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# AN INTRODUCTION TO SAILING WITH THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

A guide for instructors  
and sailing companions



# AN INTRODUCTION TO SAILING WITH THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

A GUIDE FOR INSTRUCTORS AND SAILING COMPANIONS

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Not all people with visual impairments are completely blind. More than 90% of people who are legally blind have partial eyesight. The extent of this varies from person to person and may be a result of one or more of the following conditions: extreme myopia, sensitivity to sunlight, color blindness, blurred vision, loss of visual field. Accordingly, care should be taken to treat the visually impaired as individuals, each with their own set of strengths and weaknesses. These are just people who need to do things a bit differently from others in carrying out their daily activities.



Feel free to use words that refer to vision during the course of a conversation. Vision-oriented words such as look, see and watching TV are a part of everyday verbal communication. The words blind and visually impaired are also acceptable in conversation.

Be precise and thorough when you describe people, places, or things to someone who is totally blind. Don't leave out things or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant.

Don't avoid visually descriptive language. Making reference to colors, patterns, designs, and shapes is perfectly acceptable.



If you see someone who is blind or has a visual impairment about to encounter a dangerous situation, be calm and clear about warning the person. For example, if he or she is about to bump into something, calmly and clearly call out, "Stop, \*their name\*, there is a pole in front of you."

Speak directly to the person who is visually impaired, not through an intermediary.

Speak distinctly, using a natural conversational tone and speed. Unless the person has a hearing impairment you do not need to raise your voice.

As soon as a person who is blind or visually impaired enters a room, be sure to greet the person by name. This alerts them to your presence, avoids startling them, and eliminates uncomfortable silences.

NEVER grab a person who is blind unless it is the only way to remove them from immediate danger. (In short, do not grab a person who is blind in a situation when you would not grab a sighted person). It is extremely scary to be grabbed by a person who you cannot identify. Use words whenever possible.

Do not take care of tasks for the person that he or she would normally do. First ask if the person needs help, then offer to assist. Most people with a visual impairment will tell you if they would like some assistance.



If you are asked to complete a task for someone, always leave things in the same place you found them.

Do not move bags, gear or other articles without letting the person know.

Be an active listener. Give the person opportunities to talk. Respond with questions and comments to keep the conversation going. A person who is visually impaired can't necessarily see the look of interest on your face, so give verbal cues to let them know that you are actively listening.

At sailing events, make a point of introducing blind sailors to other competitors, since they may not be aware of their presence.

Say when you are leaving and where you are going if it is appropriate. For example, going to the shed to get another life jacket.

Indicate the end of a conversation with a person who is totally blind or severely visually impaired to avoid the embarrassment of leaving the person speaking when no one is actually there.



# OVERALL RESPONSIBILITIES OF SAILING INSTRUCTORS AND COMPANIONS OR GUIDES

**RESPECT** the independence and capabilities of visually impaired sailors

**LOOK OUT** for approaching watercraft and other hazards

**PROVIDE** necessary guidance when approaching or departing the dock

**TAKE OVER** during emergencies

**HAVE THE FINAL SAY** on all aspects of the sailing outing

## PLANNING THE FIRST OUTING

### Objective

To gather information about the nature of the person's visual impairment, as well as how physically active they are.

### Caution

Be careful of terminology. Some people with visual impairments feel uncomfortable around words such as "handicapped," "disabled," or even "blind." Others may feel reluctant or embarrassed to talk about their condition. Use politeness and tact to obtain essential information from the person in order to ensure an enjoyable and safe sailing outing.

For example, one can ask an open-ended question such as: "Can you describe your vision to me?" or: "How much can you see?" Keep it simple and direct.

### Guide Dogs

Explain to the new sailor that the guide dogs cannot go on the sailboat and discuss what arrangements will be made for the dog while sailor is on the water.

# FIRST MEETING

## Introductions

If possible, know the visually impaired person's name beforehand. For example, if it is John, approach the person confidently and introduce yourself as "John, I am Jane." Then state your role or function such as manager, instructor, companion.

If there are more than one of you, let each person introduce themselves in a similar manner. Maintain a normal tone of voice.

If the sailor has a name that is difficult to pronounce initially, ask them to help you pronounce it correctly.

## Goals and Expectations

Ask the person about their expectations for the sailing outing. Ask if this is their first time or if they have sailed before. Would they like to participate actively in boat-handling, or would they be content with passive enjoyment? Explore with them any goals, e.g. recreational sailing vs racing.

## Visual Impairment

Tactfully validate the information gathered previously. If they have some vision point to objects or persons both near and far, such as boats, buoys, persons walking in the yard, etc., to get an idea of what they can and cannot see.

State who you are when you approach and ask if the person needs assistance.



