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| IALA Guideline |

**VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology**

Edition 1.2

Revision VTS49.6 (October 2020)

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# INTRODUCTION

Standardised phrases provide for quick and effective communication allowing VTSOs to overcome differences in language and at the same time reducing the opportunity for misunderstanding. Ambiguous or non-standard phraseology is a frequent causal or contributory factor in accidents and incidents.

This document provides standardised phrases for communicating with vessels and allied services to:

* Facilitate clear, concise, and unambiguous communications that are timely and effective.
* Minimise misunderstanding of the intent of messages and reducing the time required for effective communication.
* Mitigate complacency with more experienced operators, as well as a valuable coaching tool for new VTS personnel
* Assist VTS Training organisations to incorporate the use of standard VTS phraseology into their course curriculums.

It is not possible to provide phrases to cover every conceivable situation which may arise, and the examples contained in this Guideline are not exhaustive, but merely representative of phraseology in common use.

# AIMS AND OBJECTIVE

VTS Authorities should adopt the phraseology described in this guideline in their day-to-day operations to demonstrate compliance with IALA Standard 1040 – Vessel Traffic Services.

The phrases in this document are generally restricted to operational messages where it is important that misunderstandings are avoided. Users may find it necessary to supplement phrases with the use of “plain” language. When it is necessary to use plain language, it should be used according to the same principles that govern the development of phraseologies in that communications should be clear, concise, and unambiguous.

# SYMBOL CONVENTIONS USED

|  |
| --- |
| ( ) brackets indicate that the part of the message enclosed within the brackets may be added where relevant;  [ ] square brackets indicate optional content  / oblique strokes indicate that the items on either side of the stroke are alternatives;  ... dots indicate that the relevant information is to be filled in where the dots occur;  (italic letters) indicate the kind of information requested;  ~ tildes precede possible words or phrases which can be used after/in association with the given standard phrase. |

# GENERAL COMMUNICATION PRINCPLES

## LANGUAGE

VTS communications are normally conducted on a simplex VHF channel in order that participants can monitor all messages for situational awareness even when the message exchange is between the VTS and another participant. English language should be used for all VTS communications with vessels/allied services unless use of an alternative language has been agreed. Should an alternative language be used, the VTS should be mindful that not all participants may understand what is being communicated.

## CONSISTANCY

Attention should be given to the correct use of phraseology where applicable to establish efficient, clear, concise, and unambiguous communications.

VTS Authorities should implement appropriate procedures to ensure the consistant and correct use of VTS phraseology in all instances in which they are applicable.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Differing cultural experiences and backgrounds may result in different responses to situations. A lack of awareness of these differences could increase the possibility of errors and misunderstandings.

When VTS personnel communicate cross‐culturally special attention should be made to:

* Share crucial information with ships in order to create a common perception of potential dangers, even if this information seems ‘obvious’.
* Use closed loop (or Read‐back) techniques when information may be misunderstood such as the number of persons on‐board or information that would benefit others using the VTS area, instructions or advice.

# COMPILING A MESSAGE

VTS personnel should take a moment to **think** before communicating. This may sound rather obvious; however, it is one of the principal errors personnel make. Native English speakers are particularly prone to this as they have the ability to respond immediately without needing time to translate a message received and/or construct a response. VTS personnel should provide considered responses in order to resist the natural pressure to respond quickly before they have had time to think.

## MESSAGE STRUCTURE

The use of structure provides consistent message formulation and conveys a professional image to stakeholders. This technique also provides familiarity to the receiver, setting the tone of a safe and efficient VTS. VTS voice communications should therefore be structured in order to give the best chance of understanding to the receiver and to keep the message as concise as possible.

The use of action words (e.g. PROCEED) should come before the condition (e.g. time or location).

Radio communications between coastal stations and vessels have to comply with the ITU Radio Regulations[[1]](#footnote-2). These Regulations prescribe the structure of radio communication messages.

| 1. Establish contact | (Name of vessel/Call sign) this is (name) VTS |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2. Exchange information | a. Message marker | See message markers |
|  | b. Phrase(s) |  |
| 3. End of message | Over | When expecting a reply |
| 4. End of conversation | Out | When expecting no reply |

There are some general rules for phrase construction and content, which should be considered:

* Basic words are standardised ways of saying common phrases to promote consistency. These words and the message intent are detailed in Section 8.
* Avoid unnecessary words (e.g. ‘what time do you think your ETA is at the pilot station, thank you’, should be: ‘what is your ETA at the pilot station’).
* Keep the subject, verb, and object as near to one another as possible.
* Use the active form (such as ‘recommend you...‘; instead of passive ‘you are recommended to’).
* Make sentences positive.
* Each phrase should contain only one topic.
* Information must be relevant, as accurate as possible and timely.
* Communication should be addressed to the give‐way vessel first, and then the stand‐on vessel.
* Spelling words and the proper use of numbers (names of buoys, stations, call signs, etc.), spell out words using the phonetic alphabet (section 5.3) and phonetic numbers (section 5.4) as required. .

## MESSAGE MARKERS

In order to facilitate shore-to-ship and ship-to-shore communications, message markers should be used to increase the probability of the purpose of the message being properly understood.

Message markers increase the effectiveness and urgency of VHF communications as required and may help emphasise the content of the message or to ensure that the message will be properly understood. Whilst the use of message marker is not obligatory, their general use is good practice and the VTSO should apply these depending on the assessment of the situation. Their use is strongly recommended when a degree of stress or urgency exists, when there are language difficulties and when responding to unsafe situations.

There are eight message markers as defined in SMCP. Seven of them are frequently used by the VTS and are explained in more detail below. The message marker should be spoken preceding the message or at the corresponding part within the message.

Pro-words complement the message marker and may be used to prepare the receiver for the nature and content of the message that will follow (eg ‘WEATHER’ before ‘INFORMATION’).

### INFORMATION

This indicates that the following message is restricted to observed facts, situations etc.

| VTS | TRAFFIC INFORMATION. Dredger “Goomai” is operating in the Williamstown Channel 30 metres West of the Centreline. |
| --- | --- |

| VTS | NAVIGATION INFORMATION. ‘XXXX’ Light is not operational. |
| --- | --- |

Note: This marker is normally used for navigational and traffic information, etc. Information is to assist the on board decision making process.

