Washington State
Driver Knowledge Study Guide

A step-by-step review for the WA knowledge (written) test and road test

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Tap the link on any page to book your knowledge test, road test, or driving practice.

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Getting Your License (New / Teen Drivers)

In Washington, driver education is required for teens under 18. Adults 18 and older may go straight to the knowledge test and then the road test.

To get your license you must:

- Be at least 16 years old
- Hold your instruction permit for a minimum of 6 months
- Successfully complete a driver education course
- Log 50 hours of supervised practice driving (10 of them at night)
- Pass the written knowledge test (80% or higher)
- Pass the road test (80% or higher)

Permit phase

- You must have a licensed driver (licensed at least 5 years) in the front seat with you, awake and sober.

Intermediate License phase (first year)

- First 6 months: no passengers under age 20 (immediate family excepted).
- Next 6 months: no more than three passengers under age 20 (immediate family excepted).
- First 12 months: no driving between 1:00 AM and 5:00 AM unless a licensed driver 25+ is with you.
- No cell phone use of any kind, including hands-free. These restrictions end at age 18.

Before You Drive: Vehicle Check & Setup

Walk around and check for:

- Window damage; fluid leaks; low/flat tire pressure; animals under the vehicle; any other obstructions.

Tire tread — the penny test

- Tread must be at least 2/32". Insert a penny with Lincoln's head upside down into a groove. If the top of his head is hidden, tread is legal. If you see his whole head, replace the tire.

Once inside, in order:

- Shut and lock the doors; place key in ignition; adjust the seat; adjust mirrors and head restraint; fasten your seatbelt.

Know your 'void area'

- The blind area close around your vehicle that you cannot see. Always check for pedestrians, carts and other vehicles before moving.

Core Driving Concepts

Key terms

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- **POT** — Path of Travel: the path your car will travel.
- **LOS** — Line of Sight: the area you can see in any direction. Keep a clear POT and LOS.
- **Targeting** — where you focus your vision. Where you look is where you go.

Before any maneuver, ask yourself:

- Is it safe? Is it legal? Is it necessary?

The IPDE process

- **I**dentify a hazard, **P**redict what could happen, **D**ecide what to do, **E**xecute your decision.

Controlling the vehicle

- Steering hand positions: 9 and 3 (best control), 10 and 2 (good), 8 and 4 (comfort). Keep about 1/3 of the wheel between your hands — never drive one-handed.
- Threshold braking: applying maximum brake pressure without losing traction.
- Always check the rear-view mirror before braking. A gradual, smooth stop gives the best control. Always come to a complete stop.

Signs, Signals & Road Markings

Types of signs

- **Regulatory** — black & white, often with red (Stop, Yield, speed limits).
- **Warning** — yellow & black, or orange & black for work zones (railroad crossing, school zone).
- **Guide** — green = destination/direction, blue = services/rest areas, brown = parks and points of interest.

Traffic signals

- Green — proceed with caution. Yellow — slow and prepare to stop. Red — stop.
- Flashing yellow — slow down, proceed with caution. Flashing red — stop, then go when clear (treat like a stop sign).
- A steady yellow means the light is about to turn red — stop if you can do so safely.

Turning on red

- Right turn on red: allowed after a complete stop and yielding, unless a sign prohibits it.
- Left turn on red: only from a one-way street onto a one-way street, after a complete stop, unless prohibited.
- If a traffic signal is completely dark (power outage), treat the intersection as an all-way (4-way) stop.

Road lines

- Solid white — edge of the road (the 'fog line').
- Broken white — separates lanes moving in the same direction; lane changes allowed.
- Double white — no lane changes / no passing.
- Solid yellow — marks the left edge of one-way roads and separates traffic moving in opposite directions.

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- Double solid yellow — no passing.
- Broken yellow — passing is allowed when safe.
- Two-way center turn lane — use for a maximum of about 300 feet, only to turn.

