



# Level 4: Open Water Coastal Kayaking Skills Assessment

## Assessment Overview

The **Level 4: Open Water Coastal Kayaker** is a competent paddler in coastal waters with areas of exposure to current, wind, waves, and surf. They have the judgment to know when they should not paddle and have a plan for when things do not go as expected. The open water coastal kayaker can perform all the skills in this assessment safely, effectively, and efficiently in a range of coastal environments that might include surf zones, rock gardens, sea caves, or areas with strong tidal currents that may have limited access for landing.

This ACA Skills Assessment course evaluates a participant's ability to perform all the skills listed and demonstrate appropriate knowledge. The assessment course allows the participant to receive documentation of having achieved a Level 4 level of paddling ability.

## Course Prerequisites

- Acknowledgment of personal compliance with the [ACA Essential Eligibility Criteria \(EEC\)](#).
- Be a current ACA Member

## Course Duration

One day (8 Hours) minimum.

## Course Venue

A location with exposure to conditions and regular access to landing areas and within 2.0 nautical miles of shore. Participants must be assessed while paddling in three of the four conditions below, but all three conditions do not need to be experienced simultaneously.

- Winds 15 - 20 knots
- Waves 2 - 4 feet (0.6 - 1.2 meters)
- Surf 2 - 4 feet (0.6 - 1.2 meters)
- Tidal Current 2 - 4 knots

## Venue Selection

Besides the above, the location chosen by the assessor shall be conducive to assessing all skills in the "Core Skills" categories and all skills in a chosen "Venue Specific" category. The venues and associated skills have been set to an equivalent level of challenge, allowing for regional accessibility while maintaining standards. (See Level 4 Skills Assessment Assessor's Guide for further detail). The "Venue Specific" categories are:

- Surf Zone
- Rock Gardens and Sea Caves

- Tide Races
- Expedition Paddling

## **Course Size**

4 Participants: 1 Assessor; with an additional qualified assistant, the ratio can be 8 : 2. The maximum number of participants permitted is 8.

## **Assessor**

This assessment course may be offered by Level 4: Open Water Coastal Kayaking (or higher) ACA Instructors, Instructor Trainers, or Instructor Trainer Educators.

## **Preparing for this Assessment**

The document "Level 4: Open Water Training Guidance" gives guidance on how to train for paddling in Level 4 conditions and helps prepare paddlers for this assessment course.

## **Assessor's Guide and Field Grids**

The Level 4: Open Water Coastal Kayaking Assessor's Guide is the companion document to the Level 4: Open Water Coastal Kayaking Skills Assessment document. Assessors shall use the Assessor's Guide for guidance on delivering the course and to ensure compliance with standards for Level 4 paddlers. The Assessor's Guide includes guidance on what constitutes Exceeds, Meets, and Below for each skill. Also provided are Single-Paddler and Multi-Paddler Field Grids designed for the assessor's use when delivering this course.

## **Assessment Competencies and Skills**

This assessment contains Paddler Competencies, Assessed Skills, and Developing Skills.

- **Paddler Competencies** – Each category starts with a description of the overall competency that the paddler shall demonstrate. The assessor uses this as an overarching guideline that applies to all skills for the category.
- **Assessed Skills** – Assessors must observe the paddler's performance of all these strokes, maneuvers, rescues, and skills in the appropriate venue. In addition, the paddler must demonstrate the appropriate level of knowledge for this skill assessment.
- **Developing Skills** – Assessors may observe the paddler's performance of these strokes, maneuvers, rescues, and skills in the appropriate venue. Successful performance of Developing Skills may add to a pass, but unsuccessful performance shall not count against the paddler. Level 4 Developing Skills are among the Assessed Skills at Level 5.

## **Level 4: Open Water Coastal Kayaking Paddler Core Competencies and Assessed Skills**

Assessors shall evaluate the paddler for competency in the following "Core" categories.

### **Core: Boat Handling**

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler uses appropriate strokes and maneuvers to position for optimal performance and moves purposefully in the surf, rock gardens, tide races, wind, waves, and following seas. They comfortably blend strokes and modify maneuvers according to environmental conditions using both sides of the kayak effectively. They

use their paddle appropriately while edging, demonstrating blade awareness relative to conditions (for example, when crossing eddylines and side surfing). They can recover when momentarily destabilized due to environmental factors and consistently roll in Level 4 conditions.

