

Josh King lives in Seattle, where he commutes by bike every day, rain or shine. Earlier this year he switched to full-time single speed commuting; you can read his thoughts on going gearless at www.singlespeedseattle.com

- *I need to preface this by saying there's a lot of disagreement in the bike community on some of these points. I agree with the author on some and disagree on others. I've added comments below in italics. - Anne*

My commute through Seattle's Capitol Hill and into the heart of downtown takes me through a maze of cars, pedestrians, and well-intentioned but not always well-thought-out nods to cyclists. But in this chaos lies the beauty of riding to work every day: It is simultaneously a workout, a mental challenge and, quite possibly, the most efficient way to get to work. But it's not the same as riding on a placid trail somewhere, blissing out to the iPod. It's not even like a fast group ride on a country road. It requires both heightened attention and a willingness to forget many of the "rules" of cycling. In their place, here are 10 things I've learned about daily commuting in the city:

** Earbuds – not recommended for safe riding. Seeing **and** hearing what's around you should be high priorities.*

1. Obeying traffic rules is not your first priority. There are traffic rules aplenty to deal with in urban riding – street lights, stop signs, one way streets, construction zones, bus lanes, etc. Obeying these rules is all well and good, but priority number one is staying safe. I will unapologetically admit to breaking at least a half-dozen traffic rules each way, every day. Roll through stop signs? You bet. Run red lights. Check. Disobey the "Construction – street closed" signs that have been blocking my route home for the last month. Absolutely. You see, while traffic rules have a certain logic, they are built around cars, not bikes. A moving bike is a safer bike, as momentum allows you to skirt obstacles and avoid danger from any direction. Sitting motionless in the road at a stop sign or light, a cyclist is at his or her most vulnerable. Better, then, to slow down, look carefully and keep moving if the way is clear. The idea is to be critical, to not slavishly accept and obey the traffic rules just because they are there. Recognize that your safety comes first.

** I disagree with most of this. Obeying most rules is a good way to be safe rather than sorry. For transportation riding, slowing and looking before a stop sign is a good idea. My rule of thumb is to proceed without stopping only IF there is NO cross traffic. If there is cross traffic, follow standard right of way rules (vehicle on the right has right of way) unless a driver is clearly waving you through and there is no conflicting traffic. At red lights, I stop – PERIOD. Running the light may endanger you and others and can tick off drivers, making them think all cyclists are worthy of their contempt.*

2. Don't pay attention to bike lanes. Hell, nobody else in the city does. I routinely encounter buses, double-parked cars, delivery vans, wrong-way skateboarders and inebriated pedestrians blocking bike lanes. Always be prepared to take the lane. Plus, many bike lanes put you solidly in the "door zone" when you're anywhere on the inner two-thirds of the lane. That's not much of a problem when traveling uphill, but a major issue on downhill bike lanes. Always take the lane – not the bike lane, the whole damn thing – when traveling downhill.

**On this one, it depends. If your comfortable travel speed is 8-10 mph (common for casual riders), you're better off in the bike lane. If you ride faster (15+ mph), it's better to take the lane. At speeds in between, it depends on conditions. It's a judgment call.*

3. Better aggressive than meek. While stupidly aggressive riding is problematic and dangerous, overly-cautious riding is also a problem. Riders who are afraid to assert themselves in traffic are a danger to themselves and other riders. Seeking refuge from traffic, they ride too close to the curb, where the pavement sucks, junk abides and car doors and pedestrians are apt to strike at any moment. They give up their precious momentum when moments of indecision strike, cutting back on their options and imperiling riders behind them. Riders new to city streets should accept their trepidation and actively work to overcome it. As this study about traffic deaths among London cyclists found, an abundance of caution in riding is not a benefit.

** Building confidence in one's riding ability is very helpful in building confidence in traffic situations. The two are closely linked. The best way to be a more confident rider is to ride as often as possible. Riding 15 miles once a week is worth a LOT less in this respect than riding 2 miles 7 times a week. Once you are confident enough as a cyclist that the routine motions of riding (shifting gears, braking, etc.) don't require conscious thought and become automatic and instinctive, it's much easier to be confident in traffic. This is where frequent riding and repetition make a big difference. Once you are confident on the bike, work on your confidence with other road users. Whatever stage you're at, do your best NOT to show fear or hesitation. Drivers will often take advantage of it – to your disadvantage.*

4. Pacelines are very bad. Riding on someone's wheel is fine when you're spinning out in the country, but not so good in the city. You've got no idea whether they're a confident rider, or if they're going to suddenly brake because someone's puppy gets too close to the curb. Be cautious of other riders and give them a wide berth, particularly if they look skitterish or cautious.

