

New Shooter, New Pistol

Trying to become proficient at anything new can prove to be intimidating, but here's how to improve your handgun skills, 50 rounds at a time. This advice is for those just starting down the road of defensive-handgun ownership.

Let's preface this information with a few cautions. Anyone interested in obtaining a handgun for personal protection would be wise to seek guidance on basic firearm safety. Maybe a friend or a course offered for the purposes of obtaining a concealed-carry permit. A reputable firearms training academy is even better. Regardless, it's critical you become intimate with the safe operation and manipulation of your handgun before the first round goes downrange. As astonishing as it may be to uninitiated shooters and even some high-speed, low-drag tactards, there are only two things a shooter must master to be a good shot: sight alignment and trigger control. Everything else is jelly on the biscuit.

Sight Alignment

Proper sight alignment varies by sight type. The most common handgun sight has a square notch in the rear sight and a square post as a front sight. Properly aligned, you'll see an equal sliver of daylight on either side of the front sight, which is level with the top of the rear sight.



One question often asked is, do you use a 6-o'clock or point of aim hold? With the 6-o'clock hold your point of aim is the top of the front sight. With a dead-on hold your point of aim is covered by the front sight.

Most new shooters struggle less with sight alignment when they cover the target with the front sight. This method seems to work best at warding off target panic, which is the ability to pull the trigger until the sights seem perfectly aligned. The point of aim hold also has more of an application in defensive shooting, because it's unlikely you'll have a defined aiming point. You're most apt to be shooting at the center of mass on your target. By practicing with the point of aim hold, you're conditioning your eyes and trigger finger to respond to that visual clue.

Avoid the temptation to make the sight picture perfect. No one can hold a handgun perfectly still. Incidentally, when shooting at 15yards, even if your sight picture has the front blade pushed all the way to one side of the notch, your point of impact will only vary by about 2-3 inches. Make sure the front blade is in the notch, and keep it there and on target while pressing the trigger.

Trigger Control

It might seem improper to discuss trigger pull separately from sight alignment, because one without the other is pointless. They're actually two distinctly different actions that must be performed simultaneously. Some say you pull the trigger, others argue you press it. It does not matter what you call it, as long as you do it properly-manipulate the trigger without disturbing the sight picture.

Start with dry-fire practice. But first, find a pushbutton pen and hold it so you can press the button with your trigger finger. Now, press the button without moving the pen. Do this over and over without removing your finger from the button. You want to replicate this same "press" when manipulating your handgun's trigger. Transitioning to the handgun, remove the magazine, make sure it is unloaded, place your ammo in a separate location and point the handgun toward a target in a safe direction. Now, while maintaining proper sight alignment, manipulate the trigger without disturbing the sight picture.

Follow-through is critical. Follow-through consists of two parts: resetting the trigger or maintaining trigger finger contact with the trigger and reacquiring focus on the front sight. By making sure you feel the trigger reset, you're allowing yourself and the handgun to reset for the next shot. Reacquiring focus on the front sight as you recover from recoil does the same thing.

Grip and Stance

The way you hold a handgun and how you stand matters. Grip and stance help you control the handgun. The first aspect of obtaining a proper grip is to select a handgun that fits your hand-you cannot properly grip a handgun that's too large or too small for *your* hand.



Basic semi-auto pistol grip: the thumbs should be forward, as if pointing to the target.

Your father probably taught you how to grip a handgun when you were about six years old. It's unlikely that was his intention, but when he showed you how to shake hands, he was showing you how to grip a handgun. Hold it like you mean it, but not like you want to break it. The barrel should be in line with your forearm, and the arch on the backstrap of the handgun should be firmly in the web of your hand.

When pointing the handgun at the target your elbows should not be locked. The elbow of your shooting arm should be slightly bent, and the elbow of your support arm bent more. Your support hand is wrapped around your shooting hand and your thumbs should be either locked down or pointed forward. The support hand and arm should also provide some rearward pressure to help steady your aim and assist with recoil control.



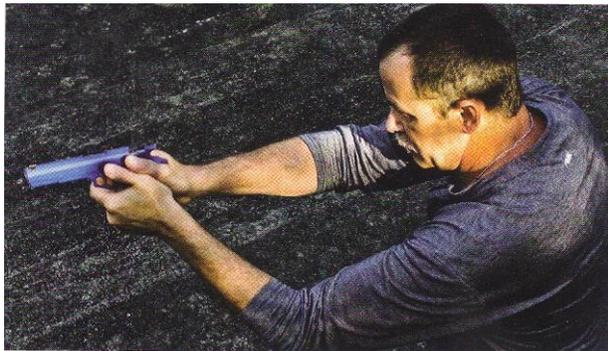
How do you stand? Stand there like you're in a fight, and like you might have to change positions, will get pushed, need to run, etc. Don't stand straight up like you're talking to your momma. Bend at all the joints, be ready to manage recoil and fight. When shooting a handgun, the shooting arm should be bent slightly and the support arm at about 90 degrees.

First Shots

I had the opportunity to train a female police officer who'd never shot before. After two days working on various aspects of handgun training, including dry-fire practice, we went to the range. The first live round she ever fired was from about 5 yards. It hit dead center. Dry-fire practice works. Wait until you have conducted an hour's worth-about 10 minutes a day for a week-before transitioning to live ammo. Do so, and I'll bet your first shot will center punch the target, too.

