



So you've passed your test!

By Mike Emslie

1 INTRODUCTION.

There's a saying that you don't really learn to drive until you pass your test. I have my own thoughts on this but would agree you don't learn to be road wise until you have been driving by yourself for a number of years.

It's easy to forget all the manners, courtesy and correct driving procedures you follow when you're learning and bad habits can develop rapidly. More and more, Police are cracking down on bad drivers and rightly so, bad drivers and the uninsured can add up to an additional 30% to the cost of your own car insurance!

So here are some tips and advice I have put together which should keep you on the right road (don't give up the day job!) based on the Pass Plus certification. With the cost of insurance rising this is a great way to keep your motoring costs down and some insurers will give decent discounts if you do the additional hours. Pass Plus covers things you don't do in your normal driving lessons and takes at least 6 hours. It has 6 modules, covering driving:

- in town
- in all weathers
- on rural roads
- at night
- on dual carriageways
- on motorways

You don't have to sit a test at the end but you are assessed throughout the training and the certificate awarded upon successful completion.

2 MOTORWAYS AND DUAL CARRIAGEWAYS

Now you have your license you can drive on any road, at any time and go anywhere you choose to! Might sound like freedom but when you're driving down the M8 at night, its blowing a gale and you can't see jack for the rain and the lights of that juggernaut behind you keep getting closer, you need to be able to confidently handle the situation. I don't intend to make anyone nervous but this is real life and you won't have me there to guide you through. But with some simple tips and a bit of common sense, you will handle these situations like it's just any other drive out!

Plan ahead! Think through where you're going and mentally practice the best route. Look up the direction of travel on Google maps and think of any visual markers that will help you along the way. Match the route to your ability. For example, take some quieter roads if you think double-lane motorways and roundabouts will stress you out unnecessarily.

Ask a passenger to help you navigate. Sat nav is great and use the voice prompts if you have it and give yourself more time than you think you'll need so you don't have to rush. And avoid rush hour until you have had a bit of practice.

When you get on the road, you will drive either responsively or reactively, depending on many factors. Responsive is being able to drive when you have time to think before you act. When you're on the road, look ahead as far as you can comfortably see - you'll have more time to respond to any hazards or challenges up ahead and when you get nearer a car or situation, slow down sooner rather than later to allow yourself time to react. Make sure you leave a 2 second gap between you and the car in front, 4 seconds in adverse weather.

Reactive driving is allowing outside factors to determine how you drive such as driving with the flow of traffic even if others are speeding or driving to close. Try to avoid slamming on the brakes where possible as this can not only cause you to lose control but can create chaos behind you! Slowing down gives you longer time to react but this needs to be done in a controlled manner and not stamping on the pedal like you're squashing a spider!

Don't forget you have passed your test! You have proven yourself to be a competent driver and have been judged able to drive a car on your own so remember that and stay positively focused!

3 GOOD DRIVING HABITS

Good habits make good drivers and something becomes a habit when it's repeated over and over (award for stating the obvious). But make sure your habit is developed properly. Poor driving is rife now, we all get frustrated at the poor standards of driving on the road and road rage is becoming common place. With video, dash cams and cameras easily to hand, it can become a crusade to name and shame those who aren't up to standard, whether that by government standards or your own!

It doesn't hurt to take a few refresher lessons now and then and most instructors would encourage you to do so, check in after 6 months and then a year to see how your driving has developed and nip any bad habits in the bud. Alternatively, have someone else test you - ask someone who knows what the correct habits are to watch you drive in an unfamiliar situation or while you're distracted.

Try to have a daily check list. I know you're busy and you need to jump in the car and dash off, but a few minutes can make a major difference in how you drive and more importantly, your safety. Opinions differ on what's 'correct' when it comes to driving habits; the tips I am giving conform to what most professional driving instructors teach.

Do your car checks. On a regular basis, check all your lights are working and check tyre pressure and condition of your tyres. On a daily basis check your seat is properly positioned, mirrors are aligned and your seat belt is correctly worn.

