



Paddling Straight or The Straight and Narrow Path For Kayakers

By Tom Holtey

Drawings by Mike Altman

[http://www.sit-on-](http://www.sit-on-topkayaking.com/Articles/Instruction/PaddleStraight.htm)

[topkayaking.com/Articles/Instruction/PaddleStraight.htm](http://www.sit-on-topkayaking.com/Articles/Instruction/PaddleStraight.htm)

One of the first problems most new kayakers encounter is going in a straight line. Their kayak will tend to wander like a stubborn mule with a mind of it's own. This is due to lack of experience, and to some degree the type of kayak they have choose. It is almost never because of a defective boat, even though this is the first thing to come to mind.

Kayak lessons will help. The instructor will teach a variety of paddle strokes and strategy to accomplish your goals on the water with those strokes. A good instructor and lesson program will teach you quite a lot more than stokes. I highly recommend taking a lesson.

Some kayaks will never go straight, they are not meant to. Surf kayaks and white water boats are just not "true trackers". Long touring kayaks will paddle straight, with some skill. Short recreational kayaks are easy to turn, but can also be paddled in a straight line with some practice.

Paddling in a straight line is the most efficient way to get from point A to point B. It is also nice to be able to "aim at a target" and "hit your mark." Wind, currents and distractions can knock you off your path and point you in the wrong direction quite easily. After all the surface of the water is a dynamic fluid environment. While a "snake trail" may burn more calories, a straight path will be more efficient and sometimes that is needed more.

Proper strokes and even application of power are the keys to paddling a straight line. Even pressure on each side is the first step. Understanding turning strokes, how they work and when to use them is the way to combat the dynamic fluid environment. Boat leaning can also be helpful on some kayak models.

EVEN POWER

STROKES - SWEEP & RUDDER

BOAT LEAN

CHOKING UP

RUDDERS & SKEGS

EVEN POWER

Everyone has a dominant side that is stronger and better coordinated. Tests have proven that a blindfolded walker will walk in a large circle, simply because one leg is stronger than another. This must also be true for a paddler. The more you paddle the more you will overcome this, just as you did when you learned to walk as a baby.

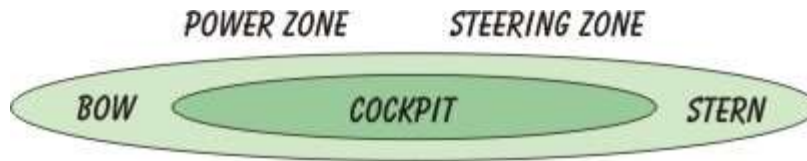


Make sure that you have an even grip on your paddle shaft, with your **hands placed in the correct position**. An uneven grip not centered and even on right and left, will provide more leverage to that side, and thus more power on one side and less on the other. (This could be used to your advantage, more later.)

Many beginners want to go a bit faster and apply a bit too much power. This is one of those instances when "less is more". First off the kayak will only go so fast before you are just pushing water around. "Stirring" the lake or ocean will only waste energy. Measure out your stokes in a relaxed easy going pace. Less power will allow you to be in more control.

Also dip your paddle in the water so that a small portion of the blade is still above the water's surface. Deeper is not better.

Your paddle blade will be "planted" in front of you at the start of the stroke. From there to your hips is the "power zone" where the energy you apply goes into making the kayak go. Once past the hips your paddle blade is in the "steering zone" where the energy you apply makes the kayak turn. To go straight reduce the time your paddle spends in the steering zone, unless you need to correct your course.



