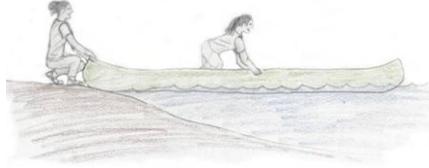


# Canoe 101 Basics

## Canoe Entry From Shore

To enter your canoe from the shore, load all your gear into the boat and make it secure, then put your paddle in the end of the boat you will be paddling in so it will be easy to reach once you are in the canoe. Slide the boat out onto the water almost completely (bow first is typically best), keeping just enough boat on the shore so it doesn't float away, and it's usually a good idea to hold onto the boat – just to *make sure* it doesn't float away (awkward moment!).

One person should hold the boat while the other carefully walks down the center of the canoe, holding onto the gunwales as they go. It's important to keep your center of gravity as low as possible to minimize your chances of flipping the boat over. The second person should then carefully put one foot in the canoe and push off with the other. Once you've pushed off, the sternman should then carefully step over their seat and sit down right away.

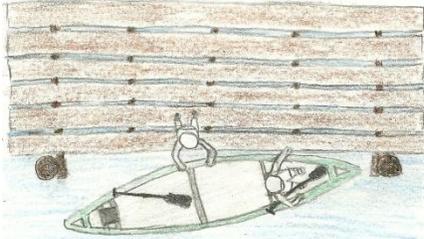


## From A Dock

If you are putting in from a dock or pier, you're still doing basically the same thing – get in one at a time, taking turns holding the boat steady for the other person.

Unlike putting in from a slopping shoreline, when you initially put the boat in, you will *really* have to make sure you keep a hand on the boat when you put it in the water, or it will very likely float away and you will have to swim after it. If you have a length of rope tied to your stern and/or bow (generally referred to as a bow line or stern line), that's a perfect thing to hang on to. Otherwise, just keep a hand on the handle, the gunwales, or something.

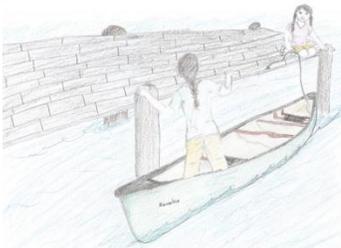
It is easiest and best to hold the boat horizontal to the dock while you're getting in. Remember to put your paddle in the end of the canoe you will be sitting in so it's within easy reach once you're seated.



As shown in the illustration, the person holding the boat from the dock should hold it at a slight angle, so the end that their partner is stepping into is as close to the dock as possible. Minimizes the risk of tipping. Or just flat out falling in.

Once the first person is in, the person already in the boat should stick their paddle in the water for stability (don't move it around, just lay it flat on the surface.) Then the person still on the dock should swing their end of the boat closest to the dock and carefully step in, get settled, and push away from the dock.

Now, getting into your canoe from a traditional wood dock can be awesome, or a total pain. It could be a great alternative to wading through mud on the bank to get into your canoe. But if the dock is a foot or more above the water line (because of low tide, it was built for motor boat use, or whatever) then getting yourself from the dock into the boat *without flipping the boat* will take some care.



It may seem completely impossible in fact. Daunting at the very least. Follow the same principles for proper canoe entry above. And be all the more careful to move slowly and keep your weight along the center of the canoe.

If you don't have a bow line or stern line, this is where you slap yourself. But in all seriousness, one of you may have to lie flat on your stomach so you can reach down to the boat and hang onto it while the other lowers themselves into it. Then first person in the boat gets to hang onto one of those dock piers to stabilize the boat while the other person takes their turn climbing down into the canoe.

If you're living lucky though, you'll find yourself boarding your canoe from a floating dock. Like [cube docks](#). This dock style rises and falls with whatever the water level is, and it's actually pretty much the perfect height for canoe entry.

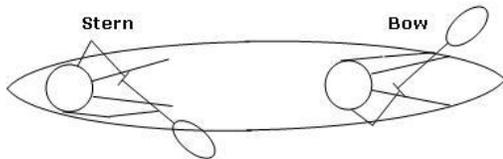
## Canoe Steering

Steering your canoe, getting it to go where you want, when you want, will be the most challenging part of learning to canoe for most people. Understanding and applying the basic keys of canoe steering will help you learn more quickly (and with less frustration) once you get out on the water.

