The 5 Keys to Space Cushion Driving for commercial vehicle operators

WHAT IS THE SMITH SYSTEM?

The Smith System is a proven defensive driving methodology built around five core principles that help drivers anticipate hazards, maintain safe following distance, and avoid preventable collisions. Originally developed for commercial fleets, these techniques reduce accidents by up to 50% when practiced consistently.

1 Aim High in Steering

Look 12-15 seconds ahead — see the big picture, not just the bumper in front of you

- Focus your eyes at least one block ahead in the city or a quarter-mile ahead on the highway.
- Scan the road ahead for traffic signals, brake lights, merging traffic, and road hazards.
- Steer toward your target — where your eyes go, the vehicle follows.
- Avoid fixating on the vehicle directly ahead; instead, look through and beyond it.

COMMON MISTAKE: Staring at the road directly in front of the hood. This gives you only 1-2 seconds of reaction time instead of 12-15.

2 Get the Big Picture

See the whole intersection, not just the signal — 360-degree awareness at all times

- Take in the entire traffic scene at every intersection, including cross traffic and pedestrians.
- Watch for vehicles approaching from side streets, driveways, and parking lot exits.
- Identify potential hazards in all directions before committing to a maneuver.
- Account for your vehicle's size — your truck occupies more space and takes longer to clear intersections.

COMMON MISTAKE: Tunnel vision — focusing only on what's directly ahead and missing threats from the sides, rear, or above (overpasses, signs).

3 Keep Your Eyes Moving

Avoid the fixed stare — continuously scan mirrors, gauges, and all directions

- Check mirrors every 5-8 seconds using a consistent scanning pattern (left, center, right, mirrors).
- Shift your focal point frequently — never stare at any one object for more than 2 seconds.
- Monitor your instrument panel regularly for warning lights, fuel, and speed.
- At night, alternate between high beams and low beams and watch for reflective eyes on roadside.

COMMON MISTAKE: The "highway hypnosis" fixed stare — looking straight ahead without scanning. This delays hazard recognition by 3-5 seconds.

4 Leave Yourself an Out

Maintain a space cushion on all sides — always have an escape route planned

- Keep a minimum following distance of 1 second per 10 feet of vehicle length (add 1 second above 40 mph).
- Position your vehicle to maintain at least one open escape path at all times.
- Avoid being boxed in — stagger your position rather than driving beside other vehicles.
- At stops, leave enough room to see the rear tires of the vehicle ahead touching the pavement.

COMMON MISTAKE: Following too closely or allowing vehicles to close your escape routes. Without an out, a sudden stop ahead becomes a collision.

5 Make Sure They See You

Use signals, lights, horn, and eye contact — never assume other drivers see you

- Signal turns and lane changes early — 100 feet minimum in the city, 300+ feet on highways.
- Use headlights at all times for visibility, even during daylight hours.
- Make eye contact with drivers at intersections and pedestrians in crosswalks before proceeding.
- Tap the horn lightly when passing parked vehicles, approaching blind curves, or near pedestrians.

COMMON MISTAKE: Assuming other drivers can see your truck. Large vehicles have massive blind spots — if you can't confirm they see you, assume they don't.

APPLYING THE SMITH SYSTEM IN COMMERCIAL VEHICLES

- Pre-trip: Walk around the vehicle and scan 360 degrees before moving. Note parked cars, pedestrians, and overhead hazards.
- Intersections: Count to three after a light turns green before entering. Check left-right-left again before proceeding.
- Highway merging: Use Key 1 and Key 4 together — aim high to spot merging gaps early, then adjust speed to leave yourself an out.
- Backing: Apply all 5 keys — scan the area (Key 2), check mirrors continuously (Key 3), and use hazards/horn (Key 5).
- Adverse weather: Increase all space cushions by 50-100%. Keys 1 and 4 become critical when stopping distance doubles or triples.

QUICK MEMORY AID — "ALL GOOD KIDS LIKE MILK"

Aim High in Steering | **G**et the Big Picture | **K**eep Your Eyes Moving | **L**eave Yourself an Out | **M**ake Sure They See You

Driver Acknowledgment

I have reviewed the Smith System 5 Keys and commit to applying these defensive driving principles on every trip. I understand these techniques are essential for preventing collisions and protecting lives.

Driver Signature _____ Printed Name _____ Date _____