

Disc driving test

Computer training software can help fast-track you through your shorebased RYA courses, from Competent Crew to Yachtmaster. The YM team put some of the latest packages – costing from under £20 to £70-plus – to the test



THE TESTING TEAM:



SIMON JINKS is YM's Technical Writer. An experienced sailor and Yachtmaster Instructor Examiner, he is ideally placed to provide a tutor's opinion on the software.



EMMA MARTIN is YM's Editorial Assistant. Having passed her Dayskipper theory in July, she is taking her practical assessment this autumn.



DAVE PUGH is YM's Geoff Pack Scholar. An RYA Keelboat Instructor, he plans to extend his offshore qualifications by taking his Yachtmaster in 2005.



CLAIRE FREW is Editorial Assistant on our sister magazine *Motor Boats Monthly*. An experienced powerboater, she is new to sailing and hopes to take her Competent Crew course later this year.

Shorebased training can be a nightmare. Things that seem second nature afloat can become an impenetrable mystery in the classroom – yet the chap next to you, who has never put to sea in anything bigger than a rubber dinghy, manages to plot his position to the nearest second of arc.

Fortunately, technology and recent research into different learning styles can help. People once written off as 'non-academic' are now termed 'kinaesthetic' (meaning they learn through pictures and actions). The computer has revolutionised the classroom. Well-written software can offer students a 'multimedia' experience, combining sound, video, animation and text. We tried some of the most recent packages developed to assist sailors with RYA training to see how effective they are.

HOW WE TESTED THEM

The first port of call for software is the internet. A search online revealed a lot of software to help train sailors, but very little specifically targeted at RYA courses. A lot of packages focus on specific topics – like collision regulations or weather – and give lots of detail. If you are doing a Competent Crew course, you don't want to be baffled by Yachtmaster theory.

We obtained all the packages we could find that claim to help teach Competent Crew, Dayskipper or Yachtmaster. We also added a few subject-specific ones covering COLREGS, weather, GPS and chartwork. We tested each product twice: once with a potential candidate for the appropriate course and once with Simon Jinks, YM's technical expert and a Yachtmaster Instructor Examiner.

TEACHME INTERNATIONAL →

TeachMe publishes three training packages as part of its correspondence courses: Competent Crew, Day Skipper and Coastal Skipper/Yachtmaster. Information is presented mainly as text with some basic animated graphics. Text is broken down into 'bite-sized' chunks over a lot of pages. There are numerous pictures, and difficult words can be clicked on for an explanation. Where appropriate, videos are included.

Contact: TeachMe International

Tel: 0870 1045678

Website: www.teachmetosail.com

COMPETENT CREW

★★★★★ £49.99

Claire found this package easy to use and colourful. She particularly liked the multiple-choice quiz, and thought 'Competent Crew' would make a good revision aid and reference source. Videos and diagrams helped explain manoeuvres, although some crucial inaccuracies had crept in (for example, one turn around a winch). Pictures were well chosen, but low resolutions left them dull and unclear.

Simon found the video quality poor and thought it needed commentary. Some animation was not text-related and missed crucial detail. Critically, the video shows a crewmember opening the mainsail halyard clutch without having secured a turn around a winch first.

**DAY SKIPPER**

★★★★★ £49.99

Emma used this software as a revision aid while doing her Day Skipper shorebased course earlier this year, and fully recommends it. The CD covers the entire course syllabus, and she found the videos particularly useful, explaining manoeuvres which she had struggled to understand with textbooks. The quiz gave her a good indication of how close she was to passing her exams.

Simon liked the commentary accompanying some of the manoeuvres and found the animation clear and well presented.

**COASTAL SKIPPER / YACHTMASTER**

★★★★★ £59.99

This has full, up-to-date and well-presented coverage of the syllabus, including new areas in GPS and chartplotter usage. There is an extensive use of mnemonics and other prompts to help memorise information. Dave found the COLREGS section particularly good, starting with a video, which covers all the basics, backed up with clear animation and flashcards. The quiz features helpful 'explain' buttons for wrongly answered questions.