My wife often asks if indicators are optional extras on some cars! As much as it can be infuriating, it's also dangerous not to use your signals but also not using them soon enough. There is no hard and fast rule how long you should indicate as it is situational dependent but this is just a rough guide and is designed to help you think in advance. Indicate for at least five seconds before you pull out from the kerb. Indicate for at least three seconds before turning. Indicate for at least three seconds before beginning to change lanes. Indicate before you steer off roundabouts (wherever practical). Look in your mirror before you indicate. Look in your mirror before you put your foot on the brake. Indicate before you brake.

Always be aware of your surroundings. Slow down if you can't see what's happening five vehicles in front of you. Slow down at intersections and look for other cars even if you have right of way. Look into intersections regardless of having right of way. Keep your eyes scanning the situation all around you. Look over your shoulder (head check) before beginning to change lanes and in other situations where vehicles could be in your blind spot.

Don't bend the rules. Come to a complete stop (no rolling) at stop signs. Drive to the speed limit. Stop for green lights when traffic in front of you is not leaving the intersection. Stop for amber lights unless it is not safe. Don't stop in box junctions. Don't pull out onto roundabouts if you can't progress round it. Don't park on double yellow lines or zigzag lines.

Be a careful driver. Stay at least 2 seconds travel time behind the car immediately in front of you. Leave a space, when stopping behind a vehicle, to drive around it if you have to (a good tip for this is tyres and tarmac, you should be able to see both). Change lanes as little as possible. Slow down when approaching green traffic lights and check to make sure no one is running a red light.

These are just a few of the many tips that can be given but are some of the more common ones.

1 BAD DRIVING HABITS!

New laws have been introduced to tackle inconsiderate behavior as well as enforcing the rules of the road for those breaking them! Driving isn't a right, it's a privilege which must be earned and maintained.

I think the one that amazes me most is driving and using a mobile at the same time. Phones come with a wired hands free kit but if you don't happen to have one, for my sanity and that of most other responsible drivers, go on eBay, spend £2 and buy one! Apart from the sheer inconsideration, the danger element is astounding and I've lost count of the number of near misses I have seen.

Lane hoggers! The boys in blue would like a word with you for your inconsideration to other drivers! Hogging the middle lane forces three lanes of traffic into one, incredibly dangerous and extremely selfish. You are no safer in the middle lane, you are most safe in the slow lane where you have the hard shoulder to move onto should you need it. Move over! You don't need to be there!

Queue jumpers will have my wife reaching for the wine when she gets home. Moving from lane to lane increases the risks to yourself and to other drivers and it's just downright ignorant. You wouldn't behave like that in Tesco, why do it on the road? And undertaking just so you can jump ahead two cars really is a waste of your time and effort as you will gain 5 seconds if you're lucky, the knock on effect is incredible as the guy you have just cut off has to slam on his brakes and so does the guy behind him and so on.

And of course the old chestnut of speeding. Need I say more?

2 DRIVING AT NIGHT

I'm going after an award for stating the obvious with this section! Night driving is so very different from driving through the day, you don't get the same colour and contrast of the day and your vision and depth perception are completely changed and impaired.

You need to go through some vital initial checks before driving off. Check that all exterior lights work properly such as the front and rear, brake lights and high beams, and make sure your windows and headlights are clean inside and outside. Dirty windows can add to glare and make it very difficult to see clearly; dirty headlights can greatly reduce efficiency, your ability to see the road properly and for the benefit of other road users.

Avoid using high beams when it's foggy – they will reduce your own ability to see and may temporarily blind other drivers. Avoid flashing your high beams at another vehicle that has their high beams on – I know you might really want to as the pillock left his on and now you're blind, but you don't need to be responsible for an accident.

Adjust your rear-view mirror to avoid the reflection of other vehicles' headlights, most cars have 'day/night' rear-view mirrors that can be tilted easily to reduce the glare. Don't use your interior light while driving – if you need to put it on for any reason find somewhere safe to pull over.

Be alert. Watch for flashes of light - at the top of hills, at road bends and intersections - that may indicate the headlights of other cars. Leave a bigger gap to allow you more time to respond. Night time driving requires lots of concentration, which can be tiring so don't drive if you are already tired, and don't do long journeys until you are experienced and know your limits.

