

DRIVING DEFENSIVELY

COURSE OUTLINE

- **When you drive defensively, you're always "looking for trouble".**
 - That's because you want to "defend" yourself against other drivers, and the trouble they can create.
- **No matter how careful you are, you have no control over other drivers.**
 - Whether they're speeding, tailgating, or just not paying attention to what they're doing, other drivers can put you at risk.
- **But other drivers are not the only problem.**
 - Most accidents happen after sundown, when darkness makes it harder to see.
 - Rain, snow and ice can send you out of control.
 - Sometimes your vehicle can let you down.
- **To defend yourself from hazards on the road, you can equip yourself with the knowledge that you need to reduce or eliminate these risks.**
- **When you're driving defensively, you should always be thinking about a way "out".**
 - This means finding an escape route to get you free of any trouble you may encounter.
- **To help you create this "out", you need to set up a "safety cushion", which is space between your vehicle and the vehicles on the road around you.**
 - First, establish a safe "following distance" between your car and the vehicle in front of you.
 - Then stay in the center of your lane to allow plenty of "side space".
 - Check your mirrors regularly to keep track of the traffic behind you, too.
- **To determine the appropriate following distance, use the "counting method" and the "three-second rule".**
 - Watch the car in front of you.
 - When it passes a landmark like a tree or telephone pole, count how many seconds go by before you reach that same point.
 - If it takes you less than three seconds to get there, slow down and back off, you're too close!

- **You also can use this "counting" method to adjust your following distance when you run into challenging road conditions.**
 - When you're driving in heavy traffic, add one extra second to your three-second following distance.
 - For night driving, when visibility is limited, or in bad weather, add two seconds.
 - Add a second or two for any other condition that you feel increases your driving risk.
- **Any activity that takes your eyes off the road, your hands off the wheel, or your mind off your driving is a "distraction".**
 - Distracted driving has been linked to as many as one in four car crashes.
 - It kills and injures hundreds of thousands of people annually.
- **Some common distractions include...**
 - Eating a sandwich.
 - Drinking coffee.
 - Putting on make-up or combing your hair.
 - Adjusting your sound system.
 - Settling down the kids in the back seat.
 - Using your cell phone.
- **You can control your own distractions, but you can't control other drivers.**
- **If you find yourself sharing the road with a distracted driver...**
 - Be careful.
 - Assume they don't see you.
 - Pull ahead or drop behind to give them a wide berth.
- **Another bad habit you can avoid yourself, but can't always escape in others, is "aggressive driving".**
 - Aggressive drivers push the speed limit, cut off other vehicles, fail to signal their turns, and merge recklessly.
 - They take a lot of risks with their lives... and yours.
 - So you need to be prepared to "defend" yourself.
- **The most common type of aggressive drivers out there are the "tailgaters."**
 - They're always "pushing" to go faster.
 - They follow right behind your car, ignoring the possibility of rear-ending you if you stop quickly.

- **The best way to eliminate a "tailgaters" threat is to let them pass you.**
 - If possible, change lanes to get out of their way.
 - Otherwise, slow down and keep to the right.
- **If they can't or won't pass, you should...**
 - Turn your emergency flashers on.
 - Slow down.
 - Pull over to the side of the road so they can go around you.
- **Aggressive drivers who are angry are especially dangerous, because they're the ones with "road rage".**
 - Each year there are thousands of reports of drivers yelling at each other, making obscene gestures, even using their cars like weapons.
- **If you find yourself on the receiving end of another driver's road rage, rule number one is "never make eye contact with an angry driver".**
 - They see it as a challenge, and it only increases their rage.
- **Instead, you should...**
 - Remain calm.
 - Ignore gestures and shouts.
 - Do not return them.
- **Try to get away from the angry driver as quickly and safely as possible.**
 - Leave the road you're on, if necessary.
- **If they keep following you...**
 - Take the threat seriously.
 - Do not stop or leave your vehicle.
 - Stay on well-travelled roads.
 - Look for a police officer, drive to the nearest police station, or call 911.
- **Driving when it's dark is more dangerous.**
 - More than half of all accidents happen at night.
 - Driving defensively by slowing down and using extra caution at night is simply common sense.

- **Don't wait until it gets hard to see before you switch on your headlights.**
 - "Daytime running lights" are standard on most new cars, but they don't provide enough illumination to comfortably see where you're going, even at dusk.
 - So switch on your headlights when the light begins to fade at dusk.
- **Switch them on in gloomy and sloppy weather, as well.**
 - When rain, snow or other conditions require you to turn on your windshield wipers, make a habit of turning on your headlights, too (many states require this).
 - Never drive using only your parking lights or fog lights.
- **You also need to adjust your speed at night.**
 - If you drive too fast, you'll "over-drive" your headlights, so that the distance your vehicle needs to stop will be more than the distance you can see.
 - This means you're going too fast to react in time to what your headlights are showing you.
- **High beams can extend your reaction time a bit, because they light up the road further ahead, and you should use them as much as possible.**
 - But remember, your high beams can blind drivers in the cars in front of you.
 - So switch to low beams when the "spray" of your light reaches that of oncoming cars, or the bumper of a car you are following.
- **Sometimes, your high beams can blind you too.**
 - Don't use them in fog or snow... a lot of that light will only be reflected right back at you.
- **Bad weather makes special demands on your vehicle, and on your attention and ability as a driver.**
 - Driving defensively in these situations begins with preparation.
- **Equip your car with the right tires for the season and the weather.**
 - This can mean "all-weather" or even snow tires.

