Learning how to surf is hard, full stop.

Made especially difficult with all the contradicting information out there.

It's a minefield to say the least.

But this ultimate guide teaching you how to surf hopes to solve all that.

A super in-depth guide for beginners learning to surf for the first time - leaving no stone unturned.

Go through the whole thing in one go, or download the PDF version to print off and read through in your own time.

Either way, this ultimate guide to learning to surf has got you covered.

Ready?

Let's go.

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PART 1: CHOOSING A SURF SPOT

When you're just starting out it's important that you're surfing the right spot, in the right conditions.

STEP 1. HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT SURF SPOT?

When you're just starting out it's important that you're surfing a beginner friendly surf break.

Here's what to look for:

- **Small, mellow, slow moving waves**: These types of waves are safe and playful, giving you plenty of time to get to your feet.

- **Beach with no rocks**: Find a nice flat beach without any rocks.

- **Avoid rips**: Beginner friendly surf spots will have fewer, slower moving rip currents.
HOW RIPS WORK

If you’re unsure how to find the best beginner friendly surf spot in your area, ask in your local surf shop or surf school and they’ll point you in the right direction.

STEP 2: CHOOSING THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

Unlike other sports, the landscape in surfing always changes, so choosing the right conditions is important.

Here’s what to look for when picking the best surf conditions as a beginner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIZE</th>
<th>WIND</th>
<th>WAVE TYPE</th>
<th>WAVE POWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2ft</td>
<td>Light Offshore</td>
<td>Whitewater</td>
<td>Weak &amp; Gentle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PART 2: CHOOSING THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

As a beginner learning how to surf for the first time, you’ll need to be on the right equipment.
STEP 3: SELECTING A BEGINNER SURFBOARD

When you’re just starting out, it’s important that you are riding the right type of surfboard. A surfboard that’s going to provide stability, to help the learning process.

Here’s what to look for:

- **Soft Top Surfboard:** These types of boards are made of soft foam and won’t injure you if you get hit.

- **Length:** You want a surfboard that is long (around 8-9ft), as this length makes it easier to catch waves, and is more stable once you get to your feet.

- **Lots of Volume:** *Volume gives a surfboard buoyancy,* this helps to keep it afloat. Choose a board with lots of volume (100 litres +).

- **Soft Fins:** Beginner surfboards should have soft, flexible fins. These **types of fins** will avoid injury if they hit you.

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STEP 4: LECROPE/LEASH

You’re also going to need a leash too.

A leash is a chord that attaches you to your surfboard to stop it from floating away from you if you fall off.
The leash should be a minimum of 7ft long, thick and sturdy.

The leash gets attached nice and tight to your back foot, with the coil pointing backwards to avoid it tangling in your toes.

**STEP 5: SELECTING A WETSUIT**

As a beginner the type of wetsuit you wear is of little importance, so long as it keeps you warm.

However as you progress and you’re looking for something a little more advanced, here’s what to look for:

**WETSUIT THICKNESS**

Wetsuits come in different thicknesses measured in millimetres.

They are generally thicker around the chest and back (protecting the vital organs), and thinner on the arms and legs for flexibility.

A winter wetsuit for cold water will typically be 5mm x 3mm (also referred to as 5/3), and a spring suit for warmer water will generally be 3mm x 2mm.

The thickness will vary depending on the temperature of the water.

**WETSUIT FLEXIBILITY**

As your surfing improves, flexibility will become important to you for manoeuvrability.

Beware though, that increased flexibility results in reduced durability, so do bare that in mind with any purchase.

If you want to go into full detail on wetsuit technology, and what to look out for when buying a wetsuit, check out this wetsuit guide.

**STEP 6: SURFBOARD WAX**

Surfers use a special type of wax which is applied to a surfboard for grip.

Furthermore, surf wax comes a variety of different blends suitable for different temperatures of water.

![COLD WATER = SOFT WAX][1] ![WARM WATER = HARD WAX][2]

The reason we have different types of wax for different climates is because it effects the melting point of the wax, which impacts grip.

So choosing the right wax for your board is actually quite important.
Not sure which type of wax to choose?

DIFFERENT SURF WAX FOR DIFFERENT TEMPERATURE WATER

Just ask the clerk in any surf shop and they'll choose the right one for your area.

PART 3: HITTING THE SURF

Alright, now that you've got all of your equipment ready, it's time to hit the water.

STEP 7: NAVIGATING THROUGH THE WAVES

Getting from the shore out to the surf will require pushing through/over waves.

As a beginner there are two main techniques to do this:

NOSE FIRST TECHNIQUE

Hold the nose of the board by your side, and lift the nose of your board over the waves as they come, allowing the whitewater to roll underneath.
TAIL PUSH TECHNIQUE

Position yourself at the back of the surfboard and as a wave approaches apply pressure to the tail of the surfboard (lifting the nose of the board up), once again allowing the whitewater to flow underneath.

