

Reading the Road

“Reading the Road” refers to visually examining the road to obtain information that will help us ride safely on it. For example, we need to be aware of anything on the surface of the road that our bikes may hit, or that affects traction, or that otherwise may constitute a hazard. As the road goes over a crest, we must be concerned about what we may encounter on the other side of the crest. As the road curves, the more we know about a curve’s features in advance, the better we can adjust our speed, position, etc. to safely handle the curve.

Road surfaces Scan the road ahead for objects to avoid and road surface conditions that could be problematic. Be wary of leaves, mud, gravel, broken pavement, potholes, etc. A poorly maintained road warrants close scrutiny. Road construction also creates hazards like uneven and rough pavement, raised edges, gravel, sand, steel plates, and plastic construction barrels. Ride with care, being alert for possible hazards.

Traction hazards have some identifying features. Look for changes in color or texture of the road surface. Be wary of something that appears shiny. It might be a metal plate, a metal grate, a manhole cover, a tar patch, or plastic or painted road markings. All can be slippery, especially when wet. A wet road has less traction than a dry road. Look for spots that appear wet on an otherwise dry road. Contaminants on the road are darker than the rest of the road and may exhibit a rainbow colored sheen. Any spot or area on the road that looks different from the rest of the road should be suspect. Also check out the shoulders. You never know when you might need an escape path.

Crests of Hills Crests of hills are of concern because we can’t see hazards on the other side of the hill that may require a rider to make a quick maneuver or stop. Approach a blind crest from the center of the lane for flexibility to maneuver either to the right or left if necessary. Reduce speed, cover your brakes, cover your clutch in case downshifting will be required, and prepare for evasive action.

Sometimes the road may curve quickly on the other side of the crest. If there are no signs indicating a curve, a rider could be surprised by the curve and meet it unprepared. As you approach a crest, try to determine if the road goes straight or turns by looking at indicators that are higher than the crest. These include utility poles, tree lines, tops of preceding vehicles, and helmets of preceding riders. Note whether these indicators continue in a straight line with the road or appear to turn. A road banked at the crest may also indicate an impending curve. A curve may also be revealed by your GPS.

Curves When you see a curve ahead, you should seek information to help you negotiate the curve safely. If you can see around the curve, you can visually assess its radius, shape, camber, etc. You can note objects to avoid or anything else that might affect traction. You can see approaching vehicles that might crowd the center line. When you can see the road and the features of the curve before you enter it, you have the information to determine your entry speed and gear, entry point, line, etc.

In contrast, for a curve that you can't see around, you enter it with incomplete information. You don't want to be surprised by a curve. It can be disconcerting to be leaned over in a curve and suddenly discover that the radius sharply decreases, or the curve is a tight S curve, or the road curves down a steep hill, or some other unexpected condition. Preparation for entering a blind curve requires the rider to take advantage of indicators about the curve that are available to him as he approaches it.

The earliest indicators are road signs with curved arrows indicating the general shape of the curve and/or speed limits. Speed signs should be taken seriously. Prudence dictates braking and downshifting to a speed and gear compatible with the posted speed. Sometimes this will seem too slow, but it's easier to speed up in a curve than it is to slow down. Riding slower gives you a reserve of speed, traction, lean angle, maneuverability, and stopping distance that you won't have if you take the curve near maximum speed. Remember also that you should always be able to stop within your sight distance.

Utility poles usually follow the edge of the road and can sometimes be seen when the road itself can't be seen. They can provide useful guidance as to the path of the road. There are exceptions, however. The line of poles may cross the road or take a shortcut through a field, so be alert for this possibility. Tree lines, hedge rows, fences, guard rails, and other objects that follow the edge of the road can also be used in this manner.

Look at the road surface. A "crowned" road slopes down on each side to drain water. In left curves, ground clearance for a leaning motorcycle may be reduced. "Off camber" refers to a road that slopes downward toward the outside of a curve. This limits your lean angle and available traction. An off camber turn can be recognized by looking at the outside edge of the curve. As you approach the curve, if the edge remains visible, the road slope is in your favor. However, if the outside edge seems to disappear as it turns, then the road may be sloping away from you, requiring caution.

Look at the road map on your GPS as it indicates your line of travel. It should display the general nature of the curve and warn you of any drastic turns involved. Note the vehicles ahead of you. They see the curve in the road before you do and their actions may provide information on the nature of the curve, even if you can't see the road itself.

A note of caution – Use all of this information but don't focus your attention on any of these visual indicators. Look at them briefly or intermittently or with your peripheral vision. Your primary visual attention must be on the road itself, especially the "vanishing point" where the road disappears around the curve.

The vanishing point indicates what the curve is going to do. Your position relative to the vanishing point changes as you ride. In curves, when the vanishing point seems to approach rapidly, the curve may be tightening up, suggesting reduced speed. If the distance between your bike and the vanishing point appears constant as you go around a curve, the curve's radius is constant and your speed is appropriate. As the vanishing point recedes away from you, the curve is opening up and you can accelerate.

Entering curves from the outside allows you to see farther around the curve. You should continuously scan from in front of your bike to as far as you can see around the curve. Look through the curve to assess its radius, surface, camber, obstructions, etc. Looking ahead through the curve has additional benefits. The bike tends to go where you look and this helps you guide the bike along the appropriate path. Also, looking far ahead reduces the illusion of speed and enhances your feeling of control. This is useful in a curve.

Reading the road is worth practicing and doing. Make a game of predicting what the road will do over a hill or around a curve. Soon it will become automatic. It will make you safer.

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