

TRAFFIC STOP STUDY GUIDE 2003



This study guide is designed to provide the law enforcement Explorer with basic principles. The guide is not all inclusive, and does not delineate specific techniques that must be used. The focus of this guide is to provide principals that are flexible and adaptable to various law enforcement situations.

Following the basic principals in this guide should allow the law enforcement Explorer to successfully handle various law enforcement training activities safely and professionally.

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Traffic Stop Study Guide

One of the most dangerous tasks that a law enforcement officer must do is stopping a motor vehicle. We classify vehicle stops into categories of risk and high risk stops. There is no such thing as a “routine” vehicle stop. An officer can never know what he or she might encounter during a risk vehicle stop. Officers must remain on guard at all times during vehicle stops. It is important that officers be suspicious yet remain professional in their interaction with the occupants of the vehicle.

Law enforcement officers must apply knowledge, skills, and abilities to make a variety of decisions regarding the mechanics of initiating and conducting vehicle stops. These decisions are based on various conditions which include but are not limited to: law, court precedents, agency policy, training, geography, and changing environmental factors such as weather, roadway, traffic, and the threat level of occupants in the vehicle. Officers must make and carry out these decisions during high-stress situations while operating a vehicle.

The vehicle stop process consists of five phases:

1. Preparation phase.
2. Pre-stop phase.
3. Stop phase.
4. Contact phase.
5. Closure phase.

The Personal Preparation Phase

For officers to safely execute a vehicle stop they must realize that the process begins with having a proper mental attitude before the vehicle stop ever begins. To compound the problem, the basic stops can easily escalate into a high-risk stop.

Officers sometimes have no way of knowing who the occupants of a vehicle are. The occupants may be innocent motorists, fugitives, criminals, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or mentally ill. Therefore, officers can never predict what the occupants might do. Officers must always be cautious during a vehicle stop and display a confident and professional attitude.

Officer survival rests on three foundational pillars of physical conditioning, mental conditioning, and tactical thinking.

Physical Conditioning: Vehicle stops are often high stress situations that make physical demands on the officer. For this reason, it is imperative for officers to be in good physical condition. Once the fight or flight reaction activates, our bodies react in many ways including:

1. Increased heartbeat rate.
2. Dilation of the coronary arteries.
3. Higher blood pressure.
4. Increase in muscle tension (muscle bracing).
5. There is increased moisture on the skin (sweat).
6. Increased secretion of acid in the stomach.

Mental Conditioning: Vehicle stops also make mental demands on the officer. The officer must control his or her anxiety and the other effects of stress. He or she must possess self-confidence, alertness, and mental preparedness to remain clear-minded and focused on the task. The proper attitude is essential in gaining and maintaining the tactical advantage. To maintain proper attitude, officers must constantly be aware of the potential dangers involved in vehicle stops. Proper attitude will help keep the officer alert to dangers.

Tactical Thinking: Thinking tactically helps the officer to remain calm during stressful situations. Survival often depends on being able to make the correct tactical decisions in a decisive manner. Proper tactics can also reduce the number of incidents that escalate in violence. Remember that no two incidents are exactly alike. Thinking tactically allows the officer to react from a range of options. Officers need to hone their tactical thinking to the point that it becomes a reflex.

To prepare themselves for the unexpected during vehicles stops, officers should routinely conduct:

1. Personal Attitude Checks.
 - a. Every officer must leave personal concerns and prejudices at home.
 - b. Are you mentally prepared to do the job?
 - c. Are you overconfident?
 - d. Are you complacent?
2. Vehicle Inspection Checks. During a vehicle stop, officer survival may depend to a great degree on the operational readiness of the officer's vehicle. At the beginning of your shift, it is imperative that you thoroughly inspect your assigned vehicle including its public-address system (PA), radio, and emergency signaling equipment. You need to know how to operate your equipment before needing it.
3. Personal Equipment Checks. The winning edge in tactical situations is often your personal equipment. Routinely check the condition and serviceability of your body armor, service holster, ammunition, firearm, portable radio, handcuffs, chemical agent and expandable baton.

