

Newspaper Article 7: Docking – a Learnable Skill

It has been said that the first rule of boating is, “Approach the dock at the speed at which you are prepared to hit it.”

Great rule! But, before we hit the dock, just how do we plan and maneuver to get there? Here are some tips that will make docking, if not a thing of beauty, at least not a memorable event.

First, we need a plan. To put together a plan, we need to look at the environment. As we approach the dock have a good look around. Here are some of the items we want to check:

The condition of the dock where it will contact the boat.
Are there any nails or other obstacles that could cause damage?

Are there fenders on the dock? (They are air filled rubber bags that keep the boat from contacting the dock.) If not, then lower your own fenders.

What kind of devices is present to tie off the boat (cleats or wooden pilings)?

Is there anyone on the dock to assist with docking?

Which way is the wind blowing and the current flowing?

Are there other boats on the dock that we must maneuver around?

Are the docking lines ready to be used – that is, attached to the boat on the docking side.

Once these questions have answers, you can proceed with the plan. First, approach the dock with the lowest speed relative to the dock. (Remember the rule above.) What this means is that you normally want to approach the dock into the wind and/or current. (There is very little current on our lake but it can be awesome along the coast.)

An example would be if the dock is running north and south and the wind/current is from the north, then you want to approach the dock from the south – going north. While wind and currents affect boats differently, unless something extraordinary is present, always dock into the wind/current.

Proceed toward the dock at the slowest speed you can manage, still being able to steer the boat. Do not go in fast and expect to use reverse to stop! It is not worth the potential consequences.

The first goal is to get a line (Remember that a rope once aboard a boat becomes a line.) attached to the dock. Usually this means someone from your boat throwing a line to someone on the dock. When you do this, throw them the end of the line that has a loop on it. Then it is easy to ask them to put it around a cleat or piling.

Once this has been done and the line is tied to your boat's bow and the dock, it is a simple matter to bring the stern into the dock. If the dock is on your right side, engage the throttle forward a little and turn the wheel to the left – remembering that you steer the stern and the bow goes the other way. This turns the stern of the boat toward the dock, making it easy to attach another line there. The bow line keeps the bow from turning left.

If the wind is pushing you off the dock, it is best to approach the dock at a good angle. In situations where the wind is really blowing, I have approached the dock almost head on. Whatever works to get a bow line attached to the dock. Once that is done, the rest becomes easy.

Often you may have no help on the dock. If that's the case, approach the dock close enough for one of your crew, or sometimes just yourself if you are alone, to either attach a line or jump onto the dock and do that. (Being oh so careful on the jump!)

Always remember that you are the Captain! You have the responsibility for what happens to your boat and the dock. Thus, you have sole authority and don't let anyone talk you out of it!

Happy Docking!