

# Things to Consider When Leading a Group Bike Ride

The goal of this document is to provide new ride leaders with some guidance for planning a route.

Although this document outlines some of my thinking around ride planning, it's just a starting point. When developing routes, I tend to err on the side of caution and develop routes that are going to appeal to a wide audience of riders. This means that I stick mostly to side streets, avoid steep hills, and generally prioritize rider comfort.

But everyone takes a different approach. It keeps things interesting and fun! And as you become more experienced, you'll discover your own route-planning "style."

I hope this document provides you with the confidence you need to get out there and lead your first ride.

—Nick Mediati (he/they)  
PDX Unity Ride  
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## Questions to Ask Yourself When Planning Your Route

### **Are you leading alone or with a friend?**

Co-leading with a friend is always a good idea. That way, you can have another set of eyes, as well as someone to “sweep”—that is, someone who rides near the back to make sure everyone stays together and to keep an eye out for mechanical problems.

### **When will you hold your ride?**

Your audience will vary depending on when you hold your ride. If you want a family-friendly ride, you might want to hold it on a weekend afternoon, for instance. Also, consider other goings-on when you schedule your ride. Are there other events going on in town that may impact attendance? Are there any holidays that you should plan around? Finally, consider the effect that events will have on your route. You will probably want to avoid the Rose Quarter if there's a Blazers game or concert, for example.

### **Where does your ride start and end?**

Parks are good places to begin and end your rides. Consider accessibility to transit. Loop rides are great because they mean a predictable starting and ending point. There's no right or wrong part of town to start or end a ride, but your starting and ending points will influence who attends your ride.

### **Are there any points of interest that you want to incorporate into your route?**

If so, use these as the framework of your route. It will make route planning a lot easier, and it will actually inform things like your beginning and end points, store stops, park stops, and so on. Your route then becomes a way to connect the dots.

### **Who is your ride for?**

Are you aiming for a chill, family-friendly ride or a fast-paced ride for serious cyclists? Have your audience in mind as you plan your route.

### **Will you have a theme?**

Odds are that your ride has a theme without you even realizing it! Your theme could be as simple as "a ride through North Portland" or as elaborate as "come dressed as your favorite childhood cartoon character." It could also be oriented around an affinity group (e.g. trans or nonbinary people) or a fandom or something else.

## **Things that Impact a Route's Level of Difficulty**

A number of factors can determine how challenging your route is, but it isn't a linear relationship. A [short route with some hills](#) can still be fun and approachable, for instance. Try different combinations of these factors and see what feels best.

<b>Length</b>	A short ride in the 5-8-mile range is going to be more attractive to less experienced cyclists and families. Longer routes will be more attractive to more advanced cyclists (though this isn't absolute). I've found that around 10 miles is the sweet spot.
<b>Pace</b>	Slower paced rides are going to be more accessible to beginners, families, and riders with disabilities. An average pace of 8-10 mph is good for a general audience.
<b>Hills</b>	The steeper the hills, the more challenging the ride. The flatter the route, the more accessible it will be. But gentle climbs and moderate descents mean a fun ride for a wide range of riders.
<b>Curves</b>	Lots of tight turns are going to be more difficult for less experienced cyclists to navigate, especially in hilly areas and at higher speeds.
<b>Road/trail surface</b>	Beginner-friendly and general-audience routes should stick to paved surfaces. If you're looking to draw a more advanced crowd, you can add in some gravel or dirt portions.

## Safety and Rider Comfort

Safety and rider comfort should be a top priority as you plan your route. You don't want to needlessly put riders in harm's way or lead them through overly awkward portions of a route.

