Essential techniques and habits every commercial driver should practice on every trip

**PURPOSE**

Use this checklist to reinforce defensive driving habits before, during, and after every trip.
Review each item, check the box when completed, and discuss any issues with your safety manager.

## 1 PRE-TRIP DEFENSIVE AWARENESS

- ☐ **Check weather and road conditions:** Review forecasts and plan route adjustments for rain, snow, ice, fog, or high winds before departure.
- ☐ **Plan your route:** Identify construction zones, school zones, high-traffic areas, and alternate routes. Avoid unfamiliar shortcuts.
- ☐ **Inspect mirrors and adjust seating:** Ensure all mirrors provide maximum visibility. Adjust seat for full pedal reach and clear sightlines.
- ☐ **Verify lights and signals:** Confirm all headlights, brake lights, turn signals, and hazard lights are functional.
- ☐ **Secure all cargo:** Verify load is properly secured per FMCSA regulations. Loose cargo shifts and creates handling hazards.
- ☐ **Eliminate distractions:** Stow phone, set GPS before moving, secure loose items in cab. Prepare everything before putting the truck in gear.
- ☐ **Check tire condition and pressure:** Under-inflated or damaged tires significantly increase stopping distance and blowout risk.

## 2 FOLLOWING DISTANCE & SPACE MANAGEMENT

- ☐ **Maintain minimum following distance:** 1 second per 10 feet of vehicle length at speeds under 40 mph. Add 1 second above 40 mph.
- ☐ **Increase distance in adverse conditions:** Double following distance in rain; triple in snow, ice, or fog.
- ☐ **Create an escape route:** Always maintain at least one open lane or shoulder for evasive maneuvering if the vehicle ahead stops suddenly.
- ☐ **Avoid the "No Zone":** Stay out of other trucks' blind spots. If you can't see their mirrors, they can't see you.
- ☐ **Manage space on all sides:** Leave buffer room to the left, right, front, and rear whenever possible. Avoid being boxed in.
- ☐ **Adjust for road type:** Increase following distance on curves, grades, bridges, overpasses, and merging areas.

## 3 SCANNING & HAZARD RECOGNITION

- [ ] **Scan 12-15 seconds ahead:** Look well beyond the vehicle directly in front of you. Spot hazards early to allow reaction time.
- [ ] **Check mirrors every 5-8 seconds:** Maintain constant awareness of vehicles beside and behind you. Use a systematic scan pattern.
- [ ] **Watch for intersection hazards:** Intersections are the #1 location for collisions. Cover the brake approaching every intersection.
- [ ] **Identify pedestrians and cyclists:** Actively look for vulnerable road users, especially in urban areas, near schools, and in parking lots.
- [ ] **Recognize aggressive drivers:** Identify tailgaters, lane-weavers, and speeders early. Create distance — do not engage or retaliate.
- [ ] **Monitor road surface changes:** Watch for wet patches, oil spills, gravel, potholes, bridge decks, and painted markings (slippery when wet).
- [ ] **Watch for stale green lights:** If a light has been green for a while, prepare to stop. Never accelerate to beat a yellow light.

## 4 SPEED MANAGEMENT & BRAKING

- [ ] **Drive at a safe speed for conditions:** The posted limit is the maximum for ideal conditions. Reduce speed in rain, fog, darkness, and congestion.
- [ ] **Brake gradually and early:** Avoid hard braking. Smooth, progressive braking reduces wear, prevents jackknife, and gives following drivers time to react.
- [ ] **Use engine braking on downgrades:** Shift to a lower gear before descending long grades. Do not ride the brakes — they can overheat and fail.
- [ ] **Account for loaded vs. empty:** An empty trailer can be harder to stop on wet roads due to reduced traction. Adjust speed accordingly.
- [ ] **Reduce speed before curves:** Braking in a curve increases rollover risk. Slow down before the curve, not in it.
- [ ] **Maintain safe speed in work zones:** Fines are doubled. Workers are present. Lanes are narrower. Slow down and stay alert.

## 5 TURNS, LANE CHANGES & BACKING

- [ ] **Signal early:** Activate turn signals at least 100 feet before turning in urban areas, 300+ feet on highways. Give other drivers time to react.
- [ ] **Check blind spots before every lane change:** Mirror checks alone are not enough. Physically verify the lane is clear.
- [ ] **Make wide right turns carefully:** Watch for vehicles, cyclists, and pedestrians on the right side. Use mirrors throughout the turn.
- [ ] **Use G.O.A.L. when backing:** Get Out And Look — every single time. Walk the area behind the vehicle before reversing.
- [ ] **Back slowly with a spotter when possible:** Use a guide and maintain communication. Stop immediately if you lose sight of your spotter.

## 5 TURNS, LANE CHANGES & BACKING (continued)

- [ ] **Avoid unnecessary backing:** Plan your route and parking to minimize backing maneuvers. Pull-through parking is always preferred.

## 6 FATIGUE, FOCUS & DRIVER WELLNESS

- [ ] **Comply with Hours of Service:** Follow HOS regulations — they exist to prevent fatigue-related crashes. Never falsify logs.
- [ ] **Recognize fatigue warning signs:** Frequent yawning, heavy eyelids, drifting lanes, missing exits. If fatigued, pull over safely and rest.
- [ ] **Never drive under the influence:** Zero tolerance for alcohol, drugs, or any substance that impairs judgment, reaction time, or alertness.
- [ ] **Take regular breaks:** Stop every 2-3 hours or 150 miles. Walk around, stretch, hydrate. Breaks improve alertness and reduce injury risk.
- [ ] **Manage distractions:** No texting, no handheld phone use, no eating while driving. Any activity that takes eyes off the road is a distraction.
- [ ] **Maintain physical fitness:** Regular exercise, proper nutrition, adequate sleep (7-8 hours), and hydration directly improve driving performance.

## 7 EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- [ ] **Know your emergency equipment:** Verify fire extinguisher is charged, reflective triangles are accessible, and first aid kit is stocked.
- [ ] **Practice emergency maneuvers mentally:** Visualize evasive actions — controlled braking, lane changes, pulling off road — before you need them.
- [ ] **If a tire blows out:** Do NOT brake hard. Grip the wheel firmly, ease off accelerator gradually, and steer to a safe stop.
- [ ] **In case of a skid:** Steer in the direction you want to go. Ease off the brake or accelerator. Do not overcorrect.
- [ ] **Report all incidents immediately:** Contact dispatch and your safety manager. Document the scene if it's safe to do so. Never leave the scene.
- [ ] **Keep emergency contacts accessible:** Company dispatch, insurance hotline, roadside assistance — stored in cab, not just on your phone.

### Driver Acknowledgment

I have reviewed this Defensive Driving Checklist and understand these principles. I commit to practicing defensive driving techniques on every trip to protect myself, my cargo, the motoring public, and my company.

| Driver Signature | Printed Name | Date |
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**RECORD RETENTION**

Maintain signed copies in the driver's personnel file for the duration of employment plus three years.
Review and re-sign annually as part of your ongoing safety training program. Contact First Underwriters for guidance.