

Handgun Marksmanship: The Basics

Achieving a balance of speed and accuracy with handguns is not easy. Just to maintain a level of proficiency takes moderate dedication, dry fire, and live fire practice. As an active duty Special Forces Soldier I attended the Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis, and Exploitation Techniques Course (SFARTAETC). It wasn't until a few months after I had graduated for some of the marksmanship lessons to sink in. In simple speak, we learned the basics of handgun and carbine shooting through practice and repetition. Slowly our movements became smooth, and smoothness made us fast. The bottom line is no matter how fast you are if you do not hit what you are aiming at you simply aren't effective. Problems tend to compound with stress, particularly under threatening circumstances. Understanding and training the basics help correct deficiencies increasing your ability to defend yourself should the need arise. This short lesson is designed to familiarize new shooters with the basics of handgun marksmanship.

There is a lot of literature and video ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)) that highlights the fundamentals of marksmanship. Like everyone else, I have my experiences and understanding of what those fundamentals are. I stand behind my techniques 100%; they will make you a better shooter and with practice ingrain fundamental handgun shooting techniques making you a skilled shooter.

Fundamentals are important and so is understanding how a pistol fits into your hand. Fitment is important. Your hand should fit comfortably around the pistol butt with enough space to easily manipulate the trigger without changing your grip. Another point worth

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mentioning here is that the smaller caliber pistols and shorter pistols, in general, are less accurate than the large frame and larger caliber guns. Grips should be textured enough to make the somewhat rough, increasing your ability to hold onto the pistol. Sometimes skateboard tape is used to cover grips or add roughness to the frontstrap and/or backstrap. Lastly, the caliber you choose should be large enough to penetrate and stop the threat.

Before moving on to the fundamentals, it is also important to understand the mindset. Mindset has been described by doctors and scientists alike as having multiple stages; some say 6 others say 4 or less. In short, you are either mentally prepared or not. Most of us walk around oblivious to our surroundings in a low state of readiness, or even willingness to take action. As things occur around us, we react in different ways. The introduction of a threat that may hurt you, family or friends may cause temporary paralysis or inability to think. Being alert to your surroundings and potential dangers permits you to quickly overcome surprise and defend yourself. Yellow and/or Orange is where I want to be, White and Black are dangerous.

White	Unprepared and unready to take action.
Yellow	Prepared, alert & relaxed. Good situational awareness.
Orange	Alert to probable danger. Ready to take action.
Red	Action Mode. Focused on the emergency at hand.
Black	Panic. Breakdown of physical & mental performance.

Coopers Levels of Awareness Indicators of Violence

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CONSISTENCY

The first fundamental I want to discuss is **CONSISTENCY**. I'll admit, it isn't a particular fundamental that was presented in this exact way while I was in Special Forces. I had heard it plenty of times, but never as a fundamental. The more I considered it, the more I realized that being consistent is a dominate factor in handgun shooting. Each time you handle a weapon, you should handle it the same way, building muscle memory. As we go through the fundamentals, remember to be consistent with each. Make your moves slow but smooth, and accuracy and speed will increase. Be consistent in all steps, seek out variances and attempt to resolve them. **Consistency is the hardest fundamental to accomplish.**

STANCE

The second fundamental is **STANCE**. Funny thing about stance is that everyone is different. Critical to stance is your ability to fully identify the threat, move to the left or right quickly, maintain a good balance and use your full weight to manage recoil. Other reasons for good balance include overcoming obstacles that may impede your movement or gunshot injuries that you may incur.

A basic starting point for a stance is to square up to the threat and assume a proper boxing/fist-fighting stance. Typically, feet are shoulder width or slightly more apart, one foot in front of the other, weight evenly distributed across hips and head up. Both arms should be extended equally from your torso, forming a triangle. Recoil management starts with your stance. It sends a wave down your arms, both shoulders, back, buttocks down to the feet. If you are ill positioned, you will not manage recoil properly, affecting subsequent shots.

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GRIP

The third fundamental is **GRIP**. How you grip the weapon is important too. It has been my experience that too many people purchase pistols that they cannot grip. What I mean by that is, either the pistol is too large or too small for their hand. The fact is that you cannot change the size of your hands and regardless of how much you want that double stack .45, the grip is too large. Conversely, when the weapon is too small, it becomes difficult to grip because there just isn't enough pistol. Lastly, a lot of guys I know buy plastic handled guns. When they sweat, or if they get oil on the pistol grip, it becomes impossible to grip.

Grip starts from the holster. To properly grip a pistol, grasp the pistol by the slide with your nonfiring hand, form a U with your firing hand and place the center of the pistol buttstock into the U as high as possible. A high grip on the backstrap helps execute a couple of critical processes. First, as the pistol discharges the slide moves backward, the higher your grip the less muzzle rise and better unloading/feeding actions become, decreasing stovepiping. Secondly, if you grip too low as you press the trigger back inadvertently, you dip the barrel making your shots drop.

