

# How to Ride the Bus (or Metro)

❁ an informative guide ❁

Walk to bus stop. Wait. Get on bus. Get off when near destination. What could be simpler? But getting to your destination is only part of the problem. At all the points between start and stop you're in a complex social environment. On your journey you will meet a variety of social types, ranging from the rude, to the unpleasant to the extremely irritating. OK, maybe the odd nice person, but that's extremely rare.

This document describes the transit experience as it is. It is not a call for change; the normal course of evolution will eventually select out unsuccessful approaches, perhaps for the collective good. Until then this is just something for you to read on the bus (or metro).

## The Big Picture

A crowded bus (or metro) means a lot of unhappy people. Packed uncomfortably close to others, human beings naturally react; some assume defensive positions, defining and defending space, while others use complex passive-aggressive tactics to achieve their goal.

However people react, the main problem is one of lack of *space*. Crimes of wasting or over-consuming space are particularly abhorrent in this context. Below you will find a "transit menagerie," a catalogue of the different ways people deal with the transit experience, and the reduction of space. See anyone you know?

## The Menagerie

### Barnacles

Upon entering the bus, these creatures quickly cement themselves to a convenient handhold. Once securely attached, they shut out the world, and do not move for the duration of their journey. Steadfast in their resolve to never move, their main crime is in ignoring the difficulties of others as people try to move past these aisle-blocking crustaceans. Barnacles, though, have one habit that is particularly devastating to movement on the bus: a barnacle's search for a place to attach itself rarely goes further than another barnacle. This means that once the first barnacle cements itself to a post, the next will attach closer to the entrance, the next closer still, and so on. In short order they form a serious impediment to onboard traffic, and often prevent people from getting on the bus altogether. This produces the interesting phenomenon of buses half-empty at the back, and clogged to overcapacity at the front.

### Loose Cannons

Some people attempt to ride the bus while eschewing all handholds. Instead of clinging to a pole or other structure, these individuals attempt to stay upright by careful foot placement, shifting body weight, and sheer hubris. Unfortunately, and as most learn by reading Greek tragedies in high school, hubris rarely goes unpunished; the arbitrary movements of a careening bus quickly cause loose cannons to live up to their namesakes as graceless, dangerous projectiles.

### Bastards With Backpacks

A backpack striking or pressing against something will convey only the coarsest of physical contact to the wearer. The lack of tactile feedback is coupled with a lack of visual feedback, owing to the backpack's essential dorsal positioning. The end result of this combination is that anyone wearing a

backpack leaves behind them a wake of unwittingly bludgeoned fellow passengers as they move and turn throughout the tightly packed metro cars or buses. Some backpackers are capable of learning to remove their pack appropriately; unfortunately each new school year brings a fresh population of bastards with backpacks, more than sufficient to sustain their numbers.

### Jesus of the STM

Clutching handholds on either side of the bus, this poor traveller has been crucified during transit. Perhaps a fitting end for someone so effectively blocking movement through the bus.

### Pole Dancers

More on the metro than the bus, one can often find someone leaning on or wrapped around a pole so as to exclude use by others. Secure in the complete control of one of the few available handholds, their space domination is the envy of their fellow travellers. Alas, these metro-mockeries of a real profession provide little amusement, and mostly just over-consume precious handhold resources.

### Line Walkers & Blockers

Line walkers are the courageous individuals who stroll along the metro platform on the wrong side of the orange line, between the actual train channel and the respectful distance most people keep from it. The motivation is efficiency--that area forms a clear, if narrow path from one end of the platform to the other. The cost, though, is in personal safety, and more importantly in the violation of the personal space of others as a line walker strolls inches from the faces of those patiently waiting behind the line.