### Key #1: Paddling Roles

The person paddling in the **front** is called the **bowman**. The primary purpose of the bowman is to "provide power." The bowman also sets the pace, watches for obstacles the sternman may not be able to see, and alerts the sternman when they see an imminent obstacle (a rock, stump, etc.).

The person in **back** is called the **sternman**, and their primary responsibility is to steer. The sternman also calls out "Switch" when it's time to switch sides, and calls out "Right [Draw](#)" or "Left [Draw](#)" when he needs the bowman's help to steer.



### Key #2: Paddle On Opposite Sides

As a basic rule of thumb, the bowman and sternman should always paddle on opposite sides of the canoe. This will help your boat go straighter, and it will make it more stable.

### Key #3: Paddle In Time With Each Other

You should both begin and end each stroke simultaneously. The bowman sets the pace, the sternman takes each stroke in sync with the bowman. This will maximize your efficiency and stability.

### Key #4: Get Your Boat Trim

Your "trim" is how level (or unlevel) the canoe sits in the water. If you weigh 200lb and your paddling partner weighs 80lb, your boat will not be sitting level in the water unless you load down your partner's end of the boat with rocks or something (such as loading all your gear in the "light" end of the canoe). A level boat goes straighter, and is much easier to steer, so it is worth the effort to find a way to make your boat trim (level).

### Key #5: Accept That Your Canoe Will Not Go Strait

Every time you take a forward stroke, either in the bow or the stern, it doesn't just move your boat forward, it slightly changes your direction too. It is virtually impossible for you to paddle a canoe in a perfectly straight line, so go ahead and release yourself (and your paddling partner) from this expectation. When you take a forward stroke on the right, it will begin to turn your boat to the left, and a forward stroke on the left will turn your boat slightly right.

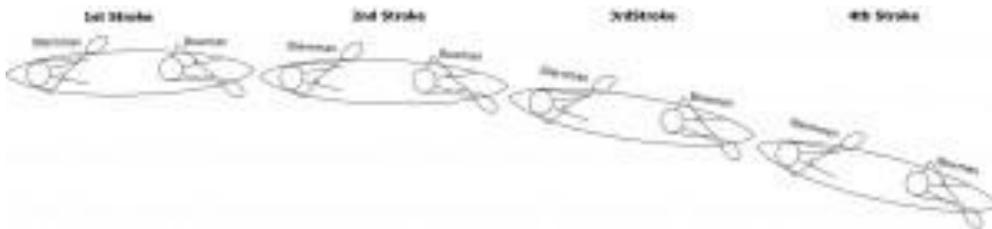
Now, assuming you and your partner are of similar weight and strength, every forward stroke by the sternman will turn the boat more dramatically than the forward stroke of the bowman. The only time this is not true is if the bowman is significantly heavier and/or stronger than the sternman.

Now that you know those five basic keys, you are well on your way to a happy steering experience, and ready to learn the basic concepts of steering.

### Basic Steering Concepts: Going Straight Using The "J" Stroke

Many recreational paddlers do most of their steering using a "Jay" stroke in the stern (a "J" stroke is simply a small [sweep](#)).

With the bowman paddling on the right and the sternman paddling on the left, with each stroke forward the boat will turn slightly right. Basically, the boat will always tend to go the opposite direction of the side the sternman is paddling on.

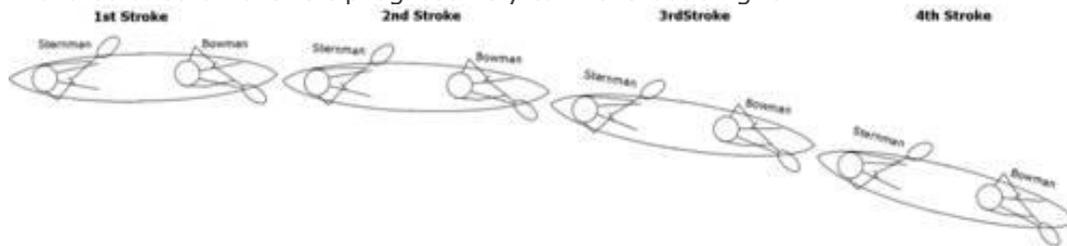


To correct this, the sternman can simply do a small [sweep](#) every 3 – 5 strokes to straighten out the course. (NOTE: A [sweep](#) on the left turns you left, and sweep on the right turns you right.) Keep in mind, a [sweep](#) is ultimately a backward stroke, so it will slow down your forward progress. It's also a very effective steering stroke, so if you do a big, powerful sweep you could easily end up turning the boat too much.

