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Chapter 1

Taking a Big-Picture Look at Commercial Driving

When I was a kid, I thought that all truck drivers, like my dad, were big and strong. My friends' fathers, who were also truck drivers, were big guys — at least for the most part. One of the fathers, who didn't have these attributes, had an accident when a steer tire blew on the truck, and he ran off the road. I asked my dad why he had the accident. My dad replied, "because he wasn't stout enough to hold the truck on the road." This reenforced my belief that all truck drivers were big and/or strong — and men.

At that time, it did take a lot of strength, nerve, and sometimes recklessness to drive big trucks in the 1960s and '70s. Trucks didn't have power steering, and roads were generally narrower. A truck might have had 30-plus gears, and the tarps for covering loads were heavier. Truck drivers didn't have cell phones to call for road service when their trucks broke down. Dispatchers and brokers were commonly known to threaten drivers with docked pay, lost opportunities, and other such illegal tactics. But as you probably know, the world is different now, and the transportation industry has drastically changed.

What has changed? To start, the demographics of commercial drivers include all ethnicities and genders who are no longer constrained by physical strength or stature requirements. Trucks have power steering. Computers can shift transmissions, so the driver doesn't have to do it manually. Not only are lighter tarps used for covering loads, but some *shippers* (the business facility from where cargo is picked up) also have devices that help drape a tarp over the cargo. A truck driver can use a cell phone to call for road service or take a picture of that broken *thing-amajig* (a component of your vehicle that you don't know the name of) and send that photo to a service person to identify. And drivers have more power behind them than in the past with whistleblower protection. Today, the lanes of city roads are wider, and the number of lanes on interstate highways have increased. Big money lawsuit verdicts have changed the way much of the industry acts and thinks.

In this chapter, I describe commercial driving and informally introduce you to various government agencies that mandate regulations for the transportation industry. I also give you a glimpse of what commercial motor vehicles (CMVs) there are as well as a preview of the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) testing.

Recognizing the Need for Drivers

In the past, the commercial driver pool was made up of baby boomers (born between 1945 and 1964), and many came from the agricultural community. Coming from an agricultural demographic, these drivers had a lot of applicable skills. They knew how to take care of, drive, and operate heavy equipment.

Over time, the baby boomers provided a sufficient supply of truck drivers in the United States. Now, many of those baby boomer drivers are retiring or not working full-time, and the number of people coming from farms has been greatly reduced. Families are generally smaller than in the past, and there has been a societal push towards college education and white-collar jobs. Even still, the need for transportation and the movement of goods has continued to grow.

For a large portion of current CDL holders, driving was not their first profession. There are drivers with doctorate degrees. There are former government agents and law enforcement officers who made the switch to driving. Retail store clerks, school teachers, Elvis impersonators and other singers, ministers, and hospital administrators have all changed careers to start driving a truck.

However, you don't necessarily have to change to a different career or company. Your current employer may have jobs that require material to be moved from one location to another, so applicants need to have a CDL to operate a vehicle. In this case, driving isn't the main focus of the company, but in order to have the required materials and tools at the jobsite, vehicles requiring CDL drivers are used.



AUTHOR
SAYS

Buses also require a CDL to operate them. I have driven buses for many school field trips, athletic events, and music events for my kids' school. I thoroughly enjoyed it (although kids in junior high school were a little challenging). I would get free admission to most of the events, and when we stopped at a restaurant for a meal, guess who got their meal free?

Knowing the Public's Perception

"They're *just* a truck driver." Some people have an idea that driving a truck or bus is an easy job. It isn't an easy job if you do it well! Unfortunately, there are some people who think commercial drivers are less intelligent or can't make it in another career. I'm here to tell you that this perception couldn't be further from the truth. (See my reference to drivers with doctorate degrees in the previous section.) Don't let these sorts of misperceptions keep you from pursuing a career as a professional driver. Good companies know the value of a driver and will treat you accordingly.