<b>Blind curves, intersections with poor visibility</b>	<p>Try to find intersections and routes with a good line of sight and/or a crossing signal. Avoid crossing at intersections with poor visibility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I try to use crossings that allow you to see at least 2 or 3 blocks in either direction.</li> </ul>
<b>Turns immediately before of after a hill</b>	<p>Avoid making turns immediately at the bottom of a hill; people will overshoot your turn because of inertia. Also, avoid steep climbs immediately after a turn since these tend to catch people off-guard.</p>
<b>Crossing major thoroughfares</b>	<p>Try to cross major thoroughfares at a signal. If a signalized crossing isn't possible, you may need to ask for help with corking—that is, riders who act as crossing guards to ensure that everyone can cross safely. But on some busy streets, even corking may not be a safe option. When in doubt, cross at lights.</p>
<b>Train, light rail, and streetcar tracks</b>	<p>When crossing tracks, consider the angle at which you'll be crossing them. Approaching them at a 90-degree angle is best. If you're crossing tracks at an unusual angle, consider another route or proceed with caution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always call out tracks as you approach them.</li> <li>• Always abide by railroad and MAX crossing signals.</li> <li>• If your route crosses the tracks at 11th/12th and Division or 8th and Division, plan a detour over the tracks via the <a href="#">Gideon Overcrossing</a>.</li> </ul>
<b>Bridges and freeway overpasses</b>	<p>Are you taking your group across a bridge or over a freeway? What is the bridge or overpass like? Is there enough space for a large group of cyclists to ride safely? Dedicated bike lanes/paths are always best, but there are no hard and fast rules here. You'll need to judge based on traffic volumes and the kind of bicycle facilities on the overpass or bridge.</p>
<b>Traffic volumes, riding in mixed traffic</b>	<p>Quieter streets like Greenways are fantastic for group rides. Bike lanes or cycleways are also good. Riding in mixed traffic on busier streets can be fine for a more advanced audience, but it isn't as approachable for beginners. It also increases the risk of conflicts with automobiles—something you'll want to avoid.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't ride through pedestrian-only ways.</li> <li>• Mixed-use paths are ok, assuming they aren't too crowded, but you'll want to ride with caution. Reduce speed, ring your bell, and call out when passing pedestrians. You may also want to ride single-file through these areas.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try not to take up more of the street than you need to. Give drivers space to pass.</li> <li>• Don't block dedicated transit lanes. Let buses pass so they stay on schedule—and so transit riders can reach their destinations on time.</li> </ul>
<b>Tools, equipment, and sundries</b>	<p>Bring a bike toolkit, a flashlight or lantern, a pump, and a patch kit, just in case someone has a flat or a mechanical problem.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a good idea to bring a first-aid kit as well.</li> <li>• Some ride leaders also bring snacks and water to share!</li> </ul>
<b>Dealing with angry drivers</b>	<p>In general, you should not confront angry or irate drivers; that only serves to escalate a potentially volatile situation.</p>

## Ride Leader Tips and Tricks

- **Practice, practice, practice.** Try a few different kinds of routes before you lead your first ride to get a better feel for what works.
- **Test your route before you lead your ride.** Even if you think your route is solid, you may find that some portions just aren't suitable for a large number of cyclists. Shift2Bikes recommends testing your route around the same time of day that you plan to hold it to account for traffic patterns, but *any* route test is better than *no* route test.
- **Trust your gut.** If something about your route feels off, reconsider it. It's OK to err on the side of caution, especially as a first-time ride leader.
- **Share route and ride details before your ride.** Riders appreciate knowing the approximate length of your route, the pacing, the start and end points, and the nature of your route (hills, mixed traffic, etc...). This will help riders determine whether this is the right ride for them.
- **Be precise with your starting location.** Don't just say you'll meet at a park; provide a specific meetup point at the park.
- **Arrive at your starting location on time.**
- **Make some opening remarks.** Go over the route, lay out the ground rules, and make your riders feel welcome!
- **Give people extra time to arrive.** People may encounter delays when traveling to your starting point, so wait at least 10 or 15 minutes after your posted start time before heading out.
- **Call out directions, obstacles, and oncoming traffic.** Inform your group when you're turning or stopping, whether there are any potholes or any vehicles approaching, and so on. Keep an eye out for pedestrians and other cyclists, too.
- **Keep your group together.** Make occasional brief stops to allow riders to catch their breath or get a sip of water, and to allow slower riders to catch up.

