Mountain biking is an exciting sport that can be enjoyed by everyone who knows how to ride a bike. It does, however, present some additional challenges compared to the average neighbourhood ride. Master these basic skills before you hit the real dirt and turn those obstacles into something to look forward to.

These mountain biking beginner skills can be practiced at a local park, school, bike path, or simply in your neighbourhood. Try to find a safe location with a steep hill.

First Things First - Get a Helmet

It’s simple. Get a helmet and wear it. This simple concept has saved thousands of lives including my own. Modern helmets are comfortable, stylish and every mountain biker wears one. You can go to your local bike shop and they will be happy to help you pick one out that suits your needs and budget.

Some other safety equipment and accessories that I recommend are cycling gloves (I prefer the full finger style), some sort of hydration system (either a water bottle or a hydration backpack), eye protection or sunglasses, bike shorts with extra padding where it counts, sunscreen, and a shirt made from quick drying material.

Pedal Play - Get Used to Your Pedals

Practice removing your foot from the pedal. Do this first while sitting on your bike with one foot on the ground. Then move on to releasing and replacing your foot while pedalling around. Beginners with toe clip and clipless type pedals will want to spend a little more time here.
Sit and Spin For Proper Fit and Position

Sit on your bike and pedal around. Your arms should remain slightly bent. Your seat height should be adjusted so your leg is about 70 to 90 percent extended at the bottom of every pedal stroke. Keep your body loose and relaxed. There is never a situation when you should have your knees or elbows locked.

Shifting Gears - Learning How and When to Shift

Get comfortable with shifting the gears on your bike. Higher gears are harder to pedal and will go faster while lower gears are easier to pedal and help you get up hills. Next, try to get used to what gears you need to be in to comfortably go up different pitched hills. As the hills get steeper, it is best to shift before you get to the hill rather than while you are on the hill.

Stand and Coast - Get to Your Correct Body Position

Spend some time coasting while standing on your pedals without sitting on the seat. Keep your arms bent and don’t lock your knees, put your pedals at the 3 and 9 o’clock positions (horizontal). Next, experiment with shifting your body towards the rear of the bike.

You will want to be in this rear shifted standing position when you coast over obstacles or when the trail gets rough. You should be standing on your pedals with your knees bent and your seat should be between your legs. This is your primary standing position.
Pedal Up - Learn to Pedal While Standing

Get comfortable with pedaling while standing on your bike. Lift yourself off the seat, stand on your pedals and crank them around. Try this in higher gears on the flat and in lower gears on the hills.

Down a Curb - Do the Drop

Find a curb where you can easily get to the upper level. Practice standing and coasting straight off the curb from the upper level to the lower level at a moderate speed. Stay in position and absorb the drop with your arms and legs. Try this at different speeds until it becomes comfortable.

Up a Curb - Get Over It

Approach straight at a curb in your primary standing position from the lower level at a slow to moderate speed. Shortly before you reach the curb push down towards the handlebars to get some spring from the front tire and then quickly push your body up from your hands and pull the handlebars up lifting the front wheel up just in time to reach the upper level of the curb. Next, quickly lighten your weight on the pedals if you can and allow the rear wheel to come up to the top of the curb. Absorb any bump with your legs and continue on forward.

If you are nervous about hitting the curb with your front wheel you can practice this at first by going over a parking stall line but be careful to keep your front wheel straight when you lift it up.

A more advanced technique for getting up the curb is to pedal your way up. To Practice this, approach the curb at a much slower speed while standing with your pedals in the 2 and 8 O’clock positions and lift your front wheel up to the top of the curb as described above. Just as your rear wheel contacts the curb crank your pedals to the 12 and 6 O’clock position bringing the rear wheel to the upper level.

These are very effective techniques for clearing obstacles on the trail at slow speeds.
**Mountain Bike Safety Tips - Ride in Control**

There are a lot of ways to improve mountain bike safety. Some will argue, including myself, that wearing a helmet is the single most important step you can take. However, the second most important step should never be overlooked; you should always ride in control.

Riding in control not only helps prevent crashes, it keeps others on the trail safe as well. When you ride out of control, you lose the ability to adjust to the terrain and environment as you pass through it. This can and does lead to dangerous crashes and injury to yourself and others.

Mountain biking is inherently dangerous and we all like to push the limits sometimes, but there is a fine line between pushing the limits safely and pushing them recklessly.

Follow these steps to stay safe on the trails and on the right side of the danger line.

**Gear Up**
Always wear a helmet and any other appropriate safety equipment for the riding conditions.

**Never Ride Beyond Your Abilities**
There is no shame in walking sections of the trail you don't feel confident enough to ride, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

**Use Appropriate Equipment for the Terrain**
Some bikes are better for different situations. Just because you can see tire tracks, doesn't mean you can ride it with your bike.

**Keep Your Speed In Check**
Always keep your speed at a level that will allow you to adjust to any unforeseen obstacles or changes in trail conditions.

**Know The Trail**
Never push the limits on a trail you are not familiar with. You need to get to know the trail you are riding at slower speeds before you can ride it like the trails you're used to.

**Slow Down for Blind Corners**
You never know what or who is around a corner when you can't see past it.

**Stop and Look**
Stop and look at sections of the trail that look like they may pose a challenge before you ride them.

**Plan on the Crash**
Always look at the consequences of crashing in a particular section or on a particular stunt before trying to ride through it. Sometimes a section can look easy to ride but can have deadly consequences to a crash.

**Start Small, Go Big**
Work your way up to obstacles and stunts. Find ways to practice moves in less difficult and dangerous situations or at lower speeds before committing yourself to something more dangerous.

