



Learning to ride

The first thing you need to know about riding a bike is not how to balance, but how to steer it.

That may not sound like much of a difference, but let me explain:



Try rolling a football across a piece of grass. If you roll it fast, it goes very straight – but gradually it slows down and stops. What keeps it going at first is called ‘momentum’. This means that its weight and its speed help to keep it moving. As it rolls it bumps over pieces of grass and small lumps in the surface, and you may notice that as it slows it moves a little to one side or the other as it bumps against uneven patches in the surface, before it stops.

Try rolling a coin (use a large one like a 2p) along a smooth surface. With a bit of practice you can roll it quite a long way without it falling over sideways. Maybe you can get it to roll all the way off the edge of the table. Try it with a hoop or maybe even a bicycle wheel, and you find that the faster you roll it, the further it goes. However, eventually it starts to steer to one side, and then falls over.



The main difference between a bike and a hoop or a 2p is that it has a rider. The rider has to do two things at once:

1. Keep steering it in a straight line to stop it falling over to one side.
2. Keep powering the bike forwards to stop it from slowing down.

When you’re learning to ride, while you’re getting to feel how the bike steers from side to side, **you don’t need to have your feet on the pedals to start with.**

Lesson 1 – Scooting the bike. First, find a wide smooth flat area like a school playground or an empty car park. It helps if it’s really wide, say 8 metres or more. A grassed area isn’t so good, because it has lumps and bumps under the surface which will make steering more difficult.

Second, lower the seat so that you can touch the ground easily with both feet. (Once you’ve learnt to steer, you’ll need to gradually raise it back to its proper height.)

Third, keeping all these things in mind, scoot with both your feet at once against the ground to propel the bike forwards. Don’t even think about pedalling yet – the main thing is to learn to steer, and to get a feel for how the bike moves. Also, don’t ‘walk’ the bike with one foot at a time – it’s important to get both feet off the ground at once. Try to keep this scooting going as far as you can. When you reach the end of the playground/car park, simply turn round and come back.

Top Tip 1. Make sure you can reach the brakes. Whenever you want to stop, practice pulling the brakes *gently*. If you pull them gently, you come to a nice smooth stop. If you pull them hard, it can often stop uncomfortably quickly! However it’s better to use the brakes to stop the bike rather than your feet, because the feet can make the bike steer unexpectedly and make you feel unbalanced.



Top Tip 2. While you ride, you need to move the handlebars gently in order to keep the bike in a straight line. **Make sure you don’t grip too hard.** A hard grip makes it more difficult to do the small corrections you have to make to keep the bike in a straight line – a gentle grip makes these easier, and more precise.

Top Tip 3. Try not to look down at the handlebars or your feet, but **keep looking ahead.** This is very important to help you keep in a straight line.



Some people remove the pedals altogether while a rider is learning, to prevent knocking the legs against them. (Please note we always advise wearing a helmet while riding – I just couldn't find pictures of helmeted people scooting!)

You need to be patient! The average time taken to get from here to pedalling is about 30-40 minutes. Sometimes shorter, but also sometimes longer too! These are quite a lot of things to remember all at once, and it really helps to have someone with you to keep reminding you (in a pleasant, encouraging way) about all these things while you're doing it.



After you've been doing this for some time, you should be able to keep your feet off the ground for longer and longer between scoots. If you can keep your feet off the ground for 5 seconds, you'll be ready to try and put your feet on the pedals. Now try to find the pedals with your feet between scoots. **(Remember to keep looking where you're going!)** When you can turn the pedals once, raise the seat by 2-3 cm and have another go. Keep raising the seat a little at a time as you get more confident. (Some riders have a problem getting their knees high enough if the seat is too low – try raising the seat by 2-3cm first, if this is the case)

A note to helpers: I find that stabiliser wheels don't really help much, except perhaps for very small children (4 or under), though I'm interested to hear from people who think otherwise. Also, it isn't always helpful to have someone push the learner along. If you feel that you have to do this – the best way is by holding the seat of the bike from underneath (this way you aren't holding them inappropriately). However, do avoid holding the handlebars for the rider – it's important they feel for themselves how the bike moves.

When you have found you can lift up your feet to pedal the bike in a straight line without stopping, remember Top Tip 1 and pull the brakes gently when you need to slow down. Now it's time for the next lesson – how to steer the bike around corners.

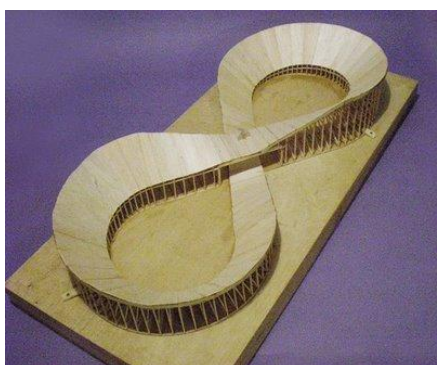
Lesson 2 - Ride around in circles. In your large, flat playground, your next step is to be able to turn the bike. Start by turning a corner, and then progress to turning in a complete circle. The circles can be as big as you like to start with! Your objective is to ride in a complete circle **anti-clockwise** (turning left) **three times** without stopping. If you have to stop for any reason – even after 2½ circles! – then start again. Then do **three clockwise** circles. Show yourself that you're getting the hang of it by gradually making smaller circles.



Your circle can be as big as you like.

Remember that it's much easier to do this if you're holding the handlebars **loosely**. With a tight grip steering becomes much more difficult – doesn't matter if you're trying to go straight or trying to turn. It's much easier to learn when you're relaxed!

Lesson 3 – Figure of 8. Now you're starting to get good! To prove it, place 2 cones about 8 metres apart. Imagine that these cones are dots in the middle of the two circles that make a figure 8. Your objective is to ride three complete figure 8s without stopping. As before, even if you stop after 2½ figure 8s, start again!



The trick of doing this is:

- Start with really big circles, and keep your dot (cone) the same distance from you all the way round.
- Aim to get the cross-over point (between your left and right circles) as close as you can to **half-way** between the two dots (cones)

When you can do this with large circles – try making the circles a

Herne Hill Youth Cycling Club www.hhycc.com



bit smaller.

Herne Hill



Youth CC

Bill Wright