4. Tactical Response Checks. Visualize different vehicle stop scenarios and think through your tactical options. Play the “what if” game in your mind. If you have a partner, think through your tactical options together. Analyze your decisions and the tactics you chose. Evaluate the scenario based on different vehicle occupant responses (i.e., if the suspect had done X instead of Y, what would you have done?).
5. Procedural Checks. Officers should mentally review the protocol for making a vehicle stop before each stop. There are many things which should take place prior to initiating the stop, such as:
 - a. Selecting a site appropriate for making the stop.
 - b. Communicating with your dispatcher (location, description of vehicle, purpose of stop, number of occupants, etc.)
 - c. Waiting for backup.
 - d. Preparing to exit the vehicle in an emergency and making sure you have all the necessary equipment on your person.
6. Skills Checks. Verbal skills can help you control the situation and prevent it from escalating into a volatile confrontation. Physical skills can help you to properly perform a vehicle stop. Practice the procedures and physical moves used in a vehicle stop.

In summary, your preparation starts long before you ever attempt to make a risk stop. Whether or not you are prepared will become crucial during the pre-stop, stop, contact, and closure phases.

The Pre-Stop Phase

There are three reasons why you might stop a vehicle.

1. Investigation – you have reasonable suspicion that an occupant in the vehicle has committed a crime or is about to commit a crime.
2. Citation - to issue a citation for an offense committed.
3. Arrest - you have probable cause to believe that an occupant in the vehicle has committed an offense that warrants an arrest.

Each of these reasons for making a vehicle stop has a different degree of danger and risk. You should always use sound survival techniques. Never become complacent. Always remember there is no such thing as a "routine stop."

Selecting an appropriate site for a vehicle stop is an important step in the stop process. In the interest of public safety and for the officer's own safety, officers should select a site for executing a vehicle stop that poses minimum risk to the officer, innocent bystanders, and the occupants of the vehicle being stopped. Keep in mind that drivers are normally compliant during risk stops and that when you initiate the stop the driver will come to a stop.

Start thinking about a suitable location to stop the vehicle as soon as you decide to execute it. Know your operating area.

1. Avoid hills, bridges, curves, or areas that might provide vehicle occupants easy escape routes.
2. Avoid areas with soft shoulders, mud, sand, or ditches.
3. Select an area that provides you maximum cover and visibility.
4. At night, choose a lighted area such as a parking lot provided there is not a lot of civilian traffic in the lot.
5. Check the flow of traffic and avoid making a stop in a high-volume traffic area.
6. Avoid heavily congested areas, especially those with heavy pedestrian traffic like shopping centers, schools, downtown areas during business hours, and the like.
7. Choose an area that has enough space to insure your safety and the safety of the occupants in the stopped vehicle.
8. If possible, do not make a vehicle stop near an establishment or location where intoxicated persons might interfere with the vehicle stop.
9. For any vehicle stop, try to select a site that provides the maximum amount of room to position the primary and secondary enforcement vehicles.
10. Select a site that gives you enough room to remove the suspects from the stopped vehicle and position them for handcuffing in case the stop escalates into a high-risk vehicle stop.

Communicate with your dispatcher before making any vehicle stop. This is important because it lets your agency know what you are doing and where you are in case you need help. The dispatcher might be able to give you valuable information about the vehicle that you are stopping and this might have a bearing on how you conduct the stop. Give your exact location and direction of travel to the dispatcher. Use the nearest crossroad or other landmark to identify your location. If your location changes, update the dispatcher. Give as much information about the suspect vehicle as possible.

1. License plate number.
2. Make, model and color.
3. Style (e.g., 2-door, 4-door, van, pick-up truck, sport utility vehicle, etc.)
4. Number and description of occupants.
5. Note any damage or other identifying characteristics such as CB/cellular telephone antennas, bumper stickers, and a dirty tag on a clean vehicle or visa-versa. (This information will help distinguish that particular vehicle from other vehicles of the same make, model, and color.)

