

Firearms Identification: Quick Reference Guide

The Gun Control Act of 1968 defines what a firearm is and establishes a concrete set of required markings for each firearm.¹ This allows each firearm to be uniquely described and to the exclusion of all others. Firearms should be identified consistently in all paperwork (incident report, property report, laboratory requests, search warrant returns, indictments, etc.) where the firearm is described to avoid potential complications. If the same firearm is identified differently in various paperwork, this can negatively impact an investigation or prosecution. For instance, a firearm must be accurately described to be successfully traced to its first retail purchaser, and when entering or querying a firearm in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), it is essential that the firearm is described the same way by the officer submitting it as stolen and the officer reporting its recovery for the NCIC to be an effective investigative tool.

Marking requirements differ for domestically manufactured firearms and imported firearms so when identifying a firearm, the place of manufacturing must first be determined. It is important to note that the marking that contains the name, city, and state of a United States company can either refer to a domestic manufacturer or an importer and may contain abbreviations.

The serial number of a firearm is also vitally important for proper identification. Always remember that the serial number is on the frame or receiver. For example, there are Glock models that have a “US” at the end of the serial number, which may be found only on the frame, not the slide. Not understanding that only the number in the frame is the firearm's serial number could result in misidentification of the firearm. Prior to the Gun Control Act of 1968, serial numbers were frequently duplicated when manufacturers introduced new models. Additionally, shotguns and some small-caliber rifles were not required to have serial numbers.

Considerations Before Identifying a Firearm

Before examining a firearm, an officer must determine that the weapon is safe and always:

- **Keep fingers off the trigger and outside the trigger guard.**
- **Treat every firearm as though it were loaded, even if it has been rendered safe.**
- **Always point the firearm in a safe direction and use a containment device if available.**
- **Know and follow agency policies on the handling and examination of firearms.**

To maintain the integrity of the case and preserve any DNA or fingerprint evidence that may be located on the firearm, always use proper safety equipment (i.e., gloves or mask if applicable).

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/90th-congress/house-bill/17735/text>

How to Properly Identify Firearms

Marking requirements differ for domestically manufactured firearms and imported firearms.

Domestically Manufactured Firearms:

- **Serial Number** – Must be unique and must appear on the frame or receiver, but may also be duplicated on other components of the firearm.
- **Domestic Manufacturer** – Name, city, and state of the manufacturer. It may contain abbreviations.
- **Caliber or Gauge.**
- **Model** – Only if a model designation exists.

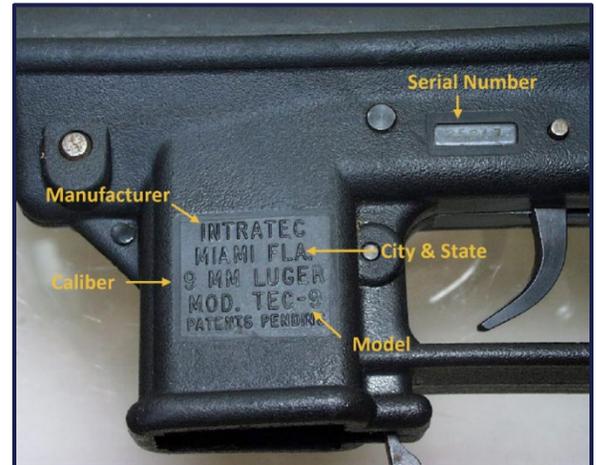


Figure 1: Markings of a Domestically Manufactured Firearm

Fold along the dotted line – This can be laminated to keep with you as a quick reference guide.

Imported Foreign Manufactured Firearms

- **Serial Number** – Must be unique and must appear on the frame or receiver, but will frequently be duplicated on other components of foreign-manufactured firearms.
- **Domestic Importer** – Name, city, and state of operation. It may and frequently does contain abbreviations. Only the abbreviation as it appears on the firearm needs to be recorded on the eTrace request.
- **Foreign Manufacturer** – Name only.
- **Caliber or Gauge.**
- **Model** – Only if a model designation exists.



Figure 2: Markings of an Imported Foreign Manufactured Firearm