



How to Pass your BCU

Phil Hadley is an experienced coach who regularly carries out British Canoe Union (BCU) Four Star assessments. In this follow-up to his article for CKUK 'How to Prepare for your BCU Four Star Assessment' he gives handy tips and advice on how to actually pass the assessment when the time comes...

OK, so you've been working hard consolidating your personal skills since your training, you've been out paddling with groups and taking a turn at leading them and now you're ready for assessment! This guide will take you through what you have to do to make it all your work and preparation count.

How the Assessment Works

One of the most important things is to make sure that you understand what it is that you are being asked to do: you will be assessed on your personal skills, and your ability to safely lead a group in moderate water conditions. The group will be reasonably competent paddlers, i.e. at about a three star standard. This isn't a coaching award, you won't be expected to teach them to surf or ferry glide. Little hints and tips to improve their day, however, are very important. You may well be asked to plan

suitable journeys taking into account, their abilities, weather, conditions, tides, water levels etc.

Pre-planning

Do your homework! Get maps and charts of the areas, read guidebooks, check tides, look at alternative venues in case of bad weather, lack of water etc. Make up some laminated sections of maps of all the areas that you may be asked to go to. Go over your navigation skills. Take a couple of spare journey planners, for sea you will be given a navigation planning exercise, completing it on a journey planner rather than a scrap of paper looks better.

You will be asked to plan your trips for the two days, again having a couple of laminated journey planners makes that look so much more organised. **Top Tip!** Use matt lamination pouches, then you can write on them with ordinary pencil, then erase later to use again.



Navigating a canoe down a rapid.



A selection of some of the available guides and maps.

Four Star Assessment

Kit

There are kit lists in the assessors notes downloadable from the British Canoe Union (BCU), Scottish Canoe Association (SCA) or Welsh Canoe Association (WCA)'s websites. The following isn't an exhaustive list just a few observations and tips:

On Your Person

You should always have a knife, it needs to be sharp and you need to be able to open it with one hand – check it regularly, they often seize up. I keep mine in a separate pocket in my BA, that way if I ever did need it in a hurry, I wouldn't be fighting with slings, karabiners and Mars bars to find it.

3 or 4m of tape is probably more versatile than a sling. It's part of your pin kit, it's your short tow system for kayak, it can be used as a stirrup for rescues, if kept coiled – it can be flicked out chameleon tongue style as an extended reach rescue.

A few plasters and some electrical tape in a small

drybag make up an 'ouch pouch' – really useful when someone cuts their finger half a mile from the end of the trip, it saves you having to land and dig through everything to find your main first aid kit.

A whistle, easy to access is a great way to get peoples attention quickly. For white water you can add a couple of screw gate HMS karabiners, possibly a couple of prussic loops if you know how to use them. For canoe a folding pruning saw is a must-carry item. For sea you need some way of attracting attention in an emergency, this could be a VHF (go on the operators course), a small day/night flare, or a mobile phone in a dry case, its general good practise to have more than one way of summoning help on your person. I also carry Denso Tape boat repair patches cut to 6 inches in length and wrapped both sides in cling film in a small dry bag.

Stuff for fixing people!

First aid kit, you've been on a first aid course right?

A trainee leader patching up an assessment guinea pig!



You should know what to carry. You can buy a standard kit, but you will need to add some items: shears – these are great if you ever do need to cut someone's kit, or fashion a sling from a polythene exposure bag – trying to cut things accurately with a river knife is surprisingly difficult. Wound dressings, or better yet army field dressings – they come in a waterproof pack. Steristrips work well for open wounds, get a couple of packs and practise with some first, cold, wet riverbank isn't the best place to learn how to use them!

Make sure you open your first aid kit regularly, they often go damp and mouldy. Make sure you know how each of the items work, you may well be asked to sort out a first aid scenario. Make sure you have no lotions, potions and tablets in your kit. If you want to carry drugs for your personal use, pain killers, upset stomach tablets etc, carry them in a separate bag marked for private use, not in your group FA kit, the exception is 300mg aspirin for suspected heart attack.

Spare Clothing

My thoughts are that if everyone is well kitted out at the start of the day, you shouldn't need to carry too much else, this is very much dependent on conditions and the kit the group turn up with, you may need to lend them spare kit before you get on the water. A few spare warm hats can be very useful if people start to get cold. Warm drink – having a flask of tea, which you then proceed to drink isn't much use if you have an incident in the afternoon – on cold days make sure you always have spare, or at least some way of heating water. I often find dehydration is often more of a problem – make sure

everyone is carrying plenty of water. A group shelter is a must!

