

How to Not Kill a Cyclist

By Matthew Baldwin

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It's National Bike to Work Day today, and maybe you noticed a lot of cyclists on your commute this morning. If you didn't—and you're a driver—that's cause for concern.

My friend was driving down a suburban road, me in the passenger seat, when he came up behind a cyclist. There was no bike lane and a car was approaching from the opposite direction, so he slowed such that we remained behind the rider.

After the other car went by, my friend began to accelerate, intent on passing. "Hang on," I said. "There's a sharp bend just ahead, and you don't want to pass while we're both going around it."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, just watch."

My friend tapped the brake and fell back. As the rider navigated the curve, he swung out into the road and upon reaching the straightaway returned to the shoulder. As my friend passed a few seconds later, the cyclist gave a friendly wave.

"Got it," my friend said to me. "Thanks."

I'm not a better driver than my friend—in fact, quite the opposite. But I am a cyclist, while he is not, and he appreciated knowing more about how we operate.

As many cyclists are aware, there are entire bookstore sections devoted to advice on co-existing with cars. We read them as if our lives depended on them, because often they do. But there are also many things bike riders would like drivers to know—like, we don't ride on the sidewalk for a reason (it's dangerous and in many places illegal), or that "cyclists" and "pedestrians on bicycles" are two distinct groups, or that we know we look ridiculous in bike shorts. As well as the following:

Don't "Door"

As in, "Trevor got doored last week and has been in the hospital ever since." Every time drivers are parked on the curb and open their driver's side door without first checking their side- or rear-view mirror, they run the risk of dooring a cyclist: striking them as they pass and knocking them into traffic, or abruptly placing the door unavoidably in their path such that they collide with it at full speed. Either way, it's what we in the business refer to as a "huge bummer" for all involved.

Dooring is also one of the easiest oh-rats-I-just-killed-a-cyclist scenarios to avoid: Whenever you're parked on the side of a road, check your mirrors to ensure no one is approaching before you open your door.

Pass Deliberately

"Pass slower vehicles" is an axiom of driving, one that motorists rarely question. And yet, as my friend who considered passing a cyclist on a curve illustrates, there are many situations in which passing merits a moment's consideration to determine whether it truly makes sense.

If, for instance, you are behind a cyclist and approaching a stop, passing the cyclist likely will gain you nothing. In fact, you may end up passing the cyclist twice: once before the intersection, a second time after. Which, let's face it, is going to annoy you.

You may wind up in that worst of all worlds: a quantum state of simultaneously passing and not passing.

Even worse is when you're trying to pass a cyclist, but can't. Such as when the cyclist is moving at roughly the same speed as traffic—as is common in urban areas, or on a downhill—in which case you may initiate a pass only to discover you have nowhere to go, because there's insufficient room between the bike and the preceding car for you to occupy. You then wind up in that worst of all worlds: a quantum state of simultaneously passing and not passing.

Finally, if neither of the above situations applies, and you're able to pass safely please do not then immediately execute a right-hand turn and cut off the cyclist. This happens more often than you might imagine, as drivers may simply forget that hanging back instead of passing is an option.

The goal here is not to list all the situations in which passing is inappropriate, but to remind drivers that passing is never obligatory, and should be done deliberately. And, while we're on the subject, passing should be "deliberate" in the other sense of the term as well: slow, unhurried, and steady.

Be Cognizant of Bike Lanes

Much of the above passing advice becomes moot on a road with a bike lane, as both drivers and cyclists will have space sufficient to avoid interaction. That doesn't mean drivers shouldn't pay attention to the cyclist of course, and it doesn't mean drivers shouldn't pay attention to the bike lane itself, as it may suddenly end or become obstructed, requiring a cyclist to move into traffic (even if only for a moment). Drivers should keep an eye out for cars parked or garbage cans set in the lane, or for the abrupt dead-ending of the lane at the transition from one neighborhood to another.

Acknowledge Cyclists

In "How to Drive Around Cyclists" Lawrence Ulrich pairs tips for drivers with "Cyclists' Commandments," one of which is "make eye contact." Drivers can help us adhere to this commandment by seeking eye contact with cyclists, perhaps accompanying it with a nod or a wave to indicate we're seen. Because lacking such reassurance, we are going to assume drivers are unaware of our presence and give them a wide berth, which may require swerving out of our path and into traffic.

Behave Predictably

Cyclists are ever vigilant for anomalous behavior on the part of motorists, as it makes us profoundly nervous. Ironically, one of the most common reasons motorists behave unexpectedly is out of courtesy toward us, such as at a four-way stop when a driver skips their turn and motions for the cyclist to proceed instead—it's a kind gesture but a bad idea. When a driver strays from the rules of the road it confuses not only cyclists, but also—more perilously—other drivers, as an element of uncertainty is abruptly injected into what is normally a well-ordered system.

Know the Law—or at Least Its Foundation

Every state and municipality has its own set of laws governing cyclists and those driving in close proximity to cyclists. At the core of every set of statutes, though, is the same fundamental concept: A bicycle is a vehicle. To wit:

- Seattle: "Every person operating a bicycle upon a roadway shall be granted all of the rights and shall be subject to all of the duties applicable to a driver of a vehicle, except as to the special regulation of this chapter and except as to those provisions of the Traffic Code which by their nature can have no application."
- San Francisco: "Bicycle riders on public roads have the same rights and responsibilities as motorists, and are subject to the same rules and regulations."
- New York: "Bicyclists have all the rights and are subject to all the duties applicable to drivers of motor vehicles."

And so forth. The specific laws of a state or city may modify some element of this concept—by mandating cyclists remain as far to the right as is safe, say, or allowing cyclist to ride two abreast—but internalizing "a bike is a vehicle" gets you 90 percent of the way to understanding cycling law.

