

Popping Up

Popping up is the evolutionary step from playing around to surfing. To get the hang of it, draw an outline of your surfboard in the sand. Then lie down on that imaginary board on your stomach as if you were paddling on a surfboard. Now imagine the big kahuna comes up behind you. Place your hands down along the rails of the board. In one fell swoop, place all your weight on your hands and pop up into standing position with your feet in the middle of the board.

Correct Standing Position

Normally you'd want your stronger foot behind you and your weaker foot in front with both feet near the middle of the board. For most, the normal position would have your right foot back and left foot forward, however, feel free to surf goofy foot (opposite) if that feels right for you. Your feet should be shoulder width apart and your knees should be bent to keep a low center of gravity. Your back foot should be somewhat perpendicular to the length of the board and your front foot should point more forwards (roughly a 45 degree angle). Again, you'll want to be far enough forwards so that your tail doesn't stall you yet far enough back so that your nose doesn't go under and toss you off the board.

Practice In The White Water

The white water is the best place to practice paddling, popping up and staying up. This is where the waves have already broken and continue to the beach, all white and foamy. A great advantage for practicing here is that you don't have to fight past the break each time you want to catch a wave. On a gradually descending ocean floor like the one found in Playa Grande near Montezuma, Costa Rica, you can walk out up to 100 meters and easily catch any white wave that comes your way. Practice catching waves here over and over until you feel comfortable popping up and staying balanced on your board. Then move out beyond the break.

Catching Waves

Once you move beyond the white water, you'll have to find the point at which the waves begin to break. In this spot, waves will swell up to where they become their steepest just before they curl over. If you're in a crowded haven for surfers, it will be obvious because everyone will be waiting about the same distance from shore. This is the "lineup". Get yourself parallel to those who know what they're doing and be sure to stay at least a board and leash's length apart.

Once positioned correctly, you wait for your perfect wave. As it approaches, you'll have to begin paddling to gain momentum. If you're on a long board, start paddling about 5 seconds before the wave will reach you to pick up speed. If you're on a short board, you can wait until a couple of seconds before. Paddle hard! If you pick up enough speed and meet the wave at the right point, you will feel yourself be taken away. It's an instantly recognizable moment. If you're not sure if you made it or not, you didn't make it.

Remember board positioning. Too far forwards and you nose dive. Too far back and you stall. If you're in the right place, in relation to the wave as well as on the board itself, you'll ride down the wave's face. If you're pointing straight forwards towards the beach, you'll catch more speed than necessary and wind up in front of the wave. The wave will crash into white water behind you and then pick you back up and carry you to shore. If this is happening to you, great, you're catching waves. Do this a bunch and get the feel of catching the wave and staying balanced on your board and enjoy the ride. With enough practice, you'll be ready for the next step...angling.

Catch It At An Angle

Now that you know how to paddle, catch waves pop up and keep your balance on the board, you're ready to extend the ride. Watching the pros, you'll notice that they can ride up and down the face of the wave because they're surfing sideways. If you're surfing straight at the beach, you ride right down the waves face and then get hit by the white water. But if you catch it at an angle and you're headed in the same direction as the wave is breaking, you can stay ahead of that break where the wave continues to be at its steepest and use that face of the wave as a snowboarder uses a mountain. You can ride up and down, cut back, cruise...now you're surfing!

As the wave approaches, try to determine which way it will break or peel. Paddle in that same direction until you catch the wave. Once properly taken away, be sure to keep your nose pointed towards where the wave is breaking. Pop up quickly and get yourself in the right position. If you do it right, a shiver may run down your spine. It's the drug that will turn that first wave into a lifelong passion. This is what it means to be "stoked"!