## Sailing Area and Features of the Boat

Describe what will happen during the sailing session, e.g. getting in and out of the harbor, how the boat will move depending on the amount of wind, the body of water where you will be sailing. Mention that the boat cannot tip over or sink.

If possible, show the person a boat on shore like the one they will be sailing. Let them touch the various components as you name them and briefly describe their function. (The same thing can be done with a model sailboat.)

## Getting Around on the Dock

- Offer your arm, indicating right or left.
- Extend your arm so that the sailor grasps it at the elbow, but do NOT grab the sailor's arm.
- Keep your elbow bent and tight to your body so that your forearm and that of the visually impaired person makes a straight line. This should put the two of you alongside each other, with the sailor following slightly behind.
- Walk at a natural pace.
- When you turn, the sailor will feel it through your arm and react accordingly.
- There is no need to push or pull, as the motion of your arm will tell the sailor what to do.
- Inform them of any changes, such as ground surface, things moving, objects overhead, or harsh shadows.

### Negotiate steps or ramps as follows:

1. Stop at the beginning
2. State whether it goes up or down, number of steps or degree of slope of ramp
3. Bring sailor to the edge
4. Advise sailor if there is a handrail on the right or left, and provide verbal cues when arriving at the end of step or ramp



- Describe distance in terms that a person with a visual impairment will understand, e.g., "There is a gap of about an arm's length between the boat and the dock."
- Note that many sailors will not require as much cueing once they have become familiar with the dock and shore area.
- If the person uses a cane, they can hold it in a modified way to feel objects while being guided, e.g., height of step, distance from dock to boat.
- Be aware of the stability of the dock as it will be influenced by other persons stepping on or off.
- If you need to go through a narrow opening, such as a gate, advise the sailor by saying something such as "Squeeze to go through the gate" and place your wrist behind your back to signal the person that they need to go behind you. Once through the gate, resume normal sighted guide technique.
- Bear in mind also that visually impaired people who use guide dogs and/or white canes treat them as extensions of their bodies. Accordingly, never distract a guide dog from doing its job or grab a cane without the owner's permission.

## Communication


Before getting in the boat, discuss terminology, and frequency and modes of communication. If dealing with someone who has sailing experience, determine which terms the sailor understands and is comfortable with (head up, fall off, left/right vs port/starboard, pinching, luffing).

Ask the sailor what specifically they would like information on (sail trim, steering angles) and how often to provide that info.

For example, a sailor may want to confirm sail trim after tacks and jibes, or may elect to have that information provided only upon request. With novice sailors, explain the terms you'll be using to provide information about sail trim, wind and steering.

## GETTING IN & OUT OF THE BOAT

This may be challenging for some sailors, especially those who are not physically active.

- Indicate if the bow of the boat is to the sailor's left or right.
  - Preferably, someone should already be in the boat as the sailor boards, to verbally cue the person as to where to place their feet and make sure there are no obstructions in the way, as well as to stabilize the boat as much as possible. It may be useful to tap the place where you want the foot to land.
  - Assist the sailor to sit on the dock in line with where they will be embarking and then explain to them how to push forward in seated position until legs are in the cockpit.
  - If the person is not physically able to move independently from standing to sitting on the dock and get up again, a transfer bench or transfer steps can be helpful. In some cases, for sailors who are not physically active or have reduced mobility, the safest transfer method will be with the sling and lift. The sailor can walk to the dock then sit on a chair on which the sling has been placed.
  - Guide the sailor on how to lower themselves onto the deck of the boat and into their seat, indicating pertinent distances, as necessary. Some sailors may find it useful to hold the shroud with one hand and use their cane in the other hand to measure the distance from the dock, to the rail, and then to the cockpit seat.
  - Be watchful to ensure fingers and hands are not pinched between boat and dock and avoid any abrupt movements that could destabilize the boat and frighten the sailor.
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- Once the sailor is seated in the boat for the first time have them reach up and touch the boom from their seat.
  - When getting out of the boat it is preferable for someone to be on the dock to verbally guide the sailor as to where to place their feet, their hands for support and to provide assistance to stand up if needed.

## BEFORE LEAVING THE DOCK

- Encourage hands-on identification of the various components of the boat, e.g., tiller, sheets, boom, mast, shrouds, sails (especially if this has not already been done on shore).
- Explain location and function of components not within the sailor's reach, e.g., jib or rudder.
- Review with the sailor the procedure for leaving the dock and where you will be placed in the boat relative to them.