As a practical matter, this means a cyclist owns the road every bit as much as motorists, and is allowed (for example) to “take the lane” whenever necessary. It also means cyclists must obey stop signs, stoplights, and all other rules of the road.

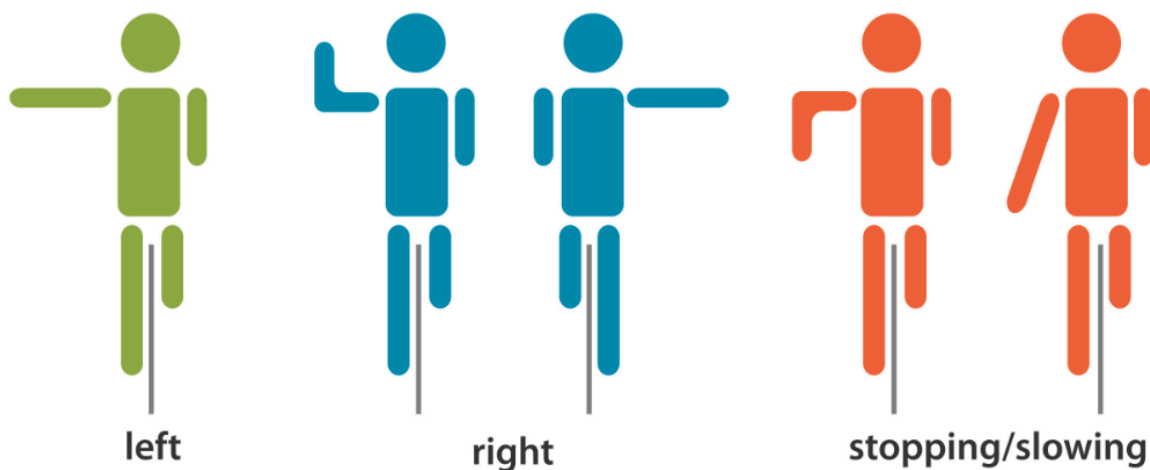
The “right-hand turn” law for motorists, however, deserves special mention. As mentioned above, drivers should never pass a cyclist if they intend to make a right-hand turn, as they will likely be cutting them off. In other instances, this is the *usual* formula:

- An automobile should be in the right-most lane when making a right-hand turn;
- A bike lane is a lane; therefore
- An automobile should enter the bike lane before making a right hand turn.

Big fat caveat: The above logic is not universal, as some places (e.g., Oregon) forbid automobiles from entering the bike lane in any circumstances. In these cases the car turns from the main lane and across the turn lane, which can be cataclysmic if a cyclist is in the process of whizzing by.

Read the Signals

The law also requires cyclists to know and use the official hand signals for turning, slowing, and stopping. But in practice almost no one does. Lest drivers judge, however, remember that by law they are supposed to know the hand signals too, yet often don't. Well here they are, in case this comes up while you're a contestant on *Jeopardy*.



You skipped right over that, and that's OK, because cyclists generally make up signals on the fly. Pointing out their intended route is a common one. Pointing to the ground to their left, when they are in a bike lane, on the shoulder, or on the right side of the road, is typically a warning that they are about the “take the lane” due to an obstruction. Most are self-explanatory. It's less important that drivers “learn the hand signals” than that they simply are aware that hand signals will be given, and keep an eye out for them.

Lay Off the Horn

IT IS A COMMON JOKE ON THE INTERNET THAT TYPING IN ALL CAPS IS THE TEXTUAL EQUIVALENT OF SHOUTING. By extension, honking to a cyclist is like putting those caps in bold and 48-point type. More to the point, a cyclist is on an unstable machine, travelling at a high velocity, and chock full o' adrenaline; introducing a loud noise into a cyclist's immediate environment may startle them—with disastrous results. A driver may become irritated with a cyclist for some reason or another, and they may be completely justified in doing so, but honking is less an expression of annoyance and more a crapshoot that may send the cyclist careening into traffic or a curb.

And remember that, the expression notwithstanding, nobody can actually honk “at” someone; one honks, and the noise assails the just and unjust alike. If there is a cyclist nearby, don't honk at anyone if you can help it.

Try going to your happy place instead. Or just sublimating that rage and yelling at the nightly news later that evening like the rest of us.

Stop Surfing

Do I even need to tell you to not text and drive? If cycling injury statistics are to be believed, as well as the personal experiences of me and everyone I know who bikes, then yes, yes I do. In fact, here's a litany of driving guidance that has no place in this article, because it's stuff you should or should not be doing regardless of the presence of a cyclist, but that I nonetheless feel obligated to mention given the topic of this article: Get off your phone, don't drive drunk, use your turn signals, don't drive aggressively, don't tailgate. Drivers have heard all these pleas before, but ignoring them near a cyclist ups the odds that someone's going to die over it.

Judge Us Not by Our Jerks

Just as some percentage of drivers are jerks, so too is some percentage of cyclists—I reckon about 15 percent in both cases. And I'm sure 15 percent of Segwayists are jerks, and 15 percent of jetpackists will be jerks at some point in the future. The Jerk Constant is as immutable and universal as π . The point here is to remember that the majority (85 percent!) of cyclists are not that punk you encountered last Tuesday, so don't let that frustration get the better of you whenever you see a cyclists up ahead.

And finally, a tip for cyclists: When riding, express your appreciation to drivers who adhere to any and all of the above whenever you can. The more you can reinforce the central truth of commuting—that motorists and cyclists are in it together—the better we will all get along. And that helps everyone, regardless of the number of wheels upon which they ride.