

Racing Terms: Glossary for Newer Sailors

written by *SailZing Editor*



If you didn't grow up sailing, how long did it take you to figure out what sailors mean when they say "put the bow down?" After hearing from newer sailors that the language of racing is hard to decipher, we decided to create a glossary of racing terms and phrases.

We chose about 80 racing terms and phrases that are likely to be obscure to newer sailors. To keep the list manageable, we did not include basic sailing terms, words defined in the racing rules, or racing terms applicable to big boats.

Our list is organized alphabetically. Italicized words have separate definitions.

Racing Terms and Phrases for Newer Sailors

Term	Synonym	Definition	More Info
Angle of attack	Angle of incidence	The angle between the <i>apparent wind</i> and the chord line of the sail.	Learn more
Apparent wind		The direction and speed of the wind as measured from a moving boat.	Learn more
Bail out		Tacking away from other boats to obtain <i>clear air</i> . Often used for starting situations.	
Barging		In starting, a boat that sails on starboard tack down towards leeward boats on starboard to try to create room. Barging violates Rule 11 of the Racing Rules of Sailing.	Learn more

Bladed out	Flattened	A sail that has been made flatter (less <i>camber</i>) with the use of sail controls.	
Blocker	Starboard blocker	Tactical positioning to windward of a starboard boat. Decreases the chance that a port tack boat will establish a <i>lee bow</i> position.	Learn more
Boom vang	Kicker, kicking strap (UK term)	Block and tackle (or hydraulic ram on big boats) to control the horizontal angle (rise) of the boom.	Learn more
By the lee		Sailing downwind with the wind blowing over the leeward side of the boat.	Learn more
Camber	Depth, fullness	The depth of a sail, measured from the chord line to the deepest point.	Learn more
Connect the dots		Strategy to sail from puff to puff while sailing on the <i>lifted tack</i> as much as possible.	Learn more
Cover	Loose cover, tight cover	Tactical positioning to stay between your opponents and the next mark.	Learn more
Cunningham		Sail control to tension the leading edge (<i>luff</i>) of the sail. Sometimes incorrectly called downhaul.	Learn more
Dip and tack	Tack and duck	Maneuver to escape being <i>pinned</i> by a boat close to windward, by bearing off to create separation, then tacking and ducking.	Learn more
Draft position	Draft forward/aft	The point of maximum depth of a sail, measured in percentage of distance from the leading edge..	Learn more
Ease, hike, trim		Basic puff response technique.	Learn more
Entry shape		The profile of the leading edge of the sail, either flat or rounded.	Learn more
Favored end	Line bias	Starting line: the end of the line that is further upwind. Finish line: the end of the line that is further downwind on an upwind finish.	Learn more
Favored side	Advantaged side	The side of the course that gets you to the next mark faster, due to more wind, favorable shifts, less current, smaller waves, etc.	Learn more

Feathering		Allowing boat to head slightly closer to the wind during a puff. This is an additional component to the <i>ease</i> , <i>hike</i> , <i>trim</i> technique	Learn more
Fetching	Laying	A boat that is sailing on the <i>layline</i> toward a mark.	
Foot	Bow down, low mode	Sailing upwind at a heading slightly further off the wind than <i>VMG mode</i> .	Learn more
Gain/lose bearing	Make or lose gauge, making or losing trees	A measure of gain or loss against another boat. With a hand-held compass, the change in the compass bearing from one boat to another over time. Without a compass, gains or losses can be measured by the change in the angle between the boats to a distant shore reference, such as trees.	Learn more
Geographic shift	Shore effects	Wind shifts due to geographic features, such as nearby shore, points of land, obstacles.	Learn more
Helm	Helm balance, weather helm, neutral helm, lee helm	Helm refers to the tiller. Helm balance refers to the pressure felt on the tiller when sailing in a straight line. Helm balance is often shortened to <i>helm</i> , as in weather helm, lee helm, neutral helm.	Learn more
In the groove	Keep it on the wind, point	Sailing close-hauled with the sail trimmed in and the heading such that the sail is neither <i>luffing</i> or <i>stalling</i> .	
Ladder rungs		Concept that upwind progress can be visualized as a series of lines (ladder rungs) perpendicular to the <i>true wind</i> direction. Also applies downwind.	Learn more
Lane	Clear lane	A path you can sail on one tack (either upwind or downwind) without encountering other boats or disturbed air.	Learn more
Layline	Layline	Upwind: the line that lets you sail close-hauled to the windward mark (or a start/finish line mark) without pinching. Downwind: the line you would sail to a leeward mark at your optimum <i>VMG</i> angle.	Learn more
Lee bow	Safe leeward position	Sailing upwind with a boat positioned just behind and to windward. The boat ahead and to leeward is advantaged, since the windward boat is not in clear air.	Learn more
Leeway		Distance or angle a boat drifts off course due to the sideways force of the wind.	Learn more

