

Ryan's Excellent Guide to Biking to Douglas

by Ryan Cousineau



Douglas College

Cycling 101

When I started working at Douglas College in 2000, I was not a cyclist. I had not regularly ridden a bike since high school. But when my motorcycle broke down, it coincided with a moment when I wanted to add some exercise to my life and reduce my commuting expenses. Riding to work seemed like the perfect solution.

It was! I have been riding to the College ever since. And now I present to you my guide on cycling to Douglas.

Go for It

The first, simplest rule is that cycling to Douglas College is as easy as riding a bicycle. Around the world, hundreds of millions of ordinary people ride to work or school every day, with no special preparation or equipment. Young, old, weak or strong, it's just how they get around. You can do it, too. Dust off whatever bicycle you have, put some air in the tires and go for a ride. Congratulations, you are a cyclist!

Short Ride?

Not all commutes are created equal, but there are a lot of ways to make biking part of your commute. If you live within five kilometres of the College, your ride should be pretty simple. On flat ground, almost anyone can ride at a steady 10-20 km/h without breaking a sweat. The hills of New Westminster impose a special penalty on some routes, but most are downhill on the way in. Even the steepest slope will succumb to low gearing, and the bike you are most likely to own (an old mountain bike) will have some low gears. And there's no shame in pushing a bike for a few steep blocks.

For short commutes, I wouldn't worry about special preparation or clothing. A backpack is the most convenient way to carry your lunch and personal effects on a short trip; I think shoulder bags are a poor choice (messenger bags work for bike messengers because they need rapid access to their cargo every few minutes; commuters don't). BC law requires a helmet, so you will want one of those: buy an inexpensive one that fits properly. Expensive helmets don't protect your head any better; they are just lighter, more adjustable for fit and have better ventilation. These are virtues, but not worth it for most riders. If you're riding a bike that doesn't have a chainguard (for example, most mountain bikes) and you are wearing long pants, tuck your right pant leg into your sock. You can buy special pants clips, but any calf-high sock will do the job just fine.





Further Away?

Once you get much beyond five kilometres from the College (you can push this a bit, especially if you've got a nice flat commute to the David Lam Campus, or you have fitness to spare), things change a little. In short, you're probably going to sweat, and riding to work in your work clothes will no longer be comfortable or pleasant once you get here.

The simplest trick is to change your long ride into a short one. The fancy phrase for this is "multi-modal commuting," which means you drive or take transit for part of your commute, and bike the rest.

Almost all BC Transit buses have bike racks, making it easy to bring your bike aboard. All SkyTrain stations have bike racks as well, and many have rentable bike lockers. There are rush-hour restrictions on bringing your bike on SkyTrain, but if you're going to the New Westminster Campus during rush hour, you can bring your bike aboard as long as your home station is in Burnaby or Vancouver (if you ride the Millennium Line, you have to take your bike off at Columbia Station, but it's a pleasant 10-minute ride to the College from there). South of the river, you're not allowed aboard SkyTrain with a bicycle during rush hour, but you can park it at the station. The David Lam Campus won't be served by SkyTrain until the Evergreen Line gets built, but the 97 B-Line connects Lougheed Station with the campus, and the bus has a bike rack.

Driving part of the way to campus and cycling the rest has its merits as well. In some cases, you can avoid a key congestion point by parking and riding. Carpooling part-way with your spouse or a neighbour makes for a flexible trip: they might not be going past the College, but if they travel within five kilometres of it, you'll have an easy ride. I won't suggest any particular spots, but if you can locate good parking within that magic five kilometres of the College, you can ride the rest of the way, saving yourself time and gaining exercise.



The Long Ride

OK, so you are going to ride in from more than five kilometres away. Once you tell people you ride to work, and it's that far, you automatically become a **SERIOUS CYCLIST**, capital letters and all. The good news: it's not that serious.

If you can ride a bike, you can probably get here. The trick is to pace yourself. There is no "correct" speed to ride at, and you will likely speed up a lot over your first six months of riding. You don't have to ride every day, and you don't even have to ride both ways: a great trick is to bus with your bike to the College, and cycle back: no fuss, no muss, and shower when you get home.

Your First Big Commute

Start slow, then build. I recommend you start with a dry run: plan a route, then ride to the College on your day off. This lets you practise the route, figure out how long your commute will take (which can vary greatly depending on hills and your ability) and discover bad route choices (or possible shortcuts) before you have the pressure of getting to work on time. Note that rush hour does not affect riding times much: very few traffic jams are so bad that there's no way for a cyclist to bypass them.