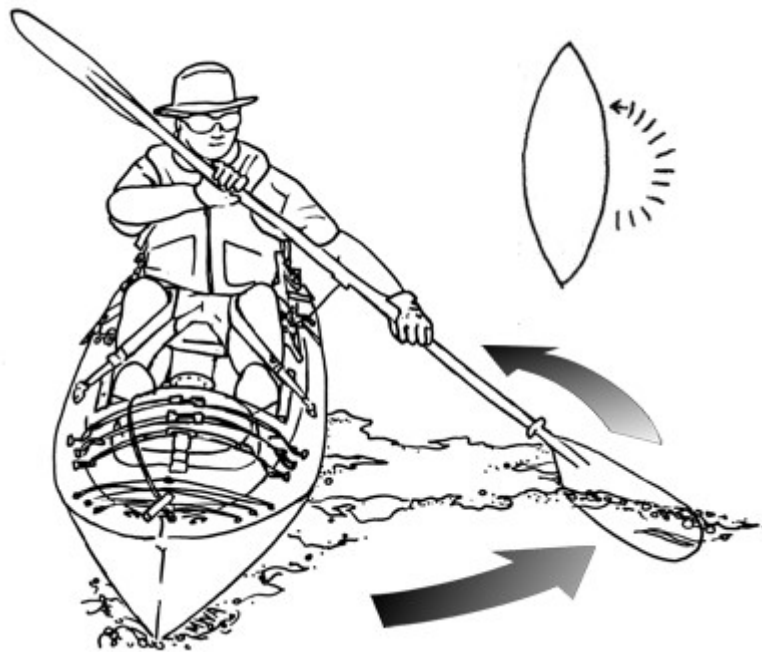
STROKES

Steering strokes will be needed to go straight. No matter how carefully you evenly meter out your left and right strokes the wind, waves and currents will push your kayak off course. You may also be seated in your boat more to one side than the other or have an uneven load, too subtle to notice. Non-the-less turning strokes are your key to keeping straight.

- **SWEEP STROKES**

The most important turning stroke is the sweep stroke. It is a sweeping motion in a wide arch with your paddle blade in the water. It can be from bow to stern: *Forward Sweep*; Or from stern to bow: *Reverse Sweep*.

We will be focused on the forward sweep for now. A forward sweep will cause the kayak to turn to the opposite side the paddle sweep is made on. This is largely due to the extra leverage of reaching far outboard with the paddle, rather than keeping it along side as you would in the forward stroke. Basically the sweep speeds up one side of the kayak.



SWEEP STROKE - KAYAK BOW TURNS AWAY FROM BLADE DIRECTION

When you are cruising from point A to point B across open water and drift off your course line, pointing away from your target, the sweep will be the best way to get back on course. In open water you have your cruising speed up and going. The forward sweep will continue to provide that power to keep the kayak moving forward.

As you notice your drift away from your goal apply a forward sweep stroke on the appropriate side to correct your heading. You need not correct all in one big sweep. Apply less power and stay in control. Many folks will make a huge sweep and find that they have over corrected from the right of the target and are now pointed to left of their target. Open water is big, and you have plenty of room and time. Make your corrections over a series of strokes, in control, and not over correcting. It is ok if your kayak is not always pointing directly at your goal.

While on the open water you are taking basic forward strokes: right, left, right, left, right, left, etc. You notice that you drift off your line a bit. Apply a series of forward sweeps on one side while maintaining your right-left rhythm with basic forward strokes on the other, for example: right sweep, left forward, right sweep, left forward, right sweep, left forward, back on course!

Paddling on one side ("canoe style") only will only lead to over correction and loss of forward momentum. Keep your left-right rhythm going, even if you have to use an almost token forward stroke on one side while sweeping on the other.

- **RUDDER STROKES**

When you are paddling in close quarters, in a small harbor with boats at anchor, among a group of close slow moving kayakers, and in situations of tight space and obstacles you will want to use a rudder stroke to steer your kayak. This will help slow your kayak and help you maintain control.

The rudder stroke is simply a drag on side, well into the "steering zone", slowing one side of the kayak and making the kayak turn to the side of the paddle's rudder stroke. Once again, "less is more". Apply only a little bit of pressure on your rudder stroke, too much pressure and you will be performing a reverse sweep with "backward thrust". The goal is only to slow one side, not to reverse it.



RUDDER STROKE - KAYAK BOW TURNS TOWARD BLADE DIRECTION

Rudder strokes can also be helpful in open water on occasion. A following sea, with waves and wind from behind, can be quite difficult to maintain a heading. The wind and waves are actually providing quite a bit of "push" in the general direction you are going, but your boat's natural tendency is to "lay in the trough", as sailor would say, meaning to go sideways to the wind and the waves. In this case there is no need to be miserly about your forward momentum and you can afford the loss of speed a rudder stroke will cause. In other situations like weathercocking, a tendency for your kayak to point up wind, as well as cross winds and currents, you may need to apply more strokes than just a simple sweep to stay on course.

When in a following sea, and riding swell coming from behind, you can use a rudder stroke. Sometimes you will need only a tiny bit of rudder, I call that a "Micro-Rudder". There is no need to break your right-left rhythm to perform a rudder stroke. Take a regular forward stroke, a token one if necessary, let the paddle blade pass into the "steering zone" and hold it there, not leaving the water, dragging just a little bit, for only a fraction of a second. In a strong following sea you may find yourself in a stroke pattern like this: Forward stroke on right, light forward stroke on left followed immediately by a left rudder, forward stroke on right, light forward stroke on left followed immediately by a left rudder, forward stroke on right, light forward stroke on left followed immediately by a left rudder, and so forth, using "micro-rudders" as needed.

- **STROKE COMBINATIONS**

Kayaks will have tracking problems from time to time. This can be from hull design, weathercocking, wind, waves & currents or poorly placed cargo (too much weight in bow or stern) and unevenly loaded tandem kayaks paddled by a solo rider (maybe with kids or dog). This can make correction strokes difficult when trying to go in a straight line. You may have to pull out every trick in the book!

