Scene Documentation Guide

A step-by-step guide to photographing and documenting the scene of an accident or incident. Thorough documentation protects your interests and strengthens your insurance claim.
Keep copies in all company vehicles, job-site trailers, and posted at each work location.

1 Why Scene Documentation Matters

The quality of your scene documentation can make or break an insurance claim. Physical evidence disappears quickly — vehicles get repaired, debris gets swept away, injuries heal, and memories fade. Photos and notes taken at the scene are often the most reliable evidence available weeks or months later when a claim is being evaluated.

Proper documentation helps:

- **Establish the facts** — who was where, what was damaged, and the conditions at the time
- **Support your claim** — adjusters rely on photos and written records to evaluate liability and damages
- **Protect against false claims** — evidence prevents others from exaggerating or fabricating injuries or damage
- **Preserve time-sensitive details** — weather, lighting, road conditions, and traffic patterns change by the hour
- **Speed up the claims process** — complete documentation means fewer follow-up questions and faster resolution

! THE GOLDEN RULE

Take photos BEFORE anything is moved, cleaned up, or repaired. You can never go back and re-photograph the original scene. When in doubt, take the photo — it is always easier to discard an unnecessary photo than to recreate one you missed.

2 Equipment and Preparation

You do not need professional camera equipment. A smartphone is sufficient for scene documentation as long as you follow proper technique. Before an incident occurs, make sure you are prepared:

Smartphone Settings

- ■ **Enable location services** for your camera app so GPS coordinates are embedded in every photo
- ■ **Enable date and time stamps** in your camera settings (or use a timestamp camera app)
- ■ **Set photo quality to the highest resolution** available — do not use low-quality or compressed modes
- ■ **Keep your phone charged** — carry a portable battery pack in your vehicle or gear bag
- ■ **Ensure adequate storage space** — clear old files regularly so you always have room for 100+ photos

Keep These Items in Your Vehicle or Job-Site Kit

- ■ Pen and small notepad (for recording details if your phone dies)
- ■ Portable phone charger / battery pack
- ■ Measuring tape (25 ft minimum) for distances and damage dimensions
- ■ Flashlight or headlamp for low-light documentation
- ■ High-visibility vest (for safe movement around a roadway scene)
- ■ Copy of this guide, the Accident Response Checklist, and the Information Exchange Form

3 Photography Sequence — Work From Wide to Close

Follow this systematic approach to ensure you capture everything. Work from wide establishing shots to detailed close-ups. This method ensures you never miss context or detail.

Pro Tip: The Four-Corner Method

Walk to each of the four corners (or directions) surrounding the scene and take at least 2–3 photos from each position. This gives adjusters a complete 360-degree view and eliminates blind spots in your documentation.

1 **Establishing Shots (50–100 ft away)**

Photograph the entire scene from a distance in all four directions (N, S, E, W). Include the surrounding environment — intersections, buildings, signage, landmarks. These shots establish WHERE the incident occurred.

2 **Mid-Range Shots (10–20 ft away)**

Move closer and capture each vehicle, structure, or area involved from multiple angles. Show the relationship between objects — how close vehicles are to each other, proximity to curbs, lane positions, and the general scope of damage.

3 **Close-Up Shots (2–5 ft away)**

Photograph all damage in detail. Capture dents, scratches, broken glass, fluid leaks, tire marks, and structural deformation. Get low, get high, and shoot from multiple angles. Include a reference object (pen, coin, hand) for scale when documenting small damage.

4 **Detail Shots (as close as possible)**

Photograph license plates, VIN plates, registration stickers, dash cam screens, odometer readings, gauge readings, safety labels, serial numbers, and any other identifying information.

