

Taxi Driver Safety Three Essays

The following three essays were written by two experienced taxi drivers from Kingston Ontario Canada. They were first published sequentially in '*News from Behind the Wheel*', a local taxi industry news magazine. They were inspired in part by the murder of a fellow driver, David Krick, on Fathers Day 2007.

The first essay, *Roy's Story*, is a first person account of getting held up by a knife-wielding thief. The second essay, *ACTS*, suggests linear thinking in a dangerous situation: Assess, Communicate, Take Control and Separate. And the third essay, *Taxi Driver Safety Skills*, is a discussion of core skills needed to stay safe on the job.

Thankfully, most of our interactions with the public are routine, profitable, and enjoyable. But when someone turns against us, we have to be able to respond in a way where nobody gets hurt.

We offer these essays to the taxi community at large without copy restrictions. They can be downloaded from the following webpage: www.allan.kleywegt.ca/taxi/taxi-driver-safety-090801.pdf

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Roy's Story

I was robbed.

I picked up a male passenger at 16 Bath Rd. around 2:00 am on July 7, 2004. His hand was bleeding and he reeked of booze. He said he had to go to Nelson street for his health card and then to the hospital for treatment. After taking too long in the house, he re-entered the cab by the rear passenger-side door. He then said he had to go to his mother's place in Rideau Heights for the card.

I had driven only a few feet when he slid over behind me, put his left arm around the front of my neck, held a knife to the back of my neck, and said, "Give me all your money or I'll stick you." My only thought was, "I'm not giving this fool anything." The rest was automatic.

I stopped the car, put it in "park", shut off the engine, and put the keys away. While I was doing this, he asked, "What are you doing? Give me your money!" Rather than respond verbally, I pushed his arm and the knife away. I got out of the car, leaving my door open. He left by the opposite door. As soon as his door closed, I hit the power locks, got in, and drove away. As I was doing this, he was vainly pulling on the door handle and pounding on the window. This took only about three minutes.

Only then did I tell the dispatcher what had happened and that I was safe. He warned the other drivers not to pick this guy up, and called the Police. I wrote my account of these events while I waited for them to arrive. The constable who finger-printed the cab said someone had cut himself breaking into a house nearby. The bloody jersey in the cab linked my assailant to this crime. About two hours after the event, I was able to wash off the fingerprint dust and go back to work.

In the end, I was not robbed of my money, but I *was* robbed of two hours working time, and my sense of security. I realized how lucky I was when I learned that he and a buddy had robbed and stabbed another driver a few days before.

My attacker got two years less a day in jail for his crimes. I got a valuable lesson. For a while, I was on high alert whenever anyone who looked like this guy got into the cab, but that faded soon. One thing that did not fade was the adrenalin rush when someone puts his arm close to my neck from the back.

Everything I've read tells me I should have given him my money, but I think I responded correctly in this situation. It certainly did make me think. I hope it never happens to you, but it could. Be prepared.

Had he been sober, had he held the knife somewhere else, had he not been alone, had he been holding a gun—all of these things would have changed my response.

There is simply no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to robbery or violence. Flexibility is vital to survival in a crisis. We need a "Plan A" to avoid problems, and a "Plan B" to handle problems we can't avoid. Planning ahead can help every one of us stay safe and make it home at the end of the shift.

-Roy Ambury, April 2009

ACTS

Roy's Story proves that any of us could be caught off guard and robbed. *So what should we do when confronted by dangerous and unpredictable people?* Fight or flight, while instinctive, isn't practical while driving a taxi. Using your head and staying calm, as Roy did, is a much safer approach. *ACTS* is a safety strategy to help you stay calm, cool and in control.

