

# Paddling Foundations – ACA SEI Focus

---

by Robin Pope

Whether you're paddling a sit-on-top on flat water, a sea kayak offshore, or a play boat in a hole, effective paddlers all draw upon the same basic skill set. Effective instructors need to understand not only how to perform these foundational skills, but also need to understand how to communicate them to students.

Below is one way of looking at these foundational skills, with explanations of how they relate to paddling and paddling instruction. There are other ways to think about these skills, and other ways to teach them. Find what works best for you.

**Comfort:** Comfort may be the most important thing an instructor can provide. Physical comfort comes from taking the time to ensure students are properly dressed, their boats are properly outfitted, and their boats are properly fitted to them. Cold students in poorly fitted boats are unlikely to learn much and unlikely to stay with the sport. Good equipment, properly fitted to the paddler, can make the difference between a great day and a miserable day. Physical comfort also means taking adequate breaks for food, water, rest and stretching. Expect beginning paddlers to become sore and tired quickly. Experienced boaters might choose to sacrifice comfort, but that is a conscious, informed choice. New boaters who sacrifice comfort are unlikely to stick with the sport long enough to make an informed decision.

Emotional comfort is just as important as physical comfort. New boaters need time to get comfortable wearing silly looking paddling gear, getting water splashed in their face, and hanging out upside down in their boat. Even experienced boaters get scared when they face a significant challenge. Instructors can improve emotional comfort by continuously assessing their students' comfort level, taking time to ease into new skills, listening to student feedback, and maintaining an encouraging and supportive "challenge by choice" attitude.

**Posture:** Good posture leads to good paddling. Paddlers should sit upright, with their spine in a relaxed neutral position, with possibly a slight arch slightly forward. Weight should be slightly in front of the ischial crests (the "butt bones"). The spine should have an upright "S" shape, not a slumped "C" shape. Some people find it helps to imagine their head is being lifted up by a string, lengthening the spine. Most people have less than optimal posture, so good paddling posture is sometimes hard to do, and harder to maintain.

Proper posture has a number of benefits. First, it allows better visibility because it lifts the eyes higher. Second, it allows better breathing by opening the chest. Third, it places the shoulder and back muscles into optimal position for paddling. Fourth, it allows better balance. Finally, good posture generally makes people feel more confident and thus gives a psychological boost.

**Balance:** Balance helps keeps paddlers in an oxygen rich environment. It's hard to paddle when you're upside down! Good balance comes from good posture. Keep the pelvis and low back loose, so that the head stays over the centerline of the boat. Once paddlers master maintaining good balance, they can start playing with deliberately putting themselves off balance to drive play moves (e.g., cartwheels). A great extension of the loose pelvis and low back, required for

## Paddling Foundations – ACA SEI Focus

---

good balance, is that it allows greater range of motion in the low back. This allows improved visibility, turning strokes and boat control.

**Strong shoulder position:** Often referred to as “staying in the box” or “staying in the cube”, this means that paddlers want to keep their shoulders in the strongest position possible. Shoulders are the most mobile joint in the body, and are the most mobile point between the paddle and the boat. As such, they are easily injured while paddling. To reduce the risk of injury, and to maximize paddling efficiency, paddlers generally should keep their elbows low (at or below shoulder height), bent, and in front of the plane of the body. Elbows can be sharply bent, or almost fully extended, but maintaining some degree of bend allows them to act as a shock absorber, protecting both the elbow and the shoulder. Some people find it easiest to think of a box, created by their hands moving with the above restrictions. Others find it easier to just keep the elbows in front of the shoulders. In either case, the shoulders stay protected and the arms are in an effective paddling position.

**Anchor:** To paddle efficiently, all the energy applied to the paddle should make the boat go where the paddler wants. For this to happen, a few things have to be anchored into place. First, the paddler needs to be well anchored in their boat. Good outfitting helps with this, as does consciously pushing with the feet, legs and buttocks during the power phase of a stroke. Second, the paddle needs to be well anchored to the paddler. A strong arm and shoulder position help transmit the paddle’s power to the boat. Finally, the paddle needs to be anchored into the water, so it doesn’t slip when power is applied to it.

Paddles can be anchored to water in two ways. First, they can directly push against the water, just like your feet push against the ground when you walk. Second, the paddle can be used to generate lift, just like an airplane wing. In both cases, the goal is to ensure the paddle (the anchor) doesn’t slip. If the paddle moves too fast, water can’t “push” against it effectively. In many cases, bubbles will be generated around the paddle – a phenomenon known as cavitation. Cavitation is a clear sign the paddle isn’t anchoring effectively and can be corrected by slowing the paddle and ensuring the paddle is fully submerged.

**Focus:** At its simplest level, focus simply means look where you’re going. However, this simple act has some powerful consequences. First, you can see where you’re going, which is generally a good thing. Second, keeping the head up and looking towards your destination helps to improve posture. Finally, it tends to set up appropriate torso rotation and boat edging when turning, which makes it easier to get where you’re going.

At the next level, focus means paddling proactively. Good paddlers look ahead and plan their route and use as few strokes as possible. They also appropriately plan their day (which might mean a detailed rapid-by-rapid plan, or might just mean “I’m doing an Ocoee play day.”). This approach lets them avoid bad spots, while hitting fun spots with as much energy as possible, and makes the day a lot more fun.

At its highest level, focus means determination. Focused paddlers are determined to get where they need to go. If they hit a rock, or miss a stroke, or catch an edge, they still maintain that mental and visual focus and accomplish their plan. Determination also means putting in the

## Paddling Foundations – ACA SEI Focus

---

necessary practice time and, finally, means being able to maintain focus when things don't go as planned.

**Timing:** When paddlers first learn, they practice even timing of their strokes, so they develop a good paddling rhythm. As paddlers become more experienced, they learn to change that rhythm, to take advantage of water features. For example a stroke might be sped up to gain momentum, or delayed so it is placed inside an eddy. Appropriately timed stroke placement makes strokes much more effective.

**Symmetry:** Most paddlers find it easier to do things on one side of the body. However, good paddlers work to develop their skills on both sides, so there is no “on-side” or “off-side”. Being able to paddle equally well on both sides means a paddler is better able to handle whatever comes their way.