

# **How To Choose a Kayak Paddle** by Graham Ketcheson (revised 2008)

“How long should my paddle be? What material is best? Straight shaft or bent shaft?” These are questions I hear a lot when teaching basic kayaking. “Don't worry too much about that now,” I often respond. “Choose one you think is right. We'll go have some fun on the water first and learn more about paddles later...”

At first, learning to make your kayak steer, move where you want it, launching and landing are much more important than choosing the perfect paddle. Once you've kayaked, perhaps even tried some different types of paddles, you'll be ready to make an educated choice.

Paddles are a personal preference. There is no right and wrong when choosing. Lots of opinions, theories, and formulas exist, but when it comes down to it, choose one that feels right. Is your paddle too heavy? Is it awkwardly long? Are you working too hard pulling water? Well you probably haven't found the right paddle yet.

In an ideal world, each kayaker would use a different paddle for each boat that they paddled. I base the overall length of a paddle on what boat I'm going to be paddling. Other features like blade size and materials are a matter of personal choice and paddling style. The average length of a touring paddle is between 210 cm and 230 cm. However there is now a trend toward shorter and lighter paddles.

## **Consider these when picking a paddle:**

- 1. Width of the boat**
- 2. Your height when seated in boat**
- 3. Cadence (how many strokes you take in a minute)**
- 4. Blade Width**
- 5. Materials**
- 6. Budget**

**Width of boat** - So it's your turn in the Queen Mary tandem kayak? Grab a long paddle, a 230 to 240 cm, you'll need the length to reach the water across the wide deck. If you are paddling a sleeker single kayak, try a 210 to 220 cm paddle.

**Height in boat** - Are you tall in the torso and long in the arms? Try a slightly shorter paddle because you can reach further, even across a wide and deep double kayak. Conversely, put a shorter torso person in the same boat and they will need a very long paddle to have a hope in reaching the water.

**Cadence** - A paddler with a high cadence, taking shorter strokes but more of them, is very efficient. A shorter paddle is best for this paddling style, say 210 to 220 cm. A high cadence paddler can keep up with a paddler of opposite style who takes long slow strokes using a long and wide paddle.

**Blade Width** - A wide blade pulls more water with each stroke and is good for working out, speed, and aggressive paddling. White water blades are often designed wider to pull you quickly around river obstacles or shoot you powerfully over waterfalls should you choose. Sea kayak blades are often narrower, allowing a

kayaker to paddle longer distances without tiring. A sea kayaker can increase their cadence but expend less energy because they are pulling less water with each stroke.

Try different blade widths. Most manufacturers have several blade styles to choose from. Test out really narrow blades like a quill or greenland style paddle too. However for the beginner paddler I don't recommend this as your primary blade but perhaps to use as your spare. Touring paddles are generally asymmetrical. The top and bottom half of blade are unequal. This reduces torque in the shaft. But that's a topic for another time.

**Materials & Budget** - There have been lots of innovations in this area and I'm sure more amazingly lightweight material combinations are yet to come. The reality is that some lightweight paddles are a little pricey. If you are serious about kayaking, you may go this route. Many moderately priced but lightweight paddles are available in fiberglass, plastic, aluminum, or any combination of these. Heavy aluminum shaft, plastic blade paddles are murderous after a day's paddle. If you can afford it go for something a notch or two up from these.

**And finally, a word on design. Bent vs straight shaft paddle?** Start out with a straight shaft first. Then experiment with bent shafts later on as you improve your skills. Bent shaft paddles were originally designed for racing and reduce stress on wrists and arms. More recreational & touring paddlers are using them today.

Remember two-piece is better than one (except for strength, one piece is preferred for white water), and buy the lightest you can afford. Your arms and shoulders will thank you for the weight and the variety (since you can feather or off-set the blade). Two pieces are also easier to store and transport.

Buy a recognized brand name from a reputable paddle shop. Ask them what they recommend. What brand and style do they use for rentals?

Have you hugged your paddle today?

### **Graham Ketcheson**

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**Editors note:** *since writing this article, many manufacturers have added more options than ever before to touring paddles: high and low angle blades to address different paddling styles; fully adjustable ferrules to set your preferred feather angle and lengths can sometimes be extended up to 10 cm! Finally, lightweight fiberglass and graphite paddles are abundant nowadays and prices have dropped as a result.*