

# 25 Tips for the Probationary FF

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**1 Respect the job.** Firefighting is one of the most respected professions in our country. For every person who wears a firefighter uniform, there are at least 10 more who wish they could. As much of an honor as it is to become a firefighter, it is equally as much of a dishonor to become complacent, and those who don't care about the job are disrespectful of the profession and their coworkers. Respect the job, work hard, and be proud of the profession you have chosen.

**2 Arrive early.** Arrive at work at least 30 minutes before your shift begins. This will give you the opportunity to prepare by familiarizing yourself with the apparatus you are assigned to. This is a habit you will want to keep for the duration of your career. Preparation for the big fire begins the moment you walk through the door, not the moment your shift begins.

**3 Be social.** Introduce yourself to everyone you meet. This is especially important on your first day. Greet other firefighters with a handshake and simply say, "Hello, I'm Firefighter \_\_\_\_\_. It's nice to meet you." These are the men and women you will be putting your life on the line with, and for. If you are meeting an officer, make sure you greet that member using the proper title. It is imperative that you understand the ranking system and address their rank. A simple "Hello, Captain" before you introduce yourself would suffice.

**4 Find the senior firefighter.** A good senior firefighter on your shift/station will be your greatest asset. Ask this veteran all of those questions you have regarding your first day—questions like, "What housework should I do?" (See No. 5 and No. 6) or "Which bed/locker is mine?" The senior firefighter is there to answer those questions, not the officer. The captain, for example, has greater responsibilities than to show you where the mop is.

**5 Be proactive around the firehouse.** Don't wait for someone to tell you what to do. As a probationary firefighter, you basically do everything. If the phone rings, answer it. If someone knocks on the door, see who it is. After lunch, volunteer to do the dishes. If you sit and watch the other firefighters doing these things, they will develop an unfavorable opinion of you early on. As a rule of thumb, if you think you are not doing enough, you probably aren't.

**6 Be the first to rise and the last to sleep.** Plan on being the last one to go to bed. This is the time to ensure that the firehouse is secured and tidy. This is also a great time to read up on fire-related material. Wake up 30 minutes before the others, make coffee, and do whatever tasks are necessary around the firehouse. The others will respect you for it.

**7 Find a mentor.** This may not be easy to do on the first or second day, but in time you will find the person who impresses you with his knowledge and attitude and who is receptive to you. Most firefighters would be honored to share their knowledge and help mentor a probationary firefighter, but you will have to make it clear that you want their help. Align yourself with the right people, because every successful person will tell you that association is the key to success.

**8 Know your riding position and responsibilities.** The officer will assign you a position and instruct you on its responsibilities. Everyone on an apparatus has specific duties and tasks that they are expected to know and accomplish to ensure success at an incident. Understand what is expected of you before you go out the door.

**9 Check your equipment.** This rule cannot be overstated. Check your personal protective equipment (PPE) and self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). Check nozzles, saws, tools, and so forth. Starting on day one, prepare yourself by checking to see where everything is located so when the officer asks for a specific tool, you won't be foolishly running around the apparatus looking for it. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

**10 Wear your safety gear.** Contrary to what you might think, you are not indestructible. You have been issued protective clothing to ensure that you go home at the end of your shift. The clothing cannot protect you if it's sitting in your gear locker. Wear your hood, your gloves, and your mask! Button your collar. Give yourself every chance of getting back home in the same shape as when you left.

**11 Ask.** When you have a question, ask it. Not asking something for fear of looking foolish will only get you in trouble. You will be working with knowledgeable firefighters, but to benefit from their knowledge, you must be willing to make the first move. They can't answer your question if they don't know what it is. We have a combined 50 years on the job, and we still ask questions. Twenty years from today, you will also ... if you're smart.

**12 Talk to the outgoing crew.** Don't let your counterparts leave without giving you a report. Ask questions about what happened on their shift that will affect your readiness, such as, "Has any equipment been moved, replaced, or sent out for repair?" Conversely, don't rush out the door at the end of your shift. Share pertinent information with the crew (and firefighter) who is relieving you. Give them the same courtesy that others extended to you.

**13 Lead by example.** Yes, even a rookie can display the qualities of a leader. If you do your job well, every time—that's the first step. On the fireground, there is something we call "layered leadership." When given an assignment, the person receiving it is expected to complete that task. If you tackle assignments with professionalism and a "whatever-it-takes" attitude, others (even veteran firefighters) may also try to reach that standard that you, the rookie, have set.

