

Escape Route(s) - Always Leave an “Out”



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Many drivers drive along without ever considering what they would do if an emergency situation arose. However, the unexpected can happen at any moment and if the driver isn't concentrating, anticipating and planning ahead, then he/she could be in mortal danger. When driving, it's always important to have an escape plan should a dangerous or unexpected situation arise? An escape plan or route is a “back-up” route that a driver can take in case of impending danger. It is a previously considered route away from danger – not an unplanned last minute action to avoid a collision. This article looks at the whole area of escape routes and how to deal with traffic situations that require a driver to take some type of evasive action to avoid becoming a potential KSI victim in a traffic collision. It also looks at the mnemonic ESCAPE and what it means. It touches briefly on the US Smith System of driving and especially the fourth rule which says: “leave yourself an out”. Finally, a conclusion is given.

Escape Route(s) – Always Leave an “Out”

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“Crashes happen when two or more vehicles try to enter the same space at the same time. Cars are moving things and can be timed so, time things so that you are not driving in the blind area(s) (spots) of another vehicle, or right beside them. These situations are potentially dangerous because drivers do not have escape routes - or extra space – and possibly cannot see one another”.¹

Introduction

As a driver, you can never fully predict what other drivers are going to do – and failing to react correctly to a sudden swerve or tailgating driver could be incredibly dangerous. So, it’s important not to let “your guard down” at any point, and be prepared to act correctly when necessary. With the future of self-driving vehicles seemingly quite a long way off, you have to do as much as you can to improve your driving, so that you can stay safe on today’s busy roads. Whilst you can’t control the actions of other drivers, you can control yours. *(There are some traffic situations, especially in towns, where correct positioning of your vehicle will “encourage” other vehicles to “fall into place” without them realizing it. Ed.)* Adopting defensive driving techniques will help you react quickly to other drivers errors, plan your escape route(s) and in turn, avoid accidents. Proactive driving means you are a responsible driver whether you’re brand new to driving or have the ability to read and react to other road users in a safe and efficient manner. The mnemonic C.O.A.P. which stands for Concentration, Observation, Anticipation and Planning should be applied when driving to assist in being proactive. In all driving situations, the best way to avoid potential danger is to position your vehicle where you have the best chance of seeing and being seen early and in good time. Also, make sure there’s an alternative path of travel so you have a place to move your car if you’re suddenly blocked or in danger and that’s where an escape plan/route comes in. An escape route is a “back-up” route that a driver can take in case of a dangerous situation arising. It is a previously considered route away from danger – not an unplanned last minute action to avoid a collision. The skill that separates a really good driver from an average driver is the ability to plan a safe escape route in the face of danger from other road users.

¹ Tom Harrington (April 2020)

This involves continuously monitoring the driving environment, searching for and planning ahead to identify possible “safe gaps” and escape routes to leave yourself an “out” should it become necessary. Generally, there are three options to escape in time. The most appropriate option will depend on the prevailing circumstances such as the type of road, the weather conditions, the volume of traffic and the type of vehicle you are driving.

ESCAPE

In attempting to avoid a collision, drivers basically have three options:

- Stop
- Turn (steer away)
- Speed up

As already mentioned, an escape route is also a backup route that a driver can take in case of a dangerous road situation arising to prevent or lessen the possibility of injury and property damage. As a defensive driver you should always endeavour to have an escape route and also plan escape routes ahead before facing dangerous situations. The following mnemonic will assist in deciding your escape route:

E – Ensure you look well ahead for hazards and leave yourself an “out”

S – Steer to the side only if you are sure it’s safe

C – Check for escape options as you drive

A – Always keep your distance from the vehicle in front

P – Plan escape routes well in advance

E – Environmental factors will dictate escape options

The general environment will generally dictate your escape options. One option is to steer to the outer edge of the road if you need to get out of the way of an approaching hazard. However, you should beware of obstacles that could prevent you from doing so. Obstacles like kerbs, street lamps, trees, buildings, fences, walls, parked cars etc. Never steer to the side unless you are sure it is safe to do so. Sometimes hidden hazards can be highly dangerous - such as a steep drop behind vegetation or a ditch which is deeper than it appears. A footpath should never be an option unless you are absolutely certain that you will not endanger pedestrians who may be emerging from doorways or shops or could be hidden from view.²

² *Best Practice Routes. Escape routes.* e-driving.com

The police can tell you many a tale about crashes where drivers involved said the same thing i.e., “*I was driving along, admittedly pretty fast and all of a sudden I hit the other vehicle because there was nowhere to go as both lanes were blocked*”. (Also, remember the car that came from ‘nowhere’? Ed.) So, what is meant by “nowhere to go and blocked?” This could simply mean that 30pc of the road was still open and if we add in the grassy strips (verges), then three quarters of the road was available. The verges are, of course, only to be used in an emergency and it (verge) might even be soft, but hitting or mounting grass verges is still a better option than hitting a solid object. Remember with escape route and gap searching training, it's only about building up the search skills and increasing preparedness. 3

Be a Psychic Driver!

