



How To Read Road Signs

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Introduction

Most people think that reading road signs is easy. In my experience there is more going on than meets the eye. This document hopes to help you understand what is going on and so you will find getting around becomes much easier.

I do not intend this document to explain what each individual road sign means, it is designed to explain common misconceptions or problems people experience when learning to drive; you should therefore still read:

The Highway Code <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-highway-code/traffic-signs>
and

Know Your Traffic Signs (free download on my website) or
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/know-your-traffic-signs>

Please note that most of these pictures in this document are taken from Google Maps and so some are slightly distorted due to how they overlay the images.

If you see HC, I am referring to the Highway Code, if you see KYTS I am referring to Know Your Road Signs.

General Road signs

Red Circles are giving orders and are mostly prohibitive



You must not exceed 40mph from this sign onwards until advised otherwise. That's an order soldier!!!

Size Matters

KYTS states: A larger sign indicates the start of a speed limit. Smaller repeater signs act as reminders. Repeater signs for a 30 mph limit are used only on roads with no street lighting. Repeater signs for the national speed limit are used only on roads with street lighting (other than motorways).

No Circle means recommendation of speed



Maximum speed advised, in miles per hour, through road works



Maximum speed advised, in miles per hour, on a road that has loose chippings

You will often see this second road sign when they have been resurfacing. If you don't have a red circle then it isn't a new speed limit – use your judgement on what would be an appropriate speed (subject to the actual speed limit of course).

Red Triangles are warning signs

Remember that a triangular road sign is a warning and is there to warn you about something coming up that is different to your current situation; take the following road sign for example:



This means two way traffic crosses one-way road. Now without knowing what it actually means you can work it out.

Remember, arrows that point:

- UP - traffic flows ahead
- DOWN - traffic travelling to where you've just come from
- LEFT – traffic travelling to the left
- RIGHT – traffic travelling to the right

If I was already in a two way road, I could reasonably expect that the road I'm turning into would also be a two way road; I would not need to be warned about it.

If I was in a one-way road however, I can use the right hand lane to turn right because there's no oncoming traffic to stay on the left for. If I can drive on the right then it would be useful to be warned that I can't do that anymore in the new road I enter, hence why there's a warning triangle.



Two way traffic ahead. Imagine that you are driving on a two lane dual carriageway late at night. You're tired and not quite at your most alert. You've been driving on the left and just overtaking vehicles by moving into the right hand lane as required. Of course there's a central reservation separating you from oncoming traffic but you've sort of zoned out from that information.

The dual-carriageway goes back to a single carriageway.

You still have two lanes in front of you so you go to overtake the car in front and meet an oncoming vehicle. The road sign was there to alert you up to a potentially fatal situation SO WAKE UP!!!!



This is a staggered junction and warns us of side roads on the left and then on the right. This should alert you to thinking that overtaking would be a very bad idea because vehicles could be turning in or out of junctions and they may be obscured by the vehicle that you want to overtake.

This sign would be on a road where you can currently overtake safely.



Falling or fallen rocks? Where? There aren't any here..... Oh hang on, that's why they've put the road sign up so that I can drive a bit more cautiously. Jolly well done Highways Agency; thanks for the heads up!

National speed limit applies



KYTS: The national speed limit for the type of road and class of traffic applies.

I felt that this needed its own mention as most people driving on our roads misunderstand what it means. Most people think that it's the number of lanes on each road but this is RUBBISH!!!! It's the number of carriageways (i.e. strips of tarmac), not number of lanes.

There are 2 national speed limits and 3 speeds in England.

You have in-town and out-of-town and the distinction is street lighting.

KYTS: Remember that in areas of street lighting (other than on motorways) a 30mph limit applies **unless** another limit is specifically signed.

Outside of town where there are no street lights, the speed limit varies based on road layout.

IMPORTANT BIT PEOPLE!!!! HC: A dual carriageway is a road which has a central reservation to separate the carriageways.

This means that any road that separates oncoming traffic with just paint is a single carriageway i.e. one road but two way traffic. It can have any number of lanes on it going in either direction but paint won't stop you hitting oncoming traffic therefore you have a reduced speed limit (60mph for a car).

A road that has two physical strips of tarmac (like a grass verge or kerb between roads) is a dual carriageway. It does not matter how many lanes there are on each carriageway. Because of the reduced chance of death, the speed limit can be higher (70mph for cars).

