

FIRST BOAT

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Pica: More Lights and Shapes

Vin Pica continues discussing navigation lights and the boating rules you need to know...

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Continuing our focus on Lights and Shapes in the “Lights and Shapes” Section of the Rules of Navigation (Rules 21-31), let’s dig in a bit since, if you go outside the bays, this knowledge is expected to be known by you by the men and women driving the “1,000 foot’er’s” loaded with cargo from places far away...

Failure to understand what these leviathans are “saying” to you can be, frankly, catastrophic – and it won’t be them that come to grief if there is a collision at sea between them and your Grady White...

Rule 22: What Does It Say?

Rule 22 is very straight forward. It says, by USCG specifications, lights must be visible at the following distances – on a fair night presumably. If the weather is foul, both you and the approaching vessel will be a lot closer when you first see each other...

Type of Light	Vessel Length (meters)	Visibility in miles
Masthead	<12	2
	12 – 20	3
	20 – 50	5
	50 – >	6
Side Light	<12	1
	12 – 50	2
	50 – >	3
Stern, including All-Around and Towing Lights	<50	2
	50 – >	3

Happily, manufacturers adhere to these specs maniacally – but be wary if you pick up something “off market” or even from older vessels where specs may have been different. BTW, want to convert meters to feet easily? Multiple the meters by 3 – then add 10% of the answer back on top and you are within inches...

20 meters * 3 = 60;
60 + 10% (6) = 66 feet by Capt'n Vin
65 ft and 7.40157 in by the International System of Units

Off by 4 ½ inches... close enough?

Rule 23 – What Does It Say?

Now we start getting into the “Christmas Tree” section – many vessels exhibit so many lights that they look like Christmas Trees underway... Rule of thumb – the more lights, the bigger a problem it will be for you if it hits you... And “yellow” as usual means “caution.” In fact, I teach that yellow lights mean “stay well clear.”

Rule 23 specifically speaks about power-driven vessels – from our’s up to the leviathans. Anything over 50 meters requires two masthead lights – one forward and one aligned with it, abaft (behind) and above it. To the uninformed, this can look confusing since it is common practice to align the side lights under the aft masthead light! This puts this solitary white light ahead and can appear, to the uninformed, that it is a large vessel underway in reverse! Definitely don’t try to go between the two white lights by falsely believing that the solitary white masthead is a vessel at anchor near another vessel exhibiting a masthead and side light...! BTW, you already know that regulatory lights on the water are blue (think USCG), not red. So, if you see a red flashing light, what is that? It is a hover-craft (known as a Wing-in-Ground [WIG] craft under the Rules) underway!

Rule 24 – What Does It Say?

Here is another set of lights not to go between at night (I can’t imagine how you’d go between them in daylight..!) Rule 24 is about what lights – and “shapes” – towing vessels shall (must!) exhibit. A towing vessel must have two masthead lights in a vertical line, one above the other. If the towed object is more than 200 meters (over a tenth of a nautical mile) astern, there must be three mast head lights in a vertical line. She must also have a towing light (yellow, per Rule 21) above her stern light. All her other lights must conform to a power-driven vessel (Rule 23.)

What about the “shape?” When under way with a tow over 200 meters aft, in all conditions (but you’ll only see it in day light), a towing vessel must also carry a “diamond shape where it can best be seen.” This is the equivalent of the three masthead lights for night/foul conditions.

What about the towed vessel? It has to show lights – and shapes – just like a power-driven vessel except it doesn't need a masthead light. But it does need side lights and a stern light plus a diamond shape if the towing vessel also exhibits one. Unfortunately, this is what has caused, from time to time, the uninformed to try to go between what they believe is two vessels... with catastrophic results... you can imagine the tension that the towing hawser between the tower and towed is under. Hitting that is like hitting a steel clothes line – at speed...

Rule 24 has a brace of other issues related to multiple towed vessels, side tows (“on the hip”) and more... But remember my rule of thumb – the more lights, the greater the distance to stay away!

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the DISR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing...”