PRO TIP: NEVER push through, or over a wave with your surfboard in front of your body. The waves’ energy will pick the board up and smash it into you. This hurts!

STEP 8: WHEN TO CATCH WAVES

Ok, now comes the fun stuff - actually catching waves.

But when should you start paddling?

You’ll want to begin paddling when the wave is about 3m away from you.

This’ll give you enough time to build up momentum, and allow your surfboard to get picked up by the power of the broken wave.

STEP 9: SELECTING THE RIGHT WAVES

As a beginner, you should be focusing entirely on whitewater waves at this point (whitewater waves are waves that have already broken).
Whitewater waves are easier to catch, and easier to successfully get to your feet.

Much better in the early stages of learning how to surf.

So look for uniform, slow moving whitewater waves to begin with (you can move on to green/unbroken waves once you’ve got the basics covered).

**STEP 10: POSITIONING ON THE BOARD**

Positioning on your surfboard is super important.

Too far forward and you’ll nosedive.

Too far back and there’s so much resistance that you won’t move anywhere.

The spot to be in is what’s known as the ‘sweet spot’ - not too far forward, and not too far back.

In this position, your surfboard should be flat - planing over the top of the water as you paddle.

Quick analogy for you: Imagine pushing your surfboard in a swimming pool from one end to another.

The way your surfboard effortlessly planes over the surface is what you want to emulate in the water with your paddling (easier said than done).

**STEP 11: PADDLING**

Alright, now for the paddling.

There are two key concepts to pay close attention to when paddling:

**MAXIMISE PROPULSION**

- Big, deep, long paddles.
- Arched back, and high elbows for maximum drive.
- Power over speed. Big powerful paddles are better than lots of weak paddles.
- Glide: Rather than being like a motorboat, you instead want to be like an olympic rowing boat. Glide beats brute power.
MINIMISE RESISTANCE

☐ Keep your legs together, and on your board.

☐ Body aligned down the centre of your board.

☐ Weight in the sweet spot.

STEP 12: POPPING TO YOUR FEET

There are many different approaches to popping to your feet, with different pop up techniques suitable to different stages of your progression.

But as a beginner, learning how to surf for the first time, here is the method we recommend.

It's called the Aussie Pop-Up, and I'll explain it below:

BREAKING DOWN THE AUSSIE POP-UP

☐ Come onto your board as we did when we were practising the prone technique.

☐ Begin your paddling. Remember, once the wave has collected you, you still need to paddle an extra three strokes just to be sure.

☐ Once you feel the wave has collected you, place your hands near the pectorals (chicken wing position).

☐ From here bring your back leg forward and cork your leg towards your body (lizard toe) - if your doing this right your back leg will be placed on top of the fins.

☐ Have your hips opened and slightly ajar.

☐ Look forward throughout the whole process.

☐ From this position, in one continuous movement, lift your body up whilst you press on your hands and your back leg.
Your back leg will lock into place first at a 90 degrees angle, as you simultaneously swing your front foot through your hands and place it on the deck of the board at 45 a degree angle.

From here, place both hands on either side of the body and continue to look forward.

Bend your knees and ride the wave.

**STEP 13: STANCE**

Your **surf stance** is the way that you stand on a board.

You’ll be either a Goofy footer (right foot forward), or a Regular/Natural footer (left foot forward).

![Goofy Stance](image1.png) ![Regular/Natural Stance](image2.png)

Once you’ve deciphered your stance, you’ll need to get your feet in the right positions too:

![How Wide Should Your Stance Be?](image3.png) ![Feet Placement](image4.png)

Feet a bit wider than shoulder width apart.

Back foot: 90°

Front foot: 45°

**PART 4: RIDING THE WAVE**
If all of the above has gone to plan, you’re now up on your feet riding the wave.

Give yourself a pat on the back.

**STEP 14: LOOK WHERE YOU’RE GOING**

Kind of obvious, but you’ll be surprised how many people don’t do this.

Keep your eyes looking where you want to go, rather than down at your feet.

Doing this helps to centre your weight over your board, and improves balance.

**STEP 15: THE DISMOUNT**

Getting off your surfboard can actually be a bit of a problem.

If the water is really shallow, jumping off can be a little dangerous as the surface beneath is uneven, and can cause you to roll your ankle or worse.

So, rather than simply jumping off here are three other suggestions:

- **THE STALL:** Shift your feet and your weight to the back of the board to stall the board and slow it down. Once the wave has passed you by, it’s now safe to dismount.

- **THE SIT DOWN:** Stall the board once again as above, and this time go from a standing position to a sitting position on the board. From here you are then safe to dismount.

