

Defensive Driving – Downgrades

Defensive driving is driving so as to prevent accidents in spite of the incorrect actions of others or adverse driving conditions, such as weather, traffic, lighting, vehicle or road condition, or the driver's physical or mental state. The defensive driver assumes that other drivers may make mistakes and is on guard in the event an error is made.

Your safety program should include defensive driver training on the proper way to negotiate a downgrade. The main reason for loss of vehicle control on downgrades is brake failure, and the main reason for this is the use of improper control techniques by the driver. The brake system may be damaged or mis-adjusted and may not have sufficient capacity for downgrade control.

Primary countermeasures for preventing a runaway are:

- Adequate driver skills
- Frequent checks on brake operation
- Adequate preventive maintenance

The following are management areas that should be addressed regarding defensive driving and tips to provide your drivers to help them become defensive drivers.

Management Issues

	Yes	No
Have drivers been trained to properly control their vehicles on downgrades?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do drivers know how to select proper gearing for downgrade descents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you periodically have qualified personnel ride with your drivers to assess their driving habits?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If vehicles are equipped with brake application pressure gauges, do drivers know how to use them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do your drivers know how to check the condition of braking systems?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do drivers perform a pre-trip inspection to assure that all vehicle brakes are functioning properly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is brake system maintenance performed as needed, and are brakes adjusted properly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are brake system maintenance intervals adjusted to reflect the terrain that vehicles normally operate on (e.g., shortened for mountainous terrain)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are drivers aware of the concept of a 'preventable accident'? A preventable accident is one in which the driver failed to exercise every reasonable precaution to prevent the accident. This is irrespective of the extent of property damage and/or personal injury, to whom it occurred or the location of the accident.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Driver Tips

To be a defensive driver in negotiating downgrades, your drivers should:

- Know the gearing on their vehicle. The gear to select for descending a grade should be no higher than that required for ascending the same grade; however, some vehicles may require a lower gear.
- Put the truck in the proper gear and check brake function before descending long, steep grades.
- Use a lower gear if speed cannot be controlled with light (10 psi) brake pressure.
- Not use the hand lever to apply only trailer brakes. This could overheat the trailer brakes and cause them to fail.

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