



USROWING SAFETY GUIDELINES

Effective Date: December 1, 2022

These guidelines are a resource for rowing coaches and administrators as you design or update your rowing safety program. They cover basic information that every organization needs in their safety protocols and should be adapted to fit your venue.

Use these guidelines in concert with the [USRowing Safety Audit Checklist](#) as a foundation to ensure your club is safe.

For questions or comments, please email Thomas.Rooks@usrowing.org

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Organizations

The items below are the responsibility of a rowing organization's management.

Safety Committee

Appoint a Safety Committee and/or Safety Officer to Develop and annually review all safety rules, protocols, and procedures including but not limited to:

- Safe practices to prevent incidents and accidents
- Create a waterway map with traffic patterns and hazards
- How to respond to on and off water emergencies
- How to report and track injuries, incidents, and equipment damage
- Review safety plan and/or emergency action plan annually
- Educate all members on the guidelines including but not limited to local area familiarization, on-water response procedures, the club's safety boat operation, and communications standards
- Post all safety information and any alerts, bulletins, or changes on organizational website, at the boathouse or through other means (e.g., club management software, social media).

Checklist

The Safety Committee should periodically complete the USRowing Safety Audit Checklist to ensure that practices are followed, safety equipment is in the proper place, and in good order

Training & Standards

Ensure all coaches and staff are up to date on any required: boating licenses, background checks, First Aid/CPR, and any other requirements necessary for compliance with local, state, federal law, or club policies.

Make sure all coaches can complete the organization's required safety responses, emergency actions, and athlete-in-the-water rescue procedures.

Coaches & Staff

These items are the responsibility of coaches and anyone else connected to the organization that performs a leadership role associated with these areas

Training & Education

Review club standard operating procedures with all coaches, rowers, and coxswains on a regular basis, ideally before every season.

Coaches and anyone responsible for providing assistance should have current First Aid, CPR, and AED certification. Visit the [American Red Cross](#) to learn more.

Coaches (and anyone driving a launch) should have a current boater safety certificate. Visit USRowing's [Safety Information Links](#) to learn more.

All safety boat operators should be trained and demonstrate the ability to operate safely on the club's waterway.

Have coaches practice response procedures on the water including approaching the boat and man-overboard recovery procedures.

This should include but not be limited to local area familiarization, on-water response procedures, the club's safety boat operation, and communications standards.

SafeSport

All coaches, administrators, and support staff must comply with USRowing [SafeSport](#) requirements.

Logbook

Each organization should have a logbook (digital or paper) for keeping tracks of what boats are on the water, where and when. It should be kept in a prominent location. Cite how, and by whom, the book will be monitored.

Entries should minimally specify the date, time launching, boat size (e.g., 4+, 2-) boat name, coach/coxswain/sculler name(s), anticipated return time, and, upon return, actual time. Have a plan to address a boat not logged back in. Everyone should sign out and then back in, every row.

The logbook should have a separate area of reporting boat damage incurred. Designate who is responsible for repair, as well as what is damaged, and be clear if boat is not row-able.

Incident Reports

The reporting coach/administrator should file a report at the earliest opportunity. Please utilize the USRowing Incident Reporting form available on the USRowing [Safety](#) page. Keep a copy in your organization's files.

Docks and Ramps

Keep docks and ramps clear of all extraneous items: riggers, slings, shoes, clothing, fishing gear, bird droppings, water bottles. Athletes can fall or trip. Keep watch for any protruding hardware, nails, unsafely warped planks, or gaps between docks.

The Waterway

Develop a traffic pattern map for your waterway and post it in a prominent location. Communicate the rules to all coaches, coxswains, and rowers.

List any known hazards, and hazardous areas to be avoided.

If yours is a shared waterway with other rowing clubs, coordinate with them to determine a safe traffic pattern.

List any safe havens (safe to dock or beach in an emergency).

List all boat ramps and/or known locations on land for rescuers in an emergency.

