

Trigger Tips

Learning how to properly control your handgun's trigger could be the most vital step in getting good hits on target.

You needed sights you can see and a trigger you can manage. This simple statement summarizes a great deal on the subject of sights and triggers. Trigger control is the most critical of all the elements of marksmanship. The other skills, such as grip, stance and sight picture, are necessary to align the pistol with the target, but trigger control-or the lack thereof-is what will determine whether a hit or miss. Call it pressing, pulling, squeezing, jerking or slapping the trigger, in that final fraction of an instant before the primer ignites and the bullet leaves the barrel, how we manipulate the trigger is going to determine where the bullet goes.

Defining Triggers We generally refer to pistol and revolver triggers as single action (SA) or double action (DA). Although there are a few trigger designs that blur the differences between the two, SA and DA are sufficient to cover variations in basic function. SA triggers can be defined as those that do one thing only, such as releasing a sear, which allows the hammer to fall under spring pressure. DA triggers do two (or more) things, such as cocking and releasing the hammer. Some pistols (both semi-auto and revolvers) can be fired in both SA and DA modes, while others are strictly SA or DA only. SA triggers generally have a lighter pull weight (they take less force to fire) and move a shorter distance. DA triggers normally require longer movement and more applied pressure.

Another characteristic of triggers is what we can call “reach”: the distance from the front, or face, of the trigger to the point where it disengages as it is pulled to the rear: how long the trigger travel is in relation to your trigger finger. Reach also describes the distance your finger must extend in order to properly interface with the trigger in a manner that allows you to control it straight to the rear without disturbing the sights. Trigger-pull weight and reach are the two variables that most often affect our ability to successfully manipulate triggers.

Gripping the Pistol Before talking about finger placement on the trigger, a few words about gripping the handgun correctly are in order. Ideally, you want a pistol that fits your hand so the center of the barrel is aligned with your forearm when you point it. If this alignment isn't achieved, you're likely going to shoot to one side or the other regardless of how you manipulate the trigger.

Everyone's hands are different and handguns are made in many sizes, so it's important to be aware of the fit between the two. There are two ways of fitting the pistol to the hand. One is to modify the handgun, and the other is to adjust your grip. Modifying a pistol so it correctly fits your hand and



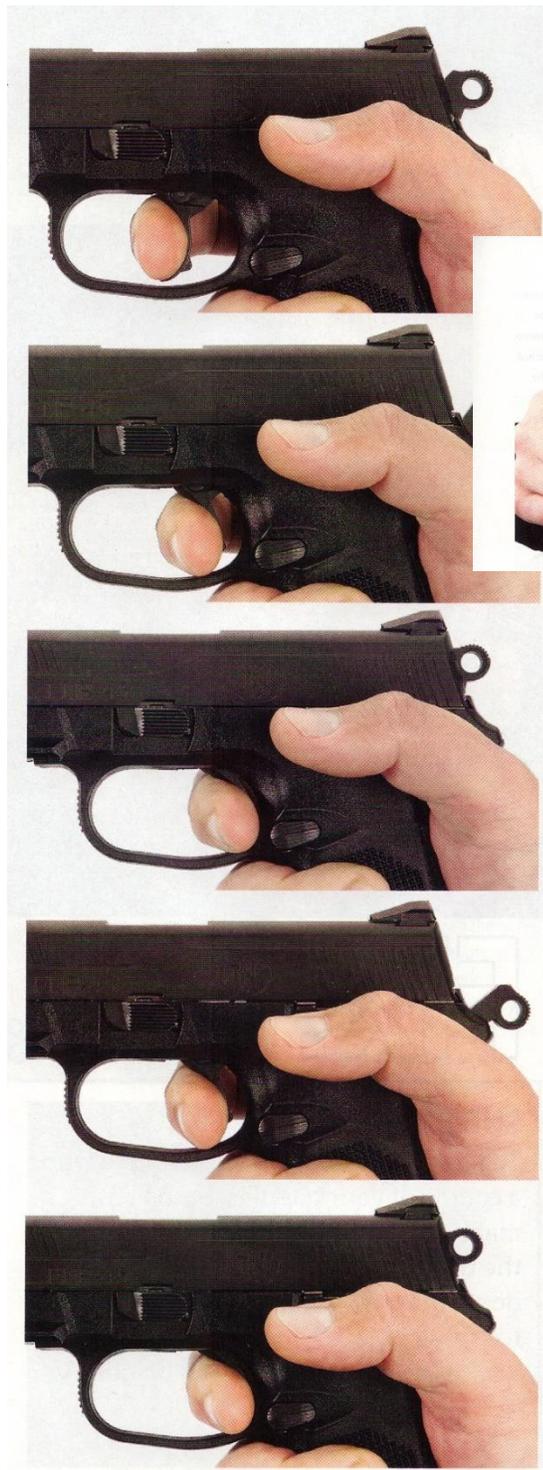
permits a proper grip can be as simple as switching interchangeable backstrap inserts. We can often get a better fit by making the stocks thinner or thicker, or making other adjustments that allow more or less reach to the trigger. On some models we can change frame parts to make the pistol fit better as the Sig P320 offers, Also grip pieces on guns like the Smith & Wesson M&P or Gen 5 Glock.

Adjusting your grip can mean moving the hand around the frame to a more centered position. Once you learn the grip that permits proper pistol alignment. The distance your index finger must "reach" to meet the face of the trigger plays a large role in trigger manipulation. Too little (left) or too much (center) finger on the trigger will result in moving the gun off target during the press.