While scanning ahead, you should always try to predict and anticipate what other drivers may or may not do and also to be fully aware of any traffic around you i.e. situational awareness. However, trying to predict some driver's actions you would need to be possessed with extrasensory perception or telepathic tendencies. Expect the unexpected to happen and always have a game plan in place where you will aim and go in an emergency situation. Here, good concentration will assist your observation and anticipation allowing you time to react. Don't allow yourself to get blocked in by other vehicles. In almost all cases, you can position your vehicle for multiple escape routes. The important thing here is to be a proactive driver instead of a reactive one. When you get really good at this, you will actually begin to feel like a psychic driver. You will be able to read the “body language” of other drivers and their vehicles and anticipate what their next move will be. Did you ever see a driver and instinctively knew he was going to change lanes or turn even before he done it? With a truly defensive driver, this comes naturally and happens all the time.

Prepare For The Worst

When driving, you must be making decisions constantly to cope with constantly changing traffic conditions. Nothing you can do will guarantee that others will see you. The only eyes you can count on are your own. Experienced drivers make a habit of knowing what is happening around them. They create a driving strategy known as SIPDE. The acronym SIPDE stands for:

- Scan
- Identify
- Predict

³ *The Upper half of the Motorcycle: On the Unity of Rider and Machine.* googlebooks.ie

- Decide and
- Execute

When scanning ahead, you should always assume the worst will happen and be prepared for it. For example, if following a dump truck or rubbish skip, assume something will fall off or just assume the truck will have a tyre blowout. You could be wrong a million times and nothing will happen, but if you're right just once, it could literally save your life. Always assume something unexpected and catastrophic will happen and formulate a plan on how you'll avoid the situation yourself (increase following distance, reposition vehicle in traffic, slow down, speed up, etc.). The Timed Interval Rule (TIR) will help you determine the correct following distance under normal road and weather conditions. Avoid tailgating by keeping a safe distance from the vehicle in front in case he slows down or stops suddenly. A recommended distance of three seconds on a dry road and five seconds when wet should be adequate. Also, keeping a safe distance behind the vehicle ahead when stopped in traffic is important for a number of reasons e.g. the vehicle may roll back, the vehicle may stall, and if the following vehicle couldn't stop you have room to move forward and there's also the plus of preventing exhaust emissions entering your vehicle.

Space Management

To be a safe driver – i.e. to driver defensively, you must manage the space around your vehicle. There are three basic elements of space management:

- Speed control
- Lane position and
- Communication

We need to determine the kinds of spatial conditions that exist while driving. There are three types of conditions that you encounter:

Open conditions:

This means that you have a space in which to drive without restrictions – you see only wide open spaces on the road ahead, with no restrictions around your car and are free to move forward or to change lanes or position without conflict.

Closed conditions:

A closed zone means that it is not available for your car's path of travel and that there's a restriction to the driver's view or that space is unavailable in a particular zone.

Changing conditions:

This often occurs when the driving situation changes from an open to a closed zone. Changing conditions can include speed limits, the roadway, weather conditions, lane width, environmental conditions, visibility, traffic flow, time of day and traffic controls etc. Each of these conditions should have an influence on what speed is appropriate, the path of travel and what type of communication is used.

Stopping Not Always the Safest ...

