

To Make a Turn

Given the fact that automobiles have been around for over a century and drivers now have easy access to educational resources like the Internet, you might assume that most drivers know how to make a turn. Sadly, this assumption leads to endless frustration, strained vocal cords, and mashed fenders. My unscientific conclusion based upon personal observation is that the number of drivers who know how to turn has decreased even as the tools to perform the task have improved. Apparently it is up to us ancient beings, who emerged from the primordial slime armed only with a Drivers' Training instructor who doubled as a phys-ed teacher, to bring the light of knowledge to the world. This is how you make a turn.

The first thing to do is to signal your turn. My driver's training instructor used to tell us "When you're driving, you're always signaling. You're signaling your intention to turn left, you're signaling your intention to turn right, or you're signaling your intention to drive straight ahead. When you signal one thing and do another, you cause accidents." He was very strict about using turn signals. I, on the other hand, am a bit more understanding. Having grown up driving older cars, I realize there are times when you may not want to signal your turns. Times when it is inconvenient or uncomfortable to use turn signals. Even so, it is important that you always signal your turn. Even if it's cold outside, it's raining, or if passing cars are throwing brown mud slushies against the side of your car, it is essential that you roll down your window, ignore the howls of protest from the passengers in the back seat, and stick your arm out the window to signal your turn. Of course, nowadays many people drive newer cars with modern conveniences. Say, cars built after January 1st 1958. If you drive a car made after that date it should have electric turn signals. In that case, WHY THE HELL AREN'T YOU USING THEM, YA' FREAKIN' MORON!!!

Please don't try to convince me that you only need to use your turn signals when your turn will affect other drivers. There are far too many accidents where the driver that caused the crash didn't see the other car for me to believe that line. For that matter, I've often been the other driver. I've sat in frustration at T-intersections (or waiting to enter a roundabout!) waiting for the oncoming car to pass, only to have it turn without signaling before it got to me. I've also slammed on my brakes to avoid hitting cars that suddenly turned in front of me without signaling. And I've had to dodge out of the way of cars that turned without signaling onto a road where I was riding a bike, walking a dog, or performing some other task which the car driver did not realize would be affected by their turn. I also don't buy the line that "I'm in the turn lane, so you ought to know I'm going to turn." I've seen far too many drivers go straight from a turn lane, generally stomping on the gas when the light turns green so they can cut in front of all the drivers who actually had the foresight to position their vehicles in the straight lane. And I have no sympathy for you or your wife/girl friend who is annoyed by the "DINK-um, DINK-um, DINK-um" noise that the turn signal makes. If I can stick my arm out the window in rain, sleet, or subzero temperatures to signal my turn, you can put up with the sound of a turn signal for a few seconds.

Now that I've gently persuaded you of the importance of using turn signals, it's important to know when to use them. Obviously you should use them before you turn, but how far before the turn? There are two general rules to follow. One is not to confuse drivers by turning your

signal on too soon. If there are multiple roads or driveways you *could* turn onto, you should wait until the one you want to turn onto is the next in line before turning on your signal. If the roads are close together, however, this rule is trumped by the overriding rule that your turn signal is meant to give your fellow drivers a heads-up that you are about to do something out of the ordinary. Turn signals are not designed to answer the question “WHY THE HELL ARE YOU BRAKING?!!!” Turn on your signal before you begin slowing down for the turn. Don’t be the guy who suddenly stops dead in the middle of the street, forcing the driver behind him to slam on the brakes. This thoughtless driver often adds to the other driver’s frustration by turning on his turn signal just as the other driver begins to pass the seemingly stalled car. This can cause the other driver to express doubts about the first driver’s sanity and parentage.

So, you intend to make a turn, you’ve turned on your turn signal, and you’ve turned it on early enough to alert other drivers that you’re about to slow down but not so soon that you confused them about where you’re going to turn. Now all that remains is to turn into the correct lane. If there’s only one lane, the decision is simple. If there’s more than one lane, you should turn into the near lane. In most states this is the law. For some reason California, Texas, and Missouri allow drivers to turn into any lane *as long as they do not interfere with traffic in that lane*. If another driver is trying to turn into the same lane, however, there will be interference. In no state and under no circumstances is it illegal or improper to turn into the near lane, so there’s never a reason not to turn into the near lane. (Drivers of giant tractor trailer trucks may not be able to turn sharply enough to turn into the near lane, but they are generally courteous enough to wait for all other traffic to clear before turning. An ordinary motorcar, which is much smaller and probably has power steering to boot, has no excuse for wallowing across the lane divider and barging into the other lane.)

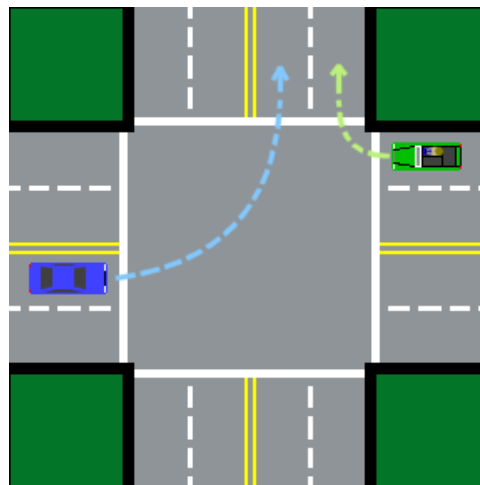


Figure 1: Blue car turning left

Consider the situation in Figure 1. You’re driving the blue car, and you’re turning left. I’m in the green car (it’s obviously much classier) and I’m turning right. If we both turn into the near lane, we can both make a safe turn at the same time. As my Driver’s Training instructor used to say, “he can turn and you can turn.” If, however, you swing wide and make a left turn into the right lane you’ll either smash into my car or force me to slam on my brakes and make a panic

stop, amid great swearing. Similarly, if I swing wide and made a right turn into the left lane (which I would never do), I would either smash into you or force you to make a panic stop.

Even if a left turn arrow is telling you it's OK for you to turn, you still need to turn into the near lane. Remember, if I'm coming from other direction I can't see your turn arrow, and even if I could see it there's no reason for me to suspect you're going to make an illegal turn into my lane. All I can see is that if there's no cross traffic, there's no reason why I can't legally make a right turn on red after a full stop. You can turn and I can turn.

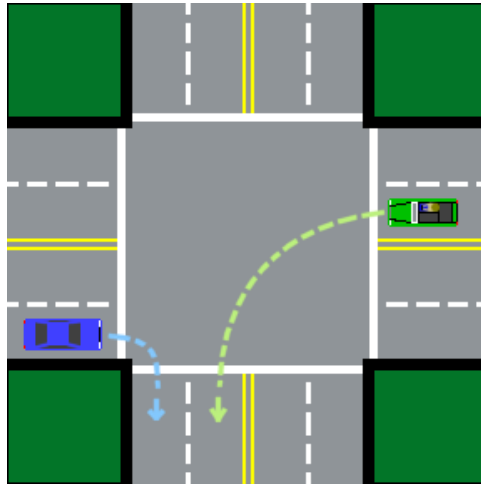


Figure 2: Blue car turning right

If you're making a right turn, as in Figure 2, the same rule applies. Turn into the near lane. If you turn into the right lane and I turn into the left lane, we can both turn with no problem. If either one of us wanders into the other driver's lane, there's a problem.

In short:

1. Always signal your turn, *especially* if you have those new-fangled electric turn signals.
2. Turn on your turn signals before you slow down but not so soon that you confuse other drivers as to where you're going to turn.
3. Always turn into the near lane.

Simple, isn't it. So why do so many drivers get this wrong?