**LONGBOW SAIL TRAINING →**

Longbow uses a very text-orientated approach, which can be daunting at first glance. Within the text, words are 'hyperlinked' – you can click on them to get quick explanations of difficult terms. Navigation is by clicking a 'next' pointer, and all animated graphics can be run step-by-step or continuously. Navigation through the course is not intuitive, with lots of small text links. Both packages tested have extensive quizzes, with questions selected at random from a massive database. With a low level of interactivity, these products look a little dated, and offer few advantages over a book.

Contact: Longbow Sail Training

Tel: 01726 844400;

Website: www.longbow-uk.com

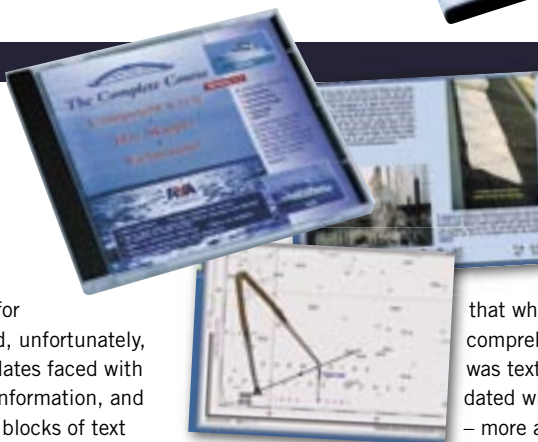
THE COMPLETE COURSE

★★★★★ £49.95

Billed as covering the entire RYA syllabus from Competent Crew to Yachtmaster, this is the only computer-based training endorsed by the RYA. All students start the course in the same way, with links offering different routes for different abilities. This method, unfortunately, leaves Competent Crew candidates faced with occasional Yachtmaster level information, and vice versa. Dave thought large blocks of text

might put students off, but pictures and animation (where included) were to the point, if a little basic.

Simon thought that while extremely comprehensive, the package was text heavy and appeared dated with poor quality pictures – more animation would help.

**FAST-TRACK COLLISION REGULATIONS**

★★★★★ £34.95

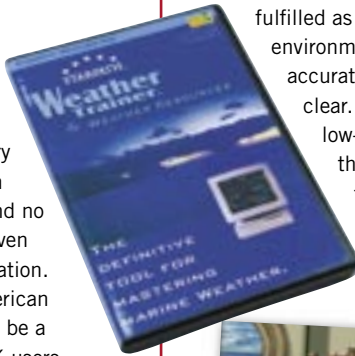
The COLREGs are a text-heavy subject and Longbow's presentation style is more appropriate in this context, with some useful animation to help explanations. The rules have been rewritten in a much more user-friendly style, and animation works well showing dayshapes changing to navigation lights as the screen darkens. Apart from a sailing quiz there are also quiz questions on merchant shipping.



STARPATH →

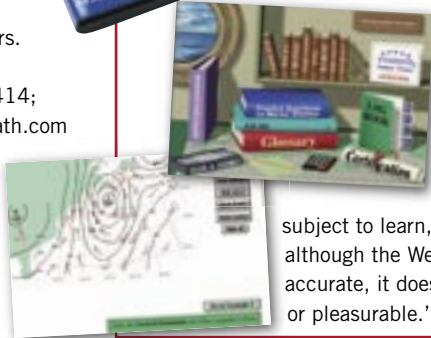
American-based Starpath software is instantly irritating with its registration scheme requiring the user to go on to the internet for a code to unlock the product. Both packages tested were very text-based with few pictures and no animation to liven up the presentation. Starpath's American bias could also be a problem for UK users.

Contact: Starpath
Tel: +1 206 783 1414;
Website: www.starpath.com



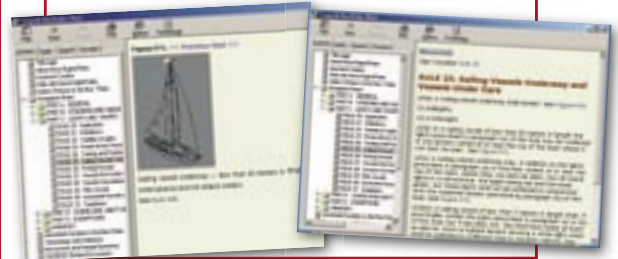
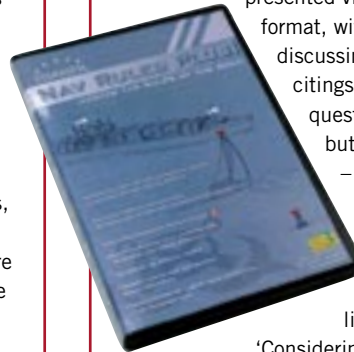
WEATHER TRAINER & WEATHER RESOURCES ★★★★★ £71.00

