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FEATURE

## Texting While Driving: How Dangerous is it?

Unprotected text: We investigate if sending messages on your phone while driving is more LOL than OMFG.

JUN 2009 | [BY MICHAEL AUSTIN \(/SEARCH/ALL/AUTHOR/MICHAEL+AUSTIN\)](#) | PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

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If you use a cell phone, chances are you're aware of "text messaging"—brief messages limited to 160 characters that can be sent or received on all modern mobile phones. Texting, also known as SMS (for short message service), is on the rise, up from 9.8 billion messages a month in December '05 to 110.4 billion in

December '08. Undoubtedly, more than a few of those messages are being sent by people driving cars. Is texting while driving a dangerous idea? We decided to conduct a test.

Previous academic studies—much more scientific than ours—conducted in vehicle simulators have shown that texting while driving impairs the driver's abilities. But as far as we know, no study has been conducted in a real vehicle that is being driven. Also, we decided to compare the results of texting to the effects of drunk driving, on the same day and under the exact same conditions. Not surprisingly, *Car and Driver* doesn't receive a lot of research grants.

To keep things simple, we would focus solely on the driver's reaction times to a light mounted on the windshield at eye level, meant to simulate a lead car's brake lights. Wary of the potential damage to man and machine, all of the driving would be done in a straight line. We rented the taxiway of the Oscoda-Wurtsmith Airport in Oscoda, Michigan, adjacent to an 11,800-foot runway that used to be home to a squadron of B-52 bombers. Given the prevalence of the BlackBerry, the iPhone, and other text-friendly mobile phones, the test subjects would have devices with full "qwerty" keypads and would be using text-messaging phones familiar to them. Web intern Jordan Brown, 22, armed with an iPhone, would represent the younger crowd. The older demographic would be covered by head honcho Eddie Alterman, 37 (or 259 in dog years), using a Samsung Alias. (Alterman also uses a BlackBerry for e-mail. We didn't use it in the test.)

Our [long-term Honda Pilot](/reviews/2009-honda-pilot-touring-4wd-long-term-road-test-update) served as the test vehicle. When the red light on the windshield lit up, the driver was to hit the brakes. The author, riding shotgun, would use a hand-held switch to trigger the red light and monitor the driver's results. A Racelogic VBOX III data logger combined and recorded the test data from three areas: vehicle speed via the VBOX's GPS antenna; brake-pedal position and steering angle via the Pilot's OBD II port; and the red light's on/off status through an analog input. Each trial would have the driver respond five times to the light, and the slowest reaction time (the amount of time between the activation of the light and the driver hitting the brakes) was dropped.



[\(/photo-gallery/texting-while-driving-how-dangerous-is-it\)](/photo-gallery/texting-while-driving-how-dangerous-is-it)

**Trigger happy: Austin (right) triggers the windshield-mounted light in simulation of a leading car's brake lights. Brown ignores it.**

First, we tested both drivers' reaction times at 35 mph and 70 mph to get baseline readings. Then we repeated the driving procedure while they read a text message aloud (a series of *Caddyshack* quotes). This was followed by a trial with the drivers typing the same message they had just received. Both of our lab rats were instructed to use their phones exactly as they would on a public road, which, if Jordan's mom or Eddie's wife are reading this, they never do.

Our test subjects then got out of the vehicle and concentrated on getting slightly intoxicated. They wanted something that would work quickly: screwdrivers (vodka and orange juice). Between the two of them, they knocked back all but three ounces of a fifth of Smirnoff. Soon they were laughing at all our jokes, asking for cigarettes, and telling us about some previous time they got drunk that was totally awesome. We had them blow into a Lifeloc FC10 breath-alcohol analyzer until they reached the legal driving limit of 0.08 percent blood-alcohol content. We then put them behind the wheel and ran the light-and-brake test without any texting distraction.

Read Phil LeBeau's Coverage on CNBC: [Texting and Driving Worse Than Drinking and Driving](http://www.cnbc.com/id/31545004/site/14081545)  
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**Phantic n' Philly**  
★★★★★


-1

Ask all the innocent trees that have lost their lives cause some stupid teenager had to reply to a text....

6:40 PM on 10/09/2015



[Reply](#)



**D2D Haffey**  
★☆☆☆☆


+0

Don't text and drive. Hand Held devices use while behind the wheel are Hazardous, Cumbersome, Deadly, and illegal.  
Go large screened device and only when stopped, just like the cops.

1:34 AM on 02/04/2015



[Reply](#)



**Phantic n' Philly**  
★★★★★

+1


this actually defies logic to even consider taking your eyes off the road anymore because so many others do !  
Anymore you literally take your life in your hands out there everyday because some butthead is doing something else other than driving in a moving vehicle.

9:25 PM on 09/03/2014

[1 Reply](#)



[Reply](#)




**Eric Marr**  
★★★★★

+1

Yep. See it every day.



5:15 PM on 10/09/2015



**Ted N.**  
★★★★★

+1

This is completely and totally false. Volkswagen is absolutely lying! At least if they intended to use this in the USA they are.

There is roughly 30,000 fatalities a year. In 2011 there were only 3,331 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver of those roughly 300 and only 300 involved cellphone use AT all!

