



7 Simple Steps to Successful Self-Defense Shooting

Written By Aaron Marshall

Presented By



Introduction

You keep (or are considering keeping) a gun to protect yourself and those you love, and for good reason. Without question, a gun is the most effective tool for self-defense available to you. But what else is there? Besides owning the gun, what steps should you take to ensure that you are prepared to use it effectively to defend yourself, should your life or the life of a loved one ever be put in danger?

As a firearms instructor, I've talked to tens of thousands of gun owners about this topic and realized that very few people know how to answer these questions. Most gun owners at least realize that they need to have some level of proficiency with their gun. Perhaps they have a trusted friend or relative teach them how to use it. Maybe they take a class. They may even regularly visit the shooting range for some practice. But is that really enough? And how would you know if it's not? Given that most people are (thankfully) not required to use their gun regularly to protect themselves, most people don't have a reasonable standard for determining whether they are truly prepared. And knowing the answer to that question could literally be a matter of life or death.

If you are in this situation, you are not alone. In fact, I was once in exactly that situation myself. At the time, I had deployed twice with the US Army to Iraq and Afghanistan. I was Army expert-qualified with the pistol and rifle. I thought I was a good shooter, because the Army told me I was. I regularly practiced with my handgun, and carried it with me everywhere I was legally permitted to do so. I figured I was as prepared as someone could reasonably be expected to be.

I was in for a wake-up call.

Thankfully, this call did not take the form of a criminal attack. I shudder to think what might have happened if it had. But fortunately, the event that woke me up was attending a class with some highly proficient gentlemen who showed me what true preparation looked like. I was humbled to learn just how much I had to learn.

See, the Army hadn't trained me as well as I thought they had. The truth is that I had received very little Army training with a handgun, and it is both ironic and a sad testament to the low qualification standard that I was able to shoot expert on the Army pistol qualification. This qualification had the effect of building in me a false sense of security. Even the rifle training I had undergone, while more extensive, did still not cover the full range of skills that I needed. I count myself incredibly fortunate that my inadequate training did not cost me life or limb in Iraq or Afghanistan.

It turned out I had a lot to learn. That moment was a turning point for me, and would lead me to devote myself to mastering self-defense shooting and teaching others to do the same.

This booklet is a straightforward guide to getting on the right track regarding personal protection with a firearm. It draws from the lessons I have learned over the years, both in my own training and from the thousands of students that I have trained. I hope that by following the seven steps that I've outlined here, you can avoid the false sense of security like the one I had built, and become truly prepared to be successful if you are ever required to use a gun to protect yourself or those you love.

One note before we begin: You'll notice that there are 7 “simple” steps, not 7 “easy” steps. While everything I am about to share with you is simple on the face of it, it is not easy. It will require time and effort on your part. It will require you to self-assess and be honest with yourself. It may require you to set aside preconceived notions and misconceptions. It will require you to confront troubling thoughts and make difficult decisions. There's a reason that many people prefer to live in the false security of ignorance or willful blindness. But the peace of mind you'll experience once you are truly prepared is amazing. It's a sense of security that nothing else can give you.

It's not easy. But it's well worth it.

Let's get started!

Aaron Marshall

Co-founder and Master Trainer, Guncraft Training Academy

aaron@guncrafttraining.com

www.guncrafttraining.com

Step 1: Get the right mindset

Mindset is arguably the most important aspect of self-defense. A proper mindset will set you up for success and, conversely, an improper mindset will be a nearly-insurmountable obstacle to success. That is why we will start with mindset.

Unfortunately, this can also be the most difficult step, and in fact, some people never get past it. This is especially true if you are a long-time shooter. It can be difficult to let go of long-held beliefs and attitudes. The good news is that, while mindset is the first step, you don't have to get everything just right before moving on to the other steps. Developing the right mindset is often a