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# *A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide*

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## **Paddling a Kayak**

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### **The 10-minute Learning Curve**

Kayaks and double paddles are so incredibly simple to use that even the rankest beginners, with little or no guidance, can hop in and make the boat respond reasonably well. That is the primary reason for the explosion in popularity of the plastic kayaks. With canoes, which have been around for years, the paddler either learns some basic skills or quickly gives up canoeing as an exercise in frustration because non-intuitive paddle skills turn out to be critical in making the boat behave. Thus canoes have a reputation for being tippy, difficult to control, and prone to getting blown around by the wind. Most people who have not kayaked think that kayaks are tippy and difficult to control as well, but once they have been in a kayak for 5 minutes, they change their minds. The very same person, who would give up paddling a canoe, can and does continue kayaking with the same limited skill set she discovered during the first 10-minute learning curve in a kayak.

The 10-minute learning curve allows you to power your strokes by pulling with your biceps. Paddling in this manner may wear you out if you are no longer young or if you want to travel fast. Since many young ladies do not have the bicep strength of young men, some of them quickly learn by pulling on the side with the blade in the water (working side) and pushing with the other arm (recovery side), two sets of muscles are used to propel the kayak. This is a more efficient method of paddling, but there is so much more that one can learn about kayaking. Not only are there paddling skills, but there are also skills like getting back into a kayak in deep water and helping to rescue other kayakers.

### **Why Should You Take a Paddling Class and Improve Your Paddling Skills?**

If you paddle in a pond or small lake and do not plan on going beyond that level, you probably should not waste your time trying to improve your skills. Your skills are more than adequate. Following are a few reasons for improving your skills, if you plan on extending your kayak horizons.

**Bragging rights** – I have challenged numerous teenagers who are in much better shape than I am to kayaking races. While I am four or five times the age of these magnificent specimens, I have yet to lose a race to one of them. The longer the race, the easier it is to win. Before the race starts, I usually hear comments such as, “This will be a piece of cake,” or “He is older than my grandfather.” After they lose and are open to a little training, which I provide, I never accept one of their challenges for a rematch. After all, I do not want to lose.

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**Safety** – Kayaks are inherently safe, but people do die in kayaking incidents every year. Many of the paddling and safety classes teach you how to get back into your kayak in deep water. Would you want your 10-year-old daughter to be paddling a kayak without any training? If not, do you think you should be a good example and take a class also?

**Snaking along** – Does your kayak turn left when you paddle with your right paddle? Does it turn right when you paddle with your left paddle? Since the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, you are paddling further than required. This is not a big problem unless your girlfriend or children notice it and start teasing you in front of your peers. Also, if paddling with friends, and caring & sharing (the politically-correct term for gossiping), the kayaks may collide if your serpentine paths are not synchronized.

**Long-distance paddling** – In order to travel farther without becoming exhausted, learning the full body stroke allows you to use your back muscles and leg muscles, rather than just your arm muscles, to propel your kayak. Your arms become elevators for positioning the paddle. If you observe kayakers in the Texas Water Safari, a 260-mile canoe and kayak race from San Marcos to the coast, you will note that those who finish the race are not the big muscular types, but for the most part scrawny paddlers who never waste a movement and who power their kayaks with limited arm power. You do not have to paddle the Texas Water Safari to need long-distance skills. Birds for birders, fish for fishermen, and other prey seldom congregate right around your launch site, so you have a greater chance of connecting if you can paddle further.

**Controlling where your kayak goes** – A friend was paddling in the slack waters of the Medina River. The river was about 50 feet wide. She was paddling into a brisk breeze and kept running into the bank. With a little instruction, she learned how to place her kayak exactly where she wanted it.

**Paddling faster** – Sometimes you are in a hurry, such as when you can see a storm coming in or you are craving a cholesterol-loaded cheeseburger. With good paddling skills, you can paddle faster and get off the water sooner.

**Paddling in rough water** – If you are on a lake and the wind comes up, you may need added skills to keep your kayak right-side-up, or you may want to paddle off the coast so you can see what you cannot see from protected waters. There are people without adequate skills who go out in rough water and many of them come back safely, but why take the risk?