- **Any tires must have plenty of tread on them to be safe.**
 - Many tires have "wear bars" between the treads.... and when the tread is worn down to these bars, it's time for new tires.
 - You can also insert a penny between the treads head first... if you can see the top of Abe Lincoln's head, you need a new tire.
- **Make sure your windshield wipers are in good shape so they can clear rain or snow off your windshield effectively.**
 - Check that you have plenty of non-freezing washer fluid to help your wipers.
- **Before winter arrives, make sure that you've got a good snow brush and ice scraper on board.**
 - Snow that piles up on a car or truck makes it harder to see, because it blends in with the falling snow and the snowy landscape.
 - Brush accumulated snow off of your car before you start out.
 - Don't forget the headlights and tail-lights.
- **Snow blowing off of a moving vehicle can create instant "whiteout" conditions.**
 - If the car in front of you has snow built up on its roof or trunk, increase your following distance so you're out of "impact range" if it should suddenly cut loose.
- **The basis of the control that you have over your car is the friction between its tires and the road surface... and rain, snow and ice can all break that "grip".**
- **To help you keep control when it's slippery...**
 - Apply your brakes sooner when coming to a stop.
 - Slow down before you get to turns and curves.
 - Always depress the brake pedal slowly and gradually.
- **If you do start to slide, you need to understand how to get that control back.**
- **"Skidding" occurs when one or more of your vehicle's wheels lose friction with the road.**
 - If you start to skid, don't slam on the brakes!
 - This robs you of whatever friction and control you may have left.
 - Instead, slow down by easing your foot off the gas pedal.

- **To regain control, steer with the direction of the skid.**
 - If your back end is skidding to the right, steer to the right.
 - If it skids to the left, steer to the left.
- **Another zero-friction road problem is "hydroplaning", which happens when there's too much water on the pavement.**
 - The grooves in your tires can't handle it, and the rubber totally loses contact with the road.
 - If you begin to hydroplane, do not use the brakes.
 - Instead, ease your foot off the gas.
 - As you slow down, your wheels will "reconnect" with the road, and you will regain control.
- **A "blowout" can be especially dangerous.**
 - With a blowout the tire goes flat quickly.
 - It suddenly creates a lot more friction with the road.
 - That can make your car pull sharply to the side.
- **To maintain control of your vehicle, you need to take action.**
 - Do not use the brakes (that will only make your car pull to the side more violently).
 - You actually need to accelerate instead.
 - Keep a firm grip on your steering wheel, and compensate for the pull of the flat by turning the wheel the other way.
- **Once you've regained control, slow down and turn on your emergency flashers.**
 - Signal and move slowly to the shoulder or breakdown lane.
 - Get to a safe, flat surface, well away from traffic, if possible.
- **If you have a spare tire and the correct tools, and you know how to change a tire, go ahead and put the spare on.**
 - If not, raise your hood or tie something white to your radio antenna or door handle to alert other drivers and the police that you need help.
 - If you're a member of a motor club like "Triple A" that provides roadside assistance, give them a call.
 - You can also call a local tire service or repair shop if you have the number.
 - Don't call 911.

- **Driving defensively is especially important when you're sharing the road with vehicles like school buses, mail trucks, or delivery vans.**
 - All these are likely to stop unexpectedly, and when they do there's often pedestrian activity as well.
 - To avoid trouble, add at least a couple seconds' extra following distance when you're behind them.
 - Stay alert for children darting across the road or a delivery person jumping out the driver's-side door.
- **Because of their size, it can be challenging to drive around "big rigs" and tour buses.**
 - A tractor-trailer can weigh up to 80,000 pounds, and at 50 miles per hour requires at least 300 feet to brake to a standstill.
- **Trucks and buses have bigger blind spots, too.**
 - You want to stay out of these.
 - Remember, if you can't see the side mirrors on a truck's cab, then you're invisible to its driver.
- **If you've ever been passed by a big truck on the highway, you've probably felt some "turbulence" in the process.**
 - First, you encounter the air that the truck is pushing out of its way as it hits your vehicle.
 - This can push you out of your lane.
 - As the truck goes by, the vacuum it has created by pushing the air out can suck you into the truck's lane.
- **When you're being passed by a truck, bus or RV, keep both your hands on the steering wheel.**
 - As the air pressure pushes your car away from the larger vehicle, steer gently into the push.
 - Be careful not to overcorrect... that will put you way closer to them than you want to be.
 - As the other vehicle completes its pass, be prepared to change course and steer away from it to stay in your lane.

- **When you want to pass one of these big vehicles, it's much like passing a car, but there are some differences.**
 - You need more open road to pass a truck or bus, since it takes longer to get around them.
 - Pass quickly to minimize your time in their blind spots.
 - Give them plenty of "side clearance".
- **Be ready for the same types of turbulence that you experience when they're passing you, but in reverse.**
 - You'll encounter the vacuum first, then the push of air as you get closer to the cab.
- **Always wait until you can see both of their headlights in your rear-view mirror before merging back into your lane.**

*** * * SUMMARY * * ***

- **Create a "safety cushion" around your vehicle whenever you're in traffic.**
- **Don't be a distracted or aggressive driver yourself, and stay away from them on the road.**
- **Turn on your headlights at dusk and in bad weather, and don't "overdrive" them.**
- **Know what to do if you have a blowout or other emergency.**
- **Prepare your vehicle and yourself for safe driving in bad weather.**
- **Apply your brakes carefully, and steer with the direction of skids.**
- **Allow trucks and buses plenty of space, and watch out for buffeting.**
- **Whether you're dealing with bad weather, bad drivers or just plain bad luck, you can defend yourself when you're driving... and arrive at the end of your journey safely!**