Hollywood movies often portray truck and bus drivers as the hero or the villain who drives recklessly in order to save someone in distress or themselves, respectively. But within the real-life industry, everyday people drive commercial vehicles — people who are parents, married or single, young adults, middle-aged, or seasoned. Sometimes a couple will drive in the same truck!



REMEMBER

UNDERSTANDING HOW DRIVERS THINK

There is an old saying that a wise man learns from his mistakes, but the wisest of men learn from the mistakes of others. If you don't know this already, you are setting yourself up to repeat the same mistakes as a commercial driver.

Driving is a career where you must always be in the process of learning and relearning in order to succeed, maybe not in a traditional academic way but through driving experience. Sometimes a new driver who needs your guidance will force you into new thoughts and theories.

A typical truck driver doesn't just gather knowledge by reading but will greatly benefit from putting learned skills into practice because the human brain stores up information to use when the opportunity arises. When the weather conditions change, or a life-threatening event unfolds before your eyes, you don't have the time to read a book about the situation. You must be able to react. Much like a professional athlete, a professional driver must train and prepare for "real-game" scenarios.

Experience is a great teacher, and in many areas, it's the only way to practice the skills needed to become a professional driver. Remember to watch other drivers to learn from their experiences.

Although there may be mixed perceptions about who commercial drivers are, no one else's perception is more important than your own. You should realize that driving a CMV is a highly responsible job. A driver makes many decisions like a surgeon performing surgery, and planning is important for both jobs. While surgeons have some assistance from a surgical team (including nurses and anesthesiologists), commercial drivers may only have help on limited occasions. Hazards come from many directions and only the driver is there to spot those hazards.

Taking a Look at the CDL Governing Bodies

It is time to examine some of the acronyms that get tossed around like everyone knows what or who they are. There are many government agencies that are involved in the transportation industry. Although there are more regulating agencies than can be discussed in this book, this section highlights the most important governing bodies that you should remember.

Thinking about federal regulations

The federal government's main contribution to regulating transportation — at least for vehicles, drivers, and the safe operation thereof — is the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration (FMCSA). The FMCSA is responsible for most of the commercial driving regulations in the US, which helps to ensure the safety of CMVs and the people who drive those vehicles.

Regulating the industry

All the compilation of federal regulations is called the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Regulations (FMCSR). It states requirements (regulations) of integrity for the major components of vehicles. Components that have defects as listed in the FMCSR are defined as *out-of-service*, meaning that

the vehicle is not allowed to be driven until the defect is repaired. Within these regulations are the rules that the transportation industry must abide by. These regulations cover driver qualifications, medical examiners, the commercial vehicles, required paperwork, and the list goes on.

Training the industry

Once upon a time, all the states did everything on their own testing, taxing, and licensing; and it was a nightmare for the transportation industry. When there was a regulation or law, especially that would be an inconvenience for the driver, someone would ultimately find a way around it. Many drivers would have more than one driver's license. When too many tickets were issued on one license, another license would be obtained from another state.

Licenses were easy to get in some locations — at least at certain times. In 1992, the CDL became the law, consisting of federal guidelines for potential drivers to study and pass. The FMCSA provided a CDL study guide, and in 2005 gave it to each state to publish and brand on their own. Each state (known collectively in this book as State Departments of Transportation) basically had their own spin on the testing.

Becoming effective in 2022, the FMCSA set up the requirements and mandated new training for commercial drivers as well as the instructors who provide the training. This training, called *Entry-Level Driver Training* (ELDT), prepares individuals for the tests needed to obtain licensing for different classifications of vehicles. (See Chapter 2 for more information on the ELDT.)

Any entity, or provider, desiring to offer training to potential CDL drivers or to drivers looking to add to their license must certify that they meet the requirements — qualified instructors, sufficient equipment, proper curriculum, and classroom space — as stated in the FMCSA regulations. Potential drivers can look online for the FMCSA registry of these providers at <https://tpr.fmcsa.dot.gov/> to find an authorized training facility. Individuals can register as ELDT providers but may only offer training for their employees.

