

## When to use a compass – and when not to ...

Over the years I've taught orienteering to lots of folks – mostly beginners, but also to many orienteers who need extra help to improve their skills. It seems to me that many people need to develop better compass-use habits. For the most part, Orange course orienteers (intermediate level) tend to overuse their compasses – while everyone else tends to neglect the compass.

Here are some hints on WHEN to use that compass: Mainly, you should use the compass to orient the map to North. In fact, it wouldn't be wrong to say the ONLY use for the compass is to orient the map. This is easiest if you hold the compass and map in the same hand. The most common mistake made by beginners, neglecting to orient their map, often causes them to run full tilt down the wrong trail.

But beginners aren't the only violators here. Your average Brown-Green-Red-Blue orienteer (advanced level) doesn't use the compass to orient his/her map often enough either. Most Br-G-R-B orienteers read maps proficiently enough that they mostly tend to orient their map by matching it to the surrounding terrain. This is not bad, but it takes too long to do it accurately, so they orient their maps only roughly – which gets them off to the right general direction, but the wrong precise direction. The longer they go on a rough direction, the easier it is to make parallel errors, the bane of every orienteer (and the delight of every course setter). A quick look at the compass saves “mucho” time later!

Many Orange course orienteers believe that their compass is an invisible lifeline to the next control. Teach 'em to take a bearing, and they ignore everything else. Getting them to rely more on reading contour lines and less on their compass bearings is a real challenge. It's very hard for them to understand that compass bearings are LESS accurate than contour reading, even though it's true.

So, when DO you use the compass?

1. Every time you look at the map, use the compass to orient it to North.
2. Whenever you leave a control, use the compass to orient the map.
3. Whenever you are at a change-of-direction landmark, use the compass to re-orient the map.
4. Whenever you are crossing a vague area, use the compass to get you from a landmark on this side to a landmark on that side.

I personally prefer a thumb compass because it makes it so much easier to orient the map and discourages taking bearings. This forces me to read the contours and notice landmarks more, all while keeping the map oriented. I haven't taken a compass bearing (except while mapping) in years. An old term for taking a bearing is “shooting a bearing”. I still remember being told long ago, “You can't shoot a bearing. They have already been shot to extinction.”

By Robin Shannonhouse