**Assessed Skills:**

- Demonstrates ability to paddle and hold position in differing wind and wave directions.
- Demonstrates ability to turn upwind and downwind efficiently.
- Uses forward and reverse paddling to reach an intended target or accomplish a specific task.
- Uses forward and reverse sweep strokes to shape a course and avoid hazards.
- Uses bow, midship, and stern rudders to turn and maintain their course.
- Uses blade support to recover and maintain stability while underway, maneuvering, and holding position.
- Uses draw strokes for effective lateral movement, whether the kayak is static or dynamic.
- Able to roll kayak from both set-up and non-setup positions.

**Developing Skills:**

- Can demonstrate rolling up on either side of the kayak.
- Displays comfort on edge in surf, waves, wind, and tidal features.

## **Core: Rescues and Towing**

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler demonstrates competent rescue and towing skills in Level 4 conditions. They choose rescues and towing configurations appropriate for the circumstances (for example, what is most appropriate for a capsize in a surf zone or capsize in a tidal rapid) and demonstrate the ability to be an active and safe swimmer when being rescued.

**Assessed Skills:**

- Performs one or more of the following assisted re-entries with an able swimmer: Side-by Side, Scoop, T-Rescue, Swimmer Deck Carry.
- Performs one or more assisted re-entries to aid an impaired swimmer: Scoop, Unresponsive Paddler, Swimmer Deck Carry.
- Performs one or more of the following self-rescues: Re-enter and Roll, Paddle Float, and Scramble.
- Is an active and effective swimmer when being rescued.
- Applies one or more of the following towing strategies with a towline: In-Line Tow, Rafted In-Line Tow, Anchor Tow.
- Applies one or more of the following towing strategies without a towline: Contact Tow, Bulldozing, and Toggle Tow.
- Effectively manages tow system and can release system while underway and following a capsize.
- Able to rescue a swimmer who has been separated from their kayak and reconnect the swimmer to their kayak.
- Able to assist another paddler's recovery from capsize by presenting their kayak or paddle.

**Developing Skills:**

- Deploys multiple techniques and strategies for each of the above rescues.
- Is present and flexible while under pressure.

## Core: Awareness and Seamanship

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler has a heightened awareness of the environment, their performance, and decision-making relative to group members and adapts plans accordingly. The paddler clearly communicates with the group to make necessary changes, is properly equipped for the conditions, and uses equipment appropriately to maintain personal and group safety and comfort.

### Assessed Skills:

- Understands the effects of wind, tide, current, and land masses on the marine environment.
- Practices Leave No Trace and demonstrates appropriate interactions with the ecosystem and wildlife.
- Understands the causes, prevention, recognition, and treatment of cold-water shock and hypothermia.
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- Understands personal and group capabilities relative to the environment and makes decisions accordingly.
- Paddles as a cohesive member of the group and positions to provide support.
- Maintains properly outfitted kayak and has working knowledge of paddling equipment.
- Understands how to pack and properly trim their kayak.
- Performs repairs allowing the paddler to return safely to the launch site.
- Carries appropriate visual and auditory signaling device(s) and understands their use and limitations.
- Can tie Bowline, Clove Hitch, Figure 8, and Trucker's Hitch knots.

## Core: Incident Prevention and Management

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler has an incident prevention mindset both on and off the water. They make good choices and demonstrate competent decision-making. The paddler can lead and assist with managing incidents in Level 4 conditions. They can identify appropriate safe zones and work with other paddlers to ensure the entire group's safety.

### Assessed Skills:

- Safely transports, unloads, and carries kayaks at the launch site.
- Actively participates in pre-trip and post-trip debrief sessions.
- Launches and lands in a safe manner.
- Communicates and directs others calmly in stressful situations (for example, during rescues).
- Works with others to perform rescues and move the group to a position of less risk.
- Demonstrates proper use of VHF radio and the ability to hail appropriate resources.

## Core: Trip Planning and Navigation

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler successfully plans, plots, and executes routes in Level 4 conditions and venues. Their chosen routes will incorporate a holistic view of all the variables within the venue and contain contingency plans.

### Assessed Skills:

- Gathers, understands, and utilizes appropriate forecasts (weather, marine, surf, and tidal).

- Demonstrates use of charts, forecast(s), and knowledge of paddling group when route planning.
- Incorporates wind, waves, and swell direction into route plans and trip choices.
- Demonstrates ability to calculate stages of the tide and incorporate them into a route plan.
- Demonstrates ability to calculate tidal drift and incorporate drift into a route plan.
- Demonstrates the ability to calculate current strength and timing and incorporate them into route plans.
- Demonstrates use of chart and compass to paddle a course.
- Demonstrates ability to identify their location at all times.
- Understands the Nautical Rules of the Road and aids to navigation, and demonstrates safe paddling in relation to boat traffic.