Leverage		A boat that is laterally separated from other boats is said to have <i>leverage</i> , and will gain the most from a favorable shift, but lose the most from an unfavorable shift.	Learn more
Leech shape		The profile of the trailing edge of sail, either flat, open, or closed	Learn more
Lift, header/knock		A wind shift that allows you to change heading without changing sail trim. Upwind, a lift lets you sail closer to the windward mark and a header (knock) makes you sail further away from the mark. Downwind, a lift makes you sail further from the mark and a header (knock) lets you sail closer to the mark.	
Line sight	Transit	An aid to judging distance to the starting line, by finding a shore reference that aligns with an end of the line.	Learn more
Long tack/gybe		The tack (or gybe) that lets you sail the most distance without getting to the <i>layline</i> . Sail the long tack first is a strategy rule of thumb.	Learn more
Luff, Luffing	Backwind, bubbling	1) The leading edge of a sail 2) Heading up toward the wind (luffing up) 3) The bubbling or fluttering of a sail when sailing too close to the wind.	
Marshmallow		A less skilled sailor. Some experts advise starting next to a marshmallow.	
Mast bend		Bending the mast from a straight line, either fore and aft or laterally. Mast bend is used to shape the sail.	Learn more
Mast rake	Rake forward/aft	The fore or aft angle of the mast compared to a horizontal reference. Often measured by the distance from the tip of the mast to the transom. Mast rake affects steering balance and sail power.	Learn more
Oscillating shifts		Wind that is shifting back and forth around an average direction.	Learn more
Outhaul		Sail control to tension the foot of the sail.	Learn more
Overstand		A boat that has sailed past the <i>layline</i> and thus sails extra distance to the mark.	
Persistent shift		Wind that shifts in one direction, either progressively, or one time during a leg.	Learn more

Pin a boat		Sailing close to windward of a boat to prevent it from tacking.	
Pinch	High mode	Sailing upwind at a heading closer to the wind than <i>VMG mode</i> .	Learn more
Pressure	Velocity	Slang term for <i>true wind</i> velocity.	
Rhumb line	(Not “rum” line)	The straight-line course from one mark to the next.	
Roll tack/gybe		Using weight to roll the boat, minimizing rudder use and accelerating after the sail crosses.	Learn more
Sail in clear air		Strategy to sail in wind that is undisturbed by other boats.	Learn more
Sail the boat on its lines	Angle of heel	Sailing with the optimum angle of heel. The design of the boat (its “lines”) dictates the optimum heel angle.	Learn more
Sail the headed gybe		Strategy to minimize distance sailed downwind by staying on the gybe that points you closer to the mark.	Learn more
Sail the lifted tack	In phase, out of phase	Strategy to minimize distance sailed upwind by staying on the tack that points you closer to the mark. If you sail the lifted tack and change tacks when the opposite tack becomes lifted, you are in phase with the shifts.	Learn more
Skewed course	Unbalanced legs	A course in which the <i>long tack</i> is significantly longer than the opposite tack. A skewed course is not square to the wind.	
Slam dunk		A boat on starboard tack (S) crosses just ahead of a port tacker (P) and then tacks as P is ducking her. If S does this right, she will end up with control, to windward and slightly ahead of P.	Learn more
Stalling		Separation of air flow from the leeward side of a sail. Also, separation of water flow from a foil (centerboard, lee board, rudder). Stalling occurs when the angle of attack of the sail or foil is too large for the flow velocity.	
Tacking angle		When sailing close-hauled, the angle between the boat’s headings on port and starboard tack. Normally roughly 90 degrees but changes by +/- 10 or more degrees in light and heavy wind.	Learn more
Take a hitch		Tactical maneuver to tack away from a boat ahead and then tack back to obtain clear air or more wind.	

Telltails	Shroud tales, luff tales, leech tales	<u>Shroud telltales</u> – ribbons or yarn placed on the side stays (shrouds) to indicate the <i>apparent wind</i> . <u>Luff telltales</u> (or sail tales, woolies, ticklers) – ribbons or yarn placed behind the <i>luff</i> of the sail to indicate airflow over the sail. <u>Leech tales</u> – ribbons placed on the trailing edge (leech) of the sail to indicate air flow.	Shroud tales Luff tales Leech tales
Tiller towards trouble		Expression to help new sailors sail <i>in the groove</i> . Move the tiller toward the <i>luff telltales</i> that are fluttering.	
Traveler		Control to change the sheeting angle of the mainsheet.	Learn more
True wind		The direction and speed of the wind over the water, as measured from a stationary reference.	
Twist	Twisted, untwisted	The change in <i>angle of attack</i> from top to bottom of a sail.	Learn more
Up in the lulls, down in the puffs	Soak low, heat it up	Downwind technique to maintain boat speed and maximize downwind <i>VMG</i> . Head up in a lull (heat it up) and head down in a puff (soak low).	Learn more
Vang sheeting		Tensioning the vang so that the boom moves to leeward but not up when easing the mainsheet in a puff.	Learn more
Veer, back	Wind shift, righty, lefty	Veer – a <i>true wind</i> shift to the right when facing upwind. Back – a <i>true wind</i> shift to the left when facing upwind.	
Velocity Made Good	VMG	Measure of the rate at which you are making progress directly upwind or downwind.	Learn more
Velocity shift	Velocity header/lift	A change in the <i>apparent wind</i> direction due to an increase or decrease in the velocity (not direction) of the <i>true wind</i> .	Learn more
VMG mode		Sailing at the heading that maximizes the <i>VMG</i> , upwind or downwind.	Learn more
When in doubt, let it out	Let the sail breathe, ventilate	Expression that reminds us to avoid over-trimming the sail. Applies in light air, in a lull, or when the boat is going slower than it should for the wind speed. .	Learn more
Windex	Wind vane, wind finder	Rotating wind indicator at the top of the mast.	Learn more