

The 5 Seeing Habits for Defensive Driving

The “Five Seeing Habits” are techniques that help drivers to use their sense of sight to improve their ability to prevent vehicle accidents. Defensive drivers drive safely and anticipate the unsafe acts of others. To do this, the defensive driver must be alert at all times and use their eyes to identify hazards and their experience to determine the proper response.

The Five Seeing Habits

1. Aim High in Steering
2. Get the Big Picture
3. Keep Your Eyes Moving
4. Leave Yourself an Out
5. Make Sure They See You

Aim High in Steering

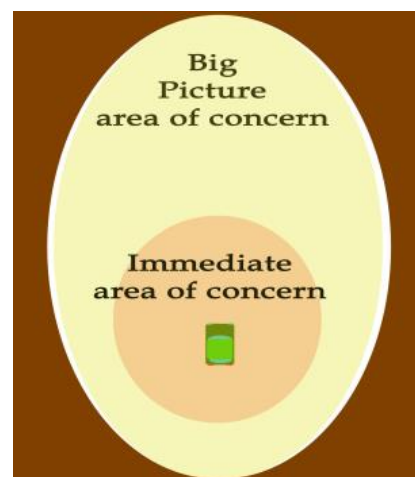
You should be concerned with what is happening all around your vehicle, but most of your attention will be out front. Because you are looking well down the road, anything that could interfere with your travel path can be seen before you get there. This allows you time to decide the best course of action. Maybe the action is to slow down, change lanes or take the nearest exit. Time to react will help to prevent the sudden movements that often contribute to vehicle accidents. Drivers that lower their vision or look only a short distance down the road for the visual clues to help them guide their vehicle, make more frequent course corrections and “drift” in and out of their lanes.

The same concept of guiding your vehicle applies to making turns. Aiming high in Steering gives you information about where you are going and allows you to spot hazards ahead, even on turns.

We must always keep our eyes moving and scan an area all around our vehicle. Another benefit of this technique is it helps you to maintain good lane position throughout the turn. Drivers who do not use this technique often pull wide through the turn or short over the curve.

Get the Big Picture

What is happening down the road? Behind you? The sides of the vehicle? Your goal is to have a constant awareness of the environment in your Big Picture Area of Concern. We are concerned about our vehicle accidentally encountering objects from any direction. *There are six sides to a vehicle. Do not forget the top and bottom.* We need to be alert for potholes, low branches and low power lines to name a few of the hazards struck by vehicles. Know the clearance height of your vehicle!



The immediate area of concern allows for only emergency maneuvers if the unexpected should happen. The Big Picture area of concern gives us time to see hazards well in advance. Scanning 14 to 18 seconds ahead means looking for potential hazards in the area you are heading toward.

The big picture includes an area side to side large enough to spot objects if they are close enough, or fast enough to enter your travel path. At times, you may have to expand your side-to-side scanning even further, but never forget out front! Having the Big Picture also means having a sense of your position with respect to other traffic.

Do not allow other vehicles to stay in your blind spot: change speeds or take other action to free up this area. The longer someone is in your blind spot, the more chance of forgetting they are there and an accident could result. If you are behind a vehicle and cannot see their rearview mirror through their rear window, you are probably in their blind spot. They may make a sudden lane change not realizing your position.

Keep Your Eyes Moving

The way you get the Big Picture is to Keep your eyes Moving. The important thing to remember is to SCAN NOT STARE! Looking at one thing for more than two seconds can lead to fixation on that object at the expense of the Big Picture. We know that ahead of our vehicle lay the majority of potential obstacles to our travel path. Checking one of your mirrors every 5 to 8 seconds gives you information about what is behind and along the sides of your vehicle. A look over your shoulder is the best way to identify objects in your blind spots. Mirrors cannot give you a 360-degree view. Merging into traffic or changing lanes always requires an over the shoulder check to determine it is safe to proceed. Check your speed from time to time. Keep your gas tank full, driving on low increases distraction by checking a low gauge more frequently.

Leave Yourself an Out

What are some common escape routes that vehicles can use in emergency situations?

- Paved shoulders.
- Clear adjacent lanes.
- “Drive Alone” (taking advantage of open spaces in traffic).

Defensive Drivers must constantly plan for the driving errors of those around them. Position your vehicle to avoid other traffic as much as practical. Anticipating what others may do is a big part of defensive driving. The best course to prevent an accident is to yield and leave space in front.

The Dangers of Tailgating

Tailgating is one of the most common and dangerous of bad driving habits. Tailgating robs the driver of time to react when the unexpected happens and the opportunity to see potential hazards well in advance. To understand the danger of tailgating, let's define the total stopping time as the time starting with your recognition of the need to stop, and ending with your vehicle at a complete stop. The first element of the total stopping time is the Reaction time. Stopping time begins as your foot depresses the brake pedal.

