

Traffic Law Incidents & Responsibility

Warm up

- Which types of traffic incidents tend to cause the most disagreement or confusion?
- Which traffic situations are hardest to describe clearly and objectively in writing?
- At what point do traffic incidents usually become legal issues rather than simple accidents?
- When do traffic cases usually require formal documentation or third-party involvement?
- In your opinion, what most often makes it difficult to establish responsibility in traffic cases?



1. Read the terms and look at the images. Use the images to help you answer the questions below.

Rear-end collision



Side-impact collision



Hit-and-run



Speeding offence



Driving under the influence



Failure to yield



Traffic violations



Minor traffic offence



- Which of these incidents are usually considered more serious, and why? *Driving under the influence and hit-and-run incidents are usually considered more serious because they involve a high risk to public safety and may result in criminal charges.*
- Which of these incidents are most likely to be disputed? *Side-impact collisions and failure to yield are often disputed because it is not always clear who had the right of way or which traffic signal applied.*

- c. Which would require careful wording when describing what happened?
Incidents involving disputed fault, such as side-impact collisions or traffic violations, require careful wording to avoid assigning responsibility before all facts are established.



2. What type of traffic incident is being described?

- A driver leaves the scene of an accident without providing details or assistance. *Hit-and-run*
- A vehicle collides with another vehicle from behind. *Rear-end collision*
- A driver exceeds the legal speed limit. *Speeding offence*
- A driver does not give way to another road user when required. *Failure to yield*
- A driver operates a vehicle while affected by alcohol or drugs. *Driving under the influence*
- A collision where one vehicle hits the side of another, often at an intersection. *Side-impact collision*
- A breach of traffic regulations that may result in a fine or penalty. *Traffic violation*
- A less serious breach of traffic rules, often handled with a warning or small fine. *Minor traffic offence*



3. Read the words below and match them to their situations (a-h) on the following page.

Procedure & documents

- to file a claim
- police report
- witness statement
- insurance coverage

Responsibility & consequences

- liability / legal responsibility
- at fault / partially at fault
- negligence
- damages



- a. After the accident, both drivers gave information to the police.
→ *police report*
- b. The driver contacted their insurance company to request compensation.
→ *to file a claim*
- c. The court decided who was legally responsible for the accident.
→ *liability / legal responsibility*
- d. A person who saw the accident described what happened. → *witness statement*
- e. The driver did not act with reasonable care. → *negligence*
- f. The insurance company agreed to pay for the repair costs. → *insurance coverage*
- g. The driver was fully responsible for the accident. → *at fault*
- i. Both drivers were found to share responsibility for the accident.
→ *partially at fault*
- h. The driver requested compensation to cover repair costs and other losses.
→ *damages*



4. Work in pairs or small groups and discuss the questions below.

What information do people tend to exaggerate or minimise after an incident?

In which situations do people *disagree most* about who is at fault?

Have you seen cases where liability changed after new information appeared?

When is it *reasonable* for a driver to be only partially at fault?

In your experience, is negligence usually obvious, or does it need to be proven carefully?

Which of these terms should only be used after all the facts are clear? Why?

Passive Voice

In traffic law and other legal contexts, the passive voice is often used to focus on facts and outcomes rather than on individuals. This allows incidents to be described in a neutral and objective way, especially when responsibility has not yet been fully established or is still disputed.

Advanced passive: Instead of making the driver the subject, legal English often makes the incident the subject.

Incident / abstract noun + was/were + past participle

The collision was caused by excessive speed.

Liability was established based on the police report.

Fault was attributed to the rear driver.

Passive with reporting structures: used when facts are not fully confirmed.

It + was/were + reporting verb + that-clause

Common reporting verbs: *alleged, determined, confirmed, disputed, established*

It was alleged that the driver exceeded the speed limit.

It was determined that the vehicle failed to yield.

It was disputed whether the traffic light was red.

💡 Use *that* for reported facts or claims; use *whether* when the fact is uncertain or disputed.



5. Rewrite the sentences using the passive voice. Focus on *the incident*, not the driver.

a. The driver caused the accident by exceeding the speed limit.

→ *The accident was caused by exceeding the speed limit.*

b. The police established responsibility at the scene.

→ *Responsibility was established at the scene.*

c. The collision caused damage to both vehicles.

→ *Damage to both vehicles was caused by the collision.*

d. The incident caused delays to traffic for over 30 minutes.

→ *Traffic delays of over 30 minutes were caused by the incident.*



6. Brainstorm in pairs or small groups: What information is usually included in a traffic incident report?



7. Read the police report and answer the questions below. As you read, check which information from your brainstorm is included and which is not.

Date: 14 March 2026

Time: Approximately 17:45

Location: Intersection of Lindenstraße and Marktallee, Hamburg

A traffic collision was reported at the above location during the evening rush hour. Two vehicles were involved in the incident. One vehicle entered the intersection and collided with another vehicle approaching from the right.

No serious injuries were reported. Both vehicles sustained material damage, and traffic was delayed for approximately 30 minutes.

According to the drivers involved, conflicting accounts were provided. One driver stated that the traffic light was green at the time of entry. The other driver claimed that they had the right of way and alleged that the opposing vehicle failed to yield.

A witness reported observing both vehicles enter the intersection but was unable to confirm which traffic signal was displayed at the time of the collision.

Police attended the scene shortly after the incident, and a report was filed. Liability has not yet been established.

- a. Which facts can be clearly established from the police report, and which details remain unclear? *It can be clearly established that the collision occurred at the stated location and time, that two vehicles were involved, and*

that no serious injuries were reported. It is also clear that both vehicles sustained material damage and that traffic was delayed. However, it remains unclear which driver had the right of way and which traffic signal was displayed at the time of the collision.

- b. What does each driver claim regarding the traffic light and right of way? *One driver claims that the traffic light was green when they entered the intersection. The other driver states that they had the right of way and alleges that the opposing vehicle failed to yield.*
- c. How reliable is the witness statement, and what information is missing? *The witness statement is partially reliable, as the witness confirms that both vehicles entered the intersection. However, the witness was unable to confirm which traffic signal was displayed, which limits the usefulness of the statement in determining responsibility.*
- d. Based on the information available, could liability be shared? Explain briefly. *Based on the available information, shared liability cannot be ruled out. As the traffic signal cannot be confirmed and the drivers provide conflicting accounts, responsibility cannot be clearly attributed to one party at this stage.*