

How to read the road – Anticipation and Planning





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Reading the road – overview

You are driving a big heavy metal box that will cause a lot of damage or death if you collide with something. If you see potential dangers early you can avoid them and keep everyone safe.

A major problem with drivers in general is a lack of observation and consideration regarding others.

Most people tend to stare at the back of the vehicle they are following and when that vehicle brakes, they brake. If the car in front were to brake hard then there's a real risk that the following car could react too slowly and crash into the back of the car they were following.

What we should all be doing is looking and thinking as far ahead **time-wise** as possible to get early warning of upcoming events. If you are following a route, anything from in front, side or behind you may try to use the bit of road that you will want to use shortly. You need to anticipate where they will be and adapt your drive to avoid conflict.

We all want to use the same bit of road; your job is to use it when someone else isn't.

Here are a few scenarios and my thoughts on them.



Remember to always assume doom and gloom.

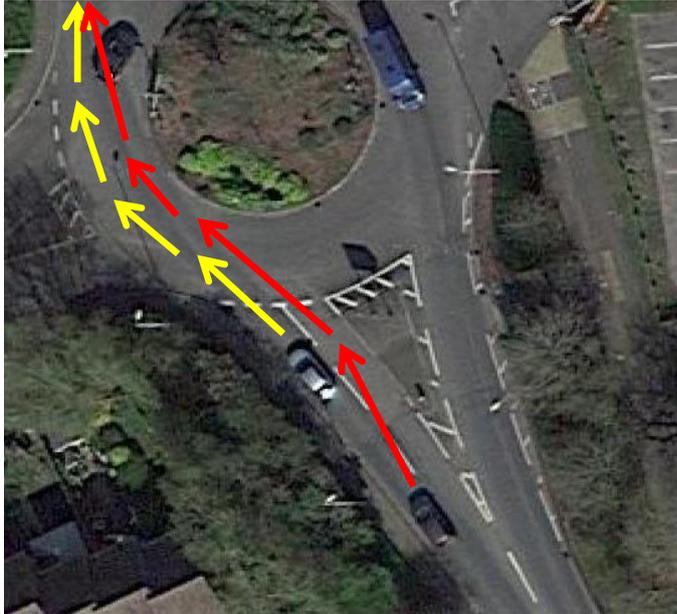
Never underestimate someone's ability to be a complete prat and do something really stupid.

Just because they shouldn't do something doesn't mean they won't. It is a sad fact that when it comes to driving, people will break the law when it suits them because they are unlikely to get caught.

You have to cater for idiots or those who are lost or confused. It doesn't matter if it's your priority or not, if they are going to hit you, you need to be doing something about it. It's better to complain about someone at home than in hospital!

Also remember that people don't usually deliberately drive badly, they can make honest mistakes, of course there are arrogant people around but most people are nice and considerate but human and prone to errors.

Scenario I – Last minute overtake



You are approaching a roundabout to go ahead and are therefore in the left lane. There is a car following you in the left lane but at the last minute he lane changes to the right. He then tries to overtake you and out accelerate you off the line, cutting back in front at the last minute.

Scenario I – thoughts

Not looking around

If I'm not keeping an eye on the car behind me, I might think that he is going right when he pulls alongside me. I may think no further on that and then get irate when he cuts me up.

Looking around

On the approach I see that the car is following me in the left lane. The left lane is for going ahead; I therefore think he's going ahead.

He suddenly lane changes; why?