### Basic Steering Concepts: Going Straight "Racing Style"

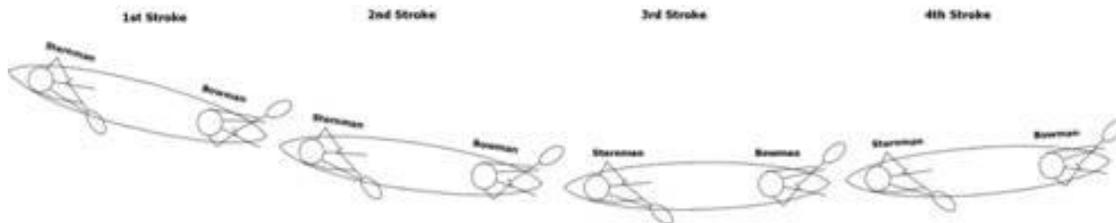
Want to save energy and improve your speed? Then try out this method used by canoe racers and long distance paddlers that need to maximize their efficiency.

So when you start out paddling, with the sternman on the left and the bowman on the right, the sternman's forward strokes on the left progressively turn the boat right.



The most energy efficient way to straighten out your course is to simply switch sides.

Once you have switched sides, you are now starting out already turned a bit to the right of where you want to be.. It will take a few strokes after you've switched sides for the boat to correct its course. Just about the time your boat is going straight again it will start heading left, and it will be time to switch sides again.



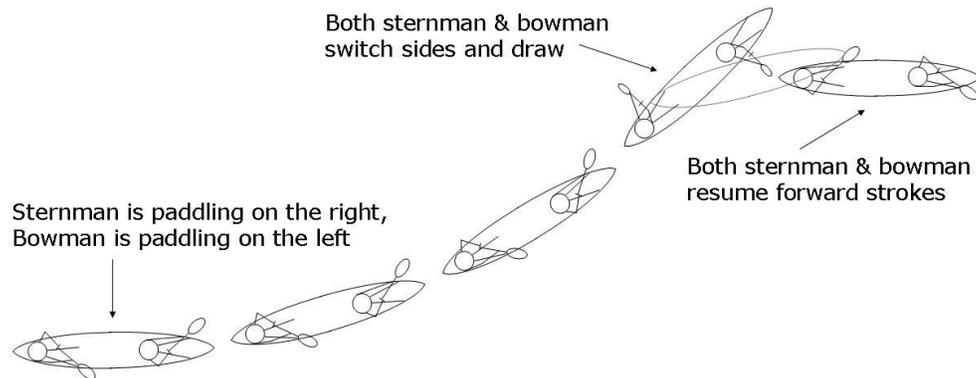
How many strokes it takes for your canoe to start turning will vary widely (depending on factors like your trim, strength differences, your boat, wind, and water currents). Pick a point in the distance to paddle toward and then count how many strokes you take before you really start turning off course (45 degrees or more), then once you switch sides, count how many strokes it takes before you are off course the other direction. After a dozen or so "switches" keeping track of the number of strokes in between, you'll start to figure out about how often you will need to switch.

Once it clicks, this is a really fun way to steer a boat, but it does take some effort. Don't beat yourself up if it doesn't make sense right away. If you keep working at it, you will figure it out eventually. If it gets too frustrating, just revert to the "J" stroke method.

