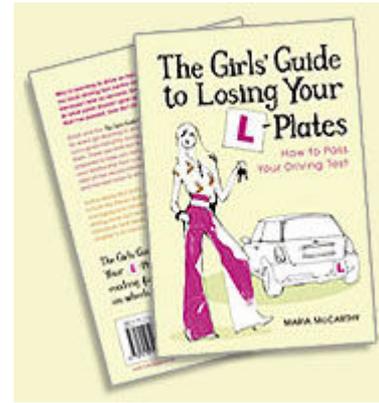


The Girls' Guide to Losing Your L-Plates

By Maria McCarthy



Decisions, Decisions

So now you've got your provisional licence and you've budgeted for your lessons it's time to find the right instructor. When it comes to learning to drive, this is one of the most important decisions you'll make. Getting the best person for you will make the process more enjoyable, quicker and have long-term benefits for your future as a driver. So choose carefully and don't settle for second best.

The following extracts are from chapter 3 of 'The Girls' Guide to Losing Your L Plates' by Maria McCarthy. For more details about Maria's book and to order a copy, please see her website www.mariamccarthy.co.uk.

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DRIVING INSTRUCTORS TO AVOID

- ◇ **The Gossip** – his golf handicap, his divorce, his holiday. This driving instructor wants to talk about everything except your driving and will continue to ramble on even when you're sweating over a manoeuvre and are in serious need of some help and advice. A certain amount of social chat can be fine and even relaxing. But if you feel he's not giving you enough attention this needs to be dealt with – you're paying for his time after all! Rather than putting up with it explain that you find too much chatting distracting and you'd rather you both just concentrated on the driving. Hopefully that should sort the problem out. If not, it's time to look for another instructor.
- ◇ **The Critic** - by their very nature driving instructors have to give feedback – but it should be aimed at helping you to do better rather than bringing you down. This is a very personal thing and an instructor whose blunt approach is appreciated by one student could be found really scary by a less confident one. If you feel that your instructor's criticism is bringing you down, tell them you feel you could do with more encouragement. If they don't take your comments on board then it's probably time to change.
- ◇ **The Short-changer** – As we all know, traffic can be unpredictable so it's understandable if your instructor occasionally turns up late. However, this time should be made up to ensure you've got the full hour you've paid for – if not straight away then at a later lesson. A few instructors can sometimes take advantage by 'just popping into' a shop or bank during your lesson time – again, this shouldn't happen but if it does the time should be made up. In some driving schools it's common practice for a student to take the previous student home during the first part of their lesson. However this can be embarrassing and means you're often likely to be doing the route to their home rather than practising test routes. The whole lesson should be focused on improving your driving skills, not using you as a taxi service to ferry around other learners. This is a school to avoid.
- ◇ **The Letch** - This is one to get rid of straight away! If you feel that your driving instructor is making over-personal remarks, trying to stare down your blouse or (shudder!) being unnecessarily tactile, then terminate your lessons and find someone else. If you are upset by his behaviour then you should report it. 'If there was a problem like that with a BSM instructor we'd want you to inform the local branch manager so we could do something about it,' says Robin Cummins, former Chief Driving Examiner and Head of Road Safety at BSM. 'If the school is a one-man band then you should contact the DSA with your complaint.'

Finding the best driving school and instructor for you

◇ Personal recommendation

Most people agree that the best way to find a good driving instructor is through personal recommendation and often that can work really well. But although it can be helpful, personal recommendation isn't the Holy Grail. Teaching is a very individual thing and the instructor who was ideal for your best mate, who's been helping her dad tinker with cars for years isn't necessarily going to be suited to you if you're the type that's still getting the indicators and the windscreen wipers muddled up on your sixth lesson. If you try them and give up in despair you might then move onto your second recommendation - the 'wonderful, patient instructor' who taught your Auntie Sue 6 years ago - but when you call him up it turns out he's retired. Which leaves only the instructor who taught your flatmate and tut-tutted and rolled his eyes so much that she regularly came home in tears and only passed on her fourth attempt.