The line walker population is kept in check mainly by line blockers--individuals who stand purposefully forward of the orange line, preventing passage of any line blocker. Line blockers quickly appear in response to the affront to personal space induced by line walking. As the number of walkers is reduced, however, the blockers' own personal safety concerns and conformity desires tend to reduce their numbers as well. This results in a most interesting bipolar ecology, as line walkers appear when the path is clear, line blockers move in to prevent them, and eventually tire of the effort,

creating an endless and cyclic struggle for metro platform supremacy.

### A Flash of Grey

You're heading for a seat; suddenly, a flash of grey, and the seat is filled with a deceptively spry octogenarian. Don't begrudge these ancient public transit experts their due; they probably need it more than you, and besides, they are obviously better at it.

### Mr. Big Cock

It is a known fact that due to bone and muscle structure, men sit more comfortably legs slightly apart. Mr. Big Cock, however, is further cursed with such a massive, distended organ that his legs are forced apart well over 90°. Still, his debilitating condition seems to cause him no shame, and he has no qualms about invading the personal space of adjacent travellers in order to protect his over-size genitals. Other travellers are invited to express their admiration by strategically spilling hot coffee, or with an unfortunately fumbled coconut.

### The Screaming Mimis

For most of the year primarily mid to late afternoon, but less painfully in the early morning as well, buses and metros are inundated with large masses of grade school and high school students. These energetic creatures can be most high-pitched in their youthful enthusiasm, sometimes shrieking in chorus to achieve jet-engine sound levels. It is recommended that travellers with hearing avoid these times of day.

### Parade Marshals

One of the more perplexing behaviours is exemplified by parade marshals. These individuals insist on setting the pace for everyone else. They are often the first at an exit, but upon achieving primacy they almost instantaneously reduce their speed to a dead crawl. Parade marshals also detest following other parade marshals, and this results in rows of these lethargic barriers bringing transit exit speed to a bare minimum as they fan out and then slowly trudge up or down stairs and along corridors. Perhaps there is perverse pleasure to be had in preventing anyone quicker from passing, but kinder motivations for this behaviour are unclear.

## Seat Guardians

A seat on a crowded bus or metro car is a rightly coveted thing. Most mysterious then is the behaviour of the seat guardian. These people will maneuver their way through a pressing crush of barnacles and other transit impediments, find a lone empty seat, and then proceed to merely stand in front of it. They do not sit, they simply prevent others from sitting.

There is an isolationist benefit in this activity. Standing in front of an empty seat does not imply or require any social interaction or space intrusion with an existing seated individual. This advantage is extremely small though, particularly when weighted against the absurd squandering of such a precious resource. Maybe they just have hemorrhoids.

## Door Guards

To some, a bus or metro car seems like a tangle of people and obstacles from which there is no escape. Pushed, shoved and compressed, these poor wayfarers sense the danger of being sucked into the constipated bowels of the transit vehicle. There, crushed and squeezed far from any exit, they will struggle in vain to reach the door in time for their stop, and end up carried far from their destination.

To avoid this awful fate door guards immediately seek out and cling to the exits. Sadly, this otherwise innocuous behaviour is at least partially the cause of the very danger they seek to avoid, for in surrounding and clogging the exits these individuals necessarily delay and impede the disembarking of their fellow travellers.

## Turnstile Omphaloskeptics

Omphaloskepsis is navel-gazing; staring inwardly, ignoring the outside world; certainly not an unusual general strategy in a transit environment. Oddly enough however, omphaloskeptics can also be found in a very literal sense, standing in front of turnstiles.

For some unknown reason, various people will head directly to the turnstile only to stop immediately in front, turn their heads down, and stare at their navels. Usually the actual navel-gazing is disguised as an attempt to find their metro

pass or ticket, buried in some hand luggage. Of course that is absurd---surely no one would be so simple-minded as to be surprised by the sudden need for their ticket or pass before crossing the turnstile, nor could anyone be so rude as to needlessly stand in front of one of the very few entrances to the metro, preventing others from entering merely because they themselves cannot enter.

Thus it is important not to interrupt these ad hoc philosophers; one day one of them may well produce a great work of introspective literature, conceived while navel-gazing in front of a turnstile.

