



## RULES OF THE WATERWAYS

### Navigation Rules

The inland navigation rules, commonly called “Rules of the Road,” govern the operation of boats and specify light and sound signals on inland waters in order to prevent collisions. Existing law requires that a complete copy of the inland navigation rules must be kept for reference on board all boats of 39 feet 4 inches (12 meters) or more in length operating on inland waters. A copy of the *Navigation Rules International—Inland booklet*, published by the Coast Guard, may be ordered for a nominal fee from: USCG Navigation Center Navcen. Please call 703-313-5900 or go to [www.navcen.uscg.gov](http://www.navcen.uscg.gov) for availability and price.





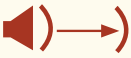
### Boater Responsibility

Nothing in the rules of the road shall exonerate the operator of a vessel from the consequences of neglecting to comply with the inland rules of the road, or from neglecting any precaution which may be required by the ordinary practice of seamen, or by the special circumstances of the case.

In interpreting and complying with the inland rules of the road, due regard shall be given to all dangers of navigation and collision and to any special circumstances, including the limitations of the vessels involved, which may make a departure from the rules of the road necessary to avoid immediate danger.

### Navigation Signals

The law prescribes signals for vessels in sight of each other to indicate the intended course of a vessel when necessary for safe navigation. Motorboats should not use cross signals (i.e., answer one blast with two blasts or two blasts with one blast).

NAVIGATION SIGNALS	
 <b>1 blast</b>	Sounding one short blast (1 second) of the horn or whistle shows intention to direct course of vessel to own starboard (right).
 <b>2 blasts</b>	Sounding two short blasts shows intention to direct course of vessel to own port (left).
 <b>3 blasts</b>	Sounding three short blasts indicates that the vessel's engines are going astern (in reverse).
 <b>5 blasts</b>	Sounding five or more short and rapid blasts is a danger signal used when the other vessel's intentions are not understood or its indicated course is dangerous.
 <b>Prolonged blast</b>	Sounding a prolonged blast (4 to 6 seconds) indicates restricted visibility (see Fog Signals, page 14).

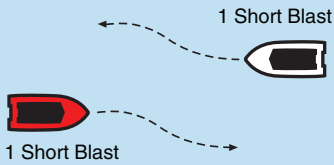
## Meeting or Crossing Situations

When motorboats are in sight of one another and meeting or crossing at a distance within half a mile of each other, each vessel shall indicate its intended maneuver with one of the following signals:

- **One short blast** = I intend to leave you on my port side.
- **Two short blasts** = I intend to leave you on my starboard side.
- **Three short blasts** = I am operating astern propulsion.

Upon hearing the one- or two-blast signal, the other vessel shall, if in agreement, sound the same signal and take steps to affect a safe passing. If the proposed maneuver is unsafe, the danger signal (five or more short and rapid blasts) should be sounded, and each vessel shall take appropriate action until a safe passing agreement is made.

## HEAD-ON SITUATION



When meeting head-on, or nearly so, either vessel shall signal its intention with one short blast which the other vessel shall answer promptly. Both vessels should alter their course to starboard (right) so that each will pass to the port (left) side of each other.

When crossing, the vessel that has the other on the starboard (right) side shall keep out of the way and avoid crossing ahead of the other vessel. The give-way vessel (the vessel required to keep out of the way) shall take early and substantial action to keep well clear of the other vessel (the stand-on vessel), which should hold course and speed. However, the stand-on vessel may take action to avoid collision by maneuvering as soon as it becomes apparent that the give-way vessel is not taking appropriate action.