Wrap your firing hand around the buttstock maintaining your trigger finger outside of the trigger assembly. Place your thumb on top of the slide facing forward. Next, put the palm of your nonfiring hand on the opposite side of the buttstock, wrap your fingers around your firing hand fingers, thumb parallel to and under (but not underneath) the firing hand thumb.

How much grip is too much? Some theory states that a firm grip is enough, others state that the weapon should be gripped fairly hard. My theory is, grip it hard enough to keep from moving up and down/side to side when firing. Keep in mind the slide moves back, your hands

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push forward, keeping the frame from also moving back. If the frame moves back with the slide, your chances of stove piping the gun increase. In a stressful situation, when others are shooting at you, you will likely grip that pistol like it's your lifeline. A strong grip reduces recoil, let's you get back on target quickly and prevents the pistol from moving in your hand. Keeping the grip consistent increases your ability to shoot quickly and accurately. Do not: (1) place both index fingers in the trigger, (2) place the index finger of the non-firing hand in front of the trigger guard, (3) grip harder with your firing hand or (4) place the thumb of your non-firing hand underneath the thumb of the firing hand.



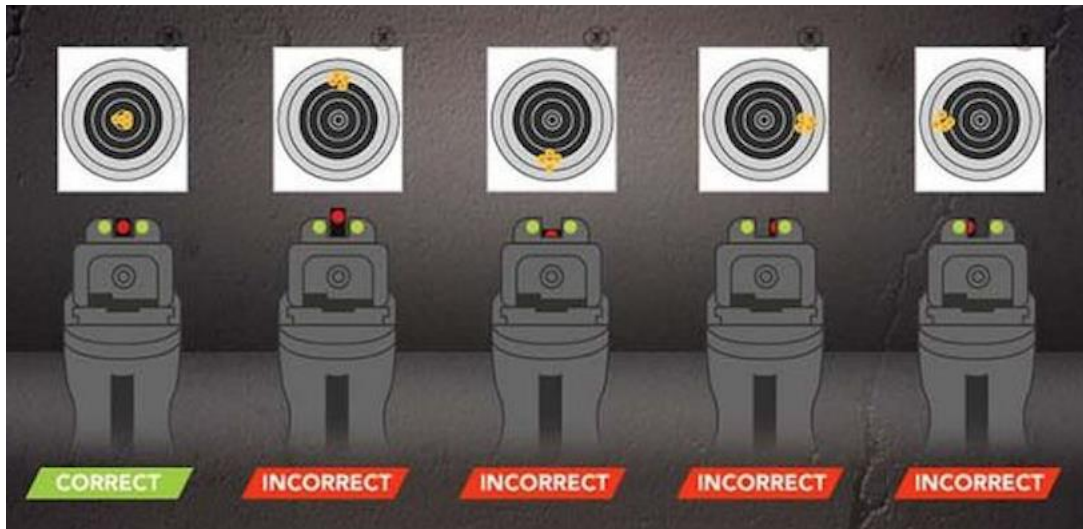
SIGHT ALIGNMENT

The fourth fundamental is **SIGHT ALIGNMENT**. The first step in aligning the sights is determining which of your eyes is dominant. Keep in mind; we will be using both eyes to shoot. Using both eyes allows us to focus better on our surroundings and simply have more situational awareness. Using one hand, extend your thumb and place it on an object about 20-30 feet away, make sure to keep both eyes open. You should see two thumbs, close your right eye, then open it again, now close the left, open it again. Determine which eye caused the thumb to move left or right of the spot that is your weak eye. As an example, I am right handed but left eye dominant. To overcome this travesty, I simply squint my left eye a little. The reason it matters is that on occasion, I find myself leaning my head towards my right shoulder, or turning my head to the right, causing my shot group to be diminished. Also, the extra movement causes me to lose time by changing my stance, in other words, I'm not consistent.

Now, with both eyes open, extend the pistol out keeping the front sight (top) even with the rear sight, placing it in the center of the rear sight. Do not change your stance. Move the

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pistol until you can easily align the sights, in other words, bring the pistol to your face, do not bring your face to the pistol.