Rule 123

Type of vehicle	Built-up areas mph (km/h)	Single carriageways mph (km/h)	Dual carriageways mph (km/h)	Motorways mph (km/h)
Cars, motorcycles, car-derived vans and dual-purpose vehicles	30 (48)	60 (96)	70 (112)	70 (112)
Cars, motorcycles, car-derived vans and dual-purpose vehicles when towing caravans or trailers	30 (48)	50 (80)	60 (96)	60 (96)
Motorhomes or motor caravans (not more than 3.05 tonnes maximum unladen weight)	30 (48)	60 (96)	70 (112)	70 (112)



Type of vehicle	Built-up areas mph (km/h)	Single carriageways mph (km/h)	Dual carriageways mph (km/h)	Motorways mph (km/h)
Motorhomes or motor caravans (more than 3.05 tonnes maximum unladen weight)	30 (48)	50 (80)	60 (96)	70 (112)
Buses, coaches and minibuses (not more than 12 metres overall length)	30 (48)	50 (80)	60 (96)	70 (112)
Buses, coaches and minibuses (more than 12 metres overall length)	30 (48)	50 (80)	60 (96)	60 (96)
Goods vehicles (not more than 7.5 tonnes maximum laden weight)	30 (48)	50 (80)	60 (96)	70 (112) 60 (96) if articulated or towing a trailer
Goods vehicles (more than 7.5 tonnes maximum laden weight) in England and Wales	30 (48)	50 (80)	60 (96)	60 (96)
Goods vehicles (more than 7.5 tonnes maximum laden weight) in Scotland	30 (48)	40 (64)	50 (80)	60 (96)

*The 30 mph limit usually applies to all traffic on all roads with street lighting unless signs show otherwise.

†60 mph (96 km/h) if articulated or towing a trailer.

Now we all know that the public at large are generally stupid. If we put the national speed limit sign up in the town centre, everyone would drive around at 60mph. We therefore use the 30mph sign to remind people of the limit but because it's the default speed limit in town, they don't repeat the sign unless you leave a different speed limit or there are no street lights.

ASSUME :

IN TOWN

30

OUT OF TOWN

60 if sharing the road with oncoming traffic
70 if separated from oncoming traffic



Single Carriageway examples = 60mph for cars

One strip of tarmac, only paint separating oncoming traffic.

Doesn't matter how many lanes there are in each direction, it's the number of roads.



Dual Carriageway examples = 70mph for cars

Two strips of tarmac separated by a central island.

Doesn't matter how many lanes there are in each direction, it's the number of roads.



Zones

I'll just point out another thing regarding speed limits and that is 'zones':



There are quite a few Zones near tests centres and these behave like national speeds in that they don't appear to repeat speed limit signs. They do often draw the speed limit on the road to remind you so keep an eye out for those.

You should assume that once you're in a zone, that speed limit applies until you see another sign but it won't always be repeated.

Background colour on direction signs



White Background

Means normal A, B, C and D roads and should be thought of as the usual roads you find in towns. Their designation just implies the traffic densities with A being the heaviest traffic.



Blue Background

Means motorway classified roads with supporting crash protection and MUST be avoided if you are on a provisional licence unless with an Approved Driving Instructor (ADI's) with dual controls fitted to the car.

Green Background



Means Primary A-road and should be thought of as a dual carriageway with central reservations and crash protection just like a mini motorway.



Brown Background

Means tourist attractions.

We always approach from the bottom



The first thing to remember is that we are always approaching from the line that's at the bottom of the sign. If there are 2 lines going up then we are the one that is nearest to the bottom; you then follow the line to the second roundabout and pretend that line is from the bottom.

So using the first picture as an example, if we were going to Farnborough, we would be going left and then ahead, like this:



Look at the floor as well



Learners make this mistake a lot.

There is a lot of information out there if you just look for it. This information can just as easily be on the floor as on a sign.

You need to look at the signs then look on the floor as you approach a junction to see if

you are being advised to do something contrary to the defaults.

In this example, to go ahead would normally be done in the left hand lane but the road markings say to use the right hand lane. **If you go contrary to road markings on your driving test, you will fail.**



Did you know for instance that this 'arrow' is actually a painted representation of the Give Way sign? The Give Way sign is the only triangle that points down and this is a painted version of that sign.