Intersections & Right-of-Way

- Approaching an intersection, identify whether it is controlled (signs/signals) or uncontrolled (none).
- At a stop sign or light, look left, right, and left again. Come to a complete stop.
- No stop line: stop at the sign, then edge forward until your LOS/POT is clear. With a stop line: stop behind the line, then move up if needed and stop again.
- **Four-way stop:** go in the order vehicles arrived. If two arrive together, the driver on the right has the right-of-way.
- **Yield sign:** you are not required to stop, but slow down and let cross traffic go first.
- **Roundabout:** yield to traffic already in the circle; signal before you exit.
- **Pedestrians:** stop and yield to anyone in a crosswalk. Always stop for a pedestrian with a guide dog or a white cane — and never honk at them.

Speed Limits (Washington defaults)

- The posted limit is the maximum for **ideal** conditions. Slow down for ice, water, snow, or fog.
- 20 mph — school zone when children are present / lights flashing / posted times.
- 25 mph — residential streets, unless otherwise posted.
- 30 mph — arterials.
- 50 mph — country roads.
- 60 mph — state highways / freeways (70 mph where posted).

Lane Changes & Turns

S.M.O.G. — a safe lane change

- **S**ignal, check **M**irrors, look **O**ver your shoulder (in the direction you're moving), then **G**o when safe. Do not slow down when changing lanes.
- Scan 15 seconds ahead, side to side, near and far. The most common reason for a lane change is a blocked POT/LOS.

Turns

- A turn is a form of lane change — always signal, at least 100 feet before the turn.
- Adjust speed and scan; begin the turn when your mirror is past the turning point; then adjust speed again.
- Know the hand/arm signals for stop/slow, left turn, and right turn — you may be tested on them.

Types of turns

- 2-point turn — the safest turnabout; the only one that does not require crossing traffic or backing.

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- Also know: U-turn, Y-turn, 3-point turn, and general turnabouts. Always know your turning radius.

Backing & Parking

Backing up

- Check your void area and POT with all mirrors and both shoulders — do not move until all is clear. Place your right arm on the back of the passenger seat, look back, and back at a walking pace using the brake to control speed.

Parking distances — do not park within:

- 12 inches — of the curb (how close you must park).
- 5 feet — of a driveway.
- 15 feet — of a fire hydrant.
- 20 feet — of a crosswalk.
- 30 feet — of a traffic light or stop sign.
- 60 feet — of a railroad crossing.
- 20 feet — of a fire station on the same side (75 feet on the opposite side).

No-parking situations

- Disability spaces (without a permit); anywhere a NO PARKING sign is posted; painted curbs (hospital/delivery zones); never park facing the wrong way.

Curb & hill parking

- Remember Wheel – Gear – Brake, and park within 12" of the curb. On a hill, turn your wheels the correct way and set the parking brake.

Parallel parking

- Pull up ~2 feet alongside the car ahead; match mirrors; back until your rear window post is just behind their lights; turn the wheel right and back to about 45°; straighten and back until your right mirror aligns with their bumper; turn the wheel left and back until centered, within 12" of the curb.

Sharing the Road

- **Large trucks / 18-wheelers:** if you can't see the driver in their mirrors, they can't see you — stay back. When passing, don't pull back in until you can see both of the truck's headlights in your mirror. Trucks and buses need more room to turn; you may need a 'staggered stop' (stop before the corner) to give them space.
- **Motorcycles:** obey the same rules as cars, but are harder to see because they are smaller — look for them.
- **Bicycles:** allow at least 3 feet when passing. Bikes may use the road, shoulder, bike lane, or sidewalk; bike lanes are marked with solid white lines — never park or drive in them.
- **Emergency vehicles:** if their lights are on, yield and pull to the right and stop. On a multi-lane road separated by a barrier, you do not have to stop — move over or slow down (Move Over Law).

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- **Watch parked cars** for doors opening, cars pulling out, and people or animals stepping out between vehicles.

Highway & Freeway Driving

- **Merging:** yield to traffic already on the road, find a gap, and accelerate to match traffic speed — do not stop on the ramp.
- Stay in the middle lane unless you are exiting (it is the primary travel lane).
- **No-passing zones** exist because your LOS/POT is restricted. Know your markings, and ask: is it safe, is it legal, is it necessary?
- On a two-lane road, if 5 or more vehicles are stacked up behind you, pull over at a safe spot to let them pass.
- Freeway numbering: odd-numbered routes generally run north–south, even-numbered run east–west.