### ADVICE

This indicates that the following message implies the intention of the sender to influence others and may include a recommendation.

| VTS | ADVICE. Container Vessel ‘Maersk Dusseldorf’ is inbound and will take tugs at Swanson Dock swing basin. |
| --- | --- |

Note: The decision whether to follow the ADVICE still stays with the recipient. ADVICE does not necessarily have to be followed but should be considered very carefully.

### WARNING

This indicates that the following message implies the intention of the sender to alert others to potential dangers.

| VTS | WARNING. VTS radar indicates you are heading towards shallow water distance 6 cables. |
| --- | --- |

Note: This means that any recipient of a WARNING should pay immediate attention to the danger mentioned and confirm the vessel’s position, course and speed in relation to the warning. Consequences are up to the recipient.

### INSTRUCTION

This indicates that the following message implies the intention of the sender to direct the action of others by a regulation.

| VTS | INSTRUCTION. Do not proceed. Remain alongside until a further instruction is passed. |
| --- | --- |

| VTS | INSTRUCTION. Do not cross the fairway. |
| --- | --- |

| VTS | INSTRUCTION. Reduce speed [to xx knots]. |
| --- | --- |

Note: The sender (eg VTS) must have the full authority to send such a message. The recipient has to follow this legally binding message unless they have contradictory safety reasons which then have to be reported to the sender.

### QUESTION

This indicates that the following message is of interrogative character.

| VTS | QUESTION. What is your maximum draft. |
| --- | --- |

### ANSWER

This indicates that the following message is the reply to a previous question.

| VTS | ANSWER. You have permission to enter fairway. |
| --- | --- |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| VESSEL | ANSWER. My maximum draft is seven metres. |

Note: An answer should not contain another question.

### REQUEST

This indicates that the following message is asking for action from others with respect to the vessel.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| VESSEL | REQUEST. I require two tugs. |

Note: The use of this marker is to signal that I want something to be arranged or provided.

### INTENTION

This indicates that the following message informs others about immediate navigational action intended to be taken. Only a vessel would normally use this message marker.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| VESSEL | INTENTION. I will reduce my speed. |

Note: The use of this message marker is logically restricted to messages announcing navigational actions by the vessel sending this message.

## PHONETIC ALPHABET

The phonetic alphabet is used to distinguish between letters, which sound similar when transmitted over the radio. They are commonly used when transmitting callsigns and in cases where a single letter is used to designate something.

Pronunciation of the phonetic alphabet is as follows:

| Letter | Spelling | Pronunciation |  | Letter | Spelling | Pronunciation |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **A** | Alpha | **al** fah |  | **N** | November | no **vem** bar |
| **B** | Bravo | **brah** voh |  | **O** | Oscar | **oss** cah |
| **C** | Charlie | **char** lee |  | **P** | Papa | pah **pah** |
| **D** | Delta | **dell** tah |  | **Q** | Quebec | keh **beck** |
| **E** | Echo | **eck** ho |  | **R** | Romeo | **row** me oh |
| **F** | Foxtrot | **foks** trot |  | **S** | Sierra | see **air** rah |
| **G** | Golf | **golf** |  | **T** | Tango | **tang** go |
| **H** | Hotel | hoh **tel** |  | **U** | Uniform | **you** nee form |
| **I** | India | in dee a |  | **V** | Victor | **vik** tah |
| **J** | Juliet | **jew** lee **ett** |  | **W** | Whiskey | **wiss** key |
| **K** | Kilo | **key** loh |  | **X** | X-ray | **ecks** ray |
| **L** | Lima | **lee** mah |  | **Y** | Yankee | **yang** key |
| **M** | Mike | **mike** |  | **Z** | Zulu | **zoo** loo |

## PHONETIC NUMBERS [NUMERALS]

Numbers are to be spoken in separate digits. For example:

“One-five-zero” for 150

Pronunciation of numbers shall be in the phonetic form as follows:

| Number | Spelling | Pronunciation |  |  | Spelling | Pronunciation |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | zero | zeero |  |  | Decimal | **day see mal** |
| **1** | one | wun |  |  | Hundred | **hun** dred |
| **2** | two | **too** |  |  | Thousand | **tou sand** |
| **3** | three | **tree** |  |  |  |  |
| **4** | four | **fower** |  |  |  |  |
| **5** | five | **fife** |  |  |  |  |
| **6** | six | six |  |  |  |  |
| **7** | seven | seven |  |  |  |  |
| **8** | eight | ait |  |  |  |  |
| **9** | nine | **Niner** |  |  |  |  |

## POSITIONS

Position may be passed either in latitude and longitude or relative to a mark. In considering which method is most appropriate, the sender should recognise that the recipient will first have to plot a position passed in latitude and longitude on a chart in order to assimilate the information.

When latitude and longitude are used, these shall be expressed in degrees and minutes (and decimals of a minute if necessary), north or south of the Equator, and East or West of Greenwich.

| VTS | WARNING. Dangerous wreck reported in position 15 degrees 34 minutes North, 61 degrees 29 minutes West. |
| --- | --- |

When the position is related to a mark, the mark should be a well-defined charted object.

| VTS | WARNING. Fishing Vessel not under command bearing 120 degrees from Fairway Buoy 1.2 nautical miles. |
| --- | --- |

## BEARINGS

The bearing of the mark or vessel concerned is the bearing in the 360 degree notation from North (true north unless otherwise stated), except in the case of relative bearings. Bearings may be either FROM the mark or FROM the vessel.

| VTS | Pilot boat is bearing 215 degrees from you. |
| --- | --- |

## COURSE

Extracts from GL 1089

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Course | The intended direction of movement of a vessel through the water.[3] (This is a generic term and normally one of the specific descriptors below should be used) |
| Course Made Good | That course which a vessel makes good over ground, as a result of the effect of currents, tidal streams and leeway caused by wind and sea. |
| Course to Make Good | That course which a vessel intends to make good over ground, after allowing for the effect of currents, tidal streams, and leeway caused by wind and sea. (Be aware that this term does not equate to Course to Steer). |
| Track | The path followed, or to be followed, between one position and another.[3]  (Be aware that despite the IMO definition the word track is used in different ways by different users and often in an historic sense.) |
| Heading | The horizontal direction of the vessel's bows at a given moment measured in degrees clockwise from north.[3] |

