



Ship Captains and Mates

What's this job all about?

Ship captains direct and navigate all kinds of ships in every type of waterway. Captains or masters are in command of ships. They set the course and speed and steer vessels to avoid hazards and other ships. They are also responsible for taking care of the business of the ship, which may include purchasing supplies, maintaining the vessel, or selling fish caught aboard a fishing vessel. On large ships, captains have deck officers or "mates" as assistants. Mates "stand watch," meaning they oversee the operation of a vessel for part of the day. On smaller vessels, there may be only one mate who alternates watches with the captain.

Alaska has a big need for captains and mates. In Southeast Alaska, the Alaska Marine Highway System is a major transportation link for communities and the people who operate the ships in the system are important to its success. Captains and mates can also be found on oil tankers, fishing and fish processing industry vessels, cruise ships, and Coast Guard vessels. Most mariners work according to a watch schedule aboard a ship. Generally the watch schedule is broken into four hours in the morning and four hours in the evening, but often overtime is required. Because mariners are working away from home, they often work seven days a week aboard the vessel for a period ranging from weeks to months. Some companies have their employees work a week on and a week off, while others work a month on and a month off. Your week or month off is the time you get off the ship to go home. Generally, travel to and from your home is paid for by the company you work for.

Here's what Ship Captains and Mates do:

- Use equipment such as depth finders and radar to watch for hazards.
- Gather information from lighthouses, buoys, and lights.
- Determine the ship's position using navigational aids, charts, and observations.
- Direct the crew who steer the ship, operate the engines, and signal to other vessels.
- Direct the people who perform maintenance or operate towing or dredging gear.
- Make sure proper procedures and safety practices are followed.
- Make sure machinery and equipment are in working order.
- Oversee the loading and unloading of passengers or cargo.
- Keep logs and records of the ship's movements and cargo.
- Stand watch for four hours and are off for eight hours while at sea.

How much money can I make?

Median wage: \$25.46 per hour.

Separate wage information is not available for ship captains and mates in Alaska, however, these occupations are included in the larger group of "ship captains, mates, and pilots." In Alaska, the median wage for this group is \$4,413 per month. Half of all ship captains, mates, and pilots earn between \$3,657 and \$5,394 per month (\$21.10 and \$31.12 per hour). Ship mates have less responsibility than captains, so their wages are usually lower than those of captains. Wages are higher for trips across the ocean than for other waters. Sometimes workers may wait months between jobs, so that can lower their yearly income. Many mariners who work full time on American ships receive benefits like health insurance and sick leave. Some employers also offer retirement plans.

How long does it take to receive training?

To work as a ship captain or mate, you must either complete a 4-year training program at a maritime academy or work your way up over many years; pass an exam; and have a merchant marine

HELPFUL HIGH SCHOOL COURSES

Below is a list of high school courses that will help prepare you for these jobs. While you do not have to take all of them, you should consider them in course planning. Some of these courses are also available at the technical or college level.

Business

Keyboarding/Word Processing
Introduction to Business/Business Management

Computer and Information Sciences

General Computer Applications
Leadership/Executive Internship

Energy, Power, and Transportation Technologies

Introduction to Mechanics
Marine Mechanics and Repair/Barge and Boat Operation
Energy and Power
Transportation Technology Work Experience

English Language and Literature

English and Language Arts (Four years)
Business and Applied English/Public Speaking

Healthcare Sciences

Emergency Medical Technology

Life and Physical Sciences

Earth Science/Geology/Chemistry
Physics/Principles of Technology/Advanced Physics courses
Integrated Science/Environmental Science
Astronomy/Marine Science

Mathematics

Pre-Algebra, Algebra/Geometry/Trigonometry
Pre-Calculus, Calculus
Probability and Statistics/Business Math

Military Science

Introduction to ROTC/Military ROTC/ROTC Drill

Second Language and Literature

Second Language

Social Sciences and History

World Geography/Advanced Geography courses
U.S. Government

Social Science

Psychology/Advanced Psychology courses
Sociology

license. Training programs for ship captains and mates are approved and monitored by the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard is an agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. You must be licensed by this agency to operate vessels for hire. You can prepare for this occupation by attending the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy or one of six national academies. In Alaska, the Alaska Vocational Technical Institute (AVTEC) in Seward has classes that can lead toward certification and can help prepare you for a licensing exam. You also can prepare by gaining experience as a deckhand. Local unions provide experience and training. As you gain experience and pass rating exams, you move up the ranks. This route takes more time than formal training programs. Because of the fast changing demands of technology, you may receive additional training on the job. Employers may provide training or pay for college course work so you can update your technical skills or expand your administrative skills. Many ship captains and mates take training courses or seminars on their own to qualify for special endorsements to their licenses. Experience as a U.S. Coast Guard or Navy officer can qualify you for a merchant marine license.

When I'm ready to work, will there be job openings?

According to Alaska industry representatives there is indication for average growth for ship captains and mates through 2014. Most openings are expected to result from replacement needs; replacing those who retire or otherwise permanently leave the occupation. The fastest growth is expected in the cruise line industry. With new ships being built, both U.S. and international flagged ships will need employees. There is likely to be strong competition for the openings in this occupation.

Please see the Training Programs section of this booklet to find out more about training in these career fields in Alaska.

