

Why Does My Clock Chime Only Six Times at Seven O'clock?

It is probably broken, unless it also chimes six times four hours earlier, and four hours later too. In that case, it is keeping “Ship’s time,” where the chimes ring from one to eight times – marking every half hour of each four-hour watch.

Back in the days of the square-riggers few if any of the crew could afford to carry a pocket watch, so each “watch-stander” depended on the ringing of the ship’s bell to tell him when his four-hour watch was to begin, and when it ended.

Even-numbered rings (2,4,6 and 8) marked the top of an hour, while odd-numbered rings (1,3,5 and 7) signaled the half hour between them. The cycle repeated itself every four hours, so

“Eight Bells” meant it was: 4:00, 8:00, or 12:00 O’clock – a.m. or p.m. in all cases.

“Seven Bells” (odd #) meant the half-hour: 3:30, 7:30, or 11:30 – a.m. or p.m. and

“Six Bells,” then, would be 3:00, 7:00, or 11:00 – a.m. or p.m.

Mystery solved!

If you can remember that at 1:00, 2:00 3:00 and 4:00 the chimes are twice the hour:

1:00 = two bells	(also two bells at 5:00 and 9:00)
2:00 = four bells	(also four bells at 6:00 and 10:00)
3:00 = six bells	(also six bells at 7:00 and 11:00)
4:00 = eight bells	(also eight bells at 8:00 and 12:00)

And that the same chimes sound both four and eight hours before and after those hours (of 1:00, 2:00, 3:00, and 4:00) it shouldn’t be too difficult to decipher the number of chimes you hear (remembering that the odd chimes will mark a half-hour).

Lesson over. Here’s your final test question:

Q: What time is it when your ship’s clock chimes nine bells?

(A: It must be time to have your clock fixed, because it shouldn’t chime more than eight times!)