



RoSPA Advanced Drivers and Riders



Brake/Gear Overlap - Has it become Routine?

A closer look at this topic by Bob Smalley Chief Driving Examiner RoSPA/RoSPA Advanced Drivers and Riders

PLEASE FORGIVE THE EARLY RAMBLINGS, but I believe it important to reflect on where we came from, where we are now and where we are going with this crucial driving issue. Those of us whose advanced driving education came out of the 'blue book' will remember that separating the braking action from the selection of the appropriate gear was the only accepted application of pure 'system'.

Having achieved an advanced grade and having left the police driving school with this firmly implanted in our routine driving, we learned to develop a method of improving our progress in emergency response situations that involved the overlapping of the brake and gear phases of the System. Being in the most responsive gear at the precise point that required acceleration was an essential element of the overlapping process. This is achieved by tapering the braking and at the point where the braking is ending, the gear is selected. In good dry road conditions safety and stability are only marginally compromised. It was carried out selectively in the knowledge that we knew where we had come from and had stepped outside that routine to increase progress. Most importantly we knew the consequences of getting it wrong, particularly if road surfaces changed and friction reduced.

The writers of New Roadcraft in my opinion have capitulated to pressure in the cause of flexibility and so called enlightened experts. In trying to use the written word to justify overlapping they have created misunderstanding resulting in dangerous practice.

In Chapter 2 pages 26 and 27 the whole key to advanced driving, the System, portrays speed and gear as an overlapping activity and singles out that if you brake you can make the gear change before the end of the braking. It then issues warnings regarding late braking, snatched gear changes and in bold purple raised text states that 'brake/gear overlap, when used, should always be part of a planned approach that is the most appropriate for the circumstances'. Is it any wonder that some police driving schools and other advanced driving instructors are teaching and genuinely believe that brake/gear overlap is now acceptable as part of routine System.

I thought it might be me that had missed the point by fighting tooth and nail for the separated brake and gear part of the System until I had a conversation recently with Inspector Peter Rogers of the Metropolitan Police Driving School at Hendon. How pleasantly surprised and relieved I was to learn that not only are they teaching the separation of brake/gear, but most officers that come to them on transfer from other forces have to receive total retraining to get brake/gear overlap out of their System. Like me Hendon is not inflexible and is happy to accommodate brake/gear overlap in line with Chapter 4 page 64 but the vagueness of the sentence "sometimes it is helpful to overlap braking with gear change" is hardly a clear guide to a crucial part of advanced driving technique. What does 'sometimes' mean? Going by the warnings issued in the next paragraph, I would suggest "sometimes" means sparingly and in cases of emergency.

As a non-emergency driver on UK roads subject to speed limits that strictly regulate progress, why do I see so many so called advanced drivers applying this technique to their normal driving on advanced driving tests, particularly at left turns and when entering roundabouts?

Condensing the System at the critical point of brake/gear creates a problem for drivers who have not perfected the feel and understanding of separation. You have to perfect the blend of Information fine tuning your Position, varying your Speed using a combination of deceleration and braking. Then decide precisely when the view of traffic and road conditions make gear selection necessary to take you through and out of the hazard under controlled Acceleration. Then and only then will you understand and feel the destabilising effect of brake/gear overlap.

Overlapping covers up a lack of advanced driving skills that require many hours of practice. In a way it mimics the gear changing of an automatic gear box. Manufacturers continue to spend millions of pounds to perfect the automatic box introducing technology that will provide the driver with the correct gear at the right time in all circumstances. It cannot be done, but I must confess they become better year by year.

So when would an examiner expect to see a brake/gear overlap? I would suggest nothing has changed for non-emergency driving: it is as it has always been. You intend to change direction, have taken careful all round observation, you have reason to believe that your safety could be at risk in the main from an approaching vehicle behind whose speed and/or lack of attention from the driver requires you to complete the manoeuvre expeditiously (get the hell out of it!). Going downhill is different in that vehicle stability and control become the overriding factors. Once learned, understood and practised the System encourages flexibility in so many differing circumstances.

The latest front cover of Roadcraft highlights technique - safety - awareness - skills. These are the hallmarks of the advanced driver. If we are to develop the novice driver, who passed the basic driving test where overlapping brake/gear is not only taught but accepted on test, then we must start by completely breaking this routine. Only then will drivers understand the reasons for using it sparingly and in appropriate circumstances.

There is no place for routine brake/gear overlap on a RoSPA Advanced Driving Test.