

KIMBERLY BROWN

VHF RADIO

CHECKLISTS & TEMPLATES

FOR SAILORS & MOTOR YACHT CRUISERS

SAMPLE



VHF Radio Checklists & Templates for Sailors

*Reducing mistakes and making it easier
when speaking over the VHF radio*

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Note to reader: I would like to take a moment to apologize for any typos, misspellings, or grammar mistakes that may appear in this book. While I have done my best to ensure the text is error-free, sometimes mistakes slip through the cracks.

I understand how frustrating it can be to come across errors in a book, and I want you to know that I take this issue seriously. I have made every effort to minimize mistakes and ensure the highest quality in my writing, but I am only human, and errors can happen. So please look past any mistakes you may find and enjoy the content of this book. Thank you for your understanding and support.

Other Titles:

- Checklists For Sailors - Passage Planning, Sailboat Maintenance, Cleaning, Medical, & More
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Five Star Reviews from Readers

Greg Smith

"Extremely informative and a must-read for first-time boat owners. For many, operating a VHF radio can be intimidating. Should the need arise, having the safety, distress, and urgency radio procedures in one place is essential when dealing with emergencies.

Best of all is being able to customize the VHF Checklist myself. I highly recommend this book!"

Julie Applegate

"Easy-to-understand verbiage and simple templates that make communicating easy. Talking on a VHF makes me very nervous as I feel everyone is listening, and if I do not say the right thing, I will be forced to walk a plank.

With this book, it breaks down the procedure in small steps and provides proper background. I have taken the templates and customized them with our boat name so anyone on our boat can simply read off the list and feel confident that they will not embarrass themselves."

Marshall Dix

"Excellent book, well presented, easy to understand. This book presented VHF essential information in a very useful and understandable format. Highly recommended for any boater using a VHF radio."

Lisa Mann

"Extremely Practical – This book likely will give confidence to boaters who might hesitate to ask for or provide assistance while on the water. It is exactly what it purports to be."

Five Star Reviews from Readers (continued)

Teresa Holland

"This is a very simple to understand explanation of how to use a VHF Radio. The VHF is a critical piece of safety equipment on a boat and should not be used without training. I found this a great resource. I will laminate the templates and have them available for myself and the crew to reference for any VHF radio situation. Thanks to Kim and the crew for taking the time to provide this book."

Doug Neal

"My wife and I have sailed for decades, and I'm always on the hunt for ways to improve our experience and safety onboard. This guide is a great tool to have onboard, not just for us but for any guests that we have with us, and it could save people's lives. Kim also offers a customized template for our own boat that we will laminate and keep in the nav station area for potential emergencies."

Rosemary D.

"Excellent publication. Having taken my RT exam a number of years ago and acquiring a new boat, I thought it a good time to do some refreshing. This book serves as an excellent refresher but also as a practical guide to sit alongside the official course, giving so many practical examples of what to use when. As a plus, the author provides a customized version that we can print out for our boat."

Graham Henderson

"A very useful aide memoire for procedures you hope never to use mostly. When you do need some of these, it will be a stressful moment, and you'll have forgotten the syntax!"

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NOTE: This above Table of Contents is for the full guide. This is just a sample and only provides some of the content.

Introduction

My first introduction to a VHF radio was while enjoying a weeklong sailing vacation around the Greek Ionian Islands. My husband, Simon, and I joined forces with another couple and hired a 33' sailboat. The four of us became part of a sailing flotilla. Every morning, we would be briefed on our destination for the day. The vacation coordinators would ensure we left our mooring and help us dock up later in the afternoon.

We had to use the VHF radio to communicate with the coordinators or 'Lead Boat Crew,' who kept close by. Thankfully, my husband and one of our friends handled all the communications, as my girlfriend and I were too scared to use the radio. I'm unsure what caused my fear of the radio – perhaps I didn't want to make a mistake?

