

What paddle should I buy? Where should I use it?

Well I shall start this article with a kind of disclaimer. Everyone has a favourite paddle and they will use it whenever they can, and each paddler will also have a preferred material and they will wax lyrical about it's properties and benefits.

What I am going to do in this article is to describe the features of a few different paddle styles, materials and uses. This isn't to say that they shouldn't be used in other places. As its all down to personal choice. I personally use my Carbon Voyager for pretty much everything, but that's because I accept the trade-offs I am making.

So how do you know when and where they should be used? Read this, think about it and then go out and paddle and find out where you prefer to use which specific paddle. Hopefully the guidance I give will save you some broken paddles and time, But mostly make days out on the water more effortless.



As the above picture shows, the range of paddles is mind boggling. And that is just a tiny selection of what is available. Also, the uses they are intended for and the materials they are made from, is just as diverse. I will start off with blade shapes and will end the article with material choices.

Blade shapes: -

So why is there such a variety of blade shapes? The open canoe has been used all over the world by pretty much all known peoples. Canoes of various materials, whether dug out, birch bark or even papyrus reeds have been found used by all indigenous people the world over. Because of this varied usage, the way that the paddle has been used changed with application, the people using it and the location and water type it is used in. Thus, giving us a full spectrum of shapes that have been developed over generations to be the optimum at what they were used for.

Ottertail:-

Very long and thin blade, similar to a kite shape that has been stretched. The tip of the blade is the thinnest part of the face, this is for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it allows the build up of power to be gradual. As the blade gets deeper in the water more face is used thus eliminating any sudden overpowering of the wrist and forearms. Secondly, it gives finer control on the more “slicey” strokes. This is an excellent blade for deep water paddling as you can effortlessly keep power on and can gently tweak the steering.



Chieftain variant

This variant of the otter tail doesn't taper to the end as much, which means the power comes on a lot quicker and enables you to gain more powerful steering at the J end of the power stroke. Because of this power gain, this paddle is excellent in deep moving water as well as on flat water. And it comes into its own on windy days.

Voyager variant

The voyager variant of the otter tail takes the tradition long thin voyager shape to ultimate lengths. You get the nimble control of the Ottertail, but the power gains are tremendous. The blade is considerable larger in area than its equivalent sized Ottertail. Downside of this is that the tendency is to overload the wrists on long flat-water trips. Great for moving deep water, OR windy Days where power is required, not so good for long flat-water trips.



The below picture shows the differences in the three blades, though the differences appear to be marginal, imagine the effect over the hundreds of paddle strokes you do on a days paddling trip. The otter tail really protects your wrists from sudden loading of power, but the overall power is limited.



Beaver tail

The tear drop shaped paddle is a popular choice of many paddlers. The reason it is so popular is that as a “go anywhere general purpose” paddle it works well. You can use it on deep flat water, as its profile lends itself to “slicey” strokes well, but it can tire your arms quickly due to the speed in which the power builds up.

But where it really outshines most other shapes is on moving water. This is due to the majority of the blade’s surface is in the bottom half of the blade, so when it is only half put in the water you still get a majority of the possible power, excellent for shallow moving water uses. Great for putting power on quickly when needed. Excellent choice for a bow paddler as part of a tandem crew.



Sugar island

The sugar island is a wide shortish blade shape that puts power on quickly and works well in shallow water. On flat water it is ok, but not as relaxing for the wrists or forearms. As part of a tandem crew it is fantastic for the bow paddler, as aggressive steering strokes, which used in the bow, are excellent with this type of paddle.

Quite often these have a bent shaft for tandem paddling. My Article on Tandem paddling will cover that though.

Voyager

Very similar to the sugar island, but the blade is less wide and tends to be slightly longer. This is the blade shape that is used in most general-purpose paddles, as it works ok on flat water, and does a good job on moving water. The power builds up quickly, so allows for fast acceleration but due to the longer slightly thinner shape allows for a more gentle build-up of pressure on the arms than the sugar island.



What material?

Paddles are made out of nearly as many products as there are shapes of paddles. Each has various characteristics that makes them useful and worthwhile trying. For simplicity I will stick with the main ones, being wood, plastic and composite.

Wood.

This is a gorgeous material to have a paddle made out of. A well-made wood paddle is a durable piece of kit, that feels nice in the hand, is lightweight and looks stunning. The benefits of wood are: -

- Variety of shape
- Lightweight
- Warmth
- Feel of the water through the paddle
- Durability

The problem with wood is that it needs to be looked after.

In my opinion the best wooden paddles are unvarnished and just require protecting with regular applications of linseed oil or Danish oil. I say this because they are less likely to Rot, as water doesn't get trapped underneath the varnish.

Varnished paddles require less day to day looking after, but once the varnish is cracked or worn through, the water can be drawn into the paddle and can then rot the paddle from the inside out, as it is difficult to dry the paddle out.

Composite

Materials such as Fibreglass, Kevlar and carbon fibre. These paddles can be formed into a large variety of shapes and uses and due to their nature are fairly durable and extremely lightweight.

Benefits of composite are: -

- Lightweight
- Feel of the water through the paddle
- Durability
- Wide ranging shapes available



The downside of most composite paddles though is the cost of them. They can cost a lot more than their wood or plastic counterparts although they last longer, with far far less maintenance.

Plastic

Plastic paddles tend to be mass produced vacuum formed paddles, these are cheap, fairly durable and therefore what most people start off with.

Benefits of plastic: -

- Cheap
- durable

the main problem with plastic is that it is dead to the feel. What I mean by this is that you cannot feel the water and changes in pressure through the paddle as easily as wood or composite, and to make it strong they tend to have ridges along the centre of the blade, which makes slicing strokes extremely hard to achieve.



So what paddle and what material? Well I have a composite voyager, a plastic sugar island, a wooden beaver tail, a wooden chieftain and a wooden voyager variant as my main selection of paddles. This covers most eventualities, I think. Which is my favourite? Well it depends on where I am paddling and what I want to achieve. Yeah I may use one paddle in not as an ideal location, but I accept the trade-off but knowing the characteristics allows me to make that choice.

The biggest advice I can give is to say” paddle with as many paddles as you can before you buy.”