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Two of the most difficult skills to master on a boat are docking and undocking. It can be unnerving to new as well as more experienced boaters. While there is no substitute for getting into a boat and actually practicing, there are some helpful hints to make mastering these skills easier. There are really three things to consider before getting on the boat. The first is the type of boat as the hull design and number of engines will influence operations around the dock. The second and third are the wind and currents around the landing point.

Before operation around docks, remember one key principle – slower is better. You never want to land faster than you are willing to hit the dock. Slow operation minimizes the potential for damage to your boat and crew, the dock and other boats around you!

In terms of the boat design, wind will influence a boat sitting high in the water like a pontoon or tritoon more than a displacement type hull. Single versus twin engine makes a big difference in maneuverability as with a twin, one can be in forward and that other in reverse to reduce the turning radius. Recognizing the differences in turning in forward and reverse due to design is a good start to learning

As noted in the paragraph above, wind can push the boat around. A wind blowing toward the dock can be helpful to you in landing but work against you in leaving the dock. Winds coming from the front or back of the boat will likely set which line to tie up first landing and which to untie when leaving.

Current, like the wind, will influence your ability to maneuver. Unlike the wind, you will have to look for signs of how the current is moving by looking to see whether or not buoys and piling have a “wake” and which direction it is moving. You can also get ideas on direction and strength of tidal currents by looking at your tide charts or app and remembering that the strongest tide current is halfway between low and high (ie mid) tide. The current will, of course, want to carry your boat in the direction it is headed.

An important consideration is whether the wind or current has a bigger influence on your boat’s maneuverability! The wind could be blowing toward the dock as you come in to land but the current could counter by holding you off the dock. If you are coming into dock, it is a good idea to come close and bring your boat to a stop with the engine idling to see which force is stronger.

There are some good videos on YouTube that you can watch to give you some visuals on docking and undocking or better yet, take the docking and undocking seminar offered by ABCHH as part of the Boat Handling Course. After watching, head to your boat and start practicing remembering that slow maneuvering around the dock is best!

The 2026 Education Calendar is now on the ABCHH.org website – lots of opportunities to learn more about enjoyable and safe boating!