

Rule 1: Pay Attention!

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"I never saw him!" is the most common excuse heard after a collision. Was the other vehicle invisible? Virtually all collisions involve inattention on the part of one or both drivers. Inattention can involve many things, some of which are daydreaming, distractions, sleepiness, fatigue, "highway hypnosis," talking, etc.

A moving vehicle develops thousands of foot-pounds of energy. YOU as a driver have the responsibility not to use that energy to injure or kill others, or damage their property. Paying attention makes it possible for you to see, recognize and avoid the hazards lurking on the road; these are the three basic elements of defensive driving. The primary attribute necessary for a safe driver is alertness, and paying attention is the most important driving task because it helps create the time you need to recognize hazards and avoid a collision.

One statistic often quoted is that most collisions happen within a short distance from home. Why is this true? Since we mostly drive in our own neighborhoods, the odds are we'll have most of our mishaps there. Close to home we get more comfortable and perhaps let our guard down (and the other guy does the same thing); you've heard that "familiarity breeds contempt?" Better yet, familiarity breeds inattention. We don't often consider that serious or fatal injuries can occur in low speed collisions.

I have a challenge for you. While it is important for you to be alert and aware, it isn't an easy task. The next time you drive, try concentrating solely on the driving task. Think of nothing else. Then see how far you get before your mind wanders. Many drivers won't even get out of the parking lot! Seasoned drivers don't HAVE to think about driving much. It's something we do automatically, and our minds are free to wander. And our minds WANT to wander. Have you ever driven somewhere and been so lost in thought that you couldn't remember anything about the trip itself? Is this a problem?

Is this a curable problem? Paying attention can become a habit, but you have to work at it. Make conscious, persistent choices NOT to eat while driving, or whatever you do that takes your attention off where your moving vehicle is pointed. Connect your mind to your eyes and work at consciously analyzing what you see while you drive. We call this "situational awareness." Driving is the most dangerous thing most of us ever do. It deserves your full attention. Mastery of this one habit can almost make you bullet-proof. Not quite,

Rule 2: Don't Trust Nobody!

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but almost.

We have met the enemy and he is us. You can never rely on what the other driver will do. Think back to all the mistakes you've made while driving over the years. Think ahead to the ones you know you will make in the future. All



the other drivers are just like us! *Don't trust them!* While you are driving, keep a wary eye on the other guy and leave yourself plenty of room. Anticipate the mistakes he might make and be ready for them. Eventually, he will! Because he's just like us! When you are driving on "autopilot," you have turned control of your vehicle over to those other drivers - you are at their mercy. Their fate is your fate.

If you are too trusting, you are relying on that other driver for your safety. Is he worthy of that trust? Every few seconds, some drivers in this country find out this is a poor bet. Maybe some of those other drivers are returning from a beer festival! Maybe they just lost a job, or worse, a loved one. The other driver might be an 11-year-old who found Dad's keys. Approach driving with the idea that every other driver is an unpredictable menace and out to get you. Most collisions occur when the "other guy" does something we don't expect, or when we do something they don't expect.

If you accept that everyone makes driving errors, the next step is to drive with a wary attitude. Be careful of approaching red lights, because you know a light by itself never stopped anyone. Watch out for folks getting ready to pull out from parking beside the road. Look for gaps in lines of traffic which might be the result of someone pausing to let another vehicle cross in front of them. (I've personally witnessed three or four collisions in the past ten years that happened just this way). There are others: failure to signal a lane change or turn, or tailgating someone when they are poking along because they need to make a turn—a turn they suddenly WILL make when they see it at the last second. You can think of dozens of others. Be alert to the possibilities and have a strategy in mind for dealing with

Rule 3: Yield Anyway!

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them.



outcome, that counts.

"Nobody ever yielded their way into a collision." Think about it. If you are in doubt about who has the right of way, give it away. The other guy may be wrong, but you can end up hurt or dead. We often say no one HAS the right-of-way until it is yielded to them. (Keep in mind I'm talking defensive driving practices, not traffic law.) Right of way rules are often misunderstood, and there are situations where the rules may not be clear to everyone. If there is uncertainty about which vehicle should have the right of way, give the other guy the road. When it comes to driving safely, it's not the principle, but the

Rule 5: Don't Drive Impaired.



First, let's define "impairment." Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines impairment as "making something worse, less, weaker, or damaged." Applied to driving, impairment

means there is a factor present that decreases your ability to operate your vehicle safely.

The first thing that comes to most folks' minds is impairment through alcohol or other drugs. There are others as well: impairment through fatigue, or as a result of disabling injuries or illness. There was a case a few years ago where a man attempted to drive with some broken limbs. He used a stick to operate the gas pedal, and ended up losing control, overran a sidewalk, and killed a person who was using a pay phone.

