

STOPPING & APPROACHING VEHICLES

AN OFFICER'S GUIDE



**TRAINING
DIVISION**



MISSOURI **LAW ENFORCEMENT** ACADEMY

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PREFACE

Approximately two-thirds of the law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty each year are killed while on "regular" patrol. Regular patrol refers to stopping and approaching vehicles and contacting the occupants. Since this is a major part of the law enforcement operation, it is important that stopping and approaching vehicles be done as safely as possible.

Many officers have worked the road for years, and have developed excellent stop and approach tactics. However, there are officers who have become complacent over time and perform stop and approach tactics without the attention to detail or high level of awareness necessary. It is imperative that officers maintain the level of intensity required and adopt a safety conscious attitude during every traffic stop.

There is no single way to stop and approach vehicles; however, there are guidelines, tactics, and techniques that provide the officer with the best possible advantage. This guide is intended to serve as a reference. Use it as a reminder of how easy it is to be at a disadvantage when contacting the motoring public.



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PREPARATION

Preparation is an ally. Paranoia and complacency are internal enemies.

When referring to stopping and approaching vehicles, preparation involves a few common sense steps that will ready an officer to employ tactics.

1. Pick a location conducive to safety. (i.e. light, shoulder, less traffic, no blind curves, hill crests, cover, etc.)
2. Make sure your pre-stop radio traffic is complete prior to activating the emergency equipment.
3. Monitor the activity and/or the occupants of the vehicle.
4. Initiate equipment readiness. (i.e. flashlight, repeater [radio] button, spotlight.)
5. Expect the unexpected.
6. All stops are considered "unknown".

VEHICLE POSITION

Positioning your patrol car in relation to the violator's vehicle may vary according to roadway type. However, most roadways will allow for a modified felony position.

This position allows for the usual safety lane plus additional cover from the left, front fender and tire, which is turned to the left. Also, should the patrol car be struck from the rear, there is a chance it will not travel directly forward against the stopped vehicle. If possible, after returning from the initial contact, the officer should reposition the patrol car to create a "safety space."



SAFETY RULE #1



There are few hard, fast rules when stopping and approaching vehicles. However, one safety consideration that must constantly be adhered to: Never sit while they stand. The officer is tactically at quite a disadvantage when this safety consideration is ignored.

This safety rule is a good reason for completing equipment and radio checks completed before activating emergency equipment. You must be ready to exit the patrol car before the violator can exit his or her vehicle.

CONTACT OPTION #1



A policy of some departments and many officers is to remain at the patrol car and signal the drive/violator to come back to you. This technique could prove safer for the officer, who must remain aware of traffic approaching from behind, while

at the same time, watch the occupants of the stopped vehicle. However, if the officer does not approach the vehicle, they may miss incriminating evidence.

Therefore, if you decide to inspect the vehicle after the initial contact, make sure the driver is positioned in a place that enables you to watch him. Don't forget: You should not search a vehicle and watch the violator at the same time. You need assistance!

CONTACT OPTION #2

The most common technique used is to actually approach the violator's vehicle. The most vulnerable position during the approach is between vehicles or "no man's land."

It is imperative that the officer positions themselves to observe traffic, unusual activity in the vehicle, back-up lights, trunk noise, etc., so they can move to some position of cover, if necessary.



Although some people may be offended by an officer approaching with his hand on his firearm, it is a safety tactic. There is a fine line between being offensive and good public relations. It is up to each officer to follow his suspicions in order to be prepared for the unexpected.

HAZARDOUS AREAS



As you continue your approach, check for secure sites that may present a hazard. The trunk is probably the first site that should be secured (visually or by pressing down). The next site will most likely be the rear seat. As you check the rear seat and proceed, use peripheral vision to observe any unusual movement. With safety in mind, do not advance forward of an occupied rear seat.

CONCEALMENT

Concealment gives an officer valuable seconds to see, identify, and react to deadly situations. The importance of officers making good use of available concealment cannot be stressed enough. As an officer approaches



the violator's vehicle, they should notice what concealment is available (i.e., the trunk area, roof, doorposts, etc.). The idea is to be able to see the threat, but make it difficult for the threat to get to you. (Do not stand directly in front of a door or window opening.)