◇ Getting one out of the phone book or via the internet

Hmm... so maybe it would be better to try the phone book? You open it up and there are the driving schools – dozens of them. Big ones, small ones, ones offering intensive courses, special payment deals. The internet can also be a useful source for finding driving schools.

Rather than sticking in a pin, choosing the cheapest or one where the name catches your eye for some reason, it's worth thinking carefully about what would suit you best. Here are some points you might like to consider:

Availability

Do you want an instructor that offers lessons during evenings and weekends or before work?

Lesson duration

If you possibly can, it's a good idea to have 2 hour lessons rather than go for one hour. You're able to settle into you driving more and can go further afield to experience different driving situations such as city or country driving.

Location, location, location

Where should your instructor be based? Would it be more convenient for you to be picked up from your home or your work/school/college – or both? If you live out in the sticks but the test routes are in the town where you work, it would be worth considering having lessons from there, so you don't have a lengthy (and expensive) journey in before you even practice the test routes.

A large or small school?

The larger schools such as the Automobile Association (AA) and the British School of Motoring (BSM) often offer special facilities – for example some BSM driving centres have driving simulators for pupils to practice on. And because they've got a pool of instructors, if your own is unavailable because of holidays or illness you'll be offered a replacement without having to have a break in your lessons. However, this can be a mixed blessing as instructors often have their own teaching styles and having someone new can affect the continuity of your lessons. Small schools also offer a personal approach and the successful ones tend to get most of their business from recommendations from satisfied ex-pupils. They can sometimes be cheaper than the major driving schools

A male or female instructor?

At the moment only 15% of the 30,000 driving instructors on the DSA register are female, and the good ones are very much in demand. Some women much prefer to be taught by another woman – maybe because they prefer female company, because they've had problems in the past with lecherous instructors, or because they feel a woman would be more sensitive and sympathetic.

Manual or automatic car?

Most people choose to learn in a manual car. This means you gain a full driving licence and can then go on to drive a manual or automatic car in the future. If however you pass your test on an automatic, that's the only sort of car you're then qualified to drive. If you want to drive a manual car you'll have to re-take your test on one. If you think you might want to hire cars in the future, bear in mind that this is easier if you have a manual licence as there aren't as many automatic cars available.

The advantages of learning in a manual is the flexibility, but if you've had problems learning to drive in the past, or if you're seriously daunted by the prospect you might want to consider an automatic. 'Because you don't have to learn to use the clutch and gears, it's a much simpler process and means you can give more of your attention to what's happening on the road,' says driving instructor Charlie Walmesley. 'I've seen people who were really struggling have their relationship with driving completely transformed.'

Assistance with theory test

Most driving instructors will offer help with the theory test in the sense of asking you questions about the Highway Code, or testing you with sample questions. They'll also answer any questions you might have. A few large schools have computers with touch-screens so you can practice under test conditions. If you feel you may have problems with the Theory Test you might want to choose a driving school that can offer you extra support.

Make and model of car

Would you like to learn in the sort of car that you might buy in the future? There are schools offering Nissans, Vauxhalls, Fords, Peugeots and Minis, so if you were dithering between a few choices you could let your preferred car be the deciding factor.

If you have a disability

Some driving schools offer specialised tuition for drivers with disabilities – such as modified cars, or instructors who have learnt sign language to assist deaf students.

If you're pregnant

'Pregnant women aren't invalids and if you feel well there's no reason you shouldn't learn to drive when you're expecting a baby,' says Bob Smalley, Chief Driving Examiner for Advanced Drivers and Riders at The Royal Society for Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA).

It's important to wear your seatbelt the correct way as your pregnancy progresses – that is with the lower strap under the bump. Your instructor will give you advice on this. During the later stages of pregnancy it can feel difficult to twist around in your seat to do the reversing manoeuvres – but again, this is something you and your instructor can work round.

However, it's important to be aware that you will have to learn the emergency stop manoeuvre and there's a one in three chance you'll be asked to perform it on your test. The test has to be carried out under the same conditions for everyone and it won't be possible for examiners to make allowances for your pregnancy. If you have concerns about this, discuss them with your doctor and midwife.