**14 Don't try to force acceptance.** Your actions in the firehouse and on the fireground will be closely scrutinized. Trying to get comfortable too quickly will likely work against you. For example, it is wise to bring in the newspaper, but your job is not to kick your feet up and read it. You can do that on your off time. When on duty, you should be reading about one thing—your job.

**15 Leave your ego at the door.** Don't think, "Been there, done that." In this profession, celebrations are short lived. You (and your crew) are only as good as your next call. Don't be overconfident or cocky because you had a fire on your first day. Sure, the experience will help, but remember, there is a lot to

learn in this business and you will NEVER know it all. The day you think you do is the day you should consider another career.

**16 Respect your elders.** There is an extensive amount of experience and information contained in the minds of the senior members of most departments. To them, you're the "kid" who just got out of the academy, and some of them may remind you of that from time to time. If so, consider that you may be showing them signs of disrespect. It's okay to share your opinion, but don't forget that these men and women paid their dues and have experience that exceeds yours. Respect that fact.

**17 Stay physically fit.** Firefighting is one of the most physically demanding jobs in the world. Consider the fact that a significant number of firefighters die each year from stress-induced heart attacks. Some of those deaths may have been avoided if the firefighter followed a health-promoting diet, worked out more consistently, and was proactive with regard to regular physicals and cardiovascular exams. In short, stay fit! Your life depends on it.

**18 Stay mentally fit.** The most important tool you have is the one under your helmet and in between your ears. You have to exercise that tool daily by attending as many classes and reading as many books as you can. There is a limitless supply of educational materials out there. A smart firefighter will understand that the day you stop reading about the job is the day you retire. If you think you have run out of things to study and learn, you have greatly underestimated the complexity of the job.

**19 If you feel stressed, tell your officer.** While on duty, you will see and experience traumatic occurrences that exceed what the average person will see on television (multiple-alarm fires, serious injuries, deaths, and so forth). In time, you will become partially immune to most of this, but you will always be affected to some degree. Some people are good at hiding their stress, but this will catch up to you and affect your personal life as well as your professional life. Don't be foolish enough to hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

**20 Have fun.** You may be saying, "Fun? Nothing I've read so far sounds like fun," but you will discover that life as a firefighter can be just that if, of course, you learn how to take a joke. The fact is, many firefighters like to test the sense of humor of probies early on. Don't take things too personally. Have fun. If you don't have a sense of humor, it would be wise to develop one. Survival in the firehouse depends on it.

**21 Be a team player.** Firefighting is the ultimate definition of the word TEAM. Individuals rarely get credit for a job well done, but your crew will be judged by how well you all work together. Remember, when things go bad, all you have is your team. Crew continuity is built at the fire station, but teamwork is fine-tuned on the training ground and at the fire scene. It also helps to get involved with off-duty, nonfirefighting activities.

**22 Be accountable.** The only person responsible for your actions is you. If you make a mistake, own up to it. Your co-workers will respect you more for admitting you were wrong than they will for your trying to hide it. Accountability is also important on the fireground. If your officer asks you to do something, do it; then immediately report back to him. Freelancing at a fire is a major problem that could end up costing someone's life.

**23 Respect the public.** Being a firefighter is an honor and a privilege. Being issued a badge doesn't mean you deserve special treatment. On the contrary, firefighting is a business of service. When people have

problems, they call you for help. They let you in their homes because they trust you and believe that you are a professional. Treat them with the same respect you and your family would want in a time of need.

**24 Make safety your priority.** No matter where you are or what you are doing, think safety. On the fireground especially, it is easy to get so caught up in the moment that you forget the basics. Take a moment to think about what you are doing before you do it. In that moment, think, "Is this the safest way I can accomplish this task?" The job is dangerous enough. There is no room for poor judgment and unsafe practices.

**25 Pay it forward.** As the years go by, you will move from probie to experienced firefighter. One day you may be the senior firefighter or company officer. Don't ever forget what it feels like to be the rookie shaking in his boots. The probies of tomorrow deserve the same respect and tutelage that you will receive. If hazing and condescension were your tutors, then be the one to break that destructive cycle. Be a dedicated firefighter, and help out the rookie, even if you weren't helped. Individually we can get better, but only as a whole can we become great.

As you can see from what you have just read, being a probationary firefighter is hard work, but if you weren't up for the challenge, you would never have chosen this profession in the first place. Accept the challenge, work hard, and stay hungry to learn. When someone is giving you advice, listen. Remember, you have one mouth and two ears; use them proportionately. As human beings, it's important to understand that we don't learn anything by talking. We learn by listening, reading, and doing.

After you successfully complete your probationary period, your attitude and behavior should not change. If you take the advice we have given you above, you will have established some great habits. Keep them, and they will serve you well.

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