

How To Pull A Trailer

Pulling a trailer, whether it is large or small, requires a regular review of the equipment, including the hitch and signals, as well as some extra safety and clearance precautions to ensure a secure drive.

Trailers require extra stopping room. It also requires forethought when changing lanes, making turns, and backing up. In general, you should be aware of where you are driving with a trailer, and avoid a situation where you might be stuck, or have to back up a long way.

Pretrip Check

Before you hit the road with your trailer haul, make sure the trailer is safely connected to the hitch, and the brake lights and signals are working properly. First, check the hitch. For a regular ball hitch, the tongue on the trailer should be properly attached to the vehicle hitch, with the locking mechanism snapped and lock pin in place. If the hitch isn't secure, it could off and go through someone's windshield.

Check the connection by pulling up on the trailer to try to pull it off the hitch, which you shouldn't be able to do. If you can pull the hitch off, it must be reattached. Also check the clearance of the connection, and make sure any wheel or stand for the trailer is in the up or drive position.

Next, check the brake lights and signals. Connect the electrical wires from the trailer to the vehicle. If no one is available to tell you whether the lights work when you apply the brakes, use the reflection of another vehicle, window, or other reflective surface; or check in the dark.

It is very important that the brake lights work on the trailer. Otherwise, motorists are unable to tell when you are slowing (and in the dark, they won't be able to see you at all).

If the trailer and hitch connection is good, and the trailer signals are working, you're ready to drive.

On the Road

Before you hit the road, though, make sure you're familiar with driving your vehicle-trailer combination. A good way to get used to manoeuvring, including some practice backups, is to drive in an open parking lot, or at least a familiar area. Backing up can be especially difficult; try turning in the opposite direction you want to go. So if you want the trailer to go right, turn the wheel left.

The most difficult part of trailer driving for many motorists is making turns. While it does not seem like there might be a need for it, drivers pulling trailers must overshoot their turns, taking them wide enough, so that the trailer's path does not put it off the road or in contact with road signs or other street-side obstacles. Cutting a corner with a trailer will put the trailer, as well as pedestrians, other drivers, and yourself, in danger of collision.

If you start a corner too tight and get into trouble, stay calm and stop. Make sure the roadway behind you is clear, back up a little bit, and take the turn again wider. It will probably be the last time you cut a corner with a trailer!

Also be aware of the size of your trailer—what is the clearance? Whatever's on the trailer must be securely fastened down, to prevent debris and other safety hazards.

Remember that the larger the load, the longer it will take you to stop. Keep an extra safe distance behind cars in front of you, and test the stopping power of your vehicle and trailer before you have to stop suddenly, so you know what you're dealing with.

Make sure you are within your vehicle's towing capacity. Some large trailers have a braking mechanism that helps slow the trailer along with the vehicle.

The bottom line is to use caution and slow down.

Avoid Jack-knifing

The other big thing to avoid when pulling a trailer is what is called "jack-knifing". Named for the position of the vehicle and trailer, this is most common when backing up with a trailer. It is basically a situation where the angle between the vehicle and the trailer it is pulling is less than 90 degrees, or beyond an L shape to a V shape.

Avoid this by never letting the trailer position get beyond the L shape. When reversing with a trailer, just take it slow and get a feel for the trailer. Keep your movement of the steering wheel to a minimum, and remember you can pull forward to straighten out, so if you are struggling, just start over. Jack-knifing will damage the hitch and trailer, so be aware of it.