I recommend riding once or twice for your first week, then gradually building up to more commutes. If you aren't otherwise getting regular cardio exercise, a long ride to the College is going to be a big change. Treat it as a workout program by easing into it. The longer your ride, the slower your build-up will be. But in all cases, listen to your body, and try to space your rides with recovery days in between, until you really get used to the ride. Depending on your commute distance and your starting fitness level, riding all the way to the College may not be the best first step. If your ride is longer than one hour, consider starting with a multi-modal commute (bus part way, perhaps, to the campus, then ride home) or with some leisure rides before you tackle your commute.

Transforming!

Sometimes the worst part about riding here is transforming yourself from a **SERIOUS CYCLIST** into a normal person. Fortunately, Douglas is a pretty good place to make that change, because both campuses have showers and change areas. They're attached to the [Fitness Centres](#), which are free for employees and included in students' fees. A shower and a change of clothes make all the difference. A change of clothes doesn't take up much space, but shoes do. Even if you pack your clothes with you, consider leaving a pair of shoes on campus. If you're a student, this is a good reason to rent a locker.

Another tactic is to commute some other way at least once a week, and bring your change of clothes with you. Once you're on campus, there's no good way to dry out sweaty or wet riding gear. I have settled on bringing a second set of bike shorts with me for the return trip, and on especially hot or wet days, I bring a second shirt, too. On very cold and wet days, I may even bring a second set of gloves and a second outer jacket, just to ensure a comfortable ride home. Plastic bags are the best way of dealing with wet clothing until you get home; then dump them straight into the washing machine.

Cycling 201



Bike Choice

Ask five cyclists for a commuter-bike suggestion, get six answers. We are opinionated! I don't agree with all the advice in the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition's [Commuter Bike Shopper's Checklist](#), but it's a good starting point. My first-bike recommendation: a decent-quality bicycle with no suspension and road (not knobby) tires. Flat handlebars are probably better for most commuters.

"Decent quality" means a bike that won't let you down by breaking down. The bikes that department stores sell don't usually qualify: the quality gap has narrowed, but the fitting, advice, support and proper setup are well worth the cost of an entry-level bike from a specialty bike shop. The price for such a bicycle (often sold as "hybrid," "commuter" or "fitness" bikes) is \$300-600, and it's perfectly reasonable to spend twice that, but not necessary.

A quality used bike is fine as well. Some bike shops sell used machines, and they can be a great value. Buying your own through private sales is a bit of a minefield: get the advice of a friend who knows bikes, and you may find some good deals. If you already have an old mountain bike with no rear suspension, and it was a reasonably good bike in the first place, you can turn it into your commuting machine. Those bikes are tough, reliable and have a wide gear range. Changing the standard knobby tires for road-friendly "slick" tires is the most dramatic change you can make: they will be much faster and will grip the road better.

The argument against suspension is this: it makes the bike heavier and, especially on cheaper designs, the suspension inefficiently squishes down with each pedal stroke. This robs you of power. A bike with a suspension fork but no rear shock is less bad than a full-suspension bike. The best solution to smoothing out the roads is fatter tires (but still slick, not knobby), and if that's not enough, a [suspension seatpost](#) is a much more efficient (and lightweight) option than full suspension.

Regarding gearing, almost any multi-speed bike is going to have gearing low enough to tackle any road. In the rare case that your bike of choice is a racing machine that doesn't have sufficiently low gears, talk to a bike shop. There are several simple ways to change the gearing, depending on your needs.

Handlebars are a matter of taste and don't make a big difference, but if you get to choose, go with a flat bar rather than a drop handlebar. It's a simpler, more practical option for city cycling, and drop bars are at their best on rides that are much longer or much faster than the average commute.

Saddles deserve a brief note: the biggest, comfiest saddle is not necessarily the best, and saddle choices are very personal. I can do no better than to recommend Sheldon Brown's [article on saddles](#), with this additional note: expensive saddles are usually expensive because they are light, or beautiful or made of leather. Much like helmets, inexpensive ones do the job just as well.

Equipment and Clothing

Bike-specific clothing is not mandatory. The essential rule is to avoid cotton (it retains both sweat and rain, allowing you to be miserable in all conditions) in favour of wicking fabrics. The easy option is any sort of synthetic sportswear, top and bottom. Wear either shorts, knickers or tights, so you don't get caught in your chain. Casual cycling shorts and pants pair the useful extra padding of bike shorts with the loose style of normal sportswear. When it turns cold and wet, good gloves and a good rain jacket are your friends. Cycling-specific jackets have some nice features, but if you already have a fleece top and a lightweight rain shell jacket, you don't really need anything else.