In situations where a simple sweep stroke, or rudder, will not work by itself you will have to improvise with a series of different strokes, applied in a rhythmic pattern over time, or used once in a while in a case-by-case basis. For example a rhythmic pattern applied over time to combat difficult waters, wind, waves, currents, uneven loading and poor hull tracking may play out like this: Forward sweep on right, light forward stroke on left followed immediately by a left rudder, forward sweep on right, light forward stroke on left followed immediately by a left rudder, forward sweep on right, light forward stroke on left followed immediately by a left rudder, and so forth as needed.

Stroke applications are limited only by your imagination. Practice and experiment with strokes in varied conditions, while paying attention to the results. Have a theory, test it and prove it wrong or right.

BOAT LEAN

Boat lean is a common way to control direction in cross winds, waves and currents. This is often best applied to traditional sit-in-side performance sea kayaks, but can be applied to many sit-on-top kayaks and assorted SINK recreational boats. Knee straps will be needed for SOT kayaks (custom cockpit outfitting for SINKs). Leaning a kayak is often called a J-Lean, because your body makes a J shape. The upper body is the vertical and the lower body is the curve.

I will not elaborate on J-Leans in depth as many SOT and SINK "REC" kayaks are wide & stable, with less secondary stability, and not really meant to be paddle as such, not to mention that many of the folks who paddle these craft have little interest in boat lean, if at all.

To J-lean a SOT drive one hip up, while pulling to center, with your leg, the knee strap on the same side. You can drive the other hip down, gripping well with both legs on the knee straps. With practice you can hold this position and paddle while leaning.

On many kayaks of all types, on flat water, a lean will cause the kayak to turn to the opposite side. A gentle lean to one side can combat a tendency to drift off course. I have found that not all kayaks will respond in this way. The many varied and new hull shapes, especially represented among sit-on-tops, can respond in quite the opposite, or not at all, depending on weather conditions. Some experimentation may be needed to determine what side a lean will best control your kayak.

CHOKING UP

As I discussed above the proper grip on your paddle shaft will even power to left and right sides.

You can shift your grip for more leverage on one side, providing out longer on one side than the other. The kayak will turn away from the side with more shaft and toward the side with less shaft.

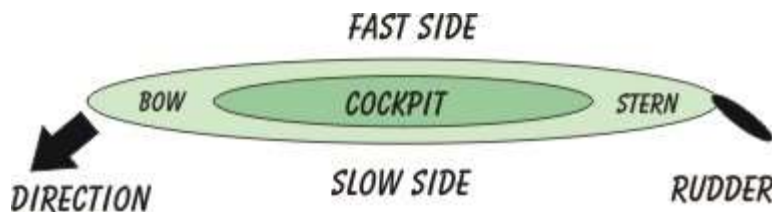
Maintaining the proper grip placement is rather important for to be at-the-ready for Eskimo rolling. SOT paddlers can feel freer in their grip placement. While I would say that grip adjustment is not the best way to approach maintaining a straight course, it may work well for some, and hopefully not as a "crutch" for lack of understanding sweeps and rudder strokes.



help you measure out

more power by reaching from the side with more

SINK paddlers who need



RUDDERS & SKEGS

What about a **rudder or skeg**? Well yes, these devices will help you stay on track. Not all kayaks have a rudder as an option and fewer models have a skeg as an option. A rudder can be described as "power steering" for your kayak. A skeg is sort of like the feathers on the end of an arrow. The many moving parts of rudders and skegs leave them vulnerable to breakage and failure. (No, they do not crap-out all the time, but they can once in a while.) Even if you do have these options at your disposal knowing the strokes and strategy to keep your kayak straight will make you a better paddler.

At Tom's
TopKayaker Shop:



Knee Straps
Contoured ergonomic design, padded knee straps, with quick release side-squeeze buckles for safety and ladder-loc for easy adjustment. Suitable for all rough water and flat water activities.

Packing Your Sit-on-top Kayak For Camping & Touring

by Tom Holtey

<http://topkayaker.net/Articles/Touring/KayakPacking/index.html>

When the summer camping and touring season is here those of you who are new to the ways of the vagabond kayaker will want to take careful note of the optimal way to load and pack your kayak. By properly storing your supplies and gear and placing them appropriately into your kayak, you can be ensured of good paddling performance, a dry bed and lots of room for camping fun. This article in our Kayak Camping series will cover the following:

1. **What To Take Along**
2. **Keeping Things Dry**
3. **Where To Pack What**
4. **Packing Without Compromising The Integrity Of Your Kayak's Performance**



I have included a photo with labels on the bags in section 3. Also take a look at the Java Scripted diagrams for three basic kayak designs in section 4. These may take some time to load, but should be worth the wait.

