

Ship Captain interview questions

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What to expect

Ship Captain interviews are usually run by a marine superintendent or crewing manager and focus on verifying certificates of competency and sea time before moving into technical and judgement-based questioning. Expect a mix of navigation knowledge, emergency response, regulatory detail and leadership examples, often followed by a hypothetical scenario to test decision-making under pressure.

- **Technical/process:** Checks how you actually navigate, plan routes and use bridge equipment like ECDIS, radar and GPS.
- **Safety and emergency response:** Probes how you handle fires, groundings, medical emergencies or equipment failure at sea.
- **Behavioural:** STAR-style questions about past command decisions, crew conflict and leadership under pressure.
- **Regulatory/compliance:** Tests working knowledge of SOLAS, MARPOL, AMSA requirements and port state control expectations.
- **Scenario/judgement:** Live hypotheticals requiring you to talk through immediate priorities and escalation under time pressure.

Interviews typically open with verification of certificates, licences and sea time, move into technical and regulatory questioning, then behavioural examples from past voyages, and often close with one or two scenario questions or a simulator-based assessment for shortlisted candidates.

1. Walk me through how you would plan and monitor an ocean crossing, including contingency planning for weather.

Why they ask

This checks your working knowledge of route planning, ECDIS and radar use, and how you build in margin for changing conditions rather than just plotting a straight line.

How to structure your answer

Step-by-step walkthrough: initial planning, tools used, checkpoints during the voyage, and how you adjust the plan when conditions change.

Example answer

"I start route planning well before departure, checking charts, tidal data and long-range weather forecasts, then build the passage plan in ECDIS with waypoints and no-go areas marked. Once underway I cross-check GPS position against radar and visual fixes at set intervals, and I review weather updates every watch change. If a system is tracking toward our track I'll re-route early rather than wait, because a small course change well in advance costs far less time than running into heavy weather."

2. Tell me about a time you had to make a difficult call during an emergency at sea.

Why they ask

This is a behavioural question probing command judgement and how you actually behave when something goes wrong, not just what the manual says.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"We had an engine room fire alarm trigger mid-crossing with deteriorating sea conditions. My task was to protect the crew and vessel without knowing yet how serious the fire was. I sounded the emergency signal, mustered the crew, sent the fire team in with breathing apparatus while I coordinated from the bridge and prepared a distress call in case it escalated. The fire team contained it within minutes using CO2 suppression, and I logged the full sequence for the incident report. We continued the voyage with the engineer's system checked and cleared before resuming full speed."

3. A fire breaks out in the engine room mid-ocean, the cargo includes flammable goods, and the weather is deteriorating. Walk me through your first ten minutes.

Why they ask

This scenario tests judgement under pressure and whether you know the right order of priorities when several risks compound at once.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-under-pressure structure: immediate safety actions, chain of command, communication, then medium-term stabilisation.

Example answer

"First priority is muster and headcount, so I'd sound the alarm and get everyone accounted for while the fire team suits up. I'd cut power to the affected area if safe to do so and start closing fire doors to contain it. At the same time I'd get a position, course and speed ready in case we need to send a distress call, and I'd brief the deteriorating weather into my decision on whether to slow down or alter course away from the worst of it. Once the fire team reports back I'd decide whether we can continue toward port or need to request assistance, and I'd keep the crew informed throughout so nobody is guessing."

4. How do you make sure your vessel and crew stay compliant with SOLAS and MARPOL requirements across a voyage?

Why they ask

This checks depth of regulatory knowledge and whether compliance is something you actively manage or just assume is handled.

How to structure your answer

Knowledge-based explanation supported by a concrete example.

Example answer

"I treat compliance as a daily task, not a pre-inspection scramble. I run scheduled drills to meet SOLAS training requirements and keep records current, and I check MARPOL logs for oil discharge and waste management personally rather than just signing off on the engineer's entry. Before entering any port I review the vessel's certificate status and outstanding deficiencies so nothing is a surprise if port state control boards us."

5. Describe how you manage crew performance and rostering over a long voyage, particularly when tension builds between officers.

Why they ask

Extended time at sea puts real strain on crews, and this probes your people leadership rather than technical skill.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"On a long crossing two officers had an ongoing disagreement over watch handovers that was starting to affect the rest of the deck team. My task was to resolve it before it affected safety or

morale. I spoke to each of them separately first, then brought them together to agree on a clear handover checklist so the issue wasn't personal anymore, it was procedural. The friction dropped off within a week and the checklist stayed in use for the rest of the voyage."

6. Port state control officers board for an unscheduled inspection. What do you check beforehand and how do you manage the inspection itself?

Why they ask

This is a practical process question checking whether you understand what inspectors look for and how to run the inspection without it disrupting operations.

How to structure your answer

Walkthrough: preparation, documents ready, conduct during inspection, follow-up.

Example answer

"Before they board I'd confirm certificates, logbooks and safety equipment records are current and easy to locate, and I'd brief the duty officer so the crew isn't caught off guard. During the inspection I stay with the officers, answer questions directly and don't volunteer more than asked, but I don't hide anything either. If they flag a deficiency I note the timeframe for correction and get it actioned straight away rather than letting it carry over to the next port."