4 Vehicle Accident — Photo Checklist

Use this checklist to make sure you do not miss any critical shots at the scene of a vehicle accident:

Scene Overview

- ■ Full intersection or roadway — all four directions
- ■ Street signs, road names, and mile markers
- ■ Traffic signals, stop signs, yield signs
- ■ Lane markings, crosswalks, and turning lanes
- ■ Speed limit signs
- ■ Overall positions of all vehicles before they are moved

Vehicle Damage

- ■ All four sides of each vehicle (front, rear, driver side, passenger side)
- ■ Close-ups of every area of damage — dents, scratches, cracked glass
- ■ Undercarriage damage (if safely visible)
- ■ Tire condition — flats, blowouts, tread wear
- ■ Interior damage — deployed airbags, broken steering column, seat belt marks
- ■ Fluid leaks under the vehicle

Vehicle Identification

- ■ License plates of ALL vehicles involved (front and rear)
- ■ VIN plate (visible through windshield on driver's side dash)
- ■ Registration sticker / inspection sticker
- ■ Odometer reading
- ■ Company name or DOT numbers on commercial vehicles

Road and Environment

- ■ Skid marks — measure and photograph with a reference for length
- ■ Debris field — broken glass, plastic, vehicle parts
- ■ Fluid spills on the roadway (oil, coolant, fuel)
- ■ Road surface condition — wet, icy, potholes, gravel, construction
- ■ Weather and visibility (a photo of the sky / horizon establishes conditions)
- ■ Nearby security cameras (note business name and camera location)

5 Workplace / Property Incident — Photo Checklist

For workplace injuries, property damage, slips/trips/falls, or equipment incidents:

General Scene

- ■ Wide shot of the entire area where the incident occurred
- ■ Entrance / exit points and walking paths leading to the scene
- ■ Lighting conditions — overhead lights, natural light, dark areas
- ■ Floor / ground surface — wet, oily, uneven, cluttered, damaged
- ■ Signage — safety warnings, wet floor signs, restricted area notices
- ■ Safety equipment in the area — guards, barriers, railings, PPE stations

Equipment and Machinery

- ■ The equipment involved — brand, model, serial number plate
- ■ Position and setting of controls at the time of incident
- ■ Safety guards — in place, removed, or damaged
- ■ Lockout / tagout status
- ■ Maintenance logs or inspection stickers visible on the equipment

Injury Evidence

- ■ Visible injuries (with the person's consent) — cuts, bruises, swelling
- ■ Damaged or bloody clothing and PPE
- ■ PPE that was being worn at the time (hard hat, gloves, safety glasses, etc.)
- ■ The specific object or surface that caused the injury

6 Video Documentation

Video can capture details that photos miss — the flow of traffic, the sound of a machine, the extent of flooding, or a walkthrough of a damaged property. Use video in addition to (not instead of) photos.

When to Use Video

Video is especially useful for: large-scale property damage (fire, flood, storm), walkthroughs of a damaged building interior, complex intersections where traffic flow matters, equipment that was in motion when the incident occurred, and conditions that change rapidly (rising water, spreading fire).

- ■ **Narrate as you record** — state the date, time, location, and what you are filming
- ■ **Move slowly and steadily** — avoid shaky or fast-panning footage
- ■ **Record in landscape (horizontal) orientation** for the widest field of view
- ■ **Walk the full perimeter** of the scene in one continuous shot if possible
- ■ **Capture ambient audio** — alarms, machine sounds, weather, and traffic noise provide context
- ■ **Keep videos under 3 minutes each** — multiple short clips are easier to manage than one long recording

7 Written Notes — What to Record

Photos tell the story, but written notes fill in the gaps. Record the following details as soon as safely possible while your memory is fresh:

- ■ **Date and exact time** of the incident
- ■ **Exact location** — address, intersection, mile marker, building name, floor number
- ■ **Weather and conditions** — temperature, rain, snow, ice, fog, wind, lighting
- ■ **What you were doing** immediately before the incident
- ■ **What you saw and heard** — sequence of events in order
- ■ **Direction of travel** for all vehicles or movement of persons involved
- ■ **Approximate speeds** (if a vehicle incident)

- ■ **Statements made by others** at the scene (record as close to their exact words as possible)
- ■ **Names and contact info** of everyone present — parties, witnesses, emergency responders
- ■ **Badge numbers** of responding police officers
- ■ **Anything unusual** — the other driver's behavior, equipment malfunction, environmental hazards

★ **WRITE IT DOWN NOW**

Memory is unreliable and degrades quickly. Details that seem unforgettable at the scene will become vague within days. Write your notes within one hour of the incident if possible.

