

What makes a good driver?

Recently, I traveled to the UK to learn how the British promote traffic safety; theirs is a most remarkable system, from the thoroughness of new-driver training to extensive public ad campaigns. Curiously, the word “safety” was rarely mentioned; instead they spoke of producing more “aware and informed” or “fit and proper” drivers.

Language can be elusive and vague. It often suffers from the pesky problem of being laden with whatever assumptions we project on it. *Safety* gets bandied about a lot, without our being sure what it actually means. The same is true of *good*: How many of us truly are good drivers—and are you one of them? You probably think you are. According to insurance researchers, up to 70% of us believe we’re above-average drivers. Obviously, this can’t be statistically true, but that’s the beauty of cognitive dissonance and social illusion—we tend to believe that we are the exception.

Ask ten people what *does* make a good driver, and you might get ten answers. *I don’t tailgate, I don’t speed, I use Bluetooth for my cell phone. I’m a good driver, but it’s my husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend who’s the real terror on the road.* Many people proudly point out that they haven’t had an accident since the last Ice Age.

These testimonies may be technically true, but how many of us have ever been surprised by the presence of a motorcyclist or pedestrian suddenly appearing in front of us, seemingly out of nowhere? A slick patch of ice? Have you ever had a near-miss when, if you hadn’t looked up in the nick of time, you’d have plowed into the car in front of you? Did you have to brake in the curve of the last freeway on-ramp you took? Have you ever caught yourself falling asleep at the wheel, but pressed on, intent on getting to your destination?

If so, you might reconsider what it means to be a good driver. And mull on this: Could you become a *great* driver?

A good driver is, first and foremost, fully aware of the situation at hand. In traffic, do you know at any given moment what vehicles are in front, alongside, and behind you, as well as your speed and position relative to them? How often do you check for their presence, as well as for other road-users you may not see so easily? Do you look in your mirrors when you brake, accelerate, or even before you enter an intersection? What’s your escape path? You can never be too aware of a situation that may shift in the blink of an eye, so situational awareness is essential.

A good driver is not a passive observer, but one who constantly searches for hazards—or more important, the possibility of them. There is the oft-mentioned neighborhood with children playing,

but a shredded tire on the highway or the presence of recycling cans out on the curb may mean a disabled semi ahead, or a stopped garbage truck on a hill. An emergency siren whose location can’t immediately be identified might be revealed by flashing reflections in a building window. A slight disturbance in traffic flow a quarter-mile ahead on a busy highway is an early clue to check your mirrors, reduce your speed, and get ready for the unexpected.

When you drive, do you practice being risk-averse? Do you take three right turns instead of that one dangerous left at an impossibly busy intersection with bad visibility? Skirt the busiest parts of a shopping mall parking lot to avoid unnecessary interaction with pedestrians and waiting cars? And reverse into a parking spot to avoid having to back out blindly into the potential path of things you can’t see coming?

A good driver should never cause anyone else on the road to unnecessarily slow, stop, or swerve. You should never be going so fast that you can’t stop safely on your own side of the road in the distance you can see to be clear, whether it’s on a 15-mph curve or the Interstate. A good driver is predictable and communicative, thinking several steps ahead in whatever situation they are about to enter—or change.

Speaking of changes, how do you adjust to them—changes in road surface, the weather, your mood and fatigue levels, distractions in and outside of the car, what vehicle you’re driving, and traffic density? A good driver is also an empathic one, thinking of how others use the road and watching for them, aware of the human foibles and vulnerabilities that can put them literally on paths of conflict.

Perhaps the most difficult part of being a good driver is that it takes tremendous honesty and self-awareness. Like it or not, we drive exactly how we are as people, in terms of our personality, ego, habits, life values, ability to plan, confidence levels, social skills, and general outlook. Do you look far ahead, anticipate, let the little things go, give yourself and others room, and practice courtesies? Do you consider yourself a victim, violated by the rude actions of others, or do you feel empowered—not entitled—to protect yourself and avoid putting others in danger? Do you focus on improving the future, or do you obsess about what went wrong in the past? Your driving reflects all of this much more than you might think. And others might very well see it much more than you.

The next time you get behind the wheel, think about what kind of driver you’re going to be today. Will you be safe? Good? Perhaps even—truly—above-average?



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