



Backing Safety

Instructor Notes: *Backing up a tow truck properly is an essential skill for any towing operator and one that must be taken seriously. The ability to perform this maneuver well separates the pros from the amateurs. Use this opportunity to discuss the challenges of backing up a tow truck – both loaded and empty – with your staff today. Take the time now to prevent a crash tomorrow.*

The average truck driver may drive thousands of miles going forward, but have you considered that most of them cover less than a mile or two per year in reverse? For some drivers, backing up a truck isn't easy and in some instances it can be deadly. According to the National Highway Safety Traffic Administration (NHTSA) there are at least 500,000 backing accidents of some type every year in the U.S. and of those half-million accidents 15,000 include some type of injury and approximately 210 deaths.

The following information is intended to help drivers avoid backing accidents through awareness of the hazards involved and techniques that can be used to prevent them.

Avoid Backing

One out of every four accidents can be blamed on poor backing techniques so don't back up unless it's necessary. Proper planning of routes and positioning of your truck can reduce the amount of backing that's needed. If you have the option, back into driveways or alleys instead of backing into traffic. This practice will give you a better view of hazards that might be in the area. It also puts you in the position to operate with full visibility when re-entering traffic. Angle is

important as well so try to back from the driver's side when able to avoid "blindside" backing.

Use a Spotter

When possible, use a spotter to assist you, especially if you are backing a large truck or into a small space. Prior to any movement, you and the spotter should review the signals that will be used to back the vehicle, especially the signal to stop. Avoid distractions, roll down a window and turn off the radio so warnings can be heard.

While the spotter and driver are working as a team, the driver tends to maintain most of the responsibility for the actions of the vehicle so look and listen.

G.O.A.L. (Get Out and Look)

When no spotter is available, get out and walk around the entire vehicle(s). This "circle of safety" should be used to observe anything that could come in contact with your truck or the vehicle you are towing. While some tow trucks are equipped with rearview cameras, the only certain way to know the surroundings is if you get out and look. During your walk-around, check for clearance hazards above and around the side of your vehicle. Once clear, get in and back up before the scene changes.

Use Every Trick in the Book

When backing, use all available aids to help you with your visibility. These include mirrors on both sides of the vehicle, hood mounted mirrors, rearview mirrors, rearview cameras, reflections of the vehicle in windows, and shadows thrown by the vehicle. To be useful, make sure the mirrors are properly adjusted before starting your shift.

Back Up Slowly

Almost every backing crash is preventable, but it takes time and practice to hone your skills. Always back up slowly and continuously check all mirrors while backing. When backing the vehicle, drivers should always expect something to get in their pathway; slow backing will enable quicker stops to avoid crashes. Every backing situation is new and different, even if this is the third time you're unloading a car at a particular dealership that day. Don't become complacent ... stay watchful for changes and new obstacles that weren't there before.

Towing Considerations

Be careful of tight turns when backing as you could damage the customer's vehicle by jack-knifing. If you're towing a tractor-trailer or similar combination, it's probably wise to disconnect the trailer before trying to back two units with multiple moving joints.

Wrap Up

Backing up a truck is not an easy task under the best of circumstances but it can be done. Pre-plan your moves, know your clearance and take your time. Remember, safety is something we can all live with.



This article is a part of TowSafe, a safety program designed for towing operators. For more information contact April at 407-706-6796.