Note [3] IMO Resolution A.918(22) IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases

As a general term, “Course” refers to the intended direction of movement of a vessel through the water. Unless it is intended to use this term in a general sense, one of the specific descriptors below should normally be used by VTS and expressed in 360-degree notation from true north unless otherwise stated.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Course Made Good | That course which a vessel has made good over ground, as a result of the effect of currents, tidal streams and leeway. |
| Course to Make Good | That course which a vessel should or intends to make good over ground, after allowing for the effect of currents, tidal streams, and leeway. |
| Track | The path followed between one position and another. |
| Planned Track | The path to be followed between one position and another. |
| Heading | The horizontal direction of the vessel's bows at a given moment. |

Always to be expressed in 360 degree notation from north (true north unless otherwise stated). Whether this is TO or FROM a mark can be stated.

Courses should be ‘course made good’ and should include a distance.

it is rarely appropriate to use ‘INSTRUCTION’ when referring to courses; alternative message markers should normally be used.

Example:

| VTS | ADVICE. Recommend course to make good 127 degrees for 2 nautical miles. |
| --- | --- |



## DISTANCES

To be expressed in nautical miles or cables (tenths of a mile), the unit always to be stated.

## SPEED

To be expressed in knots. Speed without any further notation will always be assumed to mean speed through the water. If speed over the ground is intended, then this should be specifically stated.

## TIME

Time should be given in local time in a 24 hour format. Mariners do not usually add the suffix “hours”.

## GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Place names should be those that are on navigational charts and publications.

Where this is not available then latitude and longitude should be used.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations will often save time in speech. Many abbreviations are so commonly used in normal speech and are more familiar than the original unabbreviated form. The use of such abbreviations in radio transmissions is to be encouraged provided that:

* they are quicker and easier to use than the full word (e.g. ETA/ETD in place of Estimated Time of Arrival/Departure)
* they are sufficiently well known to avoid any confusion and subsequent confirmatory transmissions.

# DELIVERING A MESSAGE

VTS communications should be professional, clear, concise and accurate.

Speech and vocal patterns should be adjusted in order to increase the likelihood of mutual understanding regardless of experience or native language.

## PREPARATION WHEN USING VHF

The proper use of VHF equipment is essential if transmissions are to be successful. VTS personnel should consider the volume and positioning of the microphone. To ensure the complete reception of the message a proper discipline is essential. It is important to listen on the channel before transmitting to ensure there will be no interferences from another station. Since there may be a delay in transmission after pressing the press to transmit (PTT) button, a brief pause is normally required before starting to speak.

## TONE AND VOLUME

The tone of the voice is crucial for mutual understanding. A message should be supported by the tone of voice used. Research has indicated that how words are expressed is just as important as what words are used.

Transmissions should be sent with a tone of calm confidence, politeness and professionalism. VTS personnel must always remain professional even if they receive over familiar or aggressive transmissions.

The volume of the voice is important. The volume of a transmission should be at a level used for normal conversation. Shouting is unprofessional and causes distortion, whilst speaking too quietly could result in the message not being heard.

## EMPHASIS ON KEYWORDS

The keyword is the most important part of the message. This should be spoken slightly louder, longer, and higher than its neighbouring words (e.g. WARNING SHALLOW water AHEAD of you).

## SPEECH RATE

Speech rate is the speed at which a speaker conveys the message. Academic studies reported that on average, the speech rate of an adult English native speaker is between 150 and 190 words per minute (WPM). In an international environment in which people from different linguistic backgrounds speak with their own accents, intonation, and pronunciation it’s crucial to maintain an appropriate level of speech rate in order to avoid speaking at a faster rate that could greatly hinder comprehension and increase language anxiety:

* modulating speech at a slower rate of around 120 WPM is highly recommended for clear and effective communication;
* in emergency situations, a much slower rate of 100 WPM should be applied so important information can be clearly and accurately delivered under high‐pressure and cognitively challenging conditions.

## WORD GROUPING AND PAUSING

Together with the adjustment of the speech rate, word grouping and pausing strategies can be used to increase the intelligibility of VTS communication. In other words, intelligibility can be enhanced considerably by dividing sentences into smaller groups of phrases and by pausing briefly between word groups. VTS personnel can also moderate their speech rates by pausing between each word group.

The effect of word grouping and pausing is important for the following reasons:

* It gives listeners the time to process each pack of information that is delivered. Furthermore, it enables speakers to prepare subsequent information for delivery.
* It decreases the use of unnecessary fillers like ‘um, hm, uh, …’, which hinders mutual intelligibility.

It is generally recognised that the use of four words in a phrase is best understood by listeners. Therefore phrases should be grouped and paused after four words if possible. This enhances comprehension and clear communication.

## QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

Information flow within a VTS is paramount. VTS often gathers and disseminates information based on real time situations within the VTS area. In the computer world the term ‘garbage in, garbage out’ is often used. The same applies to VTS communications, if you ask the wrong questions you will probably get the wrong answer.

