

Good driving in the UK

Obviously it is vital to know the law and be a suitably trained and qualified driver. Knowing and complying with the Highway Code is vital. This article focuses on issues that too many people get wrong or don't know about. These include points that it has been difficult to make clear in the Highway Code. I have also taken some points from a report on the contributory factors in road accidents in the UK published by the Institute of Advanced Motorists in 2011.

Have appropriate objectives

Good driving primarily means safe driving, for yourself and for others. It also means low stress, economical, polite and considerate driving that gets you to your destination in good time.

It does not mean just getting to your destination as soon as possible, regardless of other factors. Some drivers focus on journey time too much all the time, while others only do it in some situations, e.g. when late, at work, when driving a particular type of vehicle (e.g. a white van, a black or silver-grey German car), or on a familiar journey such as a daily commute.

Good driving also does not mean driving that shows others you are a superior person, or have a superior vehicle.

Safe driving is not just about *your* safety. Some cars, especially larger, more

luxurious models, provide excellent protection for their passengers. Does that mean it's safe for the driver to drive them faster and be generally more aggressive? No, because their vehicle gives little protection to other road users, especially if it is large and heavy.

Do you give sufficient importance to safety when you drive? A simple test is to ask yourself if you are content to complete your journey within the legal speed limit at all times, even when overtaking. If the honest answer is 'No' then you need to adjust your objectives.

Understand and respond to your fitness to drive

For example, if you have consumed any quantity of alcohol in the past 24 hours you should not drive at all. At least this level of caution is required for other inebriating drugs. This is obvious.

What is less obvious is the effect of your degree of sleepiness. Sleep debt (i.e. accumulated missed sleep) can impair driving as much as alcohol and in combination with alcohol is particularly dangerous (Dement and Vaughan, 1999).

Allow plenty of time for the journey

Estimate the time needed long before starting out. Don't consider it just before

switching the engine on. If you find you will need more time than you have left then you will be tempted to rush. Do not forget to allow extra time for fuel stops, toilet stops, and rests. Allow for traffic problems, especially being trapped on a motorway with no opportunity to turn off onto another route. Have a plan for what you will do if you arrive early so that you do not feel time will be wasted if you start too early. Plan those rests and toilet breaks.

Drive at a sensible speed

This means, almost always, driving within the legal limit and slower in poor conditions¹. It's a reasonable guess that 99% of drivers have broken the limit within their first 100 hours of driving as a qualified motorist. However, there is a big difference between occasionally going a bit over the limit and persistently driving over the limit. Never exceed 70 mph except for a few seconds in an emergency.

A significant proportion of drivers exceed the limit much more than this, sometimes going 20 or 30 mph over the limit. Why they do this is not known, but it is possible that driving a car capable of exceeding twice the maximum legal limit is part of it. Why even buy or sell such a car? Some people complain if enforcement cameras are not prominently signposted in advance and describe those cameras and the fines they trigger as just a money-making device for local government. The legal situation is that speed limits are defined and effective for all UK roads and there is nothing special about sections of road with cameras. The only reason for wanting warnings of cameras is so that you can drive too fast

¹ Rule 261 of the Highway Code covers speed limits.

and exceed the limit elsewhere without being fined.

If you have a choice between keeping up with other traffic and staying within the speed limit, stay within the limit. Speeding drivers are the ones who need to adjust.

Do not bully other drivers

Some aggressive drivers focused on getting to their destination as fast as possible go further than just speeding. They make things worse by bullying other drivers to either go faster themselves or get out of the way. This can be done by:

- Driving very close behind
- Flashing your lights
- Suddenly coming up very close behind a much slower vehicle, flashing lights
- Cutting in after overtaking to imply that the other driver should be in a different lane.

The bullying driver will often try to imply that their victim is somehow at fault.

For example, suppose you move into the middle lane of a motorway to overtake, at 70 mph, having checked that there is space behind you to do so. However, a car that was a distant speck when you started moving closes rapidly at over 90 mph, comes up close behind you, brakes at the last moment, coming scarily close – within 2 metres – and flashing lights at you.

