

## How Bicycle Laws Apply to You -- the Motorist (Part 1 of 2)

By Peter Flucke and Arthur Ross  
For the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin

Contrary to popular belief, bicycling is not inherently dangerous. What is dangerous are the often illegal interactions which occur between bicyclists and motorists every day. If everyone followed existing laws more carefully, bicycling would be much safer.

The mechanics of driving a car are quite simple. Despite this simplicity, driving is the most dangerous thing that most of us do on a regular basis -- dangerous not only for us, but for those around us as well.

Every time there is a crash between a bicyclist and a motorist, it is almost certain that one of the drivers broke a law. Motorists are often unaware of, or disregard, laws designed to protect bicyclists. More than 90 percent of bicyclist fatalities involve a collision with a motor vehicle.

Motorist-caused collisions with bicyclists occur most often when a motorist:

- turns left (or right) into the path of a bicyclist at an intersection
- fails to stop for a stop sign or other traffic control device
- exits a driveway or alley without first stopping and then looking

Let's take a look at some of the laws that affect a bicyclist's safety from the motorist's perspective. A subsequent article will deal with the bicyclist's perspective.

By law, a bicycle is a vehicle and bicyclists are given all of the same rights and responsibilities as motorists. The same set of laws apply to both bicyclist and motorists, with only a few exceptions.

To safely interact with bicyclists on the roadway, motorists *must* follow these laws:

- Yield the right-of-way to on-coming vehicles, including bicycles, before turning left at intersections and driveways.
- Stop for all traffic control devices (stop light/stop signs) and yield to all traffic before proceeding.
- Leave at least three feet between you and the bicyclist when passing.
- Do not exceed posted speed limits and reduce speeds when necessary (especially at night).
- Do not drink and drive.

If these laws were followed, the majority of bicyclist/motor vehicle collisions caused by motorist errors would be prevented. Interestingly, in most cases where a law was broken resulting in a crash, the driver who broke the law knew that he or she had committed a violation.

For motorists to safely interact with bicyclists it is helpful to understand what the bicyclist is doing. For example, a bicyclist riding more than two to three feet from the edge of the road may be avoiding rough pavement or may be concerned that motorists are passing too closely (within three feet) in a narrow lane.

Instead of thinking of the bicyclist as an obstacle to get around as quickly as possible, think of the bicyclists as a person and treat him or her as if he or she were your child or spouse or friend.

Slow down, look around, give plenty of clearance when passing, moving into the next lane if necessary for the bicyclist's safety. Do not honk your horn at a bicyclist unless it is an emergency. Make eye contact when possible and wave instead.

Be especially cautious around young bicyclists. Children are not small adults. They have developmental and physical limitations which can make them unpredictable. Slow down when you see children on bicycles and be prepared to react.

Young bicyclists on sidewalks or in driveways are a common danger. Be careful as you pass. They may suddenly enter the street in front of you. Also, a child bicyclists on the road in front of you may suddenly turn left without first looking behind or signaling, leaving you little time to react.

To learn more about cooperating with bicyclists on the road, take an Effective Cycling - Motorist Education course. To find a course near you contact the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin.

The BFW produces a wallet-sized card with a synopsis of the state's bicycle laws. To get a card contact BFW at [www.bfw.org](http://www.bfw.org), (608) 251-4456 or [bfw@mailbag.com](mailto:bfw@mailbag.com).

*Peter Flucke is a former police officer, 1998 Effective Cycling Instructor (ECI) of the Year and president of WE BIKE. Arthur Ross is the pedestrian-bicycle safety coordinator for the city of Madison and an Effective Cycling instructor. Both are board members of the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin.*