



Level 5: Advanced Open Water Coastal Kayaking Skills Assessment

Assessment Overview

This ACA Skills Assessment course evaluates a participant's ability to perform skills and demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge. The course allows the participant to receive documentation of having achieved a Level 5 level of paddling ability.

Course Prerequisites

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

Course Duration

Two days (16 hours) minimum.

Course Venue

A location with exposure to conditions where an area of retreat is accessible within 2.0 nautical miles of shore. Participants must be assessed while paddling in three of the four conditions below.

- Winds 15 - 25 knots
- Waves 3 - 5 feet (1 - 1.5 meters)
- Surf 3 - 5 feet (1 - 1.5 meters)
- Tidal Current greater than 4 knots

Venue Selection

In addition to the above, the location chosen by the assessor shall be conducive to assessing all skills in the "Core Skills" categories and a combination of at least two "Venue Specific" categories. The venues and associated skills have been set to an equivalent level of challenge, allowing for regional accessibility while maintaining standards. (See Level 5 Skills Assessment Assessor's Guide for further detail).

- Expedition Paddling
- Tide Races
- Surf
- Rock Gardens and Sea Caves

Course Size

3 Participants: 1 Assessor; with an additional qualified assistant, the ratio can be 6 : 2. The maximum number of participants permitted is 6.

Assessor

This assessment course may be offered by Level 5: Advanced Open Water Coastal Kayaking ACA Instructors, Instructor Trainers, or Instructor Trainer Educators.

Preparing for this Assessment

The document "Level 5: Advanced Open Water Coastal Kayaking Training Guidance" provides guidance on how to train for paddling in Level 5 conditions and helps prepare kayakers for this assessment course.

Assessor's Guide and Field Grids

The Level 5: Advanced Open Water Coastal Kayaking Assessor's Guide is the companion document to the Level 5: Advanced 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 5 paddlers. Assessor Guides include guidance on what constitutes Exceeds, Meets, and Below for each skill. Also provided are Single-Paddler or 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 5 Developing Skills (along with "Exceed" for Assessed Skills) should be owned by Level 5 Instructor Candidates.

Level 5: Advanced 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 5 Competency: The paddler purposely maneuvers to make moves and position themselves in Level 5 conditions. They can blend and adjust strokes and incorporate edging fluently to make technical moves. The paddler reflexively utilizes body, boat, and blade to prevent and recover from a near capsized. And, upon capsizing, they consistently execute a successful roll in Level 5 conditions. They demonstrate significant comfort and consistency while applying skills across venues in Level 5 conditions.

Assessed Skills:

- Demonstrates the ability to make progress, turn, and hold their position in differing wind and wave directions.

- Utilizes strokes and maneuvers to reach an intended target, avoid hazards, maintain or shape a course, or accomplish a specific task.
- Incorporates edging and blade support while making technical maneuvers.
- Able to roll from both set-up and non-setup positions on either side of the kayak.

Core: Rescues and Towing

Level 5 Competency: The paddler demonstrates competent rescue and towing skills in Level 5 conditions. They possess a 360-degree sphere of awareness and are present and flexible while under pressure. They understand rescue priorities and can execute situation-appropriate rescues. They move rescues from dynamic water to positions of less risk when necessary and keep the group organized until the risk is no longer imminent.

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 of the following 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.
- Applies one or more of the following towing strategies: In-Line Tow, Rafted In-Line Tow, Anchor Tow, Contact Tow, Bulldozing, Toggle Tow.
- Effectively manages their tow system and can release it under load, both upright and upside down.
- Able to rescue a swimmer 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.
- Demonstrates the role of an active and effective swimmer when rescued.
- Recovers without their primary paddle upon capsizing.

Developing Skills:

- Deploys multiple techniques and strategies for each of the above rescues.

Core: Awareness and Seamanship

Level 5 Competency: The paddler has a heightened awareness of the environment and understands the challenges inherent to Level 5 venues and conditions. They choose appropriate venues and adjust their plans when necessary, demonstrating sound decision-making based on risk/reward analysis. They support group members and help keep others within their limits by communicating and positioning themselves appropriately.

Assessed Skills:

- Understands hydrology of the marine environment and demonstrates the ability to assess and choose appropriate paddling venues.
- Practices Leave No Trace and demonstrates appropriate interactions with the ecosystem and wildlife.
- Understands the causes, prevention, recognition, and treatment of cold and heat-related issues, including hypothermia and hyperthermia.
- Demonstrates appropriate decision-making and flexibility in leadership and followership on the water.
- Demonstrates appropriate group awareness.

