured.

It requires a mariner to anticipate hazards rather than merely react to them and to recognise that conditions at sea are dynamic and may require plans and actions to be continuously reassessed.

Good seamanship includes, but is not limited to:

- **Knowledge and competence** – understanding the vessel, its equipment, limitations and handling characteristics, together with the rules, practices and procedures applicable to its operation;
- **Preparation and planning** – ensuring that the vessel, crew and equipment are suitable for the intended voyage and that appropriate consideration has been given to the route, applicable Notices to Mariners, weather, sea conditions, navigational hazards, available shelter and contingency arrangements;



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- **Situational awareness** – maintaining an accurate appreciation of the vessel's position, surroundings, traffic, weather and developing risks through proper lookout and the effective use of all available information;
- **Anticipation of risk** – identifying potential dangers sufficiently early to allow safe and effective action to be taken before a situation becomes critical;
- **Prudent judgement** – recognising that an action may be technically permissible but nevertheless inappropriate or unsafe in the particular circumstances;
- **Safe speed and appropriate manoeuvring** – operating at a speed and in a manner which allows sufficient time and distance to assess developing situations and take effective action;
- **Allowing an adequate margin of safety** – avoiding unnecessary reliance on minimum distances, last-minute manoeuvres or assumptions concerning the intentions or actions of others;
- **Understanding the limitations of equipment** – using electronic navigation, radar, AIS and other aids appropriately while recognising that such equipment supports, but does not replace, proper lookout, judgement and navigational competence;
- **Awareness of one's own limitations** – recognising the effects of fatigue, inexperience, weather, visibility, physical condition and other factors which may impair the ability to operate a vessel safely;
- **Consideration for others** – appreciating the limitations and vulnerabilities of other vessels and persons using the sea and avoiding conduct which may unnecessarily place them at risk. To take into consideration that other vessels may have different manoeuvring characteristics from own vessel;
- **Readiness for the unexpected** – maintaining appropriate contingency arrangements and being prepared to respond to equipment failure, deteriorating weather, navigational uncertainty, emergencies or the unexpected actions of another vessel; and
- **Care for the marine environment** – operating the vessel in a manner which avoids pollution and unnecessary harm to the marine environment.

Good Seamanship and Compliance with the Rules

Good seamanship requires knowledge of and compliance with applicable laws, regulations and navigational requirements. However, compliance with a rule should not be regarded as a substitute for the exercise of prudent judgement.



The circumstances encountered at sea are too varied to be addressed entirely through prescriptive requirements.

A competent mariner is therefore expected not only to know the applicable rules, but also to understand their purpose and to apply them appropriately to the circumstances encountered.

Particular attention is drawn to Rule 2 of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGs), which recognises the responsibilities arising from the ordinary practice of seamen and from precautions which the special circumstances may require of the case.

Accordingly, the absence of a specific prohibition or instruction does not, of itself, make an action safe or prudent.

Responsibility of Mariners

The safety of navigation depends substantially upon the decisions and conduct of those in charge of vessels.

Experience, technology and regulations are valuable aids to safe navigation, but none removes the need for vigilance, judgement and personal responsibility.

Good seamanship therefore requires mariners to remain alert, exercise sound judgement, anticipate developing hazards and take timely and appropriate action to prevent situations from becoming dangerous.

The following examples which are not considered as exhaustive illustrate circumstances where the exercise of prudent judgement and the ordinary practice of seamen may require precautions beyond simple compliance with a specific regulatory requirement.

1. Safe Speed in Congested or Restricted Waters

A vessel may be operating within an applicable speed limit; however, that speed may still be excessive having regard to traffic density, visibility, proximity to moored vessels, swimmers or divers, sea conditions, available manoeuvring space or the wash generated by the vessel.

Good seamanship requires the master or skipper to reduce speed whenever the circumstances require it, irrespective of the maximum speed otherwise permitted.



2. Maintaining a Safe Distance

A prescribed minimum distance, where applicable, should not automatically be regarded as a safe distance in every circumstance.

Weather, sea state, vessel size, draught, manoeuvrability, traffic, underwater hazards and the possibility of equipment failure may require a substantially greater margin.

Good seamanship requires sufficient sea room to be maintained to allow for foreseeable changes in circumstances and to permit effective action should something go wrong.

