

Kayak Paddle Length - Picking the Right Size

By [Tom Watson](#)

Besides knowing what to look for in a kayak, a beginner is also challenged with knowing what is the best paddle length to choose. Opinions vary slightly as to what is the most efficient length for a particular paddler although the range of methods is fairly narrow and commonplace throughout the paddling community. Determining the proper kayaking paddle length to use is based on several factors, from body stature to boat dimensions to paddle stroke preference. Before getting into those dynamics, a few comments on how lengths are expressed.

The industry standard is to use metric units to measure and describe paddle lengths. Tell a fellow kayaker you use a 72.22" paddle and you'll probably get a blank stare. Say you need a 220cm, however, and most everyone will immediately know – and picture – what length you are talking about.

If you are still a little rusty on your innate metric conversion abilities, know this: 2.54 centimeters (cm) = 1". Keep this in mind when you are comparing the difference in length between a 220cm and a 230cm paddle. We are talking 3.9"; that's slightly less than a 2" difference *on each end* - out to the blade tip from the center of the shaft.

Although slight, it can make a modest but accumulative difference when you consider the effects that could result from using a paddle of less (or more) than an optimum length: compromised form, banged knuckles, inefficient paddle angle or power face contact and others. Multiply any of these by a thousand strokes and imagine the potential you are losing each time you execute a stroke using a paddle that's the "wrong" length.



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Here are the major factors that will ultimately suggest the proper paddle length to initially consider:

Body Stature

A good friend of mine is exactly my same height, 6'7" tall. We often turned each other on to new kayaks on the market we could comfortably lower our tall frames down into. Despite our equal height, most of the time a super fine fit for one was an uncomfortable contortion for the other. What's going on? My height is in my legs; his is in his torso.

The length of your torso becomes one of the elements when using your height to determine which paddle length will work best for you. Most tables chart list just your height against various paddle lengths. Taking your torso height into account as well can help reaffirm what the height charts suggest for a proper paddle length.

Measuring Torso Height

Sitting up straight on a flat-seated chair, measure from between legs near crotch straight up to tip of nose. This is your torso height. (*Compiled from tables published by Aqua Bound and Mitchell Paddles*).

<u>Torso Height</u>	<u>Paddle Length</u>	<u>High Angle Style</u>	<u>Low Angle Style</u>
22"	180cm	- - - - -	- - - - -
24"	180-200cm	210cm - 215cm	215cm - 220cm
26"	190-200cm	210cm - 215cm	215cm - 220cm
28"	200-220cm	210cm - 215cm	215cm - 220cm
30"	210-230cm	220cm - 230cm	230cm - 240cm*
32"	220-240cm	230cm	
34"	230-250cm	230cm	
36"	240-250cm	230cm	

* My torso height is 33", I've never used a paddle over 240cm.



Kayak Design

Simply put, the wider the kayak paddled, the longer the paddle needed. In order to keep proper blade placement in the water, you need to be able to reach beyond the gunwales of your craft while maintaining proper paddling form. You don't want to be banging your knuckles on the deck, nor do you want too much or too little of the power face of the blade in the water.

Here again, there are many variables that come into play. A shorter person in a wider boat may need the same length of paddle as does a taller person in a narrower kayak. Paddles in tandem kayaks generally are longer than those used in solo kayaks and so on.

Another factor is the height of the seat surface in relation to the gunwales. Two kayakers of the same torso/height in the same kayak may need different paddles if the seat height was different in each boat.

Stroke Angle Preference

Do you prefer a high stroke that brings the power face closer to the side of the boat in a less acute angle of entry to the water? Or, do you like the lower stroking angle often used for casual touring that puts the shaft at a more acute angle to the surface? The same paddler, in the same kayak, would use a slightly shorter paddle for the former style, slightly longer for the latter.

You can see that finding the ideal or optimal paddle length depends of a variety of factors relating to the physical shape of the paddler, one's individual paddling style and the type of boat with which the paddle will be used. These are all gray areas that limit any black & white statement about which paddle length you should choose.

