

Eight Steps to Better Street Riding

Introduction

Many experts believe being a safe motorcyclist is more a matter of the mind than the body. While attitude and decision making are important, being physically skillful is still an essential component; however, a skillful motorcyclist is not necessarily a good motorcyclist. Making responsible decisions that reduce the risk of riding is a critical choice. A highly skilled motorcyclist riding 120 MPH through a school zone is certainly not a “good motorcyclist.” Being safe and responsible on a motorcycle results from a combination of factors; therefore, you will derive the greatest benefit from a multifaceted plan designed to enhance your street riding skills. There are eight steps you can—and should—take to become a more skillful rider.

The Eight Steps

These steps are logically sequential. That doesn’t mean you need to implement only one at a time or that you must do things in precisely this order, but if you are a new rider starting from scratch, the order suggested should be helpful. For example, “practice” is listed as No. 3, preceded by Nos. 1 and 2, taking an introductory course and independent study. Why? Because practice makes *permanent*, and only by practicing perfectly does it become perfect. If you have not learned the “what” and the “how” through taking a course or by independent study, practice is of little value and will even be detrimental if it reinforces bad habits.

Here are the eight steps:

1. Take an introductory skills-development course.
2. Engage in independent study.
3. Practice.
4. Take an intermediate skills-improvement course.
5. Ride a variety of bikes.
6. Ride off-road.
7. Attend a track school.
8. Repeat.

1. Take an introductory skills-development course.

If you have never taken a formal training course, you deserve to treat yourself. Experienced riders regularly admit that even after years of riding they learn new and important skills by taking a formal introductory skills-development course. By completing one of the Motorcycle Safety Foundation’s Basic RiderCourses, thousands of new riders have learned to ride correctly and thousands more with experience have learned skills they had never acquired on their own.

2. Engage in independent study.

The majority of motorcyclists learn to ride on their own or from a friend and never read a book or watch a video about riding skillfully and safely. That’s a big mistake. Next to taking a formal skills-development course, books and videos can provide a wealth of lifesaving information. modules for Group Riding, Riding Straight, and for the Seasoned Rider (that’s us old guys). Under “MSF Products,” you will also find *The Motorcycle Safety Foundation’s Guide to Motorcycling Excellence, 2nd Edition: Skills, Knowledge and Strategies for Riding Right*.

You can find a list of good books on the Web site of the Skilled Motorcyclist Association—Responsible, Trained and Educated Riders (SMARTER), at www.smarter-usa.org. For an astonishingly comprehensive motorcycle-specific mail-order bookstore go to www.whitehorsepress.com. RiderWearHouse/Aerostich (www.aerostich.com) also has an excellent selection of books on riding technique. It is an exceptional resource for gear as well, and even their catalog is an enjoyable read.

Subscribing to a magazine that regularly features articles on riding safely will provide you with an ongoing source of new information. While there are several of these published in Europe, *Motorcycle Consumer News* (www.mcnews.com) is the best source in the U.S. In it you will find three regular features focused on helping you to become a better rider. What you will not find in *Motorcycle Consumer News* are advertisements. This combination makes for a good magazine to subscribe to.

Every rider should have at least three or four “how-to-ride-well” books in their personal library. Don’t let them sit on the shelf and collect dust. Read and reread them. The pages should be dog-eared and full of highlighting and notes.

3. Practice.

As noted earlier, practice is important, but it is also important to practice the right way. That is why practice is listed after taking a course and independent study. If you have done either or both, then you know the proper techniques to practice. Most riders work on clutch control, limited space maneuvers, braking, cornering, and swerving. Get yourself a dozen or so markers (green or yellow tennis balls cut in half make excellent yet cheap markers), find an empty parking lot, and spend some time on focused practice. Whatever skill you choose to focus on, start slow and easy and work your way in small steps toward doing your best. Make your practice fun, setting up a “circuit” and working toward specific goals. Bring along a riding friend who can observe your riding, provide you with feedback, and help you “process” what you are learning. Be careful not to compete with your fellow rider. The only person you are competing with is yourself.

4. Take an intermediate skills-improvement course.

The Motorcycle Safety Foundation offers several skills-improvement courses of various names—experienced, advanced, for skilled riders, etc.—that may or may not be available from a public provider, depending on your state. You should be able to find one in your area.

In addition to the MSF courses there are a few others, but their availability is somewhat limited. Three of the most popular are Staying’ Safe, Street Masters, and Total Control. Staying’ Safe (www.stayinsafe.com) is the vision of internationally recognized motorcycle-safety expert Lawrence Brodsky and is known as America’s premiere on-street training program. Total Control Advanced Riding Clinics (www.totalcontroltraining.net), by Lee Parks, are conducted in a parking-lot environment and are specifically designed to fill the gap between the MSF advanced courses and track schools. There are other courses offered as well, including versions of police motorcycle training for civilians. If you do some searching, you will be able to find a skills-improvement course near you.

