

The
Learner Driver
Handbook

Ray Griffiths

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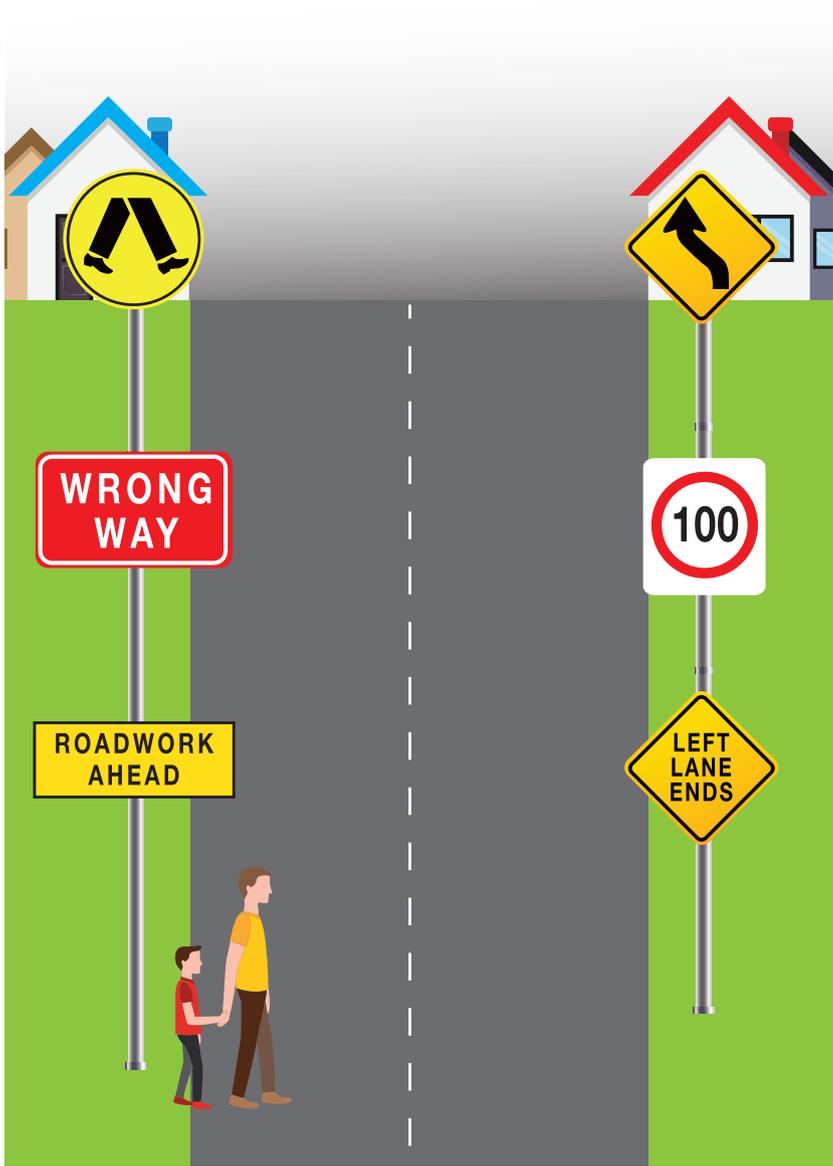
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TO SUPERVISORS AND LEARNER DRIVERS

Teaching people driving can be a rewarding and also a fun experience. However, there are hazards along the path to becoming a licenced driver.

Some learner drivers can use the brakes too much, or not enough, and degrees in between. This also applies to the use of accelerator. I have seen students steer too early or too late, some have pressed the accelerator instead of the brake and vice versa. This is why the learner is best kept in a quite area with little traffic until adequate skills are developed.



INTRODUCTION

The first Queensland driver's licence was issued in 1910. This was prompted by the first recorded road fatality in the state, which occurred on the corner of Brookes and Wickham Streets, Fortitude Valley (near the Brisbane Exhibition grounds). A speeding vehicle struck down two women as they crossed the road to catch a tram. One of the women, Amelia Down, died in hospital the next day.

It was later revealed that the driver was known to Brisbane police for his questionable driving skills. Public concern soon led to the introduction of driver testing and a system of licensing.

One hundred-plus years later, we have many more and much faster, more powerful vehicles. Our road system has changed significantly, yet road carnage is still at an unacceptable level.

This book offers a syllabus guiding the student, and supervising driver, through the many stages of learning to drive safely.

I have owned and operated The Robina Driving Academy since 1999. During this time, thousands of students have obtained their licences. These former students have gone on to be very capable drivers.

Learner drivers must pass a written test, then complete their logbook hours. In Queensland at time of writing, the number of logbook hours that must be driven and recorded is 100: 90 hours of day-time driving and ten hours of night-time driving, unless an exemption is obtained. A supervising driver must accompany the learner driver at all times. Professional lessons through an accredited driver trainer have a logbook time advantage— triple time for the first ten hours in most states— and should be considered as an investment that will pay dividends, especially when used with the lesson plans outlined in this book.

