

# Shifting an automatic transmission to neutral



Ralph Seekins

I was recently driving to the airport with a friend and, as will normally happen, we came across a couple red lights along the way. As we did, I shifted the automatic transmission into neutral and left it there until it was time to start moving again. He told me he had never seen anyone do that before and asked why I did it. I told him it was a driving habit I developed many years ago and then explained why I do it.

When a vehicle stops moving while the automatic transmission is in DRIVE, the engine is still trying to push the car forward. In engineering terms, when the transmission is in DRIVE, there is still some “torque” on the drive system. So, in less technical terms, it puts less strain on the engine and automatic transmission when the driver slips the transmission into NEUTRAL during deceleration and while stopped. Less strain means longer life and fewer repair bills.

Additionally, this method can give better braking control. For example, when a vehicle’s transmission (automatic or

manual) is in neutral and you apply the brakes, there are no opposing forces working on the wheels. What I mean here is, as stated above, when someone brakes to a stop, the engine and transmission are still putting force (torque) to the driving wheels. If you remove the torque by selecting NEUTRAL, you can brake more efficiently and, on slippery roads, you can more gently and evenly apply your brakes as you come to a stop. (Remember the old adage that, on slippery roads “the brakes are not your friend.”) In almost all cases, a disconnected driveline (transmission in NEUTRAL) while coming to a stop gives the driver better braking control and better braking control is definitely your friend.

If a person decides to utilize this driving habit, there are several things to remember. First, when you do want to go, you need to put the transmission back in DRIVE. That might sound awfully basic but it’s something several friends have told me is hard to remember after driving for years without ever moving the gear shift lever after they are under way. But, more than likely, you’ll catch on real quick and nobody is likely to notice your temporary brain lapse.

Next, on a lot of the heavier duty pickup trucks the automatic transmission may have what Ford terms a “TOW-HAUL” feature

that uses engine braking to help to slow the vehicle and control the load – like when pulling a big trailer or when carrying a large camper. If your truck is equipped with that feature, you want to utilize it when decelerating on dry pavement. You’ll have better control and save a lot on brake replacements. However, great caution should be used with these transmissions on slippery surfaces as too much engine braking can cause a loss of tire traction and could lead to sliding out of control. I personally use the TOW-HAUL feature on my F-350 when pulling our big six-horse trailer. However, I still shift to NEUTRAL when I’m at a full stop.

I learned this method because, in my early driving years, our family didn’t have a car or truck with an automatic transmission. So, if we didn’t shift to NEUTRAL at a stop, we killed the engine. The principal is the same no matter what transmission a vehicle has. Remove the torque when stopped or stopping for safety and for engine and transmission life. Good luck and safe driving.

*Ralph Seekins has more than 40 years’ experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past 32 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln Mercury.*