5. Ride a variety of bikes.

If you have owned the same bike for several years or have only owned one type of bike and your bike is the only one you ride, you might well have some gaps in your skills. You certainly are missing out on some of the fun of being a motorcyclist. As an experienced RiderCoach (someone who teaches the MSF courses), I routinely see students choose to ride, with RiderCoach help, bikes that are similar in design to the one they are already familiar with, which is understandable from a comfort standpoint. But countless other times, I've also seen the enthusiasm and excitement exhibited by students who left their comfort zone and tried a motorcycle of a different design. The "fun factor" is often surprising to them, but they're also surprised by how different the various bike designs handle from one another. While the basics are all similar, different designs have unique handling characteristics.

Experiencing a variety of bikes is a fun way to broaden your skills. Take every opportunity to ride a variety of bikes. If someone says, "Would you like to take it for a spin?" my answer is always a hearty, "Yes!"

One of the best, safest, and free (once you get there) ways to ride a bunch of bikes is to participate in the manufacturers' demonstration rides available at almost every large motorcycling event. I have been known to do nothing but "demo ride" for three full days. I can't think of a more fun way to learn.

6. Ride off-road.

If you are a street rider who has never ridden off-road, you have a great learning adventure awaiting you. By off-road, I don't mean driving your street bike or your big adventure touring bike, like the GS BMW, down a gravel road. I mean a real off-road bike ridden off-road.

The simple way to get some off-road experience is to buy a small off-road bike and have it in your backyard. Don't buy something new, don't spend a lot of money, and don't buy a dual-sport. Try to find a four-stroke (they are easier for a new off-roader to ride); but for a great adventure, a small two-stroke will give you all the fun you can handle. You will learn a ton about traction control and traction management.

For specific off-road training, check out the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Dirt Bike School (www.msf-usa.org) or the American Supercamp Riding School (www.americansupercamp.com); or go to www.amadirectlink.com, select "Riding," "Learn to ride!" and then "Advanced degrees" to find a list of more than twenty off-road training programs for serious off-road learning.

If you have a couple riding buddies who have never ridden off-road, get them to buy an old, cheap bike and join you; or to save money, go in together on the purchase of one bike you can share. A couple acres of private property is all you need, or do an online search for off-road trails and riding areas.

7. Attend a track school.

While most track schools are advertised as a “track school for street riders,” many street riders seeking advanced training are reluctant to register for one of these schools, fearing that riding on a track is not what they need or that to participate they must own a sport bike and intend to race. For most schools, this is not the case. Many focus on increasing your skills for street riding and are open to all riders, with all styles of motorcycles. A partial list of track schools is published in every issue of *Road Racing World* (www.roadracingworld.com), and many track schools advertise in this magazine. *Road Racing World* also publishes a separate, comprehensive Track Day (and school) Directory. Another good listing of track schools can be found at the AMA site, at www.amadirectlink.com. There are skills that you can learn and practice at safe and traffic-free tracks, under the direction of expert coaches, that you can learn and practice nowhere else.

8. Repeat.

Becoming a skillful rider and staying a skillful rider are two different things. Any and all of the above suggestions should be repeated often. Riders who live in areas where the riding season is limited by weather should plan on regular spring practice. Every rider can benefit from implementing each of the steps outlined above to enhance their street riding skills, and every rider can benefit from repeating the skill-enhancement activities on a regular basis. Being a “good motorcyclist” is both mental and physical. So make the effort to enhance your skills and then keep them sharp by taking advantage of the opportunities to learn and practice. Ride safe. Ride smart.

Author profile:

SMARTER President Dan Petterson, Ed.D., has been a motorcyclist for over 40 years. He rides street, off-road, racetrack, and dual sport. He currently owns 10 motorcycles, four of which are licensed and insured for street use. He has been involved in motorcycle safety since 1985 as a Motorcycle Safety Foundation instructor/RiderCoach and since 1990 as a RiderCoach Trainer. He is a graduate of several track schools, including all four levels of the California Superbike School. He holds a doctorate in education from Western Michigan University. Dan is a charter lifetime member of the AMA, having earned his charter lifetime membership many years ago by being a continuous dues-paying annual member for 25 years. He is the founder and current president of the Skilled Motorcyclist Association—Responsible, Trained and Educated Riders (SMARTER at www.smarter-usa.org).