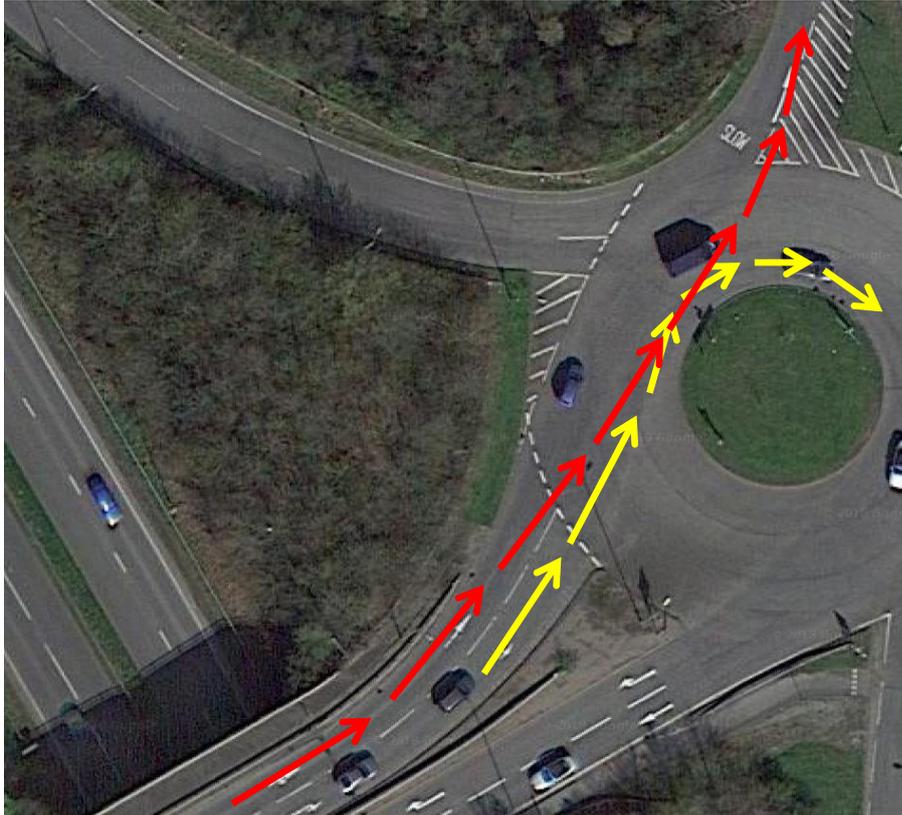
Option 1, he's turning right and only just realised (probably misread the satnav),

Option 2, he's overtaking me.

If there's a chance of a collision, I need to keep an eye on the other car whilst driving and adapt my drive to avoid a collision; I do this by changing position or speed to stay out of the way. I might speed up to keep him behind me, slow down to let him in front or stay further to the left to leave him room.

If he does try to overtake me (which he is legally allowed to do) I have to keep safe.

Scenario 2 – He's behind you! – test fail



Student following yellow line to turn right. Another person passes at speed in the left lane on the red line to take a wide sweeping angle into the first exit.

Scenario 2 – thoughts

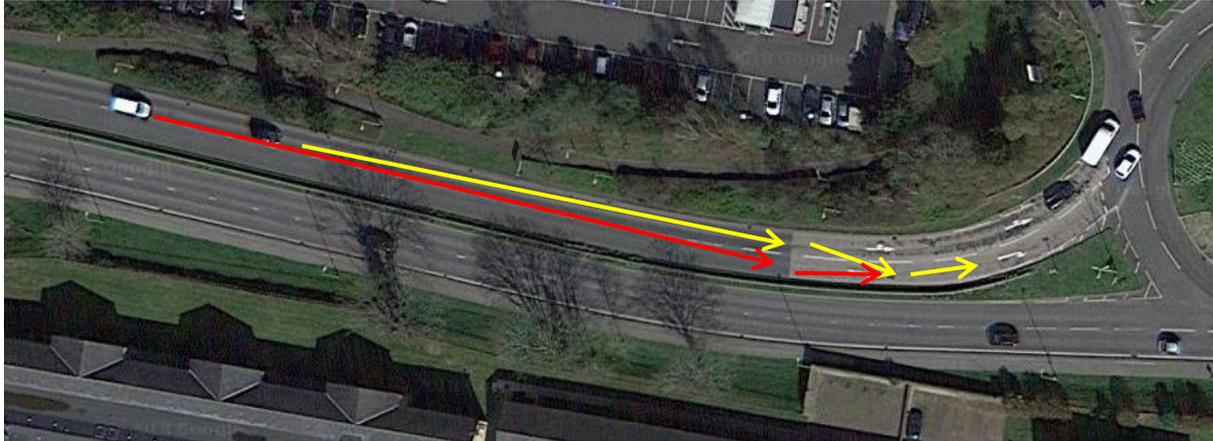
Not looking around

Exactly what happened on the driving test, student just went out onto the roundabout, the car swung in front and the examiner hit the brake to avoid us driving into the side of the other car.

