



TRAINING

# COMMUTING SKILLS

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Commuting on a motorcycle is generally a very safe way to get to work. Statistically, there are fewer motorcycle accidents where riders are commuting. There are a number of factors that contribute to this, with well-honed riding skills at the top of the list.

**T**here are six basic steps to commuting safely in traffic to help get you to work on time and in one piece. Commuting by bike helps to reduce parking problems, and if you've enjoyed your trip to work,

your day will begin and end with less stress and more pleasure. Remember that your bike doesn't just have to be for weekend outings. It is also, potentially, a really valuable time-saving tool for your everyday life.

# 1 SELF-RELIANCE

You probably already know it, but on the road, the only person you can ever really rely on is yourself. And the only vehicle you can rely on is your own. When riding in dense or fast-moving traffic, it's ok to be a little paranoid about what other road users might do, especially if they're driving a dented, dirty or otherwise neglected car. Dents are a moving catalogue of mistakes, and you need to steer well clear. Dirt and neglect show disinterest, which probably leaks into their driving as well. So keep your distance from anyone who looks like they don't notice or care whether or not you're there.

Know who's using the road with you at that time of day. Watch for vans – especially courier vans. The driver is often thinking about a lot more than just the road. Beware of high-performance cars in a hurry; the driver of a modern or “souped-up” car can accelerate and change lanes super-fast, so give them space if they're driving aggressively. Four-wheel drives and SUV's are often used to take kids to school and are likely to be driven by mums with a million other things on their mind, so it's a good idea to keep your distance from them, too. All these are generalisations of course, and not necessarily fair, but most riders have had experience with one or another of these categories of vehicle/drivers, and a little bit of paranoia might be just enough to make the difference between staying safe and coming off your bike.



# 2 STAY OUT OF BLIND SPOTS.

The general rule is that if you can't see the driver's face in the car's mirror, that driver can't see you, so – for them – you don't exist. Use acceleration, deceleration and lane position, to “ride in the mirrors” of the cars around you. Constantly moving through traffic, and riding just slightly faster than others around you, if you can do so safely, will allow you to move through blind spots rather than sitting in them. If you're moving, you're more likely to be noticed.

Remember that even when you're riding in the mirrors of a car, it doesn't mean that driver will check them before changing lanes into you. Position yourself so that if the driver fails to see you in the mirror, you are still safe from being sideswiped or forced to swerve or stop quickly.

# 3 BE DEFENSIVE, BE ASSERTIVE

Combining defensive tactics and assertive riding will create a riding skills base that will carry you through any situation. Defensive riding means being aware of your space, maintaining that space by positioning yourself in surrounding traffic, assessing traffic to predict its effect on you, and making sure the effect is minimal.

Riding assertively means riding with confidence under potentially stressful conditions, having taken the above into account. Riding aggressively is occasionally called for too, and that is a dedicated technique to be applied only occasionally. As motorcyclists, we must put ourselves in view, and sometimes that does mean a bit of aggressive throttle use to come up even with a driver's window. Simply put, sometimes slowing down is extremely dangerous and some aggressive acceleration or lane changing is called for.

Create your own outcome. Put yourself in a position where you'll have an escape route if your worst-case predictions come true. Look for traffic patterns you can move through. Sitting within a knot of traffic should be the last resort. Lethargy is not your friend.

# 4 ACCOMMODATE THE ERRORS OF OTHERS

Every driver makes mistakes. They are a constant hazard, and the list of potential errors that could end up affecting your safety is very long. It's the way of the world, it's never going to change, and all you can realistically do is be vigilant, anticipate and allow for the mistakes of other road users, and try to ensure you're not affected. In other words, give them room to stuff up.

There's no reason to react emotionally because it's almost never personal, and you don't know what's going on in that other person's life. Once you begin to make room for others' mistakes, you will no longer be taken by surprise or put in danger and it can become entertaining to watch the stupidity around you.

# 5 SLOW DOWN AROUND TOWN

Excessive speed makes us unreadable to other vehicles. A car driver who sees a headlight approaching at what he guesses to be the speed limit will have no way of knowing if the bike is doing double the limit. Bike slams into car, and who's at fault? It's the rider. Slow down to be seen, to avoid being misread, and to avoid becoming a statistic in your own or someone else's mistake. Slowing down also positively enhances your perception. Your brain gets a chance to notice things and has more time to react. Your peripheral vision widens and you relax enough to read and predict traffic.

# 6 PRACTICE!

Practice is a life-saver. If everything turns to custard and the above five steps fail to keep you safe, your survival will come down to being a skilled, confident rider. Get to an empty parking lot and practice braking; take a Pro Rider training course. Experiment with lane changes. Get familiar with the effects of counter-steering and experimenting with differing pressures on the handgrips. Practice quick glances in the mirrors and hurried looks over your shoulder, as if you were initiating an emergency lane change. Know the route you and your neighborhood commuters take to work, and study the mistakes being made. And when you're not on your bike, watch traffic patterns and instances that could get a rider in trouble. ■■■