

Gear Up for Biking Commuting by Bike

(or What Has Worked For Me)

In a recent year when I worked at the Sears Tower (and, no, I can't be bothered to remember its new name), I commuted by bike on 60 days, for a total of 2250 miles of commuting. At current Metra rates, that would save \$342 (and you can buy a **lot** of neat stuff for your bike for \$342). My first bike commuting day of the year was March 16th, and my last day was December 9th.

Some people argue: "But commuting by bike would take too much time!" Figure out how much time it takes for all of the activities you **replace** when you commute by bike. When I worked at the Sears Tower, my commute using Metra would take about an hour each way (including the time it took to walk from my house to the train, time spent waiting for the train, the actual train ride, and the time to walk from the train to my office). On top of that, I would normally spend about 45 minutes a day exercising. So that's a total of 2:45 of commuting plus exercising that my bike commute replaced.

On the worst day in the year I mentioned above (when there was a nasty headwind in **both directions** for my rides, and, yes, it does happen), my roundtrip commute took 3:07. My fastest roundtrip that year (with tailwinds both ways) was 2:30. So, at worst, I spent 20 more minutes commuting by bike, and frequently, total time was **less** when I commuted by bike rather than taking the train.

Many authors will tell you the "best" way to commute by bicycle. In my opinion, what's "best" is **what works for you**. Here are some things to think about, as well as what has worked for me.

1. Bike Choice

What, I've got to choose a bike? Can't I just use the one I have in the garage? Yes, of course you can! However, think about your bike. Would you be upset if it got stolen? Odds are, if you think it's valuable, other people might think so too, and the odds of it being stolen go up. If you commute on a bike that you really don't care about, odds are also good that it won't be particularly attractive to thieves. Bottom line – unless you've got a **really** secure place to park your bike, you're probably better off leaving your fancy free-ride mountain bike or your Italian-made, carbon fiber racing bike at home.

My favorite bike for commuting is an old road bike – in particular, one that's old enough to let you use a wide set of tires. Old road bikes aren't valuable enough to bother stealing (although they provide great transportation). And, face it, roads around here (Wilmette excluded, of course) are miserable. If it's not potholes, it's mounds of cold-patch, or six months of rough surface when the road has been scraped but it's still waiting to be paved. Wide tires not only cushion your body while you're riding, but resist flats better than narrow tires.

Old road bikes are often available for little or no cost in your garage (or your neighbor's basement). Other good places to look for a used bike are:

<http://www.therecyclery.org/>

The Recyclery, a non-profit (501c3) collective, seeks to build community through the restoration of donated and discarded bicycles. 735 Reba Place, Basement, Evanston, IL 60202

<http://workingbikes.org/>

Working Bikes Cooperative is a not-for-profit that recycles local bikes to support shipping bicycles to Third World countries. 2434 S. Western Ave, Chicago, IL 60608

<http://www.experimentalstation.org/blackstone>

Blackstone Bicycle Works is a not-for-profit organization in the Woodlawn neighborhood that aims to provide work experience and bicycles to underprivileged youth. 6100 S. Blackstone, Chicago IL 60637

<http://www.chicagobikeshops.info/shopDetails.php?id=150>

A Nearly New Shop is a for-profit shop specializing in used and recycled bikes.

1a. Bike Fit

A bike that fits you properly will let you ride further with less effort (and fewer aches and pains afterwards). If you're not sure if your bike is a good fit, talk to the experts at your local bike shop.

2. How to Ride

Unless you're fortunate enough to have a cycling commute that involves **only** trails and no streets, at some point you will **have** to ride with automotive traffic. Follow one simple rule:

Ride in the same way you were taught to drive in driver's ed

Follow the rules of the road. Be aware of **all** traffic, both in front and behind you. Signal your turns. Treat other drivers courteously...

In addition, get a copy of the League of Illinois Bicyclists' **Illinois Bicycle Laws** at:

<http://www.bikelib.org/enforcement/bikelawcard2007.pdf>

Read the card, and carry a copy on your bike when you commute.

2a. How to Ride in Traffic

Obey the simple rule above. In addition, use your sense of hearing as well as your sense of sight to keep track of overtaking automotive traffic (this means **no headphones**). When riding in traffic, a common conflict that happens is when you (the cyclist) find your lane blocked by a parked car. When you're driving and you have this happen, what do you do? Do you behave like many drivers in this area (drive at full speed up to the obstacle, and then force your way into the left-hand lane)? Or do you drive as you were taught in drivers' ed (notice the obstacle when it's fairly far away, check your mirrors, adjust your speed, and smoothly merge into the left hand lane)? I've seen many cyclists who try to handle the conflict like my first example – **not**, in my opinion, the best way to deal with the problem when you're on a bike. With the flat and straight roads in this area, you usually can see the obstacle two or more blocks away. I prefer to spot the obstacle early, keep track of approaching traffic, and merge to pass the obstacle at a safe point in the traffic flow.