What To Take Along

Have a good grasp on what you are going to bring on your kayak camping expedition. Think carefully about this, you will be paddling into the wilderness far from stores, and you cannot bring everything.

Your basic camping gear, food, emergency stuff, etc. should suffice. To start you thinking, use the checklist at the left.

Because you do have a boat to carry a heavy load, it is tempting to get a bit extravagant and bring some heavy food items or some extra cargo, or something fun to do, like a book or game for days when you are wind bound; Do so, but a good rule is to never bring more than you can keep under the deck.



Keeping Things Dry

Once you have identified all the stuff you are to take along, then you must get dry bags for everything that is not already waterproof.

All kayakers get a bit wet inside and the rougher the water the wetter they get. Our TopKayaker Shop and some outfitters carry dry bags and boxes in a variety of shapes and sizes designed to keep your stuff dry. **(Dry bags at Tom's TopKayaker Shop)**

The bags will roll up at the top, snap or zip closed. The boxes will have a rubber seal and snap closed. You may even find some that have a lid that screws down like a jar. Don't use trash bags, plastic bags (with the exception of freezer zip lock types) stuff sacks or duffels; they will not keep things dry.

While picking out your dry bags THE SIZE OF YOUR KAYAK'S HATCH IS VERY IMPORTANT. You will need to take a few other things into consideration, as well.



Make sure that the bag, when full, will fit into the hatch. The space inside the kayak is not usually the problem. If you run into trouble and you find yourself at the put-in with a bag that is too big, you can put the empty bag into the kayak, and then load the items one at a time to fill the bag while inside the hull.

This will work but it is time consuming. Also make sure that the bags you have selected will fit the intended cargo. Test loading the bags and the cargo you're carrying into your kayak before the trip is the only way you will be sure.

Where To Pack What

Quick access items: (A) - Put these things into the kayak last to make them the first things available. They will likely ride on top of other bags in your hull, this can help to keep them higher and dryer.

Some of your stuff may not need to be in bags or boxes at all: camp sandals, fuel bottles, water bottles and trash bags can go in the hull wily nily. It is ok for sandals to get a bit wet in the bilge, but seal your fuel and water bottles tight. Put your trash in two or more 1-gallon freezer zip lock bags.

Don't use a big trashcan liner; they are too big and bulky.

Important To Note: Always pack your food in the same bag for every trip to avoid a carry over of odors that may attract unwanted guest in the wilderness. Never store your white gas fuel, camp stove, or lantern in the same bag as your food, or mess kit. If it leaks your meals will taste bad and make you sick. Use your oldest or cheapest dry bag to put these things in. Leaking white gas will ruin a dry bag. Hopefully your stove will never leak but it is a possibility.

Try not to store a lot of stuff, if anything at all, on the deck of your kayak. First of all, it may fall off and sink. Also, it will make you top heavy and more likely to tip over. It can get in the way of your paddling and it allows the wind to push your kayak harder; however, sometimes you do not have a choice. Just make sure that it is tied down well, in a good place, and is not too heavy.

You might ask, "But that is the best thing about a sit-on-top kayak! I can keep things right in reach on the deck!" Well, that's true only to a point.

Items to keep on deck (B) - Secure them well within easy reach. If you have short legs the extra foot wells are a good place to tie small items. Some PFDs have backpacks for water, and emergency stuff. Use the pockets in your life vest for snacks and sunscreen as well as your whistle and signal mirror. Having a backrest with a pocket will provide a place to store a jacket or spare rope. Sometimes you can hold things in your lap if the water is not rough.

There are quite a few sit-on-tops with cargo decks or scuba tank wells. These can be handy for storing bulky packages like coolers tents or sleeping bags. It is important to use a quality dry bag in good shape for this spot because it will be very wet. You may need to add extra straps for these cargo decks if you plan to negotiate the surf zone. Test your tie downs by grabbing your bag and yanking on it.

