



Reflecting On the Safety of Bicycle Mirrors

Mirrors and their use divide the cycling community. Some find the ability to closely monitor traffic behind them very reassuring, while committed leg shaving roadies think of them as barnacles that are completely unnecessary and a blight on the cycling landscape. From a safety point of view, the message is mixed.

First, what options are available? Mirrors are of two broad types – those that are mounted on the bike and those that the cyclist wears. So, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each type?

Bicycle Mounted Mirrors

There is a plethora of mirrors designed to mount somewhere on the handlebars. Some mount in the butt-end of the handlebars, while others mount on the handlebars.

These mirrors are larger than helmet mount or glasses mounted mirrors and offer a larger field of view.

Now, handlebar space is already limited by bells, cycling computers and phones, so adding yet another gadget to those handlebars puts limitations on operating the bicycle safely and comfortably.



Many of these mirrors are poorly designed with insufficient damping of the mirror. The result is that it can be difficult to clearly see detail, such as whether-or-not the driver approaching from the rear has noticed you.

These mirrors often require continuous readjustment as you bounce your way down our cratered streets because the adjustment mechanism is often too loose.

Mirrors attached to the handlebars also means as you steer the bike the view changes and may not be reflecting the view that you need to see.

Most of the cyclists that I know have several bikes, meaning that most cyclists will need a mirror for each bike.

Glasses Mount Mirrors

Mirrors mounted to your glasses or to your helmet allow you to scan a wide area behind you and are generally the better way to go. This is particularly important in busy complicated environments where a cyclist may need to see traffic in several lanes.



Glasses mounted mirrors fit most glasses and sunglasses, but chunky arms may not play so well with these mirrors.

Helmet Mounted Mirrors

Helmet mounted mirrors give many of the benefits of glasses mounted mirrors and are mounted to the helmet with a sticky 3M or similar tape. Multiple helmets mean multiple mirrors will be needed.

What's the downside to all mirrors?

In Cycling 101 we teach the importance of communication with our fellow road users, and this is where mirrors can be a hazard. In the image (right) a following motorist will not necessarily realize that this cyclist may be wanting to move left for a lefthand turn.

It is only apparent when a cyclist signals and performs a shoulder check that the following driver understands what the cyclist's intentions are. In cycling 101 we teach the Life Saver shoulder check which involves two shoulder checks. The first gives the rider a good scan of following traffic. A second shoulder check ensures that the traffic behind has not changed, before executing the lateral move. The Life Saver shoulder check is performed before moving to each adjacent lane.

This body language is essential to communicate to following drivers that you are moving to a new position in the traffic flow. It is very important that you as a cyclist must yield to traffic in any new lane that you wish to enter. Some drivers, out of courtesy, may slow and allow you to enter the new lane, but you should never assume that you will be given that courtesy.

Bottom line – don't solely rely on the mirror for maneuvering in traffic. Do the first shoulder check to get an idea of gaps in traffic. Monitor the traffic with the mirror. When a gap opens up, do a second shoulder check to confirm that you will be able to make your lane change. Signal your intentions and smoothly move to the new lane.