What factors might affect reaction time

Driving under the influence, distracted drivers, dirty windshields, poorly functioning windshield wipers, and age and general health. This means that before you hit the brake you will travel some distance before you begin to slow down. At 30 mph, you will travel about **35 feet** in 3/4 second. At 65 mph, you will travel about **70 feet** in the same amount of time. If the vehicle in front of you stops suddenly, at 55 mph you will travel **60 feet** *before you can hit the brake*.

What types of conditions can affect you stopping time

Wet roads, bald tires, towing or carrying heavy loads, brake condition.

On Average, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a second transpires between your identification of a hazard and need to stop, and getting your foot to the brake.

Two Second Rule

One of the most accepted methods for figuring your proper following distance is to use the “two second rule”. This rule is designed to give you a two second space cushion in front of your vehicle. This takes care of the $\frac{3}{4}$ second reaction time and leaves additional time to spare. To use this rule, begin counting one thousand and one, one thousand and two, etc. until the front of your vehicle passes the same stationary point that the rear bumper of the vehicle in front of you passed when you began counting. You can use road cracks, painted markings, road signs or other stationary objects as your reference points. When the vehicle in front passes the point, begin counting. If you pass that point before finishing one thousand and two, you are too close. This rule applies to passenger vehicles, in dry conditions, with good tires and brakes. If driving oversized or heavy vehicles, if road conditions are slippery, or other conditions exist which increase the difficulty in stopping, we need to add seconds to our following distance. Tailgaters assume that the driver ahead will always warn them of upcoming hazards.

What do you do if you are being tailgated

Increase your following time from two seconds to four. This gives both you and the driver behind you two seconds to react. When you see the need to stop, you have extra time to tap your brakes and indicate to the tailgater that you will be stopping soon.

Make Sure They See You

Because we want others who share the roadways with us to notice our vehicle, we need to communicate in traffic to get their attention. We can communicate in traffic by:

- Making eye contact with others,
- Using our lights and signals,
- Using our horn and understand a vehicle’s “body language.”

A common driving situation occurs when another vehicle is preparing to enter your roadway. It could be from a parking lot, a driveway, or a crossing roadway. If we have the right of way, then we want that vehicle to stay put until we are safely past. If you are able to make **eye contact** with the other driver, you can have more confidence that the other vehicle sees you and will wait.

What can you do if you do not have eye contact

Slow down, “cover the brake” (positioning your foot over the brake but not depressing the brake). Covering the brake cuts your reaction time and allows for a quicker response if the other vehicle unexpectedly pulls out into your travel path. Eye contact may be necessary with pedestrians in the area. Always yield to pedestrians in crosswalks and attempt to warn other pedestrians of your presence if you cannot be sure if they will enter the roadway.

How might you get their attention

Headlights not only help the driver to see, but help others see your vehicle. Daytime light use increases your vehicles’ visibility and decreases the chances that others will accidentally enter your travel path. A primary theme of defensive driving is to anticipate the actions of others, and to help others anticipate our actions. Failure to signal early and consistently forces others to guess what your actions might be.

What feature about a parked car can tell you if it is a potential hazard or not

We want to know if the vehicle is occupied. One of two things might happen: either the vehicle could pull out unexpectedly, or the driver could open their door to exit their vehicle. Both of these actions could interfere with our path and we need to look for occupants, brake lights, exhaust gasses, or other visual clues to determine if the vehicle is occupied. If occupied we need to get their attention to assure their awareness of our approach. A good method for getting the attention of others is to tap the horn. Excessive horn volume or frequency will get someone's attention but rarely is more than a friendly tap necessary. Eye contact will give evidence of the success or failure of your attempt to communicate in traffic.

Backing Accidents are one of the most common types of vehicle accidents

Making the right choice where we park can help to avoid backing accidents. Most people will pull into the most convenient spot. When the opportunity to pull through an empty spot and park without backing exists, take it! This is your best choice. Never back if you do not have to. If we cannot pull through an empty spot into our parking spot, then we must back at some point. Is it better to pull into our parking spot or to back into the spot when we park? It is better to back in rather than out for several reasons. First we can begin "scanning the parking area" as we approach. Occupied parked vehicles must be paid attention to, either someone will get out or the parked vehicle will begin moving. We are trying to get the BIG PICTURE as well as MAKING SURE THEY SEE US.

