
A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide

Selecting a Paddle

No governmental body mandates that kayakers carry a paddle. It is possible to paddle with your hands, but not very effective. A board or a shovel will also work. Consider stowing a cheap paddle in the hull of your kayak, in case you lose your main paddle. You can select a paddle by price, color, length, shape of the blade, size of the blade, materials, weight, and feathering. Paddles can cost from \$20.00 up to well over \$350.00, so its possible to buy a paddle so you can brag about how much you spent. Paddles come in a number of different colors, so you can buy a paddle based on color – the paddle becomes a fashion accessory, rather than a tool that can get you to your destination and back with the least effort.

The two most important characteristics for a paddle are that it is long enough for the entire blade to enter the water and that you are comfortable using it. Keep this in mind as you select a paddle that will do the required job without breaking the bank.

Much has been written about the ideal paddle length. Much of it is not worth reading. Whatever anyone recommends, consider buying a shorter paddle. A longer paddle, especially if you hold your paddle low, tends to result in more of a sweep stroke rather than a vertical stroke (we cover the sweep stroke in the Texas Nature Kayak Guide – Paddling a Kayak) . This will cause your kayak to move in a serpentine path. A shorter paddle will result in a more vertical stroke, and your kayak will move in a straighter path. While the majority of paddles in some of the big box stores are 230 to 240 cm in length, the ACA (American Canoe Association) states that paddles that are 180 to 220 cm in length are appropriate for most people. The blades of a paddle may be longer or shorter, so rather than being concerned about paddle length, you should be more concerned about shaft length. ACA takes this into account with their recommendations for selecting a paddle. They recommend sizing a paddle by holding your upper arms straight out from your body and holding your forearms at about right angles to your upper arms. Grasp the paddle in this position. For a touring paddle, your hands should be 2 or 3 hand-widths away from the blades.

Shaft size is important. If you have small hands, you will probably find a small diameter paddle shaft more comfortable. That having been said, if you have arthritis, the paddle may be more comfortable if you slip a pool noodle onto the shaft to increase the shaft size. There are paddles with what some people refer to as twisted shafts, that are ergonomically designed to make paddling easier.

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Blade shape can be either flat or cupped. For a touring paddle, and that is the most-commonly-used paddle for nature kayaking, select a blade shape that is slightly cupped. You hold the paddle so the cup faces the rear.



Figure 2. Paddle shapes



Figure 1. The cup should face the paddler. Place some sort of identification on all of your gear.

The ends of the blades can be squared off, rounded, or contoured with one portion of the end longer than the other. Ideally, and we all know that ideally is the figment of someone's imagination and does not exist, the paddle should be inserted into the water so the entire end of the blade goes into the water at the same time.

- Square-bladed paddles are designed for the shaft to be held vertically and are usually used in white water.
- Those with one portion of the blade being longer than the other are designed for the shaft to be held at an angle. Usually they are used in recreational kayaking and in sea kayaking. The longer portion of the blade is the top.
- Then there are general purpose paddles, like the aqua-colored paddle in the photo.

Paddle blades can be wider than the orange paddle, or narrower than the yellow paddle. Select a width that you are comfortable with. If you select a large-bladed paddle because you think you can move more water with each stroke and thus move faster, you may be right, but you may end up expending more effort and as a result you may paddle at a slower cadence and move at a slower rate. The wider blade may place excess strain on your shoulders.

The difference in price of a paddle is often related to the materials used. This in turn may relate to a few ounces difference in weight. If you are involved in marathon races, an ounce or two can make a big difference. Some of the more expensive paddles are made with carbon fiber and are very light, but they may not hold up to being used to fend off rocks and the other ways many of us misuse our paddles. Breaking a \$350.00 paddle is a crisis. On the other extreme are paddles with lightweight aluminum handles and flexible plastic blades. If the plastic blades bend during the stroke, effort is lost. Some plastic blades also have a tendency to crack with weathering. There are numerous good, serviceable paddles on the market with stout aluminum or fiberglass shafts and rigid plastic or fiberglass blades. Most can be adjusted to hold the blades straight or to feather them. Prices range from about \$60.00 to about \$120.00.

Before you spend serious money to buy a lighter paddle, consider that with each paddle stroke that is done wrong, you may pick up as much as 8 ounces of water. Based on a cadence of 15 strokes per minute, you are picking up 450 pounds of water each hour. Additionally, the kayak has changed directions 900 times during that hour. Consider investing in a quality paddling class. A marathon paddler needs both quality instruction and a very light paddle. The rest of us need the quality instruction; and if we can afford it, the very light paddle is nice.

Feathering refers to being able to adjust the blades so they are not parallel. This becomes valuable especially in sea kayaking where there regularly is a strong breeze. It reduces the drag as the non-working blade is moved through the air.

Most paddles can be separated in the middle for storage. Always separate the paddle halves when not using the paddle, and keep the joint clean.

Many kayak stores will let you try a paddle out before you buy it. Many rental facilities have a selection of paddles, so when you are still renting a kayak to use, try out as many different paddles as you can. Having the right paddle makes kayaking more enjoyable.

Remember, the two most important characteristics for a paddle are that it is long enough for the entire blade to enter the water and that you are comfortable when using it, even if it does not match the color of your eyes.