Assess the Danger – *we might have a problem*

Communicate – *we do have a problem*

Take Control – *averting a bigger problem*

Separate – *getting away from the problem*

Assess the Danger

Let's look at some of the clues in *Roy's Story* that should sound warnings in our heads:

1. **Time of day—2:00 am:** Many rats, but not all, are nocturnal creatures. So it is with thieves and killers.
2. **Intoxication:** We routinely drive intoxicated people, but we all know they are a disproportionate source of trouble for us.
3. **Bleeding hand:** *Trouble follows trouble.* When an injured person uses our services, we have to be suspicious of how the injury happened. The likelihood of violence is always elevated when preceded by violence or other illegal behaviour.
4. **"I need my health card before I go to the hospital":** This is not necessarily true, and Roy should not have allowed this to throw him off. Would the hospital refuse treatment for this reason? Would you have an ambulance stop at your house first? They can always get the health insurance information *after* the immediate health concern has been attended to.
5. **The length of time he took in the house:** Troublemakers have no concept of time. They don't care how much the meter runs or how much of your time they waste. In this case, the assailant was probably nursing his wound and looking for a weapon.
6. **A change in direction:** This is common with troublesome situations. Impulsive or irrational behaviour should always make the driver more wary.
7. **The sum of the above:** One warning bell is not the same as six.
8. **A change in seating position:** When the assailant moved directly behind Roy, the attack had already started. It was already too late for Roy to prevent it.

As it happened, the assailant was *originally* preoccupied with his wound, so Roy didn't see the threat coming. He thought he was taking the guy to the hospital. The change of direction was a clue, as most criminals wouldn't want to be interrogated at the hospital about their wound. Had Roy been more suspicious early on in his assessment, he might have simply driven away and found another call. This would mean losing \$4.00 on meter, and a possible complaint, but that is nothing compared to what did, or what could have happened.

As a general guideline:

- Be confident and aware. Mentally note anything unusual about your passengers before they get in the car (like a bleeding hand). Always be aware of your surroundings and know the potential hazards around you.
- Be suspicious of suspicious characters. Anyone intent upon harming you will likely trigger some kind of warning in your head. *Pay attention to this instinct.* If you're uncomfortable with the situation you find yourself in, take control as early as possible.

Safety first, complaints later. Don't be the victim who wasn't using his head because of money or customer service guidelines.

- Know who you're dealing with. High-risk offenders released back into the community are identified on the Kingston Police website:
<http://www.police.kingston.on.ca/Community%20Notification.htm>
- Realize that you're in even greater danger if there is more than one assailant. Nothing breeds violence more than a "pack of rats", who 'egg each other on'. Some municipal by-laws limit the number of occupants in a taxi.

Communicate

The harder it is to build customer rapport, the louder your warning bells should sound. If for any reason you feel threatened, then you have to tell the dispatcher right away without alarming those in your cab. You also have to dissuade a potential attacker from doing anything foolish in a non-confrontational manner. As you feel the need...

1. **Know how to play dumb.** The driver who acts naïve won't seem to pose a threat to the passenger engaged in criminal activity. You are safer when he thinks you're too dumb to report him. Sometimes it's better to be a "Shultz" (for those that remember the character from TV's *Hogan's Heroes*).
2. **Casually mention safety equipment as a deterrent before escalation.** If a potential assailant thinks his picture has already been taken, then he is less likely to be aggressive.
3. **As the situation escalates, avoid threatening or aggressive language.** This can only make the situation worse. Maintain a naïve, friendly approach no matter what you have to say, even when you're ejecting someone from your cab. Verbal escalation is always bad.
4. **Use stand protocols.** Each taxi stand will have its own safety protocols. Learn what they are and when to use them. Once you have invoked distress protocols, the dispatcher will stay in random contact with you to verify your continued safety and location, until the situation is resolved. How you respond to the dispatcher is critical.
 - **"TFT"** – (**T**rouble **F**ollows **T**rouble) is an easy to use call sign and is an early warning to dispatch. If your customer asks what this means, just say it means something like "**T**hat's **F**reaking **T**ough" in response to a previous dispatch message. A potential attacker will be watching you like a hawk, and will be aware of every contact you have with the office—radio communications might dissuade him from actually attacking you.
5. **911 Emergency Lights.** If your Taxi has safety equipment indicating that you're in trouble, use it.

