

# River Technique *by* Steve Fisher

## Read and Run



*You're following an experienced friend down a run you've never done and he tells you that the next section is 'Read and Run'. He should only say this if he's very sure of your paddling abilities. But what defines 'read and run'? It's not just a section near the front of Kayak Session Magazine.*

**The term** generally refers to a section of whitewater where you can see all the way to the bottom of the rapid or at least an open line into an eddy. Only experience will teach you exactly what your own definition is. As a general rule, you should never run anything you can't see to the bottom of, but you'll soon find that you can often figure out what's between you and a clean run. Sometimes we find ourselves unintentionally reading and running a rapid because we've missed a crucial eddy between rapids. Doing this too often is a sure way to not get invited on the next trip.

Big water rapids only require a quick check from the top of the rapid to make sure there aren't any gnarly river-wide holes. Creeks are where you need to be careful. There are many hidden obstacles and I advise walking all the way down a rapid unless it's very clearly 'read and run'. I was running what appeared to be class II in New Zealand and discovered a sieve in the middle of the river, right before I dropped into it and almost drowned. The lesson of the day was that if you haven't scouted the rapid, you need to be even more awake than usual.

Ok, so now that you're in a rapid reading and running, what do you do? Since you don't know exactly where you need to be and you can't be sure of WHERE you want to go; you need to be sure of WHAT to do. The mindset needs to be that you break down the rapid into short sections directly in front of you. As you take on each obstacle you need to really think about the technique you'll use for that specific obstacle. Don't just bumble in while watching the horizon. As you've overcome one obstacle you glance up, check way downstream for your long-term goal, and then refocus on the task at hand – your current challenge. Most of all you need to stay aggressive and keep the boat moving. Too often people drift into a rapid, neck

outstretched, straight into a hole that they could have avoided or at least punched through. The extra second you might gain looking would be better spent really moving to where you want to go.

With time, you'll learn how to identify problems in the rapid. For example: slow water exiting, or a rounded horizon could mean there's a sticky hole. Undercuts, boil lines and diagonal waves can all throw you off line. You'll learn to recognize this stuff, but what you need to think about before the fact is what you'll do in dealing with each case.

A good way to build your read and run mindset is to paddle with someone down a run that they know well but that you've never run. They can tell you where to portage, where the dangers are, and let you figure out the rest out for yourself. To Read and Run is a concept rather than a step-by-step technique but with practice and a level head while paddling, you'll be surprised what you can put together in a rapid that you've never scouted. And ultimately remember 'when in doubt, scout!'

This photo is of Andrew Holcombe and I running '1 mile rapid' on the Salween River in China. We were able to scout the whole thing from a distance. We could tell that everything was avoidable but could not remember where all the obstacles were. As we ran it we broke it all down in Read and Run style.

**Steve Fisher is sponsored by Riot Kayaks, Seven 2 Paddles, Stohlquist, Snapdragon Designs, Teva, and Red Bull.**



Photos by Ben Coleman