

Advice an Observer offers to Associates (“But why?”)

This short article is written principally for Observers but any qualified advanced driver may find it of interest, reflecting on the days when they were an Associate. It reflects the personal opinions of the author and is not official guidance. Most new Associates come to the IAM RoadSmart Advanced Driving Course with many years of driving experience and habits are ingrained; suggesting a change in technique is therefore often resisted unless there is a reason to “buy-in” to the new method. It is never sufficient to say “Because it says so in the book”. Rather, we must offer a compelling explanation why the new method is superior, either in terms of safety or accuracy. Only then will the driver see a good reason to change. Observers therefore need to know both the *what* AND the *why*.

Driving is a seemingly endless series of “what if” possibilities and whilst most scenarios will require no intervention, our approach should be to identify hazards and prepare for a change in our driving plan, often at short notice. In other words we must be prepared to use the developing information (the “I” in IPSGA) to adapt, whilst retaining full control.

Let’s take for our example the way we hold the steering wheel when negotiating a left-hand bend. Steering wheel movements up to around 45 degrees are probably best achieved with the normal “fixed grip” hold but for tighter bends we are encouraged to use the “push-pull” method rather than crossing our hands. But why? Well, it’s always safer to have two hands available and to be in a position to quickly change direction either way, mid-corner, as the view develops and brings new information.

One common mistake I frequently see is in anticipation of a left bend; the driver inexplicably (I really don’t understand why they do this!) moves their right hand to the 12 o’clock or 11 o’clock position, as illustrated. I call this the drug dealer stance. They then rotate the wheel anticlockwise to steer left into the corner, bringing their right hand to 9 or 8 o’clock, with their arm across the wheel. Where’s their left hand all this time? Probably resting on the gear lever (in case it falls off, I presume!) or writing that all-important text message. Agghhhh!



What’s wrong with that? Well, if the airbag deploys in that position it may break the driver’s arm or dislocate their elbow. Another problem is that it limits the driver’s options for corrective actions. In this scenario and using this hand position, if the driver enters the corner and then sees that there is a cyclist just beyond the apex of the corner, if it was safe to do so (no oncoming traffic), they could slow down and be able to adjust position to the right without changing their grip (i.e. straighten up a little) and so pass the cyclist in safety. So no problem there, but how about the opposite – perhaps an oncoming motorcyclist cutting the bend? For the motorcyclist, the bend is a right-hander and they lean into our side of the road. The driver would be hard pressed to swerve further to the left since that would involve taking their right hand further round, to the 6 o’clock position. One can think of other challenging scenarios such as mid-corner understeer and oversteer correction.

Adopting a method based on “push-pull” ensures we can adapt our plan but still retain full control, covering all eventualities. Hand-crossing is not outlawed but any method should be accurate and maximise safety and stability.

What’s my point? As with all “advanced” techniques, identifying the limitations of the Associate’s current engrained habits and outlining the benefits of an alternative will increase the likelihood they will change. Just saying “Don’t do it that way, do it this way” is almost guaranteed to be ignored.

Of course the fun starts when we Observers disagree on the explanations we offer!

Roadcraft is the go-to reference. Order your copy from <https://www.desktopdriving.co.uk/>

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