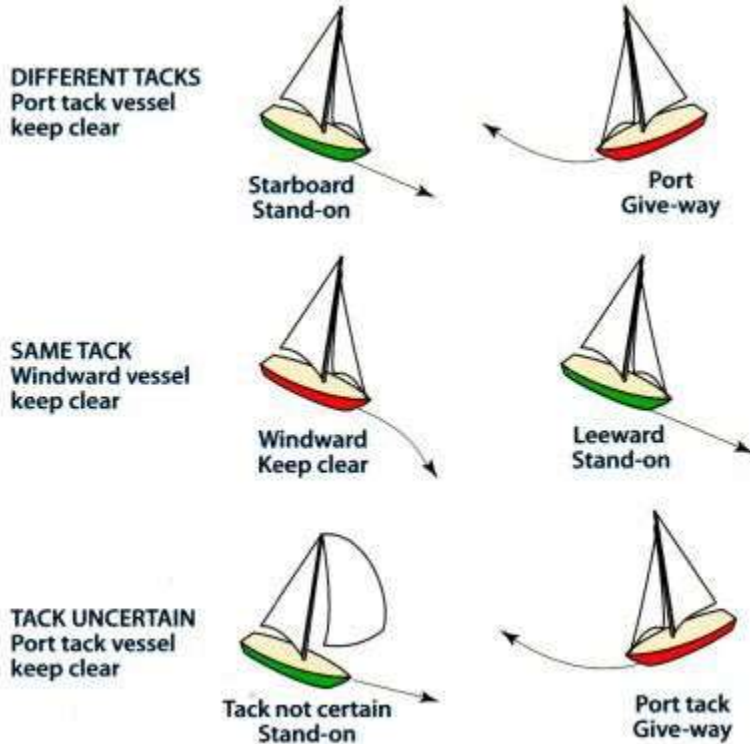


Rules of the Road for Sailboats

By [Tom Lochhaas](#)

Rules When Sailboats Meet



Collisions occur between boats more often than you might think, usually because one or both captains did not know or were not applying the Rules of the Road. The rules come from the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS), with which the U.S. regulations are consistent. Following are the basic rules that apply to all sailboats in U.S. waters.

Whenever two boats come close to each other, the rules designate one as the **stand-on** vessel and the other as the **give-way** vessel. The rules are designed to prevent a situation like two people walking toward each other on a sidewalk who both step out each other's way in the same direction and thus run into each other. The **stand-on vessel** must continue on its course and the **give-way vessel must** turn away to avoid collision. Therefore both captains must understand the Rules of the Road and know whether, in any given situation, their boat is to stand on or give way.

Sailboat vs. Sailboat

The Rules are simple when two boats meet under sail (engines not running), as shown in the illustration above:

- *If the boats are on different tacks* (sails on different sides of the boat), then the **sailboat on the starboard tack** (wind coming from the starboard side, with sails thus out to the port, or left, side) is the **stand-on vessel** and the **boat on the port tack** must **give way**. The port-tack boat must also give way to a sailboat whose tack is uncertain (such as when sailing downwind using a spinnaker).
- *If the boats are on the same tack*, the **leeward (downwind) boat** is the **stand-on vessel**, and the **windward boat** must **give way**.

In sailboat races there are additional rules about the start line, rounding marks, and so on, but the basic rules above apply when boats meet in open water.

Sailboat vs. Powerboat

Remember that a sailboat running an engine, even if sails are up, is legally categorized as a powerboat. In a congested area it is best not to run the engine with sails still up, because captains of other boats may not be aware of your engine running and may assume you are operating under sailing rules.

