

Improving driver safety through public education



Decades of research and testing have gone into the development of our system of traffic signs and signals. By design, shapes and colors **communicate** important information to drivers as they approach. Text, symbols and markings complete the message,

Despite this logical approach to road signage and traffic control devices, research shows that many motorists do not understand all of the signage in use today. Education and public outreach are the keys to increasing driver understanding of signage, pavement markings and traffic control devices. Let's take a few minutes to review the kinds of things signs can tell us.



Color is an obvious visual clue in traffic signs. Traffic signs are one of seven colors – red, white, yellow, orange, green, blue, or brown. Black is used for lettering and as the dominant color on some signs for contrast and visibility. These colors are important. They tell you, in broad terms, the kind of situation the sign addresses.



Red is a prohibition color. It is used most often for stop and yield signs.



White is a regulatory color. Signs such as Speed Limit, One Way, and Lane-Use Control signs are common examples of white regulatory signs.

Black is used as the background on signs where the added contrast helps visibility. The Night Speed Limit sign is a good example of this use.



Yellow is a warning color. Yellow signs and signals – such as those marking school areas, alerting you to an upcoming Stop sign. divided highway or winding road – indicate the need for additional caution.



Orange is a special warning color. It warns of road construction or the presence of work crews in the area. Signs indicating a construction detour or warning of Flaggers Ahead are examples of orange signs.



Green denotes directions and guidance. Signs marking highway exits and noting mileage to the next town, for example, generally are green. Green traffic lights tell us that our lane has the right of way to proceed through an intersection.



Blue is a service color. Blue signs mark motorist services, such as hospitals, public telephones, and rest areas.



Finally, brown indicates recreational sites such as lakes, parks and scenic areas, as well as facilities within these sites.



Like color, the shape of a sign communicates important information to approaching motorists.



Only stop signs, for example, are eight-sided octagons. Only Yield signs are equilateral, or equal-sided, triangles.



Just as most regulatory signs are white, most also are square or rectangular in shape. About the only exception is the "cross buck" sign used to mark railroad crossings.



Horizontal rectangles are used for most green, blue and brown signs.



There are three one-of-a-kind shapes used for specific warning signs: the circle, used to warn of an upcoming railroad crossing and to mark designated emergency evacuation routes; the "sideways" triangle, or pennant, used to mark No-Passing Zones; and the five-sided pentagonshaped signs used to designate school areas and school crossings.



Tilt a square on its corner and you get a diamond shape. The diamond shape is common both to yellow warning signs and orange construction warning signs.

While shape and color help define the type of traffic control device, text and markings complete the message. Though identical in shape and color, these two diamond-shaped signs differ in markings and meaning. One alerts drivers to an upcoming traffic situation, while the other indicates the actual area where additional driver attention is needed. These two pedestrian signs make the point.



The Advance Pedestrian warning sign alerts drivers to an upcoming pedestrian crossing – before the driver actually reaches the crossing.



The Pedestrian Crossing sign always is located at the actual crossing. The crosswalk lines near the bottom of the sign designate the crossing. Look carefully: the Advance Warning sign does not have these lines.



The Advanced Pedestrian Crossing sign tells you to be prepared because you are approaching an area where foot traffic is likely. The Pedestrian Crossing warns that you have reached the crosswalk; watch out for pedestrians.



Let's look at two more crossing signs. Like the ones we just saw, these are yellow warning signs. But, as you can tell from the pentagonal shape, these are special – they alert drivers to a school area.

Unlike the single figure found on the Advanced Pedestrian Warning and the Pedestrian Crossing signs, there are two smaller figures on these signs, and the figures are carrying books.



This School Advance warning sign indicates that there is a school area just ahead. It is used both to alert drivers to the presence of a school ahead and to alert them to an upcoming school crossing.



This School Crossing sign marks the actual crossing. Like the Pedestrian Crossing sign, the two lines near the bottom of the sign indicate that it marks the actual crossing. Remember, only the school area signs feature two figures – all other types of pedestrian signs show only one person.



All drivers should be aware of the special speed restrictions which apply to school areas. Most drivers know that the flashing yellow lights indicate a reduced speed limit near a school. But some may not be clear on when they are allowed to resume the normal posted speed.



Here's how it works: you may resume the posted speed limit after you pass a normal Speed Limit sign posted at the end of the school area, or when you pass an "End School Zone" sign. Until you reach one of these traffic signs, you still are within the school area and should be driving at the slower school area speed.



Here are two more signs which may seem similar but which actually have different meanings. The first sign indicates a turn in the road just ahead; the second indicates a curve just ahead.



The turn sign warns of a bend in the road with a recommended speed of 30 miles per hour or less.



The curve sign indicates an upcoming bend in the road with a recommended speed of 35 miles per hour or more. Often, just below either of these signs, a smaller square sign is posted that notes the recommended speed for the turn or curve.

Remember, these suggested speeds are for normal driving conditions – not for wet or icy pavement.



Traffic signals also play an important role in driver safety. Flashing traffic signals, for example, are used to alert drivers to areas requiring specific actions by each driver. Most drivers understand that a flashing red light facing them means they must bring their vehicle to a complete stop.



But what happens next often depends on the color of light being displayed in each direction – and that's not always apparent.

For example, if a red flashing light is being displayed in all directions, then all traffic must stop before proceeding through the intersection.



But in some situations the light being displayed to intersecting traffic is flashing yellow. A flashing yellow light means slow down and proceed with caution, but it does not require a stop. Never assume because you have a flashing red light that intersecting traffic has one, too.

That can be a fatal assumption.

Remember, if a flashing yellow light is being displayed in your lane, then you have the rightof-way. But you also have the responsibility of slowing down and proceeding with caution. Drive defensively at all times.



Another important distinction drivers should understand is the difference between Protected and Permitted left turns, A Protected left turn means that drivers turning left across oncoming lanes of traffic have the right of way. Oncoming traffic must stop until the signal changes. A Permitted left turn means that drivers turning left across oncoming traffic must yield to that traffic; they are permitted to turn left, but only if there are large enough gaps in the oncoming traffic to allow their turn to be completed safely. One of two specific signs attached near the left turn signal can help clear this up. If you see a traffic light displaying a green ball and a green arrow, chances are you'll also see a sign that says "Protected Left on Green Arrow." This means that opposing traffic must stop – that the traffic light displayed to their lane is red.



if your turn is marked only by a lighted green ball, then chances are you'll also see a sign that says "Left Turn Yield on Green." This means that opposing traffic also is being shown a green traffic light, and will not stop at the intersection. You must yield right of way to all oncoming traffic before proceeding with your turn. When a left turn is protected, you may turn left without yielding to oncoming traffic. If the word "protected" does not appear on the sign, then you must yield to oncoming traffic before making your turn.



Most drivers have seen the Two-Way Left Turn sign and the pavement markings that go with it. But many drivers don't realize that these center turn lanes are designed only for traffic turning left from either traffic direction. These special lanes are not designed as passing lanes, or to serve as acceleration lanes for vehicles entering the street from the left. It may seem more convenient, when attempting to turn left onto a busy street, to pull into the center left turn lane and wait for a second break in traffic – but it also can be dangerous. Here's a simple rule to keep in mind for these lanes: if you are not turning left from the lane, stay out of it!



This information may seem obvious to some of you. But when it comes to driving, nothing is more important than your attention to safety. That's why we want every driver in Texas to learn their Vital Signs, understand what they mean, and follow them.

To learn more about traffic safety, consider taking a defensive driving course. Review the Texas Driver's Handbook. Watch out for the other guy, drive safely, and by all means...

Know Your Vital Signs!