How to Choose a Canoe Paddle

Dreaming of exploring a series of lakes in the Boundary Waters Wilderness? Or is a fast-moving, heart-racing run down whitewater rapids more your style? Either way, if you want the perfect adventure, you'll need the right paddle! Don't know what's right for you? Read the following article to help you choose. With the proper paddle, you'll canoe more efficiently and tire less easily, making your time on the water more enjoyable.

First, Determine the Proper Length

Contrary to what you may have heard, standing height is not an accurate way to size a canoe paddle. Since you sit while boating, the best way to choose a paddle length is to sit — either in a canoe or on the floor. Most flatwater and whitewater canoeists will require a paddle in the 52" to 60" range, but lengths vary to fit paddlers of all sizes. Bent-shaft paddles are shorter overall, with common lengths of 48" to 54". There are several ways to determine which length is right for you.

At Home

Kneel down with your seat about 6 inches off the floor, as if sitting in a canoe. Measure from the floor to your nose. Add this measurement to the blade length. The total is the correct overall length for your paddle.

In the Store

Kneel down with your seat about 6" off the floor, as if sitting in a canoe. Hold the paddle upside down, with the grip on the floor. If the paddle length is correct, the blade should start right about even with your nose.

On the Water

Sit in your canoe and measure the vertical distance from your nose to the water. Add blade length to get the correct overall paddle length for you.

Fine-Tuning Fit

- If purchasing a bent-shaft paddle, follow the above instructions, but deduct 2" to 4" from the length.
- Canoe width affects length. In a wide canoe, a longer paddle allows you to reach the water without stretching or straining. A paddle that's too short requires extra effort to get the whole blade in the water, making it difficult to propel the boat.
- If you're buying for a child, consider a paddle made especially for children. Besides having shorter lengths, they're built with narrower shafts and T-grips, which are easier for little hands to control.

Choose a Material

The less a paddle weighs, the less fatigue you'll feel during a long day of canoeing. But don't choose a paddle based on weight alone — the best paddles offer a good balance of light weight, strength and flexibility. For whitewater canoeing, a strong, stiff paddle will hold up to the rigors of the river and provide a quick response in rapids. For flatwater canoeing, a flexible paddle helps absorb shock with every stroke.

Wood

Wood is by far the most popular material for canoe paddles. It transmits the feel of the water well, and it flexes slightly to absorb shock. It also retains warmth, so hands stay comfortable in cold conditions. Many wood paddles have a layer of fiberglass over the blade for added strength and/or have a tip guard to improve durability and help resist abrasion. Some upkeep, such as sanding and varnishing, is required to maintain its appearance. Hardwoods (such as ash and maple) and laminates that include hard and soft woods are more durable (and more expensive) than those made only from soft woods.

Fiberglass

Lightweight, durable and virtually maintenance-free, fiberglass paddles can be more expensive than those made of other materials. The nature of fiberglass allows manufacturers to design and build paddles with precision, adding specific amounts of flex or creating complex blade shapes for casual or competitive use. Whitewater canoe paddles are often made of fiberglass.

Aluminum Shaft/Polyethylene Blade

Durable and economical, paddles with aluminum shafts and plastic blades are heavier than paddles made from other materials. Aluminum shafts can feel cold in cool weather, and often feature a vinyl or foam pad where your hand grips the paddle. They make great spare paddles, and can be a good choice for beginners. Blades are made from a variety of plastics, including polyethylene, polypropylene, thermoplastic and ABS.

Blades

Blades vary in width and length. A large, wide blade will power you through the water quickly, but each stroke requires a lot of energy. A small, narrow blade is easy to paddle and more efficient over a period of time, but your stroke will not be as powerful. Some specialized paddles designed for flatwater cruising feature long, narrow blades, which offer a fairly good balance of power and efficiency for this type of canoeing. Not sure what size to get? Paddle blades measuring 8" x 20" are most common and are a great choice for most canoeists.

Something else to consider: Square-tipped blades can catch in the water and throw a paddler off balance. Beginners may want to consider rounded blades, which are more forgiving.

Grip Shape

The 2 most common shapes on canoe paddles are the palm/pear shape and the T.

- Many flatwater paddlers will choose a pear grip for comfort and control. The shape fits naturally into the palm of your hand and is comfortable for long hours on the water.
- The T-grip is the preferred shape for whitewater paddlers and some flatwater paddlers. It allows for more control over the angle of the paddle blade and it's easy to hang onto in rough water. Children's paddles usually feature a T-grip because it's easier for small hands to hold.

Don't Forget the Shaft

Shafts are available in 2 styles: bent or straight.

Straight

Traditional canoe paddles have straight shafts. These are a great choice for all-around paddling. Whitewater canoeists almost always prefer them, as they allow a variety of maneuvering and bracing strokes. This is important when you need to steer around rocks or plow through rapids on a river.

Bent

Bent shafts help position the blade for maximum efficiency on flat water. The bend in the shaft helps the blade remain vertical in the water during the most powerful part of your stroke. It also helps the paddle enter and exit the water smoothly. Angles range from about 7 to 14 degrees. Smaller angles are not as efficient for long-term paddling, but they allow a greater variety of strokes. For multi-day tours of continuous paddling, consider a larger angle.

Shape

Shafts can be round or oval in shape. Oval shafts offer a more comfortable grip than the traditional round shape. Some round shafts feature an oval section for better grip. This is called oval indexing.

Carry a Spare

If you lost your paddle on day 3 of a 5-day canoe trip, what would you do? What if it broke in the middle of a whitewater run? Without a spare, you might literally find yourself up a creek without a paddle. An aluminum-and-plastic paddle makes an inexpensive spare that could save you a lot of time and grief should the unexpected happen, even if you're only out for a day trip.