Cycling gloves are harder to substitute for, and good gloves make a big difference on cool or wet days. I suggest adding fenders to the bike if you plan to ride in the rain. They make an enormous difference in how wet you get. If you are riding a long way and carrying a heavy load, you'll want to get that weight off your back. A rear rack and one or two saddlebags is the best solution. Any decent bike shop will have a selection of both, and they can install the rack for a nominal charge (well worth it if you're not handy with tools).

Shoes and pedals come as a pair. My recommendation for your first pedals is flat pedals with [grip pegs](#), available in a wide variety of styles from most shops. You can use them with almost any shoe. Use sneakers when it's dry, and whatever boot makes you happy when it's cold or wet.

Like most SERIOUS CYCLISTS, I now ride with [clipless pedals](#) and cycling-specific shoes. But don't worry about those yet. When you're ready to take on the expense and learning curve of going clipless, you'll know. Until then, flat pedals and normal shoes are fine.

If you're lucky enough to have access to secure on-campus storage for your bike – such as your office space – you may not need a lock at all, at least not here. Otherwise, Douglas has ample bike parking at both campuses. The rack near the New Westminster Bookstore is indoors and has lots of passing traffic, which is good for security. All of the racks at David Lam are outside, but sheltered from the rain. The lightest lock is the lock you leave at the rack. I recommend a good, tough U-lock, which can stay on campus, locked to the rack, when you're not around. A much lighter cable-type rack for day-to-day use is a good complement. In short, I recommend everything Sheldon Brown says in [article on locking strategy](#) (and indeed, his entire site is a wealth of cycling knowledge).



Tools

I like to be able to fix flat tires on the road: I get one or two a year while commuting. This means carrying a portable pump, tire levers and a spare tube. Adding a patch kit is a good idea. You can find this stuff at any bike shop, but please don't bother with the self-sticking tire patches: in my experience, they have a 100 percent failure rate. Better to bring along a second spare tube. Practise [changing your tire](#) at home. You can thank me later.

That said, never underestimate the value of carrying bus fare and a credit card: a taxi or a bus will solve 99 percent of your flats and mechanical difficulties. And BCAA offers [bike assistance](#)! If you're already a member, it's a nice perk. If you know how to use it, a cycling-specific multi-tool is an excellent thing to carry. Along with the flat repair equipment, this might sound like a lot of stuff, but all of it will weigh less than a kilogram and take up about as much space as a water bottle.

If you only buy one other bike-specific tool, make it a good floor pump. You only need to spend \$25-50, and it will save you more trouble than you can imagine. If you already have an electric air compressor, they work on bike tires, too. If your tires have Presta valves (rather than car-style Schraeder, also common on bicycles), you will want an inexpensive Presta-Schraeder adapter that will let you use any car-type pump to fill your tires. Those are available at most bike shops.

A Word on Safety

Cycling is safe. I know, it doesn't look safe, and cyclists wear all that safety gear, and there are the cars, and so on. But statistics tell us that cycling is as safe as crossing the street - [arguably safer](#): in 2006, 87 cyclists in Canada died in accidents, while 375 pedestrians (and 2,135 people in motor vehicles) died in crashes. It's tricky to compare activity rates and exposure risks, but the direct health benefits of cycling strongly suggest [you'll live longer by riding to work](#) rather than driving.

That said, I have some safety tips.

