

Sailing Basics: Essential Sailing Terminology For Beginners PDF

Abeam

Off to the side of the boat approximately at a right angle to the middle of the ship or plane's length.

Example: "The coast is abeam of the boat on the port side."

Anchor

A heavy object attached to a rope or chain and dropped to the seabed to prevent the boat from drifting; essential for stopping the boat in a particular location.

Example: "As the sun set, the captain carefully lowered the anchor, ensuring it securely gripped the sandy bottom for a peaceful night's rest."

Autopilot

An electronic device or system on a boat that automatically steers the vessel without constant manual input from the sailor; it helps maintain the desired course, especially during long passages, allowing the crew to focus on other tasks.

Example: "The captain engaged the autopilot, allowing the sailboat to maintain its course while the crew members took a break and enjoyed the scenic views."

Bearing

The direction of an object or point relative to the boat's position.

Example: "The lighthouse has a bearing of 270 degrees from our current position."

Beacon

A fixed navigational aid, often on land, used to mark important points or hazards.

Example: "Look for the beacon to guide us into the marina."

Bearing Compass

A compass specifically designed to measure bearings to objects.

Example: "Use the bearing compass to take accurate readings of distant landmarks."

Bilge Pump

A pump used to remove water that accumulates in the bilge, the lowest part of the boat's interior, helping to keep the boat dry and afloat.

Example: "The bilge pump automatically activated, efficiently removing rainwater that had seeped into the boat during the night."

Boat Hook

A long pole with a hook at the end, used for various purposes such as grabbing mooring lines, fending off other boats, or retrieving objects from the water.

Example: "The sailor used the boat hook to reach the drifting hat and returned it to its owner with a friendly wave."

Bow

The forward part of the boat.

Example: "The bow cut through the waves as the boat sailed."

Chart

A navigational map used to plan and track the course of the boat.

Example: "Refer to the nautical chart to identify hazards and plot our route."

Chartplotter

An electronic navigation device that displays the boat's position and other navigational data on a digital chart.

Example: "The chartplotter provides real-time position updates and navigation assistance."

Cleats

Metal or wooden fittings on the boat used to secure ropes or lines.

Example: "The crew cleated off the lines to keep the boat in place."

Cockpit

An area in the boat where the helmsman and crew can sit or stand.

Example: "The helmsman controlled the boat from the cockpit."

Compass

A navigational instrument used to determine direction.

Example: "Check the compass to ensure we're on the right heading."

Course

The intended direction of travel relative to the wind and other navigational references.

Example: "Our course is set for due east."

Dead Water

Calm, smooth water near the surface is created by the hull's resistance, affecting the boat's speed.

Example: "In dead water, the boat may require increased engine power to maintain speed."

Deck

The surface of the boat where people walk or stand.

Example: "The crew gathered on the deck to prepare for docking."

Fenders

Cushioning devices placed between the boat and a dock or another vessel to prevent damage during docking or while tied alongside.

Example: "The crew hung fenders over the side of the sailboat, protecting it from bumps and scratches as it was moored in the bustling harbor."

Forestay

A wire or rope that supports the mast from the bow of the boat.

Example: "The forestay kept the mast in position."

Gybing (Jibing)

Changing the direction of the boat by turning the stern through the wind.

Example: "Prepare for gybing!"

Headsail

A sail set forward of the mast. Examples include jibs, genoas, and spinnakers.

Example: "They hoisted the jib to increase the boat's speed."

Helm

The steering mechanism (tiller or wheel) or the person steering the boat.

Example: "Take the helm and maintain our course."

Hull

The main body or shell of the boat.

Example: "The hull of the sailboat was made of fiberglass."

Jib

A triangular headsail set forward of the mast.

Example: "The jib was trimmed to optimize the boat's performance."

Keel

A large, vertical fin or blade that extends downward from the boat's hull, providing stability and preventing sideways drift.

Example: "The keel kept the boat balanced and prevented it from tipping over."