Figuring out state regulations

As you're driving your commercial motor vehicle down the interstate, you'll see a sign that says, "All trucks must weigh." While the FMCSA created most of the regulations, it's the states that do the majority of enforcement (along with help from county and local law enforcement). There are weigh stations scattered across the country where they not only ensure that your vehicle weighs within legal limits, but inspectors occasionally check drivers and their vehicles for safety and regulatory compliance. Inspectors might have you pull your vehicle around behind their building for an inspection. Weigh stations are generally found on major highways, but officers can set up portable scales that can be used away from the weigh stations but in a safe location. Officers can conduct business at these temporary locations just like the permanent weigh stations.

While the federal government will make regulations, it can't always make states agree to enforce or adopt those regulations. You may encounter different regulations or weight and size limits as you travel state to state because some states had their own laws prior to the federal government's laws. So state laws and regulations can be *grandfathered in* or take precedent over the federal law.

In spite of licensing regulations coming from the federal government, State DOTs administer the licensing of drivers. State DOTs follow the federal regulations but might also add some additional restrictions, like who would be allowed to be a school bus driver.

STATE TAXES ON FUEL

States collect money by taxing the fuel that commercial motor vehicles must buy. Generally, these fees go to the road and bridge funds within the states. However, if you are operating a CMV in multiple states you might think, “I want to buy fuel in a state where the tax is lower,” or “I will buy fuel where the retail price is lower.” However, the tax portion of the fuel price is irrelevant because as a commercial driver you have to keep track of the miles you drive in each state and then pay a tax for each mile you drive within each state. Periodically, these miles are reported and rectified between the states. So when you’re trying to get the best deal on fuel purchases, remember to subtract the fuel tax per gallon when you compare prices. Electronic GPS devices that transmit information back to your office, usually keep track of the miles you drive in each state to make tracking easier for you.

Discovering an Array of Commercial Vehicles

Eighteen wheelers are what many people think of when commercial vehicles are discussed, especially when they are thinking about which vehicles require a CDL to drive. City municipalities commonly have commercial vehicles that include garbage trucks, snowplows, and dump trucks. Some trucks have a vacuum apparatus for working with sewers. Utility companies need drivers with CDLs for their trucks that service customers and pull trailers.

And of course, there are many types of buses: school buses, activity buses, tour buses, prison buses, daycare buses, city buses, airport shuttle buses, and so on.

Plumbing and electrical contractors need CDL drivers for their trucks and heavier trailers. Construction companies need CDL drivers because they might be hauling heavy equipment, like cranes, well-drilling vehicles, and other specialty machinery. Others in the building industry need to drive dump trucks and concrete mixer trucks, not to mention all the equipment that needs hauled from site to site like bulldozers.

Mobile medical units are often semi-trailers pulled by a semi-tractor. Football teams and marching bands have their own trailers that need pulled by semi-tractors. Musicians, race car drivers, and others in motor sports need people with CDL’s to move their equipment from one event to the next. (See Chapter 3 for more information on the types of careers that require a CDL.)

And, in case you are wondering, the Weinermobile does not require a CDL. While I am not sure why, I know the smiles it creates don’t have weight ratings.

Knowing More Than How to Drive

I hope to never hear you say, “I’m just a truck driver.” (Note that “bus” can be substituted for “truck” here.) Truck drivers are always more than truck drivers. The earliest transportation engineers did not consider themselves to be just camel operators; they were traders and business people!

Earlier drivers had to perform much of their own repairs and maintenance (some still do). Today, many driving jobs involve loading and unloading the cargo. I see beverage haulers physically stocking store shelves with their sodas and energy drinks. The same goes for drivers from bread

and snack chips companies. Some drivers are filling static tanks at a fuel station or unloading them like septic tank truck drivers who — by the way — have some of the nicest looking trucks on the road.

Bus drivers are often assisting passengers, loading and unloading luggage, and occasionally being tour guides.



