

## Getting a Coast Guard License

It's kind of intimidating walking into the Federal Building in Oakland, going through the security screen, and presenting oneself to the Chief Warrant Officer in charge of the examination center to request a U.S. Merchant Marine Officer license.

The first thing they do is examine your paperwork to see if it's generally in order. This can take about an hour, while you sit and answer questions. They diligently go over the ½" or thicker folder of information you've likely gathered.

Then, assuming there are no obvious omissions, like missing information on the application, they send you away with the fond hope that they will issue a positive "finding" and the license will be issued in the coming weeks. If they find omissions upon closer examination, they're happy to call you and/or send a letter explaining the problem.

If you want things to go smoothly, treat them with the respect they deserve. While you don't have to dress up, it's probably not a good idea to show up in dirty or torn clothes. Also, if you're requesting an Operator of Uninspected Passenger Vessel license, call it an OUPV, not a 6-Pack. If they use the latter term, that's fine, but don't initiate it. Some in the Coast Guard find it offensive.

They will probably fingerprint you on the spot, besides asking for identification, such as a US passport.

Expect the visit to the office to last one to two hours, depending on how busy they are, how together your paperwork is, and how many questions you or they ask. They love being asked questions, so don't hesitate if you're unsure about something. If you're taking the exams in the office, expect to be there for at least one day, possibly two.

The primary requirements for the OUPV (6-Pack) USCG license are:

- Age 18 or over
- 360 days underway experience
- 90 of those days in the last 3 years
- Physical, drug test and eye exam
- Valid CPR/First Aid card
- Completion of the USCG on-site exam or completion of an approved course

Naturally, it's a bit more complicated than those simple-sounding requirements. And, if you want a higher-level license, the requirements are more demanding.

The first few requirements are straightforward. However, the exam for the regular OUPV consists of several parts and typically takes one or two days to complete.

Although there's a sea time requirement, there is no on-the-water test required by the Coast Guard.

### **Why do I need a license?**

If you carry paying passengers aboard a vessel, you need a Coast Guard license. The license is good for five years from the date of issue. The fees are less than \$200 for just about everything you'll need.

From the Code of Federal Regulations, CFR 24.10:

“Consideration means an economic benefit, inducement, right, or profit, including pecuniary payment accruing to an individual, person, or entity but not including a voluntary sharing of the actual expenses of the voyage by monetary contribution or donation of fuel, food, beverage, or other supplies.”

## **To get a license, you need to know...**

Rules of the Road There are 38 rules and 5 annexes to the rules. This is an extensive exam on the right-of-way rules, passing signals, lights, day shapes, special purpose vessels, towing identification, fog signals, etc. There are 30 questions, the exam is “closed book,” and you must get 90% to pass.

Plotting You will need to be able to draw course lines, measure distances, determine your latitude and longitude to the tenth of a minute for position determination, compute deduced reckoning based on time, speed, and distance. You need to take and plot two and three bearings fixes, along with computing and determining a course to overcome set and drift. You must have a good understanding of chart reading, Coast Pilots, and Light Lists. There are 10 questions and you must get 70% to pass.

Navigation General This covers the buoy system, weather, tide and current tables, Coast Pilots, Light Lists, Chart numbering system, Notice to Mariners, keeping your charts current, government publications, etc. There are 20 questions, it is open book, and you must get 70% to pass.

Deck General/Deck Safety You need to know about fire fighting, lines, knots, ship construction, code of federal regulations, pollution laws, safety equipment, life rafts, emergency signals, survival, ship handling, heavy weather operations, docking, mooring, anchoring, etc. There are 60 questions, it is open book, and you must get 70% to pass.

Visit the USCG website at <http://www.uscg.mil/nmc/> to get started.

## How tough is it?

These are not easy tests. Well, it's not *that* bad. You'll need to do some studying, especially regarding the Rules of the Road, and you'll need to be able to do accurate plotting. Many people take classes at a school and then take the exams through the school. Others study at home and take the tests at one of the Coast Guard examination centers. (The one closest to San Francisco is at the Oakland Federal Building. The other one in California is in Long Beach.)

You can take the tests at the examination office in one day (although they recommend allowing two days), and if you don't pass a section, you can retake just that section at a later time, up to two additional times in a couple-of-month period. Except for the Rules of the Road section, you have available to you all of the documents in the exam room (e.g., the entire set of Code of Federal Regulations, the Coast Pilot, Chart One, etc.). The trick is to be able to find the information you need.

Generally, schools have similar requirements, but you'll get a lot more help understanding what to study and how to look up the answers.

There's a slightly lower-level license that might be of interest to some instructors. It's called a Limited OUPV. The exam consists of just 40 questions. The requirements for this license are:

- Age 17 or over
- 90 days underway experience in the last 3 years
- Physical, drug test and eye exam
- Valid CPR/First Aid card
- Letter from prospective employer at a yacht club, marina, or educational institution
- Boating Safety Certificate or USCG exam

## **What are the benefits?**

The main benefit is to you. You'll know that you're among a select group who took the time and made the effort to learn and be recognized by the US Coast Guard. Additionally, you have the ability to accept paying customers.

## **What's next?**

When you've finally received your license, you're not quite done with the paperwork. You'll need to get a Federal identification card called TWIC, which stands for Transportation Worker Identification Credential. It's a relatively new Department of Homeland Security requirement for all Merchant Marine Officers. The cost is \$132.50. You'll need to make an appointment and show up at one of their offices (not at the Examination Center) for additional fingerprinting, photo taking, and form filling. For more information, visit their website at <https://twicprogram.tsa.dhs.gov/>. The TWIC is good for five years from the date of issue.