Looking around

By keeping an eye on the lane to our left, we could have slowed in time to avoid meeting at the same place. The student would have passed her driving test first time. You must know what people around you are doing.

Scenario 3 – Turning right



You (yellow line) want to turn right at the upcoming roundabout; you are currently being overtaken (red line) by 1 or more cars.

Scenario 3 – thoughts

Not looking around

As you get to the roundabout, you want to move into the right lane but find that the lane is occupied with multiple vehicles and can't. You now either have to slow considerably potentially stopping in the left lane or just go the wrong way if it's too dangerous to turn right.

Looking around

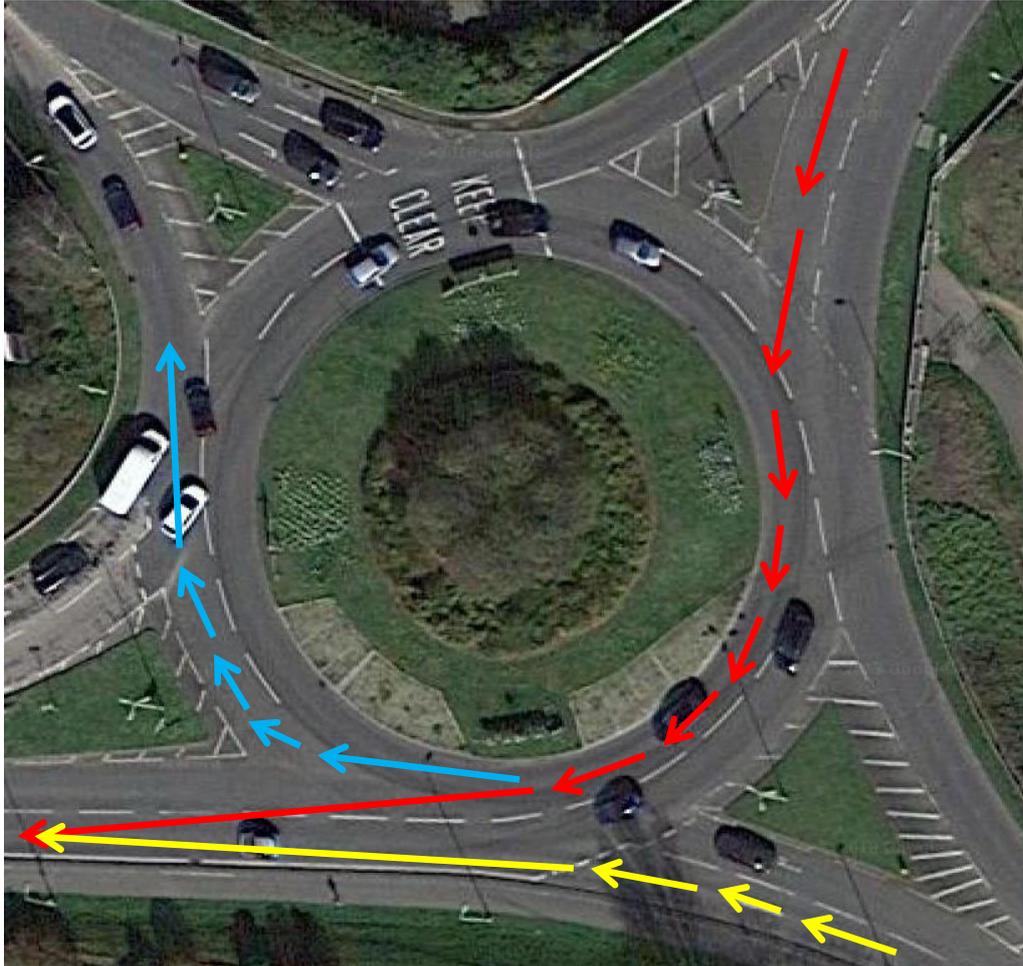
With a bit of planning, you know that you want the right hand lane in 20 seconds. Start looking now and you see that there are cars on your right.

