

Seconds Count in Following Distance



by Debbie L. Feldman

It's a normal day and you're driving your bus along a familiar route when the vehicle in front of you stops suddenly. Can you stop the bus in time to prevent a rear-end collision? It depends on your following distance.

Follow the 4-second rule

A driver's following distance must be great enough to allow the vehicle to stop safely. It depends on the vehicle's weight, speed and braking system. For bus drivers, the National Safety Council recommends the 4-second rule as the standard for measuring following distances. When you see a vehicle in front of you, look for a landmark ahead of that vehicle. A

landmark can be a lamp post, tree, telephone pole or road sign. When the rear bumper of the vehicle in front of you passes the landmark, count off 4 seconds ("one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three, one thousand and four"). If the front bumper of your bus reaches the landmark before you finish counting, you're following too closely. Take your foot off the accelerator until you can safely meet the 4-second following distance rule.



The 4-second rule gives you a cushion of space between your bus and the vehicle in front of you. This rule applies for buses operating under ideal conditions. It allows 1 second of stopping time for every 10 feet of bus length. Since passenger buses average about 40 feet, drivers should allow 4 seconds of stopping time. If the bus is 60 feet long, adjust the formula and allow 6 seconds.

Add extra seconds for bad weather

If weather or road conditions are not perfect, you need even more time and distance to stop your bus. If this is the case, increase your following distance. In rain, snow, ice or fog, you should add an extra second for each new hazard you find yourself facing.

Slowing down is a wise move when you're driving on icy roads. Beware of "black ice" — ice that has melted and frozen again. Because



black ice looks clear, it's hard to recognize and you may not know you're on it until it's too late.

Personal factors add up

Be sure to add an extra second for any personal factors that could affect your driving or reaction time — including fatigue, headache or when you're just not feeling your best. "The driver's mood is the most important factor in reaction time. It must be adjusted for, because it can slow down your reaction time," says Richard Breeden, safety and training supervisor for Omnitrans in San Bernadino, Calif.

If you're traveling faster than 40 mph, add another second to the formula. Nancy Johnson, bus operations supervisor for the Rochester, N.Y. City School District, suggests a 5-second rule on freeways.

When you approach a traffic signal, you should stop your bus far enough back to be able to see the wheels of the vehicle in front of you, according to Johnson. That way, you can give your bus enough distance to drive around the vehicle and clear it if it looks like the vehicle in front of you is not going to move. If you're about to change lanes, be sure to use the following distance rule before you do so.

Know your bus

"Know your capability and the limits of your bus and its load," says Donna Kaiser, who

owns a school bus company in Artesia, N.M. "Be aware of how long it takes to stop a bus that is full of passengers."



When training bus drivers, Kaiser takes them out in an empty bus to show them how much time it takes to stop. Then, she

The 4-second rule gives you a cushion of space between your bus and the vehicle in front of you.

teaches them to be aware of how much longer it takes to stop the bus when it's full.

Before every trip, test your brakes, lights and turn signals, and check your tires. If you have to stop suddenly and you have given yourself enough distance, your vehicle should respond the way you expect.

Always practice defensive driving. "Keep your eyes moving and anticipate what the other drivers are going to do," advises Mark Cegelski, manager of planning for the Cleveland Public Schools. Scan your mirrors, and look at all sides of your bus. Be aware of vehicles in front of you.

A little extra caution in your following distances should save you from danger. "The 4-second rule works in the city, residential and rural areas, and even on freeways. It's self-adjusting to whatever area you're driving in and whatever speed you're driving at," says Breeden. ●