

STAYING “ON THE MAP”

Simple Navigational Guidelines for Beginner Orienteering

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Orienteering is a map reading sport classically held in the woods. Usually a wide range of courses are offered suited to each person’s experience and ambition, from shorter trail walks to demanding cross-terrain racing. Starting individually, participants navigate on foot over unfamiliar terrain, guided by a detailed topographic map, their wits, and often a compass to find a sequence of specific geographic features (e.g. hilltops, boulders, trail crossings, stream junctions) indicated by circles on the map. Arriving at each feature, they discover a distinctive orange and white flag (that looks like a triangular box kite called a control flag), with a pin punch to use on their scorecard to prove they found that feature. Increasingly, events use electronic systems that record orienteers’ arrival with a computer chip inserted into a timing box. At Finish, competitive orienteers enthusiastically compare their times and route choices with others while recreational orienteers enjoy it as a leisurely outdoor family adventure.

Orienteers use a picturesque and pithy phrase that captures the essence of this thinking sport. You are either “On the Map” or “Off the Map.” Much like navigating through life, navigating with a map requires that we stay continuously aware of where we are, what’s coming up next, and what we are looking for. If we don’t know exactly where we are, Orienteering (and life) easily devolves into wandering (or running frantically) around hoping to stumble upon our goal. The tortoise often beats the hare simply by knowing where she is and where she’s going. (Though it does help, of course, to be a fast tortoise or a smart hare. 😊)

The following techniques provide beginner and veteran alike simple ways to avoid frustration – to stay on course, find features efficiently, and have the most fun.

MAP HANDLING TECHNIQUES

1. **Orient the Map** – To keep all the features on the map matched to the terrain.

Move the map into the same position as the terrain you are facing. For example, if you are on the shore looking at a lake, orient the map so that the lake is in front of you on the map. And not vaguely sort of on an angle, but aligned exactly as it appears before you. This means that once matched to your surroundings, *you* may move but the map stays the same relative to your surroundings. If you turn around to look up the hill sloping down to the lake, you just did a 180, so you should turn the map as you turn so that it remains in its fixed position matched to the terrain, now with the hillside in front of you and the lake behind.

There is nothing more confusing than having what you’re looking at on the map actually be at your back or on some odd angle. It requires you to make constant mental adjustments until your brain gets twisted like a pretzel. It is like trying to drive a car by looking in the rear view mirror. So at all times, keep the map oriented to the terrain. Make map reading easy on yourself.

2. **Fold the Map** – To keep only the area you need in sight.

We’ve all seen the movie where our hero (usually while driving his car – talk about distractions!) battles with a huge unfolded map, trying vainly to make sense of where he is. It is always a losing battle.

If you fold the map down (ideally encased in a plastic sleeve to avoid creasing the map and to protect it in wet surroundings) so that only the part you are immediately using shows, it simplifies your task immeasurably. Every time you consult your map, only where you are and where you are going next is visible. This means you often see orienteers running by with only a small folded map in their hands, surveying only the part that matters to them in the moment. Having the next 2 or 3 legs showing is a good rule of thumb, speaking of which...

3. **Thumbing** – To always know exactly where you are on the map without searching around.

You don’t want to have to relocate where you are every time you look at your map. So the easiest way to keep track is to hold your thumb at the spot on the map where you are, pointing in the direction you are moving. Opposable thumbs are a unique evolutionary gift to humankind that orienteers take full advantage of. Then as you progress through the woods or across a field, you inch your thumb along. Doing this consistently eliminates quick confused scanning and keeps you – tah-dah! – On the Map.

NAVIGATION TECHNIQUES

Questions to Ask Before You Start Moving

4. **Where Am I Now?** – These incorporate all the map handling techniques.

We hope it is obvious that you must first find on the map where you actually are and which way you’re facing before you take your first step. In Orienteering, that is simple. You are at the purple Start triangle printed on the map (though since you can’t look at your map until the course begins, you still have to orient the map to North and find the triangle). So go ahead, face North, turn your map over, orient the map to North, and find the triangle. Then fold the map to the portion you need to be visible, put your thumb just behind the triangle pointing in the direction you need to go, and ask yourself...

