



CAPISTRANO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

PRINCIPLES OF DEFENSIVE DRIVING

1. Minimize Distractions: Ironically, the person that is the greatest threat to your own safety on the road is yourself. Cell phones, music, passengers or munching on a burger are examples of distractions in the car. The NHTSA and various scientific studies have all shown that distractions are the number one reason behind car accidents and fatalities on the road. Teen drivers in particular suffer the most from distractions and incidentally, are the most accident prone.

2. High Eyes Driving: Race drivers use a technique called “high eyes” that call for the driver (you) to focus not on the car in front of you, but on the road horizon. Many drivers become fixated on the car in front of them and go into auto-pilot mode, braking when the car in front brakes, accelerating when the car in front accelerates and so on. The problem is that in a panic stop situation, if the driver in front wasn't paying attention to begin with – guess what – you're probably going to eat the end of his bumper. By keeping your eyes high up, you'll be looking at the entire traffic pattern up ahead instead. This gives you ample time to react to a sudden emergency up front – even giving you time to decide if you need to perform a quick lane toss or start slowly braking to give the guy behind you a warning.

3. Minimize Lane Changes: It's rare for a car to be rear ended while traveling the speed limit in it's own lane. It is common for accidents to happen while a car is changing lanes; perhaps by suddenly cutting off a car, swiping another vehicle in it's blind spot or two cars merging into the same lane. By choosing a lane and sticking with it for the majority of your trip, you will remove a great deal of the factors that are known to cause accidents on the highway.

4. Spot Fast Lane Changers: The flip side to not being a lane changer, is that you must be highly aware of the drivers who are. These are often the drivers who dangerously dart in and out of traffic, cutting off and swerving around drivers in the process.

Regularly monitor your rear and side view mirrors to be on the lookout for drivers that are approaching rapidly from behind or the lane next to you. These are bad drivers that will often cut in front or around you at the last second, narrowly missing your car. Deal with these drivers by maintaining your speed or even slowing down if you feel they are going to cut in front of you. *Don't* become a vigilante and speed up to box them into the adjacent lane; you don't want an erratic driver who likely has road rage tailing you on the freeway. Simply let them pass and be happy they are away from your car.

5. Spot Blind Lane Changers: Not only are there the jerks driving recklessly, but you have to worry about the absent minded driver that never checks their blind spot before changing into your lane. These guys are actually *harder* to spot than the jerk drivers, because it's harder to predict when these types drivers are about to change lanes. The best way to avoid these drivers is to *not drive in their blind spot* to begin with. If you ever find yourself in the another car's blind spot, you should either A) accelerate so that your car is parallel to the other vehicle so they can easily see you or B) slow down so that you are tailing the vehicle and no longer next to it. Option B is the more preferable method depending on your car's positioning and you should only use option A if you are already close to the front hood of the other car.

It's hard to keep by this rule in heavy traffic, because you'll always be next to a car, but you can usually identify a driver that is about to change lanes if the driver looks in their side view mirror, the car has just merged from an on-ramp, the driver is suddenly accelerating or decelerating or if the car is slowly starting to drift toward one lane. With practice, you can become very good at figuring out when another car is about to lane change and avoid being in their blind spot when it happens.

6. Don't Make Eye Contact: Studies show that many road rage incidents occur when drivers make eye contact with each other and a situation ensues. As a defensive driver, you need to realize that road rage drivers are often looking to instigate trouble, rather than simply reacting to perceived sleights against them. Making eye contact with these

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types of drivers is playing into their twisted game, so you want to avoid getting into a petty fight with someone driving a 2,000 pound vehicle; regardless of who is right or wrong.

So next time you see that tail gating jerk come next to your car and pace you, just ignore them and don't give them the pleasure they're looking for. Simply drive on as usual and they will eventually leave you alone.

7. Look Both Ways at Intersections: Intersections are inherently dangerous places and the scene of many t-bone accidents. Most drivers, upon seeing a green light, amble straight on through without a second thought; and that's usually when the driver running the red light smashes into their side.

If you are ever the first car at the intersection when the light is turning green, you should be *extremely* aware of your **left, then right** side traffic as you make your way through. I've almost been hit twice this way and both times slammed on my brakes before the other car barely clipped my front-end. Any police officer will tell you that the amount of drivers who run red lights is astounding – enough to make you think twice *and look twice* before going through an intersection.

8. Know When and How to Swerve: This is probably the absolutely hardest point to get across, because it honestly takes hours of experience behind the steering wheel to learn. The concept of swerving is applied to emergency situations where you don't have enough time to avoid an accident (which is why we have rule #1 above).

If for example, a child suddenly runs into the busy street 20 feet in front of your car, it will be physically impossible for your car to stop in that amount of distance while traveling at 40mph. In that specific situation, your only option is to try and swerve and steer clear of the object in front of the car as fast as you can. This same principle applies to a sudden wreck on the highway, fallen tree, deer or any other danger that takes you by surprise.

To properly swerve (also called a "lane toss"), you need to be certain that A) the lane you're swerving into is empty B) your car can handle the maneuver and C) you correct your swerve immediately afterward so you don't end up on the side of the road. Item A can be achieved by constantly being aware of your surroundings, but for B and C, you can only understand those by taking your car out to an empty parking lot and practicing for a few hours with cones. That- or you can take a defensive driving class.

9. Get Away From Bad Drivers: You should always do your best to keep a healthy distance between yourself and other bad drivers on the road. Problematic drivers include: drunks, speeders, tail gaters, road ragers, lane changers, extremely slow drivers and any other erratic behavior. Most of the time, this involves switching lanes and slowing down so that a speeder or drunk can pass you safely. You never want erratic drivers behind you because there is always the potential of getting rear ended.

In other scenarios, if you see a erratic driver and need to pass, make sure you do it quickly and safely as possible – trying to keep a lane between you and them if possible. If you cannot keep a distance in front of the car, due to traffic or other reasons, try to stay a distance behind the other car and never drive directly next to it. You should also report erratic driving to the California Highway Patrol or the local sheriff's department (you can call 911 directly) as the police will be on the lookout for erratic or drunk drivers if enough reports come in.

10. Don't Follow Too Closely: Saving one of the best tips for last, don't follow too closely behind the car in front of you. Always give at least 2-3 second of buffer room. Experts will tell you 4 seconds, although this author's personal opinion is that it actually invites other drivers to cut into the lane in front of you. If you drive an SUV however, you must make this at least a 3 second rule because your vehicle is heavy and takes much longer to come to a complete stop than passenger cars.

While this may sound like a tip that applies to simply being a better driver, this tip actually has defensive driving principles for emergency situations as well. The reason is that in the event of a panic stop in the lane up ahead, you will ideally have buffer room to brake and stop. This helps the driver behind you as well because it aids in their reaction time and stopping distance – a big plus if they haven't been paying attention, are slow to react or drive a vehicle with long braking distance (like a SUV).