

Basic Handgun

Safety, Training And Skills



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Gun Safety

Jeff Cooper, an influential figure in modern firearms training, formalized "Four Rules" of safe firearm handling. These are considered by many as the most fundamental and taught by nearly all firearm instructors. They are simple and easy to memorize, and they are redundant; if any one rule is broken, the other three will still provide a degree of safety if followed as prescribed.

The first rule may appear deceptively simple, but it must be treated seriously. Most firearm accidents occur with "unloaded" guns.

Gun Safety Rules

1. All guns are always loaded.
2. Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy.
3. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target and you are ready to fire.
4. Be sure of your target and what is beyond it.

Laser-based firearm simulators do not use real ammunition. They generate a harmless, low-power pulse of light to simulate an actual firearm round. While firearm simulators are extremely safe and convenient for indoor and outdoor use, you should remember to ***always practice safe gun handling while training*** with them.

If you are training as often as you should, you will be handling your simulator more than your actual handgun. You must always practice as if you are using an actual firearm to ensure you develop instinctive safe habits. You want to completely eliminate any unsafe behaviors and traits that could translate to the use of your actual firearm.

"Don't do anything in practice that you wouldn't do in the game." - George Halas

Dry Fire Training

"Dry fire" is a generic term for practicing firearm handling skills and simulating "firing" a gun *without using live ammunition*. It is widely recognized by shooting enthusiasts, shooting competitors, law enforcement and military trainers, and firearm instructors as an extremely effective means for improving firearm handling skills.

Dry fire training develops muscle memory through repetition, allowing the shooter to learn how to act and react safely, rapidly and instinctively while manipulating a firearm. It is proven to be extremely effective for practicing and honing skills such as:

- grip
- stance
- draw
- presentation
- ready position
- target acquisition
- natural point of aim
- sight alignment
- sight picture
- trigger control
- follow through
- reloading
- target discrimination
- movement and cover

Dry fire practice is also a highly effective method for validating and becoming familiar with shooting gear such as firearms, magazines, clips, speed strips, belts, holsters, magazine pouches and apparel.

Dry fire must be practiced using as close to the same motions and techniques as will be used during live fire to obtain the greatest benefit.

An actual firearm is often used while training using dry fire techniques, however this is inherently dangerous;

extreme caution must be observed constantly to ensure live rounds are not inadvertently or carelessly introduced.

Safety Rule #1: All guns are always loaded.

There are other major limitations when using an actual firearm as well:

- Pulling the trigger on an empty chamber is discouraged since this can damage the firing pin. "Snap caps" (dummy rounds) alleviate this concern but can require constant reloading.
- Popular striker-fired pistols require the firearm to be cycled by manually working the slide in order to reset the trigger. Obviously this is not a habit a shooter wants to have ingrained.
- Shooters typically do not get measured feedback regarding their performance.

Firearm simulators that use a laser overcome many of the drawbacks of using an actual firearm. These activate a laser with each pull of the trigger. The impact point can be seen by the shooter or an observer, providing visual feedback on hit location and muzzle movement while the firearm is being "fired". More sophisticated simulators provide feedback on shot counts, hits and misses, accuracy, timing, operation, and overall performance.

Dry fire practice can be done at home, it is free, and it is extremely effective. Many firearm trainers suggest that dry fire practice should constitute 70-80 percent of your overall firearm training.

The usual recommendation is to train for about 20 minutes 3-5 days a week, but practicing just 10 minutes twice a week will still greatly improve your shooting skills.

Grip

A proper grip fulfills the following goals:

- Provides a natural position for aiming.
- Prevents the gun from flying out of your hand.
- Facilitates management of recoil.
- Provides good support while minimizing muscle fatigue.
- Provides easy access to all gun controls.



Basic Two Hand Grip

Steps for the basic two hand grip:

1. Place the handgun in the web of your strong hand as high as possible.
2. Point your index finger straight, extended above the trigger guard.
3. Move your thumb forward and slightly upward.
4. Squeeze your fingers around the grip using about the same strength you'd use to hold a hammer.
5. Place the middle of your weak hand's index finger under the trigger guard.

6. Form a fist with your weak hand, squeezing around your strong hand using the same or slightly more strength than you use with your strong hand.
7. Make contact with as much of the handgun's exposed grip area as possible with the palm of your weak hand as you wrap it around your strong hand.
8. Make sure your weak hand thumb is pointed up or forward, and does not wrap around on top of your strong hand behind the handgun.



Hold the handgun in your strong hand as high as possible.



Place the middle of your weak hand's index finger under the trigger guard.



Wrap your weak hand around your strong hand.