If you are able to get in front of them, do a lane change now and get into the lane early.

If you can't lane change because the lane has cars in it, start indicating and someone might let you in before you run out of road. Alternatively, start slowing now and let the cars all go passed you and get on the back of the queue.

Either way, doing things when there's still time will mean you can be in the correct lane as you arrive at the roundabout.

Scenario 5 – Wrong assumption – Test fail



Car coming around roundabout in right lane (red line) then spiralling off at the second exit into the left lane. Student (yellow line) is emerging from the side road to turn left.

Scenario 5 - thoughts

Not thinking

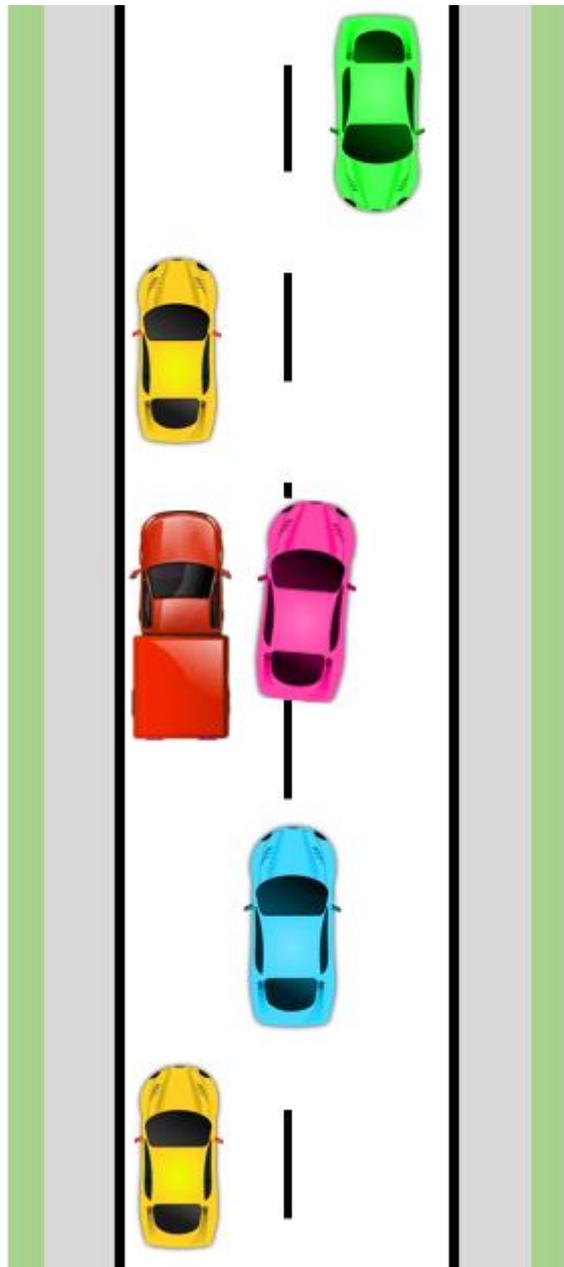
This is what happened on the driving test. Student saw the car approach in the right hand lane indicating right and assumed that the car was going to the third exit (blue line). Student then pulled out assuming that they were going different directions and the examiner stopped them to avoid an accident.

Thinking

All cars are entitled to spiral off a roundabout any time they like. Default behaviour states that we should then drive on the left unless you are overtaking or turning right. I don't know if the other car is thinking that the second exit is ahead or right so I therefore assume the worst case scenario and keep myself safe.

If the other car might go into the lane I want to use then I can only go out **before** or **after** them; **never next to them**. If I cause someone to change direction or speed by entering a road, I should not have entered that road.

Scenario 6 – Trying to park - Test Fall



On a driving test, a student (BLUE) following a car (PINK). On a road with cars parked down the sides.

PINK starts indicating left, slows and stops just after a space on the left with their car turned slightly over the centre white line. There's a second car approaching from ahead driving directly at us (GREEN).