Lights matter

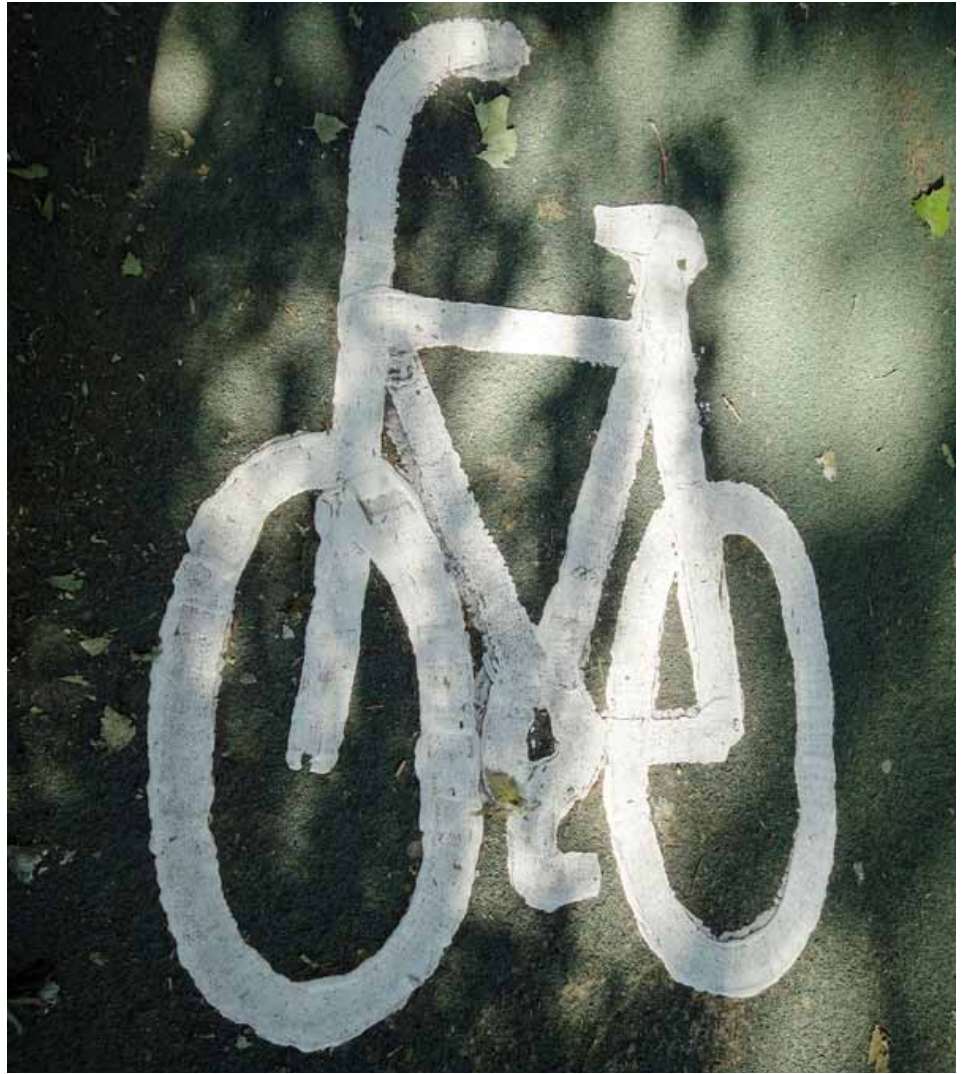
I recommend bright, blinking LED lights front and rear. White at the front, red at the back. The best rear lights tend to have three to five LEDs and use two AA or AAA batteries. This gives a great combination of long life and power. Prices start around \$6, and lights are available at any bike shop. For almost all city riding, a similar AA or AAA-powered white LED light up front will work well. Good ones start at \$10-15. This type of front light is for being seen, not seeing in the dark. If you ride on truly unlit streets (or trails) you will want brighter, more expensive front lighting. Lights are legally required after dark.

Helmets

The law requires them in BC. We will pass over the fact that the Netherlands has the lowest cycling fatality rate in the world, and yet "Wearing a bicycle helmet for daily trips is [unusual in the Netherlands](#)."

Don't ride on the sidewalk: statistically, it's a dangerous place to be. You arrive at every intersection travelling faster than any pedestrian, and from a place where no driver expects a cyclist. It's also illegal, not to mention dangerous to people on foot.





Plan Your Route

Designated cycling routes surround both campuses and [criss-cross Metro Vancouver](#). The improvement in the last decade has been remarkable. Bike routes and bike paths have their pros and cons (and some are better than others), but if you're new to cycling, they will be the nicest place to start riding. The key to any route is confidence: if you feel confident riding a particular route, then you will keep riding, and that's a good thing.

As for the rest of cycling safety, you're subject to the rules of the road. Act accordingly. Use hand signals, keep your head up and be aware that intersections are the most likely location for a car-bike crash (and car-car crashes, for that matter).

And with that, congratulations! You've graduated from cycling 101/201. You're a SERIOUS CYCLIST. To celebrate, why not go for a ride?

Ryan Cousineau is the Supervisor of Classroom Technology Services at Douglas College. When he's not riding to work, he enjoys bike racing and amateur bicycle mechanics. His greatest cycling moments were a failed 80-kilometre ride to a hot spring near Harrison Lake, and building a road-racing bicycle for a 10-year-old girl. He blogs rarely at [wiredcola.com](#), and tweets slightly as [@rcousine](#).