In this situation the driver of the illegally speeding vehicle has time to slow down earlier or shift to the right hand lane and overtake. However, he/she chooses to come up rapidly and closely behind and flash lights in order to send a message. That message is 'You are a bad, dangerous, and rude driver. You have made me slow down and you could have caused a crash, so I am teaching you a

lesson.’ The implication is that the safe, legal driver is at fault. In reality, any crash would have been caused by the speeding driver, perhaps leaving it too late to brake.

Don’t be that speeding driver bullying others².

Allow ample space

Allow plenty of space between your vehicle, the one ahead, and the one behind. The actual distance should increase with speed. Confusingly, the Highway Code suggests two different ways to decide on the minimum safe gap. Both these are within Rule 126:

- Leave at least 2 seconds between you and the vehicle in front.
- Leave at least the overall stopping distance shown in the table in rule 126. This is described as the ‘safe rule’.

The following table translates both those gaps into metres and extrapolates the table up to speeds above the legal limit of 70 mph. (The Highway Code only goes up to 70 mph.)

| Speed | Stopping distance | 2 second gap |
|---------|-------------------|--------------|
| 20 mph | 12 m | 18 m |
| 30 mph | 23 m | 27 m |
| 40 mph | 36 m | 36 m |
| 50 mph | 53 m | 45 m |
| 60 mph | 73 m | 54 m |
| 70 mph | 96 m | 63 m |
| 80 mph | 122 m | 72 m |
| 90 mph | 151 m | 80 m |
| 100 mph | 183 m | 89 m |

The car behind you should be trying to do this too. A heavier vehicle will need even more space for stopping.

Of course many things might happen to prevent this but don’t be put off by drivers who squeeze in front of you, or by trying to get through traffic lights before they change to red.

When I learned to drive, the Highway Code contained three important messages that conveyed an understanding of how to use lanes on a motorway:

- The lanes were called the slow lane, the fast lane, and the over-taking lane.
- Drivers were advised to avoid changing lanes too often.
- Drivers were advised to spread out across the lanes when traffic was heavy to maximise gaps.

The modern version of the Highway Code does not have these points and gives slightly more emphasis to moving over to the left when you safely can. Its points about overtaking differ slightly in emphasis depending on what type of road is involved.

² Don’t drive unnecessarily slowly either, especially if you are blocking others from travelling at a faster but legal and sensible speed. However, slow driving is a factor in almost no road accidents while fast or aggressive driving is a factor in a large proportion.

If on a two lane road then overtaking involves crossing the centre of the road and using a lane that is for vehicles coming from the opposite direction. This is inherently dangerous and so the code emphasises moving back to your side of the road when you can and checking there will be space before you even start overtaking.

For roads with more lanes, where you are just moving right into another lane that is for your direction of travel, the code emphasises that you should move back left when you can do so *safely*.

Rule 264 on overtaking on motorways includes 'You should always drive in the left-hand lane when the road ahead is clear. If you are overtaking a number of slower-moving vehicles, you should return to the left-hand lane as soon as you are safely past.'

The key phrase is 'safely past', which is not defined specifically but presumably this is a reference to the 'safe rule' and means that the gap between you and the vehicle overtaken has reached at least the stopping distance for the other car's speed, and the space between your vehicle and any vehicle ahead is at least the stopping distance for your speed. The word 'safely' makes a huge difference.

In addition, rule 267 on motorway overtaking includes 'ensure you do not cut in on the vehicle you have overtaken'.

Rule 138 covers the situation of a three-lane dual carriageway, which is rather like a motorway. It says 'On a three-lane dual carriageway, you may use the middle lane or the right-hand lane to overtake but return to the middle and then the left-hand lane when it is safe.'

Turning onto smaller roads for a moment, rule 137 says 'On a two-lane dual carriageway you should stay in the left-hand lane. Use the right-hand lane for

overtaking or turning right. After overtaking, move back to the left-hand lane when it is safe to do so.' Again, note the key word 'safe'.

Rule 162 talks about how to overtake but unfortunately does not make any distinction between overtaking that puts you into a lane with opposing traffic and safer lanes. It says 'Before overtaking you should make sure:

- the road is sufficiently clear ahead
- road users are not beginning to overtake you
- there is a suitable gap in front of the road user you plan to overtake.'

The 'suitable gap' would be one of the size needed for you to move back into your lane.

