

2.6.3 Defining hazards

Key points: - You are part of every hazard you meet.
- And this is what gives you control !

“What is a hazard?” is a vital question. Focusing properly on danger includes being able to separate the real threats from the unreal ones. And this starts with what you regard a “hazard” to be.

We saw before how crucial the activity of Directing Attention is to good observation. No one can give their full attention to everything all of the time, so selecting what is important is the key. Without this, you will spot the genuine dangers much later, when they have become very obvious and harder to handle.

Traditionally, a hazard is defined as:

“Any situation which could involve adjusting speed or changing course.”

And there are variations on the same theme. But seeing a hazard like this has two drawbacks:

- it is too general to help you identify which risks need your attention
- it portrays the problem as something that is “out there”, that you “react to”.

Certainly, after basic training, a driver should not have to regard every need to change speed or direction as a hazard. Most evidently, keeping pace with a flow of traffic and following ordinary bends in the road should be performed as a safe routine. The term “hazard” should be reserved to pick out actual dangers.

In re-thinking this, the first thing to recognise is that, for all the dangers you face:

part of the hazard is YOU !!



This is not an accusation, but the simple fact that a collision is a meeting of two objects. And remember also that you can only prevail over danger by thinking beyond who is to blame for it.

So, your hazards only exist because you are there too, and in that sense it is helpful to shoulder some responsibility for letting them happen. This might seem a bit hard on you, but in practice you will meet very few situations where it is not valid to some degree.

But this should not be depressing at all. It is actually very good news, because:

this is what gives you control !

The fact that you are involved allows you to change the outcome. This is a cornerstone of “defensive” driving, though for most drivers it is a radical shift in thinking about their hazards.

It also highlights that you don’t have to wait for threats to become significant. There is far more skill in preventing danger, rather than simply responding when it has become urgent. And predicting where danger will arise is done with your powers of Observation and Risk Assessment.

Returning to “What is a hazard?”, a good definition will point you to what needs your attention, and will also show that you are actively involved and exercising control. Thus, a sharper focus comes from seeing a hazard as:

“Any threat to you, that is not already allowed for in your thinking and actions”.

This promotes a more useful grasp of what is happening, and leads you to:

- assess the magnitude of risks, so the real threats stand out
- consider whether you have done enough about them
- look specifically for things you are not yet prepared for.

This is not to totally ignore what you are prepared for, of course, but to accept that it needs less of your attention. By being prepared for how a threat could develop, you reduce the risk it carries. For example, by giving an erratic driver a bit more space, your attention can then include searching for other dangers too.

Often simply being alert to a danger can reduce it. For instance, knowing how to spot when someone will change lane suddenly in front of you.

It is also clear from this, that hazards are not the same for all drivers, and:

a bad driver will be part of worse hazards than a good one in the same situation.

Lastly, remember too that hazards do not line up neatly and separately, to come one at a time. They often overlap in a chaotic jumble, with more than one needing to be tracked at once. This is why placing your attention is such a vital and continuous decision.