

Three Defensive Driving Tools to Avoid Great Impact

Jeff Hohlstein

What do *OODA*, *Three Mississippi's*, and a vehicle's front wheels have in common? They can all be defensive driving tools that will alert and prepare you for potential conflict situations and avoid a crash.

In another year or so, I'll enter that age range of 78–85, when most people decide to quit driving. Over the years, I've learned some tools that I hope will allow me to drive safely far beyond that range. I'm not a certified driving instructor, so I'll describe the tools and how I use them. How you choose to use them is up to you.

The OODA Loop: See and avoid trouble

So what's an OODA? The *OODA* Loop is a rapid decision-making tool developed by Retired Colonel John Boyd, USAF. In combat, *OODA* is used to totally confuse and demoralize the enemy. In defensive driving, *OODA* is a disciplined way of thinking that helps one see and avoid trouble. *OODA* stands for *Observe > Orient > Decide > Act*, and then do it again.

It sounds like common sense, doesn't it? But then there's a joke—Two crows were sitting in a tree above a corn field. Crow One said, "Let's fly down and eat some corn." Crow Two, "We can't. There's a man standing in the field." Crow One, "That's a scarecrow. If it was a man, he'd be looking at his cell phone."

How many times do we see people who aren't even observing? And, as we age, we need a conscious, disciplined decision-making tool to drive safely. *OODA* can be that tool. Let's start with an easy example.

Three Mississippi's: Three second rule

Three Mississippi's keep you three seconds from hitting a vehicle in front of you. It's the easiest of the tools to understand, but the hardest to practice. It's the minimum safe distance to maintain between you and the driver ahead for reaction time. I've used two seconds for years, but in researching for this article, the *Florida Driver's Handbook* Section 5.26 states, "Keep a minimum following distance of three to four seconds with an additional second for any unusual weather or traffic conditions." I've made the adjustment to three seconds. And as I get older and my reflexes slow down, I may go to four.

Cell phones and all the distractions they create aside, there are legitimate reasons to look away from the road ahead—for instance, looking back before changing lanes. In heavy traffic, it may take more than one look. Also, checking vehicles at stop signs or in the center divider or checking GPS on an unfamiliar turn. Three seconds gives us time to do that. So how does *Three Mississippi's* work?

Observe, Orient, Decide and Act

Observe—Am I three seconds behind the driver ahead?

Orient—Pick a timing landmark. The easiest one I've found is a specific dashed lane stripe, but any fixed object will do. As your vehicle ahead passes it, count, "One Mississippi, Two Mississippi, Three Mississippi." If your landmark hasn't passed under your hood, you have three seconds. There are other ways to count seconds, but using them, I've found it easy to cheat. In counting Mississippi's, there are enough syllables to keep me honest, no matter how many Mississippi's I want to count. Each one takes a full second.

Orient—I'm three seconds back, or not.

Decide—If yes, maintain. If no, I *Act*, back out and do *Observe, Orient* again. If speed changes, three seconds' distance will change. I'll do it again. If someone pulls in front of me, as they often do in heavy traffic, I back out again.

Observe—In today's world, especially in heavy traffic, many drivers maintain less than one second behind the vehicle ahead. Over the years, I have been struck from behind at least five times, and never because of a panic stop I made. I have found that backing out to at least two seconds has been worth it in the past, because I have never struck someone else from behind. Now I'm using three seconds.

A vehicle's front wheels tell a lot. I was a certified Traffic Cycling Instructor from 2010 to 2016, and I taught that you cannot count on where a driver is looking when it came to cyclists. I taught students to look at a vehicle's front wheels. I've carried that to driving.

Observe – The rotation of the front wheels tells me instantly whether a vehicle is slowing, stopped, or accelerating—before I detect the motion of the vehicle. Where the wheels are pointed tells me where the vehicle will follow.

Orient – Wheels' rotation is useful at intersections to tell me who's yielding and who's not and at cross-streets and with left-turning vehicles in a median to tell me who's yielding and who's not. Wheels' direction is useful at a roundabout to determine whether a vehicle is continuing or exiting the roundabout.

This *observation* and *orientation* allow me to *decide* and *act* defensively and safely during normal traffic flow. So, let's get into the tough stuff—stop signs and signalized intersections.

Remember the rule, "Look left, right, left," before proceeding from a stop sign? It's inadequate and, as I learned on a bicycle, people do look left because that's where the threat to them will come. But many only glance right before or as they pull out, then back left.

