

Defensive Driving While Towing a Trailer

By Elizabeth Koncki, Maryland Department of Agriculture

Many of you have heard the term “defensive driving”, but maybe you may have not been taught the method or its meaning. This short session is to familiarize you with defensive driving in terms of some practices you can easily incorporate into your driving habits that will benefit you. There are two schools of driving techniques: reactive and defensive. Reactive driving happens when you operate your own vehicle and if something in the traffic pattern changes, you react to it as it happens. Defensive driving is a skill set you use to monitor the traffic pattern to anticipate changes, identify potential changes and act to prepare for the potential change in traffic before it happens in order to safeguard you and your vehicle.

This article will be on recognizing potential hazards to reduce collisions that are particular to the type of driving a field inspector does with tips and info on defensive driving. Highlighted will be the specific duties and hazards of driving with a trailer in tow behind a passenger or cargo vehicle, but the main topics are suitable for any driver. Driving larger trucks, like tractor-trailers, is a whole profession and will not be discussed here.

Defensive driving is not difficult. It is a matter of awareness. Once you learn the basics, keep up defensive driving practices until they become a habit. Then, you will have the defensive driving skills at your disposal.

There are 7 basic parts of defensive driving:

Plan. Prepare for the trip before you start driving.

Be ready. Do not assume you know what another driver is going to do.

Be in control. You want to actively be in control of your speed at all times.

Don't be complacent. The familiar or routine is what we expect. Expect the unexpected.

Accept that others use the road. Acknowledge others right to be on the road and respect them

Be prepared for hazards. Be aware of additional hazards from poor road conditions and weather

Avoid distractions.

Plan your pre-trip and make checks.

The first step to defensive driving starts before you get in your vehicle. You begin your job with the pre-trip. The pre-trip is fundamental to the success of the trip. Pre-trip should include proper maintenance of the vehicle and trailer, route planning, secure cargo loading and minimizing driver distractions. You should also incorporate the simple rule of obeying traffic regulations. Know and understand your local driving laws including DOT rules on trailers. A check list is always helpful. Write it down and then

practice it until it becomes habit. A popular way of doing the trailer check list is an actual “walk-around” to touch or see that each item is secure.

Emphasis must be placed on the proper hitching of vehicle and trailer. A universal hitch is not good for all towing needs, so it may not be good for every application. Use the proper hitch and have knowledge of what your hitch is rated for. The best time to find this out is during the purchasing of the trailer.

There are 2 types of hitches: a receiver type and a fixed tongue (fixed draw bar). The hitch will be rated by class (I, II, III, IV) which will give you the tongue weight and the trailer weight. Only tow as much as the hitch is rated for and no more. Class III and IV are compatible with weight distribution hitch systems. Check your local regulations on what is required for your trailer based on its weight and type of trailer. Consider also the laws on what trailers require a brake control system on the trailer.

Before towing, always check that the hitch is properly placed and secured. This is especially important if you did not hitch the trailer yourself. Even if you were hands on during the hitching process and you have left the area, check again.

No one likes mischief. Check that the coupler ball socket is secure in the receiver with the coupler latch locking lever in the latched position and secured with locking pin. Pins should be all the way in so that it cannot wiggle out. Most hitches are set up so that the pin cannot be placed until the coupler latch locking lever is all the way in the latched (down) position. Connect the safety chains from the trailer to the receiver, making sure they cross under the trailer tongue and secure to the receiver plate on the tow vehicle so they will “catch” the tongue if the trailer jumps off the ball while in motion. Chains are correctly placed if they give enough slack to make a tight turn, but do not drag. Remember to connect the electrical plug from the trailer to the tow vehicle, once again making sure the cord does not drag but can move during a turn. Finally, attach the breakaway switch lanyard for those trailers with a brake control system. Look at the assembly and go over your hitching checklist to make sure all is in place. Start your vehicle, un-chock the trailer wheels and drive a bit to check that ball is seated and secure before going on the road. Everything from the trailer axle to vehicle axle all should be level. This is the time to check the operation of all the trailer lights and that all cargo is secured. Most road laws require signal, brake and running lights to work at all times. If you are working in a team, it does not hurt to have another set of eyes to check the trailer set-up.

Regardless of size, towing a trailer is more physical and mental labor than if simply driving one vehicle. Plan your schedule knowing that you will fatigue more quickly while towing a trailer. The travel time will also be longer, and not because of the added weight. It is because of the slower speed drivers are recommended to drive at. Another planning consideration is the frustration that builds with traffic as you operate the vehicle throughout the course of the day. Know your travel time and the roads of the route before you start.

Be ready for what other drivers may do.

Scan the road and look for where other vehicles are and at what speed and direction they are going. Be aware of traffic. Don't assume a driver will do what you would do in their situation. Defensive driving is all about minimizing risk by using good driving habits and anticipating traffic changes. Risk is inherent in every endeavor we do. When a driver acts with low regard to the outcome of his/her actions, more risk is assumed than is necessary. These additional driving risks may not result in catastrophe, but it can increase the odds.

