

## Lane Positioning

“Lane positioning” is the process of determining which lane, or which part of a lane, to ride in. It is an integral element of defensive riding. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) in its book *Guide to Motorcycling Excellence* lists the following nine considerations that could affect your choice of lane position:

- Increasing your ability to see more
- Increasing your visibility to other motorists
- Avoiding other motorists’ blind spots
- Avoiding surface hazards
- Protecting your lane from other drivers
- Communicating your intentions
- Avoiding windblast from other vehicles
- Providing escape routes
- Setting up for and negotiating curves

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the MSF in the *National Agenda for Motorcycle Safety* state “A well conceived lane-position strategy can greatly increase the safety of a motorcyclist, particularly in traffic.” The “best” lane position continually varies with traffic and other conditions, requiring frequent lane adjustments. We should consciously and continuously factor the above considerations into our lane selection process.

It is important to see ahead. Riding close behind a vehicle blocks more of your vision than riding further back. If you’re following a large truck, you are probably in its blind spot as well. Increased distance helps you see around the vehicle, anticipate traffic and other situations further ahead, and gives you a space cushion and more time to react. It also makes you more visible to drivers of vehicles approaching from the other direction.

A motorcycle allows you to roam from one side of the lane to the other to be able to see more, to avoid surface hazards, or to take advantage of certain situations. On a single lane road, i.e., a road with one travel lane in each direction, many riders favor riding in the left wheel track. This position provides a view around a vehicle ahead and makes you more visible to traffic approaching from the other direction. It also provides a better initial view of an approaching right curve. When another vehicle approaches from an intersecting road on the right, you’ll have a better and earlier view of the vehicle, you are more visible to it, and you are physically further away from it in case it pulls out in front of you. This left part of the lane also places you further from parked cars. Disadvantages of riding in the left wheel track are your proximity to passing traffic, both oncoming and passing from behind. With this reduced space cushion, windblasts and large vehicles with wide loads and excess speed may be threatening when passing only a few feet away.

Riding in the right wheel track provides a better view of approaching left turns. Since it is further away from oncoming traffic, it is a good position when riding on narrow roads with no center stripe. It may also facilitate use of the right shoulder as an

emergency escape route. However, the potential hazards from vehicles intersecting from the right mitigate it as a choice and one should swing over to the left wheel track when approaching a blind intersecting road from the right for more separation, a better view, and more visibility.

Riding in the center of the lane combines advantages and disadvantages of riding in the left or right wheel tracks. Although your view around the vehicle ahead may be less, you are more visible to the driver through his rear view mirror. Being able to move either right or left provides flexibility in dealing with the unknown or arising situations. For example, the center of the lane is the recommended position when cresting a blind hill and you don't know what's on the other side. Riding in the center of the lane discourages other drivers from trying to squeeze by you and taking up part of your lane. The center also gives more room for error in dealing with windblast from a passing vehicle.

In areas of heavy traffic, liquids dropped in the center of the lane from vehicles may be slippery at the beginning of a rain. Avoid it. Debris tends to collect in the center area between the wheel tracks. When traffic limits your view of the street surface ahead, riding in one of the wheel tracks may be better than riding in the center of the lane.

Riding on a road with two lanes going in your direction has some additional considerations. The rider can position his bike in various parts of either the right lane or the left lane. Choose a lane position that allows you to maintain a space cushion and to see ahead while being most visible to others, including staying out of blind spots. All vehicles have blind spots to their sides and rear where their mirrors don't cover. This is especially true for large trucks. While riding on a multilane road with other vehicles, 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 requires constant adjustment of your speed and position.

Riding in the right lane involves constantly monitoring the blind spots of vehicles in the left lane and staying out of them. The right lane is also subject to merging traffic from the right that might not even see your bike as it attempts to merge. You can adjust your speed to stay out of its way or move over to the left lane, traffic permitting, to let him in. It is not advisable to ride between a vehicle in a parallel lane and an exit because the vehicle may suddenly pull across your path to reach the exit. Since more exit ramps are on the right than on the left, it is a greater problem when riding in the right lane.

Riding in the left lane of a two lane road largely separates your bike from vehicles entering the highway from the right or crossing your path enroute to the exit ramp. Now, however, you must be wary of blind spots of the vehicles in the right lane. If the left shoulder is suitable as an escape route and you ride at speeds compatible with the speeds of other vehicles in the left lane, it may be a reasonable lane choice.

On three lane highways, riding in the center lane relieves some of the hazards related to merging vehicles from the right and allows you to ride at a speed not affected

by speeds of vehicles in the left passing lane. It puts a lane between you and the right and left shoulders, but they are still reasonably available as escape paths. A major disadvantage of the center lane is concern for blind spots of vehicles on both sides of your bike and being alert for vehicles that may merge into your lane from two sides.

Try not to ride next to vehicles in adjacent lanes if you can avoid it. You might be in vehicles' blind spots. They may move into your lane without warning. They may block your intended escape path. Sometimes vehicles tend to travel in clusters with open road space between the clusters. When possible, it's best to speed up or drop back to ride in a space clear of traffic on both sides.

There are many variables in determining the best lane position. The skilled rider considers these many factors and selects a lane position that's best and safest for the conditions that exist at that moment. He is alert and always ready to change positions as traffic and other conditions warrant. Being a safe rider requires it.

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