



Nature, But Make It Doable

Paddling Starter Guide

Kayak, Canoe, or Paddleboard — Rent Before You Buy

From Rookie Outdoor Woman — where beginners belong and confidence is earned one small win at a time.

Kayak, canoe, paddleboard — whatever floats you. The water doesn't care which one you pick, and neither should you, not on day one. Find a calm lake near you, rent the gear instead of buying it, and find out what you actually like before you own any of it. The water is patient. It'll still be there next weekend.

Print this. Save it to your phone. This is everything you need for your first time on the water — nothing you don't.

1 Pick Calm Water (10 minutes)

- ☐ Lake or slow-moving flat water confirmed — no rivers, currents, or waves for day one
- ☐ Public launch or rental dock with easy in/out access
- ☐ Checked wind forecast (calm mornings beat gusty afternoons)
- ☐ Checked for a lifeguard, marina, or other people nearby

2 Rent, Don't Buy — or Book a Lesson

You don't need to own a boat to find out if you like this. Most lakes with beginner traffic have a rental dock — and many also offer guided lessons or group tours, an easier first move with less guessing and more group energy.

- ☐ Rental gear reserved, OR a beginner lesson / group tour booked instead
- ☐ Life jacket (PFD) confirmed included — with a rental or a lesson
- ☐ Paddle sized for your height (staff or instructor can do this for you — ask)
- ☐ Quick how-to from rental staff or your instructor before you launch (always take it, even if you feel silly)

A lesson isn't the “advanced” option. It's the option with the least guessing — a perfectly good place to start.

3 Tell Someone (The Safety Text)

Text this to a person who will actually notice if you go quiet — before you launch:

“Paddling today at [Lake/Launch], [kayak/canoe/paddleboard] rental. On the water [time], back at the dock by [time]. I'll text when I'm off the water. If you don't hear from me by [time + 30 min], call the marina/rental shop, then call me.”

- ☐ Text sent before you launch
- ☐ Rental shop or marina phone number saved in your phone

Being on the water alone doesn't mean being unaccounted for. Someone should know when to expect you back.

4 Wear and Pack the Bare Minimum

- ☐ Life jacket worn the entire time you're on the water — not stowed, not “for later”
- ☐ Water shoes or old sneakers (bare feet + wet rocks + boat launches don't mix)
- ☐ Phone in a waterproof bag or case, clipped in so it can't sink
- ☐ Water bottle — the sun on open water is stronger than it feels
- ☐ Sunscreen and a hat
- ☐ A dry change of clothes left in the car

5 Before You Launch

- ☐ PFD buckled and snug, not just draped on
- ☐ Boat or board checked for stability at the dock before you commit to standing/sitting
- ☐ Phone secured, not loose in a pocket
- ☐ A quick look at where the wind is blowing from (you'll paddle into it first, so the way back is easier)

6 When to Change Plans

The dock is right there for exactly this reason. Any one of these is a fine reason to head back:

- ☐ Wind or chop picks up more than you're comfortable with
- ☐ You feel tired, cold, or shaky before you expected to
- ☐ Balance feels off and it's not getting better
- ☐ You just... don't want to be out there anymore

Turning back early isn't failing the day. It's how you get invited back by your own nervous system.

That's the Whole Guide

Calm water, a rented boat, and a life jacket that actually fits. That's the whole barrier to entry. Everything else — choosing your own gear, paddling rivers or open water, transporting a boat you own, going further or longer — is its own conversation. This guide is here to get you through one good first time on the water. The rest comes with practice.

Want more like this? Rookie Outdoor Woman has guides, stories, and a community waiting for you when you're ready. No rush. No hierarchy. You decide when and how to level up.

This guide is informational and not medical advice. Always wear a properly fitted life jacket on the water. Adjust for your health needs and local conditions. When in doubt, choose the conservative option and paddle another day.