Once you decide to initiate the stop, request backup if it is available. There is safety in numbers. If you requested a backup unit, ask the dispatcher what the estimated time of arrival for that unit is.

Ensure the PA in your vehicle is on and ready for use. Make sure you know how it works.

Keep the dispatcher updated throughout the period of the stop on any changes in location, activity, and any other significant information.

Do most of your radio communicating while driving on straight sections of road. It is hazardous to try handling the radio microphone while negotiating turns. If you have a partner, you should concentrate on the driving and let your partner operate the radio.

Remember, once you initiate the stop by activating your emergency equipment the violator may react in a way you did not expect. Try to do all pre-stop actions before turning on your emergency lights.

The Stop Phase

Once you have completed the pre-stop phase, you are ready to initiate the stop.

If two officers are present determine which officer will be the primary/contact officer and which officer will be the secondary/cover officer. This will prevent miscommunications between all those involved in the stop, including officers and suspects. The secondary/cover officer works with the primary/contact officer as an additional set of eyes and ears to ensure safety. Usually, both the primary and secondary officers will approach the stopped vehicle.

Emergency Signaling Equipment. As a rule, you should activate your emergency signals when approximately 4 to 6 car lengths behind the vehicle you are stopping. You may adjust this distance due to high speeds or adverse conditions.

Activate emergency lights, flash headlights, and sound the horn as needed to get the attention of the driver. If this does not get the attention of the driver, then activate your siren.

After the violator has pulled to the edge of the roadway leave your emergency lights and flashers on. At night, use all the lighting on your vehicle including high beam headlights, take downs, and spot lights.

As you bring your vehicle to a stop, unbuckle your seatbelt, unlock your door, and roll down your window. This will allow you to tactically react should the driver or other occupant of the stopped vehicle exits and approaches your vehicle.

If the driver of the stopped vehicle does not pull their vehicle out of the traffic lane then you should tell the driver to do so by using the PA.

Choose the appropriate vehicle position depending on number of officers in your vehicle and on whether or not there is a backup unit on scene. We recommend using one of the three following positions. In each, the distance between your vehicle and the vehicle you stopped should be enough to allow you to read the license plate on the stopped vehicle, usually one to two car lengths.

1. The In-line Position: Position your vehicle behind the stopped vehicle with your front wheels turned out. Advantages of the in-line position are
 - a. Gives officers in two-officer units more protection.
 - b. Illuminates the suspect vehicle better at night.
 - c. We recommend this position if you plan to approach the stopped vehicle from the right or passenger side.
2. Offset Position: Offset your vehicle to the left of the stopped vehicle with your wheels turned out. This allows you to illuminate the driver sides of the car and provides protection from traffic as you make you approach and contact with the driver.
3. Angled Position: Angled towards the center of the road. This position is not recommend for night stops because you lose the use of you headlights and/or take-down lights. In addition, your highlights shine into oncoming traffic. In this position, your wheels should remain straight. Advantages of the angled position are
 - a. The engine block gives the primary officer more protection.
 - b. There is more of the officer's vehicle between the officer and the suspect vehicle.

Turning your front wheels of your vehicle towards traffic during in-line or offset positioning allows the wheel and tire to protect your legs from hostile fire. In addition, if another vehicle strikes your vehicle from behind during the stop, the turned wheels may direct your vehicle away from the area where you will be working.

You should leave the engine of your vehicle running and place the transmission in park. Leaving the engine running guarantees that the vehicle will be ready to pursue the stopped vehicle if the driver tries to flee. Put the emergency brake on for safety.