The Rules are simple when a sailboat and a small recreational powerboat meet:

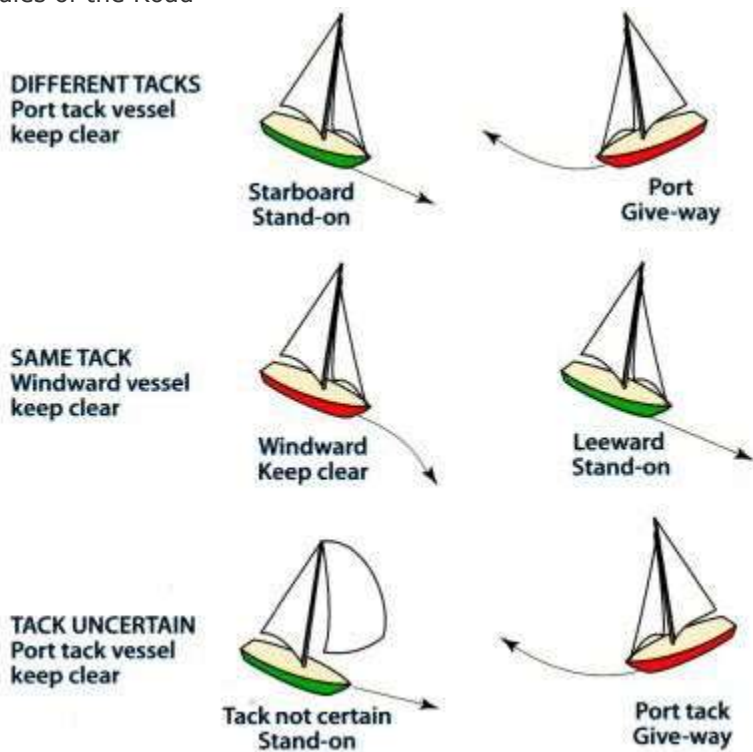
- *In most situations* the sailing boat is the **stand-on vessel** and the powerboat must **give way**.
- *If the sailboat is overtaking a powerboat*, the powerboat is the **stand-on vessel** and the sailboat must **give way**.
- Any boat with more maneuverability must **give way** to any boat with less maneuverability (see below).

Maneuverability Is Key!

Sailboats under sail generally have right of way over most *recreational* powerboats, because sailboats are assumed to have more restricted maneuverability than powerboats (for example, a sailboat cannot turn and sail straight into the wind to avoid a collision). But by the same principle, sailboats must give way to any boat with less maneuverability.

This means that usually a sailboat must give way to a large ship. If you sail offshore or at night in fog, it's a good idea to have an inexpensive [AIS system](#) on your boat to help you avoid collisions.

Rules of the Road



Following is the order of increasing maneuverability. Any boat lower on the list must give way to boats higher on the list:

- A disabled boat
- A boat that is difficult to maneuver, like a dredge or barge in tow
- A boat whose maneuverability is restricted by size or draft, like a freighter
- A boat engaged in commercial fishing, like a trawler
- A boat being rowed
- A sailboat
- A recreational powerboat

Powerboat vs. Powerboat

Remember that your sailboat is considered a powerboat when the engine is running. Then you need to follow the Rules for two powerboats meeting in open water:

- *When meeting head-on*, the boats should pass port side to port side, just like cars on a two-way road (in America).
- *When crossing*, the boat on the other boat's port (left) side must **give way**.
- *When one powerboat overtakes another from behind*, the overtaking boat (the **give-way vessel**) must use a sound signal to indicate which side it intends to pass on (one short blast for starboard, and two for port). The boat being passed signals approval by repeating the same sound signal back - or may use the danger sound signal (five short blasts) to indicate it is not safe to pass now on that side.

The ultimate rule is always to avoid collision. This may mean slowing or stopping your boat, even if you are the stand-on vessel, to avoid collision with another boat that fails to give way. Use common sense along with the Rules of the Road, and if in doubt of the intent of a large boat posing a danger, you can always hail them on your VHF radio for clarification.

Note: Illustration with permission from [The International Marine Book of Sailing](#) by Robby Robinson, © International Marine. This book includes additional information about navigation rules in special circumstances, as well as many other seamanship topics.

If you're concerned you might forget any of the rules of the road, here's a [handy app](#) to keep on your smartphone or device you can check in on anytime (it will also remind you of fog and other sound signals).

If you're not sure you have all the knowledge and skills you need for safe boating, check this [list of safety topics](#) included in boating safety courses to see you have any gaps to fill.