# Working at Height — study guide



Falls from height are one of the deadliest accidents on board, and "working at height" covers far more of the ship than people expect. This guide covers the definition, the hierarchy, ladders and scaffolding.[1][2]

## What counts as work at height

Work at height involves carrying out a task from any place from which a person could be injured falling — not a fixed two-metre figure. It therefore includes working in, entering or exiting a deep tank; working alongside an open hatch or other opening in a ship's structure; and working in close proximity to, or supported from, a ship's side. Work at height should be properly planned, organised, appropriately supervised, and carried out by trained and competent personnel. Specific hazards include dropped objects and simultaneous operations (SIMOPS).

## The hierarchy of control

The correct order of priority is **1) Avoid; 2) Prevent; 3) Mitigate** — avoid the work at height if you can, prevent the fall if you can, and mitigate the consequences if you cannot.

## Ladders

When working with ladders, apply the **1-in-4 rule** for positioning (base one unit out for every four units up), fasten the ladder at the top and bottom, and always maintain **three points of contact**.

## Scaffolding

Before scaffolding can be used: it must be inspected by a competent person prior to use and used only by competent and trained personnel; the decks must be appropriate to the nature of the work and suitable for the loads to be carried; the decks must be of sufficient dimensions to permit safe passage of personnel and safe use of plant or materials; and hazard warning signs must be displayed, with restrictions in place when scaffolding is not in use, to prevent unauthorised access to the danger zone.

## Selecting equipment and inspection

When selecting equipment for work at height, consider the duration and frequency of the task, and the evacuation and rescue measures. Working-at-height equipment should be inspected before use, after use, and following modifications.

## Key facts to remember

- Work at height = any place a person could be injured falling (no fixed 2 m rule): deep tanks, open hatches, ship's side.

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- Specific hazards: dropped objects and SIMOPS.
- Hierarchy of control: Avoid → Prevent → Mitigate.
- Ladders: 1-in-4 rule, fastened top and bottom, three points of contact.
- Scaffolding: competent inspection and use, decks fit for work and loads, adequate dimensions, warning signs when not in use.
- Equipment selection: duration/frequency and evacuation/rescue measures.
- Inspect equipment before use, after use, and following modifications.

## Sources

1. Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers (COSWP) — Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) (working at height, ladders and scaffolding).

2. Work at Height Regulations 2005 (UK) — hierarchy of control and equipment requirements for work at height.