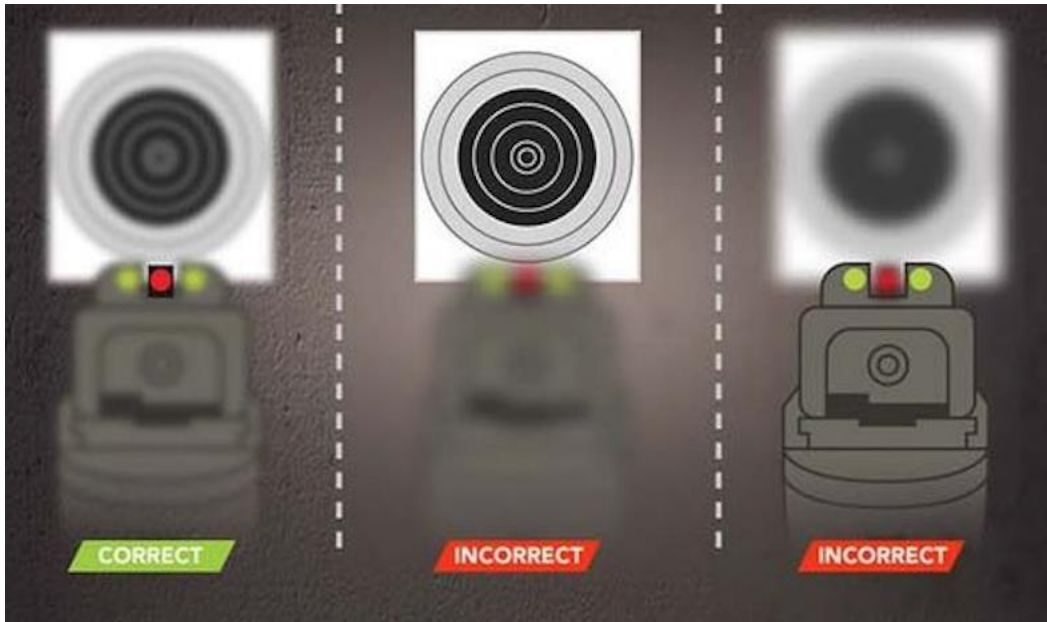
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SIGHT PICTURE

Most folks get a little confused when we discuss the fifth fundamental, obtaining a proper **SIGHT PICTURE**. This fundamental is an extension of sight alignment. What is required is that the front sight is placed center mass of the target (area/spot/X-ring) that you want to put the bullet. Since your eyes cannot multi-focus, what you will notice (if you are still watching the front sight) is that the target is slightly blurry, the front sight is clear, and the rear sight is blurry. Make sure to keep your head up, lowering your head as if you are looking over glasses causes low strikes. **Maintain the sight picture throughout your shot (s)**. This step is critical, failure to maintain your focus on the front sight (not the target) will cause you to miss the target. Some pointers are: (1) Use the top of the front sight post to aim, (2) slow down your presentation (from the 3 to the 4) so as to acquire the target and place the front sight at that spot, (3) Your focus is the front sight!! Do not lose that focus.

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BREATH CONTROL

Next, I will discuss **BREATH CONTROL**, the **Sixth** fundamental. Shooting a gun at a paper target is pretty easy and relatively stress-free. Shooting at real people is different. Adrenaline is coursing through your body, and you may have run a considerable/short distance or exerted yourself in some other manner. If you haven't trained yourself on how to breath while shooting chances are your shots will be high or low, potentially hitting an unintended target.

A that I use is to exhale as I am presenting the pistol. This allows me to exhale about $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of my breath by the time I am fully presented, leaving me at a moment of near complete stillness. It takes practice and repetition to make this second nature. What you do not want to do is exhale completely and hold your breath for an extended period. Holding your breath wears you out and causes misplaced shot groups. When executing rhythm drills try to breath when resetting the trigger. Sometimes it is better to wait a few moments to catch your breath

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before engaging. Deep breathing may help with focus.

TRIGGER CONTROL

After we have presented the pistol, acquired the target and exhaled, we can press the trigger. You can do everything else correctly but exercise faulty **TRIGGER CONTROL** and miss your intended target. When manipulating the trigger, continue to maintain sight alignment and picture as you evenly press the trigger to the rear. Your shot should come as a complete surprise and not be anticipated. After the trigger breaks and the pistol discharges, keep your finger on the trigger and allow it to return forward (ride the trigger) until it is reset. For most people, that usually means riding the trigger until it is all the way forward.

Pressing the trigger means applying a slow even pressure rearward, using only the trigger finger. Again, of importance is your ability to continue focusing on the front sight and manage recoil. Always remember to keep your finger out of the trigger if you are not engaging a target.

FOLLOW THROUGH

FOLLOW THROUGH, the eighth fundamental is critical, not just for shooting controlled pairs, but also when firing one shot. Recovery is nothing more than your ability to prevent anticipation during the shot and focusing on sight alignment through trigger press and after discharge.

RECOVERY

Finally, the ninth fundamental, **RECOVERY**, is the process that prepares you for a follow shot. Recovery begins as soon as you discharge the pistol during follow through. You will hear this referred to as a "second sight or third sight" picture. The bottom line is after your last shot, which in some cases may be your first shot, bring the pistol back on target. The pause should be visible and does a few things during practice. First, it allows you to require the target, second, it trains you to be prepared for a follow-on shot if the threat still exists. More

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importantly obtaining a second sight picture mentally trains you to **FOLLOW THROUGH** and **RECOVER**.



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