A lot of learners say it's an arrow pointing the wrong way – weirdly. You lot are weird; why would someone go around painting arrows the wrong way at every junction?

We drive on the left!!!!

We drive on the left in England. I'll just point that out as so many people think that you use the right hand lane to go ahead – this is wrong!!!

Think of using a dual carriageway. We drive on the left and any subsequent lanes are for overtaking or turning right (you can get roads that cut across the middle on dual carriageways but you can't on motorways). Once you have overtaken we go back to the left which is why the Police now fine people for middle lane hogging on motorways!

The issue is that in free flowing traffic, the Highway Code recommends that you should only overtake on the right; so if 'Person A' drives in the right hand lane for no reason, 'Person B' shouldn't pass on the left and physically can't drive through 'Person A', therefore 'Person A' is driving in two lanes; which is greedy frankly.

Note: You can pass someone on the left when: 1) in a one way street, 2) in traffic where the left hand lane is travelling faster than the right hand lane, 3) the person in the right hand lane is indicating right to turn.

Rule 268

Do not overtake on the left or move to a lane on your left to overtake. In congested conditions, where adjacent lanes of traffic are moving at similar speeds, traffic in left-hand lanes may sometimes be moving faster than traffic to the right. In these conditions you may keep up with the traffic in your lane even if this means passing traffic in the lane to your right. Do not weave in and out of lanes to overtake.

Notice that HWC Rule 268 states 'Do not' which is a recommendation, if it said 'Must not' then that would be a law and prosecution could ensue. Therefore, technically you can pass on the left but if something went wrong, like the person did a lane change into you, then you might be held partly to blame.



Always use the default settings until you are advised to do something else by a road sign, road marking or the person giving directions (such as me or an examiner).

Turning left? – left lane
Going ahead? – left lane
Turning right? – right lane

Take a look at this road sign.



If numbered from left to right, I would use the lanes like this:

Lane 1 to go ahead or left.

Lane 2 to go right or to overtake a queue of traffic in lane 1.

Lane 3 to overtake the traffic in lane 2 when turning right or if I'm doing a U-turn at a roundabout.

So if I have two lanes going to the same place, I use the left by default or the right to overtake.

Road numbers

Where there is a road number, you should take note of it.



This road sign shows that by turning left you will be on the A325; you would be travelling towards the M3 motorway, Camberley, Frimley and the railway stations.

(The brackets around the M3 in this instance mean a future road.)

If you didn't take a note of the number then you wouldn't know where to go

at the next sign:



This sign then tells us which lane we need to get into.

If I was going to Camberley for instance, I would now lane change to the right hand lane because the previous sign told me that Camberley was on the A325.

Brackets

Brackets mean:

Future road



This picture shows that by going down the road you could get to (among other places) Guildford and Farnham.

The road you would be driving on immediately would be the A331 but you need to look for signs for the A31.

Further down the road you would see this sign and road markings



You would now know that Guildford was left onto the A31 and Farnham is ahead onto the A31 going in the opposite direction.

Road classification

This road sign is telling me that to go ahead I would go onto a motorway classified road called the A329(M) and it would take me to Reading or the M4. This should be treated the same as a motorway.

If I took the slip road on the left, I would get to the junction where the Wokingham bound A329 met the Binfield bound B3408.



Direction of travel



In this instance, the brackets are clarifying which direction each lane goes in.

This sign is telling us that there are four lanes, two will take you south bound and two will take you north bound. Because we drive on the left by default, if you get two lanes that go to the same place, you should pick the left most lane of those two. So I would pick lane 1 go to south bound and lane 3 for north bound.

When you have two lanes however, you can use the right one to overtake the people in the left, so if there was a queue in lane 1, I could use lane 2 to get to the same place and overtake everyone making sure I return to lane 1 when safe.

Note that the sign shows two different ways of displaying this information; they can display the name over each lane or just write it above two lanes and join them with an underscore.



If you get two lanes that go to the same place, you use the left lane by default!!

Little yellow symbols



These are emergency diversion routes and should only be followed if a sign tells you to; like 'Road ahead closed follow (insert shape here)'. If you haven't been diverted then ignore them.