Many mums-to-be learn to drive 'against the clock' as they can't face the thought of hauling their baby and the accompanying paraphernalia round on public transport. However, if your due date approaches but you're still a long way off test standard, don't let it stress you out or prompt you to push for an early test. It might be inconvenient, but you can always start your lessons again after your baby arrives. That way, you'll be able to go in for your test when you're properly prepared and be confident that you'll be safe behind the wheel.

An intensive course?

The idea of taking one of those 'first lesson Monday, test on Friday' intensive courses advertised by some driving schools can seem to offer an appealing shortcut around having to fit in lessons around work and college over several months. However there are serious drawbacks that need to be considered.

'One of the problems with intensive courses is you don't have the opportunity to drive in all conditions with guidance from an instructor,' says Dr Peter Russell, Professor of Road Safety at the Driver Education Research

Foundation. 'For example, if you learn to drive in the summer you might never drive in the dark during your lessons. Or if you learn in the winter you might not experience the problems of driving with the bright sun shining in your eyes.' Driving consultant Kathy Higgins agrees and adds, 'Intensive lessons leading to a test at the end of the week creates a feeling of stress and pressure during the lessons – and these emotions can continue to be associated with driving long after the student has passed their test.' And it's another thumbs-down from driving instructor Liz Mitchell, 'If you have a bad lesson you can't just put it behind you and try again another day – you just have to keep flogging away at it.'

Chris Marquis of the AA also has reservations about complete beginners taking week-long intensive courses. 'It's a tremendous amount to assimilate in such a short period of time,' she says. 'It can have a short, sharp push value for people with some experience in the past – for example, if you've had lessons but failed your test and want to get going again. If you want to make progress fast then I feel that taking two hour lessons every day is acceptable but more than that can be self-defeating.'

Smoking

The vast majority of instructors wouldn't smoke in their cars. But if you dislike the smell of cigarette smoke, it's worth finding out if a potential instructor smokes at all as you might not like the smell in their car. If on the other hand you'd find it really hard to get through a two-hour lesson without a smoking break, you might want to find an instructor who is sympathetic to that.

Length of lessons

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when you're enquiring about lessons, check how long they are. The reason why some lessons seem so much cheaper than others is because you're being quoted for 45 minutes, rather than an hour.

Added extras

Some driving schools offer added extras such as a system whereby your lesson is videoed and you can play it back in your spare time and learn from watching what you did. If the prospect of any of these options appeal to you get in touch with the schools that offer them and find out more.

Post-test support / Pass Plus support

Many driving schools offer the option of having a motorway lesson after you've passed your test. Some are registered to teach the Pass Plus course. This is a training course for new drivers specially designed by the DSA which involves tuition on a wide range of road and traffic situations. Taking the course can make you a safer driver and save on car insurance as well. If you know you're going to want to take this course and would prefer to stick with the same instructor then it's a good idea to choose one who's registered to teach it.

Doing your research

Hopefully considering the above points should have narrowed things down and given you a list of potential driving schools. The next thing to do is to phone them up and have an initial chat. Firstly, it's important to check that you'd be taught by a fully qualified Approved Driving Instructor (ADI) who must have passed a three-part examination run by the DSA and have their name entered on their register. They must display a green octagonal ADI certificate on their car windscreen (a pink triangle one means the instructor is a trainee).

It's also important that they're fully insured. For peace of mind it's best to choose an instructor who's a member of the Driving Instructor's Association (DIA). This ensures they have public liability cover of £5,000,000. Look out for the DIA badge in their advertisements or on their training car.

But just as important is the 'feel' you get from them. In their adverts, many driving schools claim to provide 'fun, friendly and patient tuition'. But then it's not exactly in their interests to admit to being boring and grumpy, is it? A chat over the phone followed by a trial lesson is the best way to assess if this is the right person for you – and be willing to trust your gut instinct and look for another instructor if you feel unsure about them. As Dr Peter Russell, Professor of Road Safety says, 'A grading is a 'snapshot' of how an instructor performs on a particular lesson on a particular day, when they're being inspected. And although grading is a significant factor to consider, it's also important that you feel safe, confident and relaxed with your instructor. When there's a sense of rapport between instructor and pupil, learning is so much easier.'