

Big Ships. Little Boats.



Thousands of recreational boaters in craft of all sizes, maneuverability, and speed share the coastal waters with commercial vessels and fishing boats. Areas in and around Boston Harbor have deep draft channels where you may encounter deep sea vessels, and large tug and barge units, and ferries of all shapes, sizes, and speeds.

With such a wide variety of commercial and recreational craft sharing our waters, knowledge of local traffic patterns and practices can ensure your safety and enjoyment. We're all out there together — if we take the time to understand each other, we'll all be safer for it.



Rules of the Road: When in doubt, yield to common sense.

When you venture onto the ocean, you become part of a long tradition of maritime seamanship. With this tradition comes important rules and responsibilities that are explained in the International Navigational Rules of the Road. You can find excerpts of the Rules important to paddlers on our “How-To” web page. A few key points:

- **Never** assume you have the right of way. Kayaks and canoes do not have special privileges over other boats. Your rights as a vessel vary depending on the circumstances, as detailed in the Rules.
- Kayaks and canoes cannot block or impede the movement of larger boats in a narrow channel. Cross the channel only when traffic has cleared. Do not paddle in the channel unless it's necessary for your safety.
- Give working boats, like fishing and lobster boats, ferries, and large cargo ships plenty of room. Lobster boats often won't be looking out for kayaks and canoes; ferries put out large wakes when traveling and a strong wash when docked; and cargo ships travel much faster than it appears.
- Finally, the best advice is often “if it's bigger than you, stay out of its way!”

VISIBILITY: You may see them, but do they see you?

Small craft are often difficult to see both by eye and radar. And while bright colors and reflective material can help, they're no guarantee that you'll be seen. A safe approach is to assume that another vessel has not seen you. Be cautious. Be safe. And if at all possible, avoid operating in restricted visibility or at night.

VHF Radio: If you were listening, you would know.

Commercial vessels announce their intentions on channel 13 (nationwide) when approaching busy harbors and when getting underway from berth or anchorage. Monitoring this channel is an excellent means for small boat operators to avoid larger ships. Only in an emergency should you contact the pilots of commercial vessels on this channel to alert them of your intentions.

Tugs & Tows: We've all got a lot on the line.

While it's important that you take the time to learn the lights and day shapes for tug and tow, a safe rule of thumb is to assume that a tug and nearby barge are connected by a hawser. For that reason alone, you should never attempt to pass between them. Beware — while shifting its tow, from the hawser astern to a side or end tie, a tug will have little if any control over its barge! Stay far away.

Lobster Boats: Always at work. Sometimes hard to figure.

Lobster boats can present other boats with a variety of potentially dangerous situations. These boats will often travel in erratic courses, from buoy to buoy. And, while working on a trap, especially a string of traps, a lobster boat cannot maneuver at all. Lobstermen working on a trap may also have their attention focused on the next buoy, rather than nearby traffic, which is why staying clear of their boats is perhaps the best advice.

Ferries: Generating wash currents.

Ferries, while big and stable, are very vulnerable to wakes while at dock loading and unloading passengers and cargo. To compensate, the ferries will usually hold themselves against the dock at the landing by staying in gear, generating strong wash currents. They can also generate strong prop wash while maneuvering into and away from the ferry landings.

Deep Draft Vessels: Stay clear. Period.

It is unsafe to assume that because a vessel is at anchor that it is stationary. Large vessels at anchor may veer unexpectedly under the influence of wind, current, or an unseen, assisting tug. Great care should be taken when operating in their vicinity. Also, tankers at berth are surrounded by floating booms whose anchoring systems may extend several hundred feet out around the vessel. Stay clear!

Suggestions for Small Vessels

- When possible, keep in shallower areas outside of a deep draft channel. Craft that can operate in very shallow water, such as kayaks, can avoid almost all other traffic by navigating near the shoreline.
- Assume other vessels have not seen you or cannot see you unless you are in communication with them. Operate defensively.
- Know the rules of the road, including lights and sound signals. Five or more short blasts of the horn mean danger.
- When paddling in an area that's new to you, you can learn a lot about the local traffic patterns by stopping and watching other vessels and comparing what you see with your chart. This will help you anticipate and avoid encounters with larger, less maneuverable vessels.

These safety tips have been adapted from the "Big Ships. Little Boats." brochure produced by the marine community in Portland Harbor (Maine).