

DRIVING DEFENSIVELY FOR CDL/LARGE VEHICLE DRIVERS: THE BASICS

COURSE OUTLINE

- **When you drive defensively, you're always "looking for trouble"... not that you want to cause any, but so you can "defend" yourself against other drivers, and the trouble they can create.**
- **Whether they're speeding, tailgating or just not paying attention to what they're doing... other drivers can put you at risk.. but they're not the only problem.**
- **Most road accidents happen after sundown when darkness makes it harder to see.**
 - The roads can throw you a "curve" as well.
 - And downgrades can appear when you least expect them.
- **You never know when you may encounter a work zone either.**
 - And pedestrians have a habit of popping up at the most inopportune times.
- **Rain, snow and ice can send you out of control.**
 - Sometimes your vehicle itself can let you down.
 - Engine problems and blow-outs can occur with the best maintained vehicles.
- **So how do you defend yourself from all this?**
 - You equip yourself with the knowledge you need to cope with these situations.
- **Driving defensively is as much a mental proposition as "physical" one.**
 - Just having driving skills isn't enough when you're on the road.
- **It's all about being aware...**
 - Of the vehicle that you're driving.
 - It's size, dimensions and capabilities.
 - The load that it's carrying.

- **It's also about being alert every second that you're driving, eliminating distractions and focusing.**
 - Being prepared to handle anything that comes your way.
- **You need to be cognizant of:**
 - The time of day (is it light or dark?).
 - The "blind spots" associated with the truck that you're driving.
 - The other vehicles around you and the people driving them.
 - The list goes on and on.
- **Remember, most drivers don't understand...**
 - How commercial vehicles operate.
 - What their size requires of the person who is driving them.
 - How different they are from a car to handle.
- **Not everyone is a good driver, but most people think they are.**
 - You need to assume that other drivers will make mistakes.
 - And you will have to react to them.
- **When you are on the road you need to pay attention to vehicles that are...**
 - In front of you...
 - To your sides...
 - In back of you.
- **Watch for turn and other signals.**
 - Try to anticipate what other vehicles may do based on their position and actions as well.
 - For instance, not everyone signals that they are going to pass.
- **As you travel make a note of the "safe areas" where you could escape from a potential accident if it is necessary, such as a clear lane or a drivable area of the shoulder.**
 - Look for other vehicles that have body damage and drivers who are behaving erratically.
 - Try and stay away from them if possible.

- **You also need to eliminate anything that could distract you from the job that you're doing.**
 - Turn off your cell phone or if you need it to stay in touch with your dispatcher, put it on "auto-answer".
 - And no texting!
- **Don't try to eat your meals while you're driving either.**
 - That's what rest areas and truck stops are for.
- **Make sure to get a good night's sleep before you hit the highway, and never drive "under the influence".**
 - Remember, it's not just alcohol and illegal drugs that can dull your senses and slow your reaction time.
 - Prescription and even over-the-counter medications can cause drowsiness as well.
- **Driving defensively starts with preparing for your trip. You want to make sure that...**
 - Your vehicle is safe.
 - Your load is well secured.
 - You have any equipment or supplies that you'll need.
 - You are clear about where you are going and how to get there.
- **Start with a "walk-around" of your truck.**
 - Make sure the tires are all inflated properly, and the oil and windshield washer fluid levels are good.
 - Check the wipers themselves to be sure they are in good condition and operating correctly, and that the windshield is clean.
- **Confirm that the headlights, turn signals and emergency flashers are all working.**
- **Set your mirrors so that you have the maximum viewing area possible when you're in the driver's seat.**
 - Make sure that they are clean as well.
 - Also determine where your blind spots are.
- **You should also make sure that...**
 - There is a first-aid kit on board.
 - You have any clothes and toiletries that you will need if you will be away overnight.

