

Motorcycle Safety Series Part IV: Know Your Surroundings

In the last few articles, we've listed some basic things you can do and basic equipment you should have to keep you safe on the road. Today, we'll cover less maneuvers and more positioning. Where you are in the road, relative to other entities on the road, can be crucial to your ride.

Positioning is crucial because it allows you to be seen if you're smart about it. A good motorcyclist knows being seen is the best way to ensure their safety on the road. Positioning can help provide these benefits:

- Increase your ability to see and be seen
- Avoid others' blind spots
- Avoid surface hazards
- Protect your lane from other drivers
- Communicate your intentions
- Avoid windblast from other vehicles
- Provide an escape route
- Set up for turns

When you consider a lane of traffic, there are three different spaces a motorcycle can use. If you imagine the lane being split into three portions, named 1 to 3 from left to right, most motorcyclists feel comfortable riding in lane 1. It's the most natural feel for a lane because we drive on that side if we're in a car. Though it feels comfortable and natural, it's sounder to change up your positioning, depending on the current situation. Most importantly, you should ride where you know you'll be best seen. If lane 1 is the best position for that, then that's fine, but if there are hazards to your left, it's best to steer towards one of the other lanes. Vice versa is also true (riding lane 3 when there are hazards on your right). The middle of the lane can also be suboptimal, since oil and debris can build up there and manholes sometimes reside there. Once again, your best option is to constantly stay alert. Use your best judgement and you'll be fine.

Another thing to think about with positioning is keeping your distance from whatever is in front of you. While some bikers feel comfortable maneuvering at high speeds and passing other vehicle constantly, that's simply not the case for most riders. In fact, that's dangerous and illegal depending on the speed. Most riders will end up behind another vehicle, and it's recommended that at least two seconds of maneuverability time be kept within the distance between the two vehicles. There must be enough space to either come to a stop or find a safe escape route. This space should increase if it's harder for your vehicle to stop in the current conditions. Whether you have a bigger bike, or the roads are slick or dangerous, or you can't see through the next vehicle's windows, or someone squeezes into your space----make some more room for the vehicle in front of you. It's also recommended that you leave this space while stopped. You never know if the vehicle behind you will bear down on you or if the car in front will back up for any reason.

It's believed that the safest space to be seen by the car in front of you is in the center of the lane. If you're directly behind their rear-view mirror, they'll have a better chance of seeing you. Drivers check their rear-view mirror more than they check their side mirrors.

In the next post, we'll cover more maneuvers and how to expertly execute them. For now, ruminate on some of the advice this post gives and try to keep them in mind during your next ride on the road.

Missouri Motorcycle Operator's Manual: <http://dor.mo.gov/forms/2332.pdf>