

English for the Unexpected: Car Accidents

We have **sub zero** temperatures and **slippery** roads here in Germany, and this week I had my first ever German car **accident**.

I was driving up an on ramp to the Autobahn when my car **slid** and I **braked** to a stop. The car behind me also slid and **rear-ended** my car. Since neither of us was going very fast, it wasn't a bad accident. The bumper on my car was cracked—in the cold, the plastic broke easily—and the other driver's **license plate** fell off. The most important thing was that nobody was hurt, I was just **shaken up** and worried that my German wasn't good enough for the situation.

When I got out of the car and walked back to the driver who had hit me—it was a taxi, and he was transporting handicapped children, so I felt very bad—we called the police together. On the phone, the police **dispatcher** didn't seem to understand my accent, and so the taxi driver had to tell them where we were.

In the end, the whole thing was painless, though my day was ruined. In the end, aside from a thirty Euro fine for stopping unnecessarily, all that I lost was time.

Do you think you could have handled a similar situation in English? Can you describe your last car accident—one one you heard about from friends or family—in English? What happened? Who caused the accident? Were there any injuries?

Vocabulary

Sub zero: When temperatures are below zero (0) degrees, we say that they're sub-zero. Of course, if you know Fahrenheit, you'll know that sub zero is colder in Fahrenheit than it is in Celsius!

Slippery: Slippery describes things that don't offer very much friction, or 'grip.' When I was a boy and my mother polished the floors in our house, I liked to put on socks, get a running start, and **slide** across the floors. I still like to do that, if I get a chance! You could slide very far, because the floor was very slippery when it was freshly-polished. Oil is slippery. So are some floors, when they are wet. There are even "Slippery when wet" signs in America when floors are being cleaned.

Accident: I think everyone in the world has done something without planning to. When I'm not careful, I break things by dropping or bumping them. I never *want* to break them, it just happens when I'm not being careful. It happens on accident. An accident is something that you do without planning it. Many things—good and bad—can be accidents. But when we talk about a

car accident, we mean that the car hit something we didn't want to hit. In my case, another car hit me.

Slide / Slid: A car has wheels and, normally, it moves by turning the wheels. We say it rolls. But, when a car sits on its wheels and moves without turning the wheels—if you are **braking** and the car is still moving—we say it slides. When the roads are **slippery**, cars slide more. In my **accident**, I slid (that's the past tense of slide) but the real problem was that someone else slid into my car.

Brake: When you want your car to go faster, you press the gas pedal. But when you want the car to go slower, you press the brake. (On most cars, the brake is on the left or in the middle of the pedals.) The brake is the name of the thing that makes your car go more slowly. To brake is the verb we use to describe using the brake to slow down. When you press the brake pedal all the way to the floor, we say you make a "panic stop."

Rear-End: The "rear end" of your car is the back side of the car, where the trunk probably is. But we use the word 'rear end' as a verb to describe a very common kind of accident: one car hitting another from behind. In my accident, I was rear ended by another car: another car hit mine from behind.

License plate: When someone witnesses an **accident** one of the first things they do is to write down the number on the front of the back of the car. The number is on a piece of metal—or plastic—and each car has a different number. The metal plate with the number on it is the license plate. You can find license plates everywhere in the world.

Shaken up: Have you ever recieved bad news? After the bad news, did you have a hard time concentrating? Thinking clearly? Sometimes, we have the same feeling after we've had a big surprise: it takes us a few minutes to calm back down. When we've had a shock and can't calm back down, we say we're shaken up. I was shaken up for several minutes after the **accident**, because I was very surprised to be hit from behind and didn't know what to do. I was also shaken up for several weeks after my grandmother died, because I couldn't imagine living without her.

Dispatcher: If you call the police, does a police officer answer the phone in his car? No, someone in an office answers and asks you questions. If you need a police officer, they can contact an officer in a car over the radio. The name for the people who operate the radio and tell the police where to go is the dispatcher. After my **accident**, I called the emergency number in Germany and told them what happened. They connected me with the police dispatcher who sent a police car to our **accident**.