

Where to Ride Your Bike?

Where on the roadway should you ride your bike? Some people guess "On the left, facing traffic" so they can see traffic coming. But that idea is wrong, for several reasons:

- According to the League of American Bicyclists "Bike Ed" training program, riding on the left side is the leading single cause of car/bike collisions.
- Riding with traffic puts you where other drivers are looking for traffic. But riding wrong-way puts you where they aren't looking, especially at intersections, driveways and crosswalks.
- The closing speed of traffic in your lane is the sum of both speeds if you are facing traffic, but is the difference of speeds if you are with traffic. That difference in closing speed may mean a big difference in reaction time for you and a motorist.
- When a wrong way cyclist meets a right way cyclist, who swerves out into traffic or into the gutter? Don't expect me to!
- Less than 3% of car/bike collisions in daylight are due to overtaking errors (rear end collisions). There is simply no reason to ride the wrong way.
- State Law requires cyclists to ride on the right, not on the left. If you crash from wrong way riding, you may be at fault.

OK, there are lots of good reasons not to ride your bike on the left side of the road. But, you think, sharing a lane with passing cars is pretty scary. So, how about the sidewalk?

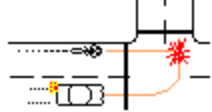
This is another bad idea. Research reported in the *Institute of Transportation Engineers Journal* in 1994 showed that, in several urban situations, sidewalk riding is about twice as dangerous as riding in the adjacent street. Why is that?

- At intersections and driveways, drivers expect to yield to pedestrians walking in or very near the intersection. Cyclists get into the intersection from farther than motorists expect. The sidewalk cyclist must be prepared to yield at every intersection and driveway in case a crossing motorist fails to notice. Riding in the street puts you where other drivers are looking for, and prepared to yield to, traffic that has the right-of-way.
- Riding on sidewalks is hazardous to pedestrians. Pedestrians are apt to change direction or stop without warning, increasing the likelihood of a collision. A bike/pedestrian collision could hurt both of you.
- Sidewalk cycling is generally legal, but it is safe only if you are moving at pedestrian speeds. Cities and towns ban sidewalk cycling in some places. Do you know where it is prohibited in your community? You don't need to bother about this if you always ride on the right hand side of the street. This is where you are safest, and you can take advantage of all the speed your bike offers.

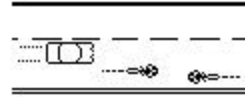
OK, no wrong-way riding, and no sidewalk riding. That leaves riding on the right side of the street. Still scary? Motorists can easily avoid colliding with large objects (like cyclists) if they are visible and moving predictably and legally along the roadway. They don't want to hurt you; they don't want to damage their car; they don't want a ticket. They just want to get where they are going; just like you do.



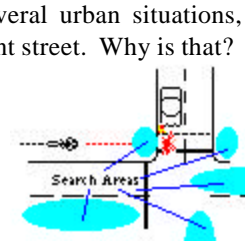
Motorist turning right does not look for wrong-way cyclist



Left-turning motorist does not see wrong-way cyclist.



Wrong-way and right-way cyclists meet.



Motorist looks for traffic only in certain places. Sidewalk cyclist is not seen.

State Law says you must ride as far to the right as *practicable*. It does not say as far to the right as *possible*. There are several situations in which you do not have to keep far to the right and where you *should not* be so far right.

- When overtaking and passing another vehicle,
- When preparing for a left turn,
- To avoiding hazards such as debris, gravel, broken glass, etc., parked vehicle doors, pedestrians, animals, surface hazards (potholes, drain grates, railroad tracks, etc)
- Or when the lane is too narrow for a bicycle and another vehicle to travel safely side-by-side within the lane.

The last provision allows you to "**take the lane**" when you need to, even if you delay traffic a few seconds. When you "take the lane," do it clearly and obviously. Hugging the edge of a narrow lane encourages motorists to try to squeeze by. If you believe the lane is too narrow, don't invite the traffic behind you to attempt to prove you wrong. The best spot is often between the right tire track and the center of the lane. Wide curb lanes, allow faster traffic to pass cyclists easily and safely without changing lanes.

Principles of Traffic Law

The League of American Bicyclists "Bike Ed" course teaches more than just to ride on the right. State Law says that cyclists have all the "rights and duties" of the operator of a vehicle. The League summarizes those rights and duties as follows:

- **First Come, First Served.** Drivers are entitled to the roadway space they are using with reasonable clearance all around, and clear stopping distance ahead.
- **Use the Right Hand Side of the Road.** Not the left side, and not the sidewalk.
- **Yield to Crossing Traffic.** At intersections (including driveways) yield to the traffic on the "bigger" road. Yielding means looking until no traffic is so close to be a danger. Signs and signals often help determine which road is "bigger". Stop when signs, signals or traffic require.
- **Yield when Changing Lanes.** Before making a lateral move, yield to traffic in the new lane. Yielding means looking until there is no close traffic. Communicate your intentions with hand signals before you change lanes.
- **Speed Positioning.** Between intersections, slower traffic keeps to the right. Overtake on the left (except when overtaking a vehicle preparing for a left turn).
- **Intersection Positioning.** Approach intersections in the proper position for your destination. Left turns near the centerline; right turns near the curb, straight thru traffic between. Remember to yield when changing lanes. Communicate your intentions with hand signals before you turn.

Night Riding

How do the rules change for riding at night? None of the principles change. You just need to add lights and reflectors. Reflectors alone are not good enough. Reflectors work only when you are right in front of the headlights of another vehicle. Drivers crossing at an intersection won't see your reflectors until it is too late. Your rear reflector and pedal reflectors help overtaking traffic to see and avoid you. But oncoming or crossing drivers and unlighted pedestrians need to see your lights.

Learn more about traffic cycling skills in a League of American Bicyclists "Bike Ed" class. See www.bikeleague.org/ for a list of instructors around the country.

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