In a dangerous situation, it's imperative that your dispatcher be made aware, and that the aggressor is deterred. Acting calm, confident and naïve will help keep things from escalating further.

Take Control

Here are a few things you can do to protect yourself when you sense trouble around you:

1. **Don't let suspicious characters in your car.** If you don't like what you see coming to your car, lock the doors and drive away. **Trust your instincts now, deal with complaints later.** The following are legitimate reasons for not letting someone in your cab:
 - too many people

- open liquor or food
- uncontrolled or vicious animals
- any kind of foolish or aggressive behaviour
- previous experience with the same individuals

You can always tell the customer that the call was assigned to somebody else. When you do refuse entry to your taxi, you will have to provide good reason to the stand. If you otherwise consistently demonstrate good judgment as a taxi driver, your decisions in this regard will be respected.

2. **Don't let a suspicious individual sit directly behind you.** You can tell people where to sit—you're in charge. If they don't want to move when asked, end the ride quickly.
3. **Don't respond to last-second instructions.** Stay in control of your vehicle—that sudden right turn into the alley might not be a good idea. Instead, naïvely ignore such requests as if you didn't hear them. Any change in destination should be given and agreed to in advance, so that sudden and dangerous road maneuvers are avoided. If your lack of co-operation causes aggression, end the ride quickly. Don't let your customers' impulses drive the car.
4. **Stick to well-travelled routes.** If your aggressive customer is overly concerned about the route being taken, you can offer a reduced flat rate to the destination or a free ride to the current location—but you don't *have* to take their route.
5. **Unfasten your seatbelt.** This will prevent it from being used to choke you, and will allow you to escape from the situation more easily. In addition, it serves as a subtle warning to a potential assailant that you are 'onto' them, which may further dissuade them from acting. In Ontario, taxi drivers are not required to wear seatbelts while transporting paying passengers.
6. **Pull your seat forward.** This way, you're further out of reach from someone seated behind you.
7. **Open the windows and turn on the interior light.** If others can see and hear what's going on inside the cab, a potential assailant will be deterred.
8. **Turn off the music radio.** You must listen and pay attention to an aggressor without distraction, and it's easier to talk to dispatch with the music off.

Taking control is knowing *what to do*, and *when to do it*, after saying "NO". Set boundaries, and let the customer know what they are. Any violation of our boundaries could be reason for going to the next step, which is *Separate Yourself from Danger...*

Separate Yourself from Danger

"Plan A" should always be to separate yourself from danger. If you feel threatened for any reason, we feel your only option is to 'kick them out'. This doesn't mean physical intervention; it means asking them to leave, and backing it up with appropriate actions. This is how we feel it should be done:

1. **Do it as soon as possible.** Don't worry about the loss. The money owed usually isn't worth the time or grief of having to deal with a problem passenger any further. Don't wait until you're almost to the customer's desired destination. You might just as well finish the job to avoid unnecessary conflict if you're almost there.
2. **Don't threaten, just do it.** You maintain control, the element of surprise, and avoid unnecessary verbal escalation while driving.

3. **Choose the location carefully.** Don't kick them out impulsively—choose a good location. Look for a place where there are plenty of other people and traffic. If there's a cop nearby, all the better.
4. **Do it as politely as possible.** Avoid verbal escalation. Short repeated sentences like, "You can get out now." will usually do the trick.
5. **If the occupants refuse to leave, ask the dispatcher to call the Police.** Avoid physical confrontation; don't attempt to forcibly remove anyone by yourself.
 - By using physical force, you may end up being charged or injured yourself.
 - You're at a physical disadvantage leaning into the passenger cabin space.
 - It may be better to wait for the police outside the cab if you're in an otherwise safe place.

