

RULE 16 — CHANGING COURSE

RULE 16.1

When a right-of-way boat changes course, she shall give the other boat *room to keep clear*.

Rule 16.1 contains one of the most fundamental principles in the rules. Simply put, when a right-of-way boat changes her course near a keep-clear boat, she must be aware of the space and time the keep-clear boat will need to stay clear of her, assuming the keep-clear boat reacts and maneuvers promptly in a sea-manlike way; and she must be sure to give her that space and time.

Let's get into this extremely important rule. Rule 16.1 is clearly talking to right-of-way boats (see Case 52). When two boats are about to collide, the keep-clear boat has the obligation to keep clear. The only way she can decide how to do this is if she can accurately figure out where the right-of-way boat is going. It would be chaos if just as a port-tack boat was reaching by a star-board-tack boat, S could suddenly and unexpectedly turn and hit P. The purpose of rule 16.1 is to protect keep-clear boats from unpredictable or last-second changes of course by right-of-way boats which, in essence, prevent the keep-clear boat from being able to keep clear.

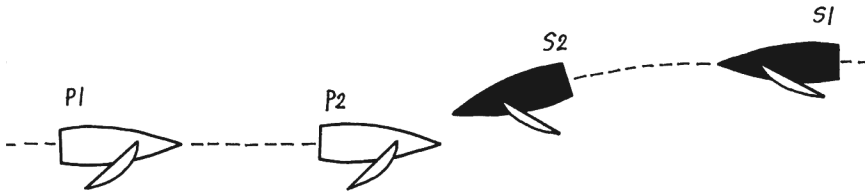
“So if I'm on starboard tack near a port-tack boat, rule 10 doesn't allow me to steer any course I want to?”



Absolutely not. That is exactly what rule 16.1 is designed to prevent. Case 60 says, “Tactical desires do not relieve a boat of her obligations under the rules. A (the right-of-way boat in the case) was free to adopt any course she chose to reach the leeward mark, but she did not have the right to luff into the path of B (the keep-clear boat) so close to B that B could not keep clear.”

However, rule 16.1 does not shift the right-of-way between two boats; it is simply a common-sense “limit” on the right-of-way boat requiring her to limit her course changes when a keep-clear boat is close by and trying to *keep clear*.

Notice that rule 16.1 only applies to a “change of course.” It in no way applies to a change in your boat's speed, sail trim or angle of heel. When P reaches by just to windward of S such that S momentarily loses her wind, thereby straightening up and hitting P's mast, P is wrong under rule 10 (On Opposite Tacks).



S has the right of way over P. But rule 16.1 requires that S not change her course so close to P that P does not have room to keep clear. So despite having the right-of-way, S needs to be careful when changing course near P.

Of course, rule 2 (Fair Sailing) is available to P if she suspects that S deliberately tried to hit her in an unfair manner (see the discussion of rule 2).



“If I’m making a smooth turn toward a keep-clear boat, am I considered to be ‘changing course’ if I continue the arc of my turn?”

Yes. Appeal 33 says, “...a boat changes course when she sails the arc of a circle or any other course where she changes direction, whether or not she moves her helm... To change course means to change the direction in which the boat is heading...”

That tells us that “course” in rule 16.1 refers to the boat’s straight-ahead or “compass” course. Therefore, whenever a boat is turning, it is changing “course.” It also refers to its fore and aft or “directional” course; i.e., when a boat that was moving forward begins to move astern, it has also changed “course” (see Appeal 33; see also rule 21, Starting Errors; Taking Penalties; Backing a Sail).



“Okay, so if I’m a right-of-way boat and want to change course near another boat, what exactly does rule 16.1 require that I give her?”

You need to give her “room to keep clear” of you. She is *keeping clear* of you when you can sail your straight-ahead course with no need to take action to avoid hitting her; and if you are *overlapped*, if you can also change course in both directions without immediately hitting her. The *room* you have to give her is the “space” and “time” she needs to get far enough away from you so that you can sail your course, assuming she acts promptly in a seamanlike way (see the definition *Room*).

Note that “promptly” means “performed readily, quickly, almost immediately” which builds in the time element. Therefore when a right-of-way boat changes course, rule 16.1 requires nearby boats to respond “promptly” or risk losing the protection of *room*.

However, “seamanlike” means “responsible, prudent, safety conscious.” Therefore, you have to be sure that your course change doesn’t force the keep-clear boat to put their or your boat’s crew, boat or equipment at risk of damage or injury by the need to make a sudden, hurried or extreme maneuver. For instance, forcing a *windward* boat to sail head to wind with a spinnaker up in heavy air may be considered “unseamanlike” as it may put their spinnaker at great risk of tearing.

“Does ‘room’ take into account the experience or the number of the crew on board the boat?”



No. Case 103 addresses this head on by saying, “Neither the experience of IW’s crew nor their number is relevant in determining ‘room’...the interpretation of ‘seamanlike way’ must be based on the boat-handling that can reasonably be expected from a competent, but not expert, crew of the appropriate number for the boat.”

Also note that the definition *Room* makes it clear that your course change can’t force a keep-clear boat to foul another boat or touch a *mark*. You need to be aware of the space the keep-clear boat has around her to get away from you.

“If a port-tack boat is bearing away to go astern of me, can I hunt down (bear away) and force them to bear away more to avoid me?”



Absolutely not. Rule 16.2 is known as “the anti-hunting” rule.