

# Backing A Dangerous Maneuver

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Backing - A Dangerous Maneuver  
Drivers of the Month*

Even though backing is one of the most basic tractor-trailer maneuvers a driver performs on a regular basis, it is also one of the most difficult. Successful backing (especially of a tractor-trailer unit) requires patience and good judgment.

Backing is the cause of many commercial vehicle accidents – approximately one in four according to some statistics. It is extremely difficult to do well. Part of the reason is that an over-the-road driver simply is not called upon to back up very often. So whatever you can do to refine your backing skills should be useful to you in your job as a professional driver.

**Visibility major problem** – The main reason that backing is so difficult is really bad visibility while you are backing up. If there's ever a time when your rear visibility is reduced to near zero, backing is it! You just can't be too careful when you are moving in reverse with any size vehicle, and your tractor-trailer or large straight truck just makes the maneuver even more hazardous. Try to use some reference point (wheels or body part) visible in the mirrors to judge distance.

The best rule is to keep in mind about backing is not to do it at all unless it is absolutely necessary. That may sound a bit silly, but it has a grain of truth in it. Backing is a very hazardous and difficult maneuver with your big rig. Try to park so you can pull forward when you leave. If you must back your vehicle (for example at a loading dock or in a congested area), use extreme care.

This report will cover several aspects of backing that you, as a professional driver, need to be aware of:

- The proper steps in performing a safety check before backing your vehicle, Remaining alert and aware when you back a vehicle,
- The six types of backing, and
- General backing procedures.

## Some complicating factors

The size of the unit, especially if it is a combination, is a big complication in backing. Because of the length, it is very difficult to judge distance from the rear of your unit with only mirrors to guide you. Another complicating factor is your inability to see what's directly behind you. The only solution is to get out and physically inspect the path your rig will be traveling before you ever put it in reverse. Don't depend just on those mirrors – they simply are not enough.

## What can you do?

Here are two important basic precautions you can take to help minimize highway hazard situations:

- Let other drivers know you are there (Use headlights, even in daylight; use other lights and signals as needed; use the horn judiciously;)
- Be as predictable as possible (Signal intentions as far ahead as you can, don't make surprise moves, try to communicate your driving strategy).

## Before you back up

No matter what the situation, backing is a dangerous maneuver. There are several safety checks you should perform before backing up your vehicle.

1. Get out of the vehicle and check the area behind it,
2. Check above, under, and to the sides of the vehicle,
3. Make sure there is adequate swing clearance,
4. Warn others that you are going to be backing your truck.

Even though you have started the backing maneuver, you should continue to look for potential hazards. Stay alert at all times. Use your mirrors to check your path and clearances. Turn on the flasher and use the horn to communicate when needed. Keep your windows down and the radio turned off so you can listen for noises. Finally, when you are backing a long distance, stop, get out, and recheck your path periodically.

## Six types of backing maneuvers

There are six specific backing maneuvers you need to master as a professional driver. They are:

- Straight line backing,
- Alley dock backing,
- Parallel parking,
- Jackknife parking,
- Sight side backing, and
- Blind side backing.

Let's take a brief look at each of them.

**Straight line backing** – This maneuver is the simplest to learn, yet fundamental to mastering all other backing maneuvers. It is the first step to learning all other backing maneuvers.

**Alley dock backing** – Alley dock backing involves backing while turning at a 90-degree angle. It occurs at loading docks when the driver must back off the street or between other vehicles.

**Parallel parking** – Parallel parking involves backing into a space along a curb or dock. While the principal is the same as parallel parking a car, it's the most difficult maneuver to learn and perform with a tractor-trailer. It is also the least used backing maneuver.

**Jackknife parking** – Jackknife parking refers to the final parked position of your rig. The tractor and trailer are at a 90-degree angle to shorten the length of the rig. This maneuver is required when the dock is too close to the street, when parking for side loading or unloading, or when there are obstructions.

**Sight side backing** – Sight side backing is backing toward the left side of the vehicle. The driver can see along the intended path of the trailer. Sight side backing gives you better visibility and control compared to blind side backing.

**Blind side backing** – Blind side backing is backing toward the right side of the vehicle. You can only see where you're going to in your rearview mirrors. Blind side backing is much more difficult than sight side backing. It should be avoided if at all possible.

### Backing straight trucks and vans

If you drive a straight truck or a delivery van, you have an easier task when it comes to backing. Backing then is pretty much like backing the family car, only bigger! The point is that you are maneuvering a vehicle that moves as a single unit. That makes backing a lot easier to control.

With a straight truck or van, you turn the steering wheel in the direction you want the back of the vehicle to go. Remember to back slowly and keep checking your mirrors for any obstacles. Be ready to slow or stop if necessary. If you're not sure, stop and get out to check that all is well.

### Backing combinations

When you back a combination unit, a tractor-trailer, you are dealing with an entirely different situation. Now you are working with a rig which is articulated: that is composed of two independent parts – the power unit (tractor) and the semi-trailer. To begin with, you need to turn the steering wheel of the power unit in the opposite direction from the one in which you want the rear of the trailer to move.

Why? The rear axle of the tractor serves as a steering axle for the semi-trailer. Therefore, you need to think about how those wheels need to turn to get the semi-trailer moving correctly.

**"S" pattern** – The power unit must pass through a kind of "S" pattern in backing. First you turn the wheel in the opposite direction from how you want the rear of the trailer to go. Then, when your backing maneuver is well underway, the wheel should be turned in the same direction as you are backing to let your tractor follow the semi-trailer

**Jacking and chasing**—When you back a combination unit, you perform two basic operations:

- **Jacking** – back to cause a jackknife angle between tractor and trailer and get the trailer started turning.
- **Chasing** – turn tractor wheel just enough to get the power unit to follow (chase) the trailer once the correct direction is established.

If your rig begins to drift off the correct path, make an adjustment in steering immediately. Don't over-adjust though or you will have a problem in reverse.

### Some backing guidelines to remember

Here are some tips to help make backing as painless as possible.

1. **Look at the complete picture** – get out and check all clearances.
2. **Back slowly** – if you run into a problem, you'll do less damage if you're moving slow.
3. **Back from the driver' side** – it takes a bit of guesswork away and gives you better visibility and control.
4. **Keep track of both sides as you back** – if you estimate clearances really well, you should only have to watch your left, but it doesn't hurt to be extra cautious and check both outside mirrors frequently.
5. **Try to find someone to help you through your backing maneuver** – two sets of eyes are better than one. Look for a "buddy!"

### Check company policy

Be sure you are aware of what your company's specific policies are concerning the subject of this Drivers' Report. Some companies have additional requirements specific to their company employees.

**Drivers of the Month**

**Congratulations!**

James Garrison	BBK Services Inc.
Norbert Brahm Jr	Brahm Trucking Service LLC
Lexie St. John Jr	Birky Farms Inc.
Eddie Allen	Braco Transport Inc.
Christopher Owen	Blue Diamond Trucking
Richard McCarty	Boomerang Transportation Inc.
Brian Messina	Bellevue Transport Inc.
Delbert Crull Sr.	Brunton Motor Freight Inc. of Illinois
Dean Ayers	Bush Motor Express Inc.
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