

# Ten Tips for Safe & Enjoyable Bicycle Commuting

by [Fred Oswald](#), PE, Bicycle Safety Instructor

Cycling to work and for errands is safe, practical and fun if you do it right. But there is much more to *driving* a bicycle than balance and steering. Many of the "bike safety" things we were taught as kids are wrong and some are dangerous.

**A common misconception** about cycling is the extent and source of danger. Most people think that the greatest danger is getting run down by cars passing from behind. The fear is natural because cars are fast and noisy and we cannot see them coming. But it is wrong. These collisions represent less than one-half of one percent of urban, daylight accidents to cyclists. (In rural areas, the ratio is slightly higher and unlighted cyclists and drunk drivers make these crashes much more common at night.)

About 90 percent of car-bike collisions involve turning and crossing traffic. (Just like car crashes.) Most of the rest are caused by wrong way riders or by swerving in front of traffic. This means the hazards are right in front of you, where you can see and avoid them if you know what to do. Below are ten tips to make your cycling safer, more useful and much more fun.

**1. Avoid Riding On Sidewalks.** Many people think that the sidewalk is a safe place to ride. However, accident studies show that riding on sidewalks has two to nine times the accident risk as proper cycling on the road, especially if you go fast. Sidewalk cyclists are in danger at every road crossing and even driveways because motorists do not look for fast traffic on the sidewalk. Also, mixing pedestrians and cyclists is dangerous to both. A bicycle "sidepath" next to a road is just about as dangerous as a sidewalk. This is why cyclists are often required to walk bikes across intersections. (Note the sign in the photo to the right.) You are much safer in the street, following the rules of the road for drivers of vehicles. Your right to use the road does not depend on having a motor.

**2. Ride On The Right With Other Traffic.** Some people were taught to ride on the wrong side of the road so they can "see traffic coming". This is dangerous and it is illegal in all 50 states. Pedestrians walk facing traffic so they can sidestep off the road, if necessary. But you cannot sidestep on a bike. The accident rate for wrong-way cyclists is almost four times as high as for cycling the "right" way. Other drivers look for traffic coming from the usual direction. They do not look for wrong-way traffic.

**3. Be Visible!** Other drivers will not hit you **if they can see you**. Bright clothes make you easier to spot in the daytime but they are little help at night; riding without lights in the dark is a very dangerous mistake. About thirty percent of cycling crashes occur at night although only about four percent of cycling is done then. The reflectors that come with new bikes are not adequate. Always use a headlight and taillight when you ride in the dark. If you are caught by darkness without lights don't try



to sneak home on the sidewalk. Walk your bike home or call for a ride. The photo shows two headlights on the author's machine. Notice how little of the bike is visible, other than the headlights.

**4. Follow The Rules Of The Road.** Everyone following the same "rules of the road" allows safe and efficient travel for all. This is the principle behind the **Effective Cycling\*\*** program. Cyclists who make up their own rules are in great danger.

**5. Learn Proper Lane Position.** Beginners typically "hug the curb" and then wonder why cars pass so close. Experienced cyclists let traffic pass when they can but they "use the full lane" when needed for safety. If cars are passing you too close, move a bit *left* to show other drivers that they must use another lane. This way you also reserve a "safety space" to the right. But if you collect a string of cars behind you, try to find a safe way to let them pass. It takes practice to learn to ride effectively in traffic. The right tire track of the right lane is often a good place to ride on a narrow road. Notice in the photo at right the red car is going completely into the next lane to pass. But if the cyclist were "hugging the curb" the motorist would likely "squeeze" past in the same lane.



**6. Be Predictable.** Ride a good, straight "line", signal turns and generally look like you know what you are doing. How can you expect other drivers to avoid you if they cannot tell where you are going?

**7. Be Courteous.** Act like an adult and share the road with other drivers. If others act rudely, keep your temper -- don't descend to their level. Carry a "jerk book" to write down license number and vehicle description of any dangerous drivers you see.

**8. Protect Yourself.** A helmet will not prevent a bike crash but it is good, cheap insurance that may allow you to walk away from one. Make sure your helmet fits and is adjusted properly. Cycling gloves help prevent "handlebar palsy" and protect hands from abrasion in a fall. Carry a small first-aid kit too.

**9. Keep your Machine In Safe Condition.** Give your bike an occasional "tune up". Before hopping on, make a "quick check". Make sure that wheels are tight, tires in good shape and squeeze brakes hard to see that they work and that cables are not about to snap.

**10. Learn From Experienced Cyclists.** Experience can be a harsh teacher and it is a slow one. (It takes at least 10,000 miles of cycling in traffic to become confident if you try to learn on your own.) Why make all the beginners' mistakes yourself when you can learn from others? Join a good cycling club, take a [Bike Ed](#) class and read expert books such as John Allen's [Street Smarts](#) and John Forester's *Effective Cycling\*\**.

\*\* The principle behind Effective Cycling:

**"Cyclists fare best when they act and are treated as drivers of vehicles."**

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