

5: TRAFFIC BASICS

RIDING PREDICTABLY

On the street, most motorists follow the same traffic rules. Traffic flows smoothly because all the drivers can predict what each other will do. A collision happens only when someone does something abnormal.

When you're on a bike in the middle of all those cars, it's easy to defy traffic rules; you can maneuver better, and almost no one will stop you. **This is how most bicyclists get into collisions.** When you break traffic laws motorists never know what you'll do next, so they're not sure how to avoid you. But if you *act like the operator of a vehicle*—signaling turns, turning from the correct lanes, and stopping at red lights—*drivers can predict what you'll do.*

Being predictable is the key to safe bicycling in traffic. And if you follow traffic rules, motorists will come to respect bicyclists as drivers of vehicles—which is how Washington laws say bicyclists should act. **5** (See the back cover for details.)

Here are the basic rules for riding predictably:

Get Smart: Know the traffic rules you should follow and when others should yield to you. See “Traffic Rules for Cyclists,” below.

Be Confident: Learn riding skills so you don't hesitate in traffic, and always be courteous. See “How to Learn Traffic Skills,” page 12.

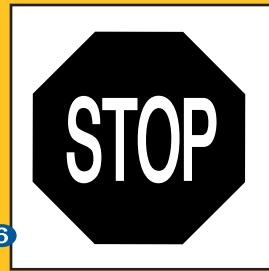
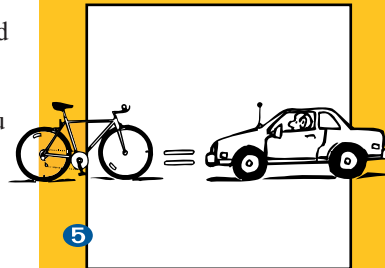
Communicate: Make eye contact and signal your moves. See “Communicating,” page 13.

TRAFFIC RULES FOR CYCLISTS

Washington requires you, as a bicyclist, to know and obey **all** of the state's traffic signals **6** and pavement markings. To learn these, read “Washington State Bicycle Traffic Laws” from the Washington Traffic Safety Commission or the *Washington Driver Guide* from the Dept. of Licensing (see www.dol.wa.gov/driverslicense/driverguide.pdf). Check out www.wsdot.wa.gov/bike/Laws.htm for links to laws and specific information about bicycle regulations.

Messengers: Some areas have other rules that apply only to bike messengers (e.g., messengers must wear helmets or display identification). Contact local officials to find out.

Right of Way: “Right of way” means permission to go ahead of somebody else. You must give right of way just as motorists do. If you don't know when to yield to pedestrians and other vehicles, read the *Washington Driver Guide*.





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Sidewalks: County and city rules vary with respect to riding on sidewalks. Check your local laws. If you do use a sidewalk, always yield to pedestrians; where there are lots of people, walk your bike. **1** And make sure to watch for cars and other vehicles at driveways.

Roads to Avoid: Bikes are banned on some sections of the state's limited access highway system. **2** Call 360/705-7277 to get a map or see www.wsdot.wa.gov/bike/Laws.htm. Cycling is also banned on certain roads and sidewalks; check with your local jurisdiction. It's illegal to ride the wrong way on a one-way street (except if marked for bicycles).

What Police Will Do: **3** If you break a traffic law, an officer can stop and ticket you. If you don't have I.D. or bond money, you can end up in a police station, calling someone to post your bond.

What can you do when police stop you for the wrong reason? If gentle persuasion doesn't work, plead your case in court. Bring this book, along with copies of local and state traffic laws, to prove your point.

HOW TO LEARN TRAFFIC SKILLS

With practice, every adult can bicycle comfortably in traffic. Start honing your skills in quiet parking lots, on side streets, or on farm roads. **4** Then practice on major streets early on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Below, we've listed a few skills that'll help you ride in traffic safely.

Look Behind You! To bike in traffic you must know how to look back over your shoulder while riding. This simple act helps you move left or right quickly—to avoid hazards, change lanes, or make a turn. And looking over your shoulder helps drivers pay attention to you. Even if you have a mirror, you should always turn your head to look before you move left or right—just as you'd do in a car.

How to Practice Looking Back: Here's how to learn to look back without swerving or slowing down.

- Find a parking lot or wide, quiet street with some kind of lane stripe.
- Ride along the lane stripe in a straight line.
- Keeping your left shoulder steady, turn your head down and around to the left. Try to keep your arms steady so your bike moves straight. Then turn your head forward.

- Turn your head back again, but this time pick out something to look at. **5** Try to keep moving straight. Then turn your head forward.
- If you can't turn your head without turning your handlebar, it should help to drop your left hand to your thigh while you turn your head.

f. Next, practice turning your head right. Then practice turning your head while moving faster.

Where to Look: As you ride you have to avoid two kinds of things: hazards on the ground right in front of you, and cars and pedestrians ahead and on either side. You should always know how both the ground and the traffic around you look. To do this, get into the habit of looking first at the ground 20 to 30 feet in front of you, then up at traffic, then back down at the ground. **6** At first this'll seem hard—maybe even strange—but with practice you'll do it without thinking.

