

Rider Education Report

Rider education is more than just learning and practicing tips and techniques on how to handle your motorcycle to keep yourself and your passenger safe. It is also about recognizing what we do as operators of two- and three-wheeled vehicles and how those actions affect others.

The primary goal when using our public highway system is to arrive alive at our destination. Interacting with other motor vehicles on the road requires us to work with strangers to travel safely and efficiently. To do this successfully, society has developed a set of rules on how we are to share our roads to keep traffic flowing smoothly and to reduce confusion that can contribute to collisions and other unfortunate events. These rules continue to evolve and change to accommodate recent technologies and human behaviors. And while these rules help, it is up to all of us to pay constant attention to new situations that can occur at any moment. We have learned to pay attention to other road users' body language as clues to what they may be intending to do next.

The bodies of drivers in cars and trucks are normally hidden from view, offering few clues as to what they are thinking or planning to do next. But the bodies of motorcyclists are very much in full view. Every physical action we make can be observed by other road users. This can be good or bad. To many uneducated drivers, certain actions common to motorcycling can be confusing. It is our responsibility to be aware that what we are doing could unintentionally cause an issue.

Here are some examples of actions which may cause confusion for other road users. While many of us use some sort of radio communication during our rides, we also use many hand signals to give others an understanding of what we want to do. Some gestures like a friendly wave to another motorcyclist could be misinterpreted when used in heavy traffic as though you are wanting a motorist to move to a new position on the road. Motorcycles have high compression engines and low gross weights, which allow us to slow the bikes and trikes very easily without using the brakes. But if we are not using the brakes, we are also not signaling that we are slowing our forward progress. An inattentive driver may realize extremely late what is happening and abruptly apply his brakes to prevent a collision. This may also cause him to become upset, even though it is his own mistake. A strong engine, low gross weight, and a small relative size also allow motorcycles to at least appear as if they are accelerating very quickly. This may cause some drivers to think we are racing and attempt to "join the fun." Riding a motorcycle is a physical activity and, especially on a two-wheeler, requires body movement to keep the machine going in the direction we want. Swerving to avoid any number of obstacles or road irregularities may catch the attention of other drivers due to the extreme movement of the bike or trike and our bodies while swerving. These rapid side-to-side changes can trigger anxiety from the unaware.

We all must do what is necessary of course to arrive alive at the end of our journey. But we all have a responsibility to each other not to cause distraction and keep our actions predictable and safe.

Richard Artmayer
KY State Educator