

Ten Keys to Safe City Driving

By Ken Skaggs C2005

Most drivers look at city traffic emotionally. This is an exercise to help them analyze it and look at it logically. Before you begin, I urge you to ask the drivers, by a show of hands, which of them hasn't had an accident in twenty or thirty years. Then ask them, what their secret is. The answer is always the same- just take it easy out there.

1. Understand Traffic Waves - If you look out the window of a ten-story building when traffic is a little heavy, you will notice that it flows in waves, with speeds ranging from over 40 mph to complete stops. Because so many drivers follow too closely to the car ahead, they wind up having to brake when the car ahead does, and if too many are bunched together, they all wind up stepping on their brakes together, causing a wave. As the wave progresses, against the flow of traffic, it will cause traffic to go slower and slower until traffic stops, or until the wave reaches a point of space. If there is enough space, the wave will dissipate. To combat these waves, try to keep a steady pace. Keep enough space in front so that you don't have to stop and you can personally eliminate these waves. The trick is, not to stop.

Note- When you follow too closely to the vehicle ahead, and he steps on his brakes, it causes you to go even slower than him. Try this experiment to prove it: When you are on an open road and traffic is light, and you find yourself slowly gaining on another truck, try to guess his speed. As you pull up behind him, notice your speedometer as you slow down. Then, try to get your truck going the same speed as him, to see if your guess was right. If you watch your speedometer as you do this, you will see that it goes below his speed before it levels out. The same is true when traffic is heavy and people step on their brakes. The one behind has to slow down even more. This is what causes traffic waves.

2. Prevent Traffic Jams - Don't cause them. What causes traffic jams? Simply put, it's because there are too many cars and not enough space. Well, we can't just snap our fingers and create more space (or less traffic), but we can bring some space to the equation, by bringing some with us, in front of our vehicles. Try not to stop on the highway. Keep enough space in front of you so that you can keep it rolling. If you are rolling, then by definition, it is not a traffic jam. And when merging, never go faster than the flow of traffic, no matter how slow that may be, and merge with space in front of you. If you have to step on your brakes when merging, you didn't do it right. If keeping space in front of you can prevent traffic jams, then the opposite is true- tailgating causes traffic jams.

Oftentimes, too many drivers bunch together so that they don't have to let someone get in front of them. They seem to feel that they will get to their destination sooner if they don't have to let so many cars get in front. But it's not true. It only seems like it. Let me prove it. Let's say for example that during heavy traffic, averaging about 10 mph, you keep about thirty feet of space in front of you. What do you do when the car ahead of you

exits? You now have fifty feet of space in front. Or, did you close that gap to maintain your usual thirty feet? Of course, most drivers close that gap and get back to their usual comfort zone, following distance. With that in mind, you can see that if a car cuts in front of you, then exits a few miles down the road, or just changes lanes, he really wasn't in your way at all. And since most drivers reading this are long-haul truckers, chances are that every car that gets in front of you will be getting off long before you do. So again, keep some space in front of you and try to keep it rolling, to prevent traffic jams. If everyone drove like this, there would be a lot less stopping and going. Of course, everyone won't be driving like this any time soon, but imagine if all of the truckers did. I think that would still make a huge difference.

3. Stay Calm - (And courteous). Tailgating causes stress because you have to stay on your toes, ready to grab your brakes at any given moment. Keeping some space in front of your vehicle, will help you stay calm and be courteous. This will reduce road rage as well. Switching lanes a lot can stress you out too, because you have to constantly check both sides to see if there is room for you, and always be ready to snatch a space if you think that the other lane is doing better than the one you're in. Lane dodging and tailgating not only causes stress, it causes accidents, and of course traffic jams. Which in turn, causes more road rage. So again, to stay calm and courteous, stay in one lane, keep some space in front, try to keep it rolling, and do the math.

4. Do the Math – (In your head.) Most drivers don't like to waste time driving. Whether you're a trucker on a schedule, or a four-wheeler going bowling, time matters. How much time do we really lose when someone cuts us off and slows us down? How much time do we really save when we pass someone slower than us, then exit two miles down the road?

Since 60 mph is the same thing as one mile per minute, and 59 mph loses one minute (or mile) per hour. That means that 59 mph for one mile will cost you one second of your time. So the rule is- every mph that you slow down (below 60 mph) will cost you one second per minute (or one second per mile- since a mile is the same thing as a minute). Sound confusing? Let me illustrate. Let's say that you are cruising along at 60 mph. A truck gets in front of you and only goes 59 mph. Before you try to pass him, do some math in your head. You know that if you were to stay there behind him for an entire hour, you would lose one minute. Divide that by sixty and you can see that if you were to stay behind him for one minute, you would only lose one second of your time. Let's take another example. Say a truck gets in front of you going 58 mph. In this case, if you stayed behind him for an entire hour, you would lose two minutes. Likewise, (divide by sixty), if you stayed behind him for one minute (or one mile), you would lose two seconds. That's why I say that you can easily do the math in your head when you start at the point of 60 mph. Simply put, divide an hour by sixty and you get one minute, and divide a minute by sixty and you get one second. So again, the rule is- one mile per hour is equal to one second per minute (when you begin from 60 mph).

