

Orienteers capture the essence of this thinking sport with a simple phrase: you are either **“On the Map”** or **“Off the Map”**. Navigating successfully requires that we stay continuously aware of where we are, what we are looking for, and what’s coming up next.

Otherwise, we end up wandering around hoping to stumble upon our goal. The tortoise often beats the hare simply by knowing where she is and where she’s going.

The following techniques provide beginner and veteran orienteers alike simple ways to stay on course, find features efficiently, and have the most fun.

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Map Handling Techniques

1. Orient the Map – Keep the map matched to the terrain

Move the map into the same position as the terrain you are facing. For example, if you are on the shore looking at a lake, orient the map so that the lake is in front of you on the map. And not vaguely sort of on an angle, but aligned exactly as it appears before you. If you have a compass, you can also orient the map to magnetic north. This means that once matched to your surroundings, *you* may move but the map stays the same relative to your surroundings.

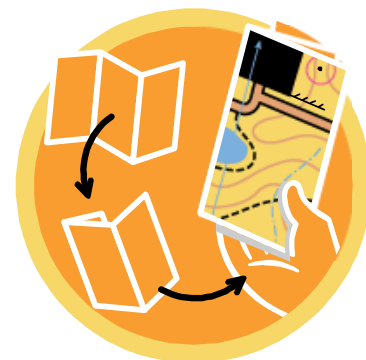
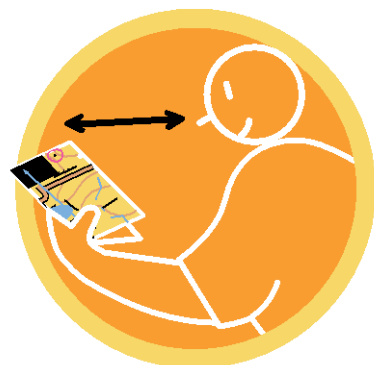
If what we’re looking at on the map is actually behind us or on some odd angle, we have to make constant mental adjustments until our brains get twisted like a pretzel. It is like trying to drive a car by looking in the rear view mirror. So keep the map oriented to the terrain. Make map reading easy on yourself.

2. Fold the Map – Keep only the area you need in sight

We’ve all seen the movie where our hero while driving his car battles with a huge unfolded map, trying vainly to make sense of where he is. It is always a losing battle. If you fold down the map so that only the part you are using shows, it simplifies your task immeasurably. Every time you consult your map, only where you are and where you are going next is visible, showing only the part that matters to you in the moment. While orienteering, the next 2 or 3 legs is a good rule of thumb.

3. Thumbing – Always know exactly where you are

You don’t want to have to search for where you are every time you look at your map. So the easiest way to keep track is to hold your thumb at the spot on the map where you are. Opposable thumbs are a unique evolutionary miracle that orienteers take full advantage of. Then as you progress through the woods or across a field, you inch your thumb along. Doing this consistently eliminates confusion and keeps you – tah-dah! – On the Map.



Map Navigation Techniques

Questions to Ask *Before* You Start Moving

1. Where Am I Now?

Before you take your first step, you must first find on the map where you actually are and which way you’re facing. In Orienteering, you start at the purple triangle. So facing North, find the triangle on your map, orient the map to the terrain, fold the map, put your thumb at the triangle pointing in the direction to the first feature, and ask yourself...

2. What Am I Trying to Find?

It makes a world of difference if you’re trying to find the corner of a building, the junction of two streams, or a tree. They look very different. So look at the “clue sheet” and find out what you are looking for at the center of the first circle. Then consider...

3. What Will Lead Me from Here to There?

Orienteers call these features **Handrails**, simple straightline (called “linear”) features like trails, fences, lakes, and edges of fields “to hold onto” that will lead us most, if not all, of the way to our next target. **Handrails** are features that make our route choice simpler, letting us move without having to think until...

Questions to Ask *As* You Are Moving

4. How Will I Know I’m On Course?

What should you be passing as you progress? That lake on your right? This stream you are crossing? The trail joining yours on the left? Any simple **Collecting Feature** you can identify reassures you that you really *do* know where you are. They also alert you to when you are approaching the mother of all collecting features.

5. How Will I Know I’m Almost There?

When people give directions, they’ll often say, “And just before you get to our street, you will pass a 7/11 on your right.” The 7/11 is your **Attack Point** – an unmistakable “you-can’t-miss-it” feature that trips your brain from cruise control to careful navigation mode. When you reach it, you know it’s only a short route to your destination. (“Let’s see, from here I’m looking for the far corner of the building just past this trail coming up on my left. Yea! There it is!”)

6. How Will I Know If I’ve Gone Too Far?

But what if all your best-laid plans go astray (and you with them)? Another page from giving directions: “Now if you get to the Starbucks, *you’ve just passed our street.*” In Orienteering parlance, this is called a **Catching Feature** – any easily identifiable feature that you should not be running into *before* the control. So if it’s staring right at you, you’ve just missed your target. But not to worry, this is a good sign. It means all you have to do is turn around and backtrack a short way. That’s why it’s always good to have a **Catching Feature** in mind. Since no one is perfect (not even the elite runners), catching a mistake right away is a major tactical skill to cultivate (a close second to actually admitting the mistake in the first place). “Wait a gosh-darned minute! I was supposed to reach that stone wall just as I was *leaving* the control. I must have gone right by it!” Again, the tortoise beats the hare who has jumped the stone wall and is 2 kilometers downstream scanning for the control that’s just *got* to be here somewhere. ☺