It is very important to learn the proper way to grip a handgun. It may not feel natural at first, but be assured you will grow comfortable with it after a little practice.

Safety Rule #2: Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy.



Do not place your strong hand low on the grip.



Do not place your weak hand under the grip ("Tea Cup hold").

Stance

A proper stance provides the following:

- Good stability and ability to handle recoil.
- Natural position allowing as many muscles to be relaxed as possible to reduce shaking and tension while shooting.
- Easy transformation for moving or shooting in different directions.

There are a number of different stances. The Weaver and the Isosceles, and their variations, are perhaps the most common.

Isosceles Stance

The Isosceles stance is widely considered the most natural and simplest to master.

The shooter's body faces directly towards the target with both arms extended to stabilize the handgun. The elbows should bend slightly to the side with the shoulders rolled slightly forward and relaxed. The feet are set apart shoulder width or slightly wider and parallel to each other. The legs are slightly bent at the knees with the body upright. For a more aggressive stance, known as the Modern Isosceles or "tactical" stance, the shooter leans forward and bends more at the knees with the dominant foot moved slightly back for additional stability.



Modern Isosceles Stance

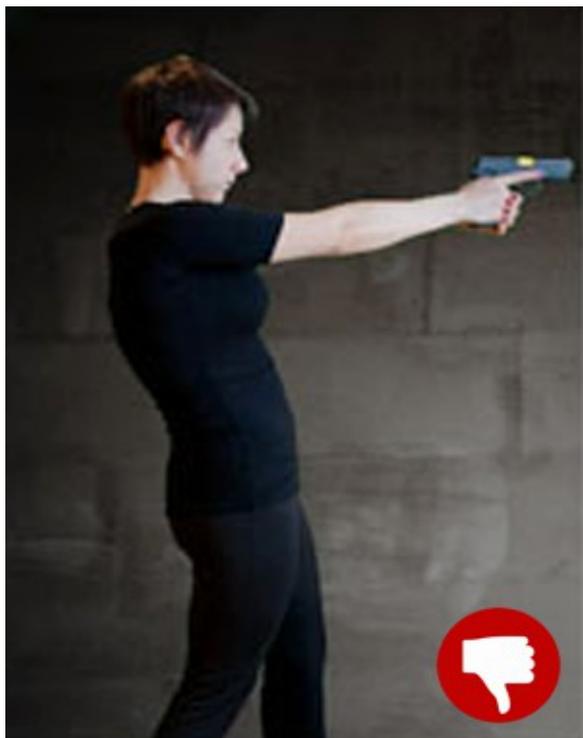
Weaver Stance

The Weaver stance uses a two hand grip with opposite tension from both hands. The shooter pushes with the firing arm and pulls with the support arm to stabilize the handgun. The body is bladed towards the target with the feet diagonal to each other about shoulder width apart. The non-dominant leg is positioned forward with the weight balanced between the front and rear legs. The support arm is bent with the elbow pointing downward, and the firing arm may be slightly bent. The firing arm may also be fully extended, commonly referred to as the Modified Weaver stance.



Modified Weaver Stance

Keep in mind that what at first feels the most natural may not necessarily provide the best results. Practice these proven methods and adopt a stance that provides the best results for you.



Avoid leaning backward.



Avoid tilting your head.



Avoid raising your shoulders.

Ready Positions

Ready positions are methods of holding the handgun while maintaining awareness and safe muzzle direction before and after engaging a target.

As a general rule, "ready" is thought to be the position the handgun is in anytime it's out of the holster and the shooter is not in a shooting stance ready to fire. A good ready position allows the shooter to enter a shooting stance quickly with a minimal amount of movement.



Low Ready



Relaxed Low Ready



Compressed or Retracted



High Ready



Temple Index



Sul (or with thumbs "pyramided")

Aiming

The keys to shooting accurately are:

- Having proper sight alignment
- Having a proper sight picture
- Holding proper sight alignment and sight picture with little or no movement until the instant the shot is fired.

Handgun sights come in different shapes and sizes, but the underlying principle is the same. You need to align three objects on a single straight line, vertically and horizontally: the front sight, the rear sight, and the spot on the target you want to hit.

Eye Dominance

Most of us have an eye that is dominant. Our brain prefers to use the dominant eye to process visual input. It is important to know which is your dominant eye so that you can use your eyes properly to be sure you are aiming correctly. Follow these steps to determine your eye dominance:

1. Extend both arms forward and form a small triangular opening with your hands by overlapping your fingers and thumbs. Your thumbs will form the base of the triangle.



2. With both eyes open, look through the triangle and focus on an object in the room through the center of the triangular opening.