If you cut that in half and begin from 30 mph, then you double the time. Since 30 mph takes an hour to drive thirty miles, then slowing down to 29 mph will cost you two minutes per hour (or two seconds per minute). But again, if they get off the highway

before you do, then they didn't count anyway because you will then close the gap up to the next vehicle to maintain your usual following distance.

Let's cut in half again, and begin at the point of 15 mph. Since it takes one hour to drive fifteen miles, if you slowed down to 14 mph, you would lose four minutes per hour (or four seconds per minute).

I know some of you are thinking that all those seconds over the course of a day, can really add up. So do the math and add them up. If you lose two seconds here, and four seconds there, and multiply that by a hundred acts of kindness, then, subtract the ones who got out of your lane, I'm sure you will be surprised to see that you really didn't lose more than a couple of minutes, all day.

Save more time on foot. Since slowing down or even stopping momentarily only costs you a few seconds, if that, you can see that more time is wasted on foot than while driving. What's the point of lane dodging and tailgating, trying to squeeze out an extra mph, if you are only going home to watch TV? The most you will miss is maybe a commercial. And if you're a trucker who's running fifteen minutes late, what's the difference if you are fifteen and a half minutes late? What if you have an accident? Then you will really be late. Learn to save time on foot. Walk quickly into your stops. Don't browse around at the Pilot, you already know what they have and the prices are too high anyway. Before you go in, think about what you need to get, get it and get out. Park your truck close to the door, if you can. Once you stop your truck, then the clock that really makes a difference is ticking.

Do one thing while you wait for the other. Go directly to the shipping department, get your dock assignment, walk quickly back to your truck, carefully back into your dock, then, go use the bathroom, make phone calls, or do paperwork. Plan your route while you are being loaded. A phone call for directions, or an extra minute looking at the road-atlas will save you ten minutes of wrong turns.

Let's do some backing math. If you are backing into a dock, which is one hundred feet away, and you go 20 mph, are you a good driver? No. What you are, is a good aimer. A good driver knows that backing up slowly will not cost you any time at all, and will in fact save you time. It saves you time because you are less apt to over-steer. Plus, if you do the math, you will see that going 20 mph for one hundred feet will only save you a few seconds. And again, if you hit something, then you will really lose time.

5. Be Predictable - Sudden movements cause accidents. Use signals early and often and ease over slowly when switching lanes. When you move in a slow, steady fashion, the vehicles around you can obviously figure out what you are doing. Likewise, when you jerk yourself back and forth between lanes, you surprise them, and increase risk. It's all about risk management out there. If you take a lot of risks, you are bound to have an accident every so often.

Sometimes drivers say that if they put their signal on too early, the cars will stay tight and not let them over. This is true, and I can't argue with it. What I suggest in this case, is leave your signal on and start easing closer to the white line, maybe even touch it. If traffic is just inching along at one or two mph, then you can actually step over the white line a little. We all know that most four-wheelers don't like to let a truck get in front of them. Sometimes you just have to be forceful. If you take the lane slowly, inch by inch, you will eventually be in it. But again, the forceful way only works at a very slow crawl, the slower the better. The faster traffic is rolling, the more likely it is that you can have an accident, and it could be considered your fault. If traffic is moving along fairly well and nobody lets you over, you may have to get off at the next exit and turn around. Of course, it's best to get into your lane long before the exit. But if you aren't familiar with the area, sometimes you just can't get over in time and you just have to turn around and come back. It may seem like a big waste of time, but again, having an accident is a bigger waste of time.

6. Time Traffic Lights - Most traffic lights are red for 30 seconds, and most traffic lights are two blocks apart in big cities. It takes exactly 30 seconds to travel two blocks, at 30 mph. So, if you are two blocks away from a traffic light when it turns red, go less than 30 mph and you won't have to stop- the light will turn green just before you get to it. Likewise, if you are two blocks away from a traffic light and it turns green, go slightly over 30 mph (31 or 32 mph ought to do it), and you will make that green light. Develop a habit of looking two blocks ahead at the next traffic light and practice trying not to stop if you can help it. By developing a habit of not stopping, you can also prevent traffic jams when driving on city streets as well as on the highway.

Also, when you keep space in front of you on city streets, you will be less apt to block an intersection or a busy driveway, when a traffic wave causes you to stop prematurely. Driveways into gas stations and shopping malls can be very busy, so get in the habit of stopping with some space in front of you so that you don't block them. It's always a good idea to stop a little way behind the next car for another reason- if they happen to break down, you will be able to get around them without having to back-up.

