

Using Neutral or Not By Skip Harrison

Is there ever an appropriate time and place to shift your motorcycle into neutral? Do you place your bike in neutral while the engine is running, and is that always a safe thing to do?

Let's take a look at Complacent Carl. He pulls up to a traffic light that has just turned red. He clicks the shift lever up and down searching for neutral, staring longingly at the indicator light panel near his speedometer for the green "N" symbol to appear. When it finally does, Carl drops both hands to his side and looks around to see who in the traffic mix might be looking--with conspicuous envy, admiration, or disgust--at him. WRONG!

Whenever Carl stops in traffic, he should stay in first gear with his left foot on the ground, left hand squeezing the clutch lever, and right toe applying pressure to the rear brake pedal. His eyes should be aggressively scanning all around him with an emphasis on his rear-view mirrors. He is now prepared to maneuver out of harm's way if a distracted driver approaches from the rear and isn't showing signs of coming to a stop. After Carl brakes, he must be ready to escape in an instant. This is not the time or place to be sitting nonchalantly in neutral. Since most motorcycles have minimal lighting to the rear, this is a good time for Carl to keep the brake light on or modulate the brake light if he sees approaching vehicles in his mirror(s).

There are occasions when it's a good idea to put your bike in neutral, but they don't happen often. I could think of only three occasions leading up to this article, so I queried about fifty riders to learn their normal habits and thoughts on this topic. The experience of my respondents ranged from novices to experts. My inquiry produced the following list with the most common usages of neutral at the top and least common at the bottom:

1. At start up to allow the engine to warm up for a brief time. Check your owner's manual for recommendations. Walking away from a running engine is not recommended because of a fire risk. Heat from the exhaust system builds quickly when there is no cooling airflow. Bikes left idling

too long have caught on fire and burned down the garage and house! The best way to warm up your bike is to ride it gently for the first few minutes, exercising common sense.

2. When inspecting the rear tire, lubricating the chain, or while lying on the ground trying to get the rear valve stem to the “six o’clock” position to check your air pressure.

3. While stopped at a red light. Sadly, too many respondents reported back with Complacent Carl’s use of neutral among their top three reasons to use neutral. Quite frankly, this just isn’t a strategy that reduces the risk of being rear-ended. After coming to a stop in the traffic mix, it’s imperative that you aggressively scan your rear-view mirrors for threats from behind and are ready for an immediate escape. Fractions of a second count in this situation. With that point driven home, allow me to make a few concessions here. Carl’s modus operandi could be justifiable. For example, when you know from experience that a particular red light is an extremely long one, while waiting for a very long train to pass at a crossing, during a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam (usually caused by an accident scene ahead of you), or at a road construction zone when a flagman has stopped you to wait for a string of oncoming traffic to pass or the pilot vehicle to arrive. (If Carl were riding a vintage bike with a lot of clutch drag, staying in first gear with a disengaged clutch would cause the clutch to overheat.) Even in these seemingly safe conditions, I highly recommend staying in first gear and ready to escape until two or more vehicles have come to a complete stop behind you. They will serve as a buffer zone in case a subsequent vehicle doesn’t stop. Even then, it would be a good idea to remain poised to engage first gear at the drop of a hat.

4. When stopping in a safe place to take a picture, consulting a map, adding a waypoint to the GPS, changing to warmer gloves, or conferring with your traveling buddy.

5. To move the bike around in the garage to gain access to seldom used items like the lawnmower or last year’s Christmas lights.

6. To show a buddy an accessory to your bike such as your new LED, modulating brake light or to hear your new throaty exhaust system.

7. While coughing up the cash at a toll plaza.

8. In order to coast down hill as far as possible after running out of gas and pushing the bike when the decline levels off or becomes an incline.

9. While being towed by another vehicle after breaking a final drive belt or chain.

We can now see that using neutral is frequently a good thing for items one and two on our list, but otherwise, using neutral should be infrequent. For almost all other occasions, leave your bike in first gear. It's a great parking gear (like the "P" on the gear indicator in your car), especially on ground that is not level. Stay in first gear at red lights, stop signs, and stop-and-go traffic. Avoid using neutral if doing so decreases your ability to reduce risk. When you're in neutral, you have little control over the bike other than perhaps the rate of engine idle. You are no longer the pilot. You've just subordinated yourself to the status of cargo.