**Paddling in rivers** – Some rivers do not have any rapids, while others have moderate rapids. Then there are those that have serious rapids. Being able to place your kayak in the center of the V (indicating deeper water) and then being able to move laterally to avoid a rock, and finally being able to turn into an eddy so you can photograph your friend coming through the rapid, are important skills if you are in moderate rapids. This skill set is not developed during the 10-minute learning curve that most kayakers go through. Take instruction so you will not be in a situation where you do not have the skills to handle it. Being in the middle of some rapids without the necessary skills is not a pleasant place to be.

## The Full Body Stroke

By inserting your paddle into the water and rotating at the waist and at the same time pressing on the foot peg on the side your paddle is in the water (working side), you are using your lower back muscles and leg muscles to power your kayak. You can go farther without getting tired. If your calves are not as tired at the end of the day as the rest of your body, you are not paddling efficiently. It takes a little time to master, but reduces fatigue. Recently I was informed that using the full body stroke uses all of the muscles that a swimmer uses and that some triathlon racers use kayaking with the full body stroke to get into shape for swimming.

One way to learn this technique is to learn it on shore from a qualified instructor before you ever sit down in a kayak. If you start out trying to learn the technique while sitting in your kayak, you will be fighting what you learned during your 10-minute learning curve. This makes learning the full body stroke more difficult. Before your eyes glaze over as you read this, hold the paddle in front of you with your hands at a comfortable distance apart (about elbow distance). Step forward with your left foot; fully insert the paddle blade into the imaginary water in front of you on the left side of your imaginary kayak. Pause for a moment for the imaginary air bubbles to leave the blade of the paddle and then with very limited arm movement, step forward with your right foot and rotate at the waist while looking at the blade of the paddle. When you have reached the maximum waist rotation, rotate the paddle by lifting your wrist. It makes no sense when practicing on land, but in the water, it will cause the paddle to pop out of the water without turning the kayak. As you transfer your weight from your left foot to your right foot, insert the right blade of the paddle into the imaginary water on the right side of your imaginary kayak. Pause to get rid of those imaginary air bubbles. Look at the blade as you step forward with your left foot and rotate at the waist. Practice this stroke on land until it comes naturally. Only then is it time to get into a kayak.

This technique works best when you hold your arms out in front of you at near shoulder height. If you have difficulty with the high paddle stance, and many people do, find the paddle height that works best for you, and use it. As you practice in your kayak, lean forward and continue to watch the paddle blade to ensure that you are inserting it fully and that you are pulling it back parallel to the keel of your kayak. After the stroke becomes second nature, you can take your eyes off the paddle blade.

At this point, you are probably still using your arms too much, so get a beach ball and hold between your arms as you paddle.

The most effective part of the stroke is when the blade moves from near your feet to just behind your knee. As the blade passes your hip, it is usually exerting a turning motion, so you may want to withdraw the paddle from the water after the blade passes your knee and before it reaches your hip.

Even though this is the most efficient method of paddling, I do not use it all the time. If I'm stalking a bird, or caring and sharing with a group of friends, I use one of the inefficient methods of paddling. Also, when I am traveling a good distance at a fairly high rate of speed, I will use the full body stroke for 15 minutes or so and then switch to another stroke for two or three minutes and then back to the full body stroke. It keeps me from getting stiff.

## Protecting Your Shoulders

Your upper arms are designed to work in front of your shoulders. Keep them there. There is a tendency to want to face forward and carry your paddle stroke backwards. This can put your shoulder in a less-than-ideal position. If a strain is placed on your arm from hitting a submerged log or rock, someone else running into you, or several hundred other things that could happen, your shoulder could be dislocated. Not only does it mess up an enjoyable day of paddling for your companions, it also hurts.

## Paddle Strokes

Get someone to demonstrate correct paddle strokes. This could be a friend, a kayaking guide who is taking you out on a tour, or an organized kayak paddling and safety class taught by a certified instructor. Then you do not have to read the rest of this article. Knowing the several paddle strokes will make your kayaking experience more enjoyable and also safer, as you select the best stroke for the situation you are in.