Stuff for fixing boats

There are various ways to fix holed boats – Denso tape, flash band, gaffer tape, ding stick, plumbers mait, all work to various degrees of success, whichever ones you carry, make sure you know how to use them. I carry a turbo lighter and hot melt glue sticks. One little tip – for canoes and composite sea kayaks take a whole roll of good quality gaffer tape, the little tiny rolls don't go far enough if you really do break a boat! A few tools, a multi-tool is often ok, but if every nut and bolt on your boat is 10mm, a proper spanner is far more useful. Climbers' accessory cord can be used to fix backbands, etc, I have also used it to replace broken canoe seat bolts.

For Sea Kayak, you'll need some way of fixing a lost hatch cover – I find that an airbag works well; I carry a 32inch canoe one, also useful if you do hole a boat.

Be Slick

Taking kit along just because you always do doesn't really show dynamic risk assessment, for example I'll probably attach a swim line to a canoe on a tight little white water run, but less likely to on a lake. The more experience you have the easier to work out what to take, and where to put it. It's pretty easy to spot a less experienced sea kayaker with tons of gear spread across their boat while they try to work out what goes in each hatch. Be slick at getting your boat and kit ready to go, taking forever to get yourself organised is a sure way to upset the group.

A four star sea kayak assessment group enjoying a paddle around a stack.



Giving a safety briefing before getting on the water.



This is the sort of situation you have to be prepared for.





Meeting the Group

This is your chance to get to know your group, and to let them know what a great leader you are! Most assessments use real live guinea pigs – but not the small furry kind! In our PC world we don't call them that anymore, we call them group members, but if anyone does use the term you'll know what they mean! They should be 'competent' in the environment, that probably equates to around three star standard. Find out names, where they come from, how much paddling they've done, etc. Be friendly, calm and relaxed, don't be overbearing!

Safety Briefs

Canoeing and kayaking are assumed risk sports! If it was less exciting, we probably wouldn't be so interested in doing it. Your job isn't to eradicate all the risks, but it is to keep the group as safe as possible. So what are the hazards? Drowning, hypothermia, foot entrapment, water borne diseases, sprains, head injuries, existing medical conditions..... the list goes on! And how do we protect our charges from these hazards? Mostly by checking their personal protective equipment, any medical conditions, by explaining correct techniques, safe swim positions, signals, hazard avoidance etc. It's massively important that you cover all of these subjects and potentially disastrous

if you forget any, but how do you remember all that stuff. I use a mnemonic A,B,C,D,E.

A - Area . Where we are, toilets, changing rooms, where we are going, plan for the day, show them the map, shuttle arrangements, any hazards we are likely to encounter, etc.

B - Boats and equipment. Are BAs and helmets well fitted? Is everyone happy with their boats? Do they have buoyancy in the boats? Is everyone suitably dressed? Look at footwear, etc

C - Communication and signals. Keep it simple here, they don't need your signal for eddy out if you're going to be on the lake all day. For the most part a whistle and come to me signal is enough. You can always add more as the day goes on and features are encountered.

Who's got a mobile, VHF, flares etc? This is your cue to check you have yours too – If someone gets hurt and you can't contact the emergency services because 'you didn't want to take your new iPhone on the water' you would have some explaining to do!

D - Doctor! This is a reminder to ask about any medical conditions, asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, allergic reactions etc – I give people the option of talking to me privately. Also how are people feeling generally?

It's also your cue to check you have your first aid kit, and ask if anyone else has one.

E - Emergencies – This is your chance to explain

what you expect in the event of a swim: safe swim position, do you want them to hold onto their boat, swim to the bank, etc.

One tip is to have a crib card laminated in your back pocket, not to read from but just to check at the end of your brief to make sure you haven't forgotten anything.

Remember

You will need to stop the group and re-brief regularly at rapids, headlands, portages, rock hopping, crossing shipping lanes etc. The swim brief may well change, on some rapids it may be 'leave your boat, swim to the side' on the next one because of the tree lined banks it may be 'stay with your boat, stay upstream of it'. The swim brief for a surf landing could well be different to the one you gave an hour ago while you were playing near the rocks.

CLAP

Remember the CLAP leadership principles: It is a very useful acronym which should have been explained fully on your training course and you should refer to it constantly while you are in the position of leader.

Communication, Line of sight, Avoidance of risk, Position of most usefulness.

Welfare Officer!

As well as keeping them safe, you need to make sure the group is happy.

Stop for breaks occasionally, have a few snacks on you. Make sure you factor in a lunch stop if people are getting hungry. When the group lands, either for a break or a portage, look after them, help them with the boats, warn them about any hazards, slippery rocks etc. More people get hurt on the shore than on the water!

Swimmer!

If you do have a swimmer, make sure you can cope with the situation - don't go steaming in to rescue someone and end up swimming yourself! Stay calm, make sure the group is safe, then sort out the poor unfortunate! Very often you can help them to help themselves, a well timed – 'Swim to me, bring your boat' can save lots of messing about.

