

Navigation lights

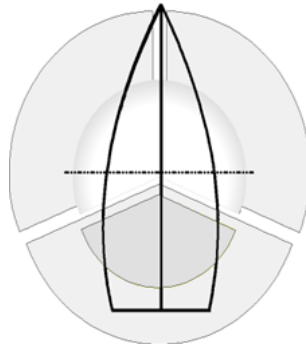
It had been one of those great delta weekends; all day at the island sitting around drinking adult beverages, smoking cigars, telling lies, you know just a bunch of boaters hanging around enjoying each other's company. I was just visiting for the day and didn't want to take my boat out, so one of my friends agreed to dingy over to King Island in the morning to pick me up and bring me back later in the evening. Works out great for me and I will even put a few gallons of gas in the boat at the King Island fuel dock for his trouble.

After a fun day and plenty of adult beverages, with the sun setting it was time for me to head back to King Island. By the time we had the gear loaded into dingy and I settled into the bow it was getting dark. I was leaning back in the coxswain position, facing towards the stern, just enjoying the ride. This is a great place as you have your back to the wind and spray and can carry on a conversation with the driver. This center console RIB has its red and green navigation lights installed on either side of the console and the white all around light at the stern, a pretty common configuration for a dinghy. We had been running for approximately ten minutes and I'm getting down to the last few minutes of a great cigar, when a ski boat came around a bend and proceeded to overtake us on our port side. It was then that I noticed something wasn't right. Maybe because of the long day in the sun, or the excessive adult beverages or perhaps because I'm backwards facing the stern, but after a few minutes I realized that our navigation lights were not right. As the ski boat is coming alongside our port side I see his green navigation light and am also looking at our green navigation light; that's not right. Then it occurs to me that our red and green lights are on the wrong sides. It appears as though the manufacturer had installed the lights incorrectly and has the green on the port and the red on the starboard. If that isn't bad enough, I had done the Vessel Safety Check on this boat just a few weeks earlier and as part of the check, we activate the navigation lights and make sure they work. In all fairness they do work, just the colors are wrong. Of course we got a good chuckle out of this and got the lights moved to their proper sides and in all the confusion I think that I even forgot to put fuel in the boat.

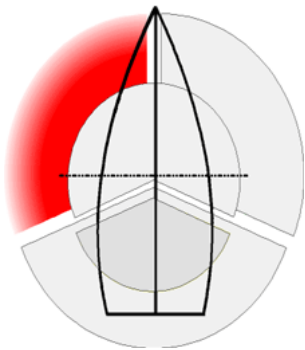
The USCG Navigation Rules devote quite a lot of time and print to lights and shapes. There are only 38 rules and 12 of them deal with lights. Everyone that has a boat greater than 12 meters (39 feet 4 inches) in length is required to keep a copy of the Navigation Rules on board. Now might be a good time to get out the book, dust it off, and take a look at Part C – Lights and

Shapes, Rules 20 to 31 and refresh your memory of the various navigation light combinations that we can expect to see. Boating in the Delta and San Francisco Bay at some point you will come across just about every type of vessel described in the rules. You should be able to recognize the various light combinations of the other vessels so that you will know how you should safely maneuver your vessel. The only vessels that I have not seen in San Francisco Bay are a hovercraft, a submarine, or a mine sweeper, but I have come across these vessels in other ports along the west coast. With a little practice you can identify the type of vessel, their heading in relationship to your vessel, and then determine if you are the stand-on or give-way vessel.

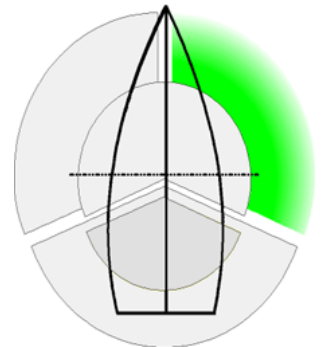
Rule 21 describes the characteristics of the different navigation lights. The red sidelight is located on the port side, the green sidelight is located on the starboard side, the white light of the vessel and is higher than the red and green sidelights, and at the stern. For vessels less than 12 meters in length the masthead and stern lights can be combined into a single all around white



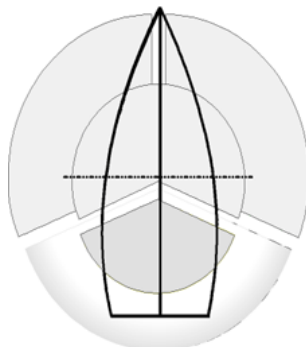
green sidelight is located on the forward is located along the centerline than the red and green sidelights, and at the stern. For vessels less than 12 meters in length the masthead and stern lights can be combined into a single all around white



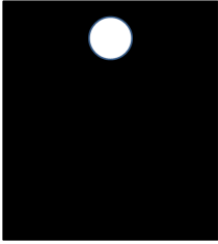
Since we mostly see power driven vessels less than 50 meters (164 feet) in length and sailing vessels, let's take a quick review of the lights we would expect to see. Rule 23 describes the navigation lights exhibited by power driven vessels under way and Rule 25



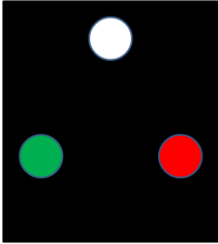
describes the lights for sailing vessels less than 7 meters (23 feet). All have red and green sidelights, the green on starboard, as driven vessels also have a white stern light. At anchor all vessels less than 50 meters in length will have a white all around light and vessels greater than 50 meters will have two all around white lights while at anchor.



