

# BBC Learning English

## 6 Minute English

### *Captain's etiquette*



NB: This is not a word for word transcript

**Rob:** Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Rob and joining me today is Jen.

**Jen:** Hi.

**Rob:** Hi Jen, Now I'm sure like everyone else, you heard the news recently about the cruise ship, the Costa Concordia, which hit some rocks and **capsized** – or overturned.

**Jen:** Yes I did hear. It really was a dreadful story, terrible news for everyone involved.

**Rob:** It was a terrible disaster. People have been discussing and **speculating** how it happened and particularly about the actions of the captain. In today's programme we're talking about what is and what isn't acceptable behaviour for the captain of a ship during a disaster at sea.

**Jen:** In other words, the captain's **etiquette**. But Rob, shouldn't we start with a question?

**Rob:** Of course, I hadn't forgotten. As we're talking about ships, I wonder if you know how heavy the world's biggest cruise ship, Oasis of the Seas, weighs? Is it:

- a) 2,500 tonnes
- b) 25,000 tonnes
- c) 250,000 tonnes

**Jen:** I can honestly say, I've got no idea about how much a cruise ship would weigh but I guess if it's the world's biggest, I'll go for the biggest number, 250,000 tonnes.

**Rob:** Well I'll reveal the answer at the end of the programme. So today, we're talking about the role of the captain on a ship. In the recent disaster involving the Costa Concordia, it was alleged the captain **abandoned** ship before all his passengers had escaped. Whether this is true or not, what should the captain do in such a situation?

**Jen:** Well when the famous ship, Titanic, sank in 1912 the captain was the last on board.

**Rob:** Very **heroic**. Let's hear from another heroic man, Lord West of Spithead. He used to be the professional head of the British Royal Navy – what is called 'The First Sea Lord'. He was captain of HMS Ardent in the Falklands War and was the last man on board when it sank.

**Jen:** So he understands why abandoning ship is never an option for a captain, even during a disaster. Here he is speaking to the BBC's James Naughtie about the history of this captain's etiquette. What does he say is 'expected' of a captain?

**Lord West of Spithead:**

Well I think it's a very important custom and a rule. It goes, if you think, back to the Titanic, the Lusitania. You know, the Captain stayed on the bridge until they were washed off as the ship sank. And I think it is expected of a captain to remain on board to look after the safety and security of his people until the last one has gone.

**Rob:** So in a disaster, he thinks staying at the ship's controls – or what is called the bridge – is an important **custom** and rule. It is the expected behaviour.

**Jen:** Yes, it's what people expect the captain to do. He is responsible for the safety and security of his passengers until the last one has gone. On the Titanic, the captain was finally washed off the bridge as it sank.

**Rob:** But even if captains are obeying the rules or doing what they think is right, there could be something else that **compels** them to stay on board. This is something the BBC's James Naughtie asked Lord West of Spithead.

**James Naughtie:**

It's more than that, isn't it? It's more than a practical question of, you know, being in charge until the rescue is complete. It's something that's in the DNA of a sea-going person. It's unthinkable...it just goes utterly against the grain to be anything but the last man off.

**Lord West of Spithead:**

That is absolutely right. It is a core aspect of duty.

**Rob:** So that's James Naughtie, suggesting that staying until everyone is off the ship is part of a captain's DNA – it's in their **genes**.

**Jen:** He used a good phrase – 'it goes utterly against the grain'. It goes against the grain to be anything but the last man off. In other words, you do the opposite of what is usually done.

**Rob:** Or you're not willing to abandon ship because it **contradicts** what you believe in. And Lord West of Spithead agrees. He says it's a core aspect of duty – it's the most important part.

**Jen:** Basically, the ship is the captain's top priority – even more important than his wife and family!

**Rob:** Yes, incredible – and Lord West of Spithead uses a name to describe what captains call their ships. Have a listen to this.

**Lord West:**

Certainly in the Royal Navy, it's referred to 'Your Grey Mistress'...because...

**James Naughtie:**

Your Grey Mistress?

**Lord West:**

... (because) you spend more time looking after your ship and being with your ship and everything than you ever do with your wife, your family. And it is – it's an absolute part of you and there comes a stage where you'll fight like mad to keep your ship safe, to look after it and to

secure it. And then you have to make a decision that it's too late, your ship is going to go. You then have to look after your people and the people you're responsible for.

**Jen:** Ha! He says in the Royal Navy, the ship is referred to as 'your grey **mistress**' because the captain spends more time with her than his wife!

**Rob:** And the captain will do everything in his power to save the ship and all the people on board, if it's about to sink. But I wonder if this is an old fashioned custom and maybe everyone should try to just save themselves?

**Jen:** Hmm, I don't think a captain would ever think about doing that.

**Rob:** Maybe. So have you given any thought to my question? I asked you if you know how much does the world's biggest cruise ship, Oasis of the Seas, weigh? Is it:

- a) 2,500 tonnes
- b) 25,000 tonnes
- c) 250,000 tonnes

**Jen:** And I said it might be 250,000 tonnes.

**Rob:** You are right. The Oasis of the Sea weighs more than 250,000 tonnes. It can carry 6,000 people and it has more than 3,000 miles of electrical cabling - that is about the distance from London to New York. That's a big ship for a captain to be responsible for. OK Jen, we've just time for you to remind us of some of the vocabulary we have heard today:

**Jen:** Yes, we heard:

**capsized**

**speculating**

**etiquette**

**abandoned**

**heroic**

**custom**

**compels**

**genes**

**contradicts**

**mistress**

**Rob:** Thanks a lot Jen. And that's all we've got time for in today's programme. Please do join us again for more 6 Minute English on our website at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). We'll see you next time. Bye.

**Jen:** Bye.

## Vocabulary and definitions

<b>capsized</b>	turned over in water
<b>speculating</b>	formulating opinions about something without knowing all the facts
<b>etiquette</b>	the formal rules of correct behaviour
<b>abandoned</b>	left behind forever
<b>heroic</b>	showing extreme courage and admired by many people
<b>custom</b>	an accepted way of doing things
<b>compels</b>	forces someone to do something
<b>genes</b>	the units in the cells of a living thing that determine its physical characteristics
<b>contradicts</b>	says or does the opposite of something
<b>mistress</b>	a woman who a married man is having a regular sexual relationship with and who is not his wife

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