Skills clinic: Overtakes and filtering

One of the best things about motorcycling is that you can overtake and filter through traffic. But doing that is also risky with plenty of potential hazards. We spoke to Mark Jaffe, owner and chief instructor from Phoenix Motorcycle Training, to find out how to overtake and filter, but still keep it safe…



Phoenix MOTORCYCLE TRAINING

Overtakes

The big advantage of riding a motorcycle is that overtaking slower vehicles can be completed quicker and safer on two wheels. Overtakes are a part of what makes your ride flow and sets motorcycles apart from cars because of their size and manoeuvrability. Get it right and it's safe and effective, but as you may have suspected, it's not as simple as it sounds, nor without its hazards.

There are some key rules to remember about overtakes. The first one is, 'Do I need to overtake?' While you could argue that it's rare to absolutely 'have to' overtake, in some situations the benefits of overtakes are greater than in others. For example, if you are following a slow tractor with hay bales on a trailer, and it's safe to assume that it will not be turning off the road any time soon, a safe and skilled overtake will let you get on with your ride without having to sit behind the tractor in the dust from the hay or any debris falling from the trailer. With so many different variables involved in overtaking, from the speeds to road conditions, and the weather to vehicles to name but a few, it is always a case of assessing the benefits of the overtake on an individual basis.

Another question to ask yourself before overtaking is whether the overtake is appropriate in the situation you are at, at the time. Again, there are several different factors at play, but for instance, you might want to stay behind a slower vehicle if you are planning on turning off the road soon. Overtaking in that situation would only offer a marginal gain, and potentially mean that you then need to slow down right in front of the vehicle you just overtook. Not cool.

As with any other area of riding, you should also be very careful not to execute an overtake near a hazard. Even something that wouldn't require any action from you at normal speed can be a problem if you are accelerating on the other side of the road during an overtake. Good observations and reading the road and your surroundings will help with this.

There is also the question of whether your bike is capable of doing the overtake safely. You should be familiar enough with the bike you are riding to know how quickly and strongly it overtakes, but this can also depend on the load you are carrying (especially if you have a pillion passenger) and external factors such as altitude and wind.

A good rule to follow is that your overtake should not have an impact on any other road users. This means that as you are doing your overtake, the vehicle you are overtaking and any road users near them should be able to continue their journey as if you weren't even there.

As you can gather from all of this, planning is essential to execute a nice, safe overtake. But a plan for an overtake also should allow for an option to abandon the overtake at any point if a new hazard comes into view. In fact, neither overtaking nor filtering (which is slow overtaking, really) should even be started unless you know where you are going to finish back on your side of the road. Before you start the overtake, you should check that if you move out to overtake, and then want to abandon the overtake, you can return to where you started from without a problem. You should then identify enough places to pull into during the overtake so that you have your options open for the whole duration of the manoeuvre. And finally, there should be a nice, safe place to finish the overtake.

Overtaking is always done on the offside of the vehicle you are overtaking (in the UK that's on the right). The only time when a nearside overtake is acceptable is when you are on a multi-lane carriageway in a slow-moving queue of traffic.

Slow-moving traffic brings us neatly to another way of getting past slower vehicles: filtering...

Filtering

Many riders regularly filter through when faced with long, stationary or slow-moving queues of vehicles. It can be a great way to save time by using your bike's size and agility to find a way past other traffic. Just as with overtakes, filtering comes with its challenges and hazards, so it's not always simple.

Filtering requires great care and can expose you to additional hazards. Don't forget that you are very vulnerable on your bike in between all the vehicles you are filtering through. It only takes one of them to switch lanes in front of you to create a potentially dangerous situation.

Many people get frustrated in their vehicles when in queuing traffic, and it's not uncommon for people to change lanes without indicating or checking if it's definitely clear. This is difficult to anticipate, but good observations, planning and anticipation will help minimise the risks.

There may also be a physical reason for the queuing traffic, such as road conditions, debris or other hazard. And if the traffic is very slow, there may be pedestrians and cyclists moving between the vehicles. Being ready to negotiate all these potential hazards is part of your filtering plan.

Making yourself as easily noticeable as possible is important when filtering. Using lights is recommended, as well as using your horn if that helps to make your presence known to others.

You should take extreme care and move slow enough to be able to react to any hazards when filtering. Even if it seems tempting to zip through lines of traffic, you should only move at a speed where you are able to stop or negotiate hazards that may come into view very rapidly.

Be ready, and make sure you constantly identify spots where to join traffic if the queue starts moving at normal speed again.

There's a lot to think about with overtaking and filtering, but a good place to start is asking yourself if it's necessary, safe and legal. If it's all of those things, then just use your skill and go ahead.

Where to get the skills?

Phoenix Motorcycle Training is the UK's largest and highest-rated motorcycle training organisation, with advanced riding courses available at several locations. To find a course that suits you, as well as your nearest location, visit phoenixmotorcycletraining.co.uk or call 0330 223 4000.