**Developing Skills:**

- Calculating tidal drift involving vector analysis.
- Limited Visibility Navigation (for example, night and fog).

## **Level 4 Paddler Venue Specific Competencies and Assessed Skills**

Assessors shall evaluate the paddler for their competency in one of the following “Venue Specific” categories. The choice of assessment venue shall enable the assessor to see all the assessed skills for the chosen category.

### **Venue Specific: Expedition Paddling**

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler successfully utilizes knowledge and resources to plan a multi-day trip. Their understanding of the environment allows the paddler to anticipate conditions during their trip and make decisions to adjust the plan accordingly. During a multi-day journey, they successfully apply Level 4 paddling skills in the environment/venue.

**Assessed Skills:**

- Provides evidence of multi-day journeys that involve overnight camping.
- Demonstrates ability to plan a successful multi-day journey using available and appropriate planning resources.
- Makes appropriate expedition decisions both before and during the trip.
- Is appropriately equipped for a multi-day journey in a planned environment and is well-versed in the use of equipment.
- Demonstrates all “Core Skills” with a fully laden kayak.

### **Venue Specific: Tide Races**

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler demonstrates an understanding of the tidal environment and can paddle through a tide race in control. They understand the challenges of paddling in areas of current and position themselves appropriately to ensure individual and group safety.

**Assessed Skills:**

- Identifies features of a tide race (eddy, eddyline, current, standing waves).
- Effectively paddles a downstream course through the current.
- Able to select an appropriate route and return to the top of the tide race.

- Demonstrates control while breaking in and out of eddies.
- Demonstrates using a ferry glide to reach an intended target while crossing the current.
- Demonstrates appropriate rescue and towing skills and moves rescue to an area of less risk when necessary.

**Developing Skills:**

- Demonstrates ability to surf tide race waves under control.
- Demonstrates ability to attain an upstream eddy.
- Demonstrates using a reverse ferry glide to reach an intended target while crossing the current.

## Venue Specific: Surf Zone

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler demonstrates the use of forecasting tools in combination with charts and maps to predict areas of surf and breaking waves. They can identify the features of the surf zone and the types of waves. They demonstrate the ability to launch, land, and paddle through the surf in control. They can self-rescue in the surf zone, perform assisted rescues, and tow where and when appropriate.

**Assessed Skills:**

- Identifies features of a surf zone (soup, impact, outside, rip, and longshore currents).
- Identifies different wave types and parts of the wave.
- Is aware of surf etiquette and applies concepts with situational awareness and appropriate positioning.
- Demonstrates control while launching and landing.
- Demonstrates the ability to identify a route to shore when sitting outside the surf break and paddle in under control.
- Demonstrates control while paddling through the surf and breaking waves to the outside or against the breaking waves.
- Side-surfs (bongo slides) with balance and intention.
- Chooses the direction of travel and exits the wave under control.
- Can effectively swim and move their kayak to shore when capsized in the surf zone or performs a re-entry and roll.
- Demonstrates appropriate rescue and towing skills and moves rescue to an area of less risk when necessary.

**Developing Skills:** Has knowledge of, and can perform, sea kayak surfing moves in Level 4 conditions.

## Venue Specific: Rock Gardens and Sea Caves

**Level 4 Competency:** The paddler uses forecasting tools with charts and maps to predict appropriate locations for rock garden and sea cave exploration. They demonstrate the ability to paddle through rock gardens and sea caves safely and efficiently. They can self-rescue in rock gardens, perform assisted rescues, and tow where and when appropriate.

**Assessed Skills:**

- Identify the zones of a rock garden (safe zones, transition zones, danger zones, play features).
- Is appropriately equipped for paddling in rock gardens.
- Demonstrates the ability to traverse zones of a rock garden safely.

- Demonstrates the ability to run an appropriate play feature (for example, rock slot, pour-over).
- Demonstrates the ability to explore sea caves safely.
- Demonstrates the ability to both land on and launch from the rocks.
- Demonstrate appropriate rescue and towing skills and moves rescue to an area of less risk when necessary.
- Transport a swimmer into an area of less risk.
- Convey a swimmer's kayak to an area of less risk.
- Can effectively swim and move their kayak to an area of less risk following a capsize in the rocks.

**Developing Skill:** Uses throwline rescue technique(s) in appropriate situations.

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Date of last revision: 1/10/2024

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