

Is backing up your trailer a challenge for you?

Learning how to back up a trailer is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for any boat or trailer owner.

Why is it so difficult to back a boat or trailer?

1. Reduced visibility. You cannot look over your shoulder to see where you are going as all you'll see is the front of the trailer. You have to use your mirrors.
2. Everything is opposite. You have to turn the steering wheel in the opposite direction that you want to go which goes against your natural instincts.
3. Trailers are equipped with a ball hitch, a ball-and-socket joint that helps the trailer turn and follow the towing vehicle. Going forward is fairly easy; the challenge comes when you have to back up.

As you back up your towing vehicle and trailer, the ball hitch gives the otherwise straight line a place to break. When that happens, your trailer ends up acting like it has a mind of its own.

4. Someone is always watching and waiting, putting us under pressure.

Steps to Back Up a Trailer

With a bit of practice and patience, backing up a trailer can become an easy task.

Step 1: Positioning

Once you have found the site assigned to you, position your vehicle so that you are backing with the driver's side closest to the trailer. This helps you to see the trailer without any blind spots.

Drive a little past the spot and position your vehicle a foot or two from the left curb. If possible, turn slightly away from the space and back towards the left curb as you pass. This technique is called scooping, and will give you a better angle to start off as you back up your trailer into your RV site.

Step 2: Inspect the Site

Get out of your vehicle and inspect the site. Look for any obstructions on the ground and high obstacles such as trees, etc. Plan space for any slideouts and for the location of the power box if electricity will be used. Decide where you want the trailer to end up.

Step 3: Backing In

Determine exactly where you want the trailer to go. Looking through your outside mirror, pick out a target on the ground no more than four feet behind the wheel that you want the wheel to pass over. Before you start to back, take time to think. Determine exactly which direction you want the wheel to move - either left, right or straight. If you place the trailer wheel in the correct place, the rest of the trailer will also be correctly located.

As you back up the trailer, keep your hand at the bottom - not the top - of your steering wheel. This is more intuitive and will help to prevent you from making any exaggerated turns that can cause your vehicle and trailer to get locked into a jackknife position. In this bottom position, moving your hands left on the wheel turns the trailer left when reversing, moving your hands right on the wheel turns the trailer right when reversing.

It is very important to remember that shorter trailers will respond much more quickly to steering adjustments than longer trailers, and are actually much harder to back. For this reason, you will need much smaller steering adjustments to prevent a jackknife situation, and may need to pull forward a few times to get the right alignment.

Adjust your mirrors to watch the wheels of your trailer, as this is where the trailer will pivot. The trailer will follow the wheels. Back up slowly and watch where the wheels are going.

It will be important to have a tighter turn as you get the back of the trailer moving in the right direction and then quickly unwind or reverse the wheel to center as soon as you get it started towards the target. Then you will want to smoothly turn the steering wheel in the opposite direction to the way you started, so that your car follows the trailer through the turn. This will gradually straighten up the trailer as you keep reversing. It may be necessary to pull forward a time or two to straighten the trailer and tow vehicle for another reverse movement.

It is important to remember that only small regular adjustments are needed to your steering wheel to make the trailer respond on your final approach. Remember, you can always pull forward to realign.

More Tips:

1. Where Possible Back from the Driver's side.

Always make it a point to back from the left side, the driver's side. This will give you a better view of the rear of your trailer than if you're backing up on the right side, the passenger's side.

2. Use Your Side Mirrors.

Side mirrors can help you a whole lot while backing up your trailer or any type of RV. It is not possible to see where you are going without the side mirrors. Your side mirrors can give you a view of the sides

and rear bumper of both your towing vehicle and trailer, helping you avoid the possibility of your towing vehicle and trailer's hitting anything or anyone on the side.

3. Invest in Convex Side Mirrors.

Convex side mirrors are designed to expand your view and minimize blind spots. You can find a range of convex mirrors in auto parts or RV stores that you can stick on the side mirror of your towing vehicle.

4. Don't Rush It.

One of the most common mistakes while backing up is to try to do it quickly. Trying to rush only increases your chances of hitting something or someone. Take your time while you're backing up. If you're in doubt, stop, get out and take a look. Also pull forward to reposition. Don't worry about the other drivers that are waiting. They are in the same boat as you are and will understand the challenge.

5. Use a Spotter.

Nothing beats having someone standing outside to help you out. Make sure the spotter is in front of the vehicle or can see your driver's side mirror. You must both first agree on the hand or voice signals that will be used. Otherwise, you might end up getting even more confused than helped.

6. Highlight the Target

If you don't have a spotter, or even if you do, it may be helpful to place large orange cones along the path, on the driver's side and follow the path of the cones using the mirrors. Also place a cone on both sides of the site where you want the trailer to stop.

7. Practice, Practice, Practice

As with any driving skill, the only way to master the art of backing up a trailer or any type of RV is to keep practicing. Every trailer and tow vehicle combination will respond differently. It is important to practice with each combination until you have a good feel for the response curve.

Large open parking lots are an excellent place to practice in backing and spotting. This practice, along with a bit of patience, will most definitely make your trailer towing experience less stressful and even enjoyable.