Emergency landing sites, contacts and phone numbers should be with any coach or safety launch operator at all times, including street addresses for potential landing locations if you need to call for help. Rescuers need land-based locations.

Athletes

All athletes (rowers and coxswains) associated with an organization are responsible for completing the items below.

Swim Test

All athletes must pass a supervised swim test or complete the organization's swim test verification form.

Organizations should keep a file of all swim test documentation.

Have a lifeguard perform the test, not the coach.

The coach should observe the test, and make note of weak swimmers.

At minimum, athletes should demonstrate the ability to float and/or tread water for ten minutes, and put on a life jacket while floating.

NOTE: If an athlete cannot swim, they must wear a PFD in the shell at all times.

Medical

All clubs should recommend that athletes consult with their primary care manager before starting or re-joining the sport.

All athletes should alert the organization and coach to any existing medical conditions.

If a medical condition exists, a document from primary care should be supplied, specifying restrictions and limitations. If an athlete might need medication during practice, such as inhaler, have onboard with coxswain.

Flip Test

All 1x scullers should be able to safely remove a single scull from the rack, get oars, navigate launching the boat, turn the boat around, flip the boat and re-enter it, return to dock, and return the boat to the rack.

Terminology

Before getting into a boat, all athletes must understand the basic boat nomenclature and rowing terminology including:

Bow, stern, port, and starboard. Athletes should know the number of their seat, the stroke position, bow person, and seat numbers in between.

"Weigh enough", "Sit Ready", "Back", "Tie-in, Un-tie."

When a coxswain or coach wants a crew to stop immediately, the term is "Weigh enough! Hold water!". When someone gives the command "Weigh enough! Hold water," rowers must respond immediately, square the blades in the water and bring the boat to a halt.

First Aid

All members of the club should be familiar with the location of first aid kits, AEDs, and any other venue or club-specific safety equipment or practices.

USRowing Safety Video

USRowing strongly recommends that all schools and clubs require their rowers, coaches and coxswains to view the [USRowing Safety video](#) with a coach present, before each rowing season.

NOTE: Following the film credits is the *Coaches and Administrators* section with more information about safety plans and heat and cold related emergencies.

Rowing Conditions

These items relate to the conditions for rowing. Each region, waterway, and organization will have different needs and risks regarding weather and water conditions. However, all organizations should assess these areas.

Overall Weather

Risks

Weather can change quickly. Even experienced crews can be in danger, depending on circumstances.

Precautions/Prevention

Assess the situation before you launch. Check the weather before going out on the water. There are several free and/or inexpensive means of determining if weather is safe for rowing. These include but are not limited to local weather websites, mobile phone apps, and devices like lightning alert pagers. With many of those resources there are also settings for lightning or wind that give an alert at a given distance or changing conditions.

Response

Different threats may require specific responses. In consideration of weather and risk, consider the experience and ability of the crew and type and size of the shell used. (e.g., in safe but imperfect conditions, more experienced crews and more oars on the water may lead to a safer experience). However, always err on the side of caution.

Changing Conditions

Risks

Boats capsizing, hazards in the water, waves.

Precautions/Prevention

Do not launch if unsafe change is forecast or likely. On the water, pay attention to changing conditions. Watch for gathering clouds, changes in wind speed and direction, temperature changes and other boats returning home. If on a river or tidal body of water, check current direction and speed by looking at floating objects, buoys, or other means.

Response

Different threats may require specific responses. In consideration of weather and risk, consider the experience and ability of the crew and type and size of the shell used. (e.g., in safe but imperfect conditions, more experienced crews and more oars on the water may lead to a safer experience). However, always err on the side of caution.

Wind

Risks

Boats capsizing, boat swamping, inability to maintain safe steering.

Precautions/Prevention

Do not launch in high winds. Use extreme caution. If sudden winds come up, return to the boathouse if the trip is safe, or take the boat to the nearest shore and wait for the winds to calm.

Response

Get back to the boathouse or, if too far, get to a safe shore.