- **Prepare for any inclement weather that you may encounter.**
 - Pack rain or snow gear and a change of clothes if you think you might need them.
 - A blanket can also be a good idea.
- **Check that you have adequate emergency equipment in place, including...**
 - Reflectors and road flares.
 - A flashlight.
 - A fire extinguisher.
- **You also need to look at the load you will be carrying.**
 - It needs to be balanced in the space that you have available.
 - Be sure that the securements are tight and fastened firmly.
- **Once you have confirmed that the truck and the load are ready to go and you have all the necessary equipment and supplies, you can chart out your trip.**
 - Enter the destination into your GPS.
 - Look at the weather forecast to see what conditions you could encounter.
- **Don't forget that your navigation system may not provide warnings of all of the height and weight limitations associated with the underpasses and bridges on your route.**
 - So you will need to pay attention to road signs at these locations as well.
- **The first thing you want to do to "defend" yourself as you "hit the road" is buckle your seat belt.**
 - More than 30% of truck drivers who die in roadway accidents are partially or totally ejected from their vehicles.
- **As you pull out you should always be thinking about a way out, an "escape route" to get you free of any trouble you may encounter.**
- **One way to create an "out" is to set up a "safety cushion"... space between your truck and the vehicles on the road around you.**
 - First, establish a safe "following distance" between your truck and the vehicle in front of you.
 - Then stay in the center of your lane to allow plenty of "side space".
 - Pay attention to the traffic behind you, too.
 - Check your mirrors regularly.

- **You need to know what your “following distance” should be before you get on the road.**
 - A safe distance can depend on your vehicle’s size and speed, as well as the road conditions you encounter.
- **But as a general rule of thumb, you should maintain a base following distance of 5-6 seconds when you’re driving a CMV.**
 - And you should add additional time if you are driving over 40mph or you run into poor road conditions.
- **For instance, when you’re driving in heavy traffic, add one extra second to your six-second following distance.**
 - For night driving, when visibility is limited, or in bad weather, add three seconds.
 - Add a second or two for any other condition that you feel increases your driving risk.
- **You should also add a second when you’re driving through construction and school zones.**
 - They often have a number of “obstacles” that you will need to avoid.
- **Once you know what your following distance should be, you need to know how to determine if you are maintaining that distance while you’re driving.**
- **Watch the vehicle 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 the number of seconds that you had calculated to get there, slow down and back off... you’re too close!
- **One last thing... when you're out on the open road with other trucks it can be tempting to "draft" them.**
 - After all, it does save gas.
- **But drafting really puts you in a precarious position if they suddenly have to brake for slower traffic or an obstruction in the road.**
 - So you need to fight that urge and keep the cushion that's appropriate for the conditions that you're in.

- **More than half of all accidents happen at night.**
 - Driving when it's dark is more dangerous, period.
 - Driving defensively by slowing down and using extra caution is simply common sense.
- **Don't wait until it gets hard to see before you switch on your headlights.**
 - Do it when the light begins to fade at dusk.
 - You need to 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.
- **And never drive using only your parking lights or fog lights.**
 - They just don't do the job.
- **You need to adjust your speed at night, as well.**
 - If you drive too fast, you'll "over-drive" your headlights, and the distance that your truck needs to stop will be greater than the distance that 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 vehicles in front of you.
- **So switch to low beams when the "spray" of your lights reaches that of oncoming vehicles, or the bumper of a vehicle that you're following.**
- **And don't forget that sometimes your high beams can even blind you.**
 - So don't use them in fog or snow!
 - A lot of the light will just be reflected right back at you.
- **"Anticipation" plays a big part when you are driving defensively.**
 - It's especially important when faced with negotiating curves and downgrades.
- **While cars can lose traction and slide out of a curve if they are going to fast, larger vehicles like trucks are more "top heavy" and tend to roll over under the same conditions.**

- **If you are going to be driving on roads that include curves, you want to make sure that your load is secured so that it not only won't move from front to back, but that it can't shift from side-to-side either.**
 - If you're driving a tractor-trailer, you also want to be sure that your "fifth wheel" is well lubricated.
- **As you approach a curve, remember that the speed advisories on any signs that you see have been calculated for automobiles, so you should slow down even further.**
 - Reduce your speed before you enter the curve.
 - There may not be enough time to slow down once you are into the curve itself.
 - Trailers usually begin to roll over before the cab, so you may not even feel that your truck is rolling over until it's too late.
- **You should stay off the road's shoulder in curves.**
 - If you hit the shoulder your right-side wheels can sink down into the looser material in the shoulder and increase the potential for a roll-over.
- **Preparation when approaching a downgrade is important as well.**
 - The main reason that truck drivers lose control on a downgrade is that their brakes fail because they don't use their gears to their maximum effect in reducing speed.
- **To drive defensively on a downgrade you need to know the range and top end of all of the gears in your truck.**
 - The gear to select for descending a grade should be no higher than the gear that is required to ascend the same grade.
 - However, some trucks will require an even lower gear to maintain good control while descending.
 - So you should put your truck into the proper gear and test your brakes before starting your descent.
- **If you feel that using the brakes is not giving you the control that you need when you apply light pressure, shift down to a lower gear.**
 - If you are driving a tractor-trailer apply both the cab and trailer brakes.
 - Applying only the trailer brakes could cause overheating and brake failure.

