

How to drive SAFELY with Skill.

This short presentation is to help drivers learn techniques and driving habits which will guide them to be safe and confident as they grow in their driving experience. The first two items include tips for those driving manual cars, whilst the remaining ones are presented to both manual and automatic cars.

Clutching and Gearing Correctly

Below are things that can be done, but!!, gears are there for a reason as each gear has an appropriate speed, use the gears correctly. Change down at appropriate speeds. It takes practice to achieve this skill. When done correctly, changing gears should be smooth and seamless as opposed to jerking and revving. If you change gears well, your passengers will experience a ride, almost as smooth, as if they were being driven in an automatic vehicle.

Q1. Can I stop in top gear? (This would be 4th gear in older cars, and 5th or 6th in newer vehicles)

A1. No. This should only be done if you happen to be in fifth or sixth gear and need to do an emergency stop. Vehicles with a six speed gearbox can generally be slowed down and stopped in 4th gear. PLEASE REFER ALSO TO QUESTION 5.

Q2. Can I skip change (skip gears) going from 4th to 2nd?

A2. Yes, it is perfectly safe to change from 4th to 2nd gear. HOWEVER, appropriate braking must be done before changing to 2nd gear. When done correctly, you should not be able to tell you have changed gear.

Q3. Why does the car jerk when I'm changing down gear?

A3. This will happen when your vehicle is moving too fast for the gear you are changing down to. To correct this you must brake more before changing down. Many people go straight to the clutch when changing down gear which is incorrect. You must take the speed out of the car first bringing it to the correct speed for the gear you are going to select and only then do you go for the clutch and select the lower gear.

Q4. Why does the car jerk when I'm changing up in gear?

A4. This will happen when your foot goes on the accelerator too heavily. Remember you only want to touch the accelerator to hold the speed you have built up before you changed up the gear.

Q5. Can I skip change from other gears?

A5. It can also be done when bringing your vehicle to a halt, going from 4th to 2nd. If doing this it is imperative that you are braking over a "very short distance". Brake to slow the vehicle, THEN, clutch in to change to 2nd, and immediately release clutch whilst still breaking, making sure you have achieved the result in answer 3. When you are just about to stop, press clutch in and change to 1st, and while keeping the clutch pressed in, continue braking to stop. This is a good way of getting out of the habit of coasting. Remember there is only one way to do this correctly – it should only be done just before bringing your vehicle to a halt. However, it is best practice to go to second gear when you have the time and distance to do so. When approaching for example, a roundabout in third ask yourself as you slow the vehicle with the foot brake, "can I continue to proceed in second gear or do I need to stop or creep ahead where I need to select first gear?" Then clutch to the floor and select the gear you have decided on.

You can also do this procedure when your intention was to stop but you then find that you can proceed without stopping. In this situation you can, just as your vehicle is almost at a stand still, raise your foot from your clutch slowly allowing the vehicle to creep onwards. Remember the vehicle must be moving at a take off speed and no faster. Again you will know that you have done this correctly by it being smooth and seamless.

Another thing to get into the habit of doing is, NOT to look at the gear shift lever whilst changing gears. This achieves two things, the first and most important thing is, you will be able to stay focused on the road, and your driving, without being distracted by the gear shift lever. The second is, you will "feel" comfortable and confident with your driving. Psychologically, this has quite a profound affect on your driving. Consider it like this. If you have ever learned to dance, your dancing coach will tell you NOT to look at your feet. Look at your partner, not your feet. Your dancing will improve and you will "feel" more "professional" at it. Strangely enough it is true with driving as well. Consider your gear shift lever as your feet, and the road as your dancing partner. Learn to change gears without looking at the shifter. Stay focused on your partner, (the road), and expect your driving to improve, because it will !!

Coasting, what is it?

Coasting happens when the clutch is fully depressed (pushed down to the floor) while the car is moving. It becomes a bad habit for a lot of learner drivers.