Finger Position: With a centered grip established, look at positioning the finger on the trigger. Proper finger placement on the trigger enables it to move straight to the rear, while too little or too much finger on the trigger will cause you to push the gun off target.

An example of moving the gun off target would be what happens when you try to shoot small, thin

handguns with long DA triggers. There are many examples of these in the new crop of small semi-autos chambered for .380 ACP and 9mm. Even with an average-size hand, these pistols feel small and skinny. If you're not careful, you to rotate your hand around the grip and stick way too much finger in the trigger guard. This positions the finger on the trigger incorrectly,



upsets the alignment of the pistol in the hand and causes shots low and to the left, regardless of how well you control the trigger. The cure for this is carefully positioning the pistol in the hand and applying only the amount of finger on the trigger necessary to make it move straight to the rear.

The ideal grip places the pistol in the center of the master-side hand and in alignment with the forearm.

- 1. Whether shooting or dry-fire practicing, make sure your focus is on the front sight and not on the target. Errors in trigger manipulation translate into movement of the front sight, and you won't see this if you're looking at the target.*
- 2. If working from a holster, make sure you have a proper firing grip on the pistol before it comes out of the holster.*

Practice this first step of the draw stroke until your hand is correctly positioned every time. Not having a properly firm and aligned grip will result in attempting to make corrections when you get to the end of the presentation sequence, and you will likely rush and slap the trigger. A good grip is the foundation and leads to good trigger control. **3.** Have a friend observe you when you're shooting. Rather than looking at the target, he should stand off to your support side and study your trigger-finger placement. His job is to make sure you're moving the trigger smoothly and straight to the rear, and that your finger remains in contact with the trigger until it resets. Avoid "bouncing" your finger on the trigger between shoots. **4.** Your training partner should also look at your wrist and fingers to see if you're anticipating the shot by tightening your grip-especially noticeable on the little and ring fingers. Often, this can be observed as



movement in the lower part of the wrist. (Hold up your finger gun and look at your wrist. Now move your trigger finger and see what the muscles in your wrist do. Next, while observing your wrist, clench your ring and little fingers. See the difference?) When firing, your grip should remain firm and only your trigger finger should move. **5. Always, practice, practice, practice,** until you are consistently manipulating the trigger without disturbing the sights. You will find practicing with a pistol will payoff in better results in all of your shooting, as the skill and concentration necessary to run a handgun trigger well makes everything else seem easier.

Assuming you have a good grip and the gun fits your hand, the ideal finger placement on an semi-auto trigger is with the first pad of the index finger centered on the face of the trigger. You may find this means positioning your finger with its first crease along the inside, or master-side, edge of the trigger. Try to avoid contacting the frame of the pistol with your trigger finger. Any pressure from this direction will cause the sights to move off the target at the point the trigger releases.

Using too much finger by wrapping it around the trigger will pull the sights toward you. Having too little finger on the trigger-pressing on the inside edge, not the center-will push the sights away from you.

A properly tuned SA trigger is a joy to shoot. Most people feel they shoot this type of trigger better than any other because it is light and they are able to break it cleanly without disturbing the sights.

An old trick for practicing trigger manipulation is to balance something like a coin or a fired cartridge case on the barrel or front sight while working the trigger of an unloaded pistol using snap caps only. If you can stroke the trigger through the pull without the coin falling, you're doing it smoothly. Here's a tip: Practice standing over a bed or a table placed between you and your dry-fire practice target-it saves your back from having to bend, down as far to recover the coin.

DA/SA Triggers The key to controlling these triggers-which start off with a long, heavy DA pull and then reset to a short, light pull-is learning to deal with the transition. Trigger reach, pull weight and travel all change between the DA and SA modes. Although the DA/SA trigger can be mastered, it presents a steeper learning curve than the other types.

There are two methods for manipulating DA/SA triggers. The first is to position the trigger finger for DA shooting and leave it that way when the trigger resets to the shorter SA mode. This usually results in too much finger wrapped around the trigger when shooting SA, but that's OK if you concentrate on pressing the trigger straight to the rear without applying pressure to the side. The other way to run these triggers is to reposition the trigger finger between the DA and the SA modes. In DA mode more finger is used to control the trigger. When the trigger resets in the shorter SA mode, change the finger position for a proper SA press.

The classic DA revolvers like those produced by Smith & Wesson and Colt were known for smooth DA travel and crisp, light SA pulls. Fortunately, companies like SIG Sauer now make semi-auto pistols with very good DA/SA triggers. These are so manageable that we teach students to shoot them with one trigger-finger position.

Other Triggers: Triggers such as those found on the Sig, P320 and P365, Smith & Wesson M&P and Glock striker-fired platforms don't lend themselves to being defined as either SA or DA. They are a little of both. These are the most modern trigger types and, if sales are any indication, the most abundant. Since these triggers usually have a lighter trigger-pull weight than a DA trigger but are a little heavier than a SA trigger, pull weight is not normally a problem. The real challenge with these pistols is reach. Some shooters may have difficulty when trying to properly position their finger on the trigger due to the large grip size. Manufacturers understand this, and they address the issue by reshaping grips or providing replaceable grip components.

It is especially important to make sure these striker-fired pistols fit your hand. Take advantage of interchangeable components until you find a combination that works for you. Even though these designs may not clearly fit into the SA or DA classification, properly positioning your finger on the trigger in a way that allows you to press it straight to the rear is still the key to control.