The Contact Phase

The contact phase of any vehicle stop begins after the officers have pulled over the vehicle they are stopping. Remember that the officers should properly position their vehicle(s) in relation to the vehicle they have stopped. Once properly positioned, the officer(s) will determine how he or she will approach the stopped vehicle. Tactical considerations in this decision include:

1. Environmental factors such as time of day, lighting, roadway conditions, and the presence of hazards.
2. The presence of bystanders.
3. The number of occupants in the stopped vehicle.
4. Known criminal history or threat level of the driver or other occupants.
5. Information received from the dispatcher before making the stop (vehicle or tag may be reported stolen or the vehicle may be listed as being utilized during the commission of a crime)

6. Whether or not backup units are available.

When initiating the contact phase of the risk stop, check for traffic before exiting your vehicle. Check the rearview and side-view mirrors and take a quick look over your left shoulder for any oncoming traffic. Once safely out of your vehicle, quietly close the door to the first notch.

If you have a partner and you have a portable radio, your partner can move forward and take a position to the right rear side of the stopped vehicle. This is a good tactic at night when the occupants of the stopped vehicle do not know there is a second officer present.

If a one-officer unit is making the stop, the officer must observe the driver and occupants as he or she approaches the stopped vehicle.

If a two-officer unit is making the stop, the primary officer observes and makes contact with the driver while the secondary officer watches the actions of the occupants and looks for potential threats from bystanders.

Use your PA system to ask the driver to turn off the vehicle. At night, use the PA system to ask the driver to turn on the dome light in his or her vehicle.

The primary officer approaches the stopped vehicle on driver's side, as follows:

1. For safety, the officer(s) should not stand between their vehicle and the stopped vehicle. Later in the stop, the officer(s) should also not have the occupants of the stopped vehicle stand in this area either. Another vehicle could collide with the law enforcement vehicle injuring or killing anybody in front of it.
2. As you approach violator's vehicle look for the following:
 - a. License plate or registration tab expired or altered.
 - b. Trunk lid partially open (be especially careful if the trunk lock is missing).
 - c. The backup or brake lights coming on (the back-up lights coming on might show that the driver put the transmission in reverse and the brake lights coming on could mean the driver is shifting out of park).
 - d. "Print" the trunk of the vehicle and check the trunk lid to ensure that it is closed and locked. Your handprint on the trunk lid will tie you to that specific vehicle in the event the driver decides to drive off or you are injured or killed during the stop.
 - e. As you move forward of the trunk, watch occupants of the vehicle through the rear window and, if there is an someone in the rear seat:
 - o Stop at the trailing edge of rear door and look through rear and side window(s).
 - o Check the occupant(s), rear seat, floor, and rear window ledge for obvious weapons or contraband.

- f. If there is an occupant in the rear seat of the vehicle, you should not position yourself forward of the rear-seat. A decision to pass an occupied rear seat is a judgment call based on the situation. Control the rear occupants' hands by having them place them on the back of the front seat. This allows you to watch their hands with your peripheral vision while making contact with the driver.

When dealing with multiple occupants within a vehicle one option is to have the driver get out of the vehicle. Have them bring the keys with them. Make contact with the driver behind and to the side of the stopped vehicle. Another option is to have all occupants exit the vehicle for officer safety.

If there are no occupants in the rear seat, check the area of the rear seat and floor for weapons or contraband and then move forward to the trailing edge of the driver-side door. Do not position yourself forward of the trailing edge of the driver side door.

Identify yourself to the driver of the stopped vehicle and give the reason for the stop. Ask driver of the stopped vehicle for specific identification like a driver license, vehicle registration, and insurance information. Have the driver remove the identification from the wallet. Never accept the driver's wallet. Check that the photo on the license matches the appearance of the driver.

You may direct the driver to turn off the vehicle. You should have the driver put their hands on the steering wheel.

If you are going to return to your vehicle to run checks or issue a citation, do not lose sight of the occupants of the stopped vehicle. Tell the driver and occupants to remain in their car. Stay alert so that you can retreat or take cover quickly should the need arise. Stay alert so that if the stopped vehicle attempts to flee you can pursue.

After you run the vehicle and license checks, return to the stopped vehicle. Your approach should be similar to your initial approach and you should observe the same safety precautions.