Coasting can happen when bringing the vehicle to a stop, before changing gear, after changing gear and driving in around small areas, such as car parks and more dangerously when cornering.

When you coast you are not in control of the vehicle, which is very dangerous. You are free wheeling, having stopped all contact between the engine and the wheels. Think back to the last time you free wheeled down hill on a bicycle. What happened? The bicycle picked up speed. If you were to drive down hill with your foot on the clutch the same thing would happen, you'd pick up speed. A low gear going down hill will keep the vehicle in check and prevent it from picking up speed, but if you were to put your foot on the clutch you're dis-engaging the gear and free wheeling.

Remember the clutch has only two primary jobs to do

1. It's used to change gear.
2. It keeps the engine running when stopping in gear, to prevent the car from stalling.

Tell tale signs that you coast.

Do you go for the clutch before the brake when bringing the vehicle to a stop?

Solution: Brake first then clutch just before you stop to prevent car from stalling.

When changing down gear are you on the clutch for a few seconds before selecting your gear?

Solution: Brake sufficiently for the gear selected, then clutch and change gear.

When you have just finished changing down gear is it more than 3 seconds before you release the clutch?

Solution: If you have braked sufficiently before you change your gear there is no need to linger long on the clutch.

Are you on the clutch constantly while going around an area like a car park?

Solution: Your vehicle can move extremely slowly in second gear it's just a bad habit pressing on the clutch when moving. If you feel you will need to drive too slowly for second gear, brake sufficiently and then press the clutch and change to first gear for a crawling speed.

There are two exceptions to holding your clutch in, holding your foot on the clutch in first gear or reverse. These are not considered as coasting and come under the vehicle management criteria of "clutch control". This allows you to adjust the speed of your vehicle instantly whilst carrying out low speed manoeuvres.

There is no such thing as coasting in 1st gear or Reverse!!

Static Steering

If your vehicle had the ability to feel and show emotions it would feel great pain when static steering takes place. Static steering mostly happens by turning the steering wheel while the vehicle is not moving. Situations where this can become a bad habit are, moving off from a stopped position, doing the driveway turnaround, and reverse parking manoeuvres.

Avoiding this is very simple; make sure you have the car moving before you turn the steering wheel. Even doing manoeuvres in tight spaces, use clutch control, bring the clutch up to just a little above biting point which will make the vehicle move slowly. Then steer very quickly while the vehicle moves extremely slowly. Also anyone who has power assisted steering will notice how much easier it is to steer when the car is slightly moving.

Technical Information regarding static steering;

There are many effects that static steering would have on your vehicle if practised, none which are good. It puts a huge strain on the rack and pinion system, bearings, tie rods and pump. There is also a lot of unnecessary wear to the steer wheels.

Awareness & Blind Spots:

Many people are of the opinion that they need to look and check blind spots so that their assessor sees them do it. Sure an assessor does need to see that you are looking, but, please remember, that the reason you are looking is to see what is happening around you, NOT to impress your assessor.

You need to check your mirrors every time you move off, stop or change direction. If you're moving off from a stopped position a quick glance in all mirrors is necessary. You will need to check your left and right mirror for cyclists coming up along beside you, or pedestrians that may step off a path. You will need to check your rear view mirror to be aware of what's happening behind you. This is the same procedure when you're stopping.

When you're coming up to make a right hand turn, check your Rear View Mirror, then your right mirror, then you right indicate, and quickly do a head check, (blind spot check). The correct order is MIB = Mirror, Indicate, Blindspot. Remember it is just a quick glance, we all notice things with a glance.

When coming up to make a left hand turn, it is exactly the same procedure, using the Rear View Mirror, then your left mirror, then left indicator, and blind spot check.

Blind Spots are the areas you can't see in the mirrors. There are four main blind spots in a car. These are where the pillars are. The first two pillars are the frames between the windscreen and the front door windows. The second two are the frames between the front and back door windows. Every time you are moving off, changing lane or merging with traffic, it is these areas that must be checked.