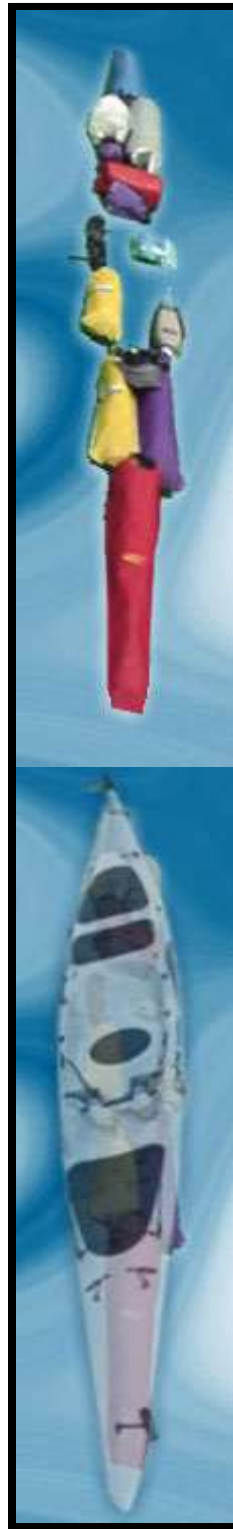
Packing Without Compromising The Integrity of Your Kayak's Performance

Preserve the integrity of your kayaks hull design and your paddling performance, by loading your kayak evenly. No matter how much you enjoy the model of kayak you've invested in, they all paddle differently when loaded with camping gear. It is important to load the kayak so that it is not lopsided, leaning to one side or the other or too heavy in the front or back.

Take a look at these Java Scripted diagrams for three basic kayak designs. Then, read the detailed suggestions for balanced sit-on-top kayak packing below. These may take some time to load, but should be worth the wait.



If your primary use of your kayak is for camping, leave the tank wells to the divers; although it has a tank well, it also has a hatch to the stern that is on the rear deck. We put our tent



This kayak has storage under the cockpit. The center hatch is good for snacks etc. The hatch behind the cockpit is good for emergency items



This kayak has bulkheads in its high performance design. There is a seal forward & aft of the cockpit, so there is no storage under there.

Important note: Put the lightest loads in the bow and stern. A sleeping bag, extra clothing, camp mattress and other light items that you do not need instant access to are best put all the way into the ends of the hull, front and back. Skinny, pointy bags are best for these spots.

*with our first aid kit
tucked inside, on top.*

Put your heaviest loads in the middle of the kayak. Drinking water is the heaviest thing you will be carrying. You may be bringing along a lot if you do not have a source of drinking water at your campsite. Water bottles and bags will often fit under the cockpit of your kayak in a variety of odd shaped nooks and crannies.

Put your bags on strings or bring a stick or hook to fish out hard to reach packages deep in the hull. Take a good look in there, stick your head right in, if you can, to explore the possibilities.

Under the seat area is also a good place to put other small bags and boxes heavy or not. The Idea is to get as much of the load in the center of the kayak as you can. Make sure that you load evenly side to side. Balance the cargo and make sure that it will not shift if you tip your kayak.

You may not be able to get under your cockpit. Some kayaks have bulkheads that prevent putting cargo there. Some of your heavy bags may be too big to fit in that space. Placing these bags close to the seating area is just as good. Tents, food bags, cooking kits are all good candidates for this location.

You may be thinking that you need a scale to load your boat evenly. You don't. Just try to get the load even bow to stern, and when in doubt, load a little bit heavier in the rear. Tents, food and water are usually the heavy weights. Your kayak will paddle better if the weight is toward the stern than toward the bow.

In conclusion, remember these points:

- Use Dry bags & boxes for everything.
- Test pack your cargo in the kayak before your trip.
- Store heavy packages in the middle of the kayak.
- Store light packages in the bow and stern.
- When in doubt, load heavier items in the back
- Load lighter ones in the front.
- Use the space under your cockpit if you can.
- Remember, the first things into the kayak are the last things out.
- Keep your deck clear of cargo, unless your kayak has a cargo well.

And, last of all, make sure you pack fun into your kayak camping expedition.

Group Kayaking: Formations & Communications by Tom Holtey

Related Article - "**Group Kayak Expeditions: Planning & Procedures**"

<http://topkayaker.net/Articles/Instruction/GroupFormation.htm>

Kayakers can enhance their paddling skills and increase safety when they apply some basic group management to their trips. Whether you paddle with a club, guided tours, kayak casually with buddies or teach kayaking, the principles below will help.

As your paddling environment becomes more dynamic and challenging the need for better organization and a paddling formation increases. In calm benign waters you may wish to use some of the principles when paddling with beginners or as conditions start to change.

Like Team Kayakers in an extreme aquatic environment you can be highly structured in your approach but just by having a basic understanding you will intuitively incorporate these concepts into your informal band of paddlers.

Make a Plan

Depending on the location and the nature of the trip you will want to spend some time preparing a plan of where to go, what to do and how to do it. If you plan to have a simple day trip, or visit a very familiar area then you will not need to put as much into it. The whole group can be involved or just a leader(s) can plan for the others.

Leaders need not be absolute; after all, this is not the Navy. You can be as casual as you need to be or not. One leader does not have to be in charge of everything, each member can contribute according to his or her skill, knowledge and desire.