## Crowd-Pleasing Stops and Landmarks

- **Ladd's Addition:** Get in some laps around Ladd's Circle.
- **Blumenauer Bridge (aka Earl):** Portland's newest bike bridge is a great addition to any route.
- **Laurelhurst Park:** Always a fun park to ride through or stop at!
- **Cathedral Park:** An ideal scenic stop for your daytime rides in North Portland.
- **H Mart on SE Belmont:** A favorite store stop for a reason!
- **SE Woodstock Blvd. between Cesar Chavez and 28th:** This is a fun downhill stretch, but has some mixed traffic and a steeper grade.
- **SE Clinton St.:** A good Greenway with a gentle downhill segment.
- **SE Harrison St. between 30th and 20th:** A faster downhill stretch into Ladd's Addition.
- **NE Alameda St. between 24th and 57th:** Gentle curves and hills make this an especially enjoyable segment.
- **N Willamette Blvd. along the bluffs:** A popular and scenic ride.
- **Skidmore Bluffs (Mocks Crest Park):** A good place to end a ride with scenic views.
- **Sellwood Riverfront Park:** A little out of the way, but a good place to go for a dip on a warm evening.
- **Poet's Beach:** Small beach under the Marquam Bridge. Not super accessible, but has ample bike parking.

## Ride Leader Resources

This document is not intended to be exhaustive, so check out these other resources, too!

- [Shift2Bikes.org](https://shift2bikes.org): This is the primary calendar for group rides in the Portland area.
  - [Leading a Social Ride](#): Be sure to check out the ride leader comic!
  - [Ride Leading Checklist \(PDF\)](#): This handy guide provides some additional pointers beyond what we talk about here.
  - [Shift2Bikes Public Health Guidance and COVID Plan](#): Some important things to consider to reduce the risk of contracting COVID on your ride.
- [Pedalpalooza — Bike Summer!](#) Portland's annual bicycling festival that takes place June 1 – August 31.
- [Bike Portland](#): A must-visit resource for all things related to cycling in Portland.
- [Ride with GPS](#): App and website for mapping out routes. It's free to create maps through a web browser on your computer. [Paid plans](#) let you create routes on your phone, use turn-by-turn navigation, set points of interest, and more.
- [Strava](#): Another popular route planning app.
- [Canva](#): Easy to use web-based graphics design app. It's a good option for creating graphics for promoting your ride on social media. Free and paid plans available.
- [Adobe Express](#): A similar, easy-to-use design app from Adobe. Both free and paid plans are available.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>**DISCLOSURE:** My employer partners with Adobe to provide Adobe Express Premium subscriptions to nonprofits. This did not influence my decision to include it in this document. –nick

## Notes and Acknowledgements

PDX Unity Ride is a non-hierarchical, anti-patriarchal bicycle collective based in Portland, OR. Our goal is to build stronger community ties through a shared love of bicycling. We work toward creating a space that is safe for those who experience transphobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, misogyny, and any other form of structural oppression.

Follow us on Instagram [@pdxunityride](#).

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This document is loosely inspired by Shift2Bikes's guide, [Leading a Social Ride](#). It's written with Portland, OR in mind, but most of it is applicable to group rides elsewhere, too.

Special thanks to Kat and Rae for providing feedback on this doc!

**DISCLAIMER:** This document is provided for informational purposes only. The information herein is provided "as-is," with no warranty or assurance of accuracy or suitability for all situations. It is based on one person's experiences as a ride leader and is not exhaustive by any means. Ride leaders assume the responsibility of leading a group ride at their own risk. Additionally, this document is not intended as legal advice of any kind. Consult competent legal counsel to learn how relevant cycling-related laws may apply to you.