

Driving School in the U.S. and Taiwan

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People everywhere need to know how to drive to get around at some point in their lives. While people living in large cities like New York like Taipei can get away with using mass transit for most of their lives without cars, eventually everyone needs to hit the road on their own. Naturally, each country has their own requirements for how you get a driver's license. The U.S. is even more complex, as each state makes its own rules. Because I grew up in California, I will be using that state's rules and comparing them to Taiwan's.

First of all, I'll compare the requirements to get a learner's permit, which lets you get behind the wheel and start to practice. In Taiwan, you go to a local Motor Vehicles Office, where you get a brief physical examination to check that you can operate a vehicle. In California, this is when you take the written test at a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) office; you are required to understand the rules of the road before ever getting behind the wheel. Once you pass either test, the physical one in Taiwan or the written one in California, you are allowed to start learning how to drive!

In California, you can get your driving experience a number of ways. As long as you have a licensed adult of over 25 years in the car with you, you can drive with just the learner's permit. For many people, this means driving with their parents. For some others, these means going to certified teaching academies, where they take you on the road and explain how to drive. In Taiwan, almost everyone has to go to a certified teaching academy. Each academy has its own training course where you practice and eventually take your test. This is different than California's method, where you drive on the open road from the very beginning.

What they teach you in the two different learning environments varies greatly. In Taiwan, you are taught the skills and techniques to pass the driving exam, which tests your ability to perform certain driving maneuvers, such as parallel parking, stopping at train tracks, and negotiating an S-curve forwards and backwards. The instructors tell you at what points to turn, how much to turn the steering wheel, where to look to ensure you're in the right place. In California, you are taught how to drive according to the rules of the road, what to do in certain situations you might face as you drive, and a few tips for getting through the test. The main difference between the two is that California trains you to drive on the road, while Taiwan trains you to pass a test. Every California driver has on-the-road experience before ever getting fully licensed; many Taiwan drivers have no on-the-road experience by the time they are fully licensed.

The test themselves have some similarities. The Taiwan system has both the written and road tests at this time, while the California system only has a road test (the written test is taken when obtaining the learner's permit). Both tests have an examiner riding with the tester to evaluate their performance and score them on their driving skills. The California test evaluates your ability to drive safely, following all the relevant rules and being aware of your surroundings at all time. The Taiwan test, on the other hand, is solely about making it through the course without too many mistakes.

While the Taiwan test has its merits — it makes sure you know how to park correctly, which the California system doesn't — it doesn't truly prepare test takers for driving on the open road. Some driving academies take students on the road for a few hours as part of their programs, some don't. Once you have your license, you're free to essentially drive as you wish, often without an ingrained appreciation for the hazards and dangers of the road or a deep understanding of why following relevant laws reduces those risks.

Although both systems, Taiwan's and California's, teach students how to drive and let them obtain their driver's licenses, there are fundamental differences in the approach and philosophies behind them. The end result is the same, but what exactly having a license means is quite different. California emphasizes safety and respect for the road; Taiwan emphasizes passing a test.