Scenario 6 - thoughts

Not thinking

This is what happened on the driving test.

BLUE just drove up behind PINK and waited for GREEN to pass. GREEN saw that the road was a bit tight and decided to let PINK park before coming passed. PINK couldn't pass because BLUE had blocked them in.

Now the road is gridlocked, BLUE either has to reverse or PINK moves on.

Thinking

PINK is indicating left, why? Are they stopping? Parking? There is a question mark over their intentions so I would start creating a gap between me and PINK.

They pass a parking space and stop – logically, they are likely to reverse into the space. I will give them room.

GREEN sees all this and also allows room.

PINK parks.

Everyone carries on their business without fuss.

Always look at the bigger picture, not just what's in front of your nose. What are people doing? Why are they doing that? What are they likely to do next? How can I adapt my drive to cater for a potential outcome?



How do we do it?

To get this early warning you need to read the road as though your eyes were a wave at the seaside. Waves move away from a beach and then come back in.

Your eyes need to:

1. Move away from the car looking as far up the road as you can see,
2. Start coming back to the car to check your lane positioning and look for potholes etc,
3. Look at the speedo to ensure you don't speed or drive too slow,
4. Go up to the mirrors to see what the people behind are doing,
5. Repeat points 1 to 4.

As you're doing points 1 and 2 from above, you want to:

1. Scan the road from left to right like you were reading a paper,
2. Make a note of all potential hazards such as pedestrian crossings or junctions,
3. Make a note of road signs and road markings and note what they are telling you about the road ahead,
4. Prioritise all the hazards and potential hazards,
5. Work out how you're going to deal with the hazards.

Never stare whilst driving, you must constantly flick your eyes to find dangers and if you find one, look more often in that direction but don't stop looking elsewhere. 3 quick looks in a direction is far better than 1 long look.

Ideally you want to be checking your mirrors every 3 to 5 seconds.

Far, Near, Dashboard, Rear

Or

Far and Near, Front and Rear!

(and dashboard).....just doesn't sound quite right does it? Not as catchy...



Examples

The diagram below shows the areas you should be looking at.



- 1** Whilst driving you should be looking as far ahead as you can see – know what you will have to contend with in the next 20 or 30 seconds.
- 2** Work your way back towards the car and pay attention to what is immediately ahead of you; is there a lane you need to be in? Do you need to avoid a pot hole?
- 3** Check the speed of your vehicle (especially if you are near to the speed limit)
- 4** Check behind you to find out what is happening. This is usually the centre mirror but can include side mirrors if they supply a better view at the time.

Why bother? What's so important about looking in these areas?

Driving a car is all about knowing what is around you so that you can make informed decisions. If you know what's around you, you can start to anticipate what people will do and then change how and where you drive to best suit the situation.

- 1** Look ahead as far as you can see.

Is there a slow moving vehicle in the left lane 5 cars ahead on a dual carriageway? Start looking at the traffic behind you to see if you can find a safe moment to lane change before you get stuck behind a slow moving convoy.

Is there a pedestrian approaching a crossing? If there is, you should start to slow the vehicle just in case the pedestrian walks in front of you.

Has someone just got into a car and so may be about to pull into your path? Keep extra vigilance on the approach. You may not need to slow but you can position slightly further away from the parked cars to allow for doors to open. Maybe cover the horn and get ready to use it if they start to move. Be prepared for the actions of others.

Is the road icy ahead? If so, start progressive gentle braking to avoid skidding, braking suddenly where it is icy can cause you to lose control.

Are you entering a new speed limit? If the speed limit is lower than the current one, think about gear choice and look behind to see how close vehicles are; would it be dangerous to brake at the last moment?

If the speed limit goes up, that's a good opportunity for others to overtake you – look out for motorbikes behind that may pull in front of you just as you start to accelerate.



Are you approaching a school? Schools mean children and parents who are rushing around. Children also don't develop the ability to assess speed until they are older; they are unable to differentiate between a car approaching at 20mph or 40mph – scary stuff!!! If you don't adjust your speed, you could easily injure or kill a child.

