Cycling in traffic

The first requirement is that you're a competent cyclist. You have to be able to stop, start, steer, brake, change gear, take one hand off the handlebars to signal, and look behind while going in a straight line. If you can't, practise away from traffic, or get trained.

There are two more things you need. One is a heightened awareness of what's going on around you. A bit like a car driver on a motorway, you don't just look dead ahead. You observe what's around you, checking side roads, looking for pedestrians about to step off pavements, etc. You need to use your ears too. Sound is your first warning of following traffic, which is why it's a bad idea to cycle with an MP3 player or to talk on a mobile phone, even though it's not illegal.

The other thing you need is assertiveness. Not aggressiveness or a holier-than-thou attitude, just self-confidence. You have as much right to be on the road and to get where you want to go as anyone else. Sometimes you will have to wait for other traffic and sometimes other traffic will have to wait for you. Don't be timid, let other road users know what you're going to do and – if it's safe – do it.

Positioning

A big part of assertive cycling is where you ride. Make sure it's not in the gutter. The road surface is poor there, because of drains, potholes, and detritus like broken glass that's been swept to the road edge by car tyres.

Worse than that is the fact that you're outside of the traffic stream, the main current in which motor traffic moves. It makes you less visible to all other road users – drivers behind you, drivers at junctions ahead, pedestrians – because they will be focusing on where they expect traffic to be, which is in that zone. If you're in someone's peripheral vision, you're easy to overlook. If you're right there where they're looking, you stand out.

At first it feels vulnerable to be further out from the kerb and you might worry that you are 'in the way of drivers'. In fact, rear end collisions are extremely rare for cyclists. Hugging the kerb is riskier because it invites motorists to squeeze past. If you're riding further out it obliges traffic to overtake you as if you were a car (or perhaps a tractor), which is just what the Highway Code requires of drivers – see Rule 163. As a rule of thumb, the distance you are from the kerb is the distance that overtaking drivers will give you.

Cycle trainers describe being in the traffic stream as 'taking the lane'. When you're cycling briskly in town, there's little conflict because a car's speed won't be very different from yours. Sometimes you'll be cycling much slower than the traffic. That's true for children or for less confident cyclists. Or perhaps it's uphill or a fast road. In those cases there's a secondary position you can adopt, which is just to the left of the traffic stream. Even then, keep out of the gutter. Don't go within 50cm of the kerb: 75cm to a metre is better.

Don't feel guilty about taking the lane. You're not blocking drivers but keeping yourself safe by controlling the space around you – for example, preventing drivers from overtaking where it is unsafe to do so. The extra space is a buffer zone too. It provides you with extra room to manoeuvre.

Manoeuvres

Before you change your position on the road, it's essential to look behind to check for following traffic. Simply looking alerts drivers that you're about to do something. Then signal clearly and boldly – arm straight out. Don't start to move out immediately. You are signalling your intention. By making eye

contact with the driver behind, you can assess whether it's safe to start moving. Most drivers will give way, a few will accelerate.

If it's safe, start to move out and keep your arm out until you've gone as far out as you're going. You want to be moving out at a shallow angle rather than suddenly, so start your manoeuvre early.

If you're overtaking a parked car, be sure to leave at least a door's width between you and it in case a door gets opened in your path. If you're turning right, you're aiming for a position just left of the white line in the middle of your road. You will need to stop and wait here if there's no gap in the oncoming traffic, or no gap in either direction if you're turning right from a side road. When you make the turn, don't cut the corner. Go right like a chess knight, not a bishop.

Turning left is easier. You still need to signal, but need not do so as early. Take the turn fairly wide. If you take it tight, you may get forced into the kerb by following traffic that's also turning left and decides to overtake you here. Take that lane!

If you're going straight on at a junction, such as a crossroads, once again, take the lane. Otherwise left-turning traffic may cut across in front of you.

When you're approaching junctions, it's common to find long rows of stationary traffic. It's permissible to overtake such traffic, and at traffic lights where there are advanced stop lines for cyclists it is often preferable to do so. Normal overtaking procedure is to pass on the right, moving back in to take the lane when you're done.

What about passing on the inside, which is rather ominously known as 'undertaking'? With care, a cyclist can pass stationary traffic like this. As before, the aim is to pass and then move back in to take the lane. Sitting in the gutter next to traffic is not good. If the car next to you goes left up ahead and you go straight on, you'll have to make an emergency stop or crash. This is a matter of life and death with long vehicles. NEVER undertake a long vehicle like an articulated lorry or a bus. If it sets off and goes left, you could die, squashed against railings or crushed under the rear wheels, which always corner in a tighter arc than the front wheels.

