

Skills Article ~ Loosen Up: Hand Grip for Kayakers

by Jay Gitomer

Excerpted from [The Proper Paddler: Posture & Body Mechanics for Kayakers](#)

There are a lot of elements of body mechanics to consider when paddling. Some we talk about a lot, like rotation. Some we touch on less often. But since everything in our bodies is connected, things that might seem small can actually have a big impact on health and efficiency.

Hand position is an example of a subtle posture that ripples throughout the body. They're just hands, hanging out at the ends of our arms, and we don't think much about them. However, making a single change can lead to more pleasurable paddles, more efficient technique, and a longer future enjoying our sport. A loose grip on the paddle is more important than it might seem.

Clutching the paddle is the main cause of paddler's wrist, the repetitive stress injury that is right up there with torn rotator cuffs when it comes to sidelining a paddler. It's common enough to have a fancy name: De Quervain's syndrome. De Quervain's happens when overused tendons become inflamed, and it takes a long time to subside. De Quervain's makes turning a doorknob, lifting a can of beer, or taking a stroke painful and wobbly.

Tension in the hands creates a ripple effect throughout the body. Make a fist right now, pretend to take a few paddle strokes, and take an inventory of what's happening with the rest of your body. Your arm muscles become tight all the way to the shoulders. Your pecs and lats are probably also tight. It takes more energy to paddle with tight torso muscles than with a loose, relaxed body. That's important because if we want to paddle far, we need to paddle efficiently, only employing the fewest muscles needed at any time. Also, we want to be loose and relaxed all over because the upper body needs to be able to function independently from the lower half so that we can edge and drive the boat with our feet while we also rotate our torsos and manipulate the paddle. That's a lot of complex action, all of which can be eased by the simple action of opening one's hands.

Holding the paddle tightly cocks the wrists. Bent wrists absorb the entire impact of the stroke. Ouch. We're right back to tendinitis. A bent wrist doesn't allow a paddler to put the full force of his body into each stroke; instead, only the amount of force that the wrist joint can tolerate is transferred to the blade. That means that the entire effort of the whole body, from the foot pushing the peg to the torso rotation to the raising of the paddle, is shorted out at the point where the body meets the blade, so the stroke doesn't provide all of the boat movement that it could. It's like running on tiptoes.

Technique is also affected by grip. When your hands are clenched on the shaft, there's a tendency to put your weight on the paddle. If your weight is on the paddle and your hands slip, you can lose your balance and sometimes end up swimming – or, at least, feeling less secure, which isn't fun. Hands that are loose on the shaft also might slip, but since your weight isn't on the paddle, your balance won't be affected. Keep your hands loose and your weight in your seat.

On a related note, holding the paddle tightly can be a sign that a paddler is arm-paddling rather than using torso rotation. Imagine paddling with no rotation, using just your arms. What would your hands be doing? The angle of movement when arm-paddling demands a tighter grip -- without the torso driving the paddle across the body, the lower wrist has to cock and the lower hand has to close around the shaft. So if you catch yourself clutching the paddle, check to be sure that you're really rotating.

So far, we've focused solely on the negative consequences of a tight grip. There isn't much to say on the prescriptive side, though, because it's so simple: relax your hands.

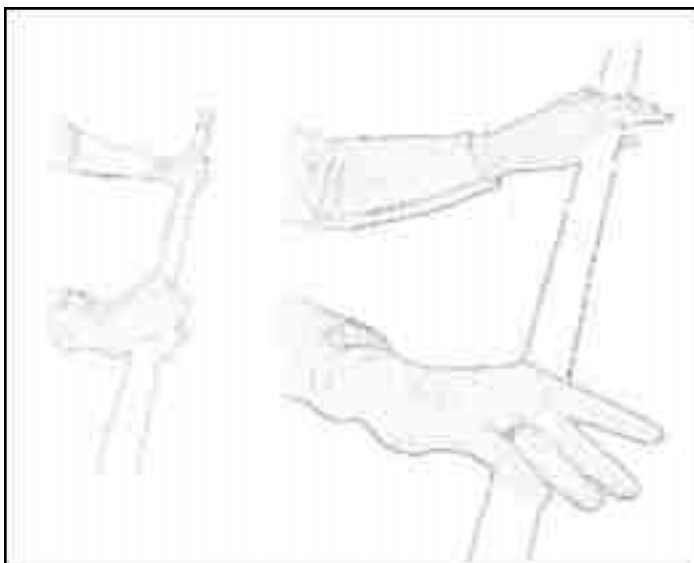


Figure 1 Incorrect vs. Correct Paddle Grip

The upper hand is open and pushing. The paddle shaft is in contact with the pad of the hand and is supported by the V formed between the thumb and hand. The lower hand forms a gentle hook. If this is hard to get the hang of, try paddling with a pinky finger raised. Occasionally do a check by wiggling your fingers. If you can wiggle all your fingers on both hands in mid-stroke, your hands are relaxed.