Which blind spot do I check when moving off and how? Your Blind Spot when moving off from the side of the curb, is the pillar between your front and back door windows on the driver side. Look out your driver's door window turning your head a little over a 90 degree angle, towards the rear of the car. This must be done just before moving off, not too early or too late. This is also the blind spot you check when merging with traffic on your right or changing into a right hand lane.

How do I know what is too late and too early? Too late would be that you moved off and then had a look. This would mean a possible collision if something was coming up beside you. Too early would be that you check before you're ready to move. This could also mean a collision. As something could come beside you after you'd checked the blind spot.

When changing into a lane on your left, look back through your back passenger door window. Remember just a glance is necessary to notice something coming up beside you. If you stay looking too long, you will end up steering in the direction you're looking without realising that you are doing so.

There's a very simple way to remember blind spot checking. Every time you're moving off, changing lane or merging. Check that it is Clear to Move.

Reversing into a parking bay on the left.

There are a couple of methods to do this procedure. (As with any manoeuvre, constant looking throughout and around you is mandatory)

Reverse parking uses 3 complete bays to navigate this manoeuvre. The bay you wish to park in is regarded as bay number one, or (bay 1). As you are driving around the car park looking for a bay to park in, indicate left, and do a mirror check, as soon as you have chosen your bay, just as you would indicate and use mirrors when stopping on the left side of the road. Position your vehicle about 1 to 2 metres out from the parking bays on your left. Drive past the empty parking bay you chose to park in, (Bay 1), so that your left side mirror is opposite, and lined up with, the line which completes Bay 3.

Preparation – Choose reverse gear

Observation – Check your way is clear via mirrors, blindspots and looking around.

Manoeuvre - Start moving the vehicle very slowly in reverse. The very moment that your vehicle starts to move, turn the steering wheel very quickly to left lock. When you are entering your bay, it is time to start to straighten the steering. Check around constantly as you manoeuvre back into your bay referring to your side, and rear view mirror to accurately position your vehicle in the centre of the bay. (To park in a Bay on the right, all the above are the same except rather than indicating left you must indicate right. Position your vehicle as close to the centre of the car park driveway as possible, without crossing over centre, so that you remain on your side of the road. This way you are far enough away from cars that are parked on your left hand side so as to avoid hitting them as you turn. AND, it keeps you on your side of the road to avoid blocking oncoming traffic. Make sure your way is clear before moving over to the right.)

NOTE

For all manoeuvres such as reverse parallel parking or bay parking, remember other traffic has right of way and you are the obstruction so make sure your way is clear before you start.

Why is it better to reverse into a parking space?

With front wheel drive vehicles the manoeuvrability is with the wheels at the front, so reversing makes for accurate parking of the vehicle. Plus if you forward park into a bay, you will be reversing out into one way traffic or two-way traffic. For visibility it is much safer to drive out rather than reverse. If you have not centred your vehicle in the space, don't just abandon it correct it.

Hazards.

You often hear people say, "The vehicle just came out in front of me. I hadn't time to do anything." It is not possible, for traffic, pedestrians or cyclists to just come out in front of you if you observe and scan the road ahead correctly for what may happen. Even if we have not been the cause of the initial misjudgment, we should have been alert to what the person might or might not do and been prepared for either one. Talk yourself through every situation out loud, like a running commentary on what's happening, and how you are going to deal with the situation. I like to practice this with all of my learning drivers. This trains our mind to behave in a certain way when driving. I call it the "what if approach".

Here is an example of this technique.

On approaching a corner, or intersection, where visibility may not be that good, say to yourself, "Around this bend there may be slow moving traffic, a pedestrian about to cross, something parked on the side of the road near the bend, or an approaching vehicle may take the corner, or intersection, wide." Practice "taking care and being aware". This does not mean driving at a really slow pace, but at a speed that you could stop safely.

