Name: _____ Date: _____

How Do You Learn to Drive?

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1260 words

Noor was twelve, and one question had been bothering her for weeks. Her cousin Teo had turned fifteen and a half and gotten a California learner's permit, and he talked about almost nothing else. Noor's own parents always said "When you're older," which was not an answer. At Sunday dinner, Noor finally asked it out loud. "How do you learn to drive?" Her aunt Ines, who teaches driving for a living, looked up from her plate. "Slowly," Ines said. "And in stages. Nobody gets handed the whole thing at once."

Ines's first surprise was that much of driving is not moving but looking. A driver has jobs that move the car: speeding up, slowing down and steering. Then there is a job that never stops, which is scanning. Scanning means watching far ahead and to the sides, not only at the road in front of the hood. California's handbook tells drivers to scan at least ten seconds ahead. Researchers call it a skill that experienced drivers build over time, and they found that new drivers often notice a hazard later.

Then she drew a car on a napkin and talked about mirrors. The rearview mirror and the two side mirrors show what is behind and beside the car. Knowing what is behind helps a driver avoid being hit from the rear. But every vehicle has blind spots. These are areas the driver cannot see by looking straight ahead or in the mirrors, usually at the sides and a little behind. Lights and turn signals work the other way around. Mirrors bring information in, and signals send it out, telling everyone nearby when the car is turning, slowing or stopping.

Noor asked the question she most wanted answered. "How far does a car go before it stops?" She guessed a few feet. Ines shook her head. Stopping has two parts, she said. First comes the thinking distance, the ground a car covers while the driver notices a problem and reacts. Then comes the braking distance, the ground it covers while the brakes slow it. In a table that Virginia's courts use, for an average car on a dry road and a driver who needs a second and a half to react, a car going 20 miles an hour needs about 63 feet to stop. Most of that, about 44 feet, is only thinking.

Then Ines doubled the speed, and Noor stopped chewing. At 40 miles an hour the thinking distance doubles to about 88 feet, because the car covers twice as much ground every second. But the braking distance grows four times, from about 19 feet to about 76. The whole stop takes about 164 feet. At 60 miles an hour it takes about 303 feet, roughly a football field. Speed does not add distance evenly, it multiplies it. Rain and ice make every one of those numbers longer, because tires grip a wet or icy road less well.

Teo's first step had been a driver education course, because California asks teens to finish a classroom or online class before they can get a permit. Then, at fifteen and a half, he applied

for an instruction permit, and a parent signed the application. Teo brought papers that proved who he was and where he lived. At the DMV office he took a vision test and a written test on the rules of the road. If you fail the written test, you must wait before trying again, and after three tries you have to reapply. The permit begins the supervised learner's period, when a new driver practices with supervision.

States do not agree on the details. In IIHS's state table for November 2026, the permit age is 14 in South Dakota and 16 in New York. California asks for fifty hours of supervised practice, ten of them at night. Why so many hours? Being new is part of the risk. IIHS is a research group supported by auto insurers. It says crash risk is especially high in the first months after getting a license, and that the quality of practice may matter even more than the amount. Noor frowned. "So who decides?" "Each state," Ines said.

Ines's car has something Noor had never noticed: a second brake pedal on the passenger side. Driving teachers sometimes use cars with dual controls, so they can slow the car if they must. California still requires the class before a permit. Ines is honest about the research, though. IIHS reports that formal studies of high school driver education found little or no drop in crashes per licensed driver. Studies of graduated licensing, which adds practice hours and limits after the license, found that it reduces crashes substantially.

Noor asked about the road test, and Ines knew what the examiner scores. In California, the examiner marks a "traffic check" in every action. That means looking at the cars, bikes and people around you, and reacting safely. The DMV says backup cameras and self-parking cannot be the only thing you use, and NHTSA agrees that a camera is no substitute for mirrors or for turning to look. Driving ten miles an hour over or under the speed limit for no good reason is a critical error. So is any moment when the examiner has to step in.

Passing the road test does not unlock everything. In California, as of 2026, a driver under 18 is a provisional driver for the first year. Teo may not drive between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., and he may not carry passengers younger than twenty unless a licensed driver who is 25 or older rides along. A few narrow exceptions exist. The limits aim at two things that raise risk, night and passengers. In a 2012 AAA Foundation study, a 16- or 17-year-old driving with two young passengers and no older one had about double the risk of a deadly crash per mile. With an adult of 35 or older aboard, the risk went down.

That three-step path has a name: graduated driver licensing. New Zealand started it in 1987. Florida was first in the United States, in 1996, and now every state has some version. Why build a system? Per mile driven, drivers 16 to 19 have about three times the fatal crash rate of drivers 20 and older. In one study of more than 800 teen crashes, the commonest errors were not scanning enough, going too fast for the conditions, and being distracted. Its lead author said this helped dispel the myth that most teen crashes come from thrill-seeking.

Noor had one more question, and it was a big one. "Won't cars drive themselves soon?" Ines

said many new cars already have sensors, cameras or radar, that warn a driver or even brake alone, though some systems only warn. They help, she said, but the sensors can miss things in low light or bad weather. IIHS says truly driverless cars are not for sale yet, and NHTSA says every car for sale still needs a driver who gives it full and undivided attention.

Noor wanted to know when she could start. "That depends where you live," Ines said. "Your state sets the ages, and states change them. But every state uses stages, because new drivers crash much more often than drivers 20 and older." Noor thought about "When you're older." It still was not a date. But now it had a class, a permit, fifty hours, a road test and a year of limits inside it. "So older means practiced," she said. Ines smiled. "Slowly," she said. "And in stages."

Questions

1. When speed doubles from 20 to 40 miles an hour, what happens to the braking distance?

A. It doubles
B. It grows about four times
C. It stays about the same

2. Why does California limit night driving and passengers on a first license?

A. Those are two things that raise a new driver's crash risk
B. Cars are harder to drive at night
C. Passengers distract the DMV examiner

3. In this book, what does graduated mean in graduated driver licensing?

A. Finished school
B. Very expensive
C. Given in steps

4. What is a blind spot?

A. A dirty spot on the windshield
B. An area the driver cannot see straight ahead or in the mirrors
C. A road with no lights

5. Why do many states ask for lots of supervised practice hours?

A. Crash risk is especially high in the first months of driving
B. Practice makes the car go faster
C. The written test is hard to pass

6. What must a California teen finish before getting a learner's permit?

A. A road test
B. Fifty hours of night driving

C. A driver education course

Words to know

scanning: looking all around
permit: written permission
examiner: test grader
graduated: given in steps

Answer key: How Do You Learn to Drive?

1. B. It grows about four times
2. A. Those are two things that raise a new driver's crash risk
3. C. Given in steps
4. B. An area the driver cannot see straight ahead or in the mirrors
5. A. Crash risk is especially high in the first months of driving
6. C. A driver education course