Fog

Risks

Collision, hitting hazards, getting lost

Precautions/Prevention

Do not launch in fog with less than 100 yards visibility. Check weather forecasts for predicted fog during your rowing session. Be sure to have land reference points, which can help the athletes get oriented as to location and proximity to the boathouse.

Response

If fog sets in while you are on the water, move slowly, and be prepared to stop quickly. Use a loud sound making device (cox box, horn, or whistle) to advise other boats of your location as you take your boat to shore, following the shore back to the boathouse. Lights can help your visibility and are required in fog as per the International and Inland Navigation Rules.

Darkness

Risks

Collision, hitting hazards, getting lost.

Precautions/Prevention

Know times for sunrise and sunset. Great care should be taken when rowing in darkness or near-darkness including:

- Take extra care to look and listen. Minimize conversation.
- Be careful not to get too close to shore or known hazards.
- Only row in familiar waters while rowing at dusk, dawn, or in the dark.
- Recreational vessels are required to display navigation lights between sunset and sunrise and during periods of restricted visibility (fog, rain, haze, etc.). Lighting should be visible enough to warn approaching vessels.
- The bow of every boat should have a red light on the port side and green light on the starboard side, and a white stern light. If lighting is needed during a period of unexpected, restricted visibility, use any means available in time to prevent a collision.

Note: For any additional questions or more information about vessel lighting please refer to the Navigation Rules or applicable state/federal boating regulations.

Response

Do not launch in darkness without appropriate lighting. If lost, communicate with the coach or anyone who can assist.

Lightning & Thunder

Risks

Danger to anyone on the water, coaches, and crews.

Precautions/Prevention

- Do not row in an electrical storm.
- There are mobile phone apps and inexpensive lightning detectors that can alert a coach or athlete if there is a lightning strike in your area.
- If you are on the water and see lightning, hear thunder, or notice your hair standing on end with static electricity, head for the nearest shore immediately.
- If the storm is upon you, take your boat ashore, get out of the boat, and wait for the storm to pass.
- Do not load boats on a trailer or handle boats on land in an electrical storm.
- If you are about to launch and hear thunder or see lightning, or quickly darkening skies, do not launch.

Response

Get out of the water immediately. Do not handle boats, riggers, or load/unload a trailer.

Tides & Currents

Risks

Boat may capsize, run aground, be unable to steer, and strike normally submerged objects.

Precautions/Prevention

If your waterway is tidal, check high and low tides and be aware of unsafe conditions. High tide may bring waves, tidal change may create strong, dangerous currents. Low tide may strand your boat. Hazards may surface more readily in low tide. Be aware of the tide height if low bridges are on your route.

Response

Do not launch if tidal circumstances are extreme. If caught in high current or shifting tides, get back to the boathouse if safe, or get to shore.

Heat

Risks

Bodily response, heat exhaustion, heat stroke, physical responses. Hyperthermia occurs when there is an increase in body temperature, usually when air temperature is above 76 degrees, and the victim is exposed to sun and heat in combination with a decrease in fluids. It may occur when sweat cannot easily evaporate; the body is being heated by the environment; or water loss from sweat and respiration is not replaced, and dehydration occurs.

Precautions/Prevention

- Plan activity level consistent with the degree of heat and humidity. Avoid mid-day rowing as much as possible.
- Maintain a high fluid level. Drink water before leaving the dock and frequently while on the water. Take an individual water bottle for easy access.
- Avoid sunburn by using sunscreen and wear a hat or visor to keep the sun off the face and out of the eyes.
- Wear lightweight, light-colored, moisture-wicking clothing.
- Remain in the shade or air conditioning when off the water.

Response

Minimize strenuous effort if the crew exhibits signs of heat exhaustion. Get the crew out of the direct sun if possible. Two serious conditions may result from overexposure to heat:

- Heat Exhaustion: Signs are throbbing headache, nausea, cool skin, chills, sweaty, and pale pulse. Response is to drink water, shade from sun, and treat for shock.
- Heat Stroke: Life threatening; signs are behavior changes, unconsciousness, hot but not sweaty, flushed warm skin and rapid pulse. Response is to douse with cool water, shade from sun, fan, ensure the airway is open, get medical assistance as soon as possible.