## CROSSING SITUATION

1 Short Blast

Give-way  
Vessel . . .  
*keeps out  
of way*

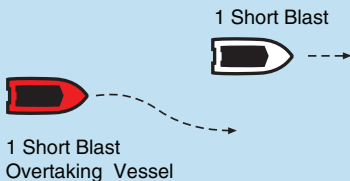


1 Short Blast

Stand-on  
Vessel . . .  
*holds course*

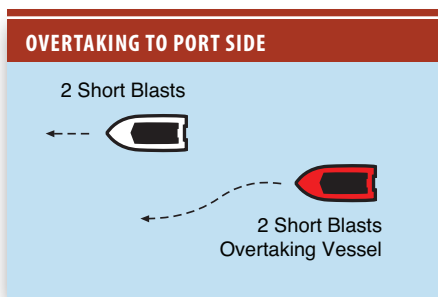


## OVERTAKING TO STARBOARD



## Overtaking Situations

When two motorboats are running in the same direction and the vessel astern desires to pass, it shall give one short blast to indicate a desire to pass on the overtaken vessel's starboard. The vessel ahead shall answer with one blast if the course is safe.



If the vessel astern desires to pass to port of the overtaken vessel, it shall give two short blasts. The vessel ahead shall answer with two short blasts if the course is safe. If passing is unsafe, the vessel being overtaken should answer with the danger signal (five or more short and rapid blasts).

A vessel approaching another vessel from the stern and overtaking it shall keep out of the way of the overtaken vessel. The vessel being overtaken shall hold its course and speed.

### Other Situations

- If your boat nears a bend in a channel where vessels approaching from the other direction cannot be seen, you should signal with a prolonged blast (four to six seconds). Approaching boats within hearing should answer with the same signal. If your signal is answered by a boat on the farther side of the bend, then usual signals for meeting and passing should be given upon sighting. If your signal goes unanswered, the channel may be considered clear.
- Keep your boat to the starboard side of narrow channels whenever safe and practicable.
- Sound one prolonged blast when leaving a dock or berth.
- Keep out of the way of sailing vessels where courses involve the risk of collision.
- In narrow channels, do not hamper the safe passage of vessels such as deep-draft liners and freighters, which can navigate only inside such channels.
- Paddlers should stay near the shore and cross channels with care, carry an efficient sound signaling device such as a loud whistle, use a white navigation light when paddling at night or in low visibility and never paddle alone.

### Rules for Sailing Vessels

When two sailing vessels are approaching one another, one of them shall keep out of the way of the other so as to avoid the risk of collision, as follows:

- When each has the wind on a different side, the vessel with the wind on the port side shall keep out of the way of the other.
- When both have the wind on the same side, the vessel that is to windward shall keep out of the way of the vessel that is to leeward.

- If a vessel with the wind on the port side sees a vessel to windward and cannot determine with certainty whether the other vessel has the wind on the port or the starboard side, she shall keep out of the way of the other.

The windward side shall be deemed to be the side opposite to that on which the mainsail is carried or, in the case of a square-rigged vessel, the side opposite to that on which the largest fore-and-aft sail is carried.

**Note:** *International sailing rules are the same as those above.*



## Fog Signals

The law also prescribes signals to identify vessels navigating in or near areas of restricted visibility. Upon hearing a fog signal apparently forward of the beam, you should reduce speed to the minimum at which the boat can be kept on course, unless it has been determined by radar or other means that the risk of collision does not exist. If necessary, use reverse propulsion. In any event, navigate with extreme caution until any danger is over.

**For motorboats:** When making your way through the water, you should sound one prolonged blast at intervals of not more than two minutes. If you are in the water,

but stopped and making no way through the water, sound—at intervals of not more than two minutes—two prolonged blasts in succession, with an interval of about two seconds between them.

**For sailboats or vessels not under command, restricted in ability to maneuver, towing or pushing another vessel, or engaged in fishing with nets, or trawling:** You should sound—at intervals of not more than two minutes—one prolonged followed by two short blasts.

**For boats at anchor:** You should ring—at intervals of not more than one minute—a bell rapidly for about five seconds. In addition, one short blast followed by one prolonged and one short blast may be sounded to an approaching vessel to give warning of your position and of the possibility of collision.

**Note:** *Boats less than 39 feet 4 inches (12 meters) in length have the option to make an efficient sound signal instead, at intervals of not more than two minutes. Boats less than 65 feet 7 inches (20 meters) are not required to sound signals when anchored in a federally designated anchorage area.*