

How to Gauge Your Paddling Skills

Our Club Guide

This guide is intended to help you estimate your current paddling level as honestly as possible. It is not an exact science and should be treated as a broad guide only. The aim is to help you choose paddles that you will be comfortable on, enjoy, and benefit from safely.

The Paddling levels (see below) and trip grades are linked, but they are not rigid rules. Everyone progresses at a different pace, and conditions vary from trip to trip. Please use your judgement and, if in doubt, talk to a trip leader or coach.

Award levels are included purely as reference points. There is no expectation that you hold any formal awards.

Paddling Levels

New Start

You are new to sea kayaking and keen to develop basic skills. You may have limited or no experience on the sea and are beginning your paddling journey.

Beginner (*equivalent to Start / Discover Award level*)

You have some basic paddling skills and may have completed a few sea trips. You are keen to gain experience and are ready to join Progression Paddles.

Novice (*equivalent to Explore Award / 2 Star*)

You have undertaken some training and practice and completed several sea trips. You are comfortable paddling on Grade A trips and continuing to build confidence and skills.

Intermediate (*equivalent to Sea Kayak Award / 3 Star / Paddlesports leader*)

You paddle regularly and have ongoing training and practice. You have completed many sea trips in a variety of conditions and are comfortable on Grade B paddles.

Experienced (*equivalent to Coastal Sea Kayak Award / Sea Kayak Leader / 4 Star*)

You have several years of experience, with trips, training and practice across a wide range of conditions. You are comfortable on Grade B and some Grade C paddles.

Advanced (*equivalent to Advanced Sea Kayak Award / Advanced Sea Kayak Leader / 5 Star*)

You are highly experienced and competent in challenging and exposed conditions. You are comfortable paddling on Grade C trips and contributing actively to group leadership and safety.

Paddle Grades Explained

The club uses a grading system similar to that found in Pesda Press kayak guidebooks and other commonly used references. These grades describe the overall difficulty, exposure and commitment of a paddle.

Progression Paddles

Progression Paddles are short trips in relatively sheltered waters. They are aimed at newer paddlers developing skills and confidence.

- Small groups with one or more leaders or coaches

- May include assistance from club 'buddies' on the water
- Focus on skills development, confidence and enjoyment

Grade A Paddles

Typical characteristics:

- Up to 20 km
- Generally straightforward landings
- Escape routes readily available
- Some shelter from swell and extreme conditions
- Light tidal movement that is easy to predict
- No major tidal races or overfalls

Competency requirement: *Novice and above*

Participants should:

- Have completed at least three Tuesday evening paddles, Progression Paddles, or equivalent within the past year
- Be able to paddle up to 20 km over a period of up to 6 hours
- Be comfortable in light swell and winds up to Beaufort Force 3 (18mph)
- Be proficient in deep-water rescues as both rescuer and casualty, practised within the last 6 months
- Include several paddlers in the group who are competent to tow a casualty

Grade B Paddles

Typical characteristics:

- Up to 30 km
- Some awkward or exposed landings
- Sections of coastline with limited or no escape routes
- Tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, crossings, swell and surf likely
- Trips are exposed to weather and sea conditions

Competency requirement: *Intermediate and above*

Participants should:

- Have completed at least three Grade A (or above) paddles within the past year
- Be paddle-fit through recent paddling and able to paddle at least 30 km over 6 or more hours
- Be confident paddling into winds up to Beaufort Force 4 over a sustained distance

- Be comfortable in moderate swell and tidal flows, and able to launch and land in small surf
- Have practised deep-water rescues within the last 3 months and be competent to assist in rescues in the expected conditions
- Carry a towline and be competent in towing and general incident management

Grade C Paddles

Typical characteristics:

- Difficult or committing landings
- Long sections with no escape routes
- Fast tidal streams, tidal races, overfalls and extended crossings
- Significant swell and surf
- Very exposed to weather and sea state
- Require detailed planning and favourable conditions to be viable

Competency requirement: *Experienced*

Participants should:

- Be experienced and capable paddlers with the skills and judgement to manage challenging conditions under the guidance of the leader
- Typically be operating at, or above, Coastal Sea Kayak Award level (with higher competence required for more demanding Grade C trips)
- Have completed at least three Grade B paddles within the past year
- Be paddle-fit and capable of paddling 30 km or more in the expected conditions, including sustained paddling into Beaufort Force 5 winds
- Be comfortable in swell, strong tidal streams and overfalls, and able to land in moderate surf
- Be fully competent in rescues in the expected conditions, with practice within the last 3 months
- Be confident towing and capable of participating in a tow over several kilometres