

## Why Checklists are Important

Emergency checklists are important tools for responding to an emergency incident on a vessel. They help vessel crew members and watchstanders control emergencies effectively and safely. Good emergency checklists contain only the tasks or functions necessary to get control of the situation.

During the stress of an emergency, checklists ensure that things are done in a systematic and consistent way. This is important when time is short, the pressure is on, and individuals are more likely to make mistakes. The primary function of a checklist is to focus attention on the critical tasks to be done in order to assume command and control over the actual emergency.

Distractions during emergency situations can result in mistakes being made. Critical steps are often skipped in the middle of a crisis. This is when the checklist becomes an important tool. Checklists should be created to suit the particular needs of each vessel. Generic emergency checklists can be missing important steps that apply to an individual vessel.

### General Guidelines for Emergency Checklists

Limit your checklist to critical tasks and remove redundant or unimportant entries. A checklist is most effective when it is focused and brief. A long checklist should be subdivided into smaller task-specific checklists. Tasks on the checklist should be prioritized and in logical order. Evaluate each item and rank it by importance. The most critical items should be listed at the beginning of the checklist. Checklists should be revised or revisited when new information is received to keep them relevant.

Include diagrams and photos to demonstrate which specific controls, switches, or equipment are referenced. Checklist items should account for required input from Vessel Traffic Systems, Port State Control, response organizations, salvors, and others.

Crew training should emphasize using checklists consistently and completing them under situational pressure. This prevents mistakes and improves performance. When all the steps on the checklist are done, the final item should be to tell to the rest of the team that the checklist has been completed.

#### WHY IT MATTERS

Checklists can help during emergencies but only if they are designed correctly. An effective checklist identifies the critical actions in simple and clear language. In complex situations, they can be a tool to guide people through the key steps necessary to control the situation.

#### Contact information

Michael Lynch  
360-407-7482  
mike.lynych@ecy.wa.gov

#### Special accommodations

If you need this document in a format for the visually impaired, call the Spills Program at 360-407-7455.

Persons with hearing loss, call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability, call 877-833-6341.

## Creating Vessel Emergency Checklists

Emergency checklists should suit the unique needs of the ship type and trade. The checklist should include:

- Goals and objectives.
- Steps in an item-by-item format (bulleted or numbered).

To create a checklist that is an effective tool for communication, identify:

- What are the important steps?
- How much time will it take to go through the checklist?
- How much time will it take to do all of the elements on the checklist?

Safety Management System (SMS) emergency checklists must be stored in pre-determined locations on the bridge and in the engine control room and should be easily accessible to all deck and engine officers. To be used effectively and quickly by watchstanders, they should be printed out and put in a clearly labeled binder.

When designing and using an emergency checklist, consider design, content and usage. You should be able to answer “yes” to as many of the following items as possible.

### Design

- Is the emergency checklist short, readable, and portable?
- Can your intended audience understand it and the terminology used?
- Does it address the emergency in a precise and practical way?

### Content

- Are the most important items listed first?
- Are critical items addressed more than once to make sure they are completed?

- Do the steps or items flow logically?
- Are all groupings between three (3) and nine (9) steps or items?
- Does the checklist require the user to state affirmatively the status of something when completing the item? (*Example: “Step 1 – Close valve VMI2. The status of valve VMI2 is \_\_\_\_\_”*)
- Is the last step to tell everyone on the team that the checklist is completed?

### Usage

- Do you require using emergency checklists during drills to ensure familiarity and identify problems?
- Do you include the checklist in the drill debrief?
- Do you note checklist items for correction and submit SMS change requests?

## Summary

You will probably not get an emergency checklist exactly right the first time. Use the emergency checklists every time drills are performed and continually verify their accuracy. A checklist should never be used for the first time in a real emergency.

Test checklists thoroughly to confirm that directions are clear and concise, easily readable, and that critical steps have not been left out. Get input from all team members. If there is a change in procedure, ensure the checklist is revised; do not just place it back in a binder. Follow your SMS procedures to regularly evaluate emergency checklists and update them as needed.

Using well designed checklists promotes close teamwork, good communication, and effective decision-making which results in fewer errors and improved safety during emergency situations.