Cold

Risks

Hypothermia occurs when a victim is subject to cold temperatures, cold water, ice or snow. There is potential danger for hypothermia when water temperature is below 80 degrees and very dangerous when water temperature is below 50 degrees.

Precautions/Prevention

Hypothermia can occur without the victim being in the water, as rowing in extremely cold weather can cause symptoms. Initial symptoms include feeling cold, turning bluish, and shivering; those symptoms may be followed by numbness, apathy, lethargy, disorientation, and loss of mental capacity.

- When air is below 40 degrees and/or water is below 50 degrees, keep a launch within 100 yards of all shells.
- Organizations should further develop standards specific for their region. Some organizations stop all on-the-water activity, some enforce the four-oar-rule for increased boat stability and safety.
- Make sure the coxswain is warm but safe. They are not moving. Many layers of clothing are not safe as they can increase the likelihood of drowning if a boat flips. Anti-exposure coveralls like a Mustang Survival suit are a better warming option.

Response

If someone exhibits signs of hypothermia and they are cold and shivering:

- Get them out of the water quickly. Heat loss is 25 times greater when in the water.
- If unable to get a person out of the water, have them huddle with others. Keep as much of the body out of the water as possible.
- Move to shelter quickly, remove wet clothing and re-warm the body. In mild hypothermia conditions, re-warm in a shower, tub or with warm blankets.
- Do not give any liquids to drink, treat for shock.
- Continue to re-warm and always obtain medical assistance as soon as possible.

If someone exhibits signs of hypothermia and their shivering has stopped:

- Call or assign someone to call for EMS.
- Treat as above but DO NOT RE-WARM EXTREMITIES!
- If the victim is no longer shivering, the torso must be re-warmed to avoid circulation of cold blood to the heart. This can kill. Wrap the victim in a warm blanket and apply heat to the underarms and groin area; wrap again in a separate blanket. Wrap each arm and leg separately to prevent rapid re-circulation of blood to the heart. Hot packs should not be placed directly on the victim, a thin layer should be used to protect the victim from burning.
- Administer CPR if necessary. Always obtain medical assistance as soon as possible.
- In a situation of cold-water immersion, be aware that in very cold-water people have survived as long as one hour underwater. Recover a victim immediately and even though there may be no sign of life, administer CPR efforts until medical assistance is obtained.

Wakes & Waves

Risks

Capsizing, swamping, getting off course.

Precautions/Prevention

If the water is too rough, do not launch. Waves are generated by winds, tides, currents, or wakes from passing boats. Because shells are vulnerable to high waves, specific care is needed with approaching wakes.

Response

If an approaching wake is higher than the gunwale, the shell should be turned parallel to the wake to avoid having part of the shell unsupported by the water. It is possible to split a shell under these conditions. Rowers should stop rowing and lean away from the approaching wake, with oars on the wake side lifted slightly.

If the wakes are lower than the gunwale and widely spaced, continue to row without adjusting course. Deep and closely spaced wakes that are lower than the gunwale may be taken at a 90° angle with the bow directly toward them.

Turning in waves can be tricky; allow plenty of room, energy, and time.

Equipment

A rowing organization's equipment is key to preventing and responding to problems. The items below are not an exhaustive list. Please consider the full range of equipment your club uses and treat all of it with equal care. Keep all equipment well-maintained and safe including: boats, oars, launches, racks, riggers, ergs, and boat trailers.

Each person is responsible for the safe condition of the boat and specifically, their own oar, rigging, foot stretchers, seat, and slide.