"Plan B"

If you still get robbed after doing everything else right, then you still have to have some sense of what to do. Your instincts will guide your responses. Take a deep breath, reassess, and decide your priorities: life, money, or property. You can decide to co-operate, or not. While co-operating doesn't guarantee your safety, it may prevent further escalation.

When you decide to co-operate with an assailant: you're really only trying to prevent physical harm to yourself. Try to co-operate this way:

- Tell assailant you will do what he wants.
- Try to keep your voice calm and steady, not shaky and fearful.
- Tell him what you are doing as you do it, so as not to scare him.
- Do everything slowly, but not so slowly as to get him upset.
- Treat the transaction as if it were a normal one.
- Don't make any sudden moves that might cause him to use his weapon.
- If possible, try to have your mike keyed the whole time.

If you decide *not* to co-operate with the assailant: be prepared, have a plan of action. Know what you're doing and how to do it. In any case, we don't advocate using your moving vehicle as a weapon in any circumstance. The unsuspecting public should never be put at risk.

After a robbery:

After ensuring our personal safety and alerting dispatch, we must do our part to prevent the criminal from striking again. Police will need a W5 description of the event—*Who, What, When, Where, and Why*.

First, leave the scene of the crime. The criminal may come back to the scene. Wait for Police in a well-lit area, with your doors locked. Write down what happened while you are waiting and it's still fresh in your mind. Concentrate on your description of the suspect, starting with:

1. Male or Female?
2. Ethnicity? Skin colour? Accent?
3. Type of hair and grooming, long or short, colour, moustache or beard?
4. What clothing was attacker wearing? A hat or cap? Any writing on the clothing?
5. Wearing glasses? Any jewelry? Any scars or tattoos?

6. Disposition, were they seemingly drunk or high?
7. What did he say? What threats were made? High- or low-pitched voice?
8. What weapon did he have? Where is it now?
9. Where and when did you pick him up? Where did you go?
10. Whatever else you feel is important.

Some Final Thoughts

In a robbery, there are too many variables to list. Here are a few of them.

Type of Threat:

- Guns, knives, beer bottles, seatbelts.
- The most dangerous people are young, middle-aged and old; male and female; white, black, brown, orange and purple; students and working people; drunk, stoned, sober.
- The number of people and where they're seated. How would *Roy's Story* have changed if there had been more than one assailant?

Taxi and Equipment:

- Heavily tinted windows are an advantage to the thief, not the driver.
- All drivers should have access to a spare key during their shift.
- Know how to escape from the trunk – lids should be releasable from within the trunk.
- If you haven't occasionally tested your safety equipment, then you probably don't know how it works, or if it does.

Defensive Options:

- Blowing the horn the moment a hostile move is made might startle the assailant and force him to reassess his actions.
- Throwing something that looks like your wallet out the window might separate you from the threat, as long as there's only one assailant.

Conclusion

Roy believes he did the right thing in his situation, but doesn't necessarily recommend that others do the same. There simply is no right or wrong way to deal with robbery or violence because each situation is unique. We both advocate that you trust your instincts in the moment.

The likelihood of robbery is low, but ever present. Don't think, "It will never happen to me." Instead, think, "How can I respond if it *does* happen?" Alertness can warn you of danger, and planning ahead can guide your responses positively. Every situation requires its own brand of common sense and luck. When there's a knife at your throat or more than one assailant, you have very few choices left. Deciding how you would have responded in *Roy's Story* is worth thinking about.

-Roy Ambury & Allan Kleywegt, May 2009

Taxi Driver Safety Skills

Introduction

Taxi driving can be dangerous. There are risks associated with working alone in confined proximity with the public, working at night, handling cash, and having very little control over our destination. New drivers, who lack experience are especially at risk. As we see in *Roy's Story*, even experienced drivers sometimes let their guard down at the wrong time. This essay identifies core risks and skills associated with this industry.

