

Vessel master Job Description

A free job description template for the Maritime industry

Company Name: _____

Location: _____

Employment Type: _____

Reports To: _____

Date: _____

DISCLAIMER

This vessel master job description template is designed to reflect Australian workplace standards and maritime industry practices at the time of publication. Confirm the applicable modern award for your business and ensure compliance with all relevant maritime and employment laws.

1. Position overview

A vessel master holds overall command of the vessel and is responsible for its safe navigation, the safety of everyone on board and compliance with maritime law. The role combines expert seamanship and passage planning with crew leadership, emergency preparedness and oversight of cargo and deck operations, most often on offshore support vessels servicing oil, gas and renewable energy installations.

In Australia, masters on offshore vessels are typically covered by the Maritime Offshore Oil and Gas Award 2020 (MA000086) under its senior officer classifications. Masters must hold a current AMSA certificate of competency and meet STCW requirements, and usually work equal-time swing rosters offshore.

This template provides a foundation for creating clear, compliant job descriptions that attract experienced, certificated masters while setting appropriate expectations for the role. Once crewed, manage swings and watch rosters efficiently with rostering software.

2. Key responsibilities

Command and safe navigation

Holding overall command of the vessel, taking responsibility for its safe navigation, manoeuvring and station-keeping, and the safety of all personnel and equipment on board.

Passage planning

Planning and executing voyages using charts, weather and tidal data and navigation systems, accounting for hazards, port and field limitations and offshore installation requirements.

Crew management and watch rosters

Leading, supervising and rostering the crew, setting watch schedules, briefing officers and ratings, and managing performance, welfare and discipline on board.

Regulatory compliance

Ensuring compliance with maritime law, AMSA requirements, the ISM Code, MARPOL and the vessel's safety management system, and maintaining certificates and surveys.

Cargo and deck operations

Overseeing safe cargo, deck and crane operations, anchor handling or supply transfers, and load stability, following approved procedures and permit-to-work systems.

Emergency response and drills

Leading emergency response, conducting regular fire, abandon-ship and man-overboard drills, and maintaining life-saving and firefighting equipment in a ready state.

Liaison with the offshore installation

Coordinating with the offshore installation manager, marine coordinators and clients on operations, approach and safe working distances, and daily activity planning.

Logs and reporting

Maintaining accurate deck logs, incident and near-miss reports and voyage records, and reporting on vessel status, operations and compliance to shore management.

3. Skills and attributes

- Seamanship: Expert navigation, ship handling and station-keeping ability, including close-quarters manoeuvring around offshore installations in varied conditions.
- Leadership: Confident command of a multidisciplinary crew, clear direction under pressure and the ability to build a strong safety and teamwork culture on board.
- Safety and compliance: Deep knowledge of maritime law, AMSA and ISM requirements, and consistent application of the vessel's safety management system.
- Communication: Clear communication with crew, shore management and the offshore installation, plus accurate written logs, reports and incident records.
- Decision-making: Sound judgement and calm, decisive action in emergencies, adverse weather and complex operational situations offshore.
- Resilience: Capacity to work long swings offshore in demanding conditions while maintaining focus, alertness and wellbeing across the roster.

4. Qualifications and requirements

The qualifications for vessel master positions are certification-driven and depend on vessel type, tonnage and area of operation. Some are mandatory, while others are preferred or desirable.

- AMSA certificate of competency (required) — A current AMSA master certificate of competency appropriate to the vessel's size and operating area is required
- STCW certification (required) — Valid STCW basic safety training and any additional certificates required for the role and vessel
- Working rights (required) — Eligibility to work in Australia
- Medical fitness (required) — A current seafarer medical certificate confirming fitness for offshore duty
- Offshore vessel experience — Prior experience on offshore support, anchor-handling or supply vessels is highly advantageous but may not be essential
- Offshore safety inductions — Current offshore safety inductions and survival training (such as HUET) are desirable for offshore work

5. Working conditions

- Extended periods at sea on equal-time swing rosters offshore
- Work in all weather and sea conditions, including night operations
- Round-the-clock responsibility for the vessel and crew while on swing
- Physically and mentally demanding work away from home for weeks at a time
- Strict compliance with maritime safety, ISM and permit-to-work procedures
- Use of personal protective equipment and adherence to offshore safety rules

6. Award information

Maritime offshore oil and gas award 2020

Most vessel master positions on offshore support vessels in Australia are covered by the Maritime Offshore Oil and Gas Award 2020 (MA000086). This modern award sets minimum pay, allowances and conditions for masters, officers and crew working on vessels servicing the offshore oil and gas industry.

Unlike hourly awards, MA000086 uses eight vessel schedules and expresses pay for senior officers such as masters as aggregate annual salaries that incorporate their roster pattern and standard offshore hours. Because the figures depend on the vessel schedule and roster, refer to the Maritime Offshore Oil & Gas Award guide for current salaries. Use award interpretation software to apply pay correctly.

Rig, production and other coverage

Not every offshore maritime role sits under MA000086. Roles based on the rig or production facility itself — rather than on a support vessel — generally fall under the Hydrocarbons Industry (Upstream) Award (MA000062), so confirm which instrument matches your operation.

Many offshore operators also work under an enterprise agreement that sets pay and swing rosters above the award. Always confirm the applicable instrument, aggregate salary and roster cycle that apply to your vessel and crew before finalising the job description.