Supervising drivers, who may be suitably qualified parents or friends, are responsible for any mistakes up until the learner passes the practical driving test and becomes a licensed driver. Supervising drivers should check with state regulations to ensure they qualify. Learner drivers should understand that once they pass the driving test, they are liable for any mistakes they make.

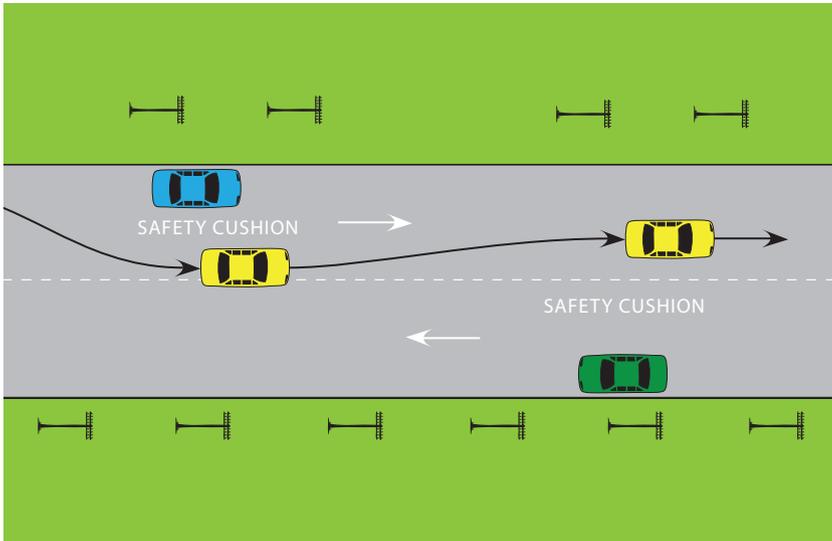
Driver education is not well understood by most people in Australia. Licence tests are a set standard of achievement, but how to reach this standard is left largely to the individual to achieve. Many people make use of driving schools to obtain their licences, while others simply take the test and hope for the best.

Under-preparation for the practical test used to be commonplace and some people still leave it until the last minute. The test isn't overly difficult but it does require some degree of skill to pass. The introduction of log books and a set number of hours did a lot to change the mindset of applicants and their supervisors. One hundred hours (Queensland's present requirement) helps to produce a more educated driver; however, further hours are necessary to gain greater proficiency.

The steps outlined in my syllabus clearly show and guide the student.

My purpose in writing this handbook is to clarify a mostly misunderstood subject.

Often, when teaching someone how to drive, I make use of comparisons. I might compare preparing a meal to leaving the kerbside safely, pointing out that both require a set number of steps in order to reach a satisfactory result. Many students find this principle difficult to practise initially, however once accepted, they progress rapidly.



SAFETY CUSHION

Learning to drive is done in stages:

- » Starting
- » Stopping
- » Steering
- » Scanning with ‘eyes like an eagle, seeing everything’
- » Practising lots of hours
- » Considerable experience at roundabouts, traffic lights, stop signs
- » New encounters
- » Increasing your understanding
- » Learning how to fix things when they go wrong
- » Developing good habits.

In 1963 in Sydney, my new job was delivering telegrams from the General Post Office (GPO), on a bicycle. I learned to have ‘eyes like an eagle, seeing everything’, and to keep some space around my bike. I kept this ‘safety zone’ (which I also refer to as a ‘crash-free zone’ and a ‘safe zone’) around me clear, allowing nothing to enter, but making sure I had an escape from anyone who did try to enter my safety zone. This means keeping a three-second gap from the car you are following, using the time-lapse formula (see below), along with keeping a gap on either side of your car, preferably one metre if possible. This strategy has served me well in ensuing years, more than 50, the last 17 teaching driving.

The time-lapse formula: When the car we are following passes a solid object like a tree, and we count “a thousand and one, a thousand and two, a thousand and three”, and our car passes the tree, then we have judged a three-second gap correctly.

In all that time, I have never had an accident, a record of which I am very proud.

Scanning the road ahead while you are driving is similar to reading a book – all the information is there ahead of you. Of course, you need to check your rear vision mirror every time you steer, brake or change your mind, as well as every five to eight seconds.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- » Scan the road ahead with 'eyes like an eagle, seeing everything'
- » Keep a safety zone around your car – a three-second gap from the car in front and a metre each side wherever possible
- » Have an early warning system for escaping from any hazard
- » Keep your eyes moving constantly...
- » Evaluate the scene ahead
- » Check your mirrors often
- » Communicate with other road users:
 - Use your indicators
 - Flash your headlights
 - Sound your horn if necessary
- » Slow down
- » AND stop if necessary.

DRIVING LEARNING CURVE

Driving is potentially one of the most dangerous activities many of us will ever undertake. By following the system outlined in this book, a high level of skill should be reached that will ensure the learner driver will effectively be able to deal with traffic hazards.

Learning to drive is often referred to as a learning curve, because it cannot be learned in one, ten or 20 sessions, so it becomes an ongoing activity that continues until you pass the practical test and beyond.

Restraint is an essential part of a good driver's toolkit!

As stated in the keys2drive program, statistics show that the driver who has just passed their practical tests has a crash rate of 20 times the average for the first six months of solo driving. No doubt the absence of a supervising driver and their restraining influence contributes to this alarming accident figure.

