

Riding on the Road

While trails and protected bike lanes provide an added measure of security, if not necessarily safety, there are never as many of them as there are streets and roads. If you want more options to get from A to B, riding on the roads is by far your best bet. And, it can be argued it's the safest way to travel by bike.

On the road, a bicyclist has the same rights and responsibilities as a motorist in a car or truck. You belong there and the laws of most states protect your right and provide guidance about how to ride on the road. But that guidance is vague. You need specifics. Here they are:

TAKE CHARGE

1. Control the situation. You are far more visible to other traffic than a driver in a car. Use that advantage to direct traffic as needed and signal to other road users your intentions and what you want others to do. For example, when coming to an intersection with a stop sign, if you want the other driver at the intersection to proceed, wave him through. If you're planning to turn, signal your intentions.
2. Control the lane. The ubiquitous signs say "Share the Road." They do NOT say "share the lane." Do not allow cars to share the lane with you if it is too narrow to share, which safety experts says is any lane less than 14-feet wide. Cars must move at least partially into an adjacent lane to pass you. If you ride too far to the right, many well-meaning but misguided drivers may try to pass you while traffic is oncoming in the adjacent lane. A miscalculation or sudden move by the oncoming driver may cause the driver trying to pass you to suddenly move too close to you, perhaps hitting you. To prevent that, control the lane. It is legal to do so. In essence, "Ride big." Motorists are looking for large hunks of metal in the middle of the lane, not tiny bikes and riders close to the curb or near parked cars.
3. Stay in the middle of a lane when cresting a hill or starting a blind curve to discourage cars behind from trying to pass you.
4. Make eye contact with drivers. If necessary, wave to get their attention.

BE PREDICTABLE

5. Stop at red lights. Yield the right of way at stop signs. If a vehicle is at a four-way stop sign before you, wave it through. Signal turns and lane changes. That's what other road users expect.
6. Occupy the correct lane. Use the left turn lane to turn left. Don't go straight from a right turn lane. Ride in a straight line. Don't wander across the lane.
7. Don't weave in and out and around parked cars. Just when you decide to re-enter the traffic lane a car behind you might decide to pass you. You'll lose that encounter.

8. Never, ever ride against traffic. The highest incidence of bike accidents is due to riding the wrong way. Motorists don't look in that direction for traffic.
9. When changing lanes, signal but also quickly check over your shoulder to ensure it's clear.

BE COURTEOUS

10. If a motorist waves you through a stop sign, thank them.
11. When you hear a car approach from behind and you can see far enough ahead to know the car can pass safely, you may move farther right in the lane and use your left hand to wave them around.
12. If at the head of a large group, let cars in intersecting lanes go thru a stop sign first.
13. Avoid uncertainty regarding who has the right of way. When in doubt, yield.

DON'T LET PAINT THINK FOR YOU

14. Under Florida law, you are required to use a bike lane if one is present. But it must be marked as a bike lane; otherwise, it's a shoulder and you're not required to ride in it. And you needn't use a bike lane if it's unsafe either due to road surface condition, debris or it being substandard. A standard bike lane must be 4-feet wide and marked as such with a stencil on the road surface. Riding in a bike lane on city streets with parked cars to your right means drivers entering the road from the right probably can't see you. Move into the traffic lane in such cases.
15. You needn't use a bike trail or segregated bike path. You are legally allowed to use the adjacent traffic lane, if you wish.
16. Ride at least four feet from parked cars, even if it means leaving the bike lane, to avoid being "doored" by an inattentive driver.

DRIVE YOUR BIKE LIKE YOU DRIVE YOUR CAR

17. When following a car, make sure you can see the driver. If you can't see him, he can't see you.
18. An advantage you have over a car is your hearing. Learn to listen for cars behind you and judge their distance and driving path.
19. Don't "override" your headlights at night. Go slower.
20. Never pass a car on the right. You're inviting a "right hook."

21. At intersections occupy the lane going in the direction you want to go. Don't stay in the bike lane as cars may turn right in front of you.
22. When stopped behind cars at an intersection, move to the left part of the lane so any cars turning left in front of you can see you. They might not if you're directly behind the car in front of you. Don't go around the cars stopped in front of you. Nobody likes a line crasher.
23. Lights are required at night, both front and rear. Don't overdrive your lights. Slow down.

BE SEEN

24. Wear brightly colored clothes.

THINK AHEAD

25. Anticipate! If you want to be in the left turn lane, make your move well before the intersection.
26. Look ahead for potholes or where the bike lane ends or the shoulder disappears. Establish road presence well before you need to be in the travel lane.
27. When approaching railroad tracks, try to cross them at right angle, if possible.
28. Always scan for cross traffic, where motorists often fail to see you.
29. Remember that motorists often think bikes are moving slower than they are. Motorists may pull in front of you due to this miscalculation.