

## Hitches

Obviously there is a difference in the type of hitch needed to pull a trailer verses a fifth wheel, so lets talk about travel trailers first, then I'll cover fifth wheels.

### Travel trailers (and pop-ups)

Let's start out with a few definitions first.

The *coupler* is the part on the front of the trailer that attaches to the ball.

The *ball* can be mounted to either the bumper, a simple drawbar that slides into a receiver, or the ball can be mounted to a hitch head that mounts to a shank that slides into the receiver.

The *receiver* (or receiver platform) is bolted (and sometimes welded) to the vehicle's frame.

Bumpers and receivers are rated for how much weight they can carry and how much weight they can pull. Receiver platforms are also rated for how much weight they can carry and how much weight they can pull when using a weight distribution hitch. The carrying capacity is usually identified by "WC" (for "weight carrying") and the pulling capacity is usually identified by "GTW" (for "gross trailer weight").

Most bumpers on trucks and SUV's can carry up to 500# and pull up to 5000# (check your bumper's rating to be sure).

All receiver platforms fall into a "classification", which has ratings for use with and without a weight distribution hitch.

Classification	Weight Carrying		Weight Distribution	
	Maximum tongue weight	Maximum trailer weight	Maximum tongue weight	Maximum trailer weight
1	200	2,000	--	--
2	350	3,500	--	--
3	500	5,000	--	--
4	750	7,500	1,200	12,000
5	1,000	10,000	1,400	14,000

The above weights are typical limits. Check the receiver on your vehicle for its limits. If the trailer you select exceeds either the maximum tongue weight or maximum trailer weight, you should upgrade your receiver to the appropriate classification before towing.

Class 1 and 2 receivers come in a variety of hitch box opening sizes (where the drawbar slides into). Class 3 and 4 receivers usually have a 2" square opening and the Class 5

receivers usually have a 2-1/2" square opening. Because of these different sizes, you must make sure you get the right size drawbar or shank to fit properly.

Reese (<http://www.reeseprod.com>), Draw-tite (<http://www.draw-tite.com>) and Eaz-lift (<http://www.eaz-lift.com>) are a few brand names you can check out to see what they offer. (Reese and Draw-tite are basically the same company making mostly the same components with different labels on them, but there are a few unique differences between them, so be sure to check them both out.)

Also make sure that the ball used is the correct size for the coupler on the trailer, and that it is also rated for the weight it will carry and pull. The most common sizes are 1-7/8", 2" and 2-5/16".

While on the subject of hitches, let's talk about sway control.

First of all, how do you know if you need sway control in the first place? Well, that's a tough question to answer. Many of the manufacturers of anti-sway devices usually recommend you use something if the trailer is longer than 20'. Some shorter trailers may need them if the tongue weight is on the light side...less than 10-12%.

Sway control devices are not intended to eliminate the potential for trailer sway, but are mainly designed to minimize the impact of when the trailer starts to sway and to try to keep it from swaying out of control. Sway control devices are also not intended to overcome poor trailer design or improper loading. To help minimize the potential for trailer sway to start in the first place, the trailer should have a minimum of 10% of the total trailer weight as tongue weight. (Some trailer manufacturers, and myself, recommend a 12% minimum.) And you should not need more than a 15% ratio. More than 15% could cause handling problems for the tow vehicle and may also overload hitch components.

The cheapest form of sway control is commonly known as a "friction bar". It works similar to disc brakes in your car, by squeezing two pads against a metal bar to create the friction, which then helps minimize the swaying. Make sure you read the operating instruction because there are certain times when you should reduce the amount of friction being applied and when it should be removed completely. I started out with this type of sway control, and it worked quite well for the size of trailer we had, but when we upgraded and got a bigger trailer, I went with a...

Dual Cam by Reese/Draw-tite. It is designed to stop sway before it starts. One cam is mounted on each side of the trailer tongue and is locked into place on one end of a weight distribution bar while the other end is attached to the hitch head, creating a fairly rigid but still moveable connection. You can read more about the Dual-cam setup on the Reese or Draw-tite websites.

### Specialty hitches

There are two, what I call, “specialty” hitches on the market today. One is the Hensley Arrow (<http://www.hensleymfg.com>) and the other is the Pull-rite (<http://www.pullrite.com>). Both claim to totally eliminate the potential for trailer sway affecting the tow vehicle. Check them out and do your own research to see if they are something you want to invest in. In my opinion, both are great products, but not everyone needs to buy one. Most people will do fine with a typical weight distribution and friction sway bar setup. However, if you have the typical setup and it is set up correctly and you experience any sway, you may want to consider one of these products.

Personally, I prefer the design of the Hensley Arrow for the simple fact that it is more portable than the Pull-rite. The Hensley can be moved from one trailer to another fairly easily. Or if you were to change tow vehicles, all you would need is a new drawbar which Hensley will trade you your old one for a new one. Although the Pull-rite is a good product as well, it is attached to the tow vehicle and may not be as easy to move to another tow vehicle. You can see this by looking at their application chart.

If your trailer starts to sway, it is usually recommended to maintain your speed while using the trailer brake controller’s manual lever to activate just the trailer brakes and to not use the tow vehicle’s brakes until the trailer sway has stopped. Once the trailer sway has stopped, release the manual lever and then slow down if necessary.

There are many things that can cause a trailer to sway. It can be as simple as incorrect tire pressure (in either the trailer or tow vehicle), how you loaded the trailer (too much weight in the wrong place), or traffic and weather conditions. Or it can be a bit more complex, like how your hitch equipment is adjusted.

## **Fifth wheel hitches**

I don't have any first-hand experience with towing a fifth wheel, but here is what I have found doing my own research.

Fifth wheel hitches are rated similar to receiver platforms...how much weight they can carry (support) and how much they can pull. When shopping for a fifth wheel hitch, it might be best to assume that some day you may have the trailer loaded up to its maximum capacity, or GVWR. Many consider 20% an average ratio of total fifth wheel weight to pin weight, but some may go as high as 25%.

Not only do fifth wheel hitches pivot from front to back, but some also pivot from side to side. This can make it much easier to unhitch when there is a slight difference in the level of the truck compared to the level of the fifth wheel.

If your truck has a short bed, you may also want to look at what are called "slider" hitches. This type of hitch slides on rails that allow the truck to make sharp turns without the front of the fifth wheel hitting the back of the cab and causing serious damage. Some of these slider hitches are manually operated while others work automatically.

Many fifth wheel hitches can be removed from the bed of the truck when they are not needed, freeing up the truck bed for other uses.