3. Approaching Harbours, Bays and Anchorages

When entering or leaving a harbour, bay or anchorage, a prudent mariner should anticipate the presence of vessels manoeuvring, vessels at anchor, small craft, swimmers, divers and other water users.

Even where a vessel has the ability or apparent right to proceed, good seamanship may require a reduction in speed, an alteration of course, additional lookout or allowing another vessel more room to manoeuvre.

4. Deteriorating Weather and Sea Conditions

A voyage which was reasonable to undertake at the time of departure may become unsafe as conditions deteriorate.

Good seamanship requires weather and sea conditions to be monitored throughout the voyage and plans to be reassessed accordingly. This may require reducing speed, altering course, seeking shelter, returning to port or abandoning the intended voyage.

Continuing merely because the voyage has already commenced is not, in itself, justification for accepting an unnecessary level of risk.

5. Navigation in Reduced Visibility

Electronic navigational aids can significantly improve situational awareness but should not create a false sense of security.

In fog, heavy rain or other conditions of restricted visibility, good seamanship may require a substantial reduction in speed, additional lookout, increased use of radar and other available navigational aids and readiness to manoeuvre immediately.

The availability of GPS, radar, AIS or electronic charts does not remove the obligation to maintain a proper lookout and exercise prudent judgement.

6. Uncertainty as to Another Vessel's Intentions

A mariner should not assume that another vessel has seen them, correctly interpreted the situation or will take the action expected of it.

Where the intentions of another vessel are uncertain, good seamanship requires early assessment of the developing situation and appropriate precautionary action rather than allowing the vessels to approach unnecessarily close before acting.



7. Interaction with Small or Vulnerable Craft

Large or high-powered vessels should have regard to the effect that their speed, proximity and wash may have upon smaller craft, sailing vessels, paddle craft, persons in the water and vessels engaged in diving or other activities.

An action which presents little risk to the vessel creating the wash may create significant danger to another person or vessel.

Good seamanship therefore includes consideration of the consequences of one's actions upon other users of the sea.

8. Anchoring and Mooring

Good seamanship requires consideration not merely of whether a vessel can anchor or moor in a particular position, but whether it can remain there safely.

Account should be taken of water depth, nature of the seabed, swinging room, proximity to other vessels and hazards, forecast weather, expected changes in wind direction and strength, and the adequacy of the vessel's anchoring or mooring arrangements.

Appropriate allowance should be made for deteriorating conditions and the possibility of dragging anchor or failure of equipment.

9. Equipment Failure

The failure of an engine, steering system, navigational aid or other equipment does not necessarily constitute an emergency if appropriate precautions are taken promptly.

Good seamanship requires foreseeable failures to be considered in advance and appropriate contingency arrangements to be available.

Where equipment essential to the safe continuation of a voyage becomes defective, the prudent decision may be to seek shelter, return to port or discontinue the voyage.

10. Assisting Persons or Vessels in Difficulty

A mariner observing another vessel or person apparently in difficulty should maintain awareness of the situation and, where appropriate and safe to do so, render assistance or alert the relevant authorities.

Good seamanship requires assistance to be provided in a manner which does not unnecessarily endanger the assisting vessel, its crew or other persons.



11. When in Doubt

Assessment should be made using all available means and judgment is not to be based on scanty information. When the available information may give rise to doubt, good seamanship is particularly important where circumstances are uncertain or are not expressly addressed by a particular rule.

Where there is uncertainty concerning water depth, another vessel's intentions, weather conditions, the vessel's position, the safety of a manoeuvre or any other matter affecting navigation, the prudent response is to resolve that uncertainty before proceeding where practicable.

Uncertainty should generally result in increased caution, not increased risk.

12. Underlying Principle

These examples are illustrative and are not exhaustive. Good seamanship cannot be prescribed for every circumstance which may arise at sea.

The underlying principle is that a mariner should identify foreseeable risks, exercise sound judgement, take timely precautions and maintain an appropriate margin of safety rather than relying solely upon minimum legal requirements or taking action only after a dangerous situation has developed.

Mariners are reminded that good seamanship is not simply the observance of rules; it is the continuous exercise of competence, prudence and responsible judgement in the interests of safety at sea.