After that first shot, you'll need to jump another hurdle: the flinch. Flinching is a common response to recoil and noise. It's why your wife jumps and tries to brain you with a frying pan when you sneak up, grab her and scream. Overcoming flinching or the anticipation of the bang is one of the most difficult things to master. It's something that will plague your shooting the rest of your life.

Eye and ear protection help with flinching. Even double up and use earplugs and earmuffs. And, shooting glasses will protect your eyes from spent casings ejected from the handgun. You can also use dummy cartridges. When you load your pistol's magazine or cylinder, load it half with live ammo and half with dummy rounds. When you press the trigger on a dummy round, you'll see for yourself if you're flinching. Using dummy rounds also lets you practice immediate-action drills, which are the gun-manipulation skills that enable you to quickly deal with ammo- and firearm-related stoppages.



Drills

The mistake many new shooters make is thinking the goal is to fire a cylinder or magazine full of ammunition and evaluate the results. Think about each shot. It's not a string six rounds, but rather six separate shots. During each, you should have rallied all your gun-handling and marksmanship skills to deliver as good a shot as you could.

There are hundreds of training drills you can use to develop, improve and maintain your skills. What we want to focus on is your first trip to the range and that first box of 50 rounds you fire. During that first trip, you'll have several goals: become further familiarized with your pistol, establish your pistol's reliability and determine the next step in your training.

For starters, dry-fire practice for a minute or two. Put up a 1-or 2-inch sticker target on a larger target with a clean background, like a cardboard IPSC target. Work through about 30 trigger presses while

keeping the sights on target. If they look good-with minimal sight movement-stand about 5 yards from the target. If you were a bit shaky during dry-fire practice, start closer.

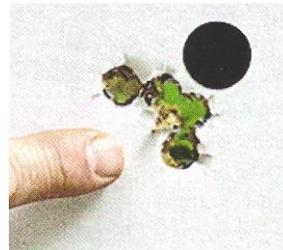
Now, load one-and only one-round. Check your grip, your stance and then bring the handgun up on target. As you're aligning the sights, place your finger on the trigger and when the sights look right, press. Do this nine more times, loading one round at a time. This will help you fully concentrate on each shot and become more familiar with the operation of your handgun. If you can cover your 10-shot group with one hand, you're ready for step two. If not, more dry-firing is in order. For step two, load five rounds and shoot at another dot at the same distance. This time, lower the handgun to the low-ready position after each shot. Don't rush. Give every shot its due. If you can cover these shots with your hand, smile and take five minutes to revel in your glory-you're ready for step three.



Ten shot groups you can cover with your hand are an indication you are doing things right. Now, work to shrink those groups.

Step three will be sustained fire at another dot at the same distance. With five more rounds, concentrate on trigger reset and follow-through by picking up the front sight during recoil so you can guide it back to the target. This is not a speed drill. Take your time, maintain your grip and stance and keep the handgun orientated on the target throughout the drill. If you can cover all these shots with your hand, you're doing well and can move on. If not, go back to step two.

Your goal should be to shoot groups like this during slow, sustained fire out to about seven yards.



Now, it's time to concentrate on shrinking your group size. Ideally, at between 3 and 7 yards, you should be able to make one ragged hole in the target. Repeat the sustained-fire drill with a ragged hole as a goal. If at any time your groups start to widen, conduct remedial training, firing as you did in step one or two, or even doing more dry-fire practice. Keep a record of your performance and after you've fired 50 rounds, quit and go home. For most new shooters, anything more will result in diminishing returns.

Learning to shoot is important, but so is learning how to properly manipulate, load and unload your handgun.

Future Training

What's next? It's time for more dry-fire practice. You cannot do too much of it. When you do return to the range, pick up where you left off. If you're making ragged holes, increase the distance, if not, conduct remedial training. When you're shooting sustained-fire groups at 15 yards that you can cover with your hand, you're ready to start working from the holster and performing other advanced drills. Hopefully by then you'll have saved up enough cash to go to a reputable shooting school or maybe met someone to train with at the range.

Sights, Triggers & Lasers

The relationship between sight alignment and trigger control is the most important duo in shooting. You can tip the odds in your favor in two ways. First, the same reason the 24/7 Big Dot Sights from XS Sight Systems are good for tactical drills makes them good for new shooters. That lack of the notch-and-post sight picture let's shooters concentrate on what's really important-the front sight. That big bold dot, in combination with the shallow V-shaped rear sight, helps shooters guard against target panic by fighting off the amateur desire for perfect sight alignment.

Second, a good trigger helps, too. Trying to maintain a sight picture while pulling a bad trigger is like playing a song on a guitar that's out of tune. The trigger on your handgun should be smooth, consistent and not too heavy. Factory triggers are getting better all the time, and good gunsmiths can fix most handgun triggers. Depending on the type of handgun, a smooth trigger with a pull weight of between 2.5 to 6 pounds is optimal.

Lastly, don't overlook the benefit a handgun-mounted laser can bring to your training. During dry-fire practice it can show you if you are flinching, help you learn muzzle discipline and also help guide your handgun to the target when you are first learning to work from a holster. Good ones from LaserMax® and Crimson Trace Lasergrips®, are not gimmicks.



Learning to manipulate and shoot a handgun safely and effectively is important if you are going to rely on it for protection. Learning to shoot is important, but so is learning how to properly manipulate, load and unload your pistol.