Specific Purpose: To convince my audience that a longer time with a learner’s permit would make younger drivers better drivers.

Introduction

I. Attention Getter: Imagine yourself in the driver’s seat of a small red Ford pickup truck. You think to yourself, “This day is just too beautiful for anything to go wrong.” You just got off from your shift at PennDOT in Harrisburg and are making your way home to Bainbridge. You’ve got the windows cracked open and the radio turned up. It is still February after all. Finally, you make your way onto 241, the final stretch of your fifteen-mile journey. Just in time, the song “Roadhouse Blues” by the Doors comes on the radio. You tap your fingers on the steering wheel as Jim Morrison starts to complement Robby Krieger’s soulful guitar. Then, for some unknown reason, you slip into unconsciousness.

You awake wearing a jacket made of metal, upholstery, and pieces of dashboard. You see blood on the mangled wreckage that surrounds you. Suddenly, a woman is there through the gnarled driver’s side window with a phone in hand. She says, “I called 911! They’re on their way!” As pain, despair, and questions flood through your mind, you ask the woman, “What happened?”

These events occurred February 23rd, 2006 on the 2500 block of Bainbridge Road. The driver of the Ford truck was Randy Lokey. He was a father, a husband, a community leader, a fellow church member, and my little league baseball coach. Randy was struck head on while cresting a hill just two miles from his house by an older model Saturn. The driver of that car was Travis Shaffer who was 20 years old at the time. He was attempting to pass in the opposing lane of traffic cresting over the same hill as Randy. Unfortunately, Randy died after being removed from his truck. Conversely, Travis Shaffer lived. Amazingly, he remains a free man and continues to drive his automobile. Charges are still pending against him.

II. Credibility: For the past four years, I have used driving as a job to pay my bills. In that time, I have been witness to many incidents of poor driving. It would be unfair of me to say that a driver under the age of 21 was behind the wheel every time I saw a driving law being broken. However, inexperienced younger drivers did commit a sizeable majority of them.
III. **Relevance:** When I refer to the term “younger drivers,” I am referring to licensed drivers between the ages of 15 and 20. That age group makes up only 6.7% of the current driving population, but account for a sobering 14% of all fatal crashes. According to a July 2005 New York Times article, traffic accidents are the leading cause of death for 15-20 year olds.

IV. **Thesis:** I believe it is unrealistic that younger drivers can learn everything that they need to know about operating a motor vehicle from an adult in a mere six months. Our state’s current method of licensing drivers just pumps out more and more raw and dangerous younger drivers putting everyone else on the road at an increased risk. As automobile technology advances, so must the licensing process.

V. **Preview:** I will describe two changes that must take place to curb this ever-increasing problem.

A. First, the period in which one has his or her learner’s permit must be extended past the current six months to one year.

B. Second, the actual licensing test must be amended to include situations other than ideal ones.

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**Body**

I. The period in which one has his or her learner’s permit must be extended past the current six months to one year.

A. As it stands right now in Pennsylvania, a potential driver that has reached his or her sixteenth birthday can receive a learner’s permit by passing a written test, getting physically certified by a doctor, and paying a nominal fee of $5. A mere six months later, that younger driver may receive his or her license by completing a short road test and logging fifty hours of behind the wheel time with a licensed driver over the age of twenty-one. If all aspects are completed, then for only $26 more, that driver can obtain his or her license.

B. However, the United Kingdom’s Department of Motor Vehicles reports that they have the third lowest death toll due to automobiles in the industrialized world. A
learner must complete somewhere between twenty and fifty hours of driving time with a registered driving instructor and display learner’s license plates while holding a permit in the U.K. In order to obtain an actual driver’s license, the younger driver must pass a rigorous 45-minute road test without any major infractions. They also are required to pay 38 pounds (that’s 75 dollars) and wait until they are seventeen to actually take the test.

C. Pennsylvania’s modus operandi for awarding licenses and the United Kingdom’s aren’t all that dissimilar. However, according to the Brake Charity Group, in 2004 19 out of every 100,000 drivers aged 16-19 died in car accidents in the U.K. Compare that to the U.S. where 30 out of every 100,000 drivers aged 15-20 died in 2004 says a June 2005 piece from the New York Times. It seems that these discrepancies between the U.K. and the U.S. policies on obtaining one’s license to drive actually do make a difference. These facts make it clear that it would be beneficial to lengthen the duration of time that one has his or her permit to one year like the U.K. Pennsylvania and other states would see lower crash rates in burgeoning drivers by lengthening this critical developmental stage. By encountering more driving situations under a licensed driver’s wing, younger drivers would earn valuable experience.

Transition: Combating younger driver’s naïveté and inherent danger behind the wheel must be gradual, but at the same time effective. While leaping a mile ahead isn’t feasible, taking inch long strides doesn’t get anyone anywhere. To ensure that latent drivers benefit by lengthening a permit’s duration, the examination at the end of that period needs to be amended as well.

II. The actual licensing test must be amended to include situations other than ideal ones.

A. During my drivers license road test, I had to parallel park in a large parking lot, make a three point turn in that same parking lot, and drive around a one square block of Harrisburg’s finest streets. Twenty minutes after I began, I had my laminated license in my hand. At no point during the road test did I have to drive at night or in slippery conditions, two of the biggest hazards on the road. CQ Press, a division of Congressional Quarterly Inc., reported in 2002 that 52% of teenage auto deaths occurred between 9 pm and 6 am. That’s 1820 teens that died in only nine hours. Crash rates for drivers aged 16-19 per mile driven at night are higher than those for
all other age groups says a June 2003 article from the NY Times. This reveals that younger drivers are ignorant of differing driving conditions, which is due, in part, to a lack of these situations being present in the current road examination.

C. A new, comprehensive licensing test needs to be utilized instead of the older, out of date assessment in use right now. This new test needs to include parallel parking on a street, not in a parking lot, and should take longer than twenty minutes. It would also benefit potential drivers for it to contain nighttime as well as daytime portions. By replacing a single examination with multiple exams, costs, such as paying the instructors, would rise. These expenses would have to be offset by increasing the price of a license. By doing this, a bigger and more expensive commitment is made when receiving a license.

D. But even more importantly, this new test should include a session where the budding driver would take his or her auto onto a slippery surface course. Safety precautions would have to be taken such as anti-roll apparatus for the bigger vehicles like SUVs. The instructor would initiate a slide by engaging the emergency brake and the student would have to be able to recover his or her vehicle from the slide. This test would prepare younger drivers for extreme conditions that they will likely have to face while driving like snow and ice.

Conclusion

I. These two amendments to the current licensing process will undoubtedly aid in the development of proper driving skills in up-and-coming drivers. There truly is a problem with younger drivers in this country, but it isn’t an irreversible one. By combating this issue during the licensing stage, bad driving habits can be overcome before they even take hold. If you truly wish to make a difference, I urge you to contact your state representatives and senators and demand changes to Pennsylvania’s driving laws. They are “dogs” on your leash and they must answer to you when innocent people like Randy Lokey die from raw and hazardous younger drivers. Randy left behind a wife, a daughter, a son, and countless friends and family members. Instead of dwelling on the sadness that this evokes, I feel that Randy would want changes made like the one’s I put forth today to keep horrific accidents like this from happening again. Thank you.