Our initial sailing vacation ended up being a huge success. My husband and I were hooked for life. We enjoyed ten more years of sailing excursions and eventually purchased our first boat – a Moody 35' sailboat.

In the UK, where we kept our Moody, the maritime law requires that at least one person per boat possesses a Marine Radio Short Range Certificate (SRC). The SRC, which must be completed at a recognized training center, instructs users in radio etiquette and procedures, digital selected calling (DSC), and emergency procedures.

Simon took the full-day course, passed the exam, and was granted a license. Fortunately for me, I once again dodged responsibility for the VHF radio.

Side note: I have good news for you if you're in the US. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 permits recreational boaters to have and use a VHF marine radio, EPIRB, and marine radar without having an FCC ship station license. So, if you're in the US, you don't need a license; however, that doesn't mean you shouldn't learn how to use the VHF.

VHF knowledge could mean the difference between life and death. Keep reading!

Introduction (continued)

Eventually, we traded our 35' Moody for a 56' Oyster sailboat, sold all our possessions, and decided to sail worldwide. At that point, I thought the time had come to face my fear of the VHF finally. But did I need to really take a course on the radio?

Is a VHF radio course essential to take?

After sailing around the Solent, a massively busy waterway off England's south coast, and listening to the VHF radio for a couple of years, I initially pooh-poohed the idea of getting my VHF License.

Simon took the VHF radio course and obtained a license when we first purchased our boat, so as long as one person had a license, I felt OK to let him hold all the knowledge. And frankly, I always thought, 'How hard can it be?'

I could quickly call up the marina and ask for a berth if I had to, so anything else would be similar. Yes? And if the worst-case scenario happened, and I had to make a MAYDAY call, I would push the scary red button on the radio and then follow the template taped to the underside of our navigation table left by the previous owner.

What if...

However, deciding to sell up and sail worldwide made me think twice about my VHF radio knowledge. If I did have to do a MAYDAY, would I do it correctly, considering the panic situation I'd most likely be in? Would I know how to figure out where I am?

What if Simon wasn't around and I received a DSC (Digital Selective Calling) alert – would I know how to respond? What is a DSC alert anyway? And what if our young daughter accidentally triggered the red button on the radio that is labeled 'Distress'?

Introduction (continued)

The most important thing about sailing is safety. If our boat is going to go down, my husband, crew, and I need to know exactly what to do. Furthermore, if someone else is in our vicinity and we can help to save lives, again, we need to know what to do.

Hubby booked me on the VHF radio course.

The pain of not knowing or having confidence in using the VHF radio became uncomfortable. Simon booked me on a VHF radio course in Southampton, England. Steve Gravells from Technical Recreational Coaching led a class of nine of us.

Steve sent us the Royal Yachting Association (RYA) VHF radio course booklet a couple of weeks before the course, so we didn't have to spend time learning the information from the book. If it weren't for the homework that Steve requested before our class – a page of questions to be filled out – I would have failed to read the book. Again – I thought, 'How hard can this be?' Knowing I had homework to do, I read the book and did the homework.

The RYA VHF radio booklet was beneficial.

Aside from the first couple of pages filled with acronyms (R&TTE, DSC, SRC, CEPT) that I knew I would never remember, the RYA book was straightforward and easy to read. It took 30 minutes to get through, and I was full of information when I finished.

Poor Simon had to listen to me say, "Did you know the word MAYDAY comes from the French word, M'aidez, and it means 'help me'? And did you know that you need to send out a DSC (Digital Selective Calling) Alert before making a Pan-Pan voice broadcast?"

The VHF radio course was surprisingly enlightening!

Introduction (continued)

Arriving at the Southampton Dry Stack after eating a bacon roll, I was eager to put the day behind me. I've never been a fan of courses. I get bored quickly, and I wouldn't say I like a numb bum – the sensation you get when sitting too long.