## Fort Builders

The transit environment forces social integration; the minimal amount of space available results in all walks of life becoming physically proximal. Naturally this is often undesired, and in order to defend themselves those most fearful of interaction with strangers keep others at bay by filling surrounding seats with packages. The laden seat is then less attractive to new riders, who will tend to fill empty seats first.

As the bus or metro fills up, kinder fort builders will proactively remove their luggage and make seats available. Sadly, this is not always the case, and a side effect of fort building is that individuals too timid to ask a fort builder to clear off a seat may be forced to stand. It is important to remember that luggage does not pay a fare, and one should never be shy in asserting priority over inanimate objects.

## Transit Salmon

A rather surprising design decision in metro cars is the dual use of entrances as exits. In order to accommodate this choice boarding passengers must wait for existing passengers to leave, an unfortunate serialization of the metro stop protocol.

Waiting passengers thus form two masses, one to either side of a door, and between them lies the "receiving line," the designated path for the exit stream. An essential quality of the exit stream is that it remain unblocked until the metro has fully discharged its cargo.

For some, however, the lure of being first on a freshly-emptied metro car is just too much to endure for the entire time it take for the car to

empty. They boldly stand within the center of the stream, defy both current and logic, and attempt to swim against the flow. Fortunately for the smooth movement of most transit users, this ichthyological strategy is usually less effective in a flow of humans, as the exiting crowd takes righteous pleasure in buffeting, jostling, and generally impeding the movements of these transit salmon.

### The Future Deaf

Be calm. Every annoying, tinny note emanating from their headphones is also a small reduction in future hearing. Trip after trip these add up, and eventually what you hear now is all they'll ever hear.

### Paper Butterflies

Ah, to sit down, relax, unfurl wings of newspaper and catch up on world events. Too bad space for the impromptu office-in-transit required for this comfortable scenario rarely exists on the metro. People unfolding a 2' x 3' newspaper quickly discover that the space required to hold and inspect a newspaper is somewhat more than the space others are willing to cede on a crowded metro. Still, some will persist, extending their vegetable-ink stained wings into the personal space of others. Paper, however, is an easily-disturbed medium, and a press of riders is usually able to remind post-larval business types that emerging from their sleepy cocoons on the metro may be a bit premature.

### Bone Bridges

While seated on the metro or bus, a convenient (and comfortable) semi-prone position can be achieved by extending one's legs across or between seats, or even by bracing an outstretched foot against a pole.. Unfortunately, this personal

pleasure also serves as a barrier to the movement of others, and rather obviously as an over-consumption of space. Moving travellers in a crowded metro are thus unsurprisingly less than tolerant of this position; bone is a brittle medium, and those constructing such bridges quickly find that "inadvertent" contact from a stumbling traveller reduces the comfort level considerably

### Toe Kicks

Somewhat less intrusive than bone bridges, though often more surprising to their fellow travellers, are the space-consuming effects of crossed legs. Such a position, however relaxing, takes up an unexpectedly large amount of aisle space. The subtlety of the effect, however, is two-edged, as various travellers give the protruding foot a healthy kick in passing.

### Bus Vigilantes

Not to be confused with actual police or STM officers, the bus vigilante's main occupation is the enforcement of common sense bus behaviour, and the doling out of punishment to those who do not maximize traveling efficiency. Rarely confrontational, their actions usually take the form of passive-aggressive responses to the other forms of transit behaviour described here. This can be as simple as roughly pushing past *barnacles*, or as devious as observing *parade marshals* and intercepting and defeating their effect with a preemptive sprint to the exit.

The bus vigilante fulfills an important social purpose in regulating the population of other bus undesirables. Like all vigilantes, though, their ungoverned rough justice can occasionally be misdirected or excessive. Just remember, you deserve it.

Coming soon: "How to Walk on the Sidewalk (and Other Flat Surfaces)"