



RULES FOR SAFE BOATING

The captain's first and primary responsibility is for the safety of the vessel, passengers and crew. **A prudent skipper always conducts a safety briefing prior to departure.** At a minimum, the following should be covered with all passengers:

- Boarding and disembarking safely
- Location, proper adjustment and use of PFDs
- Location and use of fire extinguishers
- Deck hazards such as cleats and slippery surfaces
- Underway safety including location of secure handholds, proper seating areas (no riding on bow or sitting on gunwales, seat backs, etc.) and dangers related to vessel motion such as powering up, slowing down/stopping and turning.

Go/No-Go. On many days the answer will be an obvious yes—nice weather, not too windy, short trip in familiar waters, competent crew, boat in good shape and plenty of time? Go. On other days, several factors may add up to a no—a small craft warning in the forecast, gloomy skies, a long trip, guests on a tight schedule and trouble starting an engine? No-go.

1. **Weather forecast.** Do you have a reliable forecast for the length of the trip? What are the uncertainties? Will the wind and currents be with or against you? Do you and your crew have experience with forecast conditions? Rain or fog? Rain or fog at night? Are you in familiar waters? Are there harbors along the way where you can stop if conditions worsen?
2. **The boat.** Does it have working navigation electronics and running lights, up-to-date charts, a reliable engine and drive train, sails and rigging in good condition, appropriate anchoring gear for the area, essential spare parts and enough fuel? Is safety gear aboard? Did you check the expiration dates on flares and batteries? Do you have food, water and supplies for longer trips?
3. **The crew.** What are the abilities and skills of the captain and crew? Is the crew familiar with the boat and know how to operate its equipment and systems? Have you done safety drills? Are there navigation challenges? Do you have the skills to handle a variety of weather and navigation situations? If any of the trip is at night or in poor visibility, do you have experience in these conditions? On a multiday trip, crew competence is important, especially when you add watchkeeping and galley duties.

Life Jackets are essential. Life jackets are at the core of safe boating, whether using a motorized or non-motorized vessel. *Almost 80% of boating accident fatalities result from drowning.* Always wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket. ensure a life jacket is within reach of everyone aboard. Make sure the jacket is a proper fit for your size and

weight. Children should never wear an adult jacket. Make sure the jacket is properly fastened. Good swimmers still need life jackets - when people fall off a boat, they may become disoriented, injured or unconscious. Wear it, don't stow it. Tucked-away life jackets are useless in an accident.

Never drink alcohol while boating. Alcohol affects judgment, vision, balance and coordination. Keep in mind that the sun, wind and boat vibration can accelerate impairment. Be responsible and carry non-alcoholic drinks.

Protect against propeller strikes. Make sure all passengers are accounted for before starting the engine, and wear your emergency cut-off switch at all times. When people are in the water, turn-off the engines, better yet, remove keys from the ignition, and ask one person to "propeller-watch". **See Appendix 1.**

Know what to do if someone goes overboard. If the boat capsizes or someone falls overboard, follow these boating safety tips:

- **Turn off the motor and propellers.** If someone is still on the boat, have them turn them off. If everyone has gone overboard and the motor or propellers are still on, your first priority should be to get everyone away from the boat.
- **Remain calm.** If you're wearing a life jacket, float without using too much energy and check to make sure everyone else is safe. If you're not wearing a life jacket, look for a life jacket or other floating safety device. Don't try to remove clothing or footwear. Air trapped in clothing can provide additional floatation. If you're wearing a life jacket, keep it on. Float on your back and paddle slowly and calmly to help others to safety.

Carry safety equipment on board. On top of life jackets for all, stock a complete first-aid kit, a tool kit, a horn or whistle, flares, a fire extinguisher, a marine VHF radio, a cell phone in a waterproof case, an extra dock line or two and a throwable flotation device, at a minimum. Remember sunscreen and know the signs of heat illnesses. Bring dry clothes and blankets in case of hypothermia. **See Appendix 2.**

Check your equipment and make sure it is in good working order.

