

NAUTICAL RULES OF THE ROAD

Piloting, Seamanship and Small Boat Handling, 52nd Edition

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Chapter 4 – Rules of the Road: Lights (page 64b)

Navigation lights are required by law to prevent collisions, damage to boats, injuries and loss of life.

Lights are white, red, and green. Power boats, tow boats and sailing boats have different lighting.

Power boats – The forward white light must be seen from forward and either side. An aft light must be higher than the forward light and at a distance from the forward light to permit oncoming boats to estimate a direction. The two lights form a “range” so that if one is seen directly over the other, the approaching boat will know they are headed for a head-on collision. If the forward lower light is left of the higher aft light the red port side light will be seen and the boats can pass port-to-port safely as each boat holds its course.

If a boat does not have an aft range light, it must carry a stern white light.

Boats underway might carry a red light to port and a green light to starboard.

Tug boats – A tug with tow alongside or pushed ahead must carry a bow white light plus two vertical white lights on a mast at a distance behind the bow light. A tug with a tow astern must carry a bow white light plus three vertical white lights on a mast at a distance behind the bow light.

Sail boats – A boat propelled by sails alone must carry a combination red-green bow light plus a stern white light.

Chapter 5 – Rules of the Road: Right of Way (page 67)

A boat having the right of way to pass ahead of another boat is called “privileged.” A boat surrendering her right of way to pass ahead of another boat is called “burdened.” The burdened boat must take action to avoid collision with the privileged boat.

Three occasions involve rights of way: Meeting, Crossing, and Overtaking.

1. **Boats Meeting** – A power boat meeting another power boat head-on must pass port-to-port, that is, red light to red light to avoid risk of collision, while maintaining direction and speed. If they are separated far enough, they may pass starboard to starboard or green light to green light.
2. **Boats Crossing** – A power boat crossing the path of another power boat must surrender right of way to the boat approaching on her right or starboard side. The first boat shows her green starboard light indicating a “go” zone to the boat on her right which is showing her red port light indicating a “danger” zone. The first boat must slow her speed, stop, reverse, or turn away from the second boat to avoid collision.
3. **Boats Overtaking** – A power boat overtaking another power boat is the “burdened” boat and must take evasive action keeping clear astern of the “privileged” boat to avoid collision. If there is room the overtaking boat may pass to **port** of the “privileged” boat and call out “passing to port.”
4. **Power Boats and Sailboats** – A sailboat meeting or crossing a powerboat has the right of way due to the fact that managing sails, wind and rudder to change direction or speed takes more time and is more difficult than a powerboat’s time to change direction or speed. However, if a sailboat is overtaking a slower powerboat then the powerboat is the privileged boat, has the right of way, and the sailboat is the burdened boat and must keep clear in passing or astern.
5. *The Racing Rules of Sailing 2005-2008*, United States Sailing Association, P. O. Box 1260, Portsmouth, RI 02871.
6. **Safety** – A sailboat shall give all possible help to any person or vessel in danger. A sailboat shall avoid contact with another boat if at all possible.
7. **Sailboats Meeting, Crossing and Overtaking** – (a) A sailboat meeting another sailboat head-on must pass port-to-port to avoid collision.
 - (b) A sailboat on starboard tack (wind coming from right with boom on left) has right of way crossing or overtaking a sailboat on port tack (wind from left; boom on right).
 - (c) A windward sailboat overtaking a leeward sailboat on same tack must surrender right of way and remain clear to windward of leeward sailboat.
 - (d) When overlapped the **outside** sailboat must give room for the **inside** sailboat to round a mark or pass an obstruction.
 - (e) A sailboat shall not change course if her only purpose is to **interfere** with another sailboat.
8. **Damages** – A boat not obeying the Rules of the Road or Rules of Sailing is at fault and may be liable for damages to other boats in collisions.