

The thinking driver

The thinking driver – A pause for thought
An article by Peter Rodger.

This is about every one of us – I hope. Some thoughts to prompt your own thinking...

In recent years, at the annual IAM Groups' Conference in October there has been a session on test standards queries. These sessions have involved much discussion about specific driving or riding issues – some of them very specific indeed.

In many cases, the questions being raised seem to be seeking – as is so often the case for driving or riding related questions – a form of “rule” that can always be applied.

As examples, issues around crossing or straddling double white line systems, speeding, and being on the right hand side of the road in, or approaching, bends were in discussion.

The impression I gained was that a decision on whether it was always right, or never right, in a test scenario was what was being sought. I can understand that observers helping people prepare for the test seek some form of guidance about these things. I can understand that they want to know they are “giving the right advice” and not all giving differing messages to those preparing to take the test.

Let me work through an example to try and help understand how to deal with this in an everyday way. If you are not an observer – please read on, this is for you as well. It's actually about how we all behave on the road.

Imagine driving or riding along an unfamiliar country road towards a left hand bend,

with a high hedgerow on both sides, a comfortable road width for two lorries to pass each other.

Please picture the road as a lengthy virtually straight stretch, which allows you to travel at the national speed limit. You cannot gain any effective observation to the left, the direction the road bends, because there is a banking, topped by trees, and that thick, high hedge.

The centre line is a hazard warning line as you approach the bend, and there are oncoming vehicles restraining you from positioning near the white line, so as you approach the bend you are positioned a bit to the left of that.

It is a bright sunny, early summer – let's say early June – day, and the foliage is thick and not yet cut back from all its energetic spring growth. You lose some speed – probably down to about 40 mph – turn into the bend, and see the road straightens again with some houses on either side a hundred yards or so away.

As you straighten up, and start to accelerate back up towards the speed limit, a 30 mph speed limit sign buried in the depths of the foliage on your left becomes visible, giving you just enough space to brake to that speed, if you brake very firmly indeed (at the level of an emergency stop).

The questions are:

Do you brake very firmly and reach the speed by the time you get to the sign, or a bit less firmly and run the braking though into the 30 zone by perhaps twenty yards?

There is a decision to be made here – if you do not brake and meet the speed restriction by the time you get to it, you are breaking the speed limit – that’s simple, it is a black and white law.

Now if I, as the Chief Examiner, were to give a black and white ruling about “what is allowed in the test”, the only one I could give which would satisfy the black and white constraints of the criminal law is to brake very firmly and conform with the law. The test form has a box for marking whether the drive or ride was legal or not, and doing more than 30 in the 30 zone would clearly be illegal.

But things are not really like that. Let me pick up on just one thing I did not mention in the description of the approach:

What is in your mirror/over your shoulder? Do you have a car following you at a one car length distance, being “pushy”? Is the mirror clear?

Let me alter things a little in a different way. Instead of being a nice sunny June day, let’s make it a proper English summer’s day – so pouring with rain, and with a road surface that’s highly polished, and oily looking. Would that affect your decision in the real world, on an everyday journey?



I hope that thinking about these differing circumstances which arise in exactly the same place is prompting some alteration to the idea that there is an “I would always...” answer.

Where this takes us is where driving and riding become interesting – this is the bit where the person

sitting at the controls of the vehicle – be it a lorry, motorcycle, car or bus – has to look at the circumstances they are dealing with, apply some interpretation, and reach a decision.

A decision which might be different if the circumstances were different. So does a “that’s simple, it’s a black and white rule” statement stand up to the rigour of real life?

I don’t think it does. Now I happen to hold the view that if you were prosecuted for breaking the speed limit in that first few yards, someone involved in making that happen needs to be taken to one side and be given some advice about what proper enforcement is about. However – when I am pressed for black and white rules about what is allowed in the IAM test, I find that these kind of issues are there all the time.

The advanced driving or riding test is performed in the real world among real people going about real journeys – just the same as the “L” test is. Like all those other people making their journeys, the person taking the test has to deal with real circumstances, and – whilst my example above is a deliberate construction designed to produce a theoretical dilemma – they will sometimes face real decisions, in which conforming with “Always do...” or “Never do...” produce results which are obviously not the best outcome – or may even conflict with another “always do/never do...” rule.

So the response to the question becomes “ It depends...”

I get asked to define “It depends”.

Allow me to let you into the secret of that definition. After seventeen years of

dealing with life, death, injury, honesty and deviousness in operational policing of things happening on the road, twelve years of dealing with driver and rider training in the police service, conducting driving and riding tests throughout it; training and qualifying as a driving instructor, and a driving examiner; acting as a volunteer examiner for an advanced driving organisation for just under twenty years; and a further period of nearly ten years here as Chief Examiner at the IAM – I have yet to see a definition of that which is clear or concise or answers queries in a black and white way.

Therefore – advanced driving and riding is not about being black and white, and having things laid out in simple rules. It is about being mature, sensible, and applying principles to the circumstances. It is about being “the thinking driver” or “the thinking rider”. Actually, “ordinary” driving and riding are like this – let alone advanced driving and riding.



Without the flexibility to meet circumstances and deal with real life head on, safely and sensibly, advanced driving or riding would be valueless and not worthy of your time, or mine. When you first become a parent, you control the life of your newborn child. As the baby becomes a toddler, you allow it a little more freedom, but you decide when it goes to bed, and you put it there.

Then as the child grows, that bedtime tends to become a bit later... and later... and later, as the years go by. When your child has grown up and left school and is at work or college, you no longer tell it what time to go to bed – but you might remind him or her “Don’t forget you have to go to work in the morning”.

Driving is similar – as we first start our instructor needs to give us close attention and help, with easy to understand ideas and “rules”. But as we mature, we need to be allowed more room to think and make decisions... to use our experience and understanding.



Of course, there are principles we should abide by – be safe, be systematic, be legal and be smooth. There are others, but let’s hold it there, as those are enough for now. Sometimes they can conflict with one another, and the one that must always come out on top is safety.

I was intrigued by an enquiry I received in the office recently from a driver who was having a problem at a roundabout. He explained it all, and when I read it the position was clear – he said that he did not want to “do what is wrong” according to how he read the Highway Code, but this meant he was in conflict with other traffic, with potential danger arising.

Ignoring the complexities of roundabouts, the principle is clear – it is better to be wrong but safe, rather than right but dangerous. (Please don’t write in about dangerous driving always being wrong – I’m trying to make a point here about prioritising).

So - be a “thinking driver” or a “thinking rider”. If you are an observer, doing that

brilliant thing that so many of you do so inspirationally well around the UK of helping people develop – help them become “thinking”.

If you are an examiner doing that thing you do so well – look for the “thinking” solution. We all need to give each other enough space to allow for the thinking to happen, allowing people to grow and develop, and to value the maturity and flexibility that brings.

Examiners need to give candidates room to adopt the “thinking” solution, observers need to help the thinking to develop, and we all need to think when we drive and ride.

The advanced test should really just be a drive or a ride like any other – safe, systematic, smooth, legal, and thought through. A demonstration of the thinking driver or rider making a journey and doing it well.

I cannot advise you to break speed limits, or enter bus lanes and cycle lanes you shouldn't be in, or lots of other things. However I can advise you to think as you drive or ride. Be a thinking driver or rider, (and decide your own bedtime as well!)

This article was written by [Peter Rodger](#) and appeared in the [Advanced Driving \(Summer 2014\) magazine](#).