Before launching, check the following:

- Nuts on the rigging are tight, position of foot stretchers and the smoothness of slide are acceptable.
- The forward end of the slide should be blunt and unable to gouge calves.
- Heel ties on shoes must be firmly connected, correct length of 3" and in good condition. Being able to quickly remove feet is critical especially if boat flips. (If using mules or quick-release shoes, make sure they are in working order).
- Clothing cannot become entangled in your seat or oar handle.
- Proper safety devices are on the shell, such as lights, PFD if unaccompanied, cell phone in watertight container, water.
- Check the bow ball to make sure it is white and securely fastened. A bow ball can save lives.

Coaching/Safety Launch

The coaching/safety launch should be equipped with:

- Enough life jackets (PFDs) for each rower and coxswain under the coach's care.
- Every person in the launch should be wearing a PFD. For information on types, proper use, fitting of life jackets, see [US Coast Guard approved life jackets \(PFDs\)](#).
- A paddle for the coaching/safety launch itself. waterproof First Aid kit, emergency blankets, type IV throwable PFD, a sound producing device (horn/whistle).
- An anchor, boat bailers, extra line, fire extinguishers, lights, a rescue throw bag, a flare kit, and other tools may be needed for the locality and conditions.
- Guidance for compliance with federal boating safety regulations can be found here at: [federal safety requirements for recreational boats](#)
- Tool kit for minor rowing equipment repair. Include wrenches, appropriate hardware, tapes, tools, and materials for small repairs. Only minor repairs should be done on the water.
- Keep your engine well-serviced so that it will start and operate with minimal effort. Have a plan in place if a coaching launch runs out of gas or breaks down.
- If the engine has a wearable kill switch, require that it be worn while the launch is in operation. The launch driver must wear the cord that activates the safety/kill switch in accordance with the motor manufacturer's literature. **Passed into law by Congress in April 2021, individuals operating boats under 26 feet long are required to use an engine kill switch.** [Engine/Propulsion Cut-Off Devices \(uscgboating.org\)](#)
- Research your state's requirements and have your launches inspected by your local marine constable or the USCG Auxiliary ([USCGAUX: Vessel Safety Checks](#)). It is an opportunity to develop a relationship and mutual understanding with a crucial safety resource.

Communications Devices

On coastal waterways where marine VHF radios are used, carry a marine VHF radio on each launch. Know the VHF channels ([U.S. VHF Channel Information | Navigation Center \(uscg.gov\)](#)) and procedures ([Radio Information For Boaters | Navigation Center \(uscg.gov\)](#)) that you should use in the event of an emergency.

Cell phones are necessary when VHF radios are not used. 911 is for emergency only.

If using 911 for an emergency, state your land-based reference. Critical time could be lost if the operator must figure out where you are based on waterway references.

Save local emergency numbers in your phone for direct communication.

Meet with your local fire/rescue station or department to discuss your emergency protocols and the activities of your team. This can greatly benefit efficiency and coordination in an emergency.

Boat Trailers

Boat trailers are a critical piece of equipment. Before you load, check: the tires, brakes, hubs, lights, chains, and the towing vehicle itself.

Make sure your driver is well trained. Insurance should cover all drivers as well as equipment. Be sure your route allows trailers. Check the weather, especially ice, fog, and high wind forecast. Do not let drivers drive too many hours per day. A weary driver may not be alert.

Reviews [state and federal regulations](#) and [additional boat trailer information](#) on the USRowing website.

On the Water

Proper supervision protocols must be developed and carried out to ensure the safety of the athletes. **Under no circumstances should athletes who are minors be unsupervised on the water, without a safety launch.**

Rowers in multi-person shells should always be attentive to the coxswain and/or coach.

Shells should stay within hailing distance of their safety launch. The launch has been outfitted to help athletes and/or their shell if it is needed.

All single scullers without supervision should carry a PFD in the boat.

If scullers are not with a coach, using the buddy system is an excellent way to reduce risk.

- A buddy's boat or the launch can help stabilize the rower for the re-entry if capsized.
- A buddy can call for emergency assistance
- If the rower cannot re-enter the boat, have them swim the boat to shore, lying on the stern, using the shell as a paddleboard.
- Or they can abandon the shell and lie on the stern deck of a buddy's boat to be taken to shore. The loss of muscle control can occur very quickly and dramatically in cold water. The stern deck rescue may be the only option.