- **THE STARFISH:** Rather than jumping off your surfboard trying to land on your feet, instead dismount whereby you’re trying to penetrate the water as little as possible. This is done by trying to land flat on your back. *Advanced surfers will use this technique on shallow reef breaks.*

**STEP 16: RINSE AND REPEAT**

There you go, you’ve just learned how to surf for the very first time!

Now there’s a lot to go through there, and a lot to remember, so don’t be too hard on yourself if you don’t get it right the first time.

But now that we’ve covered how to surf in this step by step format above, let’s look into some more things you need to know to really get this whole surfing thing dialled.
FAQ: HOW TO SURF MEGA BREAKDOWN

Surfing is such a difficult sport to master, with so many moving parts, and so many variables.

With that being said, here's a mega breakdown of all the most common questions we get from new surfers learning for the first time.

IS SURFING HARD TO LEARN?

Yes, surfing is a very difficult sport to learn.

Picking the basics up can be done relatively quickly, but mastering the sport will take years of practice.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN TO SURF?

To learn the basics - get to your feet, trim along the waves etc. will take between a few weeks, up to around a year.

To advance onto turns, cutbacks, floaters, re-entries etc. expect it to take around two - three years.

For advanced manoeuvres, things like roundhouse cutbacks, laybacks, barrel riding, airs etc. expect it to take around five years +.

CAN I TEACH MYSELF TO SURF?

Of course you can - and lots of people do - however going it solo will see a slower rate of improvement than someone getting outside help.

WHY IS SURFING SO ADDICTIVE?

Part of what makes surfing so addictive is the fact that it's so damn hard.

This, coupled with the fact that you're immersed in nature, surrounded by water, wildlife, and exposed to the elements makes you feel nice all round.

In fact the health benefits of surfing are huge.

There's a phenomenon known as the Mammalian Dive Reflex too, that completely changes your biology and physiology the moment you submerge yourself underwater.

Calming the body, and making you feel epic as a result.

IS SURFING DANGEROUS FOR BEGINNERS?

On the whole, so long as you follow a few simple rules - not really.
It generally only becomes dangerous if you don’t pay attention to a few simple rules:

**RULE 1. DON’T SURF OUT OF YOUR DEPTH TOO EARLY**

If you’ve had a surf lesson then you’ll be aware that the first few lessons are held in the whitewater.

This is because it’s the safest place to learn surfing.

It has a number of benefits:

- ☑️ You can always touch the sand bottom.
- ☑️ You’re out of the way of the more advance surfers.
- ☑️ Your only ever waist deep - meaning your in control.

So it goes without saying, don’t move out of your comfort zone until you’re absolutely sure and confident you know what you’re doing.

**RULE 2. CONTROL YOUR BOARD**

If you’re new to surfing, then you’re equally new to handling a surfboard.

When you’re getting bashed around in the whitewater with a big board strapped to your ankle it’s easy to get hit (or hit someone else for that matter).

So always make sure your surfboard is under control.

**RULE 3. DON’T SURF ALONE**

When you’re just starting out never surf alone.

Ideally, hit the water with a friend, but failing that be sure to surf in a beginner friendly zone with other surfers in the water for safety.

**ARE OFFSHORE WINDS GOOD FOR SURFING?**

Yes, offshore winds are considered the best winds for learning how to surf.

This type of wind makes the waves surface clean, smooth and nicely shaped - making it easier for new surfers to read the waves.

However, surfing onshore waves can be equally as fun, it just takes a little more practice that’s all.
AS A BEGINNER SHOULD I BE SURFING WHITETWATER OR GREEN WAVES?

White waves as mentioned earlier, are perfect for the learner surfer. They are safe, fluffy and easily negotiable so you can catch plenty of waves in a short amount of time.

As you move ‘out the back’ to surf unbroken waves or green waves as they are also known, things get a little more intricate.

Out here, a different set of surfing rules apply.

So, stick to the whitewater first until you’ve mastered the basics and you’re ready.

HOW DO YOU GET GOOD AT SURFING?

To get good at surfing you have to put in a lot of time, commit to learning, and be dedicated.

To fast track the process you can get surf coaching, watch tutorials online, buy online surfing courses, watch surf films, and more.

Yes, there are a lot of peripheral things you can do to get better at surfing quicker, but there’s no substitute for time in the water.

Put the time, and you’ll get results. Just be patient, as it may take a while.

A MINI ACTION PLAN TO GET BETTER FASTER

THE LEARNING CURVE IN SURFING IS UNIQUE

Unlike other sports, the learning curve in surfing is slower.

What this means is you stay at the beginner level longer than in any other sports.

Why?