5. Where Am I Going? – What is the control feature I’m trying to find?

It makes a world of difference if you’re trying to find the corner of a building, the junction of two streams, or a boulder. They look very different. So it’s a good idea to know what your target will be once you get there. It is listed on the control description sheet (called a clue sheet) that comes with your map, all written out for beginners, in only symbol form for more advanced runners. So then consider...

6. What Will Lead Me to That Feature? – What’s the best route from here to there?

We’ve all seen and used handrails. On stairways, along the edge of docks and porches. They keep us safe and steady and lead us to where we want to go without having to think very much.

Orienteers use **Handrails** too, simple straightline (we call them “linear”) features like trails, fences, streams, and edges of fields “to hold onto” that will lead us most of the way to our next target. On beginners’ courses, they often take you right to the target. On advanced courses, handrails are more subtle terrain features like ridges, rock fields, or large valleys (that we call “reentrants”). **Handrails** are features that make our route choice simpler and let us move while planning ahead until...

Questions to Ask While You Are Moving

7. How Will I Know I’m On Course? – Checkpoints along the way to keep you on target.

If, for some reason, you encounter a brain fog or are brand new at this, **Collecting Features** along the way reassure you that you haven’t gotten lost. At least not yet. 😊 What should you be passing as you progress? That lake off to your right? This stream you are crossing? The trail joining yours up ahead on the left? Any mapped feature you can readily identify along the way reassures you that you really *do* know where you are. **Collecting Features** are comforting. They can also alert you to when you are approaching the mother of all collecting features, your Attack Point...

8. How Will I Know I’m Almost There? – Finding a clear feature just before your target.

When people give directions, they’ll often say, “And just before you get to our street, you will pass a 7-Eleven (or the Mark Twain Elementary School) on your right.” The 7-Eleven (or school) is your **Attack Point** – an unmistakable feature that tells you you’re getting close. You know, one of those “you-can’t-miss-it” features. And from there, it’s a short route to your destination.

Reaching your **Attack Point** trips your brain from cruise control and scenic reveries to careful navigation mode. When you reach it, you know you’re almost there, control flag waiting for you at the feature you’ve remembered from the control descriptions at the beginning of the leg. (“Let’s see, I’m looking for the far corner of that building just ahead”, or “where those two streams merge”, or “the boulder just to the left after I hang a right at this trail crossing coming up. Yea! There it is!”)

9. How Will I Know If I’ve Gone Too Far? – When bad things happen to good people. 😊

But what if all your best-laid plans go astray (and you with them)? Another page from your friendly giving-directions manual: “Now if you get to the Starbuck’s with the Sunoco Station across the road, *you’ve just passed our street.*” In Orienteering parlance, this is called a **Catching Feature**. Catching Features are easily identifiable features that you should not be running into *before* the control. So if it’s staring right at you, you’ve just missed your target.

But not to worry, this is a good sign. It means all you have to do is turn around and backtrack a short way. That’s why it’s always good to have a **Catching Feature** in mind. Since no one is perfect (not even the elite runners), catching a mistake right away is a major tactical advantage to cultivate as a habit – a close second to actually admitting the mistake in the first place. “Wait a gosh-darned minute! I was supposed to reach that stone wall just as I was *leaving* the control. I must have gone right by it!” Again, the tortoise beats the hare who has jumped the stone wall and is 2 kilometers downstream scanning for the control that’s just *got* to be here somewhere.

Post Script

There are loads of other guidelines and skills that are useful to learn as you gain more experience. But if you master these few, you will be far ahead of the field, literally as well as figuratively. These skills form a foundation that lasts a lifetime of happy map navigation, whether driving your car or navigating an orienteering course.

Maps are magical (when accurately drafted 😊). They can get you to spots you’ve never been to and never even heard of. If you befriend them, they can get you from wherever you are to wherever you want to go. Enjoy the journey!

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