- **One key to driving defensively is to always be aware of what other drivers are doing, as well as what they may do, as they approach you.**
 - You also need to do as much as possible to make it easy for them to share the road with you.
- **Never create a situation where another driver needs to brake or adjust their steering because you have gotten in their way.**
 - You can assume that they will not see or be able to avoid you if you get into their path.
 - So you should proceed only after you are sure that you will not conflict with any other traffic.
- **As you drive, scan the road ahead for traffic and conditions that could affect you, including vehicles that may be entering the road from side streets or driveways.**
 - On two-lane roads watch out for vehicles that are passing others coming in your direction and are in your lane as a result.
- **Maintain a safe following distance.**
 - Try to stay back far enough so that if the driver in front of you slams on their brakes you can avoid hitting them.
- **Flash your brake lights to alert drivers that are following you if you see trouble ahead.**
- **Whenever you are changing lanes you should:**
 - Make sure that there are no vehicles in your "blind spots".
 - Activate your turn signals well in advance of making your turn.
 - Give other drivers the right of way as you make your move.
- **You should assume that drivers in front of you don't know that you are changing lanes.**
 - There is always the chance that they may pull out to pass or make a left turn in front of you.
- **If you are passing on a two-lane road, make sure that you can see enough clear road to complete your pass and have enough distance if there is a vehicle approaching from the opposite direction.**
 - Back off if the vehicle that you are trying to pass speeds up.

- **Making turns with large vehicles creates problems that people driving cars just don't have.**
 - Which makes it doubly important to think "defensively".
- **You need to be cognizant of other drivers in the vicinity and anticipate how your actions will affect them.**
 - Your blind spots can also make it difficult for you to see other vehicles.
- **Because your truck is longer than a car, you have to make wider turns than most automobile drivers are used to.**
 - They often encroach on adjacent lanes of traffic as well.
- **Always signal well in advance of your turn.**
 - Check your mirrors to confirm that other drivers are aware of your intentions.
- **Be careful that your path doesn't result in your truck interfering with pedestrians, other vehicles or result in wiping out a stop sign or telephone pole.**
- **For right turns:**
 - Move to the right lane well in advance.
 - Keep the rear of your truck firmly in the right lane, so that other vehicles don't try
 - to pass you on the right.
 - If you need to use two lanes to make your turn, wait for other vehicles to clear, then turn slowly.
- **If you are turning left:**
 - Don't assume that drivers who are behind or approaching you will recognize what you are going to be doing.
 - Wait until there is enough time for the rear of your truck to clear the intersection without forcing other drivers to swerve or slow down.
- **Maneuvering through intersections can be another challenge when you are driving a truck.**
 - Because of their length and slow acceleration, trucks take much more time to clear intersections than cars do.
- **In an intersection traffic can be coming at you from all directions.**
 - So it's more important than ever to pay close attention to the vehicles around you.

- **To drive defensively you need to assume the worst... that cross-traffic may not obey traffic lights and signs.**
 - So it's best to wait to see what other drivers are going to do before you move forward from a stop.
- **Make sure there is enough time for the rear of your truck to clear the entire intersection without interrupting cross-traffic.**
- **Be especially cautious crossing intersections at night.**
 - Cross-traffic may see your headlights but not realize how long your truck is.
 - They can start their crossing before you are completely through the intersection.

*** * * SUMMARY * * ***

- **We've discussed a lot of ways that you defend yourself on the road.**
- **Remember that driving defensively is as much a mental proposition as a physical one.**
 - So pay attention and stay alert.
- **Preparing for your trip is key.**
 - Check your vehicle, emergency equipment and your load.
- **Create a "safety cushion" around your truck whenever you're in traffic.**
 - Generally, your base following distance should be 5-6 seconds.
- **Turn on your headlights at dusk and in bad weather.**
 - Maintain a moderate speed so you don't "overdrive" them.
- **Prepare for negotiating curves and downgrades in advance and be sure to "gear down" appropriately.**
- **Remember that other drivers can misjudge how much space it takes for a truck to make a turn or clear an intersection.**
 - So you may need to make allowance for them.
- **The road is a dangerous place, but you can lower the risks by driving appropriately.**
- **Whether you're dealing with bad traffic, bad drivers or just plain bad luck, you can defend yourself... and arrive at the end of your journey safely!**