Because, surfing has a unique set of variables which makes the sport extra challenging:

- Your environment is always changing (winds, tides etc).
- No wave is ever the same.
Lots of the time spent surfing is spent paddling and getting smashed.

**SURF THE RIGHT SURFBOARD FOR YOUR ABILITY**

Most people are on the wrong equipment for their weight and ability.

The biggest mistake to avoid is being on a surfboard that is too small, without enough volume.

Being on a surfboard that’s too small for your ability will reduce the amount of waves you catch, make it harder to paddle, harder to get to your feet, and your success rate will fall.

If you can resist the urge to downsize your equipment too early, you’ll catch more waves, have more fun, and improve faster.

Here’s are a few articles to learn more about surfboard design:

Learn about [Surfboard Volume Here](#), [Surfboard Concaves Here](#), [Surfboard Tail Shapes Here](#), and [Surfboard Fins Here](#).

**GET SOME QUALITY SURF COACHING**

It’s kinda strange isn’t it.

Every other sport on the planet has coaching as a pathway for improvement, but for some reason, surfing doesn’t.

It doesn’t make sense, and slows progression as a result.

So if you can afford it, reach out to a surf coach in your area, or get online and get help from there.

Don’t know where to start? Just reach out to us and we can help.

**SURF SKATING HELPS YOUR SURFING TOO**

It used to be really hard to replicate the surfing movements on land.

Thankfully, nowadays with surf skateboards you can.

**Surf skating** has been an absolute blessing for surfers, helping landlocked surfers replicate in-water movements on land.

Unlike ordinary skateboards, surf-skateboards allow you to mimic the exact movements (within reason) you do when surfing.

From weight distribution to balance, pumping, carving and more.

**WHAT IS THE HARDEST PART OF SURFING?**

The hardest part of surfing is the ever changing landscape of the canvas you’re performing on.
With no two waves ever the same you're having to constantly react, rather than simply go through the motions like in many other sports.

This makes it really difficult to get better because even if you landed a trick on one wave, the next will be completely different.

**WHAT ARE THE RULES OF SURFING?**

There are a set of rules in surfing broadly called ‘surf etiquette’.

The main rules you need to be aware of are:

- Don’t drop in on other people.
- Don’t snake other people in the lineup.
- Be kind and polite in the water.
- Respect the locals always.
- Don’t bail your surfboard in front of another surfer.

**WHAT IS THE DROP IN RULE IN SURFING?**

The drop in rule in surfing is a way of establishing order in the lineup.

The surfer up and riding closest to the curl of the wave first, has right of way.

**WHO GETS PRIORITY ON A WAVE?**

![Diagram showing priority on a wave](image)

The surfer closest to the peak gets priority.

**WHY DO SURFERS SURF EARLY IN THE MORNING?**

Surfers surf early in the mornings (known in surf slang as ‘Dawny’s) for the following reasons:

- Less crowds: Less people surf early in the morning.
- Offshore winds: Winds are predominantly offshore in the mornings.
- Got to get a surf in before work or school.
CAN I LEARN TO SURF WITHOUT LESSONS?

Of course you can, it just might be a little more difficult that's all.

As with everything, the right understanding and the right knowledge will help you improve quicker.

Wherever you are in the world there will undoubtedly be a surf school near you offering surf lessons that you can hit up.

CAN YOU LEARN TO SURF AT ANY AGE?

Of course you can.

Yes, the level of progression may be a little slower with age, but with practice and perseverance it can be mastered.

Just takes a little time that's all.

WHAT'S BEST SURFBOARD TO LEARN ON?

The best type of surfboards to learn on are big, really buoyant, and made from something soft like a foam board.

Start with one of these, and stick with it until manoeuvrability becomes a problem.

CAN YOU LEARN TO SURF WITHOUT WATER?

Hmm, not really.

Yes, you can do things like surf skating, Indo Board exercises, stretching, visualisation, etc.

But the fact remains, if you're not getting in the water often, you won't improve.

WRAPPING IT UP!

Learning how to surf takes time and lots of dedication.

But the payoffs are definitely worth it.

So stick with it if you can.

And once you’ve mastered a the basics, you can move on to tackling unbroken waves, doing turns, carves, cutbacks and more.

Better to be at the bottom of a ladder you want to be on, than at the top of one you don't.

So, go grab your board, download this ultimate guide for future reference, share it with your friends, and go out and surf till your heart's content.

I'll be rooting for you.
LAUREN RINGER

Former professional surfer, and WQS warrior, Lauren is the founder and head technical coach at the House of Surf.

You may also like

Mammalian Dive Reflex: A Surfers Guide...

7 Expert Tips To Surfing Steep Waves Better...

Surfing Stance: The Ultimate Guide (2022)

Join 1.5k everyday surfers and get our best content directly in your inbox!

Email

Yes Please!