Paddle Length

Choosing the correct length for your paddle is a black art but is also a subject on which everyone has a definite opinion. The newcomer is likely to submerge in an excess of well-meant but conflicting advice.

In reality, it is meaningless to talk about the correct length for your paddle as a fixed quantity which can be applied to any type of paddle that you might be interested in. It is the "grip span" —the distance between the top of the grip and the bottom of the lower hand on the paddle—that is the important fixed dimension. The length of the blade varies considerably between designs, so it is clear that when you add your fixed grip span to the variable blade length, the overall paddle length required depends on the blade design that you choose.

There is a small length of shaft below the lower hand on the paddle but above the blade, a sort of no-man's-land that people seem reluctant to talk about. For want of a better name, I call this the freeboard zone. With the grip span and blade length both fixed, this is the variable part of the paddle design where you can fine-tune the length in light of the various considerations listed later on. The freeboard zone varies from zero to 3 or 4 inches.

The easiest method for determining shaft length is to take the required length from a paddle that you are used to and have found comfortable and efficient. Add this dimension to the length of the blade that you have chosen to give an estimate of the overall length of the paddle that you need to make.

If you are new to canoeing or do not already have a suitable paddle, several formulas can give a good approximation of your grip span, and thus paddle length. But be aware that optimum paddle length depends on many factors in addition to your physique — the width of your canoe, its freeboard (which varies with loading and whether you are paddling single or tandem), your preference for sitting or kneeling and height of seats, among other considerations.

Formula 1: Paddler's seat to nose. Sit upright in a chair and get someone to measure the distance from the surface of the seat to the tip of your nose. This distance approximates a suitable grip span.

Formula 2: Paddle aloft. Grasp a paddle (or a batten) in the normal way in both hands, and hold it above your head so that each arm makes a right angle at the elbow. The distance between the top of the grip and the far side of your other hand is again a rough estimate of the required grip span.

Refining the length estimate

Having arrived at a ballpark figure for the length of your shaft, you need to consider one or two more things that should help you refine the original estimate and end up with a paddle that suits your type of canoeing. These are variations in the freeboard zone of the shaft; your grip span should stay the same.

- A slightly shorter paddle is more suitable for solo, as opposed to tandem, paddling. When you are paddling solo, the canoe is likely to heel over toward your paddling side, reducing the free- board of the canoe. The effect will be more pronounced if you like to paddle solo with your canoe intentionally heeled over. When paddling tandem, the weight of the paddlers tends to balance out and the canoe rides more or less level.
- For whitewater, you may prefer a shaft a couple of inches longer to give more leverage for steering and bracing.
- A stem paddler benefits from a paddle an inch or two longer than that of a bow paddler; it provides more leverage for steering.