Alcohol is a prime cause of impairment. Since it acts as a depressant, it begins to diminish a person's abilities with the first sip. Many people do not realize that even at very low blood alcohol levels, way before reaching any "legal limit," impairment of physical and mental abilities is occurring. In the USA, all states now have a .08% presumptive level -- the alcohol concentration at which a driver is presumed to be impaired, with no other evidence required. But impairment often begins at AC levels as low as .04%—less than half the "legal limit." What's worse, it acts on the very skills and abilities you need most as a driver: judgment, vision, and the ability to do several things at once. Since alcohol slows your mind and your motor skills, it has a dramatic effect on your reaction time and distance. If impairment causes your reaction time to double, for example, at 70 mph that can result in an additional 103 feet traveled. Obviously, this could mean the difference between a miss and a collision. Driving with other impairments could have similar results.

One of my common themes in teaching this topic is personal responsibility. We all have the obligation to make sure we are able to drive safely whenever we operate our vehicle. Ask yourself, "Am I safe to drive? Am I rested? Am I ill? Have I taken medications that might affect my abilities? Are my limbs available for use? Has it been long enough since I had that drink for the alcohol to have worked its way through my system?" (Generally, the body can eliminate one drink per hour, and, contrary to popular beliefs, nothing can speed up that process.) Do I have my glasses on, if needed?" Only if you can answer yes to all these questions should you exercise your privilege to drive.

I am convinced that if everyone would (1) not speed; (2) pay attention; (3) not drive impaired; and (4), wear seat belts (and use other safety systems such as air bags and ABS brakes), no one would ever get killed in a traffic collision. Just these four things, practiced habitually, would eliminate most serious collisions and save 50,000 lives each year. In the real world, though, we're human, and because we are, there will always be mistakes that lead to collisions. Since we do subject ourselves to hostile environments and physical forces that are incompatible with life, we should do everything possible to minimize the risks, yes? So, again, practice [paying 100% attention to your driving](#), [drive at a reasonable speed](#), never drive impaired, and buy and learn how to use safety systems correctly. These ideas are the foundation of any defensive driving "system." **Keep the shiny side up**

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Rule 6: Wear your seat belt!



Without a doubt, seat belts are the most significant safety device ever invented. Seat belts do several things for you. They provide impact protection, they absorb crash forces, and they keep you from being thrown out of the vehicle. Modern vehicles are built with "crumple zones," and seat belts are an integral part of the system. The belts hold you in place while the vehicle collapses around your "safe" zone. Belts help keep

you in your place, in control, and better able to avoid a crash. Yet for all these benefits, folks have lots of "reasons" why they don't wear them.

Rule 9: Don't Run Red!



In my home town, drivers reportedly run red lights 120,000+ times each day!

First, there are two basic types of red light runners—there's the daydreamer or distracted driver who just doesn't see it, and then there's the driver who's impatient and accelerates on the yellow signal instead of stopping and waiting the average 45 seconds of a signal cycle! Some of us are guilty of both offenses. Are we really in that much of a hurry? Running red lights kills hundreds of us every year.

What constitutes running a red light? It means your vehicle entered the intersection after the signal turned red. In order to know whether you've entered an intersection, you must know where the intersection begins. The boundary is farther out than you might think, and that causes part of the problem. Here's the definition in my state: the intersection boundary (in Arizona) is the extension of the lateral curb lines (of two or more cross streets). The lateral curb line is an unpainted line drawn from corner to corner—just imagine a line drawn from the "point" of each corner (where the outer edge of the sidewalk meets the outer edge of the cross street sidewalk) across the street to the next one. The painted stop line and crosswalk are typically several feet nearer to you than the boundary, and many drivers erroneously believe the last crosswalk line marks the edge of the intersection. This error can result in an extra bit of time for the light to turn red before you actually enter the intersection, resulting in a violation. **PLEASE NOTE:** The definition of intersection varies from state to state and the differences can be significant—you need to know what the law and definition is in YOUR state.



Don't be fooled by painted lines: "The box" starts at the "lateral curb line," indicated here by the dotted black line.

In my state, if you entered the intersection legally (on a green or yellow signal), you have the right to clear the intersection even after it turns red. You will find that most states have similar provisions so that left turning traffic doesn't get bogged. In all of this, though, the legalities are not the most important issue.

In the defensive driving world, we say, "the green light anticipator met the red light procrastinator." The collision of these two is usually a "T-bone" - where the two vehicles meet at a 90 degree angle. It's not a "nice" collision. The typical speed through an intersection is over 50 mph! You'd find this is one of the most commonly fatal collisions - one in which seat belts and normal rear-firing air bags won't help you much.

Be careful around intersections. If you get a yellow light, stop. You can anticipate when the light is about to change, so it is no excuse to say it was too late. If you have the green light, watch for the red-light runner—look left, right, then left AGAIN to make sure the

intersection is going to be safe before you enter it, even on one-way streets (because somebody might be going the wrong way AND running red lights). Red light runners are often speeding as well, so make sure you look down the road far enough to see them coming.