Keep looking far ahead of where you are, and where you are going to go. ALL the time. This helps you identify what is ahead of you way before you get there. So if you were to see roadworks being carried out, or any other form of hazards, way ahead of you, you can prepare to be in a more appropriate lane, (if you need to be), and also be ready to make allowances for others around you.

Hazards will only become dangerous through our own misjudgment. I include myself in this. Just because we are driving instructors does not make us infallible and calling it wrong at times. We all have moments where our concentration lapses and are caught off guard. Hazards present themselves in many forms. It is easy to become complacent. PLEASE STAY ALERT AND STAY SAFE.

One hazard that I constantly see is when a car is parking, particularly - reverse parallel parking, and the vehicle behind the one wanting to park, doesn't see, or it doesn't register in their mind, that the car in front of them has their indicator flashing, and that their reverse lights are on. When they do finally notice what is happening, they don't analyse to see if the person parking can make it in one manoeuvre or not. So they keep creeping forward, leaving the person who is parking, no option but to stop what they are doing, and they find themselves in a situation where they can neither reverse or go forward.

It soon becomes a traffic jam with everyone involved becoming angry as they in turn had also moved forward. This leaves a situation where nobody can move until somebody at the back reverses. This situation could have been avoided with the "What If" technique. Eg. What if the person can't make it in one manoeuvre. I'll give them enough space to let them get into their position.

Have fun while practicing it while being a passenger in a vehicle. Look to see what is happening and analyse. Always be alert and aware.

Opportunity:

Opportunity is a category in the driving test. It covers areas as, moving off from the curb, overtaking, handling cross roads, roundabouts, turning right, turning left, changing lanes, and traffic lights. There is not a single assessor who wants you to kill yourself on the road. Their job is to ascertain that you are a safe and competent driver, making good "on the spot judgements" which keep both you and other road users safe.

You will only be negatively marked for opportunity if you have not taken a safe opportunity to join the other traffic. Assessors do not want you to take unnecessary risks.

Q. How do you judge a safe gap to join other traffic?

A. If the vehicle which is already on the road which you are wanting to turn onto, has to break to make room for you - Don't Do it.

If you can join the other traffic without forcing them to slow down for you, - take the "opportunity" BUT, Don't Dawdle, remember to allow for the fact that you will be slower moving off the mark, than the other traffic that's already moving.

ON THE DAY OF YOUR TEST:

Many of us can be nervous going into a test situation and it is no different for the driving test. Rather than saying to yourself "I have to pass this test", say to yourself "This is my opportunity to prove that I am a confident and competent driver". Remember you are not there to prove that you are a perfect driver ... there is no such thing as a perfect driver.

Remember most Assessors realise that test applicants may be nervous and part of their job is to do all that they can to help the pupil feel at ease. However do not take it personally if your assessor does not chat to you during your test. The reason for this is that it may influence the marking of the test.

Your entire test takes between 30 – 40 mins and the distance you will cover is 8 – 10km. I try to make sure a pupil has had at least three mock tests before the day of their test. Setting the tone as if it were the real driving test helps when it comes to the day of your test. It can help alleviate some nerves because you are familiar with how the test will be conducted. Arrive at the test centre 10 – 15 mins early with your Learner Permit and your test confirmation letter. Take a seat, or stand, which ever you prefer, in the waiting area for your name to be called. If you have requested me to be with you, with use of my vehicle, I will accompany you there and help you.

Your name will be called by your assessor. The assessor will ask to see your Learners Permit to make sure that it is indeed yours, that it is valid, and it has the correct category of vehicle for which you'll be doing the test in. Please have this available and ready to present, before your name is called. You will also be asked to sign a document which will be used for assessing your driving test.

You will then be asked to lead your assessor to the vehicle that you will be tested in, and the assessor will quickly check it for road worthiness. All things being good, your driving test will then be carried out. Good luck, and drive safe.