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STUFF

When a load is picked up at a shipper (legal term and “person” contracting the transportation), by a driver (also known as *an agent for a carrier*), the carrier has taken responsibility for the load. The load belongs to the carrier, meaning that if something happens to the cargo, the carrier pays the shipper for it instead of the *consignee* (transportation name for the receiver of the cargo). The driver again is more than just a driver, they are security.



REMEMBER

In this book, for the sake of brevity and your reading satisfaction, I will often use the generic term, “driver” or “truck driver” when talking about any kind of commercial driver. So feel free to substitute “bus” or “crane” for truck!

Exploring the CDL Exams

There are four categories of exams for acquiring a CDL, not just one — sorry. The good news is that the written test(s) will be on a different day. Testing is how a state certifies that you know what you are doing and have the skills to do it. Now, if only every driver exhibited the same skills in their daily driving . . .

Here’s a brief summary on the type of exams you’ll need to take to obtain a CDL:

- » **Written.** It is called a “written” exam, but you will more likely have a bunch of multiple-choice questions at a computer terminal. Which written exam you will take depends on what type of vehicle you want to drive and the type of work you desire. This exam consists, at a minimum, of a general knowledge test. Examples of additional written tests would be an air brake test and a combination vehicle test. These exams would be required for driving a tractor-trailer combination (also known as eighteen wheelers). Passing these written exams grants you a Commercial Learner’s Permit (CLP); see Chapter 2.
- » **Pre-trip inspection.** Inspecting your commercial motor vehicle is critical. Yes, I know most people don’t inspect their personal vehicles the same as what is required for commercial motor vehicles. But then again, your personal vehicle probably doesn’t endure the same type of intense day-in, day-out use — nor is it as large, meaning the capability of doing greater damage if something goes wrong.

The test is harder than real life because you must *talk* about the vehicle in front of a license examiner. However, I’ll give you lots of help with inspecting your vehicle, which is scattered throughout the book. (See Chapters 17 and 18 for more information on passing the pre-trip inspection test.)

- » **Behind-the-wheel — skills.** There will be a course that was designed to test drivers on a few maneuvers. Most states have you drive forward and stop with the front end of the vehicle in a box. They have you back up straight for a set distance. They’ll have you perform a maneuver that is much like pulling away from a curb from in between two other vehicles. Then, there’s a reverse maneuver that puts you right back in the same spot, stopping with the back end of your vehicle in a box.

License examiners give you a couple of times to Get Out and Look at your vehicle (known as GOAL) and a couple of strategic pull-ups or adjustments. (See Chapter 19 for more information on passing the behind-the-wheel test.)

» **Behind-the-wheel — road.** When the inspection is complete, and you've aced the skills course, or at least passed, you'll move on to the final test, which is the road test. The road test will vary, especially between the different types of vehicles. Your license examiner will likely have you drive along roads to test specific tasks, like someone driving a bus will have to drive across some railroad tracks. When there isn't a required scenario in the neighborhood of the licensing facility, your license examiner will simulate that scenario. For example, when there isn't a railroad track, or a hill to park on, or passengers to pick up, or a real breakdown in progress nearby, you can still expect to know what to do and explain these situations.

Becoming the Nation's Superhero

Our society only functions as it does thanks to people who have and use a CDL. Imagine the chaos if every person who had a CDL stopped driving a commercial motor vehicle. No superhero would be able to save the country from the mayhem that would ensue.

Whatever stereotypes you might have had in your head of bus and truck drivers, you can now throw them out. You can throw out many excuses you've been using to not go ahead and procure a CDL. I'll admit that driving a bus or a truck is not for everyone. To be a good driver, it takes a person who is smart, conscientious, communicative, determined — while giving attention to details — and is willing to learn. Okay, maybe I am overselling the profession, but since you have this book in hand you have at least a little bit of interest. Don't make excuses and continue your path into the world of driving commercial vehicles by obtaining a CDL.