While there are a number of different paddle strokes that one can learn, there are basically four paddle strokes that a kayaker needs to learn quickly:

- Forward Stroke
- Reverse Stroke
- Sweep Stroke
- Low Brace
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This guide is to help you master those four movements in the least amount of time. Your paddle should be held in a comfortable position, with your hands holding the paddle about as far apart as your elbows are when your arms are extended. If there is a curvature of the paddle blades, they should be cupped to the rear. If the end of the blade is not squared off, it should be turned so the point of the blade is up. This assists in quietly inserting the paddle into the water. Hold the blade so it is perpendicular to the direction of travel (Do you think you are back in a science class room at this point with a boring teacher?). Periodically change your grip on the paddle. Hold it lightly. If you grab the paddle shaft firmly, you are more likely to develop blisters. Gloves are another way to help prevent blisters. If you are using the blade in a feathered position (one blade is turned at an angle from the other blade), hold the shaft with your right hand (if you are right handed) and let the shaft rotate freely in your left hand. Always insert the blade into the water so it is fully submerged. You can more effectively paddle if you lean forward in your kayak. That does not prevent you from taking a break by periodically leaning back when paddling. Develop a comfortable height to hold your paddle. You may prefer to hold your paddles at chest height, or you may prefer to hold it lower. This is your decision.

### Forward Stroke

If you have been practicing the full body stroke, you already know the forward stroke.

If you prefer to use your arms to paddle the kayak, insert the paddle to full depth beside your feet. Pause a moment while the air bubbles on the blade escape, then move the blade towards the rear of the kayak. When the blade has passed your knees, but before it reaches your hips, remove the paddle from the water. Carrying the stroke further back, unless that extra reach is obtained by rotating the

body, can expose your shoulders to injury and can turn the kayak. If you hold your paddle low, guard against performing a sweep stroke when you want to perform a forward stroke.

Keep your paddle as close to your kayak as possible without banging the kayak, and pull it straight back. The closer you keep the blade to the kayak, and the straighter you pull the blade, the straighter the kayak will be propelled. The more splashing you do, and the more bubbles you create while paddling, the more energy you are wasting. Slow down your paddle stroke until there are very few bubbles formed as you draw the blade through the water. These bubbles are the equivalent of spinning your wheels when accelerating in a vehicle – something show-offs may enjoy, but it does not propel the car forward. If you want to go faster, gradually increase the tempo of your stroke.

Paddle for a little while, and then drift for a little while.

### **The Sweep Stroke**

The sweep stroke is easy to learn. Just reach out away from the kayak and move the blade in an arc rather than a straight line. With the sweep stroke, the hand on the working side should be reaching out from the kayak and the hand on the non-working side should be about center-line of your body. If you hold the paddle low, and especially if you have a paddle that is too long, you may be inadvertently doing a sweep stroke when you are trying to do a forward stroke. If you paddle with a sweep stroke on the left and then a sweep stroke on the right, you will snake down the lake wondering why your kayak does not track well and wondering if you should spend \$250 for a rudder. Wouldn't you prefer to think about more pleasant things while kayaking? The sweep stroke is used to turn a kayak. If you are using it, you should use it repeatedly on one side of the kayak, or you can do a forward sweep on one side of the kayak and a reverse sweep on the other to spin your kayak in place.

### **The Reverse Stroke**

Reverse stroke is the opposite of forward stroke. That sounds easy, but it is more difficult than it seems. You should not reverse the paddle blades. It will probably be difficult to keep the blades as close to the kayak as you can on your forward stroke, but then you will probably not paddle in reverse for very long. Each time you get in your kayak, it is good to paddle in reverse for 50 or 100 feet. This loosens up your muscles.

### **Low Brace**

Bracing strokes are strokes you should use instinctively. If you have to think about using a bracing stroke, you missed the opportunity to use it. You use them to help regain your balance in your kayak and keep the kayak in an upright position. They are started from whatever position the paddle is in and involve placing the blade in a horizontal position on the water to give stability. For the low brace, rotate your arms so your hands are down and your elbows are up. This will give you more control and support when the blade hits the water. The stroke can involve laying the blade on the water, or more often it will involve slapping the water with the blade. After the blade contacts the water, it is moved, usually forward, over the water. Practice leaning over in your kayak until you feel you are ready to turn over. Then use the low brace stroke to return your kayak to its normal position.

## Learning More

Every time you get in your kayak, practice these strokes. After these strokes are mastered, there are other strokes to learn, such as the draw stroke, the sculling strokes, and ruddering strokes.

If you have not decided that a kayak instructor is an insufferable professor of anatomical physics and other strange and foreign concepts, but that a kayaking lesson might include splashing of water and squeals of delight as you learn, maybe it is time to sign up for a class so you too can brag that you never lost a kayak race after learning to kayak.