To ensure effective questioning the following techniques should be used:

* Closed Questions
* Open Questions
* Funnel Questions
* Leading Questions

### CLOSED QUESTIONS

A closed question usually receives a one word answer, or a short factual statement.

| VTS | QUESTION. How many persons onboard? |
| --- | --- |

| VTS | QUESTION. Can you see the Entrance Beacon? |
| --- | --- |

### OPEN QUESTIONS

Generally open questions deliberately seek longer answers and are the opposite of closed questions. Open questions usually contain terms to elicit further information.

| VTS | QUESTION. What is the nature of your problem? |
| --- | --- |

| VTS | QUESTION. What is your intention? |
| --- | --- |

### FUNNEL QUESTIONS

This questioning technique involves the use of a series of questions. Initially general questions are asked which increase in detail with each subsequent question. With funnel questioning it may be useful to start with one or more closed questions before following up with more open questions.

| VTS | QUESTION. Can you see the Princes Inner Buoy? |
| --- | --- |
| VTS | QUESTION. Is the buoy lit? |
| VTS | QUESTION. Is the buoy in the correct position? |
| VTS | QUESTION. Describe the damage? |

### LEADING QUESTIONS

The aim of a leading question is to influence the recipients answer either by closing off undesirable alternatives or guiding the recipient in a desired direction. However, this technique is often vague and imprecise and may lead to continued uncertainty; it is not generally recommended for VTS use and other techniques such as providing advice may be more appropriate.

| VTS | QUESTION. Is it your intention to pass to north of Buoy One? |
| --- | --- |

## AMBIGUOUS TERMINOLOGY

Some words in English have meanings depending on the context in which they appear. Misunderstandings frequently occur, especially in VTS communications, and have resulted in accidents.

The use of local terminology should be avoided as this can lead to confusion. For example:

**MAY**

**Do not** say: “You may enter the fairway”

Say: “ANSWER. You have permission to enter the fairway”

**MIGHT**

**Do not** say: “You might have permission to depart if the swing basin is clear”

Say: “ADVICE. You have permission to depart when the swing basin is clear”

**SHOULD**

**Do not** Say: “You should anchor in anchorage Z4”

Say: “ADVICE. Anchor in anchorage Z4”

**COULD**

**Do not** say: “You could be running into danger”

Say: “WARNING. You are running into danger”

**CAN**

The word “CAN” describes the possibility, or the capability of doing something.

**Do not** say: “Can you advance your ETS at the berth by 20 minutes?”

Say: “QUESTION. Are you able to advance your ETS at the berth by 20 minutes ?”

## RESPONSES

When the answer to a closed question is in the affirmative or negative, consider the need to repeat the appropriate phrase or add an explanation in the response.

If information requested is not immediately available, advise the caller to *“Stand by” and consider the need to indicate the time interval within which the information will be available.*

## CORRECTIONS

When an error is made in a message, say:

*“Correction” plus the corrected part of the message.*

| VTS | Your Pilot will board you in 20  CORRECTION - Your Pilot will board you in 30, three zero, minutes. |
| --- | --- |

## REPETITION

When communication is difficult phrases or words may be transmitted twice. If any part of a message is considered sufficiently important, the message should repeated using the appropriate phrase:

*“Repeat” followed by the corresponding part of the message.*

| VTS | Do not overtake - REPEAT – do not overtake.  The tide is 1.2m – REPEAT – one decimal two meters. |
| --- | --- |

When the message is not properly heard, say:

*“Say again” or “Repeat”*

# HOW TO INTERPRET A MESSAGE

Interpretation of the message requires skills such as encoding in order to achieve effective communications. Just as confusion can arise from errors in encoding, it can also arise from decoding especially during emergency situations. There could be a number of reasons (internal/external factors) that influence the decoding procedures which should be considered, see figure 1 below.

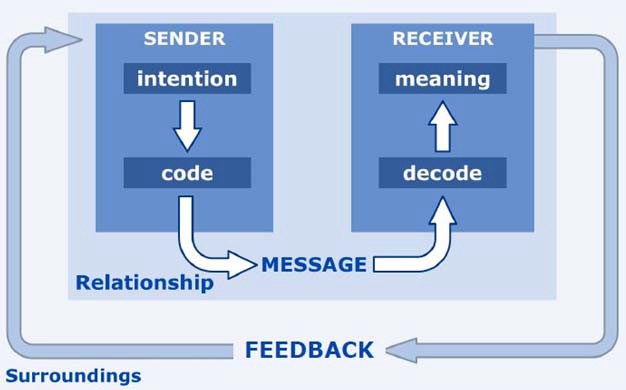


Figure 1 Communication process

## EFFECTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Effective listening skills are used to actively understand information provided by the speaker and it can be categorised into the following steps:

**Hearing**

Hearing involves the reception of sounds from the sender by:

* Avoiding interruptions.
* Clear one's mind of distractions.
* Focus on the speaker.

**Clarity**

The sender and receiver both have a responsibility to ensure that what is said is understood:

* Ask open questions to probe for further detail if required.
* Avoid asking leading questions.
* Avoid coming to conclusions before the sender finishes.
* Be aware of the sender’s choice and application of words.
* Encourage feedback through questioning.

**Interpretation**

Interpretation not only requires verification of what the sender has said, but also the understanding of the information given.

Steps to ensure understanding are:

* Communicate your interpretation and verify its accuracy.
* Identify the main issues.
* Do not assume what the sender will say, particularly when receiving routine communications.

## CLOSED LOOP COMMUNICATIONS [READ-BACK]

Misunderstandings in messages received may include half-heard words or guessed-at numbers. The potential for misunderstanding increases with the complexity of messages and may cause the bridge team to:

* Accept inadequate information received; or
* Determine for themselves the most probable interpretation.

Closed-loop communication is a technique used to avoid misunderstandings whereby when the sender gives a message, the receiver repeats a received message, or an appropriate part thereof, back to the sender to obtain confirmation of correct reception. The sender then confirms the message; by using the word “yes”.

When the receiver incorrectly repeats the message back, the sender will say “no” (or something similar) and then repeat the correct message. If the sender, the person giving the message, does not get a reply back, he must repeat it until the receiver starts closing the loop.

Closed-loop communication should be used to confirm that messages from VTS operators sent under message markers ‘INSTRUCTION, ADVICE or WARNING’ are correctly received and understood. This can be achieved through the following steps:

* The VTS operator requesting the recipient to repeat back important information. (For example, repeat advice, repeat instruction, repeat back, or Question – do you understand?)
* The recipient reading back or acknowledging in a manner to clearly indicate they have understood the message and will take appropriate action.
* The VTS operator listening to the read-back to ascertain that the message has been correctly acknowledged and take immediate action to correct any discrepancies revealed by the read-back.

Closed-loop communication should not be replaced by the use of terms such as “Roger” or “Copied”.