Driving isn't something you ever really finish learning about and you should keep learning from your experience throughout your driving career and also, by undertaking Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on a regular basis. Make sure you are always in control of your vehicle by driving in the correct position on the road, travelling at the correct speed and engaged in the right gear. (*Position, speed, gear*). Good drivers will look as far ahead as possible (to the horizon) to recognize potential hazards and shift their eyes to get the 'big picture'. They will avoid fixating on any one spot in the environment and always have a plan in case the unexpected happens. Then they can't help but be a safer driver. To ensure you have an escape route when driving in traffic, select a speed which places your vehicle between rather than inside a "vehicle cluster" or "traffic pack" of other vehicles. However, if you are in a cluster of other vehicles, maintain a "cushion" of space around your entire vehicle, because the purpose of this space is to give you additional time to observe and react to potential hazards. Try to avoid encountering a situation that involves multiple hazards such as driving three or four abreast on motorways. Speed up a little or slow down a little to avoid this situation, so that you will have an "opt out" option. Also, bear in mind not to become the "meat in the sandwich" or become "hemmed in" because this limits your options of escaping should it become necessary. Stopping is not always the safest thing to do in an emergency – you should understand how to avoid skidding on a wet road. Although it may not seem intuitive, speeding up can sometimes avoid an accident. This may work if a vehicle is going to hit you from the side or rear e.g. if you are crossing an intersection or you notice a vehicle approaching at high speed, then you should quickly speed up to avoid being impacted by the other vehicle.⁴

⁴ Course Hero. *Defensive driving escape routes & techniques*. coursehero.com

Overtaking

A frequent cause of head-on collisions is dangerous overtaking. The risk of death in a head-on collision is about 90pc so; getting your overtaking moves right is critical. The main hazard is the vehicle you are going to overtake. There are a number of secondary hazards you must consider for example, the road surface, pedestrians, glare from the sun, farm entrances, side roads, lay-bys, hidden dips (dead ground) and standing water which can cause blinding spray. It's also advisable to hold back rather than overtake if you are not sure. It's also best that you should start every overtake with the possibility that you might have to abort it. However, if you have moved out from behind a vehicle to overtake, there's a possibility that a vehicle that was behind you could have closed the gap up to the vehicle you intend to overtake leaving you nowhere to go should you not be able to complete the overtake. Also, beware of the driver who closes the gap when you are overtaking a line of traffic because a line of traffic is much more difficult than a single vehicle. It takes much more time and you have to assume that other drivers haven't seen you start to overtake and they may pull out in front of you. Even the cars behind may start to overtake even though you are ready to overtake. Once you are ready to overtake a line of traffic, you need to identify where you can move back into the line if you will not be able to overtake the whole line in one manouvere. Even if you think you can do so, a situation could develop where you have to move back into the line therefore, you should always consider a series of smaller (hedge-hopping) moves. Beware of drivers who inadvertently close gaps. If you get to your first gap and it's still safe to proceed (overtake), then look for your next gap and continue overtaking. You will need to judge each situation on its own merit. Before attempting to overtake, ask yourself the following three questions. If the answer to any them is no, do not attempt this manouvere.

- Is there a long term advantage for me to overtake? Do I need to overtake?
- Do I have enough engine power (speed) to overtake quickly and safely?
- Is there sufficient space available for me to overtake and return to my proper position on the left?

The third question is where you need to consider your escape route. For without sufficient space you could find yourself trapped in the 'danger zone' i.e. the wrong side of the road with the possibility of facing a head-on collision.

As a Decisive Driver, You Should:

- Plan an escape route that leaves you an “out” if other drivers make a mistake.
- Understand that an ideal escape route provides an adequate amount of clear decision space all around you vehicle.
- Develop a good escape route by studying and being aware of the surrounding traffic patterns (situational awareness) and using visibility, space and time to your advantage.
- Allow time and space to take decisive action such as speeding up, slowing down or moving to either the right or left.
- Never let your own safety depend entirely on other drivers.⁵

Constantly ask yourself ‘what if’ questions and make up possible scenarios in your head e.g.:

- What if the driver in front ahead slams on the brakes for no apparent reason?
- What if the approaching vehicle drifts into my lane?
- What if the vehicle coming around the bend is on the wrong side of the road?
- What if a driver emerges from a side road without checking to see if it’s safe?
- What if somebody doesn’t stop at red traffic lights?
- What if a driver doesn’t stop at a stop sign?

