

How To Choose & Shop For A Kayak Paddle

by Tom Holtey, ACA Open Water Instructor, Guide, and Author of "Sit-on-top Kayaking, A Beginner's Guide"

The paddle is an important purchase decision, right up there with the kayak and the PFD. Your paddle is the tool you use to make everything happen while paddling, and in some ways is more intimate a connection than the kayak or the life vest. Also, you must consider that you will be lifting the paddle with every stroke.

While it is best to try a paddle before you buy one, this is hard to do even if you have good access to a full service paddle sport specialty shop. On-Line shopping is a viable alternative, provided you have researched your choices and carefully sized yourself for a paddle. Even a paddle purchased after an on-water demo can eventually feel like it needs an upgrade, so you may end up with two paddles in the long run; however, it is always good to have a spare.

Shop Prepared With Basic Paddle Knowledge:

When selecting a paddle there are several considerations. First, determine the type of paddling you will be doing. There are paddles designed specifically for touring, white water, surfing, or multi use. They come in different weights, shapes and lengths.

TOURING PADDLES:



(asymmetrical style shown)

Touring paddles usually have a long, skinny, asymmetrical blade. They are often lightly built for greater efficiency on long trips. Many take apart into two or more pieces for storage.

WHITE WATER PADDLES:



(asymmetrical style shown)

White water paddles are built heavy duty to withstand the ruff and tumble river environment. The blade shape is usually symmetrical, but not always. They have a shorter and wider blade.

SURFING PADDLES

Surfing paddles are similar to white water paddles but are often built a little lighter and usually have a short asymmetrical face that is not too large.

MULTI USE PADDLES:



Multi use paddles incorporate design elements of paddles made for different disciplines. The general outcome is a generic paddle that does a little bit of every thing, but exceeds at nothing.

Next determine your style:

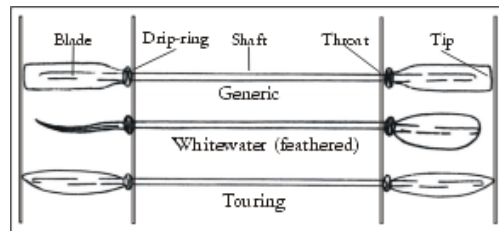


- Are you an aggressive power paddler?
Look for a larger blade and a more symmetrical shape.
- Are you a long distance or easy going paddler?
Look for a paddle with a long skinny shape for greater efficiency.
- Do you do a little bit of every thing?
A multi use paddle may be for you.

If you are a person who is not particularly strong, you should look into finding a paddle that is made of lightweight materials. This will cost more but be worth every penny out in the field. If you find yourself dealing with some wind where you kayak, a feathered paddle would be the best choice. Feathered means that one blade is positioned so that it cuts through the air on the up stroke.

Finally, what size paddle should you get?

The shaft is the part of the paddle that your body needs to "fit into." Unfortunately, manufacturers size paddles measuring from blade tip to blade tip. This wouldn't be a problem if all blades were the same lengths.



Imagine this: Two shafts, the same length. Place a pair of long blades on one shaft, a pair of short blades on the other. This will produce two paddles of different lengths, but the same shaft fitting the same person:

Joe Kayak's Paddle Selections:
All have the same shaft length but different size blades:



Low-stroke angle Touring-Distance-Ease of use



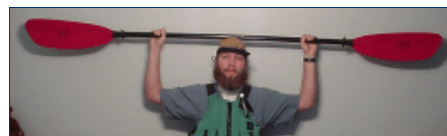
Mid-stroke angle Recreation-General Purpose Paddle



High-stroke angle Surfing-Whitewater-Power paddling

Manufacturers commonly label the measurements of the paddle in centimeters. A paddler, depending on their personal height and kayak's width, may want, for example, the following three sizes for different disciplines: a 240 cm for touring, a 220 cm for surfing and a 200 cm for white water, all with the same shaft length from blade throat to blade throat.

To fit the paddle to you, place the center of the shaft on the top of your head, holding the shaft with both hands in a paddling grip. You should kind of look like a body builder posing. Your elbows should be bent at 90 degrees square, making a rectangle of two long sides (the shaft and your upper arms) and two short sides (your lower arms) with your head in the middle. A mirror or buddy can help you. Your hands should be no more than two grips to the end of the shaft, the beginning of the blade, and no less than one grip.



These are not rules carved in stone but guidelines for you to base your decisions on. Bear in mind that a wide kayak will require a longer paddle than a narrow kayak, so adjust your choice accordingly. Also, it is recommend that you test paddle an assortment to find out what you feel comfortable with. If you are unsure of your choice, don't despair. Paddles are like shoes, they will wear out faster than your kayak. You will want to have a spare or a loaner paddle. And eventually you will want a different paddle for every occasion.

In A Nut Shell:

- Consider price versus performance when shopping for a paddle. If you are planning frequent, long distance or remote trips you should try to get the best possible paddle. This will often mean spending a bit more. Look for light weight and durability.
- If you are planning short trips close to home, that do not occur very often, a lower quality paddle will do. You certainly will enjoy a higher quality paddle but if you want to save a few bucks this is an option.
- If you loan your equipment to others, an inexpensive "loaner" paddle can be helpful. If lost or broken, it will not ruin your friendships, and save wear and tear on your quality paddle.