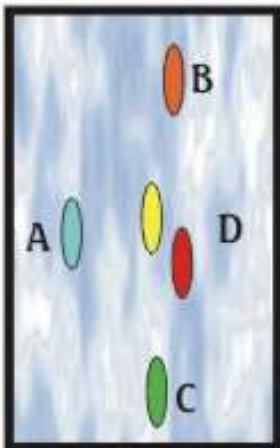


Before you launch a short meeting should be held to go over the plan, look at the charts/maps, review hand/paddle signals and be sure everyone is ready for the trip. This is also a good time to buddy-up. Two paddlers teamed up and watching out for each other is safe but also handy for sticking rudders, loose spray skirts, open drain corks and fishing things out of hatches.

Open Water (or Fog and Night) Formation

Paddlers tend to spread out on the water. It is better to keep a close group, rather than all spread out. For sit-in-side kayakers this can be very important for safety, but even sit-on-top paddlers can benefit from a close group formation. A close group is good in powerboat traffic too.

You do not need to be so close as to make your paddles clash together, within easy talking distance is close enough. Some times it is hard to keep close. The formation concept is still viable, just stung out. **See the Article: "Group Paddling"**



Like a general in battle, the Group Leader or Instructor (**A**) can lead better from behind, so they can see the group and catch up to, or drop back to, anyone who would need some help, has a question or wants some pointers.

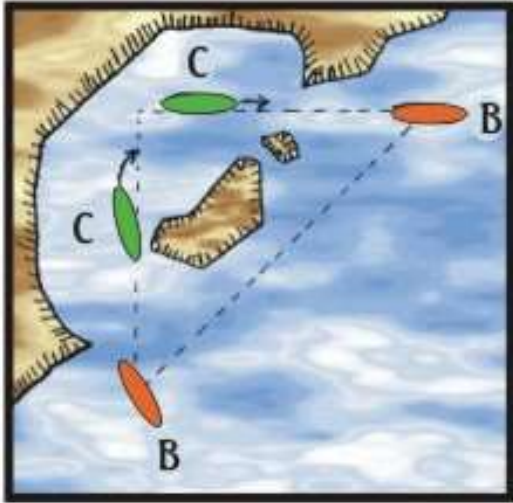
The Lead Kayaker (**B**), at the head of the pack, knows where to go and can navigate with chart and compass as needed. The Lead can be a person familiar with the trip or an assistant instructor or leader. The Lead Kayaker also sets the pace suitable to the slowest paddler in the group.

The Sweep Kayaker (**C**), last in the pack, should be a strong skilled paddler ready to help group members as needed. The Sweep could be an assistant to the instructor or leader as well. Sweep Kayakers should be prepared with some extra safety and rescue gear and know how to use it. **See Our Safe Kayaking Check List**

The Pack (**D**) gathers toward the center of the group, not passing the Lead or falling behind the Sweep.

Rock Garden Formation

Rock gardens are a combination of surf zone and white water, requiring both surfing and river skills to deal with waves, swell, over flows, currents and eddies. Your best application of Team Kayaking will go far. In a rock garden you will take turns paddling through the garden as a probe while others take turns at being safety boaters watching out for large waves and ready to lend a hand as needed.



Rock Gardens are a dangerous environment. Crashes and capsize are expected. Of course all this action is fun and a satisfying way to focus and perform the skills you have.

The Instructor or Group Leader can position himself freely to make his presence where needed and/or act as a Safety Boater.

Safety Boaters (**B**) can position themselves outside the rock garden to keep an eye on the group and watch for in-coming sets. In some multiple entry gardens Safety Boaters can be positioned in a manner that can observe the interior of the garden and the other Safety Boaters, allowing for head counts in and out.



One-way gardens and sea caves will require an in-and-out application, while large expansive gardens with multiple entries will require a spot to spot application with Lead & Sweep paddlers, not unlike a River Formation (below).

Probes (**C**) are the kayakers to enter the garden and face the challenges inside. One at a time is best in technical situations. Turns can be taken as needed or desired in the above roles for each member to get a chance, or not, to enter the garden and play inside.

Surf Landing & Launching Formation

A shoreline with breaking waves can be a formidable obstacle for some paddlers. Sit-on-top Kayakers can often deal better with this environment than sit-in-side Kayakers.



The main problem is getting off the beach (harder for sit-ins) and getting up enough forward momentum to break out through the surf zone (hard for both type). When returning the problem is negotiating the surf zone in a controlled manner (hard for both type) and exiting the kayak as it reaches the beach (harder for sit-ins).