Follow the dates. Some required safety equipment, such as flares, have an expiration date. Fire extinguishers must be replaced 12 years after their date of manufacture, so you will have to do some math. And if you have automatically inflatable life jackets aboard, the dissolvable bobbin inside the inflation mechanism also has an expiration date stamped on the outside. These dates help ensure the equipment will work when you need it, but you shouldn't stop there. While inflatable life jacket inflation cylinders don't expire, a thorough annual inspection of the cylinder and life jacket, including an overnight inflation test, is something you should have on your calendar every season.

Review a pre-departure checklist to ensure you have everything you need in your boat.

Make a float plan and be sure to give it to someone. Let a trusted family member or friend know where you're going, when you expect to return, and what to do if you fail to check in. Having someone ashore who knows your whereabouts and trip plans can potentially shorten a response time.

Review all the navigational rules and make sure you understand them.

Don't overload the boat with people or equipment. Always follow your boat's capacity restriction and make sure that passengers stay safely within the boat's railings.

Check the weather beforehand. Once on the water, the weather can turn. If you notice storm clouds, a sudden temperature drop or wind speed increasing, play it safe and get off the water.

Follow proper anchoring procedures. Having the right anchor isn't enough. To keep the wind from dragging your boat, you may need to drop two anchors in a V-formation at the front of the craft to keep it from drifting. To help prevent the tide from lifting your anchor, you may need to drop it in deeper water – about 20-30 feet or so.

Follow proper docking procedures. Depending on the wind, the current and your type of boat, docking can be a challenge. As you approach the dock or shore, make sure your bumpers are out to prevent damage to your craft, reduce your speed and make sure the docking lines are secured.

Don't rush the startup. Check for harmful fumes and maintain fresh air circulation throughout the boat. After refueling your boat, open all the hatches and smell for fumes. If detected, don't start the engine. Carbon monoxide can accumulate in and around your boat - be aware of all the places fumes and gases can accumulate. For boats with enclosed engine compartments, run the blower for a minimum of four minutes before starting the engine and after each refueling. This is especially important after visiting the gas dock.

Never swim in a marina or in other areas where boats are connected to shore power. Stray power in the water can create an electric shock hazard.

Designate an Assistant Skipper. Make sure more than one person onboard is familiar with all aspects of the boat's handling, operations, and general boating safety, in case the primary operator is incapacitated and someone else needs to get the boat back to shore.

Use caution with water sports. Skiing, tubing and wakeboarding are popular water sports, but they also can be dangerous with participants traveling at high speeds. Remember to always have a spotter in the boat, and go over basic hand signals. Make sure the propeller is stopped before getting back on the boat. Enjoy these activities during daylight hours only.

Always maintain “**3 Points of Contact**” when moving about the vessel. Always be prepared for sudden, unexpected vessel movement by having a firm footing and one hand connected to the boat.

Maintain “situational awareness”. Be aware of objects and other people, including stationed anglers, swimmers, boaters, kayakers and paddleboarders in the water. Watch for debris in the water. Have someone keep a look-out. Keep your wake low when near other boats, swimmers, or the shore.

Take a boat safety course. The U.S. Coast Guard estimates that 70% of boating accidents are caused by operator error. Before you leave the dock, make sure you know the rules and your responsibilities.

And always exercise good judgment – use common sense - respect your limits and keep within your limits to avoid injury.

Appendix 1 – Propeller Strikes

How to prevent propeller strikes

A typical recreational boat propeller can travel from head to toe on an average person in less than one-tenth of a second. Fortunately, propeller strikes can be prevented.

1. Wear your engine cut-off switch lanyard and your life jacket at all times. If the lanyard is removed from the switch, the engine will shut off.
2. Assign a passenger to keep watch around your boat's propeller area when people are in the water.
3. Consider purchasing propeller safety devices for your boat.

