



March 20, 2026

How to Select a Leader Size & Strength

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Selecting the right fishing leader is a valuable fishing skill. By choosing the best leader, you will get more strikes and increase your chances of landing those fish. In this article, we'll cover the basics about selecting leaders and attaching them, and we'll provide a few recommendations to help you maximize your enjoyment on the water.

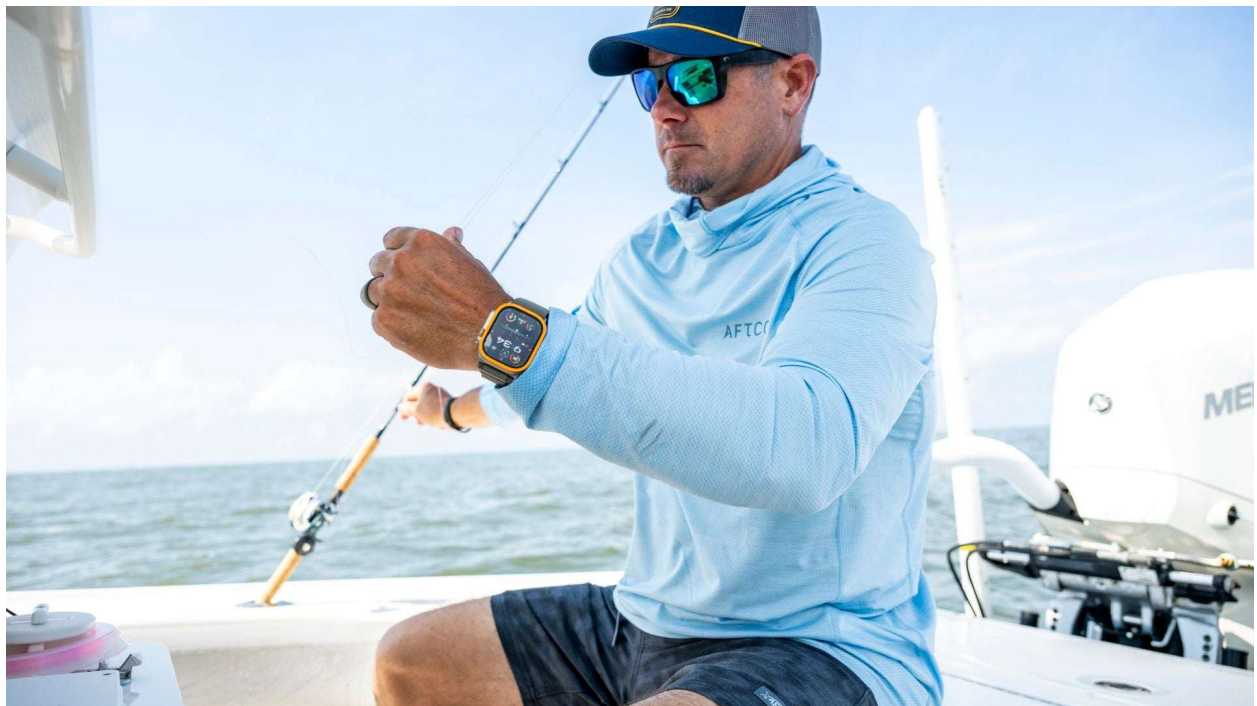
A leader is a short piece of line that connects your main line with your hook or lure. It can be the same material as your main line, but usually it's different. The fishing leader line can be stronger or weaker than the main line.

You select a main line based on specific properties such as line strength, sensitivity, flexibility, visibility, and toughness. The properties you look for in your main line aren't the same properties you need for a leader line. This is because the last few feet of line closest to your bait is highly susceptible to breaking, is most visible to fish, and may need to act as a shock absorber.

Anglers use leaders because they have specific properties that are different from the main line. Using a leader gives you the best qualities from both the main and leader lines in terms of strength, flexibility, castability, visibility, abrasion resistance, stretch, and sensitivity.

Leader Materials

- **Monofilament** fishing leader material is flexible, easy to tie, has good abrasion resistance and low visibility, provides stretch, and is relatively inexpensive.
- **Fluorocarbon** has ultra-low visibility, is stiffer than monofilament, and has exceptional abrasion resistance.
- **Wire leader** is available in single-strand and multi-strand, has great abrasion resistance, is difficult to tie, and is more expensive than other leader materials.
- **Braid** is not usually used as a leader. It is commonly used as a main line.