You can time traffic lights on rural highways too. The same rule applies. Since it takes thirty seconds to travel two blocks at 30 mph, then it would take 30 seconds to travel four blocks at 60 mph.

7. Expect the Expected - Four-wheelers are constantly trying to jam their car into a space that isn't there, which makes the whole highway stop. If you expect them to do this and even encourage it by keeping enough space in front, traffic will keep rolling and you will stay calm. Many drivers like to say expect the unexpected, but once you've been to places like Chicago and New York, you should really be expecting it. If you've driven a truck for any length of time, you must know by now that four-wheelers are going to cut you off. They'll stop right in front of you too. It shouldn't shock you any more. So, expect it, and plan accordingly.

If you are on a multiple lane highway, stay out of the right lane. Too often, a stream of tailgaters will come down an entrance ramp and try to merge as one humongous vehicle (a.k.a. a caterpillar or road-train). Of course, merging like this will cause a traffic jam, but they don't get that. You do though. So, try to stay out of the right lane when you get to a city like this, with lots of on-ramps and endless cars getting on. Just be mindful of the aggressive driver behind you, who doesn't do the math; the one who just said, "slower traffic keep right", and get to the right afterwards.

8. Compensate for the Ignorant - Of course, most drivers don't understand that space is needed to combat traffic jams and road rage. Since you are one of the lucky ones, with the capacity for thought, it is your responsibility to sometimes let two or three vehicles in front of you in order to keep traffic flowing. This is also the same reason you need more space in front of you when you have a tailgater behind- you are compensating for his ignorance. You are driving for two. It's like being pregnant, only the baby is on your back and not your front. Truckers are professional drivers and do indeed know a lot more about driving than the average four-wheeler driver. This is a fact of life. So, in your efforts to prevent traffic jams, and generally stay safe, you simply must compensate for the ignorant.

There are a lot of crazy drivers out there. Some don't care if they have a wreck. Others do, but don't understand what they did wrong. Some people always drive like they are bleeding to death and trying to make it to a hospital. Maybe some really are. You just never know what's on a person's mind. Maybe they just lost their life-savings and really don't care anymore. Just give them some room, because they are coming anyway. Don't let it bother you because they happen to be ignorant. Just be glad you aren't. Look around at all the idiots as entertainment, and smile. You know something they don't know. Instead of getting upset at them, be proud of yourself.

9. Teach Others - Explain to the people you know and work with, what causes traffic jams and road rage. Get on the CB when you see tailgating truckers causing traffic jams. Peer Pressure works both ways. Don't just compensate for their ignorance; try to teach them, so hopefully they will learn. If we all tell two people and they tell two people and so on, eventually, we can really make a difference. The road is our workplace and it's up to us to make it better. Give peer pressure. When you see two trucks traveling as one while trying to merge, get on your CB and say something to the tailgater, like "come on Schneider, how can you merge when you have no space? You are going to make the whole highway stop." Spread the word that space is the answer, and lack of it, is the cause.

10. Make Sure an Accident is Never Your Fault - Two simple rules can help you make absolutely certain that an accident will never be your fault- Stay in your lane, and be prepared to stop. Repeat these two things over and over to yourself while driving and you will never have an accident that is your fault. Stay in your lane, and be prepared to stop. Stay in your lane, and be prepared to stop. I remember the first time I ever drove a big truck. I was scared to death that I would hit something. I remember thinking to myself that I could surely move it one foot without hitting anything. So I just took it one foot at a

time. And the faster I went, I said to myself those famous words, and after twenty-five years of driving I still say them. Stay in your lane, and be prepared to stop. Stay in your lane, and be prepared to stop. It doesn't matter if it's snowing, raining, an open road, or a traffic wave, just stay in your lane and be prepared to stop, and you will never have an accident that is your fault.

When backing, open a window and turn of the radio and listen while backing. (If you happen to be in a truck stop, you should leave your CB on while backing.) If a car is back there and you can't see him, hopefully, he has a horn. Or if a person is back there, hopefully you will hear him yell at you to stop. And please, use both mirrors!

In summary, I would like to add the fact that patience is a skill. Just like playing guitar or learning kung fu, you have to practice patience if you want to get good at it. Patience is a necessary skill for truckers. A trucker without patience is like a mechanic without a screwdriver. It's a basic skill for the job you do. Don't just be an aimer, who can point his vehicle in the right direction. Be a driver. Be one who makes the road a better place. A lot of drivers like to talk about the old days and how everyone helped each other, and that they don't anymore. But I think they still do. I would like to urge you to be one of the helpful ones too.

So, next time you get into a heavy traffic situation, keep some space in front and try to keep it rolling, notice the traffic waves and dissolve them, prevent traffic jams by not stopping on the highway, stay calm and courteous, do the math in your head, be predictable, time the traffic lights so you don't have to stop, expect the expected, compensate for the ignorant, teach others, and of course make sure that an accident is never your fault.

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