Running red lights is too dangerous, both for you and for others, no matter how pressured or late you are. [Slow down](#), grow some patience! [Pay attention](#) to your driving so you aren't one of the oblivious red-light runners. **And live to drive another day!**

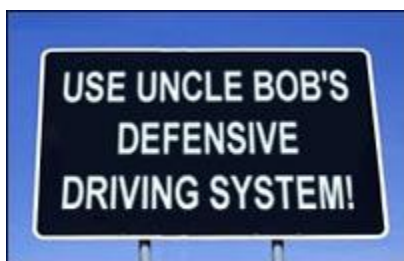
Rule 10: Drive Precisely!

Sloppy driving breeds mishaps! Most everyone knows the basics of the traffic laws; signaling, proper lane position for turns, turning into the proper lanes, complying with traffic signs (like "No U-Turns," "No right turn on red," etc.), driving to the right except when passing, passing across double yellow stripes, really STOPPING for stop signs, and many others. Drivers ignore them for the sake of expediency every day. We are so impatient to get about the details of our lives that we don't take the time to do it "right." One estimate I've seen is that average drivers commit 2.5 traffic violations every mile they drive! But, those pesky, nit-picky driving rules ARE important!



Here's an illustration of the concept applied to a different realm: the airport "traffic pattern." Occasionally in the news, a reporter will say that an aircraft crash happened because the airport had no air traffic controller, implying that it is simply chaos without one. But the fact is, uncontrolled airports are common in the aviation world and this isn't normally dangerous. ALL pilots learn basic rules for operating around airports - we enter and depart the area at set altitudes and at specific angles. We communicate our intentions to each other on special dedicated radio frequencies. We make turns in standard directions, either left or right, depending on the dictates of the airport's neighborhood. We learn where the dangers lie and how to avoid them. We keep a vigilant eye out for other air traffic, and we KNOW where to look for them because they are following the same rules we are. This process works because everyone learns the same rules and we all have a stake in doing it right. The result when someone doesn't do it right is often a smoking hole stuffed with twisted, scorched metal.

Rule 70: Use Uncle Bob's Defensive Driving System



With this article, I've written 70 rules of defensive driving. I'm certain we could come up with a few more if we thought about it, but we've covered all the main concepts and more, from general to specific. In Rule 5, I said that if ALL drivers would do just four things, no one would ever die in a traffic crash. Please read on, and see if you don't agree (but I'm going to add a fifth...)

1. **Pay attention.** The number one over-arching cause of traffic collisions is inattention and distraction. Almost every collision involves one or both of these two related errors. When I'm behind the wheel, driving is my number one task. It is my responsibility to keep my ton of metal, rubber and glass pointed safely down the road without hitting you or your

property. I am not honoring that responsibility when I'm daydreaming, eating a burger, or chatting away on my cell phone. I don't have the right to endanger you. Paying attention is the first and most important way I can shoulder that critical responsibility.

2. **Don't speed.** Speeders like to say that speeding doesn't "cause" collisions. That's rubbish. Speeding (driving at a speed higher than is safe for conditions) leaves you with less reaction time and distance than you may need to avoid a crash. An honest, intelligent person has to come to the conclusion that the cause of such a crash is the excessive speed. Speed also increases the risk of serious injury in a crash. "Speed not reasonable and prudent" is the most common measurable element in traffic collisions.

3. **Use the Two-Second Rule.** About 40% of all collisions are rear-end collisions. Avoid them by maintaining your following distance. This rule is so basic, and yet it is one of the most ignored. Also keep in mind that two seconds is the minimum -- three or four is better. Stretch it out when you can, because sometimes two seconds isn't enough. Don't believe for a second you can't use this technique in heavy traffic; you can, and that's when it is most important.

4. **Don't drive impaired.** Wait at least two hours *for each drink* before you drive. Staying on top of the driving task means being 100% there to do the job. You need all your skills and faculties for driving. Even small amounts of alcohol impair the most important skills you need to drive safely. Studies have proven that impairment starts with alcohol concentrations as low as .03% or .04% -- about half of the "legal limit" in most states, and the first thing affected is your judgment. Not surprisingly, studies have linked impaired driving to increased incidences of reckless driving. Typically, about 30% to 50% of all collisions have driver impairment as a factor, and fatality is more likely in alcohol-related crashes.

5. **Buy and use safety equipment.** Automotive safety engineering has come a long way. Today's automobile is the safest vehicle ever produced for ground transportation. Take advantage of its safety features! Buy ABS brakes, traction-control systems, & air bags. Wear your safety belts. The use of safety belts alone typically cuts the rate of injury and death in traffic collisions by about 50%.

Remember these five key defensive driving rules, and chances are excellent you'll live to a ripe old age. And that's good, because I'll need someone to play checkers with me down at the Old Folks' Home!

See you on the Road!