

Right-of-way challenges

Failure to yield the right-of-way is a leading cause of serious traffic accidents. For most types of vehicles, the risk of being involved in an accident is greater in the “right-of-way danger zones” – that is, at intersections, while merging, or when changing lanes. But, when heavy trucks are involved, the severity of these accidents often increases dramatically. This concern emphasizes the need for professional truck drivers to exercise extreme caution at all times when negotiating intersections, changing lanes, or merging with traffic. This includes being alert to motorists who fail to yield the right-of-way, as required.

Unique factors

Several unique factors increase the accident exposure for heavy trucks in the “right-of-way danger zones.” These factors include:

- Extended vehicle length
- Slow acceleration
- Stopping distance needs and
- Blind spots

Extended vehicle length increases the amount of time required to clear intersections and the amount of space needed to turn. Slow acceleration further increases the amount of time required to clear intersections. Increased stopping distance can limit the driver’s ability to stop or slow down to avoid a collision. Blind spots can obscure the driver’s view while merging or changing lanes.

Managing right-of-way danger zones

There are a number of safety measures that can be taken by drivers to help manage and reduce the potential for accidents in the “right-of-way” danger zones.

Intersections

Failing to yield the right-of-way is an underlying factor in many intersection collisions. Extreme caution should be used when approaching and crossing both controlled and uncontrolled intersections. Never assume you have the right-of-way. As a popular saying goes: “The right-of-way can only be given, never taken.”

Safety professionals recommend a number of defensive driving procedures to meet the challenges of intersections and reduce the risk of intersection collisions. These include:

- Survey the road ahead and to each side for motorists who may fail to yield the right-of-way. Other motorists often misjudge how long it takes a truck to cross an intersection and how much space the driver will need to turn.
- Be prepared to stop by taking your foot off the accelerator and covering the brake pedal. This will reduce your speed and shorten reaction time if an emergency maneuver becomes necessary. During adverse weather, slow down early so you can stop safely without skidding into the intersection.
- Be traffic-cautious and courteous. Never enter an intersection if you cannot clear it without impeding traffic or before a traffic signal turns red. Be prepared to stop if you are uncertain when the light will change.
- Be “turn-alert” for motorists who intend to turn in front of you. A driver’s turn signal may not be the only indication that he or she is planning to turn.

- Never assume approaching vehicles will stop. Always ensure you have a clear view of oncoming traffic before entering an intersection.
- Always allow enough time to safely cross or turn at an intersection. Depending on the size and weight of your vehicle, it could take you 8-10 seconds or more to cross an intersection. In that time, an oncoming vehicle traveling 55 mph will travel approximately 650-800 feet! Make sure your vehicle will clear the intersection without impeding traffic.
- Never back across a busy street or highway unless absolutely necessary. If backing is unavoidable, use a reliable spotter to make sure all traffic has been stopped.
- Inspect headlights, turn signals, and four-way flashers often to make sure they are working properly.
- Use reflective stripping. Make sure your vehicle is equipped with reflective striping as required. Many serious side-impact collisions have occurred because oncoming motorists have not been able to see a tractor-trailer blocking the roadway at night.
- Don't make unsafe left turns. Some busy intersections may be too dangerous to attempt a left turn. In these cases, making a series of right turns or turning at another location may provide safer alternatives.
- Keep your wheels pointed straight ahead while waiting to make a left turn at an intersection so you will not be forced into oncoming traffic if you are rear-ended.

Merging and changing lanes

Entering and leaving the flow of traffic often means yielding the right-of-way to other vehicles while merging and changing lanes. For trucks, these maneuvers are particularly risky because of blind spots. Safety professionals offer a number of recommendations to help reduce the risk of lane-change and merging accidents: These include:

- Avoiding changing lanes abruptly. Always signal your intention to change lanes or merge well in advance.
- Avoiding unnecessary lane changes by driving in a lane of traffic in which you can maintain a safe, consistent speed.
- Maintaining a safe following distance when merging or changing lanes so sudden traffic stops will not be a surprise.
- When entering the highway, adjusting speed to match the flow of traffic. Remember, the vehicle entering the flow of traffic is generally required to yield the right-of-way.
- Always being courteous. Provide a space for other vehicles to enter the flow of traffic safely.
- Watching for aggressive drivers. Be aware that approaching vehicles may not allow you to merge. Be prepared to slow down or stop to avoid a collision if necessary. Never allow anger or frustration distract you from making good driving decisions.
- Being deceleration-smart. Use the full length of the deceleration lane to slow down before you reach the exit ramp. Watch for drivers who may attempt to swerve in front of you.

Always checking your mirrors and blind spots before changing lanes. Utilizing hood-mounted convex mirrors can help minimize these blind spots. Be especially cautious when changing lanes from left to right. This maneuver results in a large percentage of truck-related lane-change collisions.

Pedestrians, children, and emergency vehicles

Yielding the right-of-way also means yielding to pedestrians at crosswalks, intersections, and in residential areas. Watch for children near the roadway, especially near school zones, since they may not be mindful of

approaching vehicles before crossing the street.

Always yield to emergency response vehicles. Slow down, and safely pull to the side of the roadway, if necessary, to allow all emergency vehicles to pass unimpeded. Stay alert for other motorists who may act erratically as emergency vehicles approach

Work zones and railroad crossings

Slow down **before** entering a construction zone. Be cautious of other motorists who may attempt to merge in front of you unexpectedly if the roadway narrows. Increase your following distance to provide more time to react if traffic stops suddenly. Yield to flaggers and construction workers. Watch for slow-moving vehicles entering and leaving the roadway.

Always yield the right-of-way to trains. Observe railroad-crossing signals at all times and never attempt to beat a train across a railroad grade crossing. Be aware that large objects, such as trains, appear to travel more slowly than their actual speed; therefore, it is easy to misjudge how much time you have to cross a railroad crossing.

Caution, courtesy, care, and safety first

Monitoring your surroundings and scanning the roadway for potential hazards is critical. To avoid failure-to-yield accidents, approach intersections cautiously and take care to watch for oncoming motorists who might fail to yield the right-of-way. Signal early and communicate your intentions clearly. Wait for a safe opportunity to turn or merge with the flow of traffic, and be courteous to other drivers who are attempting to do the same. Acting with caution, courtesy, care, and safety in mind can make a difference in beating the right-of-way challenges of the road.

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