Well, I was pleasantly surprised with the flow of the course. Never during the day did I wish that time would pass quickly. There was a mix of learning, watching, using the radio, coffee breaks, and general socializing. Everything taught was practical – it wasn't theory or something that would go in one ear and out the other.

And it was so powerful to see the difference between learning how to use the radio and then using it. Most of us seemed like we had it mastered, but when we went to (pretend) call another boat, the Coastguard, or make a MAYDAY, we found it more complicated than we thought.

Ensuring to say who you are and whom you're calling and finishing the message with the correct 'over' or 'out' wasn't as easy as it looked! And talking slowly enough for others to write your MAYDAY was challenging. Not one person in the class spoke slowly enough for the other members to correctly note all the MAYDAY information.

Thankfully, by the end of the day, the whole class sounded much better than when we started. That's because Steve would have us go through the call if we didn't get it right.

To say that just my confidence increased would be an understatement.

My faith, knowledge, and the importance of the subject matter increased. Learning how to use the VHF radio is not about making sure you can call a marina to request a berth – it's a device to potentially save your life and the lives of those in your area.

Until I took the course, I didn't realize that the alarm that periodically went off on my boat was an urgent message alert. I didn't know I was supposed to get a pen and paper

Introduction (continued)

to write down the follow-up voice distress message. I didn't realize that I could potentially relay a message to the Coastguard on behalf of a boat that couldn't transmit far enough for the Coastguard to hear.

Further, I didn't know you could call another vessel through the DSC system if you have their MMSI (Maritime Mobile Service Identity) number. Finally, I didn't think I could listen to multiple channels simultaneously—a dual-watch or triple-watch option.

Knowing that the majority of my readers are in America and won't have the opportunity or access to a VHF radio course, please allow me to provide some need-to-know information.

The most significant takeaways from my VHF radio course were as follows:

1. Make sure your safety equipment is working and routinely serviced. It's an obvious one, but it's imperative.
2. Create MAYDAY, Pan-Pan, MAYDAY Relay, and Accidental Alert Responses as templates. Get them laminated and position them near the radio so anyone can pull them out and follow the instructions (These are included in this guide).
3. Put the name of your boat, call sign, and MMSI number near the radio or on the templates so if a visitor has to use your radio, they know all the crucial details.
4. Teach every guest on your boat how the radio works and where the templates are to activate the DSC system and make the appropriate follow-up calls.
(Instructions are included in this guide)

Introduction (continued)

5. Ensure all the licenses are current and in your name (rather than the previous owner's name). If a MAYDAY is triggered, the Coastguard might contact the emergency contact details registered on the license. You can imagine the implications if the previous owner hasn't updated the license.

So, is a VHF radio course necessary to take?

My answer is a definite 'Yes.' Unfortunately, it's one of those situations where you don't know what you don't know. By taking the course, you'll increase your confidence in using a VHF radio, understand how to maneuver your way around the menu system, and, most importantly, understand what to do when an emergency strikes.

Overall, the VHF radio course is invaluable, and everyone in the boating community should take the course.

Whether you take a VHF course or not, it is very easy to forget how to instigate a DSC distress or urgency message and follow up with the correct broadcast message. Furthermore, remaining calm in a potentially life-threatening situation or emergency can be challenging.

By having quick, easy-to-understand, accessible instructions and broadcast templates, you make it easier for yourself to broadcast correctly and have a system that allows others who might not know how to use the VHF but are forced to do so.

Within this guide, you'll discover an explanation and an example of the various VHF calls, followed up with checklist templates ready for use. Furthermore, I've added various information, tips, and personal experiences to help make using the VHF radio easier. Taking a class is great, but if that's not going to happen, this guide will provide you with everything you need to know to be a confident sailing cruiser.

PART ONE: VHF RADIO 101

What is a VHF Radio, and why is it Important?

A VHF radio is a critical communication tool for sailors, providing reliable and efficient communication while on the water. Here's an overview of what a VHF radio is and its importance for sailors:

What is a VHF radio?