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

Some factors such as mental and emotional state, health, culture, working environment, distractions etc. can influence the interpretation of communications. Efforts should be made to minimise their negative effects on communications.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

* **SAFETY**  - The call ‘SECURITE’ indicates there is an important message regarding navigational warnings or serious weather reports. All safety messages should be broadcast to all stations or a specific station.

# VTS COMMUNICATION PHRASES

The phrases in Section 8 all contain a “key” or “action” word that is recommended for use by all VTSs to maintain global consistency of language and to avoid misunderstanding. Alternative key or action words with similar meaning should be avoided.

Throughout this section, the appropriate Message Marker has not been included in the examples. The text may suggest the most likely use and the most appropriate message marker. However, words supporting the key or action word in each phrase and the associated example may be adapted for use with other message markers for use in circumstances that differ from that in the example given.

## GENERAL

Throughout Section 8, Message Markers have not been included in the examples. This is both for clarity and also because the choice of appropriate message marker may vary for a given phrase dependent on the circumstances.

### General Communications

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| ALL RECEIVED | Information has all been received |
| APPROVED | Permission for proposed action granted |
| CHECK | Examine (something) in order to determine its accuracy, quality, or condition, or to detect the presence of something. |
| CONFIRM | Request verification of something: (e.g. permission, instruction, action, information, intentions). For example, *Confirm you have received the following…?* |
| CONTACT | Establish communications with… |
| CORRECT | Sent message is accurate |
| CORRECTION | A change that rectifies an error or inaccuracy |
| DISREGARD | Ignore last message / Consider that transmission as not sent |
| DO NOT | Instruction that an activity may not be carried out |
| SEND YOUR MESSAGE | VTS is ready to receive your information |
| I REPEAT | I will state my message again |
| I SPELL | Phonetic spelling follows |
| MAINTAIN | Continue in accordance with the condition(s) specified or in its literal sense, eg “Maintain your course” |
| NO | “No” or “Permission is not granted” or “That is not correct” |
| OUT | End of transmission. No answer is required or expected. |
| OVER | End of transmission. An answer is expected. |
| READ-BACK | Repeat all, or the specified part, of this message back to me exactly as received and understood |
| REPEAT/SAY AGAIN YOUR LAST | A request to retransmit all or a portion of a transmission |
| REPORT | Pass me the following information |
| REQUEST | A request for information or intentions |
| STAND BY | Wait and I will call you |
| YES | “Yes” or “Permission is granted” or “That is correct” |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| YOU ARE UNREADABLE |  |
| HOW DO YOU READ ME | Question to the vessel on the clarity of the VTS signal strength |







### VTS Operational Status

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| name [details] | [due to a given reason] |
| VTS OPERATIONS SUSPENDED DUE TO (details) [UNTIL] | VTS operations are interrupted [due to a given reason (e.g. protest action, strike, emergency situation)] |



### Requesting reports

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| REPORT [AGAIN] AT (location or time) | Request to report [again] when the vessel has reached a specified location or time |
| REPORT WHEN LEAVING (location / VTS area) | Request to report when the vessel has left the VTS area or a particular location. |
| REPORT WHEN PASSING (location) | Request to report when the vessel is passing or has passed the specified location |
| REPORT ETA AT (position) | Request to report the estimated time of arrival at the specified position |

### Call requests

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| CALL (VTS/allied service) [AT (time/position)] ON (channel) | Request to contact [at the specified time or position] the VTS or allied service on a VHF channel |
| CALL (vessel) FOR BRIDGE TO BRIDGE | Request to establish contact with another vessel to exchange intentions  (eg passing manoeuvres/confirming intentions/sharing information) |
| CALL AGAIN (event/time) | Request for the vessel to call VTS again when a specified event occurs  (eg after last line, when pilot boards) or in a specified time period. |

### Use of other VHF channels

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| CHANGE TO CHANNEL (channel ID) | Request to change VHF channels | |
|  |  |
| STANDBY ON (channel ) | Request for a vessel to standby on a VHF channel |
| MAINTAIN LISTENING WATCH ON (channel) | Request for the vessel to maintain a listening watch on a specified VHF channel |

### REPORTING OF VESSEL IDENTIFICATION AND PARTICULARS

When entering the VTS area a vessel’s identity and particulars should have been passed in advance. If not, these may need to be clarified through an instruction to report or a question asking for specific details.

The prefix of “WHAT IS YOUR XXXX” would normally be used prior to these message elements.



| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| WHAT IS YOUR (details) | Request specific information (such as last port of call, route, maximum draft etc.) |
| DO YOU HAVE (details) | Request for specific information (e.g. Pilot Exemption Certificate) |

### SPEED

Speed must be qualified with Speed over the Ground (SOG) or Speed through the water (STW)

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| MAINTAIN [SOG/STW] | Keep a specified speed |
| REDUCE SPEED [SOG/STW] | Instruction or request for the present speed to be reduced to the specified speed and maintained until further notice |
| PROCEED AT SAFE SPEED | Vessel to proceed at the vessels’ safe manoeuvring speed |
| WHAT IS YOUR MINIMUM SAFE SPEED | Request to a vessel to report the vessels minimum safe speed |
| WHAT IS YOUR SPEED [SOG/STW] | Request to report the vessels present speed |
| SPEED LIMIT (speed) [IN (area of)] | Notifying a vessel of a speed limit in a specified area |
| DO NOT EXCEED (speed) [SOG/STW] | Instruction that a specified speed is not to be exceeded |

### ENGINE

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| REPORT WHEN ENGINES READY | Request to report when the engines are ready |
| KEEP YOUR ENGINES READY | Request for the vessel to keep their engines ready |