3 DRIVING IN ADVERSE WEATHER

For a new driver, going on the road in the rain or snow and being caught in a downpour can be terrifying. When the road is wet, your tyres can lose their grip on the road and leads to hydroplaning. This is when the tread in the tyres fills with water and loses grip for bursts of time. And of course your vision is dramatically reduced - it is harder to see other vehicles, road signs and the road itself.

If you know you have to go out and it's already raining, give yourself more travel time to allow you to drive at a slower, safe pace and cope with the probability of heavy traffic.

Turn on your headlights – even in light rain – to help you see, and be seen. Turn on your front and rear defoggers to keep your windows clear.

A similar principal applies to snow. It fills the tread quickly but unlike water, doesn't dissipate in the same way. Be sensible about driving in the snow. If it's a little bit, isn't lying on the road too long, is bright and sunny and will melt quickly then you are likely to have little issues. But if the kids have already made a snowman and the sleds are out, stay at home and make hot chocolate with marshmallows. It's just not worth the risk.

It takes longer to stop in the wet, so increase your crash avoidance space and drive at a slower pace than you normally would. If you can see large puddles of water lying on parts of the road, slow down as you approach, keep a firm hold (not a white knuckle grip) on the steering wheel and drive through it in a controlled manner.

Brake earlier and less forcefully, than you normally would. This increases the stopping distance between you and the car in front and gives drivers behind you more time to react too. I can't stress enough you need to avoid stamping on the brakes as much as you can, this can cause you to lose tyre grip and hydroplane. Try to slow down well in advance so you come to a natural and controlled stop.

If you can't see the road or the car in front of you or you are just too stressed, safely pull over and wait until the rain stops. I would strongly recommend you ask me to spend some time with you in bad weather even if you don't do Pass Plus. We live in Scotland so it's not that you would have to wait long for the heavens to open. 3.30 on Tuesday suit you?!!!

4 COUNTRY ROADS

Driving on country roads is very different from driving in towns and cities and living in Scotland, country roads are around every corner (I crack myself up sometimes with my jokes!). The roads are usually less maintained so be aware of pot holes and broken tarmac, hitting one at high speeds can burst and damage tyres leaving you needing to change a tyre in a vulnerable position. The roads are not as well lit so you need to pay attention, look at the road and not at the view!

Overtaking on country roads is very different to overtaking on main roads – country driving often involves high speeds and winding roads. Only overtake if it is safe and if you have any doubts, stay where you are. You need to be able to see clearly in front and know you have more than enough time to pull out, pass the car in front and pull back in safely.

Driving on country roads usually means covering long distances – make sure you are well rested before setting out, and take regular breaks.

Keep a lookout for wildlife, especially when you see road signs warning that there are animals in the area. If you see wildlife on the side of the road, slow down to reduce your braking speed and give the animal a chance to cross.

If you see a horse and rider, slow right down, avoid revving the engine and certainly don't use your horn. A spooked horse can cause a major accident and the rider's safety compromised.

Watch for farmers moving livestock and farm vehicles can leave a lot of mud on the road. Slow down and approach with caution.

Slow down on winding roads. You really have no idea what is around the next bend. Slow moving farm vehicles, animals, a broken down car etc. Approach at a controlled speed and assume something will be there so you are ready to react.

5 DRIVING IN TOWNS AND CITIES

Towns and cities are overpopulated, there are more cars on the road, as well as pedestrians, bikes, delivery trucks, taxis and public transport. Plan your route and mentally practice where you'll be going.

Ideally, rush hour should be avoided – if it's not possible, prepare yourself to be patient and enjoy the soothing tones of Metallica or Take That, whatever your preference is! Don't adopt any bad habits such as queue jumping and weaving in and out of lanes, especially if my wife is on the road as you will get five levels of ear bashing in her dulcet Geordie tones! And with complete sincerity, it really doesn't save you that much time and just increases the chance of an accident.

City driving is often busy and drivers can become impatient so don't get wound up if another driver becomes frustrated with you. Also if another driver or pedestrian makes a reckless move, stay calm. Just tell yourself how much of a better person you are for not reacting to it!

Making turns on city roads can be confusing; while it's important to get as much experience as possible with tricky turns, if you're not sure whether it's safe or legal, continue driving straight and turn when you feel safe. Often city lanes will be designated for specific actions – such as 'left turn only'. Keep looking well ahead to make sure you remain in the correct lane.