

A yacht's navigation station: VHF/DSC radio, chartplotter and instruments. Standing orders tell the watchkeeper what to monitor here, what to record and when to call the captain. *1

CREW MANAGEMENT / REFERENCE

Captain's Standing Orders

A watchkeeping and communications framework you can adapt to your own vessel and passage.

Standing orders are the captain's written instructions to every watchkeeper. They define what must be monitored, what must be recorded, what may be changed without asking, and — most importantly — when to call the captain without delay. Written orders mean a tired crew member at 0300 does not have to guess. The framework below is an example; every vessel and every passage needs its own version, read and signed by each watchkeeper before taking a watch.

AT A GLANCE

Lookout Sight and hearing, plus radar and AIS — at all times.	**Navigation** Know position, course, speed, depth, hazards and traffic.
Communications VHF Ch 16 and Ch 13; the assigned working channel.	**Machinery** Temperatures, pressures, charging, bilges and alarms.
Crew safety PFDs and tethers per the orders; one hand for the boat.	**Call the captain** Whenever in doubt — there is no penalty for calling.

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*

Why Standing Orders Matter

The Navigation Rules require every vessel to maintain a proper lookout by sight and hearing and by all available means (Rule 5), to use all available means to determine whether risk of collision exists (Rule 7), and to proceed at a safe speed (Rule 6).[1] On a yacht with a small crew, the person on watch is often alone in the wheelhouse while the captain sleeps. Standing orders make those obligations concrete for that particular boat.

General Standing Orders (Example)

01	The watchkeeper is responsible for the safe navigation of the vessel during the watch and acts on the captain's behalf within these orders.
02	Maintain a continuous visual and listening lookout. Step outside the wheelhouse regularly, especially at night and in poor visibility, to look and listen.
03	Do not alter the planned route, change engine settings beyond the agreed range, or leave the helm area unattended without the captain's approval — except to avoid immediate danger.
04	Never leave the watch until relieved by a watchkeeper who is fully awake, informed and has accepted the watch.
05	If in any doubt at all, call the captain. Calling early is always correct.

Radio and Watch Routine



Fixed DSC VHF: keep a listening watch on Ch 16 and know how to send a DSC distress alert. *2



A charged handheld VHF at the helm gives a backup and allows the watchkeeper to stay in the cockpit. *3

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Channel	Use	Notes
16 (156.800 MHz)	International distress, safety and calling	Monitor whenever under way. Hail, then shift to a working channel. Never use for routine conversation.
13 (156.650 MHz)	Bridge-to-bridge navigational safety	Required on many larger vessels; commercial traffic and bridges are often reached here. Low power (1 W).[2]
9	Alternate calling channel (recreational)	Used by many marinas and bridges on the East Coast.
22A	U.S. Coast Guard liaison / working channel	The Coast Guard will direct you to it; Marine Safety Information broadcasts are announced on 16.
70	Digital Selective Calling (DSC) only	Voice use prohibited. The radio's red DISTRESS button sends an alert with your MMSI and GPS position.[3]
68, 69, 71, 72, 78A	Recreational working channels	Use for boat-to-boat and marina traffic.

Channel assignments from the Coast Guard Navigation Center.[4] Watch requirements for compulsory and voluntary ship stations are set out in FCC rules.[5]

01	Maintain the prescribed listening watch on Ch 16, plus Ch 13 in channels with commercial traffic, and the assigned working channel.
02	Confirm radar, AIS, depth sounder, position and visual lookout are working as conditions require. Set a radar guard zone and AIS CPA/TCPA alarms, but never rely on alarms alone.
03	Record position, course, speed, weather, sea state and engine readings in the log at the agreed interval (typically hourly), and at every change of watch.

Navigation and Collision Avoidance



*Radar is the primary tool for detecting targets in poor visibility and at night — including vessels without AIS. *4*



*Night watch: dim, red-tinted lighting preserves night vision for the lookout. *5*

- Assess risk of collision early. A steady compass bearing with decreasing range means risk of collision exists.[1]
- Take early, substantial action to keep clear when required — a large, obvious course change rather than a series of small ones.
- Know the vessel's position at all times; cross-check GPS against radar ranges, depth and visual aids. Plot or note a fix at least hourly.
- Keep a safe distance from shoals, traffic separation schemes, fishing gear and lee shores, as set out in the passage plan.

■ In restricted visibility, slow to a safe speed, sound the correct fog signals, turn on navigation lights and post an additional lookout. Call the captain.

Call the Captain — No Delay

Situation	Examples
Collision or close-quarters risk	Any vessel with a CPA less than the agreed limit (e.g. 1 nm offshore, 0.5 nm inshore), or any uncertain intentions.
Navigation uncertainty	Unable to fix position, unexpected depth, aid to navigation not sighted when expected, approaching a waypoint or turn.
Weather change	Wind or sea increasing beyond forecast, visibility dropping below the agreed limit, squall or thunderstorm on radar.
Machinery or systems	Any alarm, temperature or pressure outside normal range, loss of steering or propulsion, unusual noise, smell or vibration, high bilge water.
Emergencies	Fire, flooding, man overboard, injury, or any distress call heard on the radio.
Anything else	Any situation in which the watchkeeper is unsure of the safe action.

IN AN EMERGENCY

Man overboard: shout "Man overboard," point and keep pointing, throw flotation, press MOB on the plotter, then call the captain.
Fire or flooding: sound the alarm, call the captain, and begin the agreed response. Send a Mayday on Ch 16 / DSC if life is at risk.

Machinery and Crew Safety

■ Check engine instruments and the engine room at the agreed interval (typically each hour), noting readings in the log.

■ Check bilges at each watch change.

■ Life jackets are worn on deck at night, in rough weather, when alone on watch, and whenever the captain directs. Clip on where jacklines are rigged.

■ One hand for yourself, one for the boat. Use handholds, wear non-skid shoes and never go forward alone at night without telling someone.

■ Stay hydrated, fed and warm. Report fatigue early — watch schedules can be changed.

Watch Handover

01	The relieving watchkeeper arrives a few minutes early, allows eyes to adjust to the dark, and reviews the log and chart.
02	The outgoing watch briefs: position, course, speed, traffic, weather trend, machinery status, any course changes due, and any outstanding concerns.
03	The relieving watch confirms understanding and formally accepts: "I have the watch." The outgoing watchkeeper remains until satisfied the handover is complete.

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Night Orders and Sign-Off

The captain writes specific night orders each evening: the course to steer, waypoints and expected times, any course changes, CPA limits, weather expectations and any special instructions. Each watchkeeper reads and initials them on taking the watch.

Watchkeeper	Date	I have read and understood these standing orders (signature)

CAPTAIN'S NOTE

Customize channels, night orders and call thresholds for the specific passage and vessel. On my deliveries, every crew member reads and signs the orders before the first watch, and I would always rather be woken for nothing than not be woken at all.

Further Reading & Official Sources

[1] USCG Navigation Center — Navigation Rules, International & Inland (Rules 5, 7, 8, 19, 34, 35) — https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/navigation-rules-amalgamated

[2] 33 CFR Part 26 — Vessel Bridge-to-Bridge Radiotelephone Regulations — https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-33/chapter-I/subchapter-A/part-26

[3] USCG Navigation Center — Digital Selective Calling (DSC) — https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/digital-selective-calling

[4] USCG Navigation Center — VHF marine channels — https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/us-vhf-channels

[5] 47 CFR Part 80 — Stations in the Maritime Services (§80.148 watch on Ch 16) — https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/chapter-I/subchapter-D/part-80

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