

FREE STUDY GUIDE · CALIFORNIA CDL

10 Most-Missed California CDL Questions

The questions that fail more new drivers than any others — and how to actually answer them on test day.

A free study guide from

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Why This Guide Exists

Most CDL practice tests throw 300 random questions at you and call it studying. That's how people fail twice.

Here's what actually works: **find the questions that trip people up most often and master those first.**

This guide covers the 10 questions that California CDL applicants get wrong more than any others — pulled from the California CDL Handbook, FMCSA rules, and patterns we see across test-taker reports.

Each question includes:

- The actual question wording (or close to it)
- The right answer
- **Why the wrong answers feel right** — fail-traps are designed to fool you
- A memory trick to lock it in

If you can answer all 10 correctly without looking, you're in the top 25% of test-takers. Read every word.

Question 1 — Air Brake Pre-Trip: Static Air Loss

When the engine is OFF and the brakes are released, what is the maximum allowable air pressure loss over one minute?

Right answer: 2 psi (single vehicle) / 3 psi (combination of 2 vehicles) / 5 psi (combination of 3 or more).

Why people miss it: They confuse this with the *applied* leakage test — foot brake held down for one minute — which allows 3 psi (single), 4 psi (combination of 2), and 6 psi (3 or more). Two different tests, two different sets of numbers.

Memory trick: "STATIC = SMALLER" — static loss limits are always 1 psi less than applied. 2 vs 3. 3 vs 4. 5 vs 6.

Question 2 — Low Air Pressure Warning

At what air pressure must the low air pressure warning device activate?

Right answer: Before pressure drops below **55 psi**.

Why people miss it: Many memorize 60 psi from federal or out-of-state manuals — the California handbook says 55. Others guess 80, because large buses often warn at 80–85 psi. And 55 really is your last call: the spring brakes start popping on somewhere between 20 and 45 psi.

Memory trick: **55** = the warning light. **20–45** = brakes pop. If you see the light, stop while the foot brake still works.

Question 3 — Stopping Distance Math

At 55 mph on dry pavement, approximately how many feet will a fully-loaded tractor-trailer need to stop?

Right answer: About **419 feet** — well past the length of a football field.

Why people miss it: They think like car drivers and pick 150–300 feet. A loaded big rig is a different physics problem.

The breakdown:

- Perception distance: 142 ft (1 3/4 sec)
- Reaction distance: 61 ft (3/4 to 1 sec)
- Braking distance: 216 ft
- **Total: 419 ft minimum** — and air brake lag adds ~32 ft more, pushing the real-world total past 450 ft.

Memory trick: "More than a football field — and then some." $142 + 61 + 216 = 419$.

Question 4 — Black Ice

When pavement is wet and temperature is below freezing, what should you watch for to spot black ice?

Right answer: Lack of spray behind the tires of other vehicles.

Why people miss it: They guess "shiny pavement" — but black ice is clear and just makes the road look wet. Ice on your mirrors or wiper blades IS a real clue the handbook gives you, but the on-road tell is spray: when other vehicles' tires stop kicking it up, ice has formed on the road.

Memory trick: "No spray = no friction."

Question 5 — Brake Fade

What is the most common cause of brake fade on long downgrades?

Right answer: Excessive use of the service brakes, causing overheating.

Why people miss it: They blame "worn brakes" or "wet brakes." Brake fade specifically happens when overheated drums expand, so the shoes have to travel farther and press with less force. The cause is *how you used the brakes*, not the brakes themselves.

Memory trick: "Fade = made by you." If brakes fade, you over-used them.

Pro tip: California has long downgrades (I-5 Grapevine, I-80 Donner). Use a low gear, let the engine slow you, brake to slow then release. Don't ride the brake.

Question 6 — Backing a Combination Vehicle

When backing a tractor-trailer, the trailer turns in what direction relative to your steering input?

Right answer: Opposite of the steering wheel direction (relative to the tractor).

Why people miss it: Phrasing is intentionally confusing. The trailer moves opposite to your steering, but the whole rig ends up pivoting together.

Memory trick: "Steer right, trailer goes left. Then drift the tractor to follow."

What the DMV expects: Always **GOAL** — Get Out And Look. Backing without checking is the #1 cause of CDL skills test failures.

Question 7 — Hazmat Placards

When are placards required on a non-Hazmat-endorsed vehicle carrying hazardous materials?

Right answer: Never — you cannot legally carry hazmat requiring placards without the endorsement.

Why people miss it: The trick is the question itself. Test-takers try to pick a weight or quantity threshold. Wrong frame. *You can't haul placarded loads without the endorsement, period.*

Memory trick: "Placards = endorsement. No exceptions."

Question 8 — Following Distance

How much following distance should a CDL driver maintain at speeds over 40 mph?

Right answer: One second per 10 feet of vehicle length, **PLUS** one extra second above 40 mph.

Example: 60-foot rig at 55 mph = 6 seconds (length) + 1 second (above 40) = **7 seconds minimum**.

Why people miss it: They memorize "one second per 10 feet" and forget the +1 above 40 mph.

Memory trick: "Length-rule below 40. Length+1 above 40."

Question 9 — Pre-Trip: Wheel Bearing Seals

What are you looking for when checking the wheel bearing seals during a pre-trip?

Right answer: Leaks (oil or grease leaking past the seal).

Why people miss it: They overthink and pick "cracks" or "wear marks." Examiner wants the simple, primary failure mode: *is it leaking?*

Memory trick: "Seal = should seal. If leaking, it's not sealing."

Pro tip: Common pre-trip skills test miss. Examiners want you to say the word "**leaks**" out loud.

Question 10 — Cargo Securement Inspection

How often must you inspect cargo securement?

Right answer: Within the first **50 miles** after starting a trip, then every **150 miles or 3 hours** (whichever comes first), and after every break you take during the trip.

Why people miss it: They remember "the first 50 miles" but forget the recurring 150/3 rule.

Memory trick: "50 mile shakedown. Then 150 or 3."

Ready For The Full Test?

The full California CDL has 50 General Knowledge questions, 25 Air Brakes, 25 Combination Vehicles. That's **100 questions** — and we've only covered 10.

The **California CDL Master Guide** covers all three sections, 420 practice questions with explanations, audio version for studying while driving, and the full pre-trip inspection checklist.

\$39

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Sources: California CDL Handbook (CA DMV, 2026 edition), FMCSA regulations, real test-taker reports. Not affiliated with the California DMV. We just want you to pass on the first try. © 2026 StudyStack / LobsterForge.