Wrists should be in a straight line with the hands. Those of you who participate in racquet sports, shooting sports, or weight lifting are already familiar with the mechanics. Straight wrists allow the impact of each stroke to be dissipated throughout the body. That protects the wrists from repetitive stress injuries and allows the full force of each stroke to be transferred to the blade.

That was a lot of words to talk about something as simple as hand position. It's not so simple, after all, though, because they're not just hands; they're the point at which the body connects with the paddle, our primary tool for forward propulsion.

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To find out about other physical adjustments you can make to improve your paddling experience, please check out <http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/jaygitomer>.

Jay Gitomer is the owner-operator of [Blue World Paddlesports](#) and the organizer of [Babes with Blades All-Women, No-Yelling Paddling Events](#). She is known for her creative, fun approach to training. Jay is an ACA Level 3 Coastal Kayak Instructor, BCU UKCC Level 1 Paddlesports Coach, and BCU 4-Star Leader. Jay sits on the Advisory Committee of the Safety Education and Instruction Council of the American Canoe Association and also founded and runs the [Baltimore Boards](#) paddleboard club. She is a former coordinator of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association and currently volunteers with Team River Runner to help wounded service people.

REVIEWER'S COMMENTS

Alison Sigethy: Yeah Jay! I couldn't agree more—a relaxed body is a must for good paddling technique, and it is impossible to be relaxed if you have a death grip on the paddle. When I was learning to paddle, one of my favorite paddling instructors, Mitch Mitchell, said to hold the paddle like a banana—tight enough you don't drop it, but no tighter. I've always remembered that, and like the image.

I'm not sure I understand or agree with Jay's comment about your hands being more likely to slip on a tightly gripped paddle, but since I am in total agreement that you shouldn't grip your paddle tightly anyway, it probably doesn't matter.

Loose is good. On flat water, I almost always hold my paddle like I'm making an okay sign—I have plenty of paddle control but my body stays loose and fluid. This makes paddling more effective and more enjoyable. Anything that works to keep you relaxed is worth trying. I will often have students who are hard on themselves, or just thinking too much, listen to music while paddling. Music also helps you find a rhythm and paddle more gracefully.

I remember hearing a sportscaster say great athletes, when they are at their best, will often lose their mouth guards because their jaw is so relaxed. While I don't know how true that is, I do know we tend to clench our jaw when we tense up, so I'd like to add another favorite technique. When you are learning something new, or pushing your comfort zone, SMILE! It's impossible to be tense when you smile.

Mitch Mitchell: Great article by Jay. I often take students into rough water conditions, and I can always tell their comfort level by looking at their hands. A death grip signals to me that the student is tense, and not until I can get them to loosen their grip do they begin to relax the rest of their muscles and begin to go with the flow and react to the conditions.

Another important factor of a relaxed grip is that with most strokes it causes you to present your blade face in the proper orientation for the stroke you are performing. With a tight grip not only is there very little feedback from your blade but you may be compensating from an improper blade angle. We see this every day at our rental location where someone is holding their asymmetrical blade upside down and since it wants to flutter in this position they compensate by clamping down on the grip.

CPA's 16th Annual SK102 Skills Clinic April 25-27, 2014, Lake Anna, Virginia

SK102 is CPA's on-water skills clinic weekend.

SK102 offers on-the-water skills classes covering wet exits, basic strokes, basic and advanced rescues, stroke improvement, rolling and more. Additional on land courses cover topics like navigation, kayak camping, etc. SK102 is designed to get teach beginner or intermediate kayakers the skills they need to be kayak safely, including proper paddling technique to minimize the risk of stress or repetitive injury and how to rescue themselves or their kayaking partners. It's also a heck of a lot of fun.

How to register: You must register by **March 29, 2014** on our website: <http://www.cpakayaker.com/sk102/>. SK102 sells out every year with a significant waitlist. New paddlers and especially those who attend SK101 receive priority for SK102 registration.

Where: Lake Anna is 2 hours south of Washington DC. The lake is a nuclear power plant cooling pond, so the water is not only very clear, it is heated – allowing you to practice wet exits, rescues, and rolling in warm water in early spring! The location is private property on which you are welcome to camp.

Cost: \$47, which includes the cost of two days of all volunteer instruction, camping on-site, morning coffee, Saturday night dinner, porta-potties and a one year CPA membership.

For more information, please email Catriona M. at SK102.CPA@gmail.com. Pictures of last year's event are visible here: <https://picasaweb.google.com/cpakayaker/2013SK102>.

