



Level 4: Whitewater Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP) Skills Course

Skills Course Overview

This course is designed as a short program emphasizing safety, enjoyment, and skill development. The skills and knowledge gained through this course can set the stage for a lifetime of exploration, adventures, a healthy lifestyle, appreciation of water and the natural world, lasting memories with family and friends, and a rewarding experience for all - we paddle because it is fun.

If you're a student who would like a resource to prepare for this course, ACA is pleased to provide a free online paddling safety course, [here](#). A certificate of completion is included!

Skills Course Prerequisites

- Acknowledgment of personal compliance with the [ACA Essential Eligibility Criteria \(EEC\)](#).
- No prior paddling experience or training is required to participate in this course

Previous experience on a stand up paddleboard in flatwater or moving water is strongly recommended.

Course Duration

One day (8 hours) or more.

Course Location / Accessible Venues

Sections of rivers rated up to class I-II, where limited maneuvering in current may be required to avoid obstacles. *A rapid class includes rapids at the lower and upper ends of the difficulty range, designated “-“ and “+” respectively.*

Course Size

4 Participants : 1 Instructor; with an additional qualified assistant, the ratio can be 8 : 2. The maximum number of participants permitted is 8.

Instructor

This course may be offered by Level 4: Whitewater SUP (or higher) ACA Instructors, Instructor Trainers, or Instructor Trainer Educators.

Succeeding Courses

- Level 4: Whitewater SUP Assessment or Certification Course

Complimentary Courses

- Level 3: Surf SUP Skills, Assessment, or Certification Course
- Level 3: Coastal SUP Skills, Assessment, or Certification Course

Course Outline

The sequence of this course should be adjusted to best fit the participant’s needs, class location, time allowance, and craft being used.

Introduction, Logistics, and Expectations

- Welcome! We’re so glad that you’ve chosen to further your paddling experience and education by attending this course! Let’s review a few highlights about the ACA
- Let’s talk about the course itinerary, expectations, and limitations
- Lay of the land (and water): the logistics of this venue
- Review liability waiver, assumption of risk, challenge by choice, and medical disclosure
- Life jacket policy: always wear while on the water

Personal Preparation & Getting Started

- History of the sport: indigenous roots to modern day SUP
- Describe and follow safe paddling practices (behavior, substance abuse, on water and land etiquette, Leave No Trace ethics)
- Review elements of a float plan (who, what, when, where, filing practices)
- Discuss current weather conditions, forecasts, and other environmental hazards (wind, water, weather, waves)
- Discuss importance of developing good judgment, group responsibility, management, and dynamics
- Warm up to reduce injury
- Evaluate individual's swimming ability, water comfort, and confidence prior to beginning the trip
- Review paddling terminology and care of gear (to be reviewed by the instructor):
 - Board: types, parts, materials, sizing
 - Design (all-around, touring, racing, surf, whitewater)
 - Construction (composite, plastic, inflatable, foam board)
 - Safety features: foot straps, grab loops, deck attachment points
 - Fin set ups, fin shapes/sizes, materials, applications
 - Paddle: parts, materials, sizing, hand position
 - Design (intended use, blade angle, blade size, shape)
 - Construction (composite, plastic, aluminum, foam core blade, wood)
 - How to hold the paddle in correct orientation and grip for effective paddling
 - Life jacket: types, materials, fit
 - Leashes: types, when to wear
 - Helmets: types, fit
- Review of additional personal and group gear, including, but not limited to:
 - Environmental supplies (food, water, appropriate clothing, sunscreen, etc.)

- Elbow pads, knee pads, shin pads, tailbone pad, hip pads
- Releasable tow tether
- Navigational and signaling tools (maps, charts, whistle, etc.)
- Safety and rescue tools such as a river knife, tow line
- Repair kit
- First aid kit (appropriate to training)
- Communication devices (cell phones, VHF radio, etc.)
- Review securing board for transport on car or trailer using proper tie downs, straps, or knots
- Knots: Figure-8, bowline, truckers hitch, and 2 half hitches
- Review proper techniques to safely lift and carry the board on shore
- Prepare board for departure: stowing gear securely and ensuring it is balanced
- Appropriately use communication (paddle, hand, and whistle) signals

Paddling Efficiently and Comfortably in Flatwater

- Board stability (trim, posture, balance, etc.)
- Efficient and effective paddle placement for intended maneuver
- Safe and effective body usage: bio-mechanics (body, linkage, and rotation)
 - Avoidance of positions that contribute to shoulder injury
- Parts of strokes: CPR (catch, power, recovery), static and dynamic

SUP Stances

- Prone position: lying down (swim position) with paddle blade under chest/belly
- Sitting
- Kneeling: paddling using double-overhand or over-under paddle grip
- Neutral with variation/slight stagger: toes forward, knees bent, between hip and shoulder width, trim nose-tail

