

Ship Officer

Run the bridge of a tug, a ferry, a tanker or a container ship. Long trips away, long stretches at home.

TYPICAL PAY

\$92,460

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$47k to \$171k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 5 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

**Ship bridges, tugs and barges,
ferries, harbors and inland rivers**

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma or equivalent** Grade 12
Math, physics and English. You also need to pass a medical exam and a drug test before you can hold a credential.
- 2 Pick your route** Decide at 18
A four-year maritime academy, which gives you a bachelor's degree and an officer license together, or entry-level work on deck, which gives you sea time and no debt.
- 3 Build documented sea time** 2 to 4 years
Every license is measured in days actually served on a vessel. Academy cadets get theirs on training ships and commercial voyages. Deckhands get theirs by working.
- 4 Courses and the license exam** Months of classes
US Coast Guard approved training in navigation, stability, firefighting, lifeboats and radar, then the exam for your first officer license.
- 5 Upgrade as you go** 10 years or more
Third mate to second to chief mate to master, each one more sea time plus more courses. Some mariners spend a whole career climbing it.

Pros and cons

- + Strong pay without a four-year degree if you work your way up
- + Half the year off on many rotations, in real blocks
- + Food and lodging covered while you are working
- Long stretches away from family, including holidays
- Broken sleep from watch schedules, for the whole career
- Small crews, so there is nowhere to go when you do not get along

Optional boosts

Tankerman. Towing endorsement. Radar observer and electronic charts. Unlimited tonnage.

Good to know

Your career is counted in days

Every step up the ladder is measured in documented days actually served on a vessel. A day ashore does not count. Mariners keep a sea service record the way other trades keep apprenticeship hours, and I...

The pilot outranks the captain, briefly

When a large ship enters a port, a harbor pilot boards from a small boat and takes over the navigation. They know that one stretch of water better than anyone on board. It is among the best-paid mariti...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Captains, Mates and Pilots of Water Vessels (53-5021.00)

O*NET OnLine: Captains, Mates and Pilots of Water Vessels

Massachusetts Maritime Academy admissions

SUNY Maritime College admissions

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/ship-officer>



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