



Signals

Paddling venues present multiple challenges in communication. In whitewater venues, rapids produce a great deal of noise which is very hard to shout over. In other environments like lakes and coastal distance can present challenges which is exactly why the USCG requires craft in waterways they control to carry sound devices.

All Swiftwater Rescue Classes provide instruction on the basic or universal paddle & hand signals. It's good to know both since you may lose a paddle on the river or need to signal from shore during a break. Where possible stick with the universal signals so you can communicate with other groups when necessary.

In this article, we will discuss:

- Emergency Signals (and devices)
- Universal Paddle/Hand Signals
- Common Pitfalls
- Other special use signals

Emergency Signals

Emergency signals are commonly performed using a strong sound device. All paddlers should carry a pea less safety whistle within easy reach when paddling. The best brand for this type of whistle is a Fox 40.



This type of whistle produces up to 115 dB which is quite loud. In coastal venues, we typically need a device that is more powerful (an Air Horn):



Coast Guard approved sound devices can be heard up to ½ mile away (some are rated for 1 mile).

Use your device only when needed (remember the fable of the Boy who cried wolf). The common protocol is:

- Three Full Blasts – Absolute Emergency. Most paddlers in the party need to get off the river ASAP so those experienced in rescues can initiate the rescue with few distractions.
- One Full Blast – Attention. Halt, catch an eddy or cease heading down river. Look in the area of the signal for further instructions or to determine your next course of action.

If you hear Two Blasts – assume you missed one (Emergency). Some commercial rafting companies use Two blasts for other purposes, best to err on the side of caution.

I am OK.

When pinned or entrapped, your situation may look far worse to an outsider looking at your predicament. I recall a very realistic scenario we had in one of my SWR Classes some years back. My practice victim was perfectly safe in a lower water undercut hazard in a manky rapid down below a canal. That sight scared the bejesus out of a very seasoned Instructor Trainer that was passing by on the canal. The victim smiled and gave him the I am OK signal much to his relief.

An entrapment may be unstable and that may necessitate urgent action to stabilize the victim quickly. Knowing the victim is perfectly stable greatly relieves stress and generally opens up more options for rescues.

The signal for I am OK is simply patting the top of your helmet.



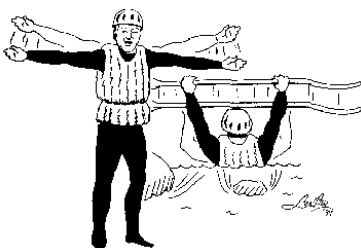
If not OK, simply do not respond or shake your head side to side.

Universal Signals

The Common or Universal signals are maintained on the American Whitewater [website](#). When using signals outside of these common ones, discuss with your paddling party during your pre put in talk in case the signal is new to them.

When using a paddle, make sure the blade face is clearly visible, not flat where they will only see the edge of the blade). The same goes for all hand signals. The diagrams below show the proper form.

Stop (often accompanied by a single whistle blast).



All Clear



Emergency (wave side to side quickly above the head)



Directional (Always in the direction you want them to head – do not point to the hazard)



Back up (Coastal Signal Only)



Pitfalls

A quite common pitfall you will see on busy rivers is overuse of whistles. These days, most paddlers are very rescue conscious and when they hear a whistle, they often spring into action. Bystanders might also interpret whistle blasts as a major emergency and immediately call 911.

Made up signals are often misinterpreted by other groups and lead to confusion. This is very clearly the case with multiple whistle blasts that do not denote a true emergency.

Line of site may be obstructed, if you can't see your audience they "might" not be able to see you.

In more complex rescues, a rigger may quickly show you some specialized hand gestures for equipment they may need when they reach the accident site.

Special Signals

Some other useful signals that are commonly used are:

Wood (or Strainer). Tap your paddle shaft (may be hard to see). The ASL (American Sign Language) gesture is a vertical open hand/arm (fingers showing), rotate at the elbow down to horizontal. I strongly prefer the ASL version as its intuitive and easy to see at a distance.

Look/Scout. Use two fingers pointed to your eyes.



This article shows a wide variety of signals you may encounter when paddling: [River Signals](#).

If you are fortunate enough to have a paddling friend that is hearing impaired and knows ASL, take the opportunity to have them teach you some basic ASL hand signals for paddling. ASL is an incredibly useful means of communication in paddling environments.

Conclusion

Paddling venues often make communications more challenging. In general, we do not pack walkie-talkies or other electronics. Rapids produce a lot of noise that is difficult (and uncomfortable to shout over). Sometimes we need to communicate at distances that are too far for simple verbal communications. Paddlers over the decades have come to rely on sound generation devices like whistles and air horns as well as a small set of universally adopted hand/paddle signals that all paddlers need to know.

I also recommend having someone carry a turned off cell phone in a Pelican Box that is well secured. You might not have cell reception on the river but may be able to reach cell service via hiking out. Text messaging is asynchronous and only needs a second to transmit your message. Your cell phone can also pinpoint your location which is exceptionally valuable for emergency responders.