Adverse Conditions

Weather hazards

- Wind can push your vehicle around, especially tall vehicles. In extreme heat/cold, check tire pressure and wiper blades.
- **Rain / hydroplaning:** water on the road can lift your tires off the surface so you lose traction. Slow down; if you hydroplane, ease off the gas, don't brake hard, and steer straight.
- **Fog:** severely reduces vision — slow down and do NOT use high beams.
- **Snow / ice:** beware black ice — ice you cannot see.

Headlights

- By law, turn headlights on from a half-hour after sunset until a half-hour before sunrise.
- Dim your high beams within 500 feet of an oncoming car and within 300 feet of a car you are following. Do not use high beams in fog.
- If an oncoming car has its brights on, look toward the right edge of the road until it passes.
- If you must stop on the shoulder, use your flashers and keep your low-beam headlights on so others can see you.

Impaired & Distracted Driving

Alcohol, marijuana & drugs

- Washington is a 'zero tolerance' state for underage drivers. BAC limits: 0.08% for 21 and older; 0.02% for under 21.
- Marijuana: 5.00 ng/mL THC limit for adults; 0.00 for under 21.
- **Implied consent:** refusing a breath or blood test suspends your license for at least 1 year — whether or not you are found guilty of the original stop.

DUI penalties (first offense)

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- Large fine plus court costs and attorney fees; license suspended at least 90 days; required alcohol/drug classes; costly SR22 insurance; possible ignition interlock device; up to a 5-year probationary license. Driving on a suspended license carries its own fine.

How alcohol affects you

- Alcohol is a depressant. The first thing it affects is your judgment — and you need good judgment to drive. It also impairs vision, concentration, understanding, feelings, and reaction time.
- Your body clears about one drink per hour. One 12 oz beer = one 5 oz glass of wine = one shot of liquor. Never mix medications and alcohol; read prescription labels.

Distracted, drowsy & emotional driving

- Both positive and negative emotions can impair driving. Take deep breaths, turn the music down, or let someone else drive if you can't calm down.
- Keep passengers under control and everyone buckled. If followed, drive to a busy public place — not home.
- Driving tired is extremely dangerous. Pull over, get out and stretch, or take a short nap.

Vehicle Maintenance

Check regularly:

- Oil level; brake fluid; transmission fluid; anti-freeze/coolant (never open the cap when the engine is hot); windshield washer fluid.
- Tires — even pressure, tread depth (penny test), uneven wear.
- All lights working, including the third brake light; wipers (heat/cold and use wear them out); windshield chips/cracks.

Emergencies

- **Any emergency:** pull safely to the side, turn on your flashers, and keep low-beam headlights on. Set out flares or reflectors.
- **Brake failure:** usually air in the lines — pump the brakes; if that fails, use the parking/emergency brake.
- **Stuck accelerator:** shift to neutral, try to free the pedal with your foot, brake, and pull over safely.
- **Engine stalls:** shift to neutral and try to restart. Overheating? Turn off the A/C (summer) or turn on the defrost/heat (winter) — you may be low on coolant. Never open a hot radiator.
- **Tire blowout:** pull over safely, flashers on, set out flares, then change the tire.
- **Car fire:** pull over, get everyone out, move a safe distance away, and call 911.

Be Prepared — Emergency Kit

Keep in your trunk:

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- Spare tire and jack; jumper cables; flashlight (with batteries); fire extinguisher; first-aid kit; flares/reflectors; duct tape; a way to communicate (cell service isn't everywhere).

For winter, add:

- Blanket; tire chains; sandbags or kitty litter for traction; a small shovel; warm clothes and gloves; water.
- Know your route before leaving, especially on a road trip, and obey warning signs.

Taking the Tests

Knowledge (written) test

- 40 multiple-choice questions; you need 32 correct (80%) to pass. Study the official Washington Driver Guide — that's where the questions come from. Arrive early with your permit. There is no set number of retakes, and the test is different each time.

Road (drive) test

- No instruction permit is required to take the road test — a valid photo ID is enough. If you bring your own car, it needs current insurance and registration, all lights working, legal tires, and license plates on the front and rear.

One more thing

- Consider registering as an organ donor when you get your license.

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