The initial menu is innovative and interesting – a virtual 'bookshelf' giving access to the different areas of the CD. Unfortunately, the promise is not fulfilled as the user clicks into a text-heavy environment. Information is extensive and accurate and diagrams, when included, clear. We liked the representation of a low-pressure system, which allowed the user to add isobars, wind arrows, fronts and predicted sea states. Comprehensive test questions are available at different knowledge levels. A resource centre gives information about international weather fax schedules and forecasts. This may be too advanced for some, but will appeal to enthusiasts. 'Weather is a hard subject to learn,' said Simon, 'and although the Weather Trainer is accurate, it doesn't make learning easy or pleasurable.'



NAV RULES PLUS! ★★★★★ £49.00

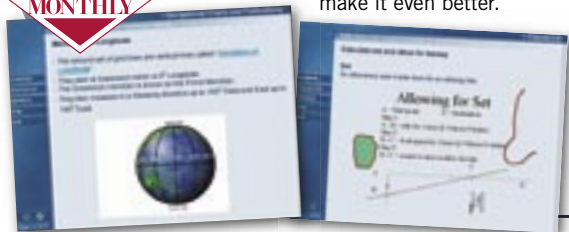
This was disappointingly presented, and offered no advantages over a book. COLREGS are presented via the Windows help format, with links to more text discussing the rules and legal citations of their use. Sample questions are included, but are not interactive – answers are simply given at the bottom of the page. Some static pictures show navigation lights and day shapes. 'Considering the amount of text involved it's probably easier to revise from a book', was Simon's verdict.



ACADEMY MARITIME →

Australian-based Academy Maritime has given its products international appeal by providing Australian, American and UK versions. Its menu-based approach is easy to use and pictures and animation are clear and high quality. A commentary highlights the main points of each topic and is repeated in the text with further explanation. Hyperlinks give access to ancillary information. Each CD starts with an optional tutorial on the software.

Contact: Academy of Maritime Training
Tel: +61 8 8338 4222
Website: www.academysail.com.au



COASTAL NAVIGATION ★★★★★ £37.00

Anyone familiar with RYA courses will feel at ease using this product, based on RYA training charts and practice navigation tables. Clear diagrams and lots of examples combine with punchy text to give an easy learning experience. Most pages have icons that can be clicked for further explanation, plus diagrams. This is a well-presented package primarily aimed at Day Skipper level, but works as a good reference for pilotage techniques. Simon found this user-friendly with well set out sections on navigation, but thought more animation could make it even better.

COLLISION REGULATIONS ★★★★★ £37.00

This is understandably heavier on text than the Coastal Navigation package, but the rules have been broken down into 'bite-sized' chunks, with a commentary giving a simplified description in most cases. Clear diagrams and animation clarifies the text and Dave was impressed with the animation showing night and day signals. The writing on the illustrations, however, was too small. Sound is used where appropriate.

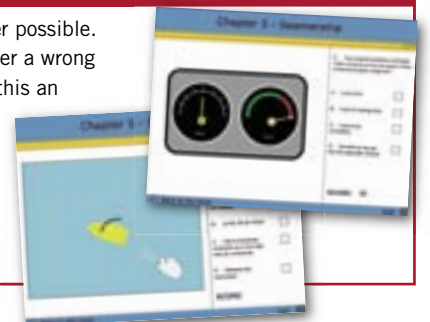


THE COMPLETE DAY SKIPPER – DIGITAL EXERCISES ★★★★★ £22.50

This CD is designed as a companion to Tom Cunliffe's book of the same title. The CD provides interactive exercises to help revision from the book. The presentation style is amusing and relaxed, with a cartoon character, Spike Marlin, putting the student at ease. The multiple-choice exercises are posed in simple language, displayed in large

print and with diagrams wherever possible. Explanations are offered whenever a wrong answer is chosen. Emma found this an excellent revision aid and Simon thought it made revision fun with good use of animation.