** I strongly agree with this. Unless you are VERY familiar with the habits and skills levels of other cyclists around you, it's a very good idea to leave some space – enough space to allow maneuvering room and a few extra seconds in case the person in front of you swerves or stops unexpectedly. When in doubt, leave more space. As in a car, the faster your speed, the further back you should follow.*

5. Variety is not the spice of life. Save the mixing it up for whatever else you like to do for fun. You're riding a bike to and from work for chrissakes, isn't that fun enough. You don't need to alter your route just to add variety. Knowing your route – every pothole, blind right turn and nasty intersection of it – is critical to riding safely. Be predictable in your riding and your route. Get a tattoo or something if your route isn't exciting enough.

Familiarity with your primary travel route is a very good idea, for the reasons given. Knowing where the potholes are can save your life. However, being familiar with an alternate route in case of street closures due to festivals, construction or other reasons isn't a bad thing.

6. Don't signal. Look, let's be honest here – most bike riders don't know what a right-hand turn signal looks like, let alone drivers. Signaling is just not going to be useful most of the time, and engaging in the pointless pursuit means taking one hand off your handlebars. I'll start signaling when I get nice smooth streets, but until then I'm keeping both hands on the grips. Go ahead and signal if it's helpful to a driver and you can do it safely, but dispense with that dumb-ass right turn signal nonsense. Just point where you're going.

** Signaling won't reach every driver, but it often helps. It's not possible to signal in every situation, but a little courtesy can go a long way. If I'm not sure what an approaching driver will do next, I often find that my signal gets a signal in response, so each of us has a better idea what to expect. If you really need to get a message through to a driver who seems confused, pointing can do the trick. If they're not giving you a signal, looking at them while shrugging your shoulders to say "what's up?" can often get the driver to clarify. I've used this many times with CTA bus drivers.*

7. Don't stand on your rights. Yeah, you've got a bike lane, or the right-of-way, or whatever. It doesn't matter. The laws of physics trump all traffic rules. A bus is entering the bike lane to meet a stop right ahead of you. Don't try to pass in the bike lane. Ditto for drivers making right turns, clueless pedestrians and lost dogs. Ride like your life is on the line. Do what's safest and most predictable to others in the road, even if that means giving up "your" lane or, God forbid, stopping.

** I'd put the emphasis on "do what's safest and most predictable to others" here. You need to get where you're going in one piece. If that means stopping or yielding even when you have the right of way, do what's needed to avoid collisions.*

8. Take the lane. This is a key skill for all urban riders. Visibility and safety demand that you be able to take the lane any time. If circumstances feel the least bit dodgy, take the lane. It may piss drivers off, but better a honk than getting doored or run over. This is particularly true when it's not fully safe for a driver to pass you with enough clearance. If there's any doubt, don't tempt drivers to pass you – take the lane and block them, even (especially?) if they honk.

** For me, this is another "it depends" answer. There are many situations where taking the lane is safer. However, it may provoke driver hostility. If you're a slower rider and traffic is piling up behind you, pulling over momentarily to let them pass may be less stressful and sometimes safer. If you're a faster rider, taking the lane and speeding up a bit may be the safer option. This is a judgment call. When taking the lane is your only safe option, it IS your legal right.*



Current California "share the road" campaign

9. Don't be a right-winger. I see this all the time. Cyclists waiting at a red light, hanging at the right corner. Or passing traffic through a green light, on the right. Dumb, dumb, dumb. This is the number one way to get hit when riding in the city. The cars won't see you as they're trying to turn right, and they'll plow right into you or pull across you when you don't have time to stop. This is why cities like Portland have installed so many bike boxes. The safest place to be at a red light is at the front of the line of traffic. Failing that, take the lane and take your turn with the cars. Just don't think you should use the right lane when going through intersection.

** I agree with this. If you're going straight through an intersection, position yourself in a through lane. Unless you're turning right, do NOT stop in the right turn lane. Right hook collisions are among the most common bike traffic crashes, and many of them can be prevented if you take the lane in a through lane to prevent drivers from passing you and then cutting you off.*

10. Wear a helmet, stupid. I seem to see more helmets in Seattle than in Manhattan, where wearing one must be against the law. But still – too many fixie hipsters and other too-cool types are cruising around with helmets. I like that as much as the next guy when cruising on the beach or a resort bike trail somewhere, but the city is HARD. There's lots of stuff that will jump up and bite you, and a crack in the pavement or an errant car door can smack your head before you know it. It's too high a price to pay for fashion, and besides – there are lots of cool bike helmets starting to hit the market.

** There's a lot of discussion on this topic. Many of us feel that having helmet laws discourages cycling, so we don't favor helmet requirements and feel it should be personal choice. That being said, wearing a helmet is cheap insurance against potentially life changing brain injury. You can always do something about helmet hair. There's no do-over with a brain injury.*