Even if you are where you should be on the road, and you're alert, some situations require evasive action. Maybe a motorist pulls out right in front of you. You've got three choices: brake, swerve, or accelerate. Circumstances will dictate which is best.

An emergency stop is harder on a bike than in a car. Your brakes aren't as good, and if you lock the wheels the resulting skid could cause you to crash. Practise stopping suddenly, away from traffic, to see what it's like. Use both brakes and slide back off the saddle to counter the fact that your bodyweight will be thrown forward as you decelerate.

Swerving is fastest if you start to turn your bars (but not your body) the opposite way you want to go, then turn them back and 'fall into' the turn. This isn't something you can rationalise in a split second so don't try. Set up a few markers away from traffic and practise slaloming between them. You should soon be able to thread the bike past while your body carries on in more or less a straight line. Alternatively, take up mountain biking. It will do wonders for your bike handling.

Accelerating is only an option if you can read the traffic well enough to know what happens next. It gets you out of trouble before it arrives.

Know your road features

Basic manoeuvres are fine for travelling along a smooth tarmac road with a straightforward layout. Sadly the road environment isn't that simple. Today's highway engineers have a suite of design

features to choose from that's as varied as a spoiled kid's Scalextric track box. Chicanes and awkward crossroads are just the start.

Roundabouts cause some cyclists problems. It doesn't help that the Highway Code gives pretty risky advice on the subject. Keeping to the left doesn't make you safer: it makes you more likely to be run over by a driver who hasn't seen you. When you approach a roundabout, take your lane – even if you're going left – as it will stop you getting squeezed by traffic doing the same. If you're going straight on or right, it's generally safer to head for the middle of the roundabout and then look, signal and peel off at the appropriate exit. If you're riding around the edge, you have to deal with traffic coming onto and off the roundabout, precisely where you're riding. And as you're on the periphery, the drivers may not have seen you. In the middle, traffic can see you and can only pass you on your left.

Traffic calming is a two-edged sword for cyclists. Slower traffic is good. Some of the calming measures are not. Those that narrow the width of the road increase the risk that traffic will overtake where there is no room to do so. Traffic islands in the middle of the road are the most common, but sometimes the road narrows on both sides with a give-way marking on one of the carriageways. Sometimes there are chicanes. Your response is the same and you can probably guess it: take the lane. If there is no room for traffic to pass safely it's best if it doesn't pass at all.

Speed humps or speed cushions also require care. The bumps can be quite abrupt. Stand up on the pedals slightly so your weight is off the saddle and keep your elbows and knees slightly bent. You can then use your body to absorb the bump. Make sure you approach any hump or cushion square on, and be alert for following traffic racing between humps and then braking or swerving left or right to go over the hump(s) in a different way.

Rising out of the saddle can work for potholes. It depends on the size of the hole and the bike you're riding. Large wheels with fat tyres will shrug off a hole that might stop a small-wheeled bike dead. If it looks rideable, rise up out of the saddle and let the bike roll through it. Your feet must have a secure grip on the pedals for this to work, or else they might be jolted off. Clipless pedals or pedals with toe-straps are ideal. Rain-wet flat pedals are not. If you're not sure of your footing, stay seated and take the hit. Of course, the best solution is not to run into the pothole at all. If you're riding sufficiently far out from the kerb, you have room for manoeuvre. Use it.

Roads can be very slippery after rain. If you have to ride over drain covers or shiny tarmac sealing lines, make sure you're going in a straight line and don't brake on top of them. A road that's been dry for a while and suddenly gets wet seems to bring dried oil spillages to the surface, so take care at junctions and roundabouts. Black ice is worse and can form anywhere. It tends to reform in the same place, so make a mental note if you hit any.

Level crossings and tram tracks deserve special mention. They're very slippery when they're wet and it's possible to slip on them even when they're not, especially if you cross them at an acute angle. Always cross level crossings and tram tracks as near to perpendicular as possible. Do the same for cattle grids, keeping an eye out for any longitudinal gaps.

Cycle lanes marked on roads and separate cycle tracks are common in most towns and cities. Some are good, others awful. You're not obliged to use them, even when they're going your way. Not all drivers appreciate this but it is so. If a cycle lane or track helps, use it. If it doesn't, don't. Be aware that on-road cycle lanes can put you further towards the kerb than safety dictates. If you leave a cycle lane, treat it like changing lanes on the main carriageway: look back, signal, move.