Landfall

The first sighting or arrival at land after a period of navigation.

Example: "We made our landfall at the designated port."

Lee Helm

A condition where the boat's helm feels lighter or the bow tends to turn away from the wind.

Example: "We have lee helm. Adjust the sails to balance the boat."

Leeward

The side or direction away from which the wind is blowing.

Example: "We'll find calmer waters on the leeward side of the island."

Lifelines

Lines or cables running around the perimeter of the boat to provide safety and prevent falling overboard.

Example: "The crew held onto the lifelines for added security."

Mainsail

The primary sail on the mainmast of a boat.

Example: "The mainsail was unfurled to take advantage of the wind."

Mast

A tall, vertical pole or spar that supports the sails.

Example: "The sails were hoisted up the mast to catch the wind."

Plotting

Marking positions and courses on a chart to track the boat's progress and plan navigation.

Example: "Plot our current position on the chart to see how far we've come."

Port

The left side of the boat when facing the bow (front). To make it easier to learn just remember, when hanging out with sailors, normally, there's no PORT LEFT in the bottle.

Example: "Watch out, there's a buoy to port."

Red Right Returning

A fundamental navigational rule indicating that red buoys or markers should be kept on the right when coming into port.*

Reefing

Reducing the sail area by partially lowering or rolling the sails to manage excessive wind or strong gusts.

Example: "The wind is picking up. We should reef the sails to maintain control."

Rigging

The system of ropes, wires, and hardware that supports and controls the sails.

Example: "The rigging was carefully adjusted to ensure proper sail trim."

Rudder

A movable vertical plate or fin at the stern of the boat used for steering.

Example: "The helmsman turned the rudder to change the boat's direction."

Running

Sailing with the wind coming from directly behind the boat.

Example: "We're running downwind with the wind directly behind us."

** Sailing with the wind coming from a direction between abeam and astern of the boat, but not directly behind.*

Example: "Adjust the sails for a broad reach. The wind is slightly off the stern."

Sail

The actual piece of fabric that catches the wind to propel the boat.

Example: "Hoist the sails."

Sextant

A navigational instrument used to measure angular distances between objects and the observer's horizon, typically used for celestial navigation.

Example: "The sextant is essential for determining our latitude using celestial bodies."

Sheet

A rope or line used to control the trim of a sail.

Example: "Adjust the mainsheet to trim the mainsail for the prevailing wind."

Shrouds

The supporting wires or ropes that run from the mast to the sides of the boat to provide lateral stability.

Example: "He tightened the shrouds to stabilize the mast."

Speed Log

An instrument measuring the boat's speed through the water, crucial for estimating arrival times and fuel consumption.

Example: "Monitor the speed log to maintain our planned cruising speed."

Stern

The rear part of the boat.

Example: "The helmsman stood at the stern, steering the boat."

Tacking

Changing the direction of the boat by turning the bow into the wind and then bringing it through the wind on the opposite side.

Example: "Let's get ready to tack!"

Tender

A small boat used to transport people and supplies between a larger vessel (like a sailboat or yacht) and the shore.

Example: "The crew carefully lowered the tender into the water, ready to shuttle passengers to the nearby island for exploration."

Tiller

A handle or lever attached to the rudder for steering the boat.

Example: "The helmsman held onto the tiller and steered the boat."

True North

The geographic North Pole.

Example: "True North is the reference point for navigation."

VHF Radio

Very High Frequency radio used for communication between boats and with onshore facilities, vital for safety and coordination.

Example: "The sailor radioed the marina using VHF radio to report their arrival time and ensure a smooth docking process."

Waypoint

A specific location marked on a navigational chart or GPS for navigation purposes.

Example: "We've reached our waypoint and need to set a new one."

Weather Helm

A condition where the boat's helm feels heavier or the bow tends to turn into the wind.

Example: "The boat has weather helm. Let's trim the sails to reduce the pressure."