



Paddling Straight or The Straight and Narrow Path For Kayakers

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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

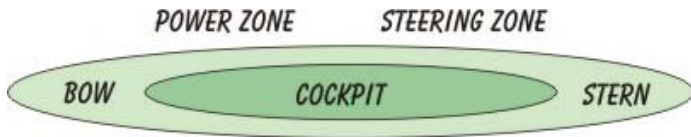
Everyone has a dominant side that is stronger and better coordinated. Tests have proven that a blindfolded walker will walk in a large circle, simply because one leg is stronger than another. This must also be true for a paddler. The more you paddle the more you will overcome this, just as you did when 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 stokes 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 stoke 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 stokes, in control, and not over correcting. It is ok if your kayak in not always pointing directly at your goal.

While on the open water you are taking basic forward stokes: 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 stokes 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 stoke. 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 stoke 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 stokes 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 stokes, 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.

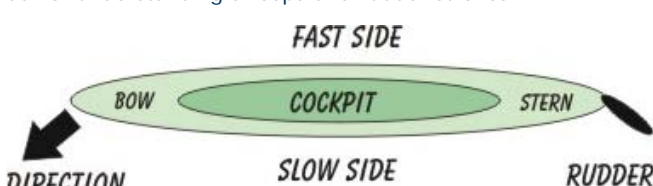
To J-lean a SOT drive one hip up, while pulling to center, with your leg, the knee strap on the same side. You can drive the other hip down, gripping well with both legs on the knee straps. With practice you can hold this position and paddle while leaning.

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 you kayak.

CHOKING UP

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

You can shift your grip for more leverage on one side, providing more power by reaching 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.



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. (see article "[Rudder Use](#)")