3. What to Wear (on the Bike)

1. Helmet – yes, it may mess up your hair; but a brain injury will mess up your life. I've now officially lost count of how many times my helmet has saved my life. Knock on wood, though; I've never had that happen while commuting by bike.

2. Helmet Mirror – odds are that you'll be riding with automotive traffic. Knowing what's behind you can also save your life, and enables you to ride more safely and with fewer conflicts with drivers (see "How do Ride in Traffic" above).

3. Sunglasses – with good, shatterproof polycarbonate lenses. I prefer glasses with at least two lenses – dark (for sunny days) and clear (for cloudy days or night riding), and I take both lenses on my commute. I once had a cicada bounce off my glasses (it was flying south, I was riding north), and the sound was like a bullet ricocheting in an old cowboy movie. I can only imagine how much damage something like that could do to my eye.

4. Cycling Gloves – one of the most common things that happens to everyone who rides is to lose your balance when you're stopped at an intersection. When you start to fall (even from a standing position), your reaction is to stick your hand out to break the fall. The padding on the palm of cycling gloves does a terrific job of keeping the grit on the road surface from getting injected under your skin. If that sounds unpleasant, it's even more unpleasant to get the grit out.

5. Cycling Shorts – the pad and construction of the shorts has evolved over the past century. The shorts are **the** most comfortable way to ride. In addition, get **black** shorts. Colored shorts or those with team logos may look good on pro cyclists, but those guys have maybe 3% body fat. When most of the rest of us put those shorts on, the logos get all stretched and distorted. In addition, the pros have mechanics who deal with problems with their bikes. If you have a bike problem when you're commuting, I can guarantee that your hands will get dirty, and I guarantee that you'll wipe your hands on your shorts.

6. Bright Clothing – make sure that drivers can see you.

4. What to Carry on Your Bike

1. A spare inner tube – in case you get a flat tire.

2. A tire patch kit – in case you get a second flat tire (a fairly common occurrence)

3. A way to inflate your tires – either a bike pump or a CO2 inflator. I prefer a pump – I'm always afraid that I'll have one more flat than I have CO2 cartridges.

4. Tools that you're comfortable using.

5. A flashing red LED light for the back of your bike – at some point, you'll get caught in the dark. Make sure that overtaking traffic can see you.

6. A front headlight. LED lights are commonly available, relatively inexpensive, and have very long battery lives. **However**, in my opinion, front LED lights are better at letting you be seen, and much worse for letting you see (and around here, seeing things like potholes is important). Halogen headlights are **much** brighter than LEDs, and with a good halogen headlight you can see the road surface well enough to ride at your normal riding pace. For my commute to downtown Chicago, I used a redundant system – **two** halogen headlights (one 10 watts, the other 15 watts, both with rechargeable batteries). With both headlights turned on, I could ride at my normal pace through the even the most poorly lit areas. Once at night I heard a pedestrian comment that they thought my approaching bike was a motorcycle because of how bright the headlights were.

7. A good lock. You're going to need to park the bike and keep it secure.

8. At least one water bottle – hydration is very, very important.

9. Fenders – they'll help keep you more comfortable when it inevitably rains.

10. A tall kitchen garbage bag. It's light, it folds up incredibly small, and it can be invaluable as an emergency raincoat when the weather surprises you.

5. How to Plan Your Cycling Route

The most important thing, in my opinion, is to sit down, have a heart-to-heart with yourself, and **think seriously about the kind of riding you'd like to do on your commute**. Are you a racer-wannabe, who is going to use commuting time to get in some solid training miles? Are you an adrenaline junkie, who thrives on dicing with traffic? I have friends who commute to downtown Chicago by heading straight down Clark Street. I prefer a calmer route through residential neighborhoods so that my mind can occasionally wander. I **love** the time I spend commuting by bike – it's peaceful, there are no phones (my cell phone is turned off), and I can think about whatever comes to mind.

After you've thought about what kind of riding you'd like to do, the best way to plan your cycling route is to go to Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com>) and plot out a route, choosing streets that you think will suit your preferences. Next, take your planned route and drive it twice – once on a weekend, and then during your probable commuting time on a work day. And drive it paying attention to the details that would bother you if you were on a bike. Finally, test ride the route by bicycle when you have absolutely **no** time pressures on a weekend.