An alternative method of making contact with driver is to approach on the passenger side of the stopped vehicle. This approach allows the officer to approach on the side of the stopped vehicle away from traffic and reduces the possibility of passing vehicles hitting the officer. This approach adds the element of surprise because the driver of the stopped vehicle usually expects the officer to approach on the driver-side.

Should the stop escalate in violence the officer may have more avenues of escape, more cover, and more concealment on the passenger side (e.g., guard rails, trees, ditches, etc.). To make this type of approach, walk around the rear of your vehicle to its passenger-side (do not walk between your vehicle and the stopped vehicle). Approach the stopped vehicle slowly as you make your approach on its passenger-side.

Use the same procedures and precautions as with the driver-side approach. You will have to talk louder or tap on the window to get the attention of the driver. The driver will have to lean or slide over the seat to hand you his or her identification. This tactic is very effective in a night

vehicle stop. One disadvantage in this tactic is that the driver is on the opposite side of the vehicle and you will need to reposition yourself to effect an arrest.

A third alternative method of contacting the driver of the stopped vehicle is to tell him or her to come back to the your vehicle. This is a good tactic to use when dealing with multiple occupants in a vehicle, when you stop a vehicle with darkly tinted windows, or when you stop a paneled van.

When you tell the driver of the stopped vehicle to come back to your vehicle, you should follow these basic procedures:

1. Move to the right side of your vehicle, away from traffic.
2. Request the driver to step out of his or her vehicle, with their driver's license, registration, and insurance card, and come back toward your vehicle.
3. Tell the driver of the stopped vehicle to stand at the right-rear side of his or her vehicle or near the right-front fender of your vehicle.

Do not allow the driver to stand between his or her vehicle and your vehicle. Maintain a proper safety zone between you and the driver of the stopped vehicle. If there is a sidewalk, both the driver of the stopped vehicle and the officer should stand on the sidewalk. Keep the driver of the stopped vehicle facing you with his or her back toward the stopped vehicle. This allows the officer to observe the driver of the stopped vehicle, any occupants still in the stopped vehicle, and the stopped vehicle itself. Control of the driver of the stopped vehicle is particularly important at this stage, especially if there are other occupants in the vehicle. Officer safety is your primary concern.

Remember too; be aware of where your violator is when your dispatcher has information for you. You do not want the violator to overhear your dispatcher giving you critical information on them. When the dispatcher has information for you tell them to standby then separate yourself from the violator. Once you are clear, ask the dispatcher to transmit the information.

If you are going to affect an arrest after completing the driver and vehicle checks, you should plan how you will accomplish the arrest safely.

If you have a partner, plan whether or not your partner will approach the vehicle with you.

If you do not have a partner, consider the risk of making the arrest alone. If you feel that the risk is controllable and that you can safely arrest the driver go ahead and do so.

Call for a backup unit if you feel you need assistance in making the arrest safely.

If a the stop escalates to a high-risk stop, consider the following emergency procedures:

1. Put as much distance between you and suspect as quickly as possible.
2. Look for a position of advantage that will give you a tactical advantage. Remember you may not always be able to get back to the safety of your vehicle.

3. If you can reach your vehicle, try to retreat by backing away from the threat but be sure to straighten the front wheels of your vehicle before backing up.
4. Communicate with your partner and your dispatcher immediately when you recognize the threat.

The Closure Phase

The threat involved in a vehicle stop does not end until the officer releases the stopped vehicle. After completing the vehicle stop, the officer should help the driver maneuver the vehicle safely back into traffic. The stopped vehicle should depart before you do.

You may have to direct traffic to help the vehicle safely enter the traffic flow.

In summary, be professional, maintain your composure and do not overreact to the situation. Maintain visual observation of the driver of the stopped vehicle along with all occupants and be aware of potential threats around the area of the stop. Do not let the driver or any of the occupants of a stopped vehicle approach you while you sit in it – get out of your vehicle. The risk traffic stop deserves all of your attention from the preparation phase through the closure phase.