FOLLOWING DISTANCE

Following too close, tailgating, drafting. These words are synonymous with inadequate following distance and a key contributor to rear-end collisions. A definition of following too close could be “Driving too close to the vehicle in front of you and not having enough time to stop before hitting it.”
The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) publishes regulations relating to the skills a driver must have to obtain a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). They include: § 383.113: Required skills

(a) Safe on-road driving skills. All applicants for a (CDL) must possess and demonstrate the following safe on-road driving skills for their vehicle class:

(b) Ability to adjust speed to the configuration and condition of the roadway, weather and visibility conditions, traffic conditions, and motor vehicle, cargo and driver conditions;

(c) Ability to maintain a safe following distance depending on the condition of the road, visibility, and vehicle weight;

(d) Ability to adjust operation of the motor vehicle to prevailing weather conditions including speed selection, braking, direction changes, and following distance to maintain control; and

(e) Ability to observe the road and the behavior of other motor vehicles, particularly before changing speed and direction.

Some states also require drivers to maintain a minimal gap of a specified distance or time interval. It's important to keep in mind that not only is it dangerous to follow too closely, tailgate or draft, it may also result in financial burden if you are ticketed for the moving violation of following too closely. If a CDL holder receives more than one such violation in a three year period he will be disqualified from operating a Commercial Motor Vehicle (CMV) for a period of time, usually 60 to 120 days. (See Table 2 to 383.51.)

What is a safe following distance?

A safe following distance is one that allows the driver of the following vehicle enough time to stop before crashing into the vehicle in front of it. Many factors play into what is a safe following distance. They include road conditions (dry, wet, snow, ice), the length of the vehicle, its weight, visibility, speed, tire style, tire condition and the ability for the driver to perceive and react to road conditions.

The recommended following distance used by professional safe drivers of commercial motor vehicles, safety professionals, FMCSA and the National Safety Council is one second for each ten feet of vehicle length. Drivers should add an extra second for speeds over 40 mph. Additional following distance should be practiced during adverse road or weather conditions.

Can you stop on a dime? Of course not. But before you even begin to apply the brakes, three things take place that increase your stopping distance. Because of this, your actual stopping distance is not just the amount of time it takes the brakes to stop the vehicle.
What takes place before you begin to apply the brakes:

- Perception time: On average it takes 1 ¾ seconds from the time you see a situation and when your mind tells you to take action.
- Reaction time: The time it takes you to decide to apply the brakes before actually applying the brakes. This time takes an additional ¾ of a second and keep in mind, you are still moving.
- Brake-lag time: Another ¾ of a second has gone by. This is the time it takes for the air brakes to begin engaging after you have pressed the brake pedal. The vehicle is still moving.

Then there is the actual braking distance. This is the actual time and distance it takes the brakes and other components to slow or stop the vehicle. This distance varies with all of the factors mentioned earlier, like road type, road condition, length and weight of the vehicle and the mechanical components of the vehicle.

Actual stopping distance:
If you are traveling 55 miles per hour on dry pavement, you are covering approximately 81 feet per second. If you are looking 300 feet (about the length of a football field) in front of you and you see a fixed object, do you have time to stop? The following illustrates how long it will take you to stop.

You see the need to take action. This translates to 1 ¾ of a second, covering 142 feet.

You react. The time it takes your brain to tell your feet to apply the brakes (3/4 of a second) covers an additional 97 feet.

Brake lag. You've applied the brakes but for another ¾ of a second, the vehicle is not being slowed by the brakes. This covers an additional 65 feet.

Braking distance. A tractor trailer traveling on dry pavement with good brakes can take approximately 168 feet to stop even after the brakes have been engaged.

The total stopping distance is 472 feet, which is longer than the length of a football field. In the scenario described above, with a fixed object 300 feet ahead a rear end accident would happen. And it could have been prevented.
How to determine safe following distance:

One way to determine following distance is to find a landmark, such as a road sign, bridge, or road markings. When the vehicle in front of you passes that mark, begin counting, one thousand one, one thousand two and so on. Your following distance should be enough to allow you to react to sudden stops or changes in the traffic flow. For a tractor trailer traveling at 55 m.p.h., the recommended following distance should be at least 6 seconds.

Maintaining at least a 6 second following distance can be difficult in heavy traffic. In metropolitan areas a good way to keep a safe following distance is to travel below the posted speed limit.

Other techniques and driving habits that can help you maintain a safe following distance include:

- Cover the brake when you see a hazardous situation or when you are unsure of the action of your fellow motorist.
- Remain alert, patient and courteous.
- Do not be distracted. Focus on the task at hand and be a professional driver who drives safely and maintains adequate following distance.
- Scan the road as far as you can see. Looking for potential hazards such as pedestrians, brake lights, animals, vehicles on the side of the road.
- Listen to your C.B. radio or traffic reports on the radio.
- Make sure you are well rested.
- Plan your route before you begin.

Failure to maintain a safe following distance can result in accidents, moving violations, fines, lost revenue, and loss of your CMV license. It can also make other drivers nervous and is considered aggressive driving. Make sure you maintain a safe following distance and be a safe, professional driver.
Following Distance
Risk Management

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