

Basic Racing Rules

There are three guiding principles that underlie the Racing Rules. All competitors are expected to compete within the framework of sportsmanship, fair sailing and helping those in danger. If you're new to racing, you only need to know 10 basic rules that will handle most situations you'll encounter on the race course. As you gain more experience, you'll learn more about the subtleties and limitations of these and other rules.

The basic rules are summarized below. A boat has right of way when another boat is required to *keep clear*. If you want to read the actual wording of the rule in the rules book, "Racing Rules of Sailing," just pass your cursor over the rule number.

- When boats approach each other on **opposite** tacks, the boat on *port tack* shall *keep clear* of the boat on *starboard tack* ([Racing Rule 10](#)). The port-tack boat keeps clear, if the starboard-tack boat does not have to change course to avoid a collision. If your boom is on the starboard (right) side, you are on port tack; if it's on the port (left) side, you are on starboard tack.
- When boats are on the **same** tack and *overlap* each other, the *windward* boat shall *keep clear* of the *leeward* boat ([Racing Rule 11](#)). If your boom is on the side next to the other boat, you are the windward boat.
- When boats are on the **same** tack and don't *overlap* each other, a boat that is overtaking from behind shall *keep clear* of the boat that is *clear ahead* ([Racing Rule 12](#)). It must change course to avoid running into the back of the other boat. If the boat from behind continues to overtake the other boat and they become overlapped then the windward-leeward rule switches on where the windward boat must keep clear of the leeward boat.
- When you're tacking, you must *keep clear* of all other boats from the time your boat passes head to wind until it is on a close-hauled course ([Racing Rule 13](#)). Look around before you tack to make sure you don't tack in the way of another boat.
- You must avoid contact with other boats if possible. Even if your boat has right of way you must avoid contact, but you don't need to act until it becomes obvious that the other boat is not going to *keep clear* ([Racing Rule 14](#)).
- Whenever you are the right-of-way boat and want to turn, you must give the other boat a chance to *keep clear* ([Racing Rule 16](#)). You cannot make an abrupt turn that allows no opportunity for the other boat to stay out of your way.
- When a boat reaches the *two-length zone* from a *mark* or *obstruction*, it has to give boats *overlapped* inside it *room* to round or pass the obstruction ([Racing Rule 18](#)). The outer edge of this zone is two boat lengths from the mark. This Rule is switched off at starting marks, and between boats on **opposite** tacks at the windward mark.

- If you cross the starting line too soon before the start, you have to go back behind the line and start again. While going back, you have to *keep clear* of all boats that have started ([Racing Rule 20](#)).
- If you hit a *mark* while *racing*, you must take a penalty as soon as possible by doing **one** 360-degree circle ([Racing Rule 31](#)). While doing your penalty circle, you must stay clear of all other boats.
- If you foul another boat while *racing*, you must take a penalty as soon as possible by doing **two** 360-degree circles, or turning 720 degrees ([Racing Rule 44](#)). While doing your two penalty circles, you must stay clear of all other boats.

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Definitions of Racing Terms

Note to all: suggest the Basic Racing Rules page have a button titled Definitions in addition to the pop-up definitions (which would have text only). The “Definitions of Racing Terms” page to have some visuals to help explain the definitions (see below).

Keep Clear – One boat *keeps clear* of another if the other can sail her course with no need to take avoiding action and, when the boats are *overlapped* on the same *tack*, if the *leeward* boat can change course in both directions without immediately making contact with the *windward* boat.

Clear Astern and *Clear Ahead*; *Overlap* – One boat is *clear astern* of another when her hull and equipment in normal position are behind a line abeam from the aftermost point of the other boat’s hull and equipment in normal position. The other boat is *clear ahead*. They *overlap* when neither is *clear astern* or when a boat between them *overlaps* both. These terms do not apply to boats on opposite *tacks* unless rule 18 applies.

Finish – A boat *finishes* when any part of her hull, or crew or equipment in normal position, crosses the finishing line in the direction of the course from the last *mark*, either for the first time or after taking a penalty under rule 31.2 or 44.2 or, under rule 28.1, after correcting an error made at the finishing line.

Leeward and *Windward* – A boat’s *leeward* side is the side that is or, when she is head to wind, was away from the wind. However, when sailing by the lee or directly downwind, her *leeward* side is the side on which her mainsail lies. The other side is her *windward* side. When two boats on the same *tack* *overlap*, the one on the *leeward* side of the other is the *leeward* boat. The other is the *windward* boat.

Mark – An object the sailing instructions require a boat to leave on a specified side, and a race committee vessel surrounded by navigable water from which the starting or finishing line extends. An anchor line and objects attached temporarily or accidentally to a *mark* are not part of it.