A VHF radio is a two-way radio system that operates in the VHF frequency range, typically between 156.0 and 174.0 MHz. It is commonly used in the maritime industry and among sailors for emergency and routine communication. VHF radios are compact, easy to use, and designed to transmit and receive voice messages over relatively short to medium distances, making them ideal for maritime communication.

Importance as a communication tool for sailors

Emergency Communication: VHF radios are a primary tool for emergency communication on the water. Channel 16, often called the "distress channel," is dedicated to emergency calls. Sailors can use VHF radios to transmit distress signals (MAYDAY calls) when facing life-threatening situations, such as sinking, medical emergencies, or man-overboard incidents.

Reliable Coverage: VHF radio signals have excellent coverage in coastal and open water areas, providing sailors with reliable communication even when far from shore. This makes VHF radios especially valuable for offshore sailing and long-distance cruising.

Maritime-Specific Channels: VHF radios have dedicated channels for various maritime purposes, such as weather updates, harbor operations, and ship-to-ship or ship-to-shore communication. Sailors can access these channels to gather important information and coordinate activities. A good example is listening on Channel 12 to the bridge operator in St. Maarten. They instruct boats when to proceed or announce any issues.

What is a VHF Radio, and why is it Important? (cont.)

Immediate Assistance: VHF radios allow sailors to quickly contact nearby vessels, the Coast Guard, and other maritime authorities in an emergency. This can lead to faster response times and assistance in critical situations.

Navigation and Safety: VHF radios provide communication between vessels, enhancing safety by allowing sailors to communicate about navigation intentions, passing situations, and potential hazards. We've contacted boats in our area several times to let them know about fishing nets or floating logs to avoid. From time to time, when sailing hard on the wind, we'll also ask an oncoming boat if they'll pass us on the incorrect side so that we don't have to change our direction significantly.

Weather Information: Many VHF radios can receive weather broadcasts, including NOAA Weather Radio transmissions. This information is vital for sailors to stay informed about changing weather conditions and plan their voyages accordingly.

Coordinated Communication: VHF radios are often used to coordinate activities among a fleet of boats, such as buddy boats on group cruises. They enable sailors to stay in touch, share information, and assist if needed. During long passages with buddy boats, we'll pick an unused channel and communicate about fish we've caught, thoughts on squall sightings, or do periodic check-ins.

Regulatory Compliance: In many countries, the use of VHF radios on boats is regulated, and sailors are required to follow specific rules, including obtaining the necessary licenses. Using a VHF radio in compliance with these regulations is essential for safety and legal reasons.

A VHF radio is a fundamental tool for sailors, serving as a reliable and effective means of communication for both routine and emergencies. Its importance cannot be overstated, as it enhances safety, facilitates coordination, and provides access to critical information while out on the water.

VHF Radio Components

A VHF marine radio consists of several components that work together to provide communication capabilities for sailors. Here's an overview of the various parts of a VHF radio.

1. Main unit

A VHF radio's central unit houses the radio system's core components. It typically includes:

- **Transceiver:** This is the heart of the radio, responsible for transmitting and receiving signals.
- **Power Supply:** The central unit connects to the boat's electrical system or battery.
- **Antenna Connector:** This is where you connect the VHF antenna, allowing the radio to send and receive signals effectively. It's important to keep this clean.

2. Microphone

The microphone is an essential handheld component that allows the user to speak into the radio and control various functions. Key elements of the microphone include:

- **Transmit Button:** This button, often labeled "Push to Talk" (PTT), is pressed when you want to transmit your voice over the airwaves.
- **Channel Selection:** Many microphones have buttons or knobs to adjust channels and settings.
- **Volume Control:** You can adjust the audio volume using a dedicated knob or buttons on the microphone.
- **Emergency Button:** Some microphones have a dedicated emergency button to quickly access distress calls.