The relative risks and dangers of our job are:

- High probability, high danger: Motor vehicle collision.
- High probability, low danger: Serving belligerent and obnoxious people.
- Very low probability, very high danger: People who are intent upon harming us.

Professional drivers understand the risks of their trade and develop core skills to protect themselves from the dangers.

Driving Skill

The greatest threat to our safety is the way we operate. Not staying alert, not driving safely, not wearing our seatbelt, and not monitoring the road-worthiness of our vehicles are all self-imposed risks. These risks are easy to control by using common sense.

Taxi Acumen

We advise all new taxi drivers to develop their 'street smarts' quickly. The following are some of the things experience has taught us.

1. **Be extra alert when responding to corner calls.** Lots of calls, dispatched or not, may be suspicious. Pay attention to your situational instincts.
2. **Don't bring weapons to work.** Aside from the legal issues, and the possibility of the weapon being turned against you, there are safer ways of dealing with threats. Don't let customers bring potential weapons like open beer bottles into the vehicle either.
3. **Think before doing what the customer asks.** Be vigilant if a customer wants you to drive to a secluded area with an undetermined purpose. Using tact and humour, you should be able to get a sense of whether the services requested are legitimate or not. If you feel that the purpose of the trip is something you don't want to be involved with, refuse the ride. If you are requested to drive into a boxed-in location like an alley, back in. This way you can easily drive away if there's trouble.
4. **Everybody gets runners.** If you think your customers will run without paying, announce that you're turning the meter off just before the desired destination, and they can pay you now (while you're still moving). Whispering passengers are likely candidates for this treatment. If they tell you they have to go in the house to retrieve money, ask for some collateral.
5. **Intoxicated people are more prone to motion sickness.** Have a barf bag ready. Drunks don't like to pay clean up fees any more than we like to clean up. Further, many of our passengers assume that we're trying to rip them off when we attempt to add clean up fees to the fare (the current Kingston by-law stipulates a sanitary clean up fee of \$75). Lastly, the Police rarely help us in this situation, whether we can show the local by-law or not.

Local Knowledge

Even though you may know less than some other drivers, your customer expects you to know where you're going. If you make a mistake, admit it right away and compensate for it—we shouldn't make our customers pay for our mistakes or lack of knowledge. It's better to ask for directions if you're not sure of the best route.

Roy's Book is meant to be the best navigational tool for taxi drivers in the Kingston area, but there are other solutions like GPS systems, paper maps or dispatch directions. No matter what tools you choose, make sure that you fulfill the expectation of knowing where you're going.

Language and Social Skills

Research has shown that language barriers are often a source of conflict in our business. When you don't share the same first language, be absolutely certain what the destination is. Again, make allowances for the person who doesn't share your language or culture so that frustrated social interaction doesn't escalate.

Here are some social situations to consider:

- **The person with special needs:** People with special needs, like the elderly and differently abled may require more patience. Don't let your rush to the dollar make you forget your manners. Ask what they need before you do anything.
- **The agitated customer:** How do you avoid turning the agitated into the aggressive?
- **The belligerent group of young men who want to make sport of you:** How do you prevent an escalation?

No matter who you're dealing with, the following are always important:

- ✓ **Dress appropriately.** First impressions are visual. Don't allow the way you dress for work, or the jewellery you wear, or the way you handle money attract trouble.
- ✓ **Create and maintain a positive tone throughout the ride.** Make a good first impression. Try to make eye contact with every customer as they approach and enter the cab. Most people react to a smile with a smile—if they don't, be wary. Try to establish rapport with your customer by being agreeable, listening in conversation and using appropriate humour. If this fails, try to figure out why without interrogating them. Building rapport is important, but overdoing the charm routine can get your taillights kicked out if the girl is charmed, but not her boyfriend, as personal experience can attest.
- ✓ **Learn to "read" people's behaviour.** Be wary of those who are intoxicated, who whisper amongst themselves, who have multiple destinations or can't give a clear destination. The guy who says, "I only have \$10, I hope that will be enough" is unlikely to be a problem.
- ✓ **Treat everyone the way you would want them to treat you.** Never make assumptions based on a person's appearance. Most people will reflect back to us what we project to them. The less you like the look of your passengers, the better you have to treat them. Judge people by their behaviour, not their appearance.
- ✓ **Only a tiny minority of people will cause problems.** When they do, deal with them as positively as possible. Don't take it personally when people try to dump garbage on you because they have too much garbage of their own. Control your reactions. Ignore an insult rather than responding.
- ✓ **Don't play retaliation games.** Aside from ejecting your customer when it's necessary, this only escalates any misgivings there may be. Making threats is always a bad idea.