How to reduce the risk of propeller strikes

Safe boating includes **prevention**. To reduce the risk of propeller strikes, make sure everyone on the boat knows where the propellers are and is aware that they pose a danger. Here are ways to help you stay safe when using a boat with a propeller.

- Before starting your boat, walk to the stern and look in the water to make certain no one is near your propeller (people near the propeller may not be visible from the helm).
- Never get on or off a boat while the engine is running or idling.
- Educate passengers about the location and danger of the propellers.
- Call attention to and discuss any propeller warning labels around your boat.
- Establish clear rules for swim platform use, boarding ladders and seating. (If possible, passengers should remain seated at all times.)

Turn off the engine at key moments

- Never allow passengers to board or exit your boat from the water when engines are on or idling (your propeller may continue to spin).
- Never start your boat with the engine in gear.
- Never leave the propellers spinning when a passenger is in a vulnerable situation.
- Make sure everyone is seated properly and there is no-one swimming near or diving from the boat.
- Do a head count to verify that everyone is on board before starting the engine.

Prevent passengers from being thrown overboard

- Do not allow passengers to stand.
- Do not allow passengers to sit on the transom, gunwales, seat backs or bow while underway.

Operate your boat in safe areas

Boat operators are responsible for the safety of people in and around their boat at all times. Make sure you know how to identify warning buoys, signs identifying swimming areas, and signals for 'diver down', "passenger overboard" and when a water skier is waiting to be picked up.

This includes:

- Keeping away from swimmers, divers, anglers and people doing water sports.
- Staying alert to diving flags and other signs that people are in the water.
- Slowing down when approaching busy or congested areas, and anchorages.
- Staying away from marked swimming and diving areas.
- Being extra careful when enjoying towed water activities or when near others who are doing so.

Always wear your ECOS and life jacket

Since 2021, you may be obliged to wear an ECOS (Engine Cut-Off Switch) on your person. If a boat operator strays too far from the helm, a lanyard kill switch detaches and automatically turns off the engine. This applies if your vessel:

- is under 26 feet
- is equipped with an ECOS
- has a helm that is not an enclosed cabin
- is operating on plane or above displacement speed

Assign a spotter

- Carelessness is a major factor in propeller-related injuries and deaths.
- Choose a responsible adult to keep watch of the propeller area of the boat when people are in the water.
- Choose another passenger to keep watch of children on board and sound the alarm if a child falls overboard.

React properly in an emergency:

- If someone falls overboard, immediately turn toward the person in the water so that the stern is away from them. At the same time, shift to neutral so that the boat propeller stops spinning.
- **Never put your boat in reverse to pick up someone in the water. Instead, circle around.**

Appendix 2 - Safety Equipment

PFDs, Flares Fire Extinguishers, Sound Devices and Lights

To legally operate your vessel, both the Coast Guard and the states require you to carry certain equipment aboard your boat. These requirements are generally based upon the length of your boat, but a recent trend has been to have requirements based upon the time of year that you operate your vessel, or how far from shore you might operate your vessel. For example, boats 16 feet in length and over must have the at least:

- **One personal flotation device (in good condition) for each person on board,** plus a throw-able cushion or ring is required. You must have the PFDs out of the plastic and in a READILY accessible location. The throw-able should be close by the steering station.
- **Three current-dated, hand-held, approved flares** are minimum equipment to serve for day and night distress signals, both inshore and offshore.
- **The correct number of approved fire extinguishers,** readily available for use is based on the size of your vessel.
- **A sound making device.**
- **Working running lights.**

Recommended Equipment

Coast Guard minimum requirements are just that, minimum. It is suggested you carry additional safety equipment, such as:

- Anchor with sufficient line/chain (at least five times water depth)
- Bailer (bucket)
- Oars or paddles
- First aid kit
- VHF radio
- Water
- Tool kit
- Sun protection
- Flashlight and extra batteries