When launching in the surf several group members can assist each paddler as they launch, holding the kayak steady and giving a mighty push. The first paddler off the beach and into the surf zone should be competent paddler who is skilled in the surf zone, can take care of herself and others. Then start sending out the rest of the group, assisted by a 2-4 strong members, one at a time. Leave those most able to launch themselves for last. Finally a self-sufficient paddler, possibly the

group leader, launches solo.

When landing with shore break it is best to have the strongest paddlers, most skilled in surfing, land first. Then they can assist the others as they land. A person wading in the surf zone can catch the stern of an incoming kayak to act as sea anchor while those already landed can control the kayak to shore (with or without the rider). Those assisting the landings must take extra care not to be run over by an out of control kayak. Keep your PFDs and helmets on.

The Group Leader or Instructor may want to stay on the water until the last paddler has landed, ready on the water as needed, but only if she can count on a strong paddler to land first. Alternatively in a very small or novice group she will land first and help the rest of the group come ashore.

River, Tide and Current Formation

White water kayaking is a discipline with its own procedures for group management and safety. Special training is required to run rapid rivers. [See TopKayaker.Net's "White Water Articles Index"](#)



Flat-water kayakers, on both fresh and salt water, will sometimes paddle in environments that feature strong currents, eddies, rapids and standing waves. Ocean tides flow up channels and out again, around points of land and islands creating currents similar to white water rivers. Even flat-water rivers and streams have fast sections where the flow is constricted or pours over and around obstructions.

Water with currents and obstacles will require a formation similar to that used in open water, while incorporating elements of rock garden formations.

Use a Lead (a skilled paddler able to make decisions on navigating the section) and Sweep (a strong paddler able to assist those who have capsized or fallen behind) to keep the group together.

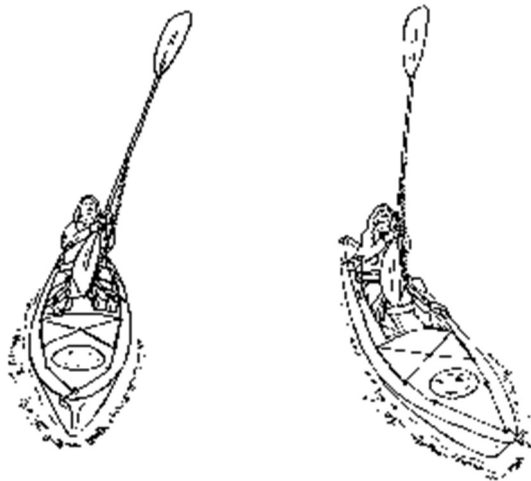
A Leader/Instructor can be free to apply their presence where it is needed within the pack.

As the conditions become more technical the group can go one at a time, through each challenge, setting up Safety Paddlers in strategic spots, changing roles and leap-frogging, even scouting, as needed.

Communications

When the surf is crashing, the wind howling or the currents gurgle loudly it may be difficult to communicate by voice. Sometimes distances will make vocal communications impractical.

It is important to go over the meaning of your hand and paddle signals with the group prior to needing them. Signals are like dialects & different groups and situations will use different signals. Be sure that everyone is in the know at your pre-launch meeting.



**Need Help: Wave paddle
high overhead from side to
side like a flag.**

**All Clear, Go Center, Come:
Paddle held straight up.**



Left / Right: Point in direction to go toward with paddle blade (held on slant). Never point to a hazard.



Stop: Hold paddle overhead and horizontal, sometimes with a pumping motion, up and down.

The humble PFD whistle is a highly dependable communication device. One strong blow of the whistle signals: Attention or Gather Around. Three whistle blasts (or quickly repeated blows) signals the need for help.

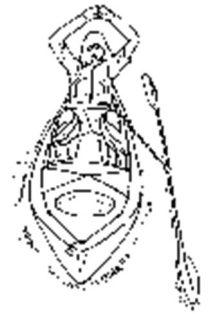
Paddle Signals

Paddle signals have been a long standard of white water kayakers, and the vocabulary is well established. The large body movements are easy to see from a distance. Paddle signals can also be effective from shore to guide kayakers through the surf zone. [Read our comprehensive article: "Signal Devices"](#)

Arm or Hand Signals

Some groups use hand signals. The subtle gestures cannot always be seen clearly at distance or through foggy salt stained glasses. If you are close enough to see hand signals you are probably close enough to use your voice, and that may send a clearer message. Use both your voice and your hands for extra emphasis.

Larger body motions can be more effective, but take your hand(s) off the paddle shaft. Any hand or paddle signal can deter quick reaction with a needed paddle stroke or brace, so be sure you are in a stable situation when signaling, or do so quickly. Arm signals are very effective for surf landings when used from the shore.



Need Help: Wave one hand overhead, side to side, like greeting a friend across a crowd.

