

First day at work

Congratulations! You've passed your test, and you're about to start your first day's work as a driver of a heavy goods vehicle. This leaflet is aimed at all those who are completely new to haulage. To save time, we've made the assumption that you'll be driving an artic.

Things you will need.

A pair of gloves.

Protective footwear.

High visibility clothing (can be borrowed).

Maps, the most useful being the "AA Truckers Road Atlas" with the bridge heights.

Arriving at the yard: On your first day, it's a good idea to arrive early, not just to show willing, but to familiarise yourself with the layout of the premises. If your employer put you through your test, life will be a lot easier. If, like many, you did the training on your own, your first sight of your new job may be on a dark winter morning in a yard you've never seen before. Make a note of obstructions, parked cars and uneven ground. Is there a weighbridge? Parking on it will not make you popular! If there are forklifts about, and you need to approach one for directions, be careful. Many drivers have been retired by forklifts, painfully.

The Vehicle: Most C + E tests are trained for and taken in a 250 hp tractor unit pulling a 30 – 40 foot flat bed with 2 axles on steel springs, unladen of course. Most haulage is undertaken in a 360+ hp unit, pulling a 44 foot triaxle trailer on air suspension laden up to 44 tonnes. The gearbox will differ not only from the trainer (usually a 6 speed), but also between manufacturers. Common layouts are 4 over 4 range change, with or without splitter (Volvo, Scania, MAN, older Mercedes, some ERFs and Leyland DAF), six speed with splitter (Renault, DAF), and the new semi- and fully automatic shifts now coming into service. They all work the same, but they all look different!

Checking and starting: If your new employer is giving you an assessment drive, remember to do as much as you know, and ask about the rest. The first thing to check on any vehicle is the oil. The old quart a day engines are thankfully a memory, but the vehicle you're getting into could have a leak or simply be getting on a bit. No one's ever been sacked for being careful. If you can't find the dipstick, ask. Some vehicles have electric levels that show up on the oil pressure gauge with the engine off. Then check the water, screen wash, tyres, hoses and connectors to the trailer (if coupled up). Are there dents or other visible damage? Check the lights, including the brake lights. Check the fuel level; if the gauge doesn't work check visually. A torch or long narrow piece of wood may be useful. Start the engine without using throttle and let it idle until all the pressures (oil, brakes, suspension where available) are normal. Normal idle oil pressure is usually 30 psi/ 2 bar, brake air around 120- 150 psi/ 8-10 bar, suspension 8-12 bar. If the air pressure won't build up, report it. Don't idle an engine for long. It wastes fuel and they don't warm up any quicker. Check your height indicator. Does it show the correct height for the vehicle/trailer? It's an offence to get it wrong! Remember to fill your tacho card in and remember that it faces forward (up) in the instrument head.

It won't start! It won't go! It won't stop! On certain vehicles, the engine is stopped with a kill switch. Some, like the Mercedes, have a button on the floor, which doubles as the exhaust brake. These are becoming rare, but they're not all gone. The other version is the dash mounted pull switch, found on older Volvos and Scania's up to 1996. This locks in the OFF position. Until it's pushed in, the engine won't start. Sometimes, the vehicle refuses to move. This is usually caused by either the trailer brakes being on, a lack of air pressure, or the "BROMSE" button in a Volvo popping out. This lives on the dash and needs to be pushed in to release the handbrake. Also, some engines cut out if idled for too long (usually Cummins).

Moving off: If you're connected to the trailer, engage first gear and pull away smoothly. With a laden trailer, make all your moves deliberate. Small twitches have no effect, large jerks of the wheel show a lack of foresight. The yard will probably have a speed limit; 5 mph is quite fast enough. If you're going for an assessment drive, your assessor will tell you what to do next. If you have to pick a trailer up, remember that it may be heavy and hard to get under smoothly. Lower or raise the rear axle if you have to; ask for advice on using the lift control box situated by the driver's seat. One connector you may not recognise is the electrical lead with the large black plug. This is the trailer ABS lead, and it is an offence not to connect it, if the trailer has a socket for it. Check the trailer suspension; a lever at the rear on the near (left) side adjusts it. Make sure it's set to the "Drive" position. If your vehicle/trailer is loaded, is the load secure? It's your responsibility.

Nearly ready: You've got your vehicle, you've done the assessment or you're about to be thrown in at the deep end. Find out where you're going. Ask about the best route to get there. In hilly or urban areas, a ten mile shortcut can turn into a 40 minute delay. Ask about weight limits, as many premises have several approach routes but only one legal one. Ask about low bridges. Make sure you know how the paperwork should be completed. Find out what you have to do when empty.

What not to do: Spinning a laden trailer in its own length. It rips up the yard surface, strains the suspension and can pull tyres off.

Working bare handed and then driving without washing your hands. Apart from the dirt you transfer to the cab, the diesel present will cause dermatitis and can cause cancer. If it's someone else's regular vehicle, they will be forthright if it's not clean.

Spilling fuel while filling. You can lay your employer open to large fines for polluting, let alone the wastefulness aspect. Clean it up.

And last.

You're ready for the road. You've learned how to pass the test, now you're going to learn how to be a driver. You already possess something that less than 1% of the population have. You've chosen a profession that demands initiative, alertness and foresight. Remember that you'll have to do the thinking for a lot of the people you share the road with. And when you get ten minutes down the road by yourself, you'll have the biggest grin for miles!

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