- Board wiggle: legs act independently from upper body, head/torso remain over center of board
- Hybrid/modified stance: one foot drops back 2-3 inches (6-8 cm) enhancing rotation while maintaining balance
- Surf stance
- Offset surf stance variations: narrow, wide, drop knee on back leg, one or both feet forward
- Asymmetrical stance relative to the axial and lateral centerlines
- Open vs. closed stances
- Foot movement, placement, & sequencing

Strokes and Bracing

Emphasis should be placed on paddle articulation, fluid transitions, utilization of board trim, and effective transfer of power from the paddle through the feet

- Forward stroke
- Canted forward stroke
- Reverse (backstroke)
- Forward Sweep
- Reverse Sweep
- Draw (dynamic / static)
- Draw to the nose
- Cross nose draw
- Rudder Stroke (tail draws and prys)
- C-stroke (draw to the nose into forward stroke)
- Low brace
- High Brace
- Extended forward sweep (cross board draw and forward sweep combo)

- Cross tail – heel side low brace

Flatwater Maneuvers (*taught so participants learn in both regular and goofy stances*)

- Launching and landing: low dock, beach, or bank to enter and exit safely
 - Three points of contact, keep weight low, etc.
- Board trim awareness: nose to tail, rail to rail
- Propel the board forward in a straight line 15-20 board lengths
- Stop the board within two board lengths
- Move the board backwards in a reasonably straight line 3-4 board lengths
- Abeam: move the board sideways 20 feet (6 meters) to each side
- Propel the board in a figure of 8 course around markers 3-4 board lengths apart
- Turn the board while maintaining forward motion 90° to the right and left
- Veering, carving, and paddling the “inside circle/outside circle”

River Hydrology Features and Associated Risks

- Currents
- Rocks (upstream and downstream Vs)
- Ledges and low head dams (horizon lines)
- Pins and entrapment
- Strainers/sieves
- Bends
- Undercut rocks or ice
- Dams/flow diversion structures and pipelines
- Holes and hydraulics

Maneuvers in Venue

- Front ferry from both river left and river right

- Eddy turns (wide / shallow) from both river left and river right
- Peel outs (wide / shallow) from both river left and river right
- C-Turn (peel out and eddy into same eddy) from both river left and river right
- S-Turns (peel out one side and eddy into opposite side) from both river left and river right
- Front surfing using tail & nose strokes for control
- River running in stand up paddleboards
 - Understanding of elevation & constriction for board/paddler acceleration
 - Strategies for accelerating the paddler when approaching a rapid
 - Strategies for preventing deceleration in a rapid
 - Body position and stance in different types of rapids for acceleration/deceleration

Safety and Rescue

- Principles of Rescue
 - Use of safe rescue strategies such as T-RETHROG (Talk, Reach, Throw, Row, Go)
 - Rescue Priorities: people, board, paddle, gear
 - Responsibilities of the group, rescuer, swimmers
 - Appropriate use of rescue and safety gear
 - Emergency procedures
- Self care and care of other group members
 - Importance of fueling, hydration, clothing/insulation, and sun protection
 - Cold shock, hypothermia, and hyperthermia: prevention and treatment
- Techniques for falling
 - How to fall on the board to prevent separation from the board
 - How to fall off the board in deep and shallow water

- Board remount: from side of board or from back of board
- Assisted remounts: side-by-side, board flip rescue, or other effective means
- Self rescue: swim 20 feet (6 meters) to shore in moving water using defensive and offensive techniques
- Strategies and techniques for board recovery including bumping, bulldozing, towing, or swimming a board to shore
- Towing: contact tow, leash tow, or other effective means
- Shoreline rescue - extension rescues
 - Use of throw ropes
 - Pinned craft rescue
- Principles of wading
- Causes, prevention, and rescues for foot entrapments
- Unresponsive paddler rescue

Day Tripping

- Trip planning: determine route difficulty and skill requirements
- Leader qualities: representing the group's best interests and taking overall responsibility
- Put-in safety briefing
- Scouting
- Portaging and lining
- Three person minimum for group trip

Conclusion and Wrap Up

- This has been a great class! Let's talk through what we've learned with a group debrief and/or Individual feedback
- Course limitations: there is always more to learn, and the skills and concepts we discussed require more practice and experience

- First aid and CPR training is a very valuable tool and could make the difference between a “near miss” and an emergency requiring outside rescue / first responders
- Paddling is a lifetime sport - there are local organizations, clubs, events, competitions, and classes through which you can continue your learning and build community. Get connected!
- Handouts and reference materials (if applicable)

© American Canoe Association

Date of last revision: 1/1/2023

<https://americancanoe.org>

This curriculum is managed by the ACA SUP Committee. To connect with the leadership of this committee, please view the SEIC Committee rosters on [the ACA website](#).