Some web resources about planning a cycling route (and about commuting by bike in general):

Paul Dorn's Bike Commuting Tips

<http://www.runmuki.com/commute/commuting4.html>

Minnesota Department of Transportation -- Choosing Your Route

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/bike/bikeroutes.html>

eHow -- How to Plan Bike-Friendly Commuter Routes

http://www.ehow.com/how_8323_bike-friendly-commuter.html

CommuteByBike.com -- Commuting 101: How to find the perfect route using Google Maps

<http://commutebybike.com/2007/11/14/commuting-101-how-to-find-the-perfect-route-using-google-maps/>

CommuteByBike.com -- Beginner Tips

<http://commutebybike.com/cats/commuting-101/>

Pinellas County, Florida -- Can Bicycle Commuting Work for You?

<http://www.pinellascounty.org/MPO/PDFs/commutebrochure1.pdf>

International Bicycle Fund -- Ten Tips for Bike Commuting

<http://www.ibike.org/encouragement/commute-tips.htm>

6. How to Ride in Downtown Chicago

Surprisingly, I've found that riding in a major city is often less dangerous than cycling in the suburbs. Most of the drivers in downtown Chicago are professionals – and their behavior is predictable. I've generally found the most dangerous drivers downtown to be people who I assume are suburbanites driving their SUV's.

In any major city, **pay attention**. Watch everything – particularly pedestrians at intersections. If there is no bike lane on the street on which you're riding, ride down the center of your lane. Take the entire lane – it's yours, and you don't want to invite a driver to encroach on your space.

Ride predictably – use the right-hand lane unless you need to move to the left to make a left-hand turn. Signal your turns.

7. What to Do With Your Bike When You Get To Work

Check with your employer – see if there is a secure area inside your workplace where you can keep your bike.

If not, there are generally more than enough bike racks (especially in the City of Chicago) to securely lock your bike.

Remove your front wheel, put it next to your rear wheel, and insert your lock so that the bike's frame, both wheels **and** the bike rack are enclosed in the lock. Make sure that whatever you're locking **to** is securely fastened down – thieves sometimes remove the bolts from the base of street signs, for example, so that the signpost can simply be lifted out through the lock. They can then simply throw your bike, lock and all, in the back of a vehicle, and take it away to remove the lock at their leisure.

Take everything that has a quick release (lights, seat pack, water bottle) off the bike; pack it in a small nylon bag and take it with you. Follow the simple rule: If it's not bolted down, it **will** get stolen. For a fun exercise, go north on Sherman Avenue in Evanston from the downtown area. Look at the bikes locked at street signs along the road. You'll see many bikes have parts missing – one a seat, another a front wheel, a third a rear wheel, and somewhere else you'll see just a wheel locked to a post. I guarantee that someone went along the street, and simply collected enough unlocked and unbolted parts to quickly put together a complete bike.

7. What About Clothing For Work?

Here you have to do some planning. I carried my work clothes with me (which was easy, since our office was business casual) in a bike messenger bag. Being male, it was also easy to leave shoes at the office. In case of emergency, I also kept a full change of clothes in my office.

Some people plan their week's commuting in advance, and travel by car or train on Monday, taking the rest of the week's clothing with them.

8. The Dirty Truth – What About Showering at Work?

1. Find out if your company has a shower facility. If your company **does** have a shower facility, that's wonderful (and makes things **much** easier). Find out how to get permission to use the shower...

2. If your company **doesn't** have a facility, see what you can do to get one (for example, I know one dentist who lives in Deerfield, and specified having one installed when his office was remodeled in Kenilworth).

3. Talk to the manager at local health clubs. In downtown Chicago, there seems to be a health club in every building. Try to negotiate a "shower only" pass with the facility.

4. If all else fails, sponge bathe in the sink in the bathroom.

9. The Benefits

1. One less car.
2. It's good for the environment.
3. It's good for humanity. Petroleum is an irreplaceable natural resource. Once it's gone, it's **gone**.
4. You can feel smug all day.
5. You can eat like a cyclist (much to the chagrin of your less athletic coworkers).
6. I absolutely **love** riding down the lakefront path through Grant Park in Chicago, going **faster** than the gridlocked cars on Lakeshore Drive.
7. I also (perversely) enjoy pulling up to a bike rack in downtown Chicago, and having pedestrians treat me as if I were a bike messenger. They move to the far side of the sidewalk (or cross the street), and studiously avoid making eye contact. It's a fascinating study in how we treat other human beings.
8. I've had some absolutely delightful conversations with cab drivers when we've both been waiting at a traffic light in downtown Chicago.
9. The view of Chicago is nothing short of spectacular on a sunny morning as you ride south on Chicago's Lakefront Path.