**Play It Smart**
If you think what you are doing is not the smartest, you are probably right. Think about what you are doing and trust your instincts.
How to Change Gears on Your Bike

Knowing when and how to change the gears on your bike is not one of those things that is immediately intuitive to most people. It seems like it should be simple to do, but somehow it ends up more complicated than that and many riders new to a geared bike feel frustration the first few times as they invariably shift into a much harder (or easier) gear than the one they really wanted.

The actual shifting of gears, clicking from one to another is not difficult. It's just a matter of getting the feel for going up or down in the range of gears, and the good news is that being able to shift smoothly is about 80% practice and only about 20% understanding what's happening. In no time at all, you'll be shifting like a pro, changing gears smoothly without even thinking about it.

Why Bikes Have Gears - What Shifting Does

When it comes right down to it, bikes have gears to allow your pedal speed (your cadence) to stay relatively steady and at about the same level of effort, regardless of if you're going down a big hill or up it. Your speed may change, but having gears means you can climb without killing yourself as well as to go fast on a descent, your pedalling still pushing the bike forward and not just twirling futilely, your feet unable to keep up with the speed of your wheels.

It works like this. If all the riding you ever did was on a flat level road at a constant speed, you wouldn't need gears at all. Your bike would have just one gear, set at just that right spot where you can keep pedalling at a nice comfortable pace without killing yourself. From the riding you've done so far, you certainly know the feeling when you are cruising along in the cadence that is just right for you - going along at a steady clip but not straining yourself. That's what we're trying to have happen with our pedalling all the time.

But the world is not flat, as you know, and there are hills that we go up and down when we ride. Putting gears on the bike allows you to keep pedalling at that sweet point we talked about where you're most comfortable, regardless of the incline.

The trade-off is that easier pedalling up a hill means you're going to be going slower. And to be able to zoom fast down a hill, you ride in a gear that is much higher than you'd ordinarily be able to start out in or even use to ride on the flat. In both cases your effort pushing on the pedals feels about the same, because the gearing makes adjustments that allow you to either climb easier or go faster than you would if you had just one gear.
Shifting Your Bike's Rear Gears

Most bikes with gears have between five and nine gears in the back. We are talking about these back gears first because they are the most important to you and where most of your shifting takes place. The shifter for your back gears is usually at your right hand. Get in the habit of using these first.

The shifter on the other side changes the front chain rings. Those are for major shifting that doesn't happen as frequently, but the rear sprockets are what you use almost continuously for small adjustments as you go. It would not be uncommon for you to make several shifts over a couple hundred yards as the terrain goes up and down.

In the back, the biggest sprocket, the one closest to the inside of your wheel, produces your easiest pedalling. The smallest sprocket on your rear wheel, the outermost one, allows you to go the fastest, but is not going to be easy to pedal in unless you're already moving pretty good.

What you're ultimately trying to get the feel for -- and what will become second nature for quickly with just a little practice -- is to shift when you sense that your pedalling is becoming easier or more difficult as it happens, so that you maintain yourself in that perfect and comfortable pedalling spot.

Picture this: the pedalling starts to get just a bit harder because of a small rise in the path and you automatically flip it into an easier gear to maintain your cadence, or pedalling rhythm. Or, the road starts to flatten out and go downhill in front of you and your speed increases, so you flip quickly into a higher gear, and allow yourself to go even faster with the same amount of exertion.

When you notice that you’re starting to do this without even thinking is when you’ll realize that you’ve gotten the hang of shifting.
What the Front Gears Do

Most bikes with gears have two or three big ones up front. Located by your pedals, these are most commonly called chain rings. And you actually won't use them very much at all. Especially when you first get started, you should make a point not to worry about shifting them your front gears at all. Most experienced cyclists will pick one and stay in it probably 90% of the time, and you'll be just fine in picking one and sticking with it.

This is because the big gears in front are for making major shifts in the overall range of your gears. For instance, the smallest chain ring up front is going to give you the easiest pedalling. So if you anticipate a lot of climbing, you'll probably want to operate primarily using the small chain ring in the front, and again, doing most of the actual shifting in your rear gears. If you've got lots of flat riding or down hills, the larger chain ring in front will serve you better. It will allow you to go faster by providing higher gears for you to use, when the bike is already moving fast enough that you can keep the pedals going without the type of exertion it would require if you were going slower or climbing.

Again, the basic premise is to pick one and generally stay there. Your adjustments should be continuous, smaller shifting through the gears in the back. You'll only shift between the front rings if the range of gearing in the back, where most of your shifting takes place, is not allowing you to do what you need to do to either climb easily or pedal fast enough on the downhills to keep driving the pedals.

Shifting Tips - A Few More Hints About Changing Gears

Once you've mastered the basics of shifting there are a couple more things to remember that will help you make changing your gears go even more smoothly.

1. **Anticipate shifts**: It is very difficult to change gears (and bad for your bike) when you pushing the pedals very hard. So get in the habit of downshifting into an easier gear as you come to a stop or begin the approach to a big hill.

2. **Don’t try to shift when you are stopped**: Bikes with traditional gearing are designed to be shifted when the pedals are moving, so don't try to shift when you are stopped. It's bad for the bike to shift when the pedals are not turning, and so you want to remember this and anticipate your stops, shifting to the right gear that you want to be in starting out before you actually stop.

3. **Avoid cross-chaining**: It’s hard on your chain and your sprockets to be at extreme angles. To avoid this, don’t shift your bike to a spot where it’s on the littlest ring in the front and smallest gear in the back, or vice-versa, on the large ring in both front and back. That puts the chain on opposite extreme ends of the spectrum and if you find yourself in this situation, it’s a good sign that it’s time for a big shift in the front gear to help bring things back in synch.