Emergency Situations

If Boat Capsizes

Stay with the boat. Newer shells have been designed for flotation and have flotation compartments under each rower's bench. Older boats may not have sealed compartments under each rower's bench but bow and stern compartments will keep the boat afloat.

Athletes should not leave their shell unless being rescued immediately. If a swamped boat is within a swim-able, near distance from the shore, the athlete may swim the boat to the shore, staying with the boat.

Caution athletes to not leave the boat, even if the athlete considers themselves a strong swimmer.

Advise the athletes to:

- If in distress, have the crew wave their arms or a shirt above their heads or raise one oar in the air, use a whistle, airhorn, or other noise maker to attract assistance. If in a single use whatever means possible without risking capsizing.
- In the event of a person overboard the immediate command should be "Weigh enough! Hold water."
- If the safety launch can get to the victim first, allow the launch to rescue the victim. If the launch is not in the immediate vicinity, back the shell to the victim and have them hang onto the shell until launch arrives. Another athlete may have to enter the water to assist if the victim is injured.
- If an athlete is injured the immediate command should be "Weigh enough! Hold water!" Signal launch if first aid is needed.
- If the shell is damaged but afloat and not taking on water; Immediate command "Weigh enough! Hold water!" Make adjustments or signal launch for assistance.

If a Coxed Boat Swamps

The immediate command should be "Weigh enough! Hold water!" A shell is swamped when the interior water reaches the gunwales. If the shell has sealed compartments under each rower's bench, it will stay afloat, and the

rowers should stay in the shell. If the athletes are in a boat without sealed compartments (older boats) the flotation ends may cause the boat to break apart, in that case the athletes should follow the procedures listed below:

- Coxswain directs rowers to untie, and by seat number rowers should carefully slip overboard one by one.
- If the boat is taking on excessive water, signal the launch and unload rowers by pairs; starting in the middle of the boat; as soon as possible to avoid damage to the boat. Pairs should form buddies and keep watch of each other. The coxswain should buddy with the stern pair.
- If rescue is not imminent, take the following steps: Remove oars and place them parallel to the shell. All persons should move to the two ends of the shell. It is dangerous to roll a shell when near riggers. Then roll the boat so the hull is up, to form a more stable flotation platform so rowers can either lie on top of the hull or buddies can hold onto each other across the hull. Remember that body heat loss occurs 25 times faster in the water. Do not roll the boat if rescue is on the way.
- A launch can shuttle athletes to the nearest shore. Be careful not to overload the launch.
- When the boat has been brought to the shore, remove the oars. If the ends of the shell have filled with water, they must be drained before the boat can be removed from the water. Lift the shell carefully to avoid injury or damage. A boat full of water is very heavy, so try bailing first, then roll the boat slowly and lift it from the water.
- If the shell breaks apart and begins sinking, the immediate command should be "Untie!" Get out of the boat and follow the same procedures as for a swamped shell. **Do not leave the floating boat.** Swim boat to shore if launch is not immediately present.

When Recovering Athletes from the Water

Instruct athletes how to enter the coaching launch from the water.

Approach from the leeward side, keeping the outboard propeller away from any victims.

Turn off the engine as soon as contact is made. Avoid overloading.

If another boat is in distress near your craft, maneuver your shell to the distressed shell. Assist in any way that does not jeopardize the lives in your shell.

Note: Refer to the capacity limits set by the launch manufacturer. This information is on the launch. Contact Manufacturer if not posted. Stay aware of the capacity, to avoid overloading the launch in an emergency.

Note: All determinations of whether a particular act or practice complies with these safety expectations will be made at the sole discretion of USRowing. **USRowing reserves the right to require additional measures in any given situation based on USRowing's assessment of overall circumstances.**

For more information and demonstrations see the [USRowing Safety Video](#).

ROW SAFE!