All Clear, Go Center, Come: Both arms held straight up and motioning. (Or use one arm)

Left or Right: Point in direction to go with arm(s), motioning as needed. Never point to a hazard.

Stop or Back Paddle: Hold both arms overhead making an X.

Paddle Harder: Cranking motion with both hands.

OK: To ask if someone is OK face them and place one hand on top of head, making an O shape. (Or use both arms to make a big O.) To answer that you are OK, or to signal to others who may be wondering, make the same signal back. If you are not OK, do not signal. (Head nods; Yes or No, can help make your message clear.)

Your use of hand and arm signals is limited only to your group's imagination. While there are some dialects that are in use, and even published, this type of signaling does not have the long time tradition as the paddle signals do. Non-the-less it would be nice to work toward a uniform language while still adding to and tweaking the vocabulary to fit your group's needs.

Hi-Tech Communications

Radios can be a great help to some paddlers. They will be particularly handy for informal groups that tend to string out and have some distance between kayakers. During your pre-launch talk a working channel should be agreed upon, as well as an alternative channel to use if needed.

While the VHF is common among sea paddlers FRS and GMRS are also useful (some people may even be inclined to use cell phones). Both Lead and Sweep paddlers should have radios. Others who also have a radio can buddy up with those who do not.

A radio is not as convenient as one would think. Hi-Tech devices are certainly not mandatory, and to some are controversial. A radio can be a hassle to use, stow and maintain. It is best not to solely rely on your radio, so make a good trip plan, stick to it, keep a close group (in formation as needed) and hold a signal pow-wow before launch.

Group Kayak Expeditions: Planning & Procedures

by Tom Holtey <http://topkayaker.net/Articles/Instruction/Group.html>

Putting together a group paddle? Do it right. In this article Holtey outlines the details of organizing a group paddle, from choosing Lead and Sweep Paddlers to coordinating a "Float Plan."

Related Article: "**Group Kayak Expeditions: Formations & Communications**" Safety is a concern to all boaters and other outdoor sports enthusiasts, especially when on group excursions. By educating yourself and fellow paddlers of the possible dangers, admitting your limitations and being aware of theirs, and preparing with plans and equipment, you can eliminate most unfortunate situations. Maintenance, preparation, planning, and practice are the keys to good safety protocol. Here are some tips:

MAINTENANCE:

Inspect your equipment regularly for defects and damage. Leaks are the most critical thing to look for:

- Check the hull of your kayak for cracks or holes
- Inspect the gaskets of your hatches for wear
- Also look for a worn or poorly fitting drain plug
- Even a broken strap eye can cause a performance problem if it prevents the use of your knee straps.

Take care of this before you are on the beach so that your companions and the launch are not delayed. Use a check list to make sure that all the necessary equipment is ready and also in good shape. (see Tom's **Safe Kayaking Check List**)

PREPARATION: THE FLOAT PLAN

Group organization is important to eliminate any confusion or miscommunication. A float plan is a good place to start. The plan should consider:



- Where and when you will be paddling;
- The starting place
- The ending place
- The route your group will take
- How many people are going
- Who they are.
- Let some responsible person, who is not going on your trip, know of the plan
- It would help if the plan is in writing

PLANNING:

Everyone needs to know the plan as well. Have a group meeting prior to launch in order to accomplish the following:

- Make the plan clear to all members
- Choose a lead kayaker and a sweep kayaker
- Assess each individual's strengths and weaknesses
- Paddlers should buddy-up with those who have similar paddling styles and speeds

Regular head counts while on the water is a good idea.

The **Lead Kayaker** should be a strong paddler, with experience and a good idea of where you are going. It is his job to:

- Lead the group, making decisions on where to go and where not to go
- Paddle at a pace that everyone in the group can keep up with

No one in the group should pass the leader.

The **Sweep Paddler** should also be a strong experienced paddler who might be inclined to paddle at a slower pace. It will most likely be this person who will have to assist a paddler in distress. They should have experience in kayak rescue techniques. It is the responsibility of the sweep paddler to:

- Have a well stocked supply of safety and signal devices
- Not let anyone fall behind them.
- Keep an eye out for the paddlers ahead of them
- Maintain the pace of the slowest paddler

It is helpful if the lead and the sweep can communicate via VHF radio or cell phone. It is best to keep the group close together but in some conditions that can be hard to do.

PRACTICE:

When planning a trip that involves several days paddling in areas unfamiliar to some of the group, practice sessions in varied conditions are a valuable idea. Holding surf clinics, for instance or rescue demonstrations; getting together for short excursions in wind and waves, etc. will make these conditions less challenging.

Maintenance, preparation, a plan that involves all members of the party, and practice will greatly reduce mishaps and confusion. There is always room in your gear bag for common sense, so bring it and use it on every trip.