On-Water Method

By far, the best and ultimate method for determining that ideal length is to get out on the water and paddle using proper techniques in a kayak you will be using with your paddle. Demo days are a great

way to help you test paddle a kayak. Most reps will be able to suggest a starting length of paddle for you to try. Once you find a boat you like, you may want to try a few different lengths of paddles as well.

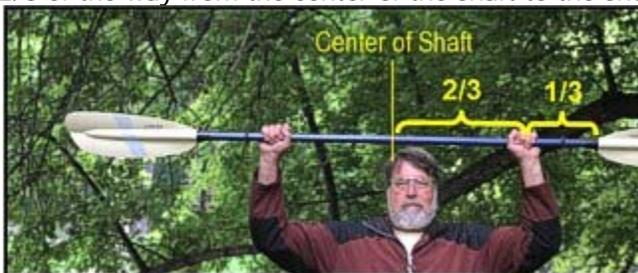
Testing a paddle will mean using proper form (torso twist, upright posture, proper hand positioning, good forward and sweeping stroke styles, etc.). You don't want to choose a paddle based on poor paddling form. Of course the beginner's form you've acquired could be the result of using an improper length of paddle from the start.

As you can see, it's a matter of trial and error and seeking – and following - good advice from those more experienced.

Quick-Pick Method

There are two quick and fairly accurate on-shore methods for determining a proper length of paddle to use:

1. The first method involves holding your arms out, elbows bent at about right angles in normal paddling posture and grasping the paddle as you would normally. Your hands should be about 2/3 of the way from the center of the shaft to the shoulder of the blade.



2. Select a paddle you think is about the right length and stand it upright (vertically) alongside you. Reach up with your arm fully extended, hooking your first finger joints over the top edge (tip) of the paddle. If you can reach further/completely around the top edge or, conversely, if your fingers don't even reach the top, choose a different length accordingly.



Approximating Proper Paddle Length

First joint of fingers should just hook over top edge of the blade as shown.

By the Numbers

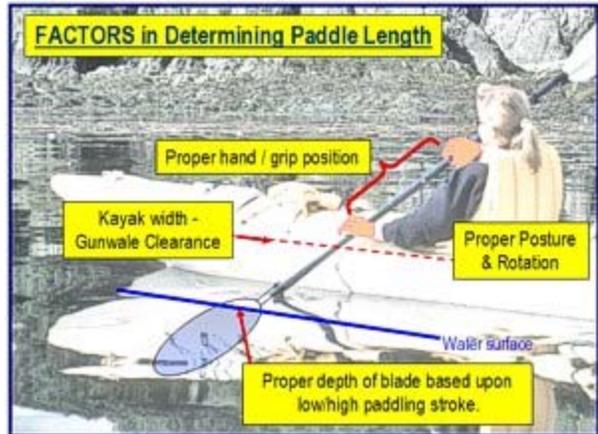
Here is a compilation of measurements from several paddle manufactures that cross reference height and boat widths to suggest the proper range of paddle lengths to consider:

Paddler's Height & Boat Width

(Compiled from information from Bending Branches/Sawyer/Werner Paddles & Others)

Height Range In Feet/inches	* * *	Boat widths in inches		
	21-23	24-26	27-28	28+
< 5' -5'5"	210-220	230	230	230-240
5'5"- 5'10"	220	230	230	230-240
5'10"- 6'2"	220-230	230-240	230-240	240
> 6'2"	240	240	240	240

Choosing the right paddle length you should use depends on many factors that are determined by your size, paddling style and type/size of boat. The more you develop and fine tune your paddling and experiment with different paddles, the easier it will be for you to determine what's the best length for your paddle. And if you are like most avid paddlers, you will soon have several in your arsenal from which to choose.



Now, deciding upon the shape of the blade, feathered/unfeathered and paddle weight and material is a whole other related matter...

Be safe; Have fun!



Tom Watson is an avid sea kayaker and freelance writer. For more of Tom's paddling tips and gear reviews go to his website: www.wavetameradventures.com He has written 2 books, "[Kids Gone Paddlin](#)" and "[How to Think Like A Survivor](#)" that are available on Amazon.com.