On foul weather days, rear windows are often obscured. Drivers back out before they can see if it is clear. When we decide to back into our spot instead of pulling in, we take advantage of several things. First, we have had the opportunity to scan the area as we pull into the parking area. Because our vehicle is moving, other drivers and pedestrians should be aware of our vehicle and will be more prepared for our backing maneuver. Parked vehicles that suddenly back out of their spot are more likely to surprise nearby motorists and pedestrians, increasing the chances of an accident. Vehicles that face out in their parking space give us the best view when pulling out. Driving past the spot in preparation to back gives the driver a chance to scan the parking area as discussed earlier. By looking out their window and over the shoulder, drivers' can back *and* scan the parking area as they back.

Vehicles with no rear-view mirror, such as trucks, have significant blind spots behind their vehicles. Depending on the truck, an object directly behind the truck may not be seen in the trucker driver's side mirrors unless it is more than 100 feet away. What can drivers do to see behind them before backing out straight?

- Get out and take a look.
- Use a spotter if one is available.
- Use frequent taps on your horn as you back up to warn anyone in the area.

Intersections

One of the most serious types of accidents occurs at Intersections. Why? Pedestrians, sideswipes, and rear end collisions. All three are often serious and involve injuries. Here are some basic concepts to understand that can keep you out of trouble as you approach and drive through intersections:

- **The Stale Green Light**
- **The Point of Decision**
- **Clearing the Intersection.**

Stale Green light. The light was green in your direction when you first laid eyes on it, so you cannot be sure when it will change. We do not want to be distracted by our uncertainty of when a light will change when we drive through intersections. It is common to select a **Point of Decision**, to allow for a normal safe stop before the intersection at current driving speed. Most people pick a spot along the side of the road that, if they reach it before the stale green light

changes to yellow, they will continue through the intersection. The idea is to make it safely through the intersection before the light changes. Once the point of decision is reached, you must decide whether to slow down or continue. If the light turns yellow or red, come to a safe stop. If light is green, continue scanning, begin “clearing the intersection”.

As you approach the intersection, you should begin the process of “**Clearing the Intersection**”. Clearing the intersection means looking for hazards before entering the intersection. Are vehicles stopped? Are they slowing down? Have you made eye contact? Cover the brake if unsure. You may need to select a decision point more distant from the light if this happens. Because the light changes before you enter the intersection, and the fact that you have not left enough time and distance to allow for a safe, controlled stop, then your options are an emergency stop, or to run a red light. Both of these actions are very dangerous and again highlight why intersections are so often involved in vehicle accidents.

The clearing process starts by looking left as you have passed your point of decision; then check traffic and other hazards to the right as you approach the intersection; and then you should check left as you enter the intersection because this direction would be the closest. We can still be hit even after we enter the intersection and must continue scanning for hazards. We finish clearing the intersection after we are completely through it.

DO NOT LEAVE THE SCENE OF AN ACCIDENT!

Trucks and oversize vehicles are especially susceptible to this because of their size, vehicle noise, and blind spots. The driver may legitimately not realize that an accident occurred. Scan your mirrors as you get through an intersection just to make sure that you did not make contact with anything but the street as you passed. If in doubt, find a place to park and go back and check.

When stopped in traffic or at a intersection, how far should you be from the car stopped in front of you? Many accidents involve a stopped car being struck from behind by an inattentive driver. If you are struck from behind, you will be driven into the car in front of you if you are stopped too close. If you can see the vehicle’s tires meet the ground, you should be far enough back.

When awaiting an opportunity to make a left turn, it is important to keep your wheels straight. If you are struck from behind in this situation, you will be driven into oncoming traffic if you have already turned your front wheels to the left.

Seatbelts

Seatbelts are the best insurance policy you will ever have. The statistics do not lie: seatbelts save lives! Some drivers feel that they do not need to wear seatbelts when traveling at lower speeds and for short trips. First, a large percentage of accidents occur within a few miles of home. Second, even a 30-mph accident can kill you. The impact at 30 mph is about the equivalent of jumping off a four-story building. Seatbelts are necessary at all speeds!

Ask any State Patrol Officer and they will tell you that they rarely have to unbuckle a fatality at an accident scene. Seat belt wearers according to statistics are about seven times more likely to survive a vehicle accident. Another thing to remember when it comes to wearing seatbelts is to set the proper example. Young drivers are ten times more likely to be involved in a vehicle accident. Why? They have better vision, hearing, and reflexes, what they do not have is experience. Kids learn more from our actions than what we tell them. If we show them that seatbelts are not important by our failure to use them 100 percent of the time, then that is the lesson they will learn. Knowing that young drivers are more likely to be in an accident should give us every reason to give them the best possible chance of survival.