You should be constantly asking yourself these types of questions while driving. We already tend to do this subconsciously, but thinking these situations through will make your drive much safer. Unfortunately, you are forced to use the road with people who don’t always take driving safety seriously enough. You must always leave yourself an “out” in case the worst happens. Having an escape plan is crucial for your safety behind the wheel.⁶ Also, one must continuously ask: what if I encountered a tree or other object lying on the road just round the bend. *(Remember the driving instructor who asked the lady pupil what she would do if a cyclist was lying on the road after falling off her bicycle just over the brow of the hill. As they proceeded over the hill, there was a lady lying on the road who had just done that.*

⁵ Decision driving tactics: plan an escape route. jumpjet.info

⁶ Driving Skill Academy. Have an escape route. muidsa.com

The instructor must have been psychic Ed.) To become adept at spotting possible escape routes, one has to be continually and consciously practice until it almost becomes like second nature. However, there may be places in which, despite the best of intentions, there simply is no escape. And it's precisely in these places that your mental training becomes more important. It's a matter of sharpening your observational skills to find the lesser of two evils, so that you can recognize it immediately in an emergency. It's better to drive through a fence than into a wall. It's better to drive into bushes than into the side of a car. One learns to "play the best card" when "dealt with a bad hand" instead of being paralyzed by fear and doing nothing at all. Many motorists when faced with an impending crash tend to visually 'freeze and lock-on' to the obstacle they are about to connect with. Because of the immediate fear, they tend to become spellbound, their gaze fixed on the other vehicle and fail to search for a gap or escape route. The escape route doesn't always have to take you off the road. Like the choice between the fence and the wall beside the road, there is sometimes a choice between obstacles that present different levels of danger. A stack of straw bales maybe a couple of yards high, which can be seen at the edges of the road during harvest time or during a motor rally event on narrow country roads may be "soft" but is more dangerous than a "hard" but very light car trailer. One learns these differences by means of constant mental occupation with escape routes and its one of the objectives of mental escape route or "gap searching" training.

The Smith System – 4th Rule

The Smith System of driving ⁷ is about reducing collisions, preventing injuries and saving lives. Each principle is designed to reduce the risks involved in driving by teaching drivers to anticipate dangerous situations. By driving defensively, traffic-related injuries are reduced, even in adverse weather conditions. The five rules of the Smith System are:

- Aim high in steering. The drivers should steer and focus their attention high (full beam), so as to view the road ahead as a whole and not just a short distance ahead (immediate distance).
- Get the big picture. Be aware of your surroundings (situational awareness) at all times.
- Keep your eyes moving? Consistent eye movement prevents your body from entering a trance-like state.
- Leave yourself an out. Ensure other vehicles don't box you in.

⁷Top Driver. November 7 2018. Rules of the Smith System. topdriver.com

- Make sure they see you. As a driver, make sure other drivers can see you and can anticipate your move.

The fourth principle of the Smith System is the “leave yourself an out”.⁸ Drivers who “leave themselves an out” make sure they are not following another vehicle too closely in anticipation of sudden slowdowns. Drivers who “leave themselves an out” also avoid being surrounded by other drivers by choosing inappropriate lanes in traffic.

Conclusion

Sooner or later in your driving career, something unexpected will happen. You can prepare for unexpected situations and be wrong as many times as you like, but all it takes is to be right once to save yourself time, money, heartache, injury, lawsuits and possibly even your life or the life of a loved one. Therefore, to minimize the risk of an accident or incident, you should get the ‘big picture’ as you drive. In other words don’t ever fixate on any one thing – even a potential hazard or emergency. Instead of staring at the road hazard, you should scan your mirrors, look left, look right, look way down the road and look for escape routes. This means having ‘loose vision or ‘shifty eyes’ and always looking for an escape route should it be needed. An escape route is a back-up route in surrounding areas that a driver can take in case of a dangerous road situation arising to prevent or lessen the possibility of injury or property damage. It is a previously considered route away from danger – not an unplanned last minute action to avoid a collision. The skill that separates a really good driver from an average driver is the ability to plan a safe escape route in the face of danger from other road users. This involves continuously monitoring the driving environment, searching for and planning ahead to identify possible “safe gaps” and escape routes to leave yourself an “out” should it become necessary. Also, it’s crucial to keep an appropriate ‘buffer zone’ around your vehicle. Generally, there are three options to escape in time. The most appropriate option will depend on the prevailing circumstances such as the type of road, the weather conditions, the volume of traffic and the type of vehicle you are driving. As a defensive driver, you should always endeavour to have a planned escape route and also have it planned well ahead in order to take evasive action should a dangerous situation arise. A defensive driver always has an escape route(s) in mind and will never depend on other drivers to follow the rules of the road thus; this helps him to remain safe in the face of danger.

⁸ Top Driver. November 7 2018. topdriver.com

And also by applying the mnemonic COAP – concentration, observation anticipation and planning - he will be in a position of preparedness to deal with any unexpected situation that may arise and hopefully have an “out” to escape safely and unscathed from a potentially dangerous situation.