Leader Selection

To select the right leader, you need to consider the fishing technique you are using, water clarity, potential cut-offs from docks and other obstructions, the toothiness and abrasiveness of your target species, and their spookiness or wariness. Here are some tips and pointers:

- Leader strength is generally based on the main line's pound test rating. The leader can be heavier or lighter than the main line but keeping the diameters relatively close is best.
- When fishing in stained or murky water, choose the heaviest monofilament or fluorocarbon leader that you can tie easily, that won't hinder the action of the bait, and that will allow you to cast freely.
- Fluorocarbon is the best choice in clear water. If fish are skittish or leader-shy, you may need to downsize the leader strength.
- If you are fishing in heavy structure where you need extra protection against cut-offs, fluorocarbon is your best bet.
- Fluorocarbon provides excellent abrasion resistance when fishing for species with sharp teeth.
- Mono-leader material is more flexible and easier to tie than fluorocarbon when using heavy leaders.
- Wire leaders are the best choice when pursuing sharks, muskies, bluefish, or other toothy species.

To learn more about leader material selection, check out this blog from [On the Water](#).

Attaching Leaders to the Main Line

There are two primary methods of connecting a leader to the main line. The leader can be tied directly to the main line or attached using a swivel.

Direct tying is simply using a knot to attach the leader to the main line. It has several advantages over the swivel method: knots are less visible, create less drag in the water, and are less expensive. You can also reel the knot through the rod guides, which is challenging using a swivel.

The knot you choose depends on the materials of the main line and the leader. Common knots used for direct tying include:

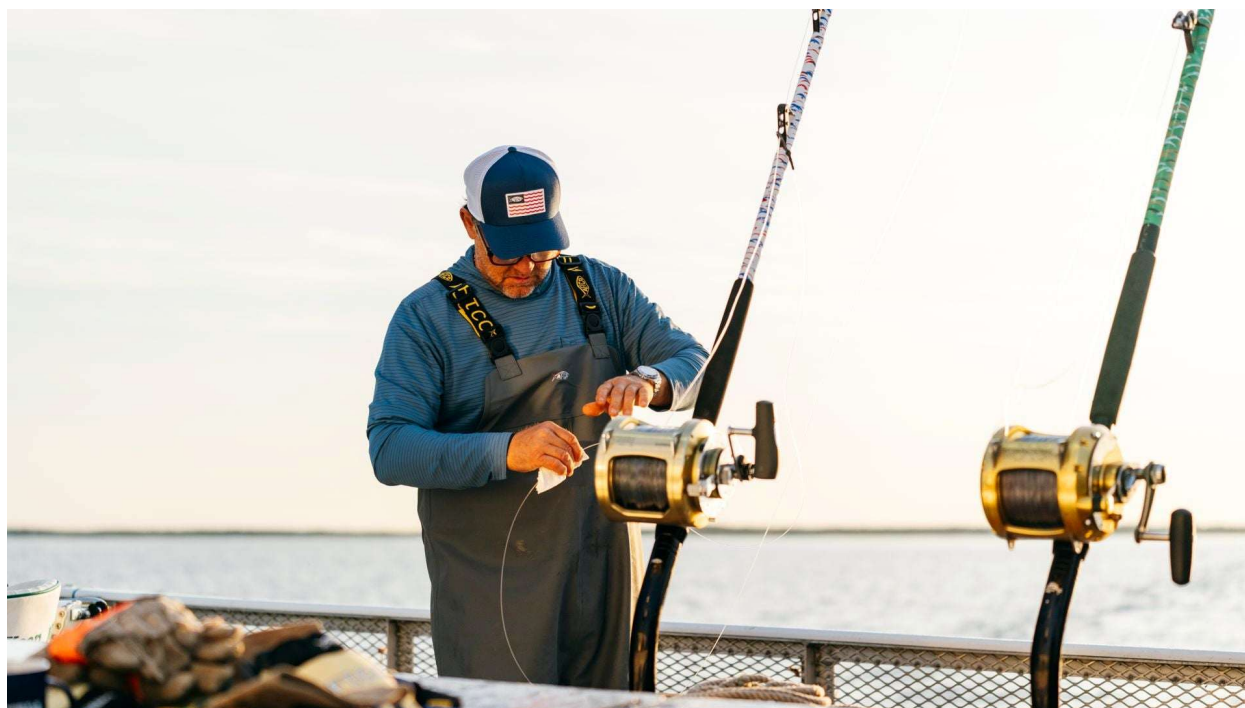
- The Double Uni knot
- The RP knot
- The Albright knot
- [The FG knot](#)
- [The PR knot](#)