8 Sketching a Scene Diagram

A simple hand-drawn diagram is one of the most valuable pieces of documentation. It does not need to be artistic — it just needs to be clear and accurate.

Include the following in your diagram:

- ■ Road layout — lanes, medians, shoulders, curbs, turn lanes
- ■ Direction of travel for each vehicle (use arrows)
- ■ Position of each vehicle before, at the point of impact, and after (final rest)
- ■ Point of impact — mark with an X
- ■ Traffic controls — signals, stop signs, yield signs
- ■ Compass direction (N / S / E / W arrow)
- ■ Skid marks — show starting point, direction, and approximate length
- ■ Landmarks — buildings, intersections, driveways, signs
- ■ Location of witnesses and bystanders
- ■ Location of security cameras

Practice space — sketch an example diagram here or use this area after an incident.

9 Preserving and Organizing Your Evidence

Collecting evidence is only half the job. You must also preserve and organize it properly so it is usable weeks or months later during the claims process.

1. **Back up immediately**
   Upload all photos and videos to cloud storage (Google Drive, iCloud, Dropbox) the same day. Do not rely solely on your phone — phones get lost, broken, or wiped.

2. **Do not edit or filter photos**
   Adjusters need original, unedited images. Do not crop, rotate, apply filters, or enhance. Edited photos can be challenged as tampered evidence.

3. **Create a folder structure**
   Organize by date and incident. Example: '2026-02-01 — Vehicle Accident Hwy 405'. Include subfolders for photos, videos, documents, and notes.

4. **Name files clearly**
   Rename files with descriptive names: 'Front_Damage_Vehicle1.jpg' is more useful than 'IMG_4782.jpg'. This saves time when an adjuster requests specific images.

5. **Retain everything**
   Do not delete any photos, even blurry or seemingly redundant ones. Let the adjuster or attorney decide what is and is not useful. Keep everything for at least 6 years.

10 Common Mistakes to Avoid

- **Moving vehicles before photographing** — always document positions before anything is moved, unless safety requires immediate relocation
- **Only photographing your own vehicle** — you need photos of ALL vehicles and property involved
- **Forgetting to capture the surroundings** — wide shots of the intersection, signage, and road conditions are just as important as damage photos
- **Not recording witness information** — witnesses leave quickly; get names and phone numbers immediately
- **Relying on memory alone** — write everything down within the first hour while details are fresh
- **Admitting fault at the scene** — even a casual "I'm sorry" can be used against you in a claim
- **Discarding damaged items** — do not repair vehicles, throw away broken equipment, or clean up evidence until your broker or adjuster says it is okay
- **Delaying the report to your broker** — late reporting is one of the top reasons claims are denied or reduced

11 Quick-Reference Field Card

Tear out or photograph this page and keep it in your wallet, glove box, or hard hat for fast reference:

1	Ensure safety — hazard lights, move to safety if needed
2	Call 911 if injuries or major damage
3	Take wide-angle photos from all four directions BEFORE anything moves
4	Photograph all damage — close-ups and 10 ft away
5	Photograph license plates, VINs, and identifying info
6	Photograph skid marks, debris, signals, road conditions

7	Exchange info — names, licenses, insurance, plates
8	Get witness names and phone numbers
9	Get officer name, badge #, and report number
10	Write your account of what happened within 1 hour
11	Sketch a scene diagram — vehicles, arrows, point of impact
12	Call your insurance broker within 24 hours

EMERGENCY & REPORTING CONTACTS

Emergency Services
911

First Underwriters Insurance
(425) 242-5357
www.firstunderwriters.com

Company Safety Director
Name: _____
Phone: _____

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