Obstruction – An object that a boat could not pass without changing course substantially, if she were sailing directly towards it and one of her hull lengths from it. An object that can be safely passed on only one side and an area so designated by the sailing instructions are also *obstructions*. However, a boat *racing* is not an *obstruction* to other boats unless they are required to *keep clear* of her, give her *room* or, if rule 21 applies, avoid her.

Overlapped – See *Clear Astern* and *Clear Ahead*; *Overlap*

Racing – A boat is *racing* from her preparatory signal until she *finishes* and clears the finishing line and *marks* or retires, or until the race committee signals a general recall, *postponement* or *abandonment*.

Room – The space a boat needs in the existing conditions while maneuvering promptly in a seamanlike way.

Tack, Starboard or Port – A boat is on the *tack, starboard* or *port*, corresponding to her *windward* side.

Two-Length Zone – The area around a *mark* or *obstruction* within a distance of two hull lengths of the boat nearer to it.

Windward – See *Leeward* and *Windward*

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Text of Rules

Racing Rule 10 -- On Opposite Tacks

When boats are on opposite *tacks*, a *port-tack* boat shall *keep clear* of a *starboard-tack* boat.

Racing Rule 11 – On The Same Tack, Overlapped

When boats are on the same *tack* and *overlapped*, a *windward* boat shall *keep clear* of a *leeward* boat.

Racing Rule 12 – On The Same Tack, Not Overlapped

When boats are on the same *tack* and not *overlapped*, a boat *clear astern* shall *keep clear* of a boat *clear ahead*.

Racing Rule 13 – While Tacking

After a boat passes head to wind, she shall *keep clear* of other boats until she is on a close-hauled course. During that time rules 10, 11 and 12 do not apply. If two boats are subject to this rule at the same time, the one on the other's port side shall *keep clear*.

Racing Rule 14 – Avoiding Contact

A boat shall avoid contact with another boat if reasonably possible. However, a right-of-way boat or one entitled to *room*

- (a) need not act to avoid contact until it is clear that the other boat is not *keeping clear* or giving *room*, and
- (b) shall not be penalized under this rule unless there is contact that causes damage.

Racing Rule 16 – Changing Course

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

Racing Rule 18 – Rounding And Passing Marks And Obstructions

In rule 18, **room** is **room** for an inside boat to round or pass between an outside boat and a **mark** or **obstruction**, including **room** to tack or gybe when either is a normal part of the maneuver.

18.2 – Giving Room; Keeping Clear

(a) Overlapped – Basic Rule

When boats are *overlapped* the outside boat shall give the inside boat *room* to round or pass the *mark* or *obstruction*, and if the inside boat has right of way the outside boat shall also *keep clear*. Other parts of rule 18 contain exceptions to this rule.

(c) Not Overlapped at the Zone

If a boat is *clear ahead* at the time she reaches the *two-length zone*, the boat *clear astern* shall thereafter *keep clear*. If the boat *clear astern* becomes *overlapped* outside the other boat she shall also give the inside boat *room*. If the boat *clear astern* becomes *overlapped* inside the other boat she is not entitled to *room*. If the boat that was *clear ahead* passes head to wind, Rule 18.2(c) no longer applies.

Racing Rule 20 – Starting Errors; Penalty Turns; Moving Astern

A boat sailing towards the pre-start side of the starting line or its extensions after her starting signal to comply with rule 29.1 or 30.1 shall *keep clear* of a boat not doing so until she is completely on the pre-start side. A boat making a penalty turn shall *keep clear* of one that is not. A boat moving astern by backing a sail shall *keep clear* of one that is not.

Racing Rule 31 – Touching a Mark

31.1 While *racing*, a boat shall not touch a starting *mark* before *starting*, a *mark* that begins, bounds or ends the leg of the course on which she is sailing, or a finishing *mark* after *finishing*.

31.2 A boat that has broken rule 31.1 may, after getting well clear of other boats as soon as possible, take a penalty by promptly making one complete 360° turn, including one tack and one gybe. When a boat takes the penalty after touching a finishing *mark*, she shall sail completely to the course side of the line before *finishing*. However, if a boat has gained significant advantage in the race or series by touching the *mark* she shall retire.

Racing Rule 44 – Penalties For Breaking Rules of Part 2**44.1 Taking a Penalty**

A boat that may have broken a rule of Part 2 while *racing* may take a penalty at the time of the incident. Her penalty shall be a 720° Turns Penalty unless the sailing instructions specify the use of the Scoring Penalty or some other penalty. However, if she caused serious damage or gained a significant advantage in the race or series by her breach she shall retire.

44.2 720° Turns Penalty

After getting well clear of other boats as soon after the incident as possible, a boat takes a 720° Turns Penalty by promptly making two complete 360° turns (720°) in the same direction, including two tacks and two gybes. When a boat takes the penalty at or near the finishing line, she shall sail completely to the course side of the line before *finishing*.

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