7. Frequently asked questions

About the role

Q: What does a vessel master do?

A vessel master holds overall command of the vessel and is responsible for its safe navigation, the safety of everyone on board and compliance with maritime law. They plan passages, lead and roster the crew, oversee cargo and deck operations, run emergency drills and liaise with the offshore installation. On offshore support vessels the master also maintains logs, incident reports and voyage records for shore management.

Q: What award covers vessel masters in Australia?

Masters on offshore support vessels are usually covered by the Maritime Offshore Oil and Gas Award 2020 (MA000086) under its senior officer classifications. Roles based on the rig or production facility may instead fall under the Hydrocarbons Industry (Upstream) Award (MA000062), and some operators use an enterprise agreement. Always confirm which instrument applies to your operation.

Q: How is a vessel master paid under the maritime offshore award?

Unlike hourly awards, the Maritime Offshore Oil and Gas Award 2020 uses eight vessel schedules and expresses pay for senior officers such as masters as aggregate annual salaries that already account for their swing roster and standard offshore hours. Because the figure depends on the vessel schedule and roster cycle, see our Maritime Offshore Oil & Gas Award guide for current salaries.

Q: Do I need to include pay details in a job description?

It's not legally required, but including indicative pay can attract more applicants and set clear expectations. For masters you can reference the aggregate award salary and swing roster, or use phrasing like 'Aggregate salary per the applicable award and roster' or 'Competitive salary based on vessel and experience.' Check the Maritime Offshore award guide for guidance.

Qualifications

Q: What certificate does a vessel master need?

A vessel master must hold a current AMSA certificate of competency appropriate to the vessel's size and operating area, along with valid STCW certification and a current seafarer medical certificate. For offshore work, offshore safety inductions and survival training such as HUET are often required. Confirm the exact certificates needed for your vessel type and area of operation.

Q: Is offshore experience required to be a vessel master?

It depends on the vessel and operation. Prior experience on offshore support, anchor-handling or supply vessels is highly advantageous and often expected, but requirements vary by role and vessel schedule. The essential requirements are the correct AMSA certificate of competency, STCW certification, medical fitness and working rights in Australia.

Q: What qualifications should I require vs prefer for a vessel master?

Mandatory requirements usually include a current AMSA certificate of competency for the vessel, STCW certification, a seafarer medical certificate and working rights in Australia. Preferred qualifications include offshore support vessel experience and current offshore safety inductions or survival training. Match the certificate class carefully to your vessel's size and operating area.

Q: Do vessel masters need STCW certification?

Yes. Valid STCW basic safety training is a standard requirement for seafarers, and masters need it alongside their AMSA certificate of competency. Depending on the vessel and role, additional STCW certificates may also apply. Always verify that a candidate's certificates are current and appropriate for the vessel and voyage type.

Employment

Q: Should I hire casual or permanent vessel masters?

This depends on your operation. Permanent full-time or part-time masters on a swing roster provide crew consistency and stronger retention for ongoing offshore work. Casual masters offer flexibility to cover leave, dry-docking or short campaigns. Many operators use a mix, and pay is often set by an aggregate award salary or an enterprise agreement rather than a simple hourly rate.

Q: What is a swing roster for a vessel master?

A swing roster is an equal-time offshore work pattern — for example an even period on the vessel followed by an even period off — common for offshore support crews. The Maritime Offshore Oil and Gas Award and enterprise agreements build the roster into the aggregate salary. Set out the exact swing pattern in the job description so candidates understand time away from home.

Q: What allowances apply to vessel masters offshore?

The Maritime Offshore Oil and Gas Award and any applicable enterprise agreement set the allowances and salary structure for offshore masters, which are generally reflected in the aggregate salary rather than paid as separate hourly loadings. Confirm the current salary, allowances and roster cycle that apply to your vessel before finalising the offer. See the award guide for detail.

Q: What should I include in a vessel master employment contract?

Key elements include: position title and classification, employment type, aggregate salary and applicable award or agreement, swing roster pattern, vessel and area of operation, reporting structure, main duties and required certificates such as the AMSA certificate of competency and STCW. Use our digital employment contracts to simplify this process.

Rostering

Q: How far in advance should I provide rosters to vessel crew?

Award and agreement rules and the swing cycle vary, so confirm the notice period that applies to your operation. As a general practice, publishing swing rosters well in advance gives masters and crew visibility of their time on and off the vessel. Using rostering software helps keep swing patterns clear and reduces last-minute changes.

Q: How do I roster vessel masters across swings?

Plan swings so each master's on and off periods, certificates and rest requirements are respected, with a back-to-back master ready to relieve at crew change. Use rostering tools to track swing cycles, hours and certificate expiry, and to fill gaps when a master is on leave. This keeps the vessel crewed and compliant across campaigns.

Q: What rest and fatigue rules apply to vessel masters?

Rest and fatigue management for masters is governed by maritime regulations, the applicable award or agreement and the vessel's safety management system, including minimum rest and watchkeeping requirements. Because masters carry round-the-clock responsibility on swing, set clear fatigue policies and record hours accurately. Use time and attendance tools to support compliance.

Q: How do I manage vessel master availability for rostering?

Collect availability, certificate details and swing preferences during onboarding and keep them current. Use HR software and rostering tools to track when each master is available, their certificate class and any expiry dates. Set clear policies on minimum availability and how to request changes, which simplifies crew-change planning and avoids gaps offshore.