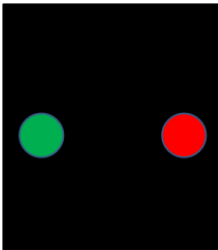
vessels and power driven vessels less than 7 meters in length with the red being on the port side and well as a white stern light. Power driven vessels less than 7 meters in length with the red being on the port side and well as a white stern light. Power driven vessels less than 7 meters in length with the red being on the port side and well as a white stern light.



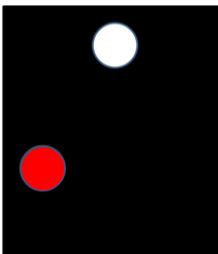
A single white light could have several meanings. We could be looking at an anchor light, the stern light of a large ship, or the navigation light of a vessel less than 7 meters (23 feet) in length, but, in all cases we are the give way vessel and must alter course and speed to avoid collision.



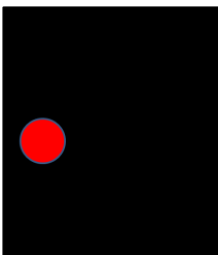
In the case of meeting a power driven vessel less than 50 meters in length, we would see both the red and green side lights as well as the white masthead light. In this case both vessels are the give-way vessel and must alter course and speed. The preferred maneuver is for both vessels to alter course to the right and pass port-to-port



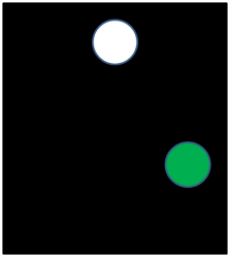
If all we see are the red and green sidelights and no white masthead light, then we are meeting a vessel under sail and we are the give-way vessel and must alter course and speed. The vessel under sail is the stand on vessel and must maintain course and speed.



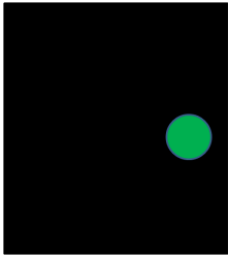
Seeing just a red sidelight and the white masthead light, we know that this is a power driven vessel that is crossing our bow from right to left. Since this vessel is to our right we are the give-way vessel.



A vessel under sail crossing from right to left would show just the red sidelight and have no white masthead light. A power driven vessel is always the give-way vessel to a vessel under sail.



A green sidelight and a white masthead light is a power driven vessel crossing our bow from left to right. We are the stand-on vessel and must maintain course and speed.



We would see just a green sidelight of vessel under sail crossing from left to right. Even though the boat is to our left, since the vessel is under sail, we are the give-way vessel.

With this information fresh in your mind, consider the confusion and risk we could cause having our red and green lights on the wrong side. A vessel crossing our bow could mistake our direction and believe us to be the give-way vessel when we think the other vessel should give-way. All vessels operating at night, or in restricted visibility, are required to display navigation lights. If you are operating between sunset and sunrise you must have the navigation lights activated. Operating your boat at night can be a lot of fun and safe but you should be able to recognize the various combinations of navigation lights. Reading the Navigation Rules can be a tedious task so perhaps getting a navigation light cheat sheet, reviewing one of the many websites, or even a set of flash cards will help. If you haven't taken a USCG Aux or US Power Squadron basic boating class for a few years this can be a good review as they cover lights and shapes along with other important information. We have only looked at two of the 12 rules that deal with navigation lights so devote a little time to reviewing the remaining 10 rules.

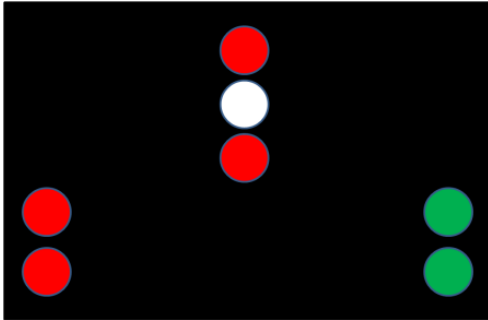
We learned from this that although rare, manufacturers do make mistakes. Having navigation lights on the wrong sides should have been caught long before the vessel was put into service and run at night. I know of at least one vessel safety examiner that now looks more closely at the navigation lights. Surprisingly a short time after this incident I was doing a check on a fairly new boat and found the combination masthead/anchor light was installed backwards. The anchor light part was fine, but the white masthead light faced aft instead of forward. Another

easy fix, just unscrew and rotate the fixture 180 degrees. But having no white light forward and a two white facing aft, would also confuse the other vessel.

Sitting back enjoying a glass of port and a cigar, I consider one of the more colorful light combinations and one that we see regularly in San Francisco Bay and occasionally on the delta. I was thinking back to a late night entrance into Santa Barbara last year when we came around the breakwater and found the channel almost completely plugged up with a dredge. Although not unexpected since the USCG Weekly Local Notice to Mariners listed the harbor as being dredged, we didn't expect him so near the entrance and right in the middle of a very narrow channel.



Look closely at the photo and you can make out the various lights that indicate the nature of the vessels work and the safe side to pass.



One more. You will see this quite often in San Francisco Bay and sometimes in the Stockton Deep Water Channel. If you don't recognize the light combination, get out your rules book and take a look at Rule 27. This is one that you don't want to make a mistake around.

Take a look at the USCG Aux web site at <http://cgaux.org/boatinged/>

Or the US Power Squadron web site at <http://www.usps.org/> The course is available on-line, by DVD, or class.

Have a good story to tell, send me an email. patcarson@yachtsmanmagazine.com. I love a good story.