CONTACT OPTION #3

This option is the same as the first option, except the officer approaches on the "passenger" side using the same techniques and safety considerations.

INTERVIEW OPTION #1

Many officers choose to stand behind the driver's door while talking to the driver. The advantage, of course, is being behind the driver, who must turn to locate and/or assault the officer. The disadvantage is the inability to observe the passenger and any traffic that may be approaching from behind.

Again, make use of available cover (doorposts, roof). Do not stand in the middle of the driver's door with your head in the window.

Notice the view the driver has if an officer positions himself properly. Also, the officer does not have anything occupying his hands, particularly during daylight hours. At night, officers should carry a flashlight in the non-gun hand.

Constantly think
TACTICALLY.



INTERVIEW OPTION #2

After locating the occupant's hands, take one step to the front door post and use this alternative contact point. Not only can the front seat occupants be observed more easily, but traffic can be monitored with peripheral vision. This position is not recommended if the rear seat is occupied. Some officers dislike this vantage point because the officer is easily observed in the "natural" line of fire of the driver. However, the officer should be able to keep the violator's hands in view more easily from this location, not to mention the weapon he/she may be reaching for.



THE DRIVER

The driver's identification is a primary objective. However, asking for a driver's license while the driver is still seated in his vehicle is eliminating one of the hands you have just cautiously spent time securing, and should be watching. An alternative is to have the driver exit his vehicle and, as you observe his hands, have him locate his license while you watch.

An additional element in this tactic is to use the driver as a shield between you and the other occupants as you proceed to the rear of his or her vehicle.



UNIFORM COMPLAINT SUMMONS

A difficult tactical decision has always been violator placement while writing a traffic citation. Some officers would rather have the driver seated in the patrol car than to try to write while attempting to watch him while he sits several yards away in his vehicle. With the violator in the patrol car, the officer can watch hands and has removed the violator from his environment.

This tactic also has its disadvantages, including the close proximity of the violator to the officer and the violator's "cheap shot" capabilities. It is also more difficult to watch any passenger movement in the violator vehicle while watching the violator and trying to fill out the Uniform Complaint Summons.

If you do choose this tactic, remember Safety Rule #1: Do not sit while he stands. He should be seated first while you watch his hands and, with peripheral vision, watch any unusual movement in his vehicle.

COMPLACENCY KILLS POLICE OFFICERS.



SAFETY FIRST

After your initial contact with the violator, whether you approach or motion the driver back to the patrol car, you will have to choose a place from which to conduct business. With safety and traffic in mind, plus weather permitting, the best place would be the right rear of the violator's vehicle. The violator is standing to the right rear of his vehicle so he can be observed.

Having the driver return to his vehicle instead of standing is, of course, another option. Remember, however, the only thing more hazardous than approaching a vehicle is approaching it **twice**.



SAFETY RULE #2

How many tactical errors do you see in this picture?



One of the most dangerous situations for an officer is allowing himself to be outnumbered. The safety conscious officer will maintain a one-on-one scenario (Safety Rule #2).

The officer above is standing with his back to traffic near the traveled portion of the road. At the same time, he is attempting to write a citation and watch two people. This officer is relying completely on luck. He cannot be expecting the unexpected.

With safety in mind, use whatever technique is necessary to maintain a one-on-one situation while standing in an appropriate location.

**DON'T SLEEP
WITH YOUR EYES OPEN.**

SUMMARY

This reference guide is not intended to be a traffic stop insurance policy. There is nothing, to my knowledge, that an officer can read to ensure his/her safety. That can only be accomplished by formulating and practicing a system of tactical maneuvers or survival tactics.

This guide does not address every stop and approach tactic (e.g. vans, trucks, felony, etc.). It does provide for tactical suggestions regarding the stop and approach of a motor vehicle. Remember: Every traffic stop is "unknown".

An officer who is in good physical condition, mentally alert, and has a tactical game plan for every traffic stop still needs a little luck to survive the stresses and predicaments of law enforcement. An officer in poor physical condition, mentally complacent, and who puts an excessive amount of faith in his/her "bullet proof" vest needs all the luck in the world.



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