Rule 163 also talks about overtaking and also does not distinguish between the two main types. It says 'Overtake only when it is safe and legal to do so. You should:

- not get too close to the vehicle you intend to overtake
- ...
- ...
- move quickly past the vehicle you are overtaking, once you have started to overtake. Allow plenty of room. Move back to the left as soon as you can but do not cut in.'

The last sentence does not include the word 'safe', which matches the approach when overtaking takes you into an opposing lane. Yet, even here, there is a reminder not to 'cut in'.

So, for roads where your overtaking uses a lane going in your direction, you need to be able to move over into the left hand lane while still leaving a *safe* gap in front of you and behind you. At motorway speeds this is quite a big gap – almost 100 metres at 70 mph. Do not move over so quickly that there is only a gap of 3

metres in front or behind! Also, consider how long it will be before you want to change again, perhaps to overtake an HGV. If you will barely have time to change lanes left before you want to switch right again, and if you are driving at the speed limit anyway, then there is no real need to change.

Imagine that you are on a motorway in the second lane doing 70 mph. There are HGVs doing 60 mph in the slow lane next to you and the gaps are not quite large enough to allow you to move over safely. A black BMW 3 series comes up behind you at over 85 mph, flashes its lights, changes lanes at the last moment, overtakes you, then shifts back in front of you leaving a gap of just a few metres before pulling away ahead, still at over 85 mph.

The speeding, bullying driver could have changed lanes to overtake earlier and clearly should have got much further ahead before changing back in front of you. The flashing lights were not needed. The intention was to send you a message. That message was 'You are an inconsiderate driver who is hogging the middle lane and you have forced me to change lanes to get past you. You clearly don't know the Highway Code, which says to move left as soon as you can, and you need to be taught a lesson.'

In reality, you cannot be holding up traffic if you are driving at 70 mph and the Code says to move over when you can do so *safely*, not just when it is physically possible. The speeding driver is the one who is breaking the law and creating the danger. The true 'middle lane hogger' is someone driving at less than 65 mph in the middle lane for a long period when there is plenty of space in the left hand lane. This is quite a rare sight.

Leave extra space for confused or uncertain drivers

Every driver should try to avoid becoming confused or uncertain while driving. Planning your route carefully beforehand can help. I recommend learning the route and studying street level images of important turnoffs.

However, everyone gets confused or uncertain at times. Here are some common reasons:

- A new route
- Complicated, multi-lane junctions in rapid succession (e.g. in central Reading)
- Unusual behaviour by other drivers (e.g. stopping in a No Parking zone, blocking a lane, going very slowly)
- Counter-intuitive road layouts, perhaps where the natural lane choice is not the correct one
- Misleading, over-complicated road signs about road works and diversions
- Being a beginner having a lesson
- Confusing, poorly timed, or incorrect instructions from a navigation app
- Trying to decide between two courses of action where the decision is a very close one (what cricketers sometimes call the 'channel of uncertainty').

Nobody is immune to this. Uncertainty and confusion in another driver can often be deduced from their low speed, unreliable signals, and failure to get accurately in a lane.

The best approach to drivers in this situation is to give them even more space than usual. The wrong approach is to flash your lights, sound your horn, and try to overtake as quickly and as loudly as possible. The driver who does these things is trying to send a message. That

message is 'You are a bad, inconsiderate, and dangerous driver and you have slowed me down. You need to be taught a lesson.'

In reality, the aggressive, bullying driver is making a difficult, stressful, and dangerous situation much worse.

Look carefully

A huge contributing factor for road accidents in the UK is failing to look properly. It is a mistake to look only in the places that other road users are supposed to be. If other drivers are driving too fast, overtaking on the inside, trying to 'nip through' a gap, too close behind, ignoring lights or give way signs, or making sudden, aggressive manoeuvres then vehicles can easily be in unexpected places or travelling at unexpected speeds.

If trying to pull out or overtake, be content to miss an opportunity if you are not sure you have looked properly.

Be aware of factors that might impair your looking, such as dazzling light, darkness, rain, snow, fog, a stiff neck or back, cargo or people in the back, a broken mirror, and blind spots on your vehicle. Make an extra effort. Don't just glance; search for dangers.

Conclusion

The UK is one of the safest countries in the world for driving, but still you don't have to drive much to see dangerous, often aggressive, driving.

The dangerous behaviours discussed in this article are ones you can see in a typical day's driving.

Take care to protect yourself.

References

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