

Being Seen for Safety

What is the primary cause of motorcycle crashes involving other vehicles? Studies of motorcycle accidents reveal that drivers of other vehicles either don't see motorcycles, or don't accurately process what they do see, and violate the bike's right of way leading to a crash. This article addresses some of these concerns and what we can do to reduce our risks when we ride.

The Motorcycle Accident In Depth Study (MAIDS), listed three reasons that other vehicles don't "see" motorcycles. They are (1) Driver inattention, (2) Temporary view obstructions, and (3) Low conspicuity of bike. Let's discuss these three topics in reverse order so that we can deal with the easier ones first.

We can increase our conspicuity by wearing high visibility outer garments. Light colored helmets can be seen above fairings and tour-paks and are especially recommended. The conspicuity of the bike itself can be increased by adding more and brighter lighting. A most critical scenario involves a vehicle making a left turn in front of an approaching bike. A bright headlamp or a modulating headlamp may get the driver's attention as you approach. Auxiliary lights or running lights on either side of the headlamp make the bike appear wider and assist drivers in seeing the bike and judging its distance and closure rate. If you turn off your auxiliary lights during a group ride, be sure to turn them on again for the solo ride home. On the rear of the bike, more lights, brighter lights, and brake lights that flash make us more conspicuous to drivers behind us. Reflective material on our helmets, attire, and bikes increases our conspicuity at night. Making the bike and rider more conspicuous is easy to do. We just have to do it.

A second concern is when the bike is not visible to the driver because of temporary view obstructions. We can also do something about this but it is not as easy. Intersections are the most dangerous areas for a motorcyclist. As we approach an intersection, we should ride in a manner that makes us most visible to oncoming vehicles or to vehicles coming in from side streets. We should try to choose lanes, switching lanes as necessary, which allow these other vehicles to see us.

We should also avoid having our presence masked by other vehicles. Riding close behind other vehicles may hide us from the view of drivers who may violate our right of way because they can't see us. Change lanes or drop back to open up the view. Adjusting our speed and lane position as necessary, we should try to ride in a space cushion where we can be seen and have room to maneuver. This relates to the "SEE" Defensive Riding Strategy. "Search" ahead for vehicles that might pose a threat, "Evaluate" whether they can see you, and "Execute" a maneuver that puts you in their line of vision (and also allows you to take evasive maneuvers if necessary).

Vehicles traveling in the same direction as you can also pose a threat. All vehicles have blind spots to their sides and rear where their mirrors don't cover or where vehicle pillars, camper shells, trailers, etc. inhibit their vision. A motorcycle is relatively small and can easily be obscured from a driver's vision. This is especially true for large

trucks which have large blind spots. While riding on a multilane road with vehicles all around you, you should continuously evaluate whether you are in a blind spot of any vehicle that could pose a threat if the driver doesn't see you. Staying out of these blind spots generally requires constant adjustment of your speed and position. We should help other vehicles to see us.

Reduced visibility from darkness, rain, fog, and sun glare makes it more difficult for other drivers to see us. Bright lights and conspicuous garments are in order for darkness, rain, and fog. Motorcycle raingear of high visibility is a worthwhile acquisition. Sun glare may be a problem during morning and evening hours. When the sun is in your eyes, it is also in the eyes of the driver approaching you from behind. When the sun is shining on your back, it may also be directly in the eyes of a motorist approaching you and intending to take a left turn in front of you. Exercise extra caution during circumstances of reduced visibility.

We should clearly signal in advance our intentions to slow, stop, change lanes, turn, etc. Hand signals visibly reinforce the message of brake lights and turn signal lights. Brake lights that flash a few times when they are applied attract the attention of a following vehicle. Try to avoid situations in which your signal may be misinterpreted by drivers of other vehicles. For example, a driver seeing your signal for a turn might not know if you intend to turn at the intersection or into the driveway that precedes it. The wave of your left hand to a fellow biker in the opposite lane could be interpreted as an intention to move to the left lane. We must think about what we are doing and avoid sending unclear or conflicting signals.

The third and most prominent concern was identified as "driver inattention." This includes drivers who are distracted or impaired and don't see you even when you are in their line of sight, drivers who see you but their mental processes don't identify you as a vehicle of concern, and drivers who see you but misjudge your distance and speed. These are the drivers, whose pitiful explanation at the crash scene is that they "didn't see the motorcycle," are the ones hardest for us to understand and excuse. There are various national, state, and organizational efforts to educate motorists regarding motorcycles. We should support these efforts.

What else can we do? In spite of our best efforts to be conspicuous, to ride in a manner to be seen and clearly indicate our intentions, we are still at risk from the drivers who don't "see" us for one reason or another. Some motorcycle safety experts advise us to "Ride as if you are invisible." This is their way of saying that a motorcycle rider can never safely assume that a driver will see him. Defensive riding maneuvers must involve a high degree of caution based on this pessimistic assumption regarding driver behavior.

The problem of vehicle drivers causing crashes because they don't see motorcycles remains with us. We can't depend on other vehicles to keep us safe; we have to do it ourselves. Our efforts to be conspicuous, to ride in a manner that clearly communicates our presence and intentions, and to ride defensively at all times can reduce our risk. Let's continue to make these efforts and ride safely.

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