

River Technique *by*



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This topic involves one of the most basic rules of whitewater kayaking. We've consistently been told that you should always lean downstream; although that is a nice rule of thumb there are actually many situations in which you should do the opposite:

Always lean downstream???

There are many subtleties to leaning your boat, many of which can only be learned by you through time on the water. So this article can only really help to open your mind to the idea that leaning downstream is not a hard and fast rule - and perhaps help reinvent your thinking a little. I've increasingly leant upstream in various situations and since the leans are brief and only slight, I've wondered how I'd illustrate the idea. As you can see I've used an on-board camera. By looking at the horizon you can tell which way I'm leaning.

The leaning concept is simply to expose your hull to 'oncoming' water at all times and to avoid water catching your edge or loading onto your deck. Eddies are the most common place to lean upstream but there are really quite a few occasions even when in the main current. Anytime you're traveling fast and hit slower water, converging currents, boils or funny water, it's time to lean away and expose your hull at least until you've slowed to the same speed as the said feature. You need to expose your hull to whichever water is hitting you fastest.

Let's now zone in on a proactive use of this idea (rather than as a defensive move). What we're talking about is a continuation of the idea mentioned above. Conventional wisdom will tell you that you always lean towards (downstream) a wave or hole as you hit it. Not true. Yes there are many times you do lean into it, such as for the 'Tuck and Duck' or simply bracing over a hole, but what if you're approaching in such a way that you feel you'll catch your downstream edge or bow? We call this tripping over your bow or paddle - it's when you see guys flip downstream as they hit a feature. Now it's time to apply the idea of leaning upstream. Without delving too deep into the technical or physical ins and outs, let me explain an example of how I would do this:

I'm approaching a feature that I feel I'm going to have trouble plugging through so the only way is over. I intentionally turn slightly at an angle. You need to find the correct angle - Too straight and you won't get your bow over it...too much angle and you'll be spun back upstream and into the feature (hole). At this point I'm exposed to potentially being stopped in my tracks if I don't proactively lean upstream and perform the maneuver. Right before I hit the feature I lean upstream and take a sweep on the upstream side with the idea of lifting my bow, exposing my hull to the feature and straightening the boat with the sweep stroke. When you get this right you'll feel the boat bounce up over the foam pile and a moment later you'll need to take your next stroke on the downstream side and return to leaning downstream. By now you've lost a little speed (relative to the flow) but you're clear of the feature.

For further illustration lets look at the two image examples below:



Example 1: In this picture my bow is pointed at river right and I'm leaning upstream taking a right sweep stroke. Notice the aerated 'funny water' on my left. That's what I'm leaning away from. When you hit those bubbles you often flip downstream as your downstream edge falls into the pocket of air.



Example 2: Here my bow is pointed at river left as I finish a left sweep after hitting quite a big hole leaning upstream. In this case I jumped over the hole but finished off more sideways to the current than I would have liked. That's because I approached with a little too much angle. In this situation I could also have done a 'tuck and duck' to pierce the hole.

There is one more thing to be said: Generally if you're going faster than the main flow of the river you can afford to lean upstream whenever you need to. If you're going slower than, or the same speed as the current then you're pretty much left with leaning downstream at all times - then when you hit features, you're slowed down further and need to lean downstream more. It can be a self-perpetuating problem, which is why you'll always see me paddling fast down rapids! So there you have a couple of examples of how you can also lean upstream - combined with moving quickly downstream. Next time you're out there, just loosen up and experiment with the idea on a few small features. It's not only useful but also fun to play around with.

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

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