

The fact is that very few recreational boaters know much of anything about the maritime “rules of the road,” described in the official Coast Guard publication, *Amalgamated International & U.S. Inland Navigation Rules*.

And in truth, there's really not that much you *need* to know of those rules in order to safely operate a private boat on most lakes, rivers and coastal waters. You can manage just fine, for instance, without knowing offhand that air-cushion vessels operating in non-displacement mode must exhibit an all-round flashing yellow light. But there are a few basic right of way concepts any responsible boaters should know by heart.

Navigation Rules to Know

Of course, like the rules of automobile traffic, the Navigation Rules don't really work too well unless most or all skippers follow them — and, again, not many do. On the other hand, that's no excuse for not learning them and at least making a good-faith attempt to follow them yourself. If nothing else, if you're involved in a collision, you'll be a lot better off if you know the rules that governed the situation and can prove — or at least argue persuasively — that you were following them.

Here, in plain English, are some of the most important rules:

1. If two powerboats are crossing in such a way that they might collide, the vessel that has the other on its starboard side is the give-way vessel.

For example, if there's another boat off your starboard bow that's going to cross your path, it's your responsibility to stay out of its way. In most cases, that means either turning to starboard or slowing down so that you'll cross behind the other vessel.

On the other hand, if a vessel that you're going to cross paths with is on your port side, that makes you the stand-on vessel, which means it's your responsibility to maintain course and speed and let the other vessel do the necessary maneuvering to avoid a collision or close call.

Of course, this is one of those situations in which knowing the rules doesn't do much good if the skipper of the other vessel doesn't know them, and the Nav Rules allow for that, saying that the stand-on vessel "may ... take appropriate action to avoid collision ... as soon as it becomes apparent that the vessel required to keep out of the way is not taking appropriate action ..." Regardless, when in a crossing situation, you should at least start by trying to follow the rules.

2. In a head-on meeting situation, just like on the highway, you should always attempt to pass an oncoming vessel port-to-port by altering your own course to starboard.

There are situations where passing starboard-to-starboard makes more sense, but port-to-port should be your default approach.

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3. When you're overtaking a vessel traveling in the same direction, the

other vessel always, always has the right of way

Technically, overtaking is defined as “coming up with another vessel from a direction more than 22.5 degrees abaft her beam.”

If it's even close, though, assume that you're an overtaking vessel, meaning it is entirely up to you to avoid a collision. Even if the vessel you're passing makes a sudden turn across your bow as you pass, resulting in a collision, that collision is completely your fault.

4. Sailing vessels have the right of way over power-driven vessels.

But that's not as simple as it sounds. A “sailing vessel” as defined by the Nav Rules is *not* any boat with a mast and some sails, as some sailboat skippers seem to believe. Instead, a sailing vessel is, “any vessel under sail provided that propelling machinery, if fitted, is not being used.” In other words, if the engine is running, it's a powerboat, whether the sails are hoisted or not.

The powerboat is the give-way vessel no matter which side the sailboat is on.

In practical terms, powerboats have to get out of the way of any sailboat that's actually sailing — even if the powerboat is just drifting with the engine(s) off. The only situations in which a sailboat under sail has to change course or speed to avoid a powerboat are when the powerboat is anchored or tied to the shore, and when the sailboat is overtaking the powerboat.

The sailboat/powerboat rules trump the crossing situation rules in #1 above. If a powerboat is in a crossing situation with a boat under sail, the powerboat is the give-way vessel no matter which side the sailboat is on.

5. Paddle craft have no special privileges.

According to the Nav Rules, kayaks and SUPs are subject to rules #1, #2 and #3 above, just like powerboats. They are not provided any special right of way privileges like those of sailing vessels. That's of course not an excuse to scare or endanger paddlers; common sense should tell you to use extra caution around them.

On the other hand, if you are a paddler yourself, always, always keep in mind that you have to follow the same rules as powerboats. By cutting across a channel and expecting powerboats to do whatever is necessary to avoid you, you're not only endangering yourself and other boaters but also violating the Nav Rules.

6. Take early, positive actions to avoid collisions.

In virtually any of the above situations, it's important for the give-way vessel or, in the case of a head-on situation, both vessels, to take clear action right away. According to the Nav Rules, "Any alteration of course and/or speed to avoid collision shall ... be large enough to be readily apparent to another vessel observing visually or by radar; a succession of small alterations of course and/or speed should be avoided." Course alterations should be "positive" and "made in ample time."

Know what you're supposed to do and do it decisively.

In other words, know what you're supposed to do and do it decisively, rather than waiting to see what the other boater is going to do, which can lead to potentially dangerous little "sidestepping" games where both operators act like people trying to pass one another in a narrow hallway.

7. Don't let a basic knowledge of the rules take precedence over plain old common sense.

Again, only a tiny minority of weekend boaters know anything at all about the rules of navigation. Never assume that just because you know what you're supposed to do in a given situation, the other boater(s) involved do too.

Instead, use the rules as a starting point in determining your actions and adhere to them if possible, but be ready to do whatever is necessary to prevent collisions.