Contact: Adlard Coles Nautical
Tel: 0207 758 0200
Website: www.acblack.com



RULESMASTER PRO

★★★★★ (c£35.00)

This Australian package is designed as a series of live presentations with a commentary over text and pictures. The voice can be muted at any time, which speeds up presentation of text and diagrams. As with all COLREGs software, a lot of text is included, but this package presents it in simple, concise language. The graphics are excellent, with animated diagrams explaining concepts where possible. This was the only genuinely interactive COLREGs software, with the user undertaking

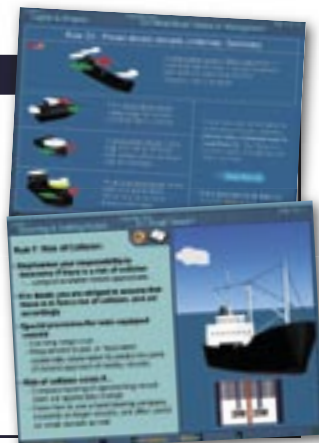


exercises, such as dragging navigation lights to their correct positions or placing lights on certain vessels. Each lesson ends in a short quiz.

'This would be a good CD for Day Skipper or Yachtmaster candidates,' was Simon's verdict.

Contact: Ross Learning Media
Tel: +61 7 3848 0402;

Website: www.rulesmaster.com



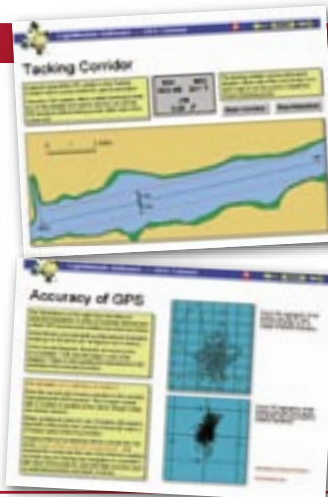
GPS TUTORIAL

★★★★★ £19.95

By modern standards this looks old-fashioned. The introduction is reminiscent of the classic Space Invaders game. Active links are often provided to access more information but with 'buttons' scattered all over the screen, it requires an irritating level of mouse movement. Diagrams and descriptions are clear, and some useful and unusual technical



information is provided. The passage-planning section tries to persuade you to buy more software. The saving grace of this package, however, is an excellent, practical GPS usage section, which shows how to get the best from your set using clearing lines,



tacking corridors and other techniques. Simon was impressed by this tutorial on the use and background to GPS – which could also be a good *aide mémoire* for instructors. It includes all that he teaches on GPS at an RYA workshop for instructors.

Contact: LightMaster
Tel: 020 8405 8200

Website: www.lightmaster.co.uk

COASTAL AND DEEP WATER TRAINING CONSOLE

★★★★★ £FREE OF CHARGE

This package is only available by logging on to the RNLI's website. It is not targeted at covering RYA courses, but could be used as a revision aid at Day Skipper level. It uses minimal text with graphics where possible. Dave found the animations of high quality, particularly a superb explanation of tides. As would be expected from the RNLI, there is a strong bias towards safety,



with first aid and COLREGs getting extensive coverage. The buoyage section has a variable fog level allowing the user to watch as first the light signals come on and then as the buoy itself disappears from view. A section on basic engine maintenance is also included.

Simon's verdict: 'We can all learn a lot from this program.'

Contact: RNLI
Tel: 0800 543210;

Website: www.rnli.org.uk/training/launch.asp

CONCLUSION

Software has moved on so that with the right training CD and personal commitment it's possible to sit down and pass your shorebased course at home. For most of us, however, these CDs will be a revision aid and it's here they excel. We felt that many CDs are still not making the most of animation and commentary – which leaves little advantage over revising from a book. The RNLI's website is a valuable resource: available free online, it could make your revision a lot more fun.