By comparison (we don't have 2011 numbers yet.)

In 2010, 10,228 people were killed in alcohol-impaired driving crashes, accounting for nearly one-third (31%) of all traffic-related deaths in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The whole add is a flat out lie.

I don't blame volkswagen for being incredibly misinformed and lying to the public..Everyone is so misinformed on this it is amazing. The koolaid has been served

... [read more](#)

6:47 AM on 09/03/2014

**1 Reply**



Reply



**Cadillac Ranch**



+0

Thank you! The first time I heard the ludicrous claims that texting while driving was as dangerous as drunk driving I lol'd. I was going to comment but you said it perfectly.



6:30 PM on 03/24/2017



**Nicholas N.**



+3

I have a feeling that mandating everyone to drive cars equipped with manual transmissions would help deter a good many of the offenders. It probably wouldn't solve it, but it would definitely help improve driver attentiveness, which in turn theoretically keep drivers off their phones.

Also, the laws against texting while driving - at least in NC - are so pointlessly hard to enforce, they might as well not exist. Currently, it is considered a secondary offense, which means that if a police officer sees you texting while driving, they cannot pull you over for that. Instead, they must first pull you over for speeding, reckless driving, etc, before they can accuse you of texting while driving. Furthermore, unless the offender admits they we

... [read more](#)

9:18 PM on 03/24/2014

**1 Reply**



Reply



**Renee J.**



+3

Texting and Driving should be a first offense. I don't understand why they are not taking it serious enough. There are too many people dying and getting hurt from someone else negligence.



4:31 PM on 05/10/2014



**James Shaffer**



+2

Texting and Driving should be treated by the authorities as no different than D.U.I. The consequences of such irresponsible behavior could lead to tragic results and should be treated as such.

Driving is a privilege! You should drive a safe car, get full coverage insurance (check \$25/month from Insurance Panda), keep your car in tip top shape, keep your car well maintained, etc. No room for debate here. If you text and drive you should lose your license for a time. It's possible to multitask but not to look two places at once.

10:35 PM on 03/23/2014

**2 Replies**



Reply



**Phantic n' Philly**



-1

excellent ideas



6:17 PM on 03/24/2014



**Cadillac Ranch**



+0

Absolutely terrible idea. If texting while driving was as dangerous as drunk driving we would have noticed a massive increase in driving fatalities during the years texting was becoming more common. Instead we see a continued steady decrease, using vehicle miles travelled, through the era of text message usage becoming more common. The results show the exact opposite results as the article and all the "experts" would lead us to believe. So tasking overburdened police forces with arresting everybody who texts would not be the best idea and would cause a penalty way out of line with the offense.



6:42 PM on 03/24/2017



**Phantic n' Philly**



-1

it's so dangerous that some dim witted blonde yesterday almost rear ended me because she was so busy texting rather than watching the narrow 2 lane road we were on, thankfully several people saw it and one happened to be a upper makefield police unit, well she'll have to explain to her hubby why she got a 210.00 ticket and narrowly missed getting her volvo's suv's nosepiece re arranged and having to buy me a new beater to run around in .....

7:58 PM on 11/26/2013



Reply



**Denny J.**



-1

HOW MANY TIMES IS IT GOING TO TAKE...??? Before ALL cellphone makers AND carriers and ALL automakers to get the heads out of the sand..the technology is HERE NOW TO JAM cellphone and smartphones from sending and receiving texts and calls while a vehicle is in motion..but I think no one has the balls to do this because people will moan and whine its an invasion of their rights...WHAT RIGHTS?...and teen drivers are one of the WORST offenders of texting and driving..but their parents whine cause they wont be able to text them or their friends wont be able to communicate with them if phones are jammed while driving...and AT&T has an app on their phones now that will disable phones while driving...but people can opt out of it being put on p

... [read more](#)

7:08 AM on 11/25/2013

**2 Replies**



Reply



**Renee J.**



+0

I totally agree with you. If it's not an 911 call no one should be allowed to use their phones.



4:34 PM on 05/10/2014



**Chris V**



+2

What about passengers, or if you are on a plane or train? I want to be able to use my Phone/GPS/Pandora/internet in those situations. Your solution removes that as an option.



2:15 AM on 02/04/2015



**Anthony Thomas 1**



+1

Time to do something about this epidemic that is costing us lives, young lives. There are phone apps out there that disable your phone when you reach a certain speed. They work great, just ask my teenage daughter. I installed it on her phone and now I have the piece of mind knowing she can't use her phone while driving. The one I got costs \$2. Small price for what it brings. Check it out at the google play store. SMS CMC-AK

10:27 PM on 10/15/2013



Reply



**Ryan Dickey**



+0

Checkout Textface and you can see loads of people texting and driving everyday!!

I just uploaded a video of a trucker texting and driving on our YouTube!

8:48 AM on 05/13/2013



Reply

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[Reaction Averages at 35 MPH \(http://media.caranddriver.com/files/texting-while-driving-how-dangerous-is-itaverages-at-35-mph.pdf\)](http://media.caranddriver.com/files/texting-while-driving-how-dangerous-is-itaverages-at-35-mph.pdf)

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