3. Close your right eye while keeping your hands still. If you can still see the object through the triangle, then your left eye is dominant. If the object appears to move behind your hands such that you can no longer see it, then your right eye is dominant.
4. To verify, repeat Steps 1 and 2 then close your left eye while keeping your hands still. If you can still see the object through the triangle then your right eye is dominant, otherwise your left eye is dominant.

If you are right handed, most likely your right eye will be the dominate eye. Likewise, if you are left handed your left eye will probably be dominant.

It is generally recommended to aim and shoot with both eyes open as your dominant eye should naturally pick up the sights when you aim. It is much better to have the advantage of a full field of vision using both eyes whenever possible.

However, some shooters may have trouble aiming with both eyes open even after extended practice. If closing your weak eye while aiming works best for you, then by all means, go ahead and close your weak eye and use only your dominate eye for aiming.

It is not unusual for some people to be "cross-dominant", meaning that their dominant eye is the one opposite of their strong hand. It can be particularly challenging for right-handed shooters to aim properly if their left eye is dominate, and of course left-handed shooters will have the same problem if their right eye is dominate.

Consider these methods if you are cross-dominant:

1. Tilt your head to align your dominate eye with the sights, using your strong hand to fire the handgun.
2. Close your dominate eye and use your non-dominant eye for aiming, using your strong hand to fire the handgun.
3. Learn to shoot with your weak hand.

Methods 1 and 3 may allow a person who is cross-dominant to learn how to aim and shoot correctly with both eyes open. However, many people find it very difficult to learn to shoot effectively with their weak hand and will prefer to use either method 1 or 2. Practice each method and use the one that works best for you.

Sight Alignment

Sight alignment is the relationship of the front and rear sights. Proper sight alignment requires that the front sight is vertically centered within the notch of the rear sight, so that there are equal amounts of light on both sides of the front sight post. The top of the front sight must be aligned horizontally with the top of the rear sight.

It is important to understand that small changes in sight alignment largely affect the point of impact at the target. Below are examples of how the point of impact is affected by various errors in sight alignment.



Correct



Aligned Right



Aligned Left



Canted Up



Canted Down

Sight Alignment And Target Impact

Sight Picture

In most cases your eye should be focused on the front sight. The target and rear sight should be out of focus. More rarely, when shooting very short distances (e.g. less than 3 yards or meters), you should focus on the target instead, switching to a more intuitive "point and shoot" mode. But generally speaking you should always look at and concentrate on the front sight.

Most often, the point on the target you want to hit should sit just on top of the front sight, commonly called a "six o'clock hold".



Proper sight picture with six o'clock hold

Some handguns may be set up for a sighting different than the common six o'clock hold. For example, handguns which are sighted for a "center hold" (sometimes called "combat hold") require the shooter to place the front sight dot so that it fully covers the exact center of the target.



Six O'Clock Hold



Center Hold

If you are uncertain as to how your handgun is sighted, practice using a variety of holds to determine the sight picture that proves to be the most accurate.

Regardless of how your sights are set up, always remember to focus on the front sight post unless you are less than 3 yards or meters from the target.

Sight Adjustments

Very often accuracy problems are with the shooter and not the sights. Changes to the sights should be made only if you are certain they need adjusting, or if you want to change the hold set up. If you are unsure, ask an experienced shooter to try your handgun and compare results before making any adjustments.

Here are two simple rules to remember when making sight adjustments:

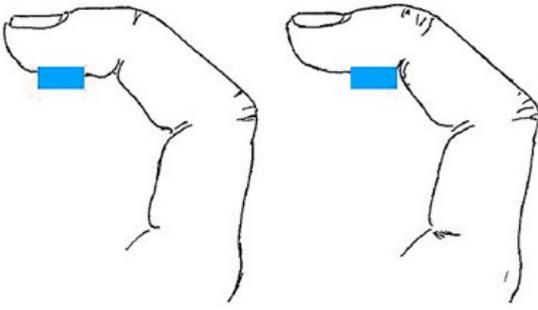
1. Move the *rear sight* in the direction you want the point of impact to move.
2. Chase the impact point with the *front sight*.

Trigger Control

Poor trigger control is most often identified as the biggest source of inaccurate shot placement. Even experienced shooters tend to "anticipate" the shot and naturally try to compensate the recoil movement, jerking the gun just before the shot, and as a result missing the target.

Here are recommended steps for working the trigger:

1. For handguns with a lighter trigger pull weight (e.g. less than 7 pounds), the middle of the pad of your index finger should be placed on the trigger. For heavier trigger pull weights, more finger may be required, up to and including the first joint.