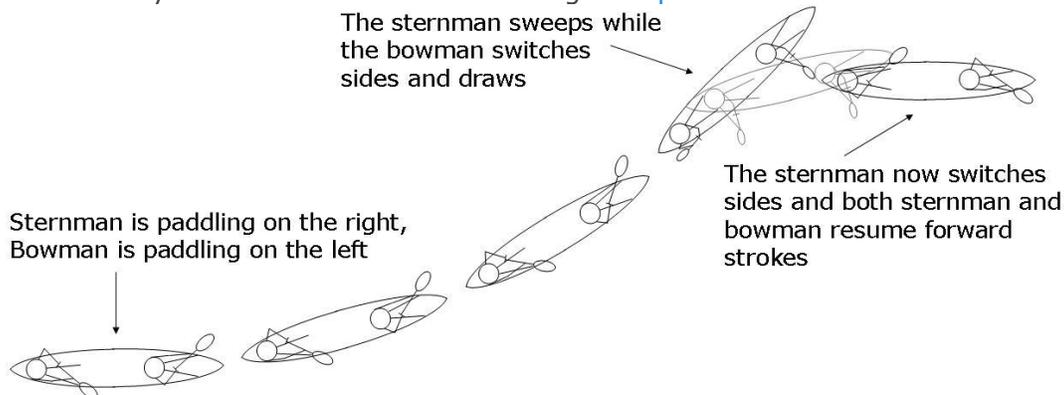
### Basic Steering Concepts: Turning

Not all of canoeing is going in a straight line—sometimes you need to turn to get where you want to go. And sometimes serious turning maneuvers are required when you are trying to go straight and it isn't working very well.

That is when you really start to use [Draws](#) and [Sweeps](#). Now let's say your boat really gets turning off course, or you need to make a hard turn. At this point, you can both switch sides and [draw](#).



Or, the sternman can stay on the same side and do a big **sweep** while the bowman switches sides to **draw**.



Either combination will turn your boat quickly and effectively. If one sweep or draw isn't enough, keep sweeping and/or drawing until your boat is headed where you want it, then proceed paddling forward again.

### Final Thoughts

For some reason, the process of steering a canoe can be really stressful for some people—especially when you're just learning and you have an audience. It's very easy to get totally frustrated with your paddling partner when the boat won't seem to go where you want it to.

So remember—canoes don't travel in straight lines, and not everything is you (or your partner's) fault – it's often the wind and/or current that's messing you up. Give yourselves a break!

Take it slow and give yourself time to figure out how to steer your boat under your unique paddling circumstances. You'll have so much more fun if you get rid of unrealistic expectations and just work with it until it starts coming together. Interestingly enough, it all starts coming together much faster when you're not freaking out (surprised much?). Keep it cool and enjoy the ride people.

### Steering Solo

How to steer a canoe solo? When you do not have a paddling partner, the rules of steering change a bit, though all the [basic principles](#) still apply.

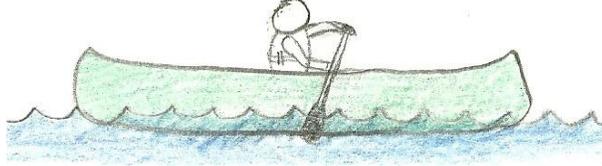
#### Key #1: Get Your Boat Trim!

This may be the single most important part of paddling solo. If you are lucky enough to be paddling a solo canoe, then your seat will already be in about the right spot for your boat to be level in the water. If, however, you are paddling a tandem (two-seater) canoe by yourself, you have a bit more of a challenge. If you try to paddle a tandem canoe sitting on one of the seats, it is best to sit on the bow seat, facing the stern (with your feet in the middle of the boat). Even then, by sitting in one end of the canoe, the other end of the canoe will be *much* lighter, and unless you weigh 80lb or less, the other end of the boat will be sticking up out of the water like a sail. With a "sail" like that, unless you have your back to the wind, you are totally at the mercy of the wind.



Other than the wind blowing you around, being extremely out of trim like that makes it very difficult to steer. If you are reasonably strong, two or three strokes on one side will have your boat turned 90 degrees, which requires a huge sweep, and that huge sweep will likely steal whatever forward momentum you created in those two or three strokes. Very frustrating.

So, you need to either weigh down the other end of the canoe enough to make it level in the water, or you need to sit in the middle of the canoe. Kneeling actually works better, though, if you're going to be kneeling in the middle of your canoe for awhile, get your knees some padding! You can also sit on the center thwart, though doing so will put your center of gravity higher than a seat will which increases your chances of flipping. It also gets uncomfortable fast, so again, get yourself some padding.



### **What To Do When You Flip**

Every canoeist needs to know what to do when you flip a canoe. If your sense of balance is pretty good, you will probably be able to stay upright most of the time you are canoeing. Give it enough time though and *everybody* will end up flipping their canoe eventually. In fact, every time you get in a canoe, you should plan as if you are going to flip (tie gear to the boat, wear clothes you don't mind swimming in, etc.).

When you do happen to flip your canoe, the way you handle it will depend on the water conditions you find yourself swimming in.