When using a swivel to connect the leader to the main line, the knots are simpler than direct tying, but there are two knots instead of one. One knot connects the main line to the swivel, and the other connects the swivel to the leader. Here are some popular knots to use with a swivel connection:

- The Improved Clinch knot
- [The Uni knot](#)
- The Palomar knot
- The Haywire Twist (for single strand wire)

Leader Set-up Recommendations & Examples

Saltwater Leaders



- A monofilament or fluorocarbon leader is used in most situations when fishing with braid as a main line.
- A Carolina rig consists of a free-sliding egg sinker on the main line connected to a swivel, followed by a leader and hook. My go-to setup for light inshore fishing is a 17-pound test braid main line tied to the swivel with a Palomar knot. The leader is 30 inches long, and the 30-pound test [AFTCO Saiko Pro](#) fluorocarbon is attached to the swivel with an improved clinch knot.
- Offshore trolling lures require heavy monofilament or fluorocarbon leaders. For general offshore trolling, I use a 6-foot section of 80-pound test fluorocarbon leader crimped directly to the hook or lure, with a crimped loop snapped into a ball-bearing snap swivel tied to the main line.
- For shark fishing, I recommend multi-strand wire. The swivel and hook are crimped to the leader. Leader length, leader strength, swivel strength, and hook size are all matched to the rod and reel size you are using.

Freshwater Leaders



- When using a braid main line, you should usually use monofilament or fluorocarbon leader material. However, some anglers prefer not to use a leader when fishing in heavy weeds, grass, or heavily stained water.
- A Carolina rig has the leader as an integral part of the setup. It consists of a free-sliding egg sinker on the main line connected to a swivel followed by a leader and hook or lure.
- When bass fishing in downed trees, stump fields, or other areas with potential snags, many anglers use a mono or fluorocarbon leader of less strength than the braid main line. When the bait gets snagged, the angler can break the leader without trying to break the heavy main line.

Leader Selection FAQs

What leader should I use with topwater lures? Monofilament leaders are best for topwater lures. Avoid the use of fluorocarbon or wire, as they sink and can hinder the lure's action.

Leader Selection FAQs (continued)

I am fishing in a tournament, any suggestions for leaders? Tournament rules vary. Some tournaments have specific rules about leaders, while others use IGFA guidelines. Check and double-check the tournament rules to be sure you comply.

Can I tie a thin main line to a thick leader? If you use a braid main line, you can tie it directly to a mono or fluorocarbon leader that is much thicker than the main line. If your main line is mono or fluorocarbon, you should use a leader that is relatively close in diameter to the main line.

Should leaders be stronger than the main line? Yes, if you need an abrasive, cut-resistant leader. If you need a leader that is nearly invisible, you can use a leader lighter than the main line.

How long should my leader be? Use a leader of 3 feet or less if you are casting, so the knot or swivel won't be reeled up past the rod tip when you cast. If you target fish that have rough scales and fins, like tarpon and billfish, the leader should be longer than the fish you expect to catch.

Should I use a leader with braided line? A monofilament or fluorocarbon leader is typically used with braid main line.

Any advice for leader-shy toothy fish like kingfish or wahoo? Use a fluorocarbon leader and attach a short secondary wire leader just in front of the bait.

Why don't you use leader material for your entire line? The characteristics that make a good leader material don't necessarily make a good main line. Heavy, thick leader material is difficult to cast, can be too stretchy for the main line, is expensive, and greatly decreases your reel's line capacity.

Does it matter what type of reel I am using when it comes to choosing a leader? No, you can use any leader material for spinning, baitcasting, or conventional reels.

By selecting the best leader for your target species and how you fish, you will get more strikes and land more fish.

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John Flanagan writes about fishing, boating, business, and coastal lifestyle. A life-long fisherman, licensed captain, and aficionado of all things coastal, he pursues his passions on the coastal waters of North Carolina. [Learn more here.](#)