

Boating Mnemonics That Work...for Me

by Cynthia Lamb

When one is first learning boating, there are lots of terms, concepts, and rules to remember. Many boaters end up using different memory tools to learn and to recall it all.

Mnemonics are a great way to remember something. To this day, I still know the names of all the great lakes because of the **HOMES** mnemonic. I took piano lessons when I was about 8 years old and can still recall the order of the notes on the lines of the Treble Clef from the bottom to the top (E, G, B, D, F) because of the mnemonic **"Every good boy deserves fudge."** Today kids are probably taught "Every good boy deserves fruit" because it's healthier.

I don't know why, but I recently got to wondering about the most useful mnemonics for boating. These are some of my favorites, some well-known, some that I made up.

"Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning" is a very old mariner rhyme that you have probably heard. My mother used to say it all the time, and she wasn't even a sailor. Supposedly, the concept of a red sky at night predicting fair weather for the next day is over two thousand years old and is even cited in the New Testament. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this old saying does have a scientific explanation and is correct in most cases (e.g., it works in the mid-latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere).

"Red, right, returning" might be the most well-known and useful boating mnemonic (again, even my mother knows this one). This is a way for boaters to remember on which side of the red buoy they should pass. When coming from the open sea or proceeding upstream, a boater must keep the red Aids to Navigation (ATONs) on their right (starboard) side.

Many people remember which side is **"port"** and which side is **"starboard"** by remembering that the words "left" and "port" have the same number of letters. You can also remember that the red navigation light is on the port side of a boat because Port is a red-colored wine.

After boating a few years in this area, I've learned some new mnemonics that have proven to be quite useful. My goals are to be safe, have fun, and be comfortable. This not only means the obvious things like no running aground and not getting caught in bad weather, but also having the smoothest ride possible.

"The bend is your friend." I love this one. This mnemonic helps keep you from running aground. In a meandering river or creek, water flows fastest along the outside of the bend, and slowest on the inside. The fast-running water scours the bottom, making the outer part of the bend the deepest part. In straight rivers or creeks, the fastest flow tends to be in the middle.

“If birds soar, boat some more.” I’ve been working on my weather forecasting skills using both technology and natural methods. There are various weather forecasting methods that rely on birds. For example, if you want to know the wind direction, find some birds and see which way they are pointing. Birds like to face into the wind. Also, if you’re at the beach and all the seagulls fly inland, head for the car.

This particular mnemonic looks at birds in flight. Generally, high-flying birds indicate fair weather and low-flying birds are a sign of rain. Most researchers say that it’s all about birds sensing the changes in atmospheric pressure. Birds find it uncomfortable to fly high in low atmospheric pressure. I’m not sure this concept is totally reliable, but it does have a lot of merit based on what I’ve been reading.

“45 degrees is a breeze.” To safely cross the wake from another boat, slow down and approach the wake at a 45-degree angle. It’s not only safer, but it makes the ride much more comfortable for your passengers.

“If you tack, it will save your back.” This one expands on the one above. The 45-degree angle concept is not just for crossing wakes but can be used to take on head seas as well. I usually sit up front in our open bow boat, so hitting waves head on is not very comfortable. Remember, a straight line may be the shortest distance to where you want to go, but it’s not always the safest, or most comfortable routine. If you find yourself in rough conditions, take the seas ahead at a 45-degree angle; first to one side then the other. Allowing equal time for each tack will maintain the same average heading. I thought tacking was only for sailboats until I took our boat handling class. Brilliant.

“GRN: Green, right, north.” My husband and I spend a lot of time going in and out of the intracoastal waterway (ICW). We all know “red, right, returning” but when you’re in the ICW here, the convention is different. It can get confusing. The ICW So, when you’re going north on the ICW, just remember GRN and keep those green ATONs on your right.

“Bow down or I’ll frown.” If you get into any sort of chop and your ride is starting to get uncomfortable, use the trim tabs to get the bow down. This cuts the chop and gives you a smoother ride. If you do this, your passengers will thank you.

If you have any additional mnemonics of your own, please let me know.

Stay safe and have fun out there.