## ON THE WATER

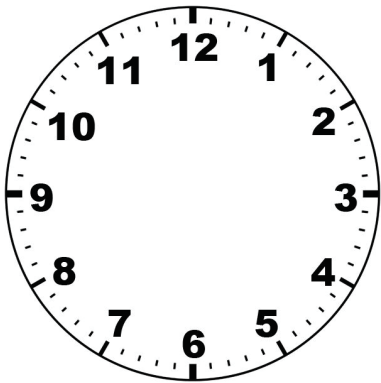
### Communication

- Project your voice to overcome windy or other adverse situations. If verbal commands are needed, keep your instructions clear and consistent, for example, “up” and “down,” not “up” and “off.”
  - Provide timely and precise information on any maneuvers required.
  - Try to use specific numbers rather than relational terms. For example, you may direct the sailor to steer up 5 degrees, rather than “up a little.” It may be useful to “calibrate” the sailor’s perception of 5 degrees and adjust accordingly. Or tell the sailor “I am going to take the tiller, keep your hand on it while I show you what I mean.”)
  - Refer to lines by their size and texture, not their color, e.g., “the thick line to your right.”
  - Over time you will develop a sense of what is necessary information and what is not. It is best to “over-communicate” and then pare it down. This is a learned process — listen to your sailor’s communication needs and develop together.
- It may be useful to develop code words for quick manoeuvres if accompanying the sailor in a race. There may be occasions when you want to take the tiller, in order to give the sailor a break, while you discuss a concept.
  - If you need to take care of a task while on the water, such as untangling the cunningham or pulling a trailing line aboard, remember that a blind sailor cannot see you. Narrate what you are doing so that they are not concerned by a lapse in your guidance while you handle the task. If you are not speaking for a period of time, a blind sailor may wonder if you have fallen overboard
  - Don’t forget to provide positive feedback to your sailor, e.g., “You’re holding your course really well,” or “That tack was perfect.”





## COACHING TIPS



### Using a Clock Analogy

Used to describe the location of objects relative to the boat. (Younger sailors may not be familiar with analog clocks so this should be verified before using this analogy.)

Reference the boat's direction as 12 o'clock and indicate other objects in relation (e.g., there is a buoy 50 meters away at 2 o'clock). This can also be used in relation to the feel of wind on one's face, e.g., on starboard tack, where's the wind on your face? This assumes that the person's face is facing ahead, or at 12 o'clock. The sailor should respond "between 1 and 2." Or "between 10 and 11" if on port tack.

### Assisting with Steering

Use consistent language to describe the extent of tiller movements:

- Centered tiller is 0 degrees.
- Range of tiller movement could be a scale of 1 to 4 to port or starboard.
- "Bow up 2" means the bow swings towards the wind.  
"Bow down 2" means the boat bears away from the wind.

### Finding the Wind

Talk to the sailor about feeling the wind on your face. Instruct the sailor to move their face back and forth until their nose points directly into the wind. (Instructors should frequently test this awareness by asking sailors to identify the wind direction).

Identifying the direction of the wind when the boat is moving involves learning the relationships between the vertical plane of the face, the center line of the boat, and the angle of the tiller. The feel of the wind on the cheek, ear and back of the neck should be noted.

If they have trouble with the nose, ask sailors to turn their heads until they feel the wind on both ears, then they know they are facing upwind.

### Feeling the Groove

Have the sailor bring the boat up to the edge of the wind and remark on the cues that indicate they have gone too far, such as the flattening of heel angle, slowing of the boat, sound of luffing sails. Have them bear off again until they feel the boat heel over again, speed up, and luffing stops.

Do this several times with guidance, and then set up with a good runway ahead to let them try feeling the groove without guidance. Then tack and repeat on the other board. Focus on not talking too much to allow the sailor to use their senses to find the wind and get the boat moving.

## COMING BACK TO THE DOCK

Explain at which point you will be taking control of the boat and how you will be maneuvering (e.g., tacking, pointing the boat into the wind, letting out the sails).

Once the sailor has more experience, you may be able to have the sailor at the helm so that you can catch the dock. If a complicated docking situation arises, and you do not feel capable of guiding the sailor through it, simply bail out and approach again.

It is much easier to guide someone at the tiller than it is to guide them to catch the dock or snag a cleat (or mooring ball). Additionally, it promotes autonomy throughout the whole sailing process.

Assist the sailor in getting off the boat, following the same guidelines as described above when getting on the boat.



## PROGRESSION

As a sailor with a visual impairment learns to sail and improves, guiding should become more and more focused on providing information, rather than instruction. A guide is there to “fill in the gaps” and to provide information that the sailor is missing.

Whenever possible try to encourage the sailor's sense of autonomy and increase their decision-making confidence. Focus on providing helpful information they need to make decisions.

You can promote autonomy by providing information about the wind and sails too. You might ask: “Our sail looks wrinkly at the front and we are feeling overpowered. What controls should we adjust?” Then let the sailor suggest what to do.

Consider teaching the sailor to rig the boat in order to gain a better understanding of how a sailboat works. Most of it can be done by feel.

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