

River Grades Explained

A general classification system is in use around the world so that river paddlers can gauge the general difficulty of a river or stretch of river.

The following descriptions are only a guide to the grading system.

GRADE 1

Moving water, unobstructed and without technical difficulties. There may be small waves and riffles to challenge the paddler. The route will either be very obvious or any route down may be possible.

GRADE 2

Waves, small stoppers and other minor obstructions to avoid. Eddies, cushion waves, small drops may be encountered with a clear passage usually easily visible from the water.

GRADE 3

Waves, stoppers and technical difficulties are more severe. There may be drops and powerful constrictions. The main distinguishing factor of Grade 3 water is that the paddler will have to follow a recognisable route to avoid obstacles and hazards.

GRADE 4

Severe waves, drops, stoppers and other obstructions. The route is not easily recognisable and will usually require careful inspection from the boat or bank.

Grade 4 encompasses a wide range of rivers, from those with pool-drop rapids to those with extended continuous rapids; so there is a huge variation in difficulty. It is common to distinguish easier grade 4 rapids by grading them as 4- and harder rapids as 4+ (or in some cases, 3/4 or 4/5).

GRADE 5

Extremely difficult rapids with precise and technically demanding routes to be followed. Stoppers, currents and waves will be powerful and inspection is essential.

GRADE 6

All of the above carried to extremes. Grade 6 usually means unrunnable rapids, which may just be possible in certain conditions.

Yes, these descriptions are vague and unspecific. Grading is an imprecise and controversial activity. A continuous grade 3 river may be more challenging than a pool-drop grade 4 river.

Gradings given by Authors of river guides are PURELY THEIR OWN UNTRUSTWORTHY OPINION and should only be used for a general guide. A river is a dangerous, unpredictable and constantly changing environment.

FORGET THE GUIDEBOOK GRADE ON THE DAY. INSPECT AND DECIDE FOR YOURSELF IF YOU ARE UP TO, AND HAPPY WITH, A RIVER.

