Safe Lifting Operations Onboard — study guide

A lifting operation is only as safe as the plan, the equipment and the discipline around it. This guide covers the rules that keep a lift from becoming an accident.[1][2]

Starting a lift

A lifting operation may start only with a **clear plan and proper authorisation**. The person responsible for identifying potential hazards and preparing the plan is the **Officer in Charge**, and the main reason for following safe lifting procedures is to protect yourself, your crewmates and your ship from accidents and injuries. A **toolbox talk** before the lift ensures everyone understands their roles, the communication methods and the emergency procedures.

People, signs and training

Only personnel who are **trained and qualified** may operate the controls of lifting equipment, and safe lifting is ultimately **everyone's** responsibility. Barriers and exclusion zones are set up to keep non-essential personnel clear of the lifting area; a person may enter a designated exclusion zone only if they are part of the lifting operation. One of the most important rules of safe lifting is: **never walk or stand under a suspended load** — stay clear of the load path even with the best equipment, because even the best equipment can fail.

Equipment

Safe Working Load (SWL) markings must be visible and suitable on all lifting equipment before use. Inspect lifting equipment such as wire slings and hooks for damage — frayed slings, bent shackles or cracked hooks. Every certified shackle, hook or chain should be recorded in the ship's **lifting gear register**. If a defect is found, report it, do not use the equipment, and store it separately from other equipment. It is **never** acceptable to improvise or use uncertified tools for a "quick lift".

Key principles

The key principles of safe lifting are to plan carefully, inspect equipment, and use certified tools. Effective communication during a lift means clear and continuous communication between the operator and the signalman. Reporting near misses and incidents makes future lifts safer.

After the lift

Once the load is landed and secured, disconnect the lifting gear carefully, inspect it for damage, and store it properly.

Key facts to remember

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- Start only with a clear plan and authorisation; the Officer in Charge prepares the plan and identifies hazards.
- Only trained, qualified people operate controls. Never walk or stand under a suspended load.
- Exclusion zones keep non-essential people clear; enter only if part of the lift.
- SWL markings visible; inspect for frayed slings, bent shackles, cracked hooks; keep a lifting gear register.
- Defect found → report, don't use, store separately. Never use uncertified tools.
- Key principles: plan carefully, inspect equipment, use certified tools.
- Clear, continuous communication between operator and signalman; report near misses.

Sources

1. Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations (LOLER) 1998 (UK) — planning, inspection, marking and record-keeping for lifting operations.
2. Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers (COSWP) — Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) (safe lifting operations on board).