Spotter Do's and Don'ts

Do...attend spotter classes as much as possible.
Do...surf the web for additional information on spotting, severe weather, etc. (including Storm Prediction Center)
Do...have a watch, pencil, note pad, cell phone, and colored Spotter Quick Reference Guide with you when spotting
Do...make an effort to provide an accurate report - the time, location, condition (what you experienced/saw), and location
Do...reference your severe weather report location to the cultural/political center of the nearest city/village, to the nearest 1/10 mile and one of the 16 compass points (stationary spotters)...such as...1.5 NNE Madison
Do...provide in your report what direction you are looking at while viewing a rotating wall cloud, funnel cloud, or tornado, since you can't accurately determine, in the heat of the battle, how far away the wall cloud/funnel cloud/tornado is from your position
Do...spot with a partner, especially if you are mobile - two heads are better than one in this business!
Do...place the safety of you and your family first
Do...utilize communication channels that have been set up for you or your group, and follow proper format/procedures
Do...make sure the National Weather Service receives your report via our 800 number, HAM frequencies, internet or 911
Do…identify yourself as a "trained severe weather spotter" if you call 911 or the NWS – they will then trust your report and not have to dispatch a squad car to your location to verify what you see (waste of time)
Do...be willing to freely share some of your severe weather pictures with the NWS for educational purposes, on-line stories (it's in the public domain when on our web site)

Don't...assume you know everything there is to know about spotting - keep an open mind - you'll learn something new every year
Don't...make it difficult for emergency response people (emergency management, law enforcement, fire fighters, Red Cross, etc.) to do their job - don't get in the way unless you are specifically asked to help
Don't...just take pictures and video of a wall cloud or tornado and forget to relay your spotter report
Don't...get upset at the National Weather Service if you don't see your severe weather report appear on-line as a Local Storm Report (LSR) or in a Public Information Statement (PNS), or in some "Top News of the Day" article on the NWS's web page - we get hundreds of reports from the 20 counties we service.
Don't...assume that you have a tornado just because you see something that looks like a funnel cloud - you must see some indication of ground-based, rotational spray effects (rotating debris/dirt) underneath persistent, rotation at cloud base (with or without a visible condensation funnel) in order to classify it as a tornado. If the cloud feature you're looking at isn't rotating itself on a vertical axis, it's not a tornado or funnel cloud, no matter how scary it looks.
Don't...call-in or relay a report if you're not sure what you're looking at - you must be 100% sure of what you're looking at - accuracy is the highest priority, after your safety - We'd rather have no report rather than a false report.
Don't...forget to give yourself a pat on the back - for your volunteer, public safety efforts!

When reporting tornadoes or funnel clouds or rotating wall clouds –

Is it in the correct place in the storm? Best view? Is it rotating? Do you see rotational dirt/debris effects/spray at the ground level with cloud-base rotation directly above the ground effects? – it's probably a tornado. Provide frequent updates.
In which direction are you looking toward when viewing the tornado or funnel cloud or rotating wall cloud? Is it off in the distance or is it close? Don't try to estimate the distance between you and the tornado/funnel cloud/rotating wall cloud – we don't need it.

When reporting hail –

Use only "small marble" to describe small hail that's about ½ inch in diameter. Do not use the phrase "large marble-size hail, because marbles come in different sizes. If you cannot measure the hail, use coins or other known objects to describe the size.
Report size of largest hailstone, using the largest diameter of an odd-shaped hailstone.

When reporting powerful thunderstorm winds –

Did you measure or estimate the wind gust? Did the wind produce damage? If damage occurred, describe…what was damaged, character, extent.

When measuring snow depths –

Use the toll-free number or internet to contact the NWS during a storm and afterwards with your storm total.
Measure in at least five locations and find the average. Avoid measuring snow next to buildings. Record the snowfall to the nearest tenth of an inch. Time period between measurements of new snow that is reported to the NWS must be at least 6 hours, but no longer than 24 hrs. The National Weather Service reports new snowfall amounts once every 6 hours at its major reporting sites, at 6am, noon, 6 pm, and midnight. You may want to measure snow once per 24-hr period at 6 or 7 am – this is acceptable.