



The Complete Beginner's Guide to Learning to Drive in the UK

2026 Edition

A Comprehensive Handbook for Absolute Beginners

Phoenix Driving, Cirencester

Free for absolute beginners in the Cirencester area

www.phoenixdriving.org

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A Comprehensive Handbook for Absolute Beginners

Written by Mike and Rebecca Dunnaway

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Your local family-run driving school – fun, friendly lessons in Cirencester and surrounding areas.

About the Authors

Mike and Rebecca Dunnaway run and own Phoenix Driving, a local family-run driving school in Cirencester. The driving instructors at Phoenix Driving are all fully qualified and approved by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA). Each instructor is included on the register of fleet driver trainers, qualified to give driver development training, and registered with the Motor Schools Association of Great Britain. Phoenix Driving offers tailored, one-to-one lessons in a fun, friendly environment to help you become a skilled and confident driver.

COSTS AND TIME COMMITMENT (Rough Guide – June 2026)

Learning to drive is a serious investment in your independence. Here are the main costs to budget for in the Cirencester area:

- **Provisional licence:** £34 if you apply online (£43 by post)
- **Theory test:** £23
- **Practical driving test:** £62 on a weekday or £75 on an evening, weekend or bank holiday
- Professional lessons: Typically £45-£50 per hour locally. Check our website for our latest prices.

The DVSA recommends that most people need **at least 40–50 hours of lessons** with a qualified instructor, plus plenty of private practice with a suitable supervisor (aged 21+, full UK licence held for at least 3 years, and the car properly insured with L plates displayed).

Total cost to pass often falls in the **£2,000–£3,000+** range depending on how quickly you progress and how much supervised private practice you get. Plan and budget for it like any other important skill – it is worth doing properly.

Introduction

This is a comprehensive handbook for absolute beginners who know nothing about driving. The guide covers everything step by step – you don't need any prior knowledge. It is written in simple language and will take you from the first application to passing your test and beyond.

Learning to drive takes time and practice. The DVSA recommends most people need at least 40-50 hours of lessons with a qualified instructor plus private practice. Be patient and safe. Use this guide with real lessons. Contact Phoenix Driving for local support. You can do this!

Section 1: How to Find and Pick an Instructor

1. Go to the [DVSA register: Find driving instructors and schools \(GOV.UK\)](https://www.gov.uk/driving-instructors)
2. Look for ADI (Approved Driving Instructor) status.
3. Read reviews and check qualifications.
4. Meet or call for a chat – you should feel comfortable.

5. Ask about lesson structure, prices, and success rates.

Quick note on instructor types: Fully qualified ADIs (Approved Driving Instructors) are on the official DVSA register and can take you all the way to test independently. Their green badge must be clearly displayed on the windscreen when giving lessons. Trainee instructors (PDIs) have a pink badge which must also be displayed; they are still learning how to do the job and are not fully qualified.

It is a legal requirement for anyone charging for driving lessons (or anything of monetary value) to display their ADI badge on the windscreen. Giving paid instruction without being properly registered (or properly supervised as a trainee) is illegal.

Only around 30% of candidates pass the final Part 3 test (the ability to teach), which is why instructors who have earned the green badge have significant training and experience. Always check the badge colour on the windscreen and verify their status.

Phoenix Driving is local and recommended for Cirencester.

Section 2: Getting Your Provisional Licence

Provisional Licence Checklist

Item	Completed?
Application submitted (£34 online)	
Passport-style photo ready	
Proof of ID and address	
Medical conditions declared to DVLA	
Insurance arranged for practice	
L plates obtained	

You cannot drive or have lessons without this plastic card.

Who Can Apply

- You can apply from 15 years 9 months. You can usually drive at 17 (16 with higher-rate DLA/PIP - GOV.UK).
- You must live in Great Britain.
- You must not have a driving ban.
- You must declare any medical conditions to the DVLA (full list on www.gov.uk).

How to Apply – Step by Step

1. Go to www.gov.uk/apply-first-provisional-driving-licence.
2. Fill in the online form (£34) or paper form by post (£43).
3. Prepare a passport-style photo.
4. Provide proof of identity and address.
5. Submit and wait 1-3 weeks for the photocard.

What the Licence Allows

- Book theory test.
- Have lessons with ADI.
- Practise with supervisor (21+, full licence 3+ years, insured car with L plates).

Important Rules

- Insurance and L plates required. No private-practice motorways. Motorway lessons OK with an ADI (dual controls).

Section 3: The Theory Test

Book at www.gov.uk/book-theory-test (£23).

Free Highway Code search (works on your phone): highway-code.phoenixdriving.org

Full Sections, Marking and Scores

The theory test has two sections. You must pass both on the same day.