2 Looking closer in front of the car

Is there a lane to stay in? Are you on a roundabout in a marked lane? Changing lane inadvertently if there's someone to your side could result in the death or a motorcyclist.

Is there a pothole? Potholes do thousands of pounds of damage to vehicles each year by bursting tyres or destroying suspension; if it's safe to go around then do so; if you can't (maybe there's oncoming traffic) reduce your speed so that the impact isn't as harsh.

Are you just about to enter a left turn only lane? Failing to notice you are in a lane that goes left can result in accidents as the people around you will expect you to turn. There's a really big chance that someone will drive in front of you causing an accident. To avoid this, always know where you are driving, you can then safely lane change if you're in the wrong place.

Is there a child or cat coming through between parked cars? Roads with lots of parked cars can hide approaching hazards – keep your eyes peeled! A child doesn't stand much chance if you're not looking for them and they walk out into your path 2 car lengths ahead of you.

3 Check your speed

Unless there's good reason, you should be driving near the speed limits.

Driving too slowly causes inconvenience for others at best but can be exceedingly dangerous in other situations. The bigger the difference in speed between your speed and the traffic around you, the harder it is for people to avoid a collision and when one occurs, the bigger the impact.

Speed limits are there for a reason, they keep people safe in built up areas and improve survival rates. You have to know the current speed limit you are driving in and know the speed you are driving at. Speed cameras are everywhere, don't risk losing your licence because you aren't aware of your speed.

4 Check your mirrors

Is there a bike coming through stationary traffic behind you? If you pull away as a bike passes you on the left or right, you could cause a collision – check!

Is there an emergency vehicle trying to get through? Anticipating this situation will mean that you have left enough room in front of you to get out of the way of the emergency services. Failing to get out of the way could ultimately hold them up – do you want it to be your fault that someone failed to get to hospital in time?

Is there a car approaching in the right hand lane of a dual carriageway? If you need to do a lane change, you need to move into a safe gap in the traffic. Good early knowledge of an approaching



vehicle will give you options; you could slow down so that they pass earlier or you could speed up so that they can't catch you. Either option may be what you need; you decide at the time.

If you only looked in your mirror at the moment you needed to change lane but then found that there was a car there, you would have to take evasive action and you'd look pretty stupid.

Is the person behind you weaving and looking down the side of your vehicle? People who drive like this are generally looking for an opportunity to overtake. Some people will take serious risks to overtake and you may be called upon to slow down to give them room to get back to the left in order to avoid them hitting someone else. This happens a lot and can happen at any time – you have to be prepared for situations like these.

Situational Examples

Hopefully you now appreciate why you have to know what's going on all around you. You need to know what's going on in all 4 places pretty much all the time.

Sometimes you will spot a hazard that needs extra attention in one of those areas. For instance, staying in your lane on a roundabout is very important so look at position 2 in preference to the other positions. Once you are happy with your positioning, start looking at your mirrors for people trying to overtake you or looking ahead to see the speed limit of the new road.



Normal driving you could cycle through 1,2,3,4.

A car is trying to overtake you, you could do 1,4,2,4,3,4,1,4,2,4,3,4 so I'm looking twice as often in the mirrors.

Average speed cameras are in operation and I can't afford to break the speed limit 1,2,3,4,3,1,2,3,4,3,1,2,3,4. I'm now looking more often at the speed (I don't need to look twice as often but I do need to look more often).

There's a pedestrian crossing in the distance with a pedestrian approaching; in this instance I would look more frequently at the pedestrian the nearer I got to them (still keeping an eye on everything else).

At the end of the day it doesn't matter the actual order you look at these 4 places, what does matter is that you know what's going on in them all and that you prioritise where to look when you find hazards.

Be careful not to fall into the trap of spotting a hazard and then only looking at that hazard. For example, you could see a motorbike start to overtake you in the high street only to find that a pedestrian walks out in front of you.

Good drivers notice everything and think about how others will affect them; they almost see into the future and anticipate what will happen shortly. By anticipating, you adapt your driving; always assume the worst will happen and look out for idiots!