

What to Do If You Are Stopped by the Police

Police proactively patrol our campuses and local roads to ensure your safety. There are many reasons why you may be stopped by a law enforcement officer. An officer may stop you on foot or while you're in your vehicle if he or she is conducting a criminal investigation, making a traffic stop, or believes you need assistance.

From an officer's perspective, there is no such thing as a "routine" traffic stop because many officers are killed while conducting them. Therefore, police are always wary as they walk up to your vehicle, especially at night.

Our goal is to ensure all citizen-police interactions are safe, effective, courteous, and fair for all concerned.

Here are some tips on what to do *and what not to do* if you are stopped by the police. These tips will expedite the interaction while reducing the risk of misunderstandings.

- If you observe an officer behind you with emergency lights and/or siren activated, remain calm, activate your directional signal, and safely pull over to the right side of the road or to a nearby safe location.
- The officer may not exit the cruiser immediately. He or she is informing dispatch of the location of the stop, your vehicle, tags, etc. for your and the officer's safety. Remain in your vehicle unless the officer directs otherwise.
- If the stop occurs at night, the officer will illuminate the inside of your vehicle with a spotlight and flashlight. This is for the officer's safety as well as your own, so don't be alarmed. You can ease any concerns of the officer approaching your vehicle by turning on the interior vehicle lights and then keeping your hands in plain sight, preferably on the steering wheel where the officer can see them.
- If you have a weapon in the vehicle, inform the officer immediately, identify the weapon's location, and await further instructions from the officer. Do not reach for the weapon to show it to the officer.
- Avoid sudden movements, especially toward the floorboard, rear seat, console, or passenger side of the vehicle. These motions will be interpreted as danger signs by an officer. Instruct your passengers of this guidance.
- The officer will ask for your identification along with other documentation. Wait until the officer asks for your driver license, vehicle registration, or other documents before reaching for them. Tell the officer where your documents are located, such as in your wallet, purse, console or glove box, *before* reaching for them. Remember: the officer may not know your intentions and does not have sufficient reaction time to deal with a threat.
- Often, an additional police officer will come to the scene of a traffic stop, especially if there are multiple occupants in your vehicle or if there is a lot of traffic. This is for the officer's and your safety.
- The officer may give you a warning or issue you a ticket. If you feel the reason is vague or unclear, you may ask for clarification, but do not become argumentative. If you desire to contest the ticket, you may do so in court. A traffic stop on the side of the road is no place to dispute a ticket.
- If you are issued a ticket, you will be asked to sign it. Your signature is not an admission of guilt; it only signifies your promise to come to court or pre-pay the fine (if allowed). If you refuse to sign the ticket, the officer is obligated by law to take you into custody and bring you before a magistrate. Your vehicle will be towed and you will be issued a criminal citation in addition to your traffic offense.

- Although it will appear on a summons, you may ask an officer for his or her name and badge number, and you may make a complaint against a NOVA officer if you feel you have been treated unfairly or discourteously. Contact Police Dispatch (703-764-5000) and ask to speak with a supervisor.