## PROVISION OF INFORMATION

### traffic information

| **Message Element** | **Message Intent** |
| --- | --- |
| AHEAD [distance] [details] | Inform a ship that there is a ship/object in front of it [distance details] [other details may be added] |
| ALTERING COURSE | Inform a that another ship is changing direction |
| ANCHORING (in position) | Inform traffic that a ship is getting ready to anchor |
| ANCHORED (in position) | Inform traffic that a ship is anchored |
| CONSTRAINED BY (details) | Inform traffic that a ship is restricted in her ability to manoeuvre due to a specified conditions (eg draft) |
| CROSSING (details) | Inform traffic that a ship is proceeding in a direction near right angle with traffic flow or route. Alternatively the ship is proceeding through an area/fairway (one side to another) |
| OVERTAKING | Inform that a ship is overtaking another ship |
| DEPARTING (details) | Inform traffic that a ship is departing an area or alongside/anchor berth |
| DUE TO (details) | Inform that other considerations need to be taken into account such as traffic in the area |
| EASTBOUND/ WESTBOUND/ NORTHBOUND/ SOUTHBOUND | Directional information about a ship’s movements |
| ENTERING | Proceeding into a port/fairway/channel/area |
| (FISHING/PLEASURE) BOATS IN (position/area) | Inform ship that traffic, with unknown intentions, is in the area |
| INCIDENT IN (location/area) | Advising of an incident in an area/location |
| INBOUND | Ship is proceeding into a port/fairway/channel/area |
| LEAVING | Used in the context of navigational information or advice e.g Leaving a buoy to Port/Stbd or leaving the channel |
| MEET | Encounter one or more ships |
| NAVIGATIONAL HAZARD (details) | Advising of a specific navigational hazard (eg derelict ship, uncharted rock, pipeline leaking gas, shallow water) |
| NO TRAFFIC INFORMATION | To inform that VTS has no available information regarding traffic that may affect the ship’s intended movements |
| (activity) OPERATIONS IN (position/area) | Advising of operations such as dredging/diving/survey in a specified position/area |
| OUTBOUND | Ship is proceeding out of a port/fairway/channel/area |
| PASSING (location or ship) | Inform a ship where another a ship is relative to a location or a ship that is overtaking another |

Ships should be clearly identified (e.g by by name and call sign). It may also be beneficial to identify the ship by type, for example ***‘****container ship Maersk Rotterdam’*. In many cases, the message element will be preceded by the identity of the ship about which information is being provided.

An example of traffic information:

| VTS | TRAFFIC INFORMATION - MV (XXX) AHEAD of you distance 3 miles is ANCHORING in position (XX) |
| --- | --- |

### Weather information

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| WIND (at location) (direction in degrees/cardinal) (speed) | Communicate the wind direction and speed at location (XXX) |
| GALE/STORM/TYPHOON EXPECTED IN (location) AT (time) | Inform about pending adverse weather conditions. |
| VISIBILITY AT (location) XX (meters/cables) IS (x meters) | Information about restricted visibility in a specified area |

### Tidal/Hydrological information

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| TIDE IS (rising /falling /high / low) | Information about the tidal conditions in the area |
| WATER LEVEL AT (position) IS (meters/ cm) | Information about the water level in the area |
| TIDAL CURRENT DIRECTION | Indicates the direction from which the tidal current setting (goes) |
| TIDAL CURRENT SPEED | Indicates the speed of the tidal current (knots or meters per seconds) |
| CURRENT DIRECTION | Indicates the direction from which current setting (goes) |
| CURRENT SPEED | Indicates the speed of the current (knots or meters per seconds) |

### Information Broadcasts

When providing Information, the VTS may direct the message to a particular ship. Alternatively, general information may be to all ships in the area by a routine broadcast message. This may contain a number of the message elements listed above combining traffic information, weather information and tidal/hydrological information. A broadcast is directed to “All Ships” and this call is normally repeated three times before the message itself is transmitted.

Broadcasts may also be used to transmit emergency information in the event of a major marine, environmental, security incident or on suspension of any VTS services, advising of any special restricted / safety areas and any communication restrictions or changes. In such circumstances the same principles apply and it may also be appropriate to request all vessels to maintain watch on a designated channel, minimise all VHF radio traffic and be ready for vessel traffic instructions.

An example of a routine broadcast message:

| VTS | All Ships, All Ships, All Ships  This is (VTS)  Traffic Information   * VLCC (ship name) inbound via Fiddlers Channel is constrained by her draft   Weather Information   * Wind at Sharp Point 320 – 20 knots.   Tidal Information   * Water level at Green Terminal 4.2 metres – 0.5m above prediction. |
| --- | --- |

An example of an emergency broadcast message:

| VTS | All Ships, All Ships, All Ships  This is (VTS)   * MV (Name) aground * In positon 120 Black Rock Beacon 2.4 nm * Tug (name) outbound via Fiddlers Channel to assist * Wide berth requested |
| --- | --- |

## MANAGEMENT OF SHIP TRAFFIC

### NAVIGATING IN VTS AREA

When a vessel enters the VTS area there is an exchange of information, such as:

* Verifying the vessels identity
* Confirming reporting requirements
* Providing relevant traffic information
* Providing navigational / fairway information
* Establishing compliance with IMO requirements (charts and publications, passage plan, mechanical defects, personnel shortfalls)

guidance, advice or instructions

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| AVOID (details) | Request to avoid something (eg area, location, object) |
| CHECK YOUR POSITION | Request for the ship to check their position |
| DO NOT PROCEED (details) | Instruct the ship not to continue or proceed |
| DO NOT ENTER | Instruct the ship not to enter |
| DO NOT CROSS | Instruct a ship not to cross a certain point or area (eg the fairway or TSS) |
| DO NOT OVERTAKE | Instruct a ship not to overtake |
| KEEP CLEAR OF | Request to keep clear of an activity (eg diving operation) |
| KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE OF (XX miles/cables/meters) [FROM] | Request for the ship to maintain a specified minimum safe distance of (state unit) [from an area or an object] |
| LEAVE (details) | Instruct a ship to leave an area (eg fairway/recommended route/track) |
|  |  |
| NAVIGATE WITH CAUTION | Request for the ship to navigate or proceed with caution |
| PASS (details) | Request for the ship to pass to a relative direction or area (eg NW of location) |
| PERMISSION TO ENTER (details) | Permission provided to enter an area such as VTS area, fairway |
| PERMISSION TO CROSS (details) | Permission provided to cross into an area or line. |
| PERMISSION TO MOVE IN (area) | Permission provided to move within an area (eg fairway channel) |
|  |  |
|  | s |
| REMAIN OUTSIDE (area) | Advise the ship to remain outside an area |
| RETURN TO (details) | Request for the ship to return to (area, location, route) |
| WAIT FOR (details) | Request for the ship to wait for an event (eg ship (name) leaving berth, ship (name) ahead of you, improvement in visibility) |
| WHAT ARE YOUR INTENTIONS | Question requesting the ship to advise of its intentions (eg movements, passing, overtaking) |
| WIDE BERTH REQUESTED | Request for the ship to give the area or object a wide berth |