- Maintains properly outfitted kayak and has working knowledge of paddling equipment.
- Performs repairs allowing the paddler to safely paddle to an access point.
- 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 5 Competency: The paddler has an incident-prevention mindset both on and off the water. They make good choices and demonstrate competent decision-making. They can lead and assist with managing incidents in Level 5 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 planning and debriefing sessions.
- Launches and lands in a safe manner.
- Communicates and directs others with a calm demeanor in stressful situations.
- 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 5 Competency: The paddler successfully plans, plots, and executes routes in Level 5 conditions and venues. Chosen routes will incorporate a holistic view of all the variables within the venue and contain contingency plans. They demonstrate the ability to adjust their route while underway and paddle to alternate aim points, whether paddling with good or limited visibility.

Assessed Skills:

- Gathers, understands, and utilizes appropriate forecasts (weather, marine, surf, current, and tidal).
- Incorporates wind, waves, and swell direction into route plans and trip choices.
- Incorporates tidal planning and calculations of tide stages, current strength, and drift into route plan and trip choices.
- Plots, plans, and executes a successful "Route Plan" considering variables of the day.
- Demonstrates use of chart and compass when paddling their "Route Plan".
- Understands the Nautical Rules of the Road and aids to navigation, and demonstrates safe paddling in relation to boat traffic.
- Demonstrates the ability to navigate in limited visibility (for example, fog or darkness).

Level 5 Paddler Venue Specific Competencies and Assessed Skills

Assessors shall evaluate the paddler for their competency in two 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 5 Competency: The paddler utilizes knowledge and resources to plan a successful multi-day journey in Level 5 conditions. They make appropriate expedition decisions (landing, launching, camping locations, go/no-go) considering self, paddling group, and anticipated weather and water conditions. They are appropriately equipped for a multi-day journey and can perform all skills in a fully laden kayak.

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.
- Chooses appropriate launching and landing locations based on topography, tides, waves, and character of breaking surf.
- Is appropriately equipped for a multi-day journey in a planned environment and is well-versed in the use of equipment.
- Demonstrates knowledge and proper use of a VHF radio and any appropriate remote communication tool(s) for the expedition location.
- Demonstrates knowledge of emergency planning, ability to coordinate extractions with rescue services, and ability to assist when requested.
- Demonstrates all “Core Skills” with a fully laden kayak.

Venue Specific: Tide Races

Level 5 Competency: The paddler demonstrates an understanding of the tidal environment. They can paddle through a tide race in control and play in the tide race. 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.
- Creates a plan for the tide race.
- Effectively paddles a course through the race and can return to the top of the tide race.
- Demonstrates controlled peel-outs and eddy turns; uses eddy line to enact directional changes.
- Demonstrates use of forward and reverse ferry glides to reach an intended target.
- Demonstrates the ability to attain around a headland or other obstruction.
- Demonstrates control while surfing waves in a tide race.
- Demonstrate appropriate rescue and towing skills and moves rescue to an area of less risk when necessary.
- Completes a journey across the current requiring calculation of tidal drift using vector analysis.

Venue Specific: Surf

Level 5 Competency: The paddler demonstrates the use of forecasting tools in combination with charts and maps to predict areas of surf and breaking waves. They demonstrate control while launching, landing, paddling through Level 5 surf zones, and while surfing. They can self-rescue in the surf, perform assisted rescues, and towing where and when appropriate.

Assessed Skills:

- Identifies surf zone features and hazards.
- Develops a strategy for surfing breaks with various wave characteristics.
- Is aware of surf etiquette and applies concepts with situational awareness and appropriate positioning.
- Is appropriately equipped for paddling in the surf.
- Demonstrates control while launching, paddling through the surf, and landing.
- Demonstrates control while surfing and exiting the wave.
- Demonstrates appropriate assisted rescue and towing skills specific to the surf zone.
- Demonstrates appropriate self-rescue skills specific to the surf zone.

Venue Specific: Rock Gardens and Sea Caves

Level 5 Competency: The paddler demonstrates the use of forecasting tools in combination with charts and maps to predict appropriate locations for rock gardens and sea cave exploration. They select and run play features and can paddle through rock gardens and sea caves safely and efficiently. They can self-rescue in rock gardens, perform assisted rescues, and towing where and when appropriate.

Assessed Skills:

- Identifies zones and features 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 land on and launch from the rocks.
- Demonstrates appropriate rescue and towing skills and moves rescue to an area of less risk when necessary.
- Transports a swimmer into an area of less risk.
- Conveys 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.
- Demonstrates use of throwline rescue technique(s) from the kayak and land.

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This curriculum is managed by the ACA Coastal Kayaking Committee. To connect with the leadership of this committee, please view the SEIC Committee rosters on [the ACA website](#).