



16721
NMC Policy Letter 03-03
April 3, 2003

From: Commanding Officer, U.S. Coast Guard National Maritime Center
To: Distribution

Subj: DEMONSTRATIONS OF COMPETENCE IN VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS
(FLASHING LIGHT)

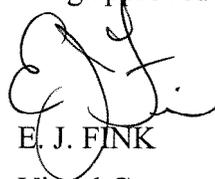
Ref: (a) International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and
Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended (STCW)
(b) Title 46, Code of Federal Regulations (46 CFR), Part 10

1. PURPOSE. This policy letter provides guidance on demonstrations of competence in visual communications. The guidance in this document may assist industry and individual mariners to meet the requirements of references (a) and (b). This guidance is not a substitute for applicable legal requirements, nor is it itself a rule. It is not intended to, nor does it impose, legally-binding requirements on any party. Applicants for the credentials addressed in this policy letter may propose alternatives to qualify for these credentials. Such alternatives should be forwarded to the U. S. Coast Guard National Maritime Center for evaluation against the standards of references (a) and (b).
2. ACTION. Commanding officers of units with marine safety responsibilities should bring this policy letter to the attention of the maritime industry and to institutions that offer U. S. Coast Guard approved training. This policy letter will be distributed by electronic means only and is available on the Internet at <http://www.uscg.mil/STCW/m-policy.htm>.
3. BACKGROUND.
 - a. 46 CFR 10.401(h) requires that all applicants for near coastal and oceans licenses above 1600 gross registered tons (GRT), either original or raise in grade, pass a practical signaling examination. To date, this examination has been administered either at Coast Guard Regional Examination Centers (RECs), or as part of a Coast Guard approved visual communications course.
 - b. The STCW Code also requires that candidates for certification as Officer in Charge of a Navigational Watch on Ships of 500 Gross Tonnage (GT) or More (greater than 200 GRT) demonstrate competency to *transmit and receive information by visual signaling*.
 - c. In its Fall 2002 meeting, the Merchant Marine Personnel Advisory Committee (MERPAC) accepted the report of its working group recommending several changes to the criteria the Coast Guard uses to assess competence in visual communications. This policy letter implements those recommendations.

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4. DISCUSSION.

- a. Applicants for STCW certification and a near coastal or ocean license as Mate or Master of greater than 200 GRT (500 GT or greater) may satisfy the STCW and demonstrate competence in visual communications (flashing light) by successful completion of an approved course or testing at an REC. Applicants may propose alternatives that would demonstrate competency in visual signaling. To propose an alternative, the applicant should submit a request to the NMC along with details of the alternative method of demonstrating competency.
- b. A mariner who has met the requirements for initial STCW competency in visual communications and who is actively serving on sea going ships will be considered as having demonstrated continuing competence in visual communications provided he or she completes at least one year of sea service within the past five years.
- c. Mariners applying for unlimited tonnage near coastal and ocean licenses remain subject to 46 CFR 10.401(h) which requires flashing light testing for each original issue or raise in grade of an unlimited tonnage license. Re-testing is not required for a renewal of a license.
- d. Until such time as new equipment is procured or changed over at the Coast Guard RECs, the administration of flashing light examinations will continue as per the instructions in the *Administration Guide for Merchant Marine Deck Licenses (Deck Guide)* February 2002, Assessment Guide 1-13. RECs will continue to offer this examination following the existing format of six words per minute with five letter groups and the passing score of 70%.
- e. As an alternative to (d), mariners may opt to demonstrate competency in visual communications by successfully completing a Coast Guard approved *Visual Communications* course which incorporates the MERPAC recommendations. Lists of Coast Guard approved courses can be found at the National Maritime Center web page, <http://www.uscg.mil/nmc/>.
- f. Guidance for approval of visual communications courses is provided in enclosure (1). The guidance incorporates the MERPAC recommendations, and includes several changes to the existing demonstration of competence, most notably a reduction in the transmission speed to four word groups per minute. Schools wishing to have a visual communication course approved, or to modify an existing approved course, may submit a request to this office.



E. J. FINK

Enclosure: (1) Recommendations for Visual Communications Courses

Distribution: Commandant (G-MSO)
Area Commanders (m)
All District Commanders (m)
All COs, MSOs
All Activity Commanders
All RECs

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS (FLASHING LIGHT) COURSES

- There is no minimum course length. Practice exercises are recommended prior to the administration of the final assessment.
- Assessments of competence (final examinations) may be sent at the rate of four (4) words per minute or higher. Use of “long spaces” between letters is permissible.
- Final Assessment should consist of two sections; a Random Letter Group section, and an International Code Of Signals (Pub. 102) Code Group section.

The Random Letter Group section may consist of the signal identity “DE” followed by a four (4) letter identity signal or name, sent once. This is followed by five (5) random, three letter groups, each of which is transmitted twice. The ending signal (AR) indicates the end of the five (5) three letter groups. Five points are given for each correct letter in a group for a possible maximum total of 75 points (15 letters x 5 points each = 75 points).

The International Code Of Signals (Pub. 102) Code Group consists of the signal identity “DE” followed by a four (4) letter identity signal or name, sent once. “YU” is then sent (once) indicating that a Code Group follows, after which five (5) code groups are sent, each of which are transmitted twice. The ending signal (AR) indicates the end of the five (5) letter groups. Each correctly decoded group is worth five points for a total of 25 points (5 code groups decoded correctly x 5 points each = 25 points).

The practice of recording all random letter groups and all code groups, will continue to be entered on the applicant’s answer sheet in the exact order as transmitted. As in the past, any group where the letters are misarranged will cause that group to be found in error. Minimum acceptable score for the entire exam is 70%.

- Students may copy the single or multiple letter groups by dot and dash character, which must be deciphered after transmission is complete and before entering Pub. 102 for the decoding exercise. After transmission is completed, the student should be allowed up to one (1) hour to decipher the five code groups using Pub. 102, and transfer the results onto the answer sheet.
- Signals may be sent either by a tape recorder/light configuration, or computer software. Schools wishing to use computer software should submit a copy of the software to the National Maritime Center for evaluation.
- Alternative methods of demonstrating competency in visual communications may be submitted to the National Maritime Center for evaluation.

ENCLOSURE (1)