Control of the vehicle under your operation helps reduce risk.

So, how does risk increase? You may bring on more risk by your direct actions or the risk may come from exterior sources. First, let's look at internal sources of risky behavior. Do you ever rationalize your actions, such as telling yourself that you are only driving fast because everyone is? Having this mentality does not allow you to be in control at all times while driving. When you are in control of your speed, you are able to manage your vehicle and trailer. You can adjust your speed without having to panic stop or floor the accelerator when you see a car angling for an exit or that other parked car is pulling out. Remember that the trailer you are towing adds yards and minutes to your acceleration and braking abilities. Give yourself enough space between vehicles, in front and behind. Also, expect your driving time to double while towing trailer. Good drivers recognize risk and can react to minimize danger that could result in damage or injury.

Expect the unexpected.

Most of us feel complacent while driving on a familiar route and assume that we know what the traffic will do and what is around each turn. The truth is that you do not know what will happen, though you may have done the same thing hundreds of times. Keep aware and think about your safety before each action. For example, if there was a collision while you were pulling out, the point of impact would probably be the trailer, as the oncoming driver did not expect you have a trailer. If the trailer is struck on its forward side or at its axle, the force of the impact will pull the trailer off the hitch, but not before dragging your vehicle around. The loose trailer can end up almost anywhere and put others at risk, including you. To give a real world example from the Maryland Weights & Measures Department, one of our propane prover trailers suffered an accident after a car impacted the tow vehicle's rear tire. The trailer detached from the tow vehicle and flipped on its side, curving up the trailer deck and shearing off the supports and fittings from the prover. It ended up 20 meters away from the other vehicles.

This was due to the physics of a side impact to the tow vehicle at low speeds, 25 mph. Luckily, there were no injuries.

All the roads are a stage and all the cars merely players.

Every driver has their own agenda or goal. Few of us have time to drive on the road for the pleasure of it. When we do get the chance, it is a fun and rewarding experience. Accept that there are other drivers who are most likely only focused on what they are doing at the time. Some drivers do things that annoy us.

However, trying to rationalize why will only distract you from reaching your goal and increase the risk of an accident. Your goal is to get home safe and to do your best to get the vehicle and trailer home without incident. Remember that trailers do react differently than vehicles do to sudden steering movements. Try to avoid any swerve or sudden change in speed and direction when towing a trailer. Trailers tend to push or pull the vehicle while in motion. Brake controllers can help slow a vehicles speed, but cannot stop the trailer and vehicle on their own. Sway control devices remedy some of the sway caused by the forces of air pushing on your trailer. Sway control devices, such as weight distribution hitch with spring bars are very useful and should be used properly and be the correct system for the size of the trailer.

Road hazards.

Weather. Bad weather does two things to the roads. It changes the road surface and reduces visibility. When a road becomes wet from rain or snow, your vehicle is driving on water instead of asphalt. This water mixes with oil and dirt left behind by cars to create a slick surface. Rain, snow and sleet also reduce visibility on the road. Even road spray from a car in front of you can cause visibility issues. Visibility also declines as you increase in speed. The solution is to drive only as fast as you are able to maintain control of the vehicle. No driver has full control of a vehicle on wet road surfaces. Your best option is to drive below the speed limit. In regards to pulling trailers, it's best to remember that trailers don't like to stop when they have no traction.

Roads can also become warped and uneven over time. A very common area for this to occur is at traffic lights. The asphalt here becomes deformed with ruts where cars and trucks have braked. When starting from a full stop, accelerate gradually so trailer tires do not spin on these uneven areas. The condition is magnified if there is standing water. These same ruts make it very hard to get traction to stop at traffic lights. As mentioned, necessary stopping distances double while pulling a trailer. This means you need to plan ahead as soon as you see the light and be prepared to stop. It may be necessary to slow down at all intersections.

Railroad tracks are also very slick. Gravel roads can be unpredictable in that they often have a "corrugated" surface and may start to wash out during rainfall. Scan the road surface as you drive to prepare yourself and your vehicle. Allow a space cushion of 3 seconds for normal driving. Add another 3 seconds for each factor out of your usual driving routine such as towing a trailer, bad weather, suspect driving, feeling ill, or driving at night.

Avoid distractions.

Anything that distracts your focus (wandering thoughts, passengers, phones, eating, reaching for items) off of the view of the road increases the risk of an incident.

In 2012, OSHA asked businesses for help in reducing fatalities from distracted driving by asking employers to “send a clear message to workers and supervisors that your company neither requires nor condones texting while driving...” Studies show that drivers who send or receive text messages focus their attention away from the road for an average of 4.6 seconds. At 55 mph, this is equivalent to driving the length of a football field with your eyes closed.

Operating a vehicle is a skill set you learn. To be effective, you should learn to look, identify and act accordingly in all situations. May this overview presentation assist you in your future driving endeavors. Remember to keep within the law and keep your mind on your safety. Happy Trails!