- ✓ **Get a destination before you drive.** If you're not sure how to get there, look it up *before* you start the meter, or obtain directions from the customer. This is a good way to establish rapport with the passenger. Unless there is some safety issue, we're obligated to take each customer by their preferred route. When you do this, there can be no arguments over the fare. Notwithstanding this, ignore last-second "turn here" instructions which put you at greater risk of collision.
- ✓ **Set clear and reasonable boundaries.** Remain in charge of the whole vehicle, including the stereo. Good customer relations might mean that you let them listen to their favourite radio station, but you handle the controls.
- ✓ **Your attitude and your habits will determine your overall safety.** Sort your priorities with each situation separately. You are at greater risk when you're only thinking of money, so avoid arguments over it. Usually you'll get the full fare, and sometimes even a tip. Everybody gets short-changed or has a runner once in a while. Take the attitude that the fare on the meter is the recommended price. If somebody doesn't want to pay you for whatever reason, laugh it off and consider how you can avoid this person later. It's usually more profitable to cut your losses and move on than to pursue that last nickel.

Communications Equipment

The two-way radio is for safety and business communication, so learn to use it professionally. Good radio skills will help conceal our communications from an aggressor and contribute to the safety of everyone on the road.

- ✓ **Develop your passive listening skills.** This means hearing your call sign at all times.
- ✓ **Practice active listening.** Pay attention to what is being said. Don't interrupt the dispatcher when he is talking to another driver. Be selective when you key the microphone—background noise interferes with radio communication.
- ✓ **Take care of business while talking to your customer.** Avoid the common rookie mistake of turning the radio off when a customer is in the car. You never know when the dispatcher will try to contact you, whether you're on duty or not.
- ✓ **Find the right tone of voice to use with each dispatcher**—working with him is better than working against him. A good dispatcher will have a clear idea of what's going on in your cab if you key your microphone while talking to your customers.
- ✓ **Do not allow your customers to entertain themselves with your radio**—there's nothing funny about them interfering with taxi communications.
- ✓ **Do not use the radio to retaliate against the dispatcher.** In case of a dispute, use the phone. Would you want someone to be fooling with the radio when you're in trouble?

Recommended Emergency Protocols

Panic buttons are a great idea – but not all taxis have them. We have already proposed 'TFT' in *ACTS* as an early warning call sign to use when you suspect trouble in your cab. Further, we would like to recommend the following protocols for emergency situations:

- One click of the microphone means 'Yes'
- Two clicks of the microphone means 'No'
- Repetitive clicking should mean 'I have a problem in the car'; five clicks imply a bigger problem than three. Save the clicking for emergencies.

These protocols can be easily concealed with the radio at low volume.

Conclusion

Roy's Story is a cautionary tale. *ACTS* deals with life-threatening situations. *Taxi Driver Safety Skills* is a more general guide to safety in our industry. The three essays together are intended to open up a dialogue on issues common to our industry. This discussion can only make our jobs safer.

There is no right or wrong way of handling any difficult situation—each one is unique. Nonetheless, alertness will serve us well where paranoia will not. The core skills and professionalism that we bring to the job can serve us better than any weapon.

-Roy Ambury & Allan Kleywegt, June 2009