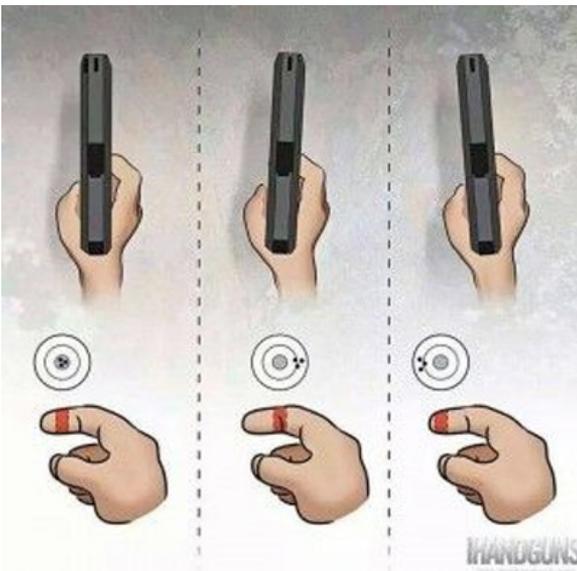


Lighter pull weight *Heavier pull weight*

2. Slowly press the trigger straight back until you have picked up the slack.
3. Squeeze the trigger, steadily increasing the pressure. No jerking movements.
4. Squeeze directly backward, without applying any pressure to the sides.

The shot should happen suddenly, surprising you which will help prevent jerking the gun in anticipation of the shot.

It is very important to press the trigger *straight back*. Incorrect trigger finger placement can cause the handgun to move left or right as force is applied while pressing the trigger.



Finger Placement Effect On Impact Point

Your breathing can also affect handgun movement. A common recommendation is to breath normally as you

visually acquire the target and raise the handgun. Exhale about half way and hold briefly as you establish good sight alignment and sight picture, then press the trigger to get the shot off. If you have too much air in your lungs, the pressure you feel will interfere with your ability to hold. If you completely empty your lungs, you will likely tire more quickly and may begin to shake.

Remember, the key to accurate shooting is to hold proper sight alignment and sight picture with little or no movement until the instant the shot is fired.

Follow Through

The main goal of follow through is to prepare for the next shot as quickly as possible with minimal effort and re-alignment.

As soon as the shot is fired, while the gun is still moving from the recoil, move your trigger finger forward, releasing the trigger. You should release the trigger just to the point it resets and would produce another shot when squeezed again.

If you are using the proper stance and grip, the recoil moves the gun first up and slightly aside, and then the gun naturally moves down. Control the downward movement to direct the handgun to the same or a new target location. Try not to force a separate movement; just ride the movement the gun does anyways. Simply correct it only as much as needed such that the handgun ends up where you want it for the next shot.

A follow through executed properly will have you finishing the shot with the sights on the target and your finger on the trigger ready to pull again. With some practice it becomes an automatic reflex, laying a good foundation for performing rapid follow-on shots.

If there are no follow-on shots to be made, fully release the trigger and remove your finger completely from the trigger. Extend your finger above and well outside the trigger guard area.



Safety Rule #3: Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target and you are ready to fire.

If you are training for personal defense, also keep in mind that being forced to use your firearm in a life threatening situation is extremely stressful.

A common side effect in these adrenaline infused scenarios is a phenomenon known as "tunnel vision" which manifests as reduced auditory and visual capability as your senses naturally concentrate solely on the known threat. Tunnel vision can severely reduce your ability to perceive and react to threats outside your immediate focus.

With this in mind, get in the habit of deliberately scanning your surroundings on all sides to detect other potential threats and maintain a high level of situational awareness.

Safety Rule #4: Be sure of your target and what is beyond it.

Advanced Skills Training

More advanced handgun skills include:

- Drawing from a holster
- Reloading / magazine changes
- Handling malfunctions
- Competitive shooting
- Concealed carry techniques
- Movement and cover

There are many on-line resources available that cover each of these topics in depth, including blog sites, on-line magazines, and forums on firearms and shooting.

Training is often available at gun ranges for new and experienced shooters alike. Do some searches for locations in your area to find out what courses and seminars might be offered at gun ranges near you.

Joining a local gun club is also a great way to find even more training opportunities. Many clubs offer regular weekly or monthly handgun matches such as:

- Steel Challenge
- USPSA / IPSC / IDPA Practical Pistol
- Bullseye / "900" or "2700" Pistol
- Cowboy Action
- Bowling Pin

And of course, be sure to check out courses offered by national shooting sports organizations such as the NRA, NSSF and CMP.

"Prepare, practice, persevere." - Kurt Schulz

"Practice is the hardest part of learning, and training is the essence of transformation." - Ann Voskamp