Controls and instrumentation need to be learned until there is no error. The location of brake, accelerator, clutch and steering need to be learned well.

Other secondary instruments should be incorporated in driving practice, with the goal of operating confidently before your practical test. The goal is to approach a corner braking smoothly, using indicator, checking mirrors, steering smoothly and being aware of traffic both in front of and behind your vehicle as the corner is negotiated. Learn to use multiple controls consecutively and smoothly. The idea is to improve coordination. The best way is to start simply, then build up to more complex skills. For example, start by checking mirrors, braking, steering smoothly. Then begin to incorporate other skills, using more controls such as the sun visor, demister switch, etc.

Identify lefts and rights. Watch is left hand. Left, right, left, right. Practise until these are identified quickly and accurately. This is a must for driving safely.

Self-commentary during driving is good for improving confidence and driving skills. Practise similar to:

"I am driving in left lane, there is a blue car following also in left lane 75 metres to the rear. A red car is just in front of that but in right-hand lane. I am approaching a multi-lane roundabout. I am in left lane so I will exit in that lane. A flashing sign ahead indicates that a school zone follows. Three children and an elderly man are crossing and the 'lollipop man' is holding up a stop sign, so I will wait until they all exit the crossing."

You will find these self-commentaries very helpful, as they increase your concentration levels.

Advice for supervisors

- » Check with your state body concerning the licence required for supervising. Plates are required.
- » Students need guidance, support and reassurance, especially in early lessons.
- » In manual cars, students may need assistance with gears, which is why practice in quiet areas initially is required. Steering is often another area that may require assistance while co-ordination is gained.
- » Driving schools, equipped with dual controls, could well be an option to help students past this difficult stage.
- » Students often require advice on situations encountered, or on road rule interpretations. Recently a student asked me, as we approached two cyclists, one who was riding outside the bike lane, "If I blow my horn at him, and he falls off his bike and hurts himself, will I get in trouble?" She needed an answer. My advice: if you do not know the answer, study the road rules with the student, treating it as a joint project.

- » Supervising someone learning to drive requires patience. Remember that the person learning does not know how to drive; they are learning.
- » I have found it helpful to use constant reminders, and clear instructions. “Turn left at the next corner.” Learner drivers are easily upset by uncertainties, such as directions. In areas of speed, it’s helpful to say, “Slower for the next corner please...less accelerator... use brake gently.” You must tell them, they do not know, you are the driving supervisor, you have a driving licence, and you have passed your driving test. The student driver does not have the information about corner speeds, which gear to use, or even if he needs to slow down. Give instructions as though you are driving the car. “Slow down, stop, pull your handbrake on, use your indicator...” Tell the student exactly what they need to know.
- » After many hours’ practice, they will hopefully remember to slow down on corners, use their indicators and pull on their handbrake on an incline. If they don’t, they need more lessons.
- » Beginning a driving lesson, promote good driving habits by having the student adjust mirrors and seat, as described in Chapter 2, Controls and instrumentation, then describe the system of vehicle control when driving from one hazard to the next. A commentary by the supervisor is recommended, similar to:

“Mirror, indicator, blind spot. Is it safe to leave the kerbside? Approaching roundabout, mirror check, slow to 15 kph, give way to any vehicles on the roundabout, proceed when safe.”

Communication needs to be very specific with your student so they have a clear understanding of straight left or right turns. Multi-lane roundabouts require special attention. Students can easily become confused with multi-lanes. Commentaries reminding the student of what is required reinforce the correct procedure in the student's mind.

Promote safe habits such as securing the car when stationary, and leaving the car in gear with the park brake on. Using expressions such as "Men in black" as a substitute for "mirror, indicator, blind spot" might help some students retain this vital routine in stressful situations.

Always plan where you will go in the driving lesson. Planning is a part of good driving, so teach this. Learners will appreciate encouragement in your dealings with them, as will not being patronising. One student I recall was deeply distressed after being told by a friend who was teaching her that she drove 'like a baby'. Consider carefully the words you use.

Expecting too much of a learner invariably ends in squabbles. One girl confided to me, "My father yelled at me this morning." She was trying to park his new car and it was the first time he'd not treated her like a princess. She was plainly shocked.

Students don't learn under stressful conditions. Give them more time, allowing them to learn basic car control.

If a student is struggling with driving, keep them doing the basics until they begin to display some degree of mastering their car skills. They can then be moved to more advanced situations. Remember, some can get confused between brake and accelerator in the early stages when they are pressured. This mostly occurs when they are placed in advanced situations too early. Take care not to advance the student beyond their comfort zone. Bring them on slowly.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- » Drivers who have just passed their practical tests have a crash rate 20 times higher than the average for the first six months of solo driving.
- » Restraint is an essential part of a good driver's toolkit!
- » Learn controls and instrumentation until they are second nature.
- » Then incorporate other secondary instruments in driving practice, until operating confidently before the practical test.
- » Practise identifying left and right, essential for safe driving: Ring finger – left hand. Watch – left hand.
- » Practise self-commentary during driving to improve confidence and driving skills.