

Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)

by Tom Vanderbilt, 2008. Random House USA, Inc. 416 pp.
ISBN: 9780307277194

Reviewed by Margaret Winn, M.A.

In *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)*, Tom Vanderbilt dives into the psychological, cultural, and societal reasons behind why we as individuals drive the way we do. While *Traffic* was published in 2008 and some aspects presented are outdated, most of the text remains incredibly relevant. Vanderbilt explores real-world scenarios and provides anecdotes to entertain the reader. For those of us who are drivers, Vanderbilt mentions that driving may be the most complex task we complete each day.

While not written specifically for Orientation & Mobility (O&M) professionals, *Traffic* is highly relevant to our field. As O&M specialists, we teach our learners the skills they need to interpret and respond to traffic in the complex and evolving built environment. It is essential that we teach the most current strategies for analyzing and crossing intersections.

Vanderbilt delves into why drivers behave the way they do, which for an O&M specialist helps to highlight potential or real dangers to our clients. This book is a must-read for any O&M specialist or allied professional working with a client who participates in O&M services. After reading *Traffic*, you will better understand the need to encourage those we serve to continually seek information about infrastructure changes, cultural norms and behaviors, and regulations that impact pedestrian travel.

Vanderbilt touches on urban planning and how a region's signage and infrastructure affect traffic flow. This is important for our clients to understand in their day-to-day travel as well when in another environment. Understanding how and why urban planners design infrastructure is an important piece that we can incorporate into O&M lessons. As

O&M specialists, it is imperative that we understand driver behavior as we monitor clients during lessons and build their confidence with up-to-date information.

Our instruction must be informed by the cultural and regional nuances that may exist on the road. I learned this lesson early in my career, while working in Pittsburgh for a few years as a transplant resident. I was blown away the first time I witnessed a “Pittsburgh Left.” This occurs when a driver who has the right-of-way at a green traffic light pauses to allow an oncoming vehicle to turn left in front of them. This is often signaled by a wave of the hand or a flash of headlights. After witnessing a few rogue left turners, I thought “Wow! What terrible drivers!” only to learn that Pittsburgh is one of the “friendliest” driving cities, and the “Pittsburgh Left” is commonplace. Reading through the book, this practice was referenced in chapter 8. I immediately felt validated in my experience and thankful that I learned of this regional driving behavior before I began my work with clients.

For those O&M specialists who move to a new location or provide multi-regional field work, these small cultural details can make a huge impact. It is further important to understand the regional nuances in planning so that we can effectively advocate and collaborate with transportation planning professionals at the local level while also empowering our clients to advocate within their communities.

Vanderbilt explores the variabilities of driver behavior and what is encountered as a person drives through both rural and urban environments. He provides data on how many times in an hour we are distracted by changing the radio station or how an infant distracting a parent may impact traffic. The anonymity of being a driver inside a vehicle allows us to act in ways we would not if we were more clearly on display. The way we drive in large urban environments where we are unlikely to know those we are driving alongside is quite a different experience from how we would drive if we were visiting a familiar small town where we likely would know those who are driving beside us. In each situation, our driving behavior changes. In various situations, as individuals we may overestimate how risky others are while also underestimating our own risk-taking practices.

Drivers may also experience “inattention blindness,” such as when, because of preoccupation with a concept or task, we fail to notice a fully visible object or event. The gorilla-suit study is an example; in this study observers watch a video and are given the task of counting the number of basketball passes a team makes. Observers are so focused on the task that they fail to notice a person in a gorilla suit walking across the scene. It is important that our clients understand that the brain may not always process what it is not expecting to see. We as instructors must help our learners understand that they may not always be as noticeable as one would expect.

Vanderbilt expresses that most of us hear the word “traffic” and simultaneously have both physical and psychological negative reactions. We can feel stress creep into our bodies. He identifies many of the traffic issues facing society—traffic jams, merging behaviors, and increasingly distracted drivers. When Vanderbilt discussed certain issues on the road, such as the rules for merging, I could feel my body tense as if I were currently in that high stress situation. Vanderbilt’s personal reflections and examples of anecdotal evidence will have the reader go back in time to their personal experiences on the road as a driver, cyclist, or pedestrian. These reflections may help us recognize and address the reactions and worries within ourselves and in our learners.

In the 17 years since *Traffic* was published, the built environment, the temptations of texting and social media, and the everyday distractions of drivers and pedestrians alike have drastically increased. Despite the age of this book, it remains germane to the work we do. I’m certain an updated version of this text would be well received and would offer new insight into how people drive today.

Reading *Traffic* has positively influenced my driving behavior. It has made me think deeply about the nuances of being a driver, a pedestrian, and an O&M specialist in Metro Detroit, the Motor City.

Margaret Winn, M.A., COMS, AER O&M Division Chair, 2024–2026

Corresponding Author: Margaret Winn, email: margaretkwinn@gmail.com.

Published online 25 July 2025