Example of communications with a vessel approaching or entering into the VTS area.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| VESSEL | *[Vessel] ENTERING [VTS area] / AT [Entry Location]* |
| VTS | [Vessel] … For example:   * CONFIRM [certain details] * INFORMATION (eg berthing, traffic updates, navigational hazards) * REPORT AGAIN AT (location) * PILOT WILL BOARD AT ….. |































### BERTHING

#### General

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| BERTH (name) [(port / starboard side) TO] | Notification of berth allocation [notification of side to the berth wall] |
| BERTH NOT CLEAR/ CLEAR AT (time) | Advising that the berth is no longer clear [and time the berth is expected to be available] |
| WAIT UNTIL BERTH CLEAR | Instructing or advising a vessel to wait until the berth is clear |
| [Vessel] LEAVING BERTH (name) AT (time) | Information that a (vessel) will leave a berth at a specified time |
| BERTHING DELAYED UNTIL (time / by XX hrs) | Advising that berthing will be delayed until a specified time |
| BERTH CHANGED TO (provide new berth) | Information about a new berth. |

#### Departure from berth

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| REPORT WHEN SINGLED UP | Request for the vessel to report when it has singled up |
| REPORT WHEN READY TO DEPART | Request for the vessel to report when the last line has been let go. |
| REPORT (XX minutes) BEFORE DEPARTURE | Request for the vessel to report a specified amount of time before departing |

### PROCEEDING FROM OR TO AN ALONGSIDE BERTH OR ANCHORAGE

#### Approving Permission to proceed

Based on the information available, the VTS assesses that it is safe and gives approval for the vessel to proceed from or to an alongside berth or anchorage, subject to the discretion of the Master.

Prior to or immediately following a request to proceed **from** a berth or anchorage, the vessel should be notified of the position and intentions of other traffic or any other conflict avoidance measures and, after approval has been given, other vessels should be notified of the impending departure (see section on “Provision of Traffic Information”).

| **Message Element** | **Message Intent** |
| --- | --- |
| PERMISSION  TO (enter / depart / proceed)  FROM/TO (berth/anchorage/ lock/creek)  [TO (location and/or subject to condition)] | Permission has been granted to proceed to undertake an activity (eg enter, depart, proceed)  From a location (eg berth, anchorage area, lock, creek, fairway, pilotage area) from (departure) or to (arrival) which permission has been granted  [Optional - Destination or other conditions may be included as appropriate] |

Example where a VTS provides permission to proceed from a location:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **VTS** | (vessel name) HAS PERMISSION TO (depart / proceed) FROM (berth/anchorage/lock/creek). [Subject to condition] |
|  |

Example where VTS provides permission to proceed to a location:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **VTS** | PERMISSION TO PROCEED TO (berth name/anchorage designator) |

#### Denying Permission to Proceed

If the VTS assesses that it is not safe for a vessel to proceed from or to a berth or anchorage, the response from VTS should be direct to the vessel and the response must be unambiguous, clear and issued with the message marker instruction.

| **Message Element** | **Message Intent** |
| --- | --- |
| NO | Response to a vessel request advising that an activity has not been granted. This should be backed up with a formal instruction. |
| REMAIN (alongside/berth/anchorage) (give reason) | Instruct the vessel to hold position at a location (eg alongside, a berth, anchorage) for a specified reason. |
| DO NOT (details) | Instruction that the permission has not been granted, or activity has been cancelled (eg leave berth) |
| CALL AGAIN IN (time) | Advising vessel to call again later or at a specific time. |

Example where a VTS denies permission to proceed from a location:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **VTS** | NO  INSTRUCTION. (Vessel) MUST REMAIN ALONGSIDE/AT (location/anchor) (give reason) [CALL AGAIN (in … minutes or after event has passed)] |
|  |

Example where a VTS denies permission to proceed to a location:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **VTS** | NO  INSTRUCTION. (Vessel) DO NOT PROCEED TO (berth name/anchorage designator) (give reason) [instructions and/or notification of expected availability] |

### ANCHOR OPERATIONS

#### Anchoring instructions

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| ANCHOR (in position/area) | Instruction to a vessel to anchor in a nominated position/specified location |
| ANCHOR TO WAIT FOR (details) | Request for the vessel to anchor until a specified time or event (eg tug, berth, pilot) |
| ANCHORING PROHIBITED (details) | Advising that anchoring is prohibited. Further details may be provided on specified areas or the entire VTS area. |
|  |  |
| DO NOT ANCHOR (details) | Request for a vessel do not anchor in a specified location (eg fairway / outside port limits) |
| REPORT WHEN ANCHOR DROPPED | Request for a vessel to report when the anchor has been let go or dropped |
| REPORT WHEN AT ANCHOR | Request for a vessel to report when the vessel has settled to its anchor |

#### Weigh or heave up anchor

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| HEAVE UP ANCHOR (details) | Request for a vessel to weigh or heave up anchor (details such as a specified time) |
| CALL (XX minutes) BEFORE HEAVING UP ANCHOR | Request for the vessel to report before they weigh or heave up anchor |
| REPORT WHEN UNDERWAY | Request for a vessel to report when the anchor is clear of the water and the vessel is underway. |

#### Dragging anchor

Where a vessel has been identified to be dragging anchor, it may be appropriate, to issue an all ships broadcast to notify all vessels in the area of the developing situation.

