Before reading the article, answer the following questions:

1. What is your number one driving distraction?

While reading, do the following:

1. Highlight or underline words, phrases, or sentences that you think are important. In the

margins, write your reactions.

2. Write words or phrases that summarize each paragraph in the margins.

3. Pose questions in the margins to express difference of opinion or put a question mark

next to any part you don’t understand.

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**Distracted Driving**

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Safely operating a motor vehicle is a complex procedure requiring concentration, coordination, and prompt, immediate responses to sensory input. Millions of people perform this act on a daily basis, often in the midst of a host of distractions. Conversations with other passengers, unruly children or pets, food, beverages, blaring car radios and CD players can all divert a driver’s attention, even if only for a moment, long enough to create a safety hazard. Modern mobile communication devices such as cellular phones, smartphones, and portable media players pose an equal or greater danger. In the first years of the 21st century, and especially since the rise of mobile text messaging, a great deal of research, press attention, and legislative debate have been devoted to the issue of distracted driving.

According to a study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the overall number of highway fatalities in the United States was lower in 2009 than in any preceding year since 1950, although automobile accidents remained the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 3 and 34. By the agency’s figures, distracted driving was a causal factor in over 16 percent of these deaths, up from 10 percent in 2005. Many commentators attributed the rise in distracted driving to the ever-increasing popularity of cell phones and “texting,” especially among the young. By some estimates, Americans sent and received more than one trillion text messages in 2009. A study cited by the National Transportation Safety Board determined that conducting a cell phone conversation while driving diminishes the speed and quality of a person’s reactions as much as having a blood alcohol level of .08 percent, the legal threshold for drunk driving in all fifty states. Even more dangerous, most experts agree, are typing and reading e-mail or text messages behind the wheel. A 2009 Department of Transportation study of commercial vehicle operators found that driving while text messaging made a “safety-critical event” 23 times more likely than routine driving.

**Situational Awareness and Inattention Blindness**

Distractions that can impair driving ability come in three categories: manual (hands off the steering wheel), visual (eyes off the road), and cognitive (mind diverted from the task). Texting combines all three varieties of distraction. Ray LaHood, Secretary of Transportation under President Barack Obama, said in a National Public Radio interview, “If you have your eyes on a BlackBerry for four seconds trying to text, you go the length of a football field, including the end zone, without looking at the road.”

The mental diversions are by far the most significant. California, New York, and 8 other states, plus the District of Columbia, have banned talking on hand-held cell phones while driving, but permit use of hands-free devices such as those using Bluetooth technology. However, dozens of studies have indicated that there is virtually no difference between the two types of cellular devices when it comes to distracted driving risk. Researchers coined the term “inattention blindness” to convey how even in the absence of visual distraction, a driver who is multitasking has less brain function available and can thus literally fail to see or pay attention to things that are squarely in the field of vision. A 2012 study by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that drivers simultaneously performing cognitively demanding tasks suffered a measurable loss in situational awareness. These findings help explain why distracted drivers may run red lights, rear-end the vehicle in front of them, or get into a deadly collision. Interestingly, conversation between drivers and other passengers in the same vehicle has not been shown to increase accident risk. This may be because passengers, unlike those on the other end of a phone call, are aware of the same road conditions as the driver and can adjust their conversation accordingly. Another theory holds that talking on the phone divides a driver’s attention between the physical environment of the road and the “virtual space” of the conversation.

Other surveys, such as one conducted in 2009 by the American Automobile Association (AAA), reveal that while the vast majority of motorists recognize the inherent dangers of distracted driving, many nevertheless engage in risky behaviors. For example, in the AAA poll, 58% of respondents described talking on a cell phone while driving as a serious safety threat, yet 55% admitted that they had done so once or more within the past month. Teenagers, who are inexperienced drivers yet often heavy users of cell phones and texting, may be especially likely to engage in distracted driving practices despite legal bans and safety warnings. Moreover, many teens also report being in vehicles driven by their parents or other adult drivers who talk on the phone or text while in motion.

**Debating Distracted Driving**

In accounting for the distracted driving phenomenon, some commentators claim that suburban lifestyles and long commuting times give rise to the impulse toward multitasking while on the road. Others argue that the instantaneous nature of mobile communication technologies has created a norm of constant availability that tempts their users to communicate from their cars despite the danger to themselves and others. Transportation Secretary LaHood, who has often referred to distracted driving as an “epidemic,” convened national Distracted Driving Summits in Washington, DC in 2009 and 2010. He and other safety proponents draw parallels to the issue of drinking and driving, which was only recognized as a major health hazard after the advocacy of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and other groups in the 1980s. To effect a meaningful reduction in distracted driving will require stronger state laws, more effective enforcement of existing statutes, and a change in cultural attitudes around cell phones and texting. As of 2012, 39 states prohibit text messaging while driving and 32 states ban cell phone use by young and novice drivers. No state, however, has gone as far as to outlaw all drivers from using all types of cell phones, as Japan has done. Dozens of countries, including 18 European Union member states, prohibit driver use of hand-held cell phones in a moving vehicle.

The debate remains vigorous over whether and how society should attempt to combat distracted driving. Some opponents of cell phone driving bans assert, quite accurately, that communication devices are hardly the only or even the most common distractions associated with accidents and highway fatalities. However, no legislation can forbid motorists from activities such as listening to the radio, eating, shaving, or applying makeup while driving. By this argument, which verges on reductio ad absurdum, efforts to ban motorists from using cell phones are ill-advised. Automobile manufacturers have supported the government’s efforts to raise awareness of distracted driving and are on record against texting and use of handheld phones while in motion. Industry organizations maintain, though, that research into the dangers of hands-free cell phone use remains inconclusive. Late in 2011, Ray LaHood said he would not support a federal ban on driver use of hands-free devices, as advocated by the National Transportation Safety Board. Mobile phone and software companies are developing new technologies such as voice-activated communication systems as well as applications that detect when a phone is located in a moving vehicle and automatically divert incoming calls to voice mail accounts or carry out a text message auto-reply.

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AWL Vocabulary

Complex procedure conduct accurate factor

Diminish despite significant reveal