VHF Radio Components (continued)

3. Controls

VHF radios have various controls, typically located on the main unit and sometimes on the microphone. These controls allow users to configure and operate the radio, including:

- **Power Button:** To turn the radio on and off.
- **Channel Selector:** Used to choose the desired channel for communication.
- **Squelch Control:** Adjusts the squelch level to filter out background noise when there's no signal.
- **Menu Button:** For accessing settings and options within the radio's menu system.
- **Display Backlight:** Controls the illumination of the display, useful for nighttime operation.

4. Display

The display provides essential information and feedback to the user. It typically includes:

- **Channel Display:** Indicates the currently selected channel.
- **Signal Strength Indicator:** Shows the strength of incoming signals.
- **Transmit Indicator:** Lights up when the radio is transmitting.
- **Menu Navigation:** Displays menu options and settings for configuration.
- **Clock and Timer:** Some radios have a built-in clock and timer for various timing functions.
- **Emergency Alerts:** Displays information related to distress calls and other emergency notifications.

VHF Radio Components (continued)

These components work together to facilitate communication via VHF radio. The main unit houses the critical electronics, while the microphone allows users to speak and control the radio's functions.

The controls and display are user interfaces that enable users to select channels, adjust settings, and monitor the radio's status during operation. Proper understanding and use of these components are essential for effective and safe sailing communication.

Broadcasting a MAYDAY

The MAYDAY checklist template in the next section of the guide can be used with any vessel fitted with Digital Selective Calling (DSC) and should be posted as close to the VHF radio as possible. Many boat owners have the checklist or MAYDAY template taped to the inside cover of the navigation table. MAYDAY's are made when people or vessels are in **'grave and imminent danger requiring immediate assistance.'**

MAYDAYS or Distress Alerts should be made only when immediate assistance is required for the vessel you are on. Examples include fire, explosion, sinking, major head or spinal injury, or man overboard.

If immediate assistance is needed for another vessel, do not use this procedure.

Consider doing a MAYDAY Relay if another boat is in trouble and unable to use the radio. Or use a MAYDAY Relay if a vessel calls the Coastguard and the Coastguard does not respond (described later). An example of a MAYDAY is as follows:

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY.

This is Britican, Britican, Britican.

Call Sign VX4139 *pronounced* Victor (V) X-ray (X) Fow-er (4) Wun (1) Tree (3) Nin-er (9)

MMSI number 234001547 *pronounced* Too (2) Tree (3) Fow-er (4) Zero (0) Zero (0) Wun (1) Fife (5) Fow-er (4) Sev-en (7).

MAYDAY Britican.

Call Sign VX4139 *pronounced* Victor (V) X-ray (X) Fow-er (4) Wun (1) Tree (3) Nin-er (9)

MMSI number 234001547 *pronounced* Too (2) Tree (3) Fow-er (4) Zero (0) Zero (0) Wun (1) Fife (5) Fow-er (4) Sev-en (7).

My position is four-nine-degrees, three-eight decimal four-five north and zero-zero-six degrees, two-zero decimal one-four west.

The nature of my distress is an engine fire. I require immediate assistance.

We have four people on board.

Over.

Broadcasting a MAYDAY Template

- ☐ Fill out the template below, making sure to write the phonetic alphabet/number for the Call Sign (A=Alpha, B=Beta, etc.), longitude, and latitude written out digit by digit (ex., In position four-nine-degrees, three-eight decimal four-five north).
- ☐ Open the cover over the red distress button momentarily and, if prompted, choose a relevant distress reason (fire, sinking, man overboard, etc.).
- ☐ Depress the red button for 5 seconds or until the radio informs you that the alert has been sent.
- ☐ Wait 15 seconds, then pick up the radio voice transmitter and press the side button to announce the broadcast outlined below slowly. Repeat the MAYDAY every 4 minutes until a response is received.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY"

"This is (your boat name 3x): _____ **"**

"Call Sign: _____ **"**

"MMSI: _____ **"**

"MAYDAY (your boat name spoken once): _____ **"**

"Call Sign: _____ **"**

"MMSI: _____ **"**

"My position is (Longitude): _____ **"**

"(Latitude): _____ **"**

"The nature of distress is: _____ **"**

"I require immediate assistance. We have _____ persons on board."

