



River Kayak Hand Paddling 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.

***Note:** For Level 2 venues, this course is suitable for both spray skirted kayaks as well as non-spray skirted kayaks. Skills not applicable to non-spray skirted kayaks are followed by the notation: *. The use of non-spray skirted kayaks in conditions above Level 2 is not appropriate.*

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

Course Duration

The course duration should be adjusted to best fit the needs and goals of the participants. Half day (4 hours) or more.

Course Location / Accessible Venues

For Level 2: Moving water on rivers up to and including class I sections.

For Level 3: Sections of rivers rated up to class I-II, where limited maneuvering in current may be required to avoid obstacles.

For Level 4: Moving water on rivers up to and including class II-III sections.

A rapid class includes rapids at the lower and upper ends of the difficulty range, designated “-“ and “+” respectively.

Course Size

5 Participants : 1 Instructor; with an additional qualified assistant, the ratio can be 10 : 2.
The maximum number of participants permitted is 10.

Instructor

This River Kayak Hand Paddling skills course may be offered by:

- Level 4: Whitewater Kayaking Instructor (or higher) with the River Kayak Hand Paddling Endorsement
- Level 2 or Level 3 River Kayak Instructor with the River Kayak Hand Paddling Endorsement AND the Kayak Rolling Endorsement

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

Getting Started

- Describe and follow safe boating practices (behavior, substance abuse, on water and land etiquette, Leave No Trace ethics)

- 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 course
- Review paddling terminology and care of gear (to be reviewed by the instructor):
 - Boat: parts, materials, sizing, outfitting adjustment
 - Paddles: types, parts, size and shape, fitting, position, tethers
 - How to hold the paddle in correct orientation and grip for effective paddling
 - Spray skirts: types and materials, grab loop, and how removal is achieved when using hand-paddles*
 - Life jacket: types, materials, fit
 - Helmet types and use
 - Personal equipment for hand-paddles: gloves, tethers, flotation, backup pair
- Review proper techniques to safely lift and carry the boat on shore
- Appropriately use communication (paddle, hand, and whistle) signals

Paddling Efficiently and Comfortably

- Boat stability (trim, posture, rocking, 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

Strokes

- Forward stroke (alternating hands)

- Power forward (both hands)
- Back stroke (alternating hands)
- Power back (both hands)
- Draw (side, stationary, sculling, stern)
- Sweep (forward, reverse, neutral)
- Brace (single, double, wing)
- Rudder

Maneuvers

- Forward
- Spin
- Stop
- Ferries
- Eddy turns
- Peel outs
- Moving abeam
- *Additional curriculum for for Levels 3-5:*
 - *Veering, carving, paddling the “inside circle”*
 - *Sideslips*
 - *C-turn*
 - *S-turn*
 - *Surfing with control*
 - *Roll - Optional at instructor’s certification level and discretion; can be taught by ACA Level 4 (or higher) Whitewater Kayak instructor or by an ACA Level 3: River Kayak instructor with Kayak Rolling endorsement*

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

Safety & Rescue

- Principles of Rescue
 - Use of safe rescue strategies such as T-RETHROG (Talk, Reach, Throw, Row, Go) including throwable buoyancy aids and throw bag use
 - Rescue Priorities: people, boat, paddle, gear
 - Responsibilities of the group, rescuer, swimmers
 - Appropriate use of rescue and safety gear
 - Emergency procedures
- River running strategies
 - River classifications (understanding of Class I - VI)
 - Scouting on shore and by boat
 - Portaging and lining
 - Group organization on the river
- 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

- Calmly exit the boat after a controlled capsize, using proper body position and contact with the craft and paddle
 - When exiting the kayak with a spray skirt* after capsize: must be modeled two ways: (1) utilizing the spray skirt grab loop and (2) releasing the skirt off the hip
- Self rescue: swim 20 feet (6 meters) to shore in moving water using defensive and offensive techniques
- Strategies and techniques for boat recovery including bumping, bulldozing, towing, or swimming a boat to shore
- Strategies for paddle and boat recovery
- Swimmer tow options
- Self and assisted swimmer re-entry techniques (i.e., scoop, heel hook, rescue sling, etc.)
- Assisted rescues: boat over boat or side by side or others appropriate to conditions
- Unresponsive paddler rescue
- *Additional curriculum for for Levels 3-5:*
 - *Shoreline rescue*
 - *Throw rope use*
 - *Pinned craft rescues*
- Emptying water from the boat (on shore, bailers, pumps, sponges etc.)
- Advantages and disadvantages during rescues of various kayaks (i.e., sit-ins, sit-on-tops, recreational kayaks, inflatables, creek boats, play boats, etc.)
- How to establish optimal routes through rapids, and how options may differ for when using hand paddles
- Identifying, planning for, and navigating obstacles and hazards when using hand-paddles
- Cold water considerations, especially as they pertain to hand paddles

**Not required for those paddling a kayak without a spray skirt*

Judgement & Evaluation

In addition to mastering “hard skills,” the importance of developing personal judgment and group responsibility increases when using hand paddles, particularly on more difficult paddling venues.

- Self Awareness
 - Understanding level of personal anxiety
 - Understanding personal risk assessment style and tolerance
 - Knowing your responsibility to the group
- Self Evaluation
 - What is required to successfully navigate this feature?
 - Can I perform the needed moves and requirements using hand paddles?
 - What are the consequences if I fail? Am I able to accept these consequences?
 - What type(s) of rescue would be required if I fail?
- Group Evaluation

Your decision to use hand paddles as a primary or secondary tool may depend largely on not only your personal skills and abilities, but the river venue and the group

- Is the size of the group manageable for me as a leader?
- Do I have the skills to perform needed rescues for this group?
- Does the group have the skills to perform the needed moves and requirements?
- Is the group in satisfactory condition to navigate this feature (anxiety, risk tolerance, physical wellness including fitness, nutrition, hydration, fatigue, mental sharpness)?
 - Actual risk versus perceived risk
- Are members of the group able and willing to support others (without peer pressure)?
- Are there other subjective considerations that need to be considered - is the group affected by psychological effects such as groupthink, halo effect, familiarity, scarcity, etc.?

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)

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