Ready for a Brake: Always keep your hands near or over your brake levers—so you can stop fast in a pinch. When you brake, squeeze the front and back brakes at the same time. (To learn more, see "The Quick Slow-Down" on page 22.)

Shifting Gears: If your bicycle has a gear system, know how to shift without looking down. Always pedal when shifting, no matter how slowly. Learn shifting from a friend or a bike shop.

COMMUNICATING

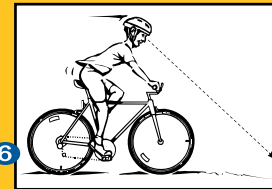
Bikes are slower, quieter, and less visible than most other vehicles. So you should make drivers notice you, and try to communicate with them. And because a lot of bicyclists don't follow traffic laws, drivers don't always know what you'll do—even if you think it's obvious. Here are some ways to communicate.

Use Hand Signals:

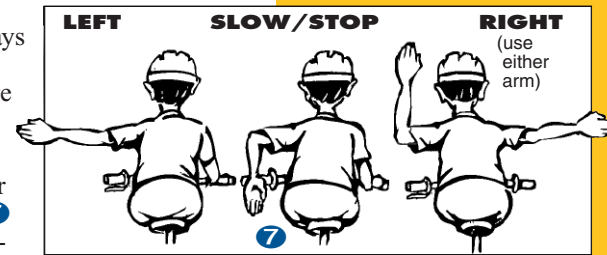
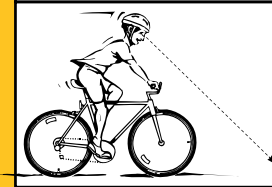
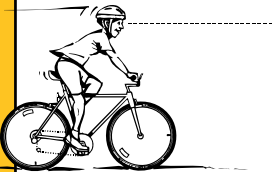
Whenever you change lanes or turn, signal with your arm. **7** Right turns may be signaled either by the left hand and arm extended upward (making a right angle) or the right hand and arm extended outward, horizontally towards the right. If you're about to move in an unexpected way—like around a bunch of glass—point to the part of the road you're moving to. Also signal when slowing down. The law says you must signal before making a turn, so you might have to signal while shifting and braking—but don't do it if you'll lose control. You can yell your intentions, but remember that noisy traffic might prevent others from hearing you.

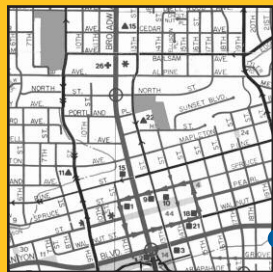
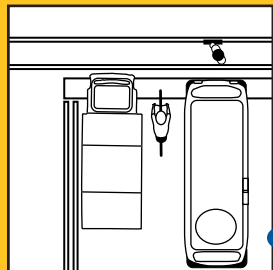
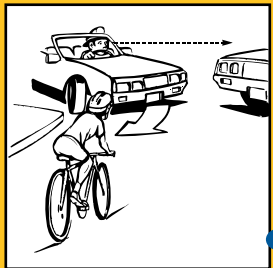


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Yielding: When you're waiting for a car to pass you before you cross an intersection or change lanes, the driver might not realize you're yielding. Wave at the driver to go ahead. Also, when drivers correctly yield the right of way, it's a good idea to thank them by waving or nodding.

Pretend You're Invisible: In some situations—like a car turning in front of you—it's a good idea to pretend the driver doesn't see you. Know in advance how you'll avoid that driver. Can you stop in time? If not, slow down or plan how you'd steer out of the way.

How to decide whether a driver sees you:

- ▶ Watch for the car to move slower than it would if you weren't there.
- ▶ Look at where the driver's eyes are. ❶ If they're not looking at you, slow down and be ready to get out of the way.

Make Noise: Just as a car honks its horn when it comes out of an alley, you should make noise when you emerge from places where people can't see you—like when you emerge from between two vehicles to get into an intersection. ❷ Use a horn, bell, or whistle, or yell if you have to.

Headphones: Don't wear them! As a bicyclist in traffic, you can hear more of what's going on around you than motorists can. In fact, people with whom you share the road expect you to hear their engines, horns, or shouted warnings. If you wear headphones you might not hear something that can help you avoid a crash. Also, in Washington State *it is illegal for the operator of a vehicle to wear headphones.*

PICKING YOUR ROUTE

Before you ride, decide which streets to take to your destination. Think about road construction, rush-hour congestion spots, and bad pavement. Use the King County or Seattle bicycle map or other local map to pick your route. ❸ Two words of caution:

- ▶ Maps don't tell you where crime might be a problem. Before you bicycle in an unfamiliar place, talk to someone who knows the area.
- ▶ Not all neighborhoods have good cycling routes. Some maps show streets designated for cycling, but these streets still might have rough spots.