Approaching an Intersection Using OODA

An intersection is any place that a vehicle, pedestrian or cyclist can enter your lane, creating a conflict – including side roads, driveways and center median breaks. Using OODA, as soon as I'm close enough to properly observe, I scan the entire intersection to orient myself. If I see a potential conflict, I keep it in my scan and decide/act as necessary.

Approaching a Stop Sign

As I approach or stop at a stop sign, I:

Observe – Look right all the way to the sidewalk or, if none, to the road edge. I look for pedestrians and cyclists opposing traffic. Cyclists may legally oppose traffic on a sidewalk, but not on the road, but some do. Then I sweep left, checking cross traffic and the opposite side of the intersection, and finally, look left for my opening.

Now I'm *oriented*. If there are potential conflicts, I've noted them.

Decide, Act—If there are no other conflicts and I have an opening, I go, but as I release the brakes, I look all the way back to the right. Whereas a pedestrian would be picked up in the first sweep, a cyclist may have been too far away. They come upon an intersection almost like from nowhere. If waiting for a traffic break, as it approaches, I again *Observe* and *Orient* right to left. If nothing has changed, as the break arrives, I go.

Yield Signs

Most Yield signs are at signalized intersections. If I already have a green light, as I approach the Yield, I sweep right to left, paying particular attention to the sidewalks and opposing lanes across the intersection, looking for pedestrians, cyclists, left-turning drivers, and continue. If I don't have a green light, I stop, do a similar sweep, ending left, looking for an opening. As it arrives, I again check the sidewalks and crosswalks and across the intersection for left-turning drivers. Then I look left and go.

Green Lights

Going straight through a green light. President Reagan's time-worn adage "Trust but verify" applies here. Approaching an intersection, in this order, I look right for pedestrians and cyclists, left for red-light runners, across for left turners, and, as I enter it, right for red-light runners.

Red Light Turns Green

Going straight when the red light turns green. To me, this is the most dangerous time to enter an intersection. Stopped cars can tell a lot. Before the light turns green, I check the cross lanes. If they're all filled with stopped cars, then a red-light runner isn't a problem. Before the light turns, I again check for bicyclists and pedestrians. If I'm first in line, and the cross lanes aren't filled with stopped cars, as I release the brakes, I check first left for red-light runners and immediately across the intersection for left turners on a red arrow. I have seen as many as three vehicles in a row turn left against a red arrow. As I enter the intersection, I check for red-light runners and right turners from the right.

How to Integrate OODA into Your Driving

You don't have to use OODA exactly as I do. The fact that you use it to become more defensive will cause you to make faster and better decisions than many other drivers. In the beginning, you'll have to mentally run through the steps – Observe, Orient, Decide, Act, at each potential conflict. This is called conscious competence. After using it for a while, getting in the vehicle will bring OODA to mind and as you drive, the steps will occur automatically – unconscious competence. If you find yourself becoming distracted, bring it back to your consciousness.

OODA is a great tool for people of all ages, especially for older drivers. But there is more. As we age, we lose strength, balance, and cognitive skills, unless we do something about it. There are many studies that say exercising a few hours a week can benefit all three, regardless of how old you are when you start. Many Medicare Advantage programs offer Silver Sneakers, a free membership to participating gyms. These health-care companies would rather pay for your gym membership than to pay for your illnesses resulting from a sedentary lifestyle.

So, the choice is yours. Do you want to drive more defensively and extend your driving years? OODA is a useful tool, and exercise is the enabler.



Bio: Jeff Hohlstein grew up near Buffalo, New York. He served in the U.S. Navy from 1960 through 1981, when he retired with the rank of commander. He and the former Miss Jo Allison Manly married on July 19, 1966. He earned his bachelor's degree in History and Political Science from La Verne College, while on active duty. After his career as a fighter pilot, the Hohlsteins settled in Southern California. He worked for Lockheed Corporation in California and Texas. In 1995, he left Lockheed and, together, they opened Management Recruiters of Round Rock, which they operated until 2004. The Hohlsteins moved to Orange Park, Florida in 2005, near Jodi's childhood home. From 2010 through 2017, Jeff taught traffic cycling; first,

Traffic Skills 101, certified by the League of American Bicyclists; also, Cycling Savvy, certified by both the Florida Bicycle Association and the American Bicycling Education Association. Today, Jeff and Jodi are happily retired and active in The North Florida Bicycle Club. They are members of the Florida Department of Transportation District Two's Community Traffic Safety Team in Clay County.