Cycle tracks off the road, perhaps along an adjacent footpath, present a different problem: you'll have

to give way at every side road, whereas on the main carriageway you'd have right of way. Not only will that mean you progress more slowly, but it also presents greater risk. It's at junctions where the vast majority of cycle accidents occur, and specifically T-junctions. That said, it can be pleasant to get away from the traffic on busy roads.

Some cycle tracks use extinct transport corridors such as old railway lines and towpaths. These go point to point without having to give way for roads. Many are shared-use and are popular with pedestrians. If so, give way as necessary and ring your bell to announce your presence. Look out for dogs being walked, particularly if the dog is loose or on a very long lead. Dogs don't know the Highway Code.

Know your road user

Everyone has their bête noir on the road. White van man. School-run mum. Boy racers. BMW drivers. Cyclists! Try to avoid thinking in stereotypes. Other road users are just other people. If you can see them, be seen by them, and communicate with them, you are already half way to being a happy road cyclist.

A common refrain from drivers to cyclists is "Sorry mate, I didn't see you." That's why you take the lane when you need to, signal boldly, and look them in the eye. You're helping drivers see you. Even then, some drivers are distracted or careless and may not register you or the speed at which you're travelling. There are warning signs: the car might be creeping forward; the pitch of the engine may change; maybe there's a thumping bass beat that says there's a young male driver – statistically the most dangerous – at the wheel.

Drivers of long vehicles are often very skilful. Yet they may genuinely not see you because their vehicle has blind spots. If you cannot see the driver's face in one of the mirrors, the driver cannot see you. Don't cycle too close behind and NEVER cycle up the inside. The biggest risk isn't from the biggest vehicles, but from skip lorries and concrete lorries that race about urban areas on a tight schedule. Give them a wide berth. Watch out for bus stops ahead, in case a bus overtakes and pulls in suddenly.

Pedestrians can easily see you but may step out in front of you because they haven't heard you. Bikes are almost silent and pedestrians get used to gauging traffic by sound. This is where a ping of your bell comes in handy. If there's too little time to reach for your bell, shout 'Look out!' This usually roots the pedestrian to the spot while they work out just what it is they are supposed to be looking out for. You can then swerve past safely.

Motorcycle and moped riders may jostle for position with cyclists in urban areas, particularly filtering past stationary traffic. Riders of big motorcycles have to pass a test and are skilled. Riders of mopeds or small engine motorcycles may have passed compulsory basic training, but don't count on it. It *isn't* always compulsory if you hold a full driving licence.

Other cyclists should be no problem on the streets. Those that ignore traffic law are. Keep a close eye on cyclists riding along pavements or ignoring traffic signals. They might do something else equally stupid that puts themselves in your path.

You won't encounter horse riders very often. Animals can be frightened by sudden noises, so don't use your bell, but do call out and talk to the rider as you pass. Horses are not frightened by human voices. The silent approach of cyclists can spook horses, so it helps if the rider is forewarned.

Planning your route

Riding a bicycle is one of the fastest and easiest ways to travel around a town or city. The reason? Cyclists have a reliable average speed. Capitalise on this when you plan your routes. You don't have to take 'fast' main roads that run directly from A to B. A more roundabout route down empty backstreets without traffic lights may be quicker, and will likely be more pleasant. A section of cycle track or tow-path, or even a bit where you have to get off and walk, may still save time. Or it may just take you away from heavy traffic or a tricky junction that you'd like to avoid.

A good cycling map can turn a nerve-jangling urban ride into an enjoyable experience. Many councils publish cycling maps of their cities; ask at the local Tourist Information Centre or look on the council website. If they don't, CycleCity Guides (http://www.cyclecityguides.co.uk) have cycling maps for a large number of towns and cities. If there isn't one, you'll need to experiment using the local street map.

Information about where it is good to cycle is increasingly available on the internet. Cycling England is developing an on-line cycle journey planner (http://www.transportdirect.info/Web2/JourneyPlanning/FindCycleInput.aspx?repeatingloop=Y) through Transport Direct. A number of towns and cities are already included in this, with plans to cover all urban areas, together with the National Cycle Network, by 2012. Alternatively, check out the Cyclestreets journey planner (http://www.cyclestreets.net/journey/), which is a user-generated and managed web tool.

If you take a wrong turn, don't worry about it. Don't hesitate. Go with it and pull over when it's safe. When you're stationary on the pavement you can get your bearings and look at your map. If need be, push your bike to where you want to get to if it's easier than riding there.