

With a few basic steps, a Notary can significantly reduce the risk of letting a potential ID thief slip through the cracks in the system. Here are some examples.

1. *Never accept a birth certificate as identification.* One of the primary misconceptions among signers, businesses and even some Notaries, is that a birth certificate is a valid form of identification. Not only do birth certificates lack the crucial elements needed for any ID presented before a Notary — a photograph, signature and current description of the signer — in several states, strangers can easily request a copy of a person's birth certificate.
2. *Never accept a photocopy of an identification document.* Occasionally, a signer will present a Notary with a photocopy of a driver's license, passport or other photo ID. If the signer cannot provide the original ID, the notarization must be refused. The photocopied ID may have been illicitly copied and could be used to commit a crime.
3. *Personal appearance is crucial.* Without personal appearance by the signer, even legitimate identification is useless. A person presenting another individual's identification and claiming to represent them should be carefully scrutinized by the Notary. If the person lacks power of attorney status or fails to meet the requirements for a proof of execution by subscribing witness, the notarization should be refused.
4. *Watch for discrepancies between a signature and ID.* In some situations, a signer's name may differ from an identification document because of marriage or other legal name change. It's also possible the person is an identity thief trying to use a similarity in names to commit fraud. Notaries should always remember the "less, not more" rule to judge whether a signature is acceptable. For example, if a person's ID reads, "John Jacob Smith," but the signature on the document reads "J.J. Smith" it is acceptable to notarize. However, if the signature on the document reads "Mary Jane Smith," but the ID reads, "M. Smith," the notarization should be refused. If the Notary is in doubt, ask the signer to provide secondary identification to confirm identity.
5. *Do not accept a temporary license.* When people renew driver's licenses, it is customary for motor vehicle departments to issue a temporary license for the interim period between the old license expiring and the new one being issued. These temporary licenses are not acceptable as ID for purposes of notarization. In some states, a temporary license is simply a computer printout with no photograph or signature. While the state of California does include a photo on temporary licenses, the state's Notary Public Section has stated that temporary licenses are not acceptable ID for notarization.

By following these steps, a Notary not only safeguards signers from identity theft, he or she also exercises reasonable care to protect against liability. The Notary who makes an extra effort to screen ID shuts the door of opportunity firmly in the face of the would-be identity thief.