

River Technique *by*



Steve Fischer

I was recently being coached at paragliding when my instructor repeatedly told me to look where I wanted to go, and to point and lean my body in that direction. How could this have anything to do with steering a glider? I soon realized that just like in kayaking it is critical to channel all of your energy towards where you plan to be. I was reminded of this when I sat in on one of EJ's 'strokes and concepts' courses. Nestled in the beginner lingo were some useful, often forgotten tips for paddlers of every level.

Look where you're going

When

I refer to looking where you're going, I don't mean simply keeping your eyes open and your mouth shut. Although that is important, there are a few hard and fast principles that, combined with all of your other skills, will keep you out of trouble. Before we go into each, let's first clarify where it is that you want to go. I use a stolen term called 'thin slicing' – an idea that I'll go into at another time, but basically what you do is break the rapid into segments from top to bottom. Running a complex rapid is broken into a series of separate moves. Even though your end goal is the eddy at the bottom of the rapid, that is not where you look. You will focus on where you need to get in the immediate future, during your current move. You focus on one move at a time before combining them together.

Now let's create an example of a move. Let's say that you need to catch an eddy halfway down a rapid. How often have you seen someone try to catch an eddy and miss it as they gaze downstream at where they don't want to go? I've seen it hundreds of times. At the point where you're busy making a move, you need to completely focus on that move, look at where you want to go and forget about the rest of the rapid and the places that you don't want to go. It's easy to hit a goal, or an obstacle, that you're looking at. Here are some steps for hitting your goals.

For now we're forgetting about the technicalities of strokes, boat leaning, angles, speeds, etc. and just thinking of what's going on with the body above the kayak.

Head and eyes: Looking where you're going primarily keeps your attention on getting there. This is the unexplainable grey area where simply looking at a place helps you get there. But what can be explained is that the direction that your head is turned affects the direction that your shoulders rotate and therefore affects weight shift. This is something that should be remembered in pretty much all sports, and kayaking is no different. I find this most important when surfing a wave – you always look upstream no matter which way the boat spins – that's because you want to stay upstream. So the bottom line is, stay focused and keep looking where you want to go, not where you don't want to go. Don't be the rabbit staring into the headlights of an oncoming car.

Shoulders and torso: Now that you're looking in the right direction it will be easier to point your shoulders in the right direction. Whilst there is obviously some rotation of your shoulders and torso as you paddle, you need to have your body point where you're heading. Your shoulders should stay roughly perpendicular to your target. Now, here's one for you: Even as you take a sweep stroke to turn your boat, you continue to keep your shoulders perpendicular to your target (the inside of the turn) and maintain an aggressive forward body position (sorry slalom paddlers – the idea of rotating your shoulders with your sweep is old school and less efficient).

Paddle: There are many different types of strokes, but one thing that you should try to keep consistent is pointing the spine of your blade where you want to go (the blade in the water is perpendicular to your target). Picture (and try) this: Your boat is pointing down stream but you want the eddy 45 degrees off to your right. You look at the top of the eddy, point your body at it and here's where things get cool: You reach out with your right hand and plant the blade in the water directly between you and the target with the paddle spine pointing at the target. As you now pull towards your body, the boat will turn towards the target and move forwards towards the target. As you take your next strokes, the angle of the stroke to the boat adjusts but keeps pointing at the target until your boat is pointing at the target and you're taking forward strokes. Try it. It works, and you'll be surprised at how many of your buddies don't know this trick.



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