Handy Hints and Tips

Canoe

Get a portage bag – A big dry bag with rucksack straps, this can hold all your kit and makes organising yourself really easy, it's also a great way to alter your trim.

Lots of people seem to struggle with the open water days, especially the navigation -get your map waterproofed and constantly check where you are, try mounting your compass on your thwart using a small bungee cord. Think carefully about where the wind is coming from and how that effects your position. Have plenty of strategies for dealing with



A leader running a small rapid while the group wait for his signal in an eddy upstream.

wind, such as tandem and tow the empty boat. Make sure the group are aware of how to trim the boats for different conditions. Read the part in the sea kayak section about 'holding station'

You may be asked to make a sailing raft. Think about your positioning, what would happen if anyone fell out, you can pre-empt that by training a floating rope off the back of the raft.

Part of my safety brief for canoe is what to do in the event of the boat pinning. Anyone with kayaking experience often wants to lean on the rock, this can be disastrous in a canoe leading to a 'preacher pin' where the thwart or seat pins the calves. I always tell people in the event of a pin, get their legs from underneath thwarts or seats immediately. I also tell people to right their own capsized boats in the event of a swim, it's less likely to pin, and so much easier for me to get to the handle of the empty the boat.

You may be asked to lead an upstream section, perhaps poling, remember all your leadership strategies, tell people to give each other plenty of room!

Sea Kayak

Be constantly alert as to where you are in relation to your chart. Good pilotage is important, even if you're not 'on' as the leader.

We often use OS maps instead of charts, make sure you've marked on any buoys from your chart – they are a great help with your pilotage.

Always be aware of what the tide is doing, as well as the wind, how is that going to affect you and your group's position. Write down tidal info on your planner, as well as the weather forecast.

One of the first things I show to a group is how to 'hold station' by paddling into wind or current – in the sea environment 'Stop' doesn't mean simply stop paddling!

Think carefully about what kit you may need to access at sea, that needs to go either in your day hatch, or on your person, you should never be taking off front or rear hatches at sea. You may need to fix a hole in a boat while afloat, make sure you have some way of doing that.

Get people to check hatches are secure before launching, especially after lunch. Check skegs are

working, especially if people have just launched off shingly beaches.

Think about stopping the group early at features such as headlands, shipping channels, busy harbour entrances etc, and brief them. Also think carefully and have strategies for rock hopping, and for surf landings and launches (read Simon's bit on surfing!)

White Water

On rivers you should have an understanding of what you are likely to come across by reading guidebooks and finding out about the stretches you are likely to be paddling. Stop the group well before features so that you can make decisions about how to proceed. You need to ask yourself a few questions: Can I paddle it safely? Can my group? Are we paddling en masse? Do I need to bring them down one at a time? Do I want bank support? Very often the leader may simply say 'Wait here, watch for my signal' they can then take a look and make a decision. Try to make the decision quickly. When you come back to the group and you explain the line, signals etc make sure you look at the group. I often see leaders pointing out lines while looking downstream with the group in the eddy behind them-not able to hear anything they say!

Surf Tips

(Courtesy of Simon Hammond, former World Surf Kayaking Champion and BCU level 5 Surf Kayak coach)

You'll need to be able to read the environmental clues to help with positioning in the water and to stop dangers remembering that as the tide moves dangers may come and go. As the leader an awareness of other water users is essential, you should be able to lead from both the shore and from the water and in fact the real challenge is can you lead and still surf? How would you position yourself and do this safely? How will you deal with a fellow paddler who dislocates their shoulder or who catches a wave and disappears out of sight around a rocky point? How have you briefed and organised your group? How will you rescue a swamped boat in a rip current? You won't always need it but a long (10m) tow-line is a very useful bit of kit to have on you.

We don't carry any kit in our kayaks when surfing but as a leader you would be expected to have a

AUTHOR

Phil Hadley

Phil Hadley is a keen and busy coach who is based in the midlands. Phil spends most of his time moulding the minds of the new coaches. You can find him dotted around the UK at running level 1 and 2 coaching courses. Or running workshops at the Open Canoe symposium, or off sea kayaking in the states. He's a keen whitewater kayaker too!



leader's bag left on the beach which would contain safety kit and comfort kit. A survival shelter is surprisingly useful even on a Cornish beach in the middle of the summer! Other bits and bobs can help with group organisation. I've been impressed with leaders who have marked their surfing area with a couple of flags (avoid lifeguard colours) or who have dressed their paddlers in easy to spot lycra rash vests!

Good Luck!

Good luck, so long as you have properly prepared and just do what you are good at, you can really enjoy the assessment process. ☺

Home Nations' Websites

BCU

www.bcu.org.uk

Canoe England

www.canoe-england.org.uk

Scottish Canoe Association

www.canoescotland.org.uk

Welsh Canoe Association

www.welsh-canoeing.org.uk

Canoe Association of Northern Ireland

www.cani.org.uk

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