

## Group Kayaking: Formations & Communications

by Tom Holtey

Related Article - "[Group Kayak Expeditions: Planning & Procedures](#)"

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.

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### 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.

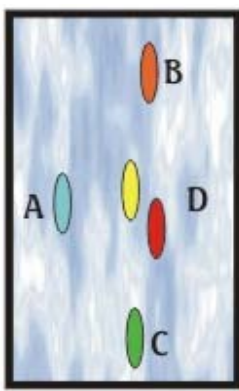
Before you launch a short meeting should be held to go over the plan, look at the charts/maps, review hand/paddle signals and be sure everyone is ready for the trip. This is also a good time to buddy-up. Two paddlers teamed up and watching out for each other is safe but also handy for sticking rudders,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

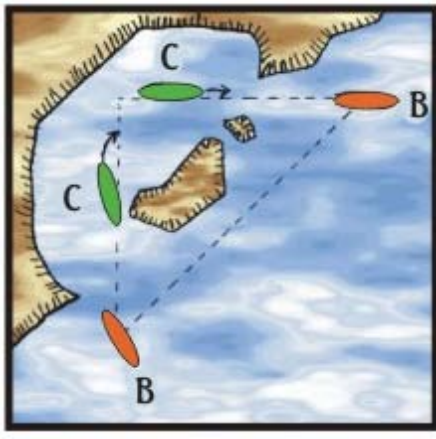
The Lead Kayaker (**B**), at the head of the pack, knows where to go and can navigate with chart and compass as needed. The Lead can be a person familiar with the trip or an assistant instructor or leader. The Lead Kayaker also sets the pace suitable to the slowest paddler in the group.

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.

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 capsizes 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.



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.

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. (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. (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.

### Conclusion & Resources

The material above is meant to get you thinking about organizing your group and using paddling formations, as needed and applicable to your group and the waters you kayak on. If you paddle in challenging conditions such as open ocean, white water, tidal currents, rock gardens and the surf zone, please seek lessons and additional educational information for your paddling discipline.

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