

# The Smith System



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[Smith System Driver Improvement Institute, Inc. - Driver Training](#)

**The positive approach to protect yourself from the inconsistent and unsafe actions of other motorists.**

**Comments by**

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# **Space Cushion Driving**

**The main concept of the Smith System is space cushion driving. Space cushion driving unlocks vision barriers and allow you to open a whole new vista of comfortable, at ease, and smooth driving. Good vision buys time and space to help you avoid trouble and adjust to traffic conditions.**

# **The 5 Major Habits of The Smith System**

- 1. Aim High in Steering**
- 2. Get the Big Picture**
- 3. Keep Your Eyes Moving**
- 4. Leave Yourself an Out**
- 5. Make Sure They See You**

# 1. Aim High in Steering

- Repeated glances well ahead at the center of the intended path (lane) that you are traveling.
- Keep your vision high, way down the road. Try looking **20-30 seconds down the road.**
- “Look where you want to go and not where you are at”

# Good Habits

- **Keeps vehicle centered in the lane.**
- **Sees moving and fixed objects at least a block away in city traffic and at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile ahead on expressways or highways.**
- **Maintains a safe following distance.**
- **Avoids swerving when passing other vehicles, turning or approaching parked vehicles.**
- **Reduces speed to allow for poor conditions or reduced visibility.**

# Clues to Low-Aim Steering

- **Veers far left to avoid object on right**
- **Hugs left side of lane**
- **Swings too wide when turning left (not looking through the intersection)**
- **Uses bright headlights when overtaking at night**
- **Sits on front of seat peering off front bumper**
- **Fails to reduce speed under poor visibility conditions**

## 2. Get the Big Picture

- **As you move into traffic you are constantly entering new areas and new situations. Each of these areas and situations is presenting new scenes and new opportunities. It becomes your responsibility to make sure you get the entire picture.**

# What is the Big Picture?

- **The traffic picture that you see is the sum total of every conflict that can be perceived. It is not just what you see but what you should see.**
- **Your big picture should be at least 12-20 seconds (visual control zone) down the road and entire width to the roadway (from edge to edge).**



# How Do YOU Get and Keep the Big Picture?

- You must eliminate all barriers that interfere with getting the picture.
- You must establish a **4-8 second following distance**.
- When traffic density prevents proper following distance, your speed must be reduced and attention sharpened for trouble clues.
- You must concentrate on the job of driving.

# Good Habits

- **Avoids being boxed in when lanes ahead are blocked.**
- **Avoids severe braking and abrupt turns.**
- **Adjusts speed when approaching intersections on stale green traffic signal.**
- **Correctly anticipates moves of other drivers and pedestrians and avoids conflicts.**
- **Slows down before entering “no control” intersections or where there is a possibility of conflict.**

# Clues to Small-Picture Looking

- **Following too close.**
- **Hard stops or turns (not looking ahead for what other traffic is doing or not picking out cues as to intersections where they want to turn [not planning]).**
- **Traffic delays due to poor positioning or timing.**
- **Delayed response to critical situations.**

# 3. Keep Your Eyes Moving

- Eye movement is the key to getting and keeping your big picture.
- Since the traffic scene and traffic situations are continuously moving, your eyes need to move too.
- Keep your eyes moving every **two seconds**. Look near, look far, check your inside mirror, check your right outside mirror, etc.

# Good Habits

- **Keeps eyes moving at least every two seconds and checks to the rear every five to eight seconds.**
- **Checks to the rear before changing lanes, turning or stopping.**
- **Stays clear of erratic drivers.**
- **Checks in all directions and leaves a space cushion before starting up at intersections.**
- **Disposes of eye holding distractions quickly.**

# Clues to Fixed-Stare Driving Errors

- **Slow disposal to eye-holding problems.**
- **Weak habits in checking sides (fails to check inside and outside mirrors and blind spot before changing lanes).**
- **Fails to check rear before leaving curb.**
- **Drives with side and rear view blocked**



# 4. Leave Yourself an Out

- **Strive for a Space Cushion.**
- **You need space to the front, to the rear and on both sides of your vehicle.**
- **You open up space for an out when you choose the proper lane, leave space ahead, and to one or both sides.**
- **Plan for space, be ready for the unexpected.**

# Good Habits

- **Recognizes the lane of least resistance and positions the vehicle accordingly.**
- **Allows extra following distance when crowded by a tailgater.**
- **When possible, leaves a least one side open for swerving room**
- **Passes only when there is space, visibility and distance to do so safely.**
- **Quickly re-establishes space around the vehicle when space diminishes.**



# Clues to Driver Failing to Leave an Out

- **Space-cushion around vehicle not achieved.**
- **Maintains speed when visibility is reduced.**
- **Fails to recognize doubtful situations.**
- **Drive too fast for conditions.**

# 5. Make Sure They See You

- **Communicate with all other highway users.**
- **Use your turn signals for turns and lane changes.**
- **Communicate with the drivers behind you (use hand signals, turn signals, or soft brake applications).**
- **Get eye contact.**
- **A gentle tap of the horn to get other drivers attention.**

# Good Habits

- Alerts non-attentive drivers and pedestrians with gentle tap of the horn or flick of the lights to get eye contact.
- Turns on lights when visibility is low in order to be seen.
- Tries to obtain eye contact with people when conditions dictate that it should be done.
- Gives early signals for turns of lane changes and checks to see if they are heeded.
- Does not ride in the blind spot of drivers on the left or right.

# **Clues to Driver Not Making Attempts to Be Seen**

- **Poor use of turn signals.**
- **Reluctant to use horn.**
- **Fails to use lights in dim light conditions.**
- **Does not practice brake “taps.”**

# Assignment

- Check your own use of the good habits of the Smith System by assessing your own driving using the 25 items in the **Smith System Driver Evaluation Check List**. Send a copy of your assessment to [safety@siu.edu](mailto:safety@siu.edu)