### **Near Shore/Swim It! Method**

If you are anywhere near shore, particularly if you are in a moving river, just hang on to the boat and swim it to shore. It helps to tuck your paddles under the seats and/or thwarts so they stay with the boat and you have your hands free. This could be challenging if the current is very strong. Try to work with the current as much as possible, float down stream awhile if you have too until the current slows up a bit. Once you reach shore you can then turn your boat on its side and slowly drag it up onto the bank so all the water pours out. Then flip your boat upright and get back out there paddling.

### **Far From Shore/Flip It! Method**

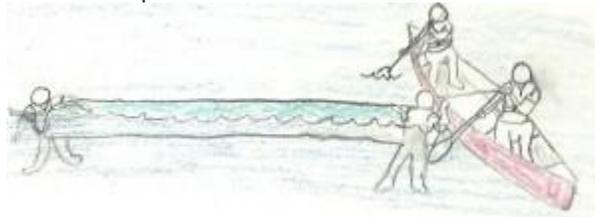
If you are a long way from shore, first tuck your paddles under the seats or thwarts so your hands are free. Then you and your partner get at either end of the canoe and try to lift/roll it over so it dumps out at least some of the water and you trap some air underneath. Then both of you swim under the boat and with your head up in the air pocket, get a firm grip on the gunwales and lift the boat up and flip it over. Then you can take turns climbing back in.

This is a VERY difficult maneuver; in fact it will be more or less impossible unless you're really stinking strong and amazingly good at treading water! Use any floatation you have to sit or stand on in the water – worth a try anyhow. At best, you still won't get all the water out, but you're not aiming for perfection, just a boat that can get you back to shore again. It would be advisable to go out of your way to get to shore as soon as possible so you can dump the remaining water. Paddling with several inches of water will make you very tippy and it will also sap your strength considerably.

### **Boat-Over-Boat Rescue**

If a canoe capsizes when another canoe is nearby to help, this rescue method will enable you to right their canoe, while dumping all the water, and assist its former passengers back into the boat.

Bring your canoe perpendicular to the capsized canoe, with their bow or stern touching the center of your canoe. Make sure the capsized canoe is upside down in the water.



Carefully move to the center of your canoe and with the assistance of the capsized paddlers lift the end of their upside down canoe onto the gunwale of your canoe.

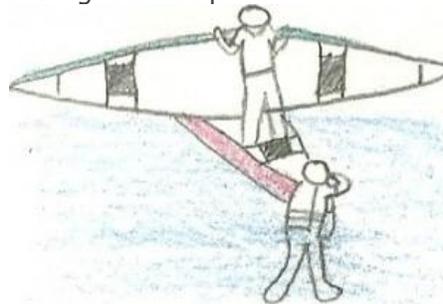
It is helpful if one of the people in the water gets onto the far end of the capsized canoe, pushing it under water and lifting the other end.



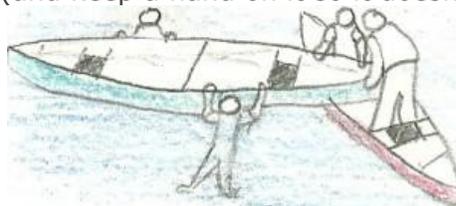
Work together to pull the canoe evenly across both gunwales of your boat until the middle of the capsized canoe is over the middle of your canoe and, carefully balanced, the whole boat is out of the water.



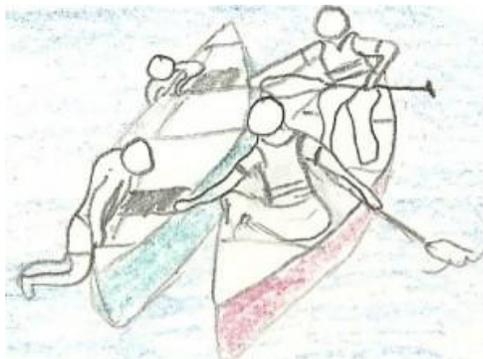
Carefully roll the canoe over so that it is right side up.



Slide the canoe back into the water (and keep a hand on it so it doesn't float away!)



Turn the capsized boat parallel to your canoe and hold onto the gunwales while its passengers do their best to climb back into their boat.



Information from:

<http://www.canoeingbasics.com/canoeing-101/>

Beginners Guide:

[http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.americancanoe.org/resource/resmgr/sei-educational\\_resources/beginners\\_guide\\_aca.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.americancanoe.org/resource/resmgr/sei-educational_resources/beginners_guide_aca.pdf)