"Other information to note is as follows: _____ **"**

_____ **"**

"Over" (Set timer for 4 minutes for next broadcast attempt if nothing is heard)

PART 3: APPENDIX & EXTRAS

Appendix - Phonetic Alphabet Table

Letter	Word	Pronunciation
A	Alfa	Al Fah
B	Bravo	Brah Voh
C	Charlie	Char Lee
D	Delta	Dell Tah
E	Echo	Eck Oh
F	Foxtrot	Foks Trot
G	Golf	Golf
H	Hotel	Hoh Tell
I	India	In Dee Ah
J	Juliet	Jew Lee Ett
K	Kilo	Key Loh
L	Lima	Lee Mah
M	Mike	Mike
N	November	No Vem Ber
O	Oscar	Oss Cah
P	Papa	Pah Pah
Q	Quebec	Keh Beck
R	Romeo	Row Me Oh
S	Sierra	See Air Rah
T	Tango	Tang Go
U	Uniform	You Nee Form
V	Victor	Vik Tah
W	Whiskey	Wiss Key
X	X-ray	Ecks Ray
Y	Yankee	Yang Key
Z	Zulu	Zoo Loo

Get the full guide to have access to:

- VHF Radio Channels
- VHF Radio General Tips & Information
- Checking Your VHF Radio Works
- Emergency Broadcasts & Examples
- Digital Selective Calling
- DSC for Making Ship-to-Ship Calls
- Calling Someone Over the VHF
- Calling Someone Over the VHF (Busy Areas)
- Setting Up Dual and Triple Watches
- Why NOT Use a Cell Phone for Emergencies
- MAYDAY Relay Template
- Pan-Pan Template
- Radio Medical Advice Template
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- Receiving a VHF Distress Message Template
- Phonetic Numbers Table
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- Medical Radio Advice for Injury Template
- Additional Resources for VHF Radio
- Do's and Don'ts for Sailing Cruiser Nets
- How to Prevent Boat Failure

About Kim Brown

Born and raised in Rochester, NY, Kim grew up and married her British prince, Simon, in 1998. The couple lived in England following the ordinary course laid out by society. Kim appeared to be successful. She had a husband, daughter, house, car, nice vacations, and owned her own company.

In 2013, however, Kim questioned her life purpose and motivation instead of feeling successful. She followed the program of being a kid, getting an education, attaining a job, getting married, rising through the ranks, starting her own company, and having a baby, yet she felt something was wrong. She wasn't as fulfilled as she thought she would be.

What about happiness and fulfillment?

Kim had climbed the ladder society deemed worthy but felt it was against the wrong building! At 37, she sold her 50% shareholding, and she and her husband decided to turn their current lifestyle in for a new one.

The new life included selling most of their possessions, buying the largest yacht they could afford (a 56' Oyster), and setting sail around the world with their, at the time, three ½-year-old daughter, Sienna.

The result?

With Sienna in tow, Kim and Simon created a new lifestyle around meaningful connection, creative expression, freedom to be authentic, adventure, and FUN. Rather than put money and societal norms first, they decided to see what happens when you follow passion instead of outdated societal norms.

About Kim Brown

After ten years of living the sailing lifestyle, the couple has demonstrated to others that it's possible to do what you love *and* earn a living. In addition to Kim's valuable sailing guides, Kim and Simon created week-long *Sailing Lifestyle Experience* charters in the Caribbean, helping people to become confident sailing cruisers. For more details, visit: www.SailingBritican.com