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| YOU APPEAR TO BE DRAGGING ANCHOR. | Sensor information indicates the vessel is dragging anchor. |
| CHECK YOUR ANCHOR POSITION | Request or advise for the vessel to check position of its anchor |

### PILOTAGE

Depending on the waterway there may be local differences in terms used such as pilot station, pilot boarding ground. Similarly when referencing the pilot’s activities such as on bridge or on board. (put something more specific on pilot boarding instruction to cover local procedures)

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| PILOT BOARDING TIME (time) [AT (location)] | Information when the pilot will board the vessel at a specified time [and location] |
| WAIT FOR PILOT at (location) | Instruction or Request for the vessel to wait for a pilot in a specified location |
| PILOT CANNOT BOARD [reason] | Advising that the pilot cannot board the vessel [reason may also be given] |
| PILOT DELAYED | Advising that the pilot will be delayed |
| PILOTAGE SUSPENDED | Pilotage service is unavailable |
| PILOTAGE RESUMED | Pilotage service returned to normal |



































































## RESPONDIG TO DEVELOPING UNSAFE SITUATION

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| YOUR POSITION (details) | Advising the ship its current position relative to a location/landmark -  .../ bearing ... degrees.  Distance … nautical miles/cables... kilometres /metres from ....  ~ in the centre of the fairway.  ~ on / not on the radar reference line (of the fairway).  ~ on the ... (cardinal points) side of the fairway. |
|  |  |
| YOU HAVE LEFT (details) | Inform the ship that it has left an area (eg fairway / recommended route/track) |
| YOU ARE LEAVING (details) | Inform the ship that it is about to leave an area (eg fairway/recommended route/track) |
| YOU ARE APPROACHING (details) | Advising the ship by continuing in the same direction it will approach some obstacle / danger (eg submerged wreck) |
| YOU ARE RUNNING INTO DANGER (details) | Advising the ship by continuing in the same direction it will encounter some danger such as:  ~ shallow water ... bearing … distance …. nm  ~ submerged wreck ... (cardinal points) of you. |
|  |  |
| CRITICAL TURN (details) | Advising about a critical turn (eg the vessel is approaching or did not alter course as expected) |
| YOU HAVE DEVIATED FROM (details) | Advising the ship has deviated from intended route (eg passage plan) |
| CLOSE QUARTER SITUATION WITH (details) | Advising the ship is passing close to another ship |
|  |  |
| COURSE TO MAKE GOOD (details) | Advising the vessel about a recommended course |



## EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

## 

## 

## 







The VTS will often be one of the first to respond to the call of ship that has an emergency situation.

It is important that VTS requests and collects any further information to help in response activities.

Immediate questions may include:

| Message Element | Message Intent |
| --- | --- |
| TIME AND LOCATION OF INCIDENT (details) | Request to the ship when and where the incident happened |
| REPORT ANY INJURIES ON BOARD | Request to the ship total injuries on board |
| REPORT ANY DANGEROUS CARGOES ON BOARD | Request to the ship to report dangerous cargo |
| REPORT ANY POLLUTION | Request to the ship to report pollution in area around |
| DO YOU REQUIRE ASSISTANCE | Request to the ship if any assistance is required |
| CAN YOU PROCEED WITHOUT ASSISTANCE | Asking the ship if is capable of navigating by itself |
| REPORT THE DAMAGE TO YOUR SHIP | Request to the ship to report the damage |
| REPORT DETAILS OF (nature of incident) | Request ship to provide a status on the situation (collision, grounding, fire, man overboard etc.) |



## DEFINITIONS

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ANCHORAGE | | | A place where a ship anchor or can be anchored | |
| ANCHOR WATCH | | | Maintain lookout when at anchor | |
| AREA TO BE AVOIDED | | | A routeing measure comprising an area within defined limits in which either navigation is particularly hazardous or it is exceptionally important to avoid casualties and which should be avoided by all ships, or certain classes of ship. | |
| BERTHING SCHEDULE | | | A detailed plan of times and events affecting vessels in the port. | |
| CONVOY | | | A group of vessels navigating together in same direction | |
| CRITICAL TURN | WE HAVE TO FIND OUT A DEFINITION | |
| CURRENT DIRECTION | | | The current goes to | |
| DRAGGING | | | Moving of an anchor over the sea bottom involuntarily because it is no longer preventing the movement of the vessel | |
| IMMEDIATE ACTION | | | To react quickly to a situation. | |
| LAST LINE | | | Mooring lines are released except the final line needed to hold the vessel. | |
| NOT APPROVED | | | Advising that approval for an activity has not been granted | |
| OCCUPIED | | | Berth or anchorage taken by another vessel | |
| PEC (Pilot Exemption Certificate) | | | A certificate which removes the need to use a pilotage service. It normally applies to a specific vessel and route. | |
| PILOT EMBARKATION ORDER | | | The sequence in which pilots board vessels | |
| PILOT DISPATCH | | | Pilot dispatch centre or pilot dispatch office | |
| PILOT STATION | | | A place where a pilot embarks/disembarks | |
| PROHIBITED | | | Not permitted | |
| QUARANTINE | | | When a vessel is suspected to be carrying contagious disease or health related issue is held in isolation from the shore. | |
| REPORTING POINT | | | A mark or position at which a vessel is required to report to the local VTS | |
| RESTRICTED | | | Permitted access to certain vessels at certain conditions | |
| RESTRICTED AREA | | | See IALA guideline 1070 | |
| SAFE DISTANCE | | | The minimum distance allowed to avid dangerous situations | |
| SINGLED UP | | | Mooring lines are released except the minimum needed to hold the vessel | |
| SPECIAL OPERATION | | | A performance of a practical work or of something which affects the safety of navigation (e.g. difficult tow, diver, survey, dredging, cable line laying). | |
| STRIKE | | | Port services temporarily suspended due to a protest action | |
| WIND DIRECTION | | | The wind is coming from | |































# REFERENCES

* IMO Resolution A.857(20) Guidelines for Vessel Traffic Services
* IMO Resolution A.918(22) IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)
* ITU Radio Regulations, Volume IVE, Recommendation ITU‐R M.1171‐0 and subsequent chapters



1. Volume IVE, Recommendation ITU‐R, M117 and following [↑](#footnote-ref-2)