



Photo by Aaron Barna | Olympia, WA



L4

OPEN WATER KAYAKER OVERVIEW

THE LEVEL 4 OPEN WATER KAYAKER is a competent paddler in coastal waters with areas of exposure to current, wind, waves, and surf. They have the judgment to know when they should not paddle and have a plan for when things do not go as expected. The open water kayaker can perform all of the following safely, effectively, and efficiently in a range of coastal environments, including surf zones, rock gardens, sea caves, and areas with strong tidal currents that may have limited access for landing.

An open water kayaker must be able to:

HANDLE THEIR KAYAK

Open water kayakers can launch and land from a dock, beach, or rocky shore where waves, surf, or current may be present. They can make progress, hold position, and turn upwind and downwind. They use strokes and maneuvers to make moves, shape courses, avoid hazards, and establish position. They maintain stability, are relaxed in current, winds, moderate surf, and waves, and can consistently roll from set-up and non-setup positions.

RESCUE THEMSELVES AND ASSIST OTHERS BACK INTO THEIR KAYAK

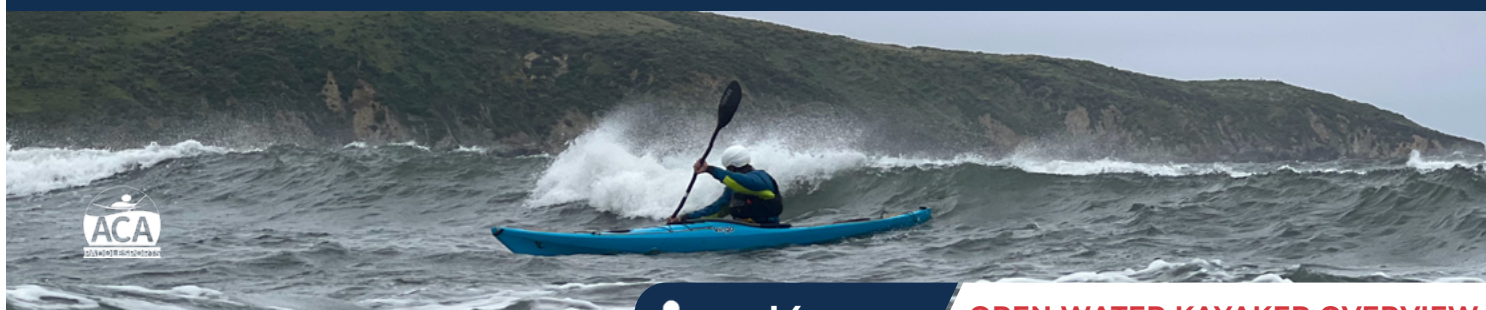
Open water kayakers can re-enter their kayak both assisted and unassisted. Solutions for unassisted deep water re-entry work in conditions and, when necessary, they can swim their kayak to an area of less risk. They are an active part of the solution, their choice of rescue is appropriate for the conditions, and they efficiently reassemble the paddling group.

TOW ANOTHER KAYAKER

Situations might include quickly moving a paddler to a safe zone, anchoring a kayak or a paddler in a safe zone, towing an incapacitated paddler in their kayak and over a distance, or towing a paddler who needs directional assistance.

HAVE A GENERAL KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING OF:

- **Awareness and Seamanship:** Open water kayakers choose appropriate venues that are within the limits of the skills and experience of the group. They are aware of changing environmental conditions, group members, and potential hazards and adapt plans as necessary. Communicates with the group to make necessary changes. Open water kayakers are properly equipped with a well-maintained sea kayak and the equipment for rescues and towing. They carry and know how to use the equipment necessary to repair other people and their kayaks.
- **Incident Prevention and Management:** Open water kayakers have an incident prevention mindset both on and off the water. They make good choices, communicate calmly, and work as part of a team. They know how to use a VHF radio to communicate with other vessels and hail the Coast Guard, and other services, when necessary.
- **Trip Planning and Navigation:** Open water kayakers successfully plan, plot, and paddle appropriate routes in L4 conditions and venues. They are comfortable navigating by chart and compass and have pulled together all the necessary forecasts to help them understand the conditions before they launch. They can plan for tidal waters and incorporate wind and waves into their trip plan. Open water kayakers are well familiar with aids to navigation and the Nautical Rules of the Road and paddle safely through areas of boat traffic.



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VENUES Open water kayakers explore, learn, and play in various locations, offering incredibly diverse and unique paddling environments. They can develop skills in home waters to prepare them for taking an expedition, paddling in tide races, surfing, or rock gardens and sea caves. **Paddlers who take a Level 4 Skills Assessment will be evaluated in one of the following venues:**

EXPEDITION

They can plan a multi-day trip on a coastline that has exposure to open water, make appropriate decisions during the trip, and perform skills in a laden kayak.

TIDE RACES

They know the features of a tide race, can perform rescues in the tide race, and paddle through the race under control.

SURF ZONE

They know the features of a surf zone, the types and parts of a wave, can perform rescues, and paddle through the surf zone in control.

ROCK GARDENS AND SEA CAVES

They know the zones of a rock garden, can perform rescues and towing, and paddle through rock gardens and sea caves in control.

LEARN MORE

Want to learn more about kayaking in open water?

- [ACA website](#)
The Education tab, can assist in finding courses (“Course Calendar”) and instructors (“Find an Instructor”).
- [ACA Level 4 Training Guidance resource](#)
gives suggestions on developing the skills of an open water kayaker.
- [ACA Level 4 Open Water Skills Assessment](#)
measure your progress as a paddler or qualify for a Level 4 Trip Leader training or Level 4 Instructor training.