

Friendly merges: co-operation and trust keep traffic flowing smoothly

Readers request a refresher course for drivers who merge from a dead stop or don't let others in

I receive many letters and emails each week from readers asking that I write about some road safety issue or another. The last two columns on cell phones, for example, came about because of the amount of mail I received on the subject. It was obviously something people wanted to talk about.

This column is along the same lines. I hear you loud and clear; write something about merging.

Let's call this column "Overcoming Merging Anxiety." Or maybe "Remedial Merging 101."

It's a given that merging can be unnerving the first few times you do it. After all, we're taught to be defensive drivers at all times. Remember your driving lessons: "never trust another driver, and never assume you know what they're going to do next."

Which is more or less what we have to do when we correctly merge



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into traffic, and when other drivers correctly accommodate us.

And what is the correct way to merge?

Merging 101

Let's say you're the merging driver. What you should do is to enter the merge lane (also called an acceleration lane), accelerate to highway speed, and watch the traffic coming up on your left. (Make sure you're signalling your intentions, too, by the way!) Based on the speed and positioning of the vehicles you're merging into, adjust your speed slightly (up or down) so you can ease in to traffic without disrupting the flow at all.

It requires a lot of concentration, as you have to watch the flow of traffic on your left, which takes both your mirrors and shoulder checks, and keep an eye on the vehicle in front of you, too, if there is one. Many accidents occur when drivers are so busy checking their mirrors that they don't notice the driver in front of them in the merge lane has panicked and come to a dead stop, or slowed right down.

Which brings us to the things you should never do in a merge lane.

Do not stop. Do not slow to a crawl. You create an incredible hazard by trying to accelerate from a dead stop to highway speed while unsuspecting vehicles are racing up behind you. Not only that, but you'll frustrate the poor drivers trapped behind you in the merge lane so much they'll actually leave teeth marks in their steering wheels. And, you've now left them at risk by forcing them to merge

from a dead stop, too.

Oh, and one more thing. If you want to be in the far left lane, please don't wait until two or three lanes of traffic are free before you merge in and cut across. This is definitely not good form.

The trick is to merge into the near lane at the speed the traffic is flowing. Which brings us back to that trust issue we talked about earlier.

It takes trust and cooperation to merge properly, and that includes assuming you have the cooperation of the drivers you're merging with. Scary thought.

Let the other guy in

Now, there's a concept. Merging isn't just the responsibility of the driver in the merge lane. So, if you're a driver with whom those vehicles are merging, what should you do?

First, pay attention. It's your job to watch what's happening on those

merge lanes. If you see a driver trying to merge, and it looks like the two of you will be meeting up, ease off the gas and let them in. It won't hurt, I promise. Just lift your foot off the gas a bit, and then put it back down. You see, that other driver trusts you to adjust your speed so they can safely merge.

Better yet, if you can do so safely, change lanes - move over and give the merging driver the whole lane. You can always move back when everyone has settled in. And use your signal lights while you're at it!

It really does work; it just takes a little give and take.

Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

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