Section 1: Multiple Choice — 50 questions about the Highway Code, signs, rules, and safety. You select the correct answer on a computer screen. You need 43 correct to pass. The questions are chosen from a bank of official questions. *Why:* To make sure you know the rules before you drive on the road.

Section 2: Hazard Perception — 14 short video clips. You click the mouse when you see a developing hazard. You need 44 points out of 75 to pass. The scoring is based on how early you spot the hazard. *Why:* To develop the skill of spotting dangers early – the most important safety skill.

How to Study from Absolute Zero

- Get the official DVSA Highway Code book or app.
- Spend 30-60 minutes every day.
- Use free practice websites and the official DVSA app.
- Take full mock tests until you score high.
- Focus on weak areas (signs, vulnerable road users, weather, documents).

Hazard Perception Tips

Click when you see something that could cause danger (pedestrian stepping out, car pulling out, changing traffic lights). Do not click too early or too many times. Practice with official clips.

Section 4: Lessons and Basic Skills

How lessons are structured

Lessons start with how the car works and the basic controls, then move on to real traffic (junctions, roundabouts, other road users), then to planning a journey and driving on your own. Towards test standard your instructor will ask you how that went and what you would do differently next time. That order stops lessons jumping about.

Cockpit Drill — This is the first thing you do every time you get in the car. It ensures you are comfortable and safe.

1. **Doors** – Close and check all doors are shut. *Why:* Prevents them opening while driving.
2. **Seat** – Adjust the seat so you can reach the pedals comfortably with your legs slightly bent. *Why:* Good control and comfort.
3. **Steering wheel** – Adjust if possible so you can hold it with arms slightly bent. *Why:* Better steering control.
4. **Seatbelt** – Put on and make sure it is not twisted. *Why:* Legal requirement and safety in a crash.
5. **Mirrors and blind spots** – Adjust all mirrors and check blind spots by turning your head. *Why:* Full awareness of surroundings.

Controls

• **Accelerator** (right foot – gives the car more power) • **Brake** (right foot – slows or stops the car) • **Clutch** (left foot – used for changing and engaging gears and helps the car move smoothly) • **Gear stick** (changes gears) • **Steering wheel**

MSM and PSL Routines

MSM (Mirror – Signal – Manoeuvre) is the core routine you must use before every change of direction or speed (turning, overtaking, changing lanes, stopping, etc.). It stands for: **1. Mirror** — check all mirrors and blind spots. **2. Signal** — clearly signal your intention in good time. **3. Manoeuvre** — only then carry out the action safely. It is one of the most important habits because failing to check mirrors or signal properly is one of the top reasons people fail the practical test and cause accidents in real life.

PSL (Position – Speed – Look) is the routine used when approaching junctions, roundabouts, and hazards. It stands for: **1. Position** — get the car in the correct lane/position early. **2. Speed** — adjust your speed appropriately for the situation. **3. Look** — look all around (including blind spots and over your shoulder where needed) for other road users. These two simple routines (MSM + PSL) are the foundation of safe, defensive driving. They force you to think ahead, communicate clearly, and stay aware — exactly what examiners and real roads demand. Master them early and everything else becomes easier and safer.

All the Other Skills You Will Learn and Why

- **Moving Off:** To start safely from a stop. *Why:* Prevents stalling and accidents at junctions.
- **Hill Starts:** Starting on a slope without rolling back. *Why:* Common on UK roads.
- **Stopping:** Smooth braking. *Why:* Safe stops in traffic.
- **Gear Changing:** Smooth gear changes. *Why:* Control speed and fuel efficiency.
- **Steering:** Proper steering technique. *Why:* Accurate control.
- **Junctions:** Approaching and turning at junctions. *Why:* Safe priority and observations.
- **Roundabouts:** Entering, circulating, exiting. *Why:* Common UK roads – safe lane discipline.
- **Dual Carriageways:** Lane changes and overtaking. *Why:* High-speed roads.
- **Motorway Driving:** Joining, lane discipline, and safe exiting. *Why:* Essential for confident driving on major roads.
- **Overtaking:** Safe overtaking. *Why:* Passing slower vehicles.
- **Independent Driving:** Following sat nav or signs. *Why:* Real-world driving without constant instructions.
- **Manoeuvres:** Parallel park, bay park, turn in the road (3 point turn). *Why:* Parking in real life.
- **Reversing Manoeuvres:** A variety of reversing techniques used in real-world situations. *Why:* Builds confidence and control when reversing.
- **Controlled Emergency Stop:** Sudden stop. *Why:* Unexpected hazards.
- **Night Driving:** Lights and visibility. *Why:* Driving after dark.
- **Adverse Weather:** Rain, fog, ice. *Why:* Safe in bad conditions.
- **Awareness and Anticipation:** Predicting hazards. *Why:* Defensive driving.
- **Hazard Perception:** Spotting dangers early. *Why:* Prevent accidents.
- **Speed Control:** Matching conditions. *Why:* Safe speeds.
- **Road Positioning:** Correct lane position. *Why:* Safe and legal.
- **Mirror Use:** Constant checks. *Why:* Awareness of surroundings.
- **Signalling:** Clear signals. *Why:* Communicate intentions.
- **Eco Driving:** Efficient driving. *Why:* Save fuel and environment.
- **Defensive Driving:** Anticipating others. *Why:* Stay safe.
- **Passenger Safety:** Passenger awareness. *Why:* Protect others.
- **Vehicle Checks:** Basic maintenance. *Why:* Safe vehicle.
- **Overall Safety and Attitude:** Responsible attitude. *Why:* Good driver for life.

Section 5: Show Me / Tell Me – Full Official Lists

You will be asked one 'Tell Me' question (explain how you would do something) at the start of your practical test and one 'Show Me' question (demonstrate while driving safely) during the test. The questions are taken from the official DVSA list below. Practice explaining clearly and simply.

TELL ME QUESTIONS (14 Official Questions with Simple Beginner Answers)

1. Tell me how you'd check that the brakes are working before starting a journey.

Answer: The brakes should not feel spongy or slack. Test them as you move off – the car should not pull to one side.

2. Tell me where you'd find the information for the recommended tyre pressures for this car and how tyre pressures should be checked.

Answer: In the manufacturer's handbook or on a sticker on the driver's door pillar. Check when the tyres are cold using a reliable gauge. Don't forget the spare tyre and always refit the valve caps.

3. Tell me how you make sure your head restraint is correctly adjusted so it provides the best possible protection in the event of a crash.

Answer: The rigid part of the head restraint should be at least as high as the top of your ears or eyes and as close to the back of your head as possible. Note: Some head restraints are not adjustable.

4. Tell me how you'd check the tyres to ensure that they have sufficient tread depth and that their general condition is safe to use on the road.

Answer: The tread depth should be at least 1.6mm across the central three-quarters of the tyre and around the entire outer circumference. There should be no cuts or bulges.

5. Tell me how you'd check that the headlights and tail lights are working. You don't need to exit the vehicle.

Answer: Explain that you would operate the light switch (turn the ignition on if necessary) and then walk around the vehicle to visually check the lights are working.

6. Tell me how you'd know if there was a problem with your anti-lock braking system (ABS).

Answer: The ABS warning light on the dashboard should illuminate if there is a fault with the anti-lock braking system.

7. Tell me how you'd check the direction indicators are working. You don't need to exit the vehicle.

Answer: Explain that you would operate the indicator switch (turn the ignition on if necessary) and then walk around the vehicle to check the indicators are working.

8. Tell me how you'd check the brake lights are working on this car.

Answer: Explain that you would press the brake pedal (ignition on if needed) and check the brake lights using reflections in windows or doors, or ask someone to help.

9. Tell me how you'd check the power-assisted steering is working before starting a journey.

Answer: If the steering feels heavy, the system may not be working properly. Before starting a journey, apply gentle pressure to the steering wheel while starting the engine – you should feel a slight but noticeable movement as the power assistance begins to operate. Alternatively, turn the steering wheel just after moving off; it should feel light and easy if working correctly.

10. Tell me how you'd switch on the rear fog light(s) and explain when you'd use it/them. You don't need to exit the vehicle.

Answer: Operate the rear fog light switch (with dipped headlights on and ignition if necessary) and check that the warning light is on. Use rear fog lights when visibility is seriously reduced (for example in dense fog, heavy rain or snow) to less than 100 metres.

11. Tell me how you switch your headlight from dipped to main beam and explain how you'd know the main beam is on. You don't need to exit the vehicle.

Answer: Operate the headlight switch or stalk (ignition or engine on if necessary). You know main beam is on when the blue main beam warning light illuminates on the dashboard.

12. Open the bonnet and tell me how you'd check that the engine has sufficient oil.

Answer: Locate the engine oil dipstick, pull it out, wipe it clean, re-insert it fully, then pull it out again and check that the oil level is between the minimum and maximum marks.

13. Open the bonnet and tell me how you'd check that the engine has sufficient engine coolant.

Answer: Locate the coolant expansion/header tank. Check that the coolant level is between the high and low markings (engine cold). Never remove the cap when the engine is hot.

14. Open the bonnet and tell me how you'd check that you have a safe level of hydraulic brake fluid.

Answer: Locate the brake fluid reservoir and check that the fluid level is between the high and low markings on the reservoir.

SHOW ME QUESTIONS (7 Official Questions with Simple Steps)

1. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you wash and clean the rear windscreen?

Step: Operate the rear washer control while driving safely.

2. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you wash and clean the front windscreen?

Step: Operate the front washer control.

3. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you'd switch on your dipped headlights?

Step: Use the light switch.

4. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you'd set the rear demister?

Step: Switch on the rear demister.

5. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you'd operate the horn?

Step: Press the horn button.

6. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you'd demist the front windscreen?

Step: Use the front demister control.

7. When it's safe to do so, can you show me how you'd open and close the side window?

Step: Use the window control.

Section 6: The Practical Driving Test

The test lasts about 40 minutes.

Full Structure

1. Eyesight check – read a number plate from 20 metres (new-style font/plates) or 20.5 metres (older-style font/plates). You can wear glasses or contact lenses if you need them for driving. If you fail the eyesight check you fail the test immediately and the DVLA will be notified.
2. Tell Me question.
3. General driving and independent driving (20-35 minutes following the examiner's sat nav or road signs).
4. One manoeuvre.
5. Possible emergency stop.
6. Show Me question.

Driver Faults (Often Called Minor Faults)

You can have up to 15 driver faults (often called minor faults) and still pass. These are small mistakes that do not cause danger. However, if the same driver fault is repeated many times, it can show a lack of consistency and may lead to a serious fault or fail even if the total is under 15.

Serious Faults

A serious fault is a mistake that could have caused danger but didn't because of luck or the examiner's intervention. One serious fault will fail the test. Examples: Poor observation at a junction that nearly causes a problem.

Dangerous Faults

A dangerous fault is a mistake that causes actual or potential danger to you, the examiner, or other road users. One dangerous fault will fail the test immediately. Examples: Pulling out without looking and causing another vehicle to swerve.

Top 10 Common Reasons People Fail the Practical Test

1. Observations at junctions

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2. Mirrors when changing direction
 3. Moving off safely
 4. Positioning at right turns
 5. Steering control
 6. Response to signals
 7. Road positioning
 8. Manoeuvres
 9. Awareness
 10. Appropriate speed

Skills you will cover in lessons

These are the main skills you will work through in lessons, from controls to planning and awareness. They show what good looks like in real conditions. They are not the examiner's official marking sheet.

1. Cockpit drill
2. Controls
3. Moving off
4. Stopping
5. Gear changing
6. Steering
7. MSM/PSL routine
8. Junctions
9. Roundabouts
10. Dual carriageways
11. Overtaking
12. Independent driving
13. Manoeuvres
14. Emergency stop
15. Night driving
16. Adverse weather
17. Awareness and anticipation
18. Hazard perception
19. Speed control
20. Road positioning
21. Mirror use
22. Signalling
23. Eco driving
24. Defensive driving
25. Passenger safety
26. Vehicle checks
27. Overall safety and attitude

Independent Driving

This part lasts 20 to 35 minutes (it can be most of the test). You will follow directions from the examiner's sat nav (they set it up for you – you cannot use your own), road signs, or a combination of both. The examiner will tell you which to follow. If you cannot see a sign (e.g., covered by trees), the examiner will give directions until you can see the next one. The focus is safe driving, not perfect navigation. Minor wrong turns are usually not faulted if you observe properly.

Manoeuvres You Are Tested On and Why

You will be tested on one of the following: Parallel park (reverse parallel to the kerb) – common parking in real life; Reverse bay park (reverse into a marked bay) – supermarket and car park parking; Pull up on the right and reverse – safe reversing in real situations; Forward bay park (forward into a marked bay) – common parking. Many instructors will also teach other manoeuvres (e.g., reversing around a corner) to build confidence.

Test Centres — Check www.gov.uk for current local centres (e.g., Gloucester, Swindon, Cheltenham).

Test Day Tips — Arrive early. Good sleep. Breathe slowly if nervous. Remember it is just showing what you have learned.

Section 7: After Passing the Test

Apply for your full licence on GOV.UK. Consider Pass Plus for extra skills and insurance discounts. Take motorway lessons (not part of the test). Look at advanced driving courses from [RoSPA \(www.rospace.com\)](http://www.rospace.com) or [IAM RoadSmart \(www.iamroadsmart.com\)](http://www.iamroadsmart.com) for further confidence and discounts.

Final Message

You have everything you need. Practice safely. Contact Phoenix Driving for lessons in the Cirencester area. Drive safely and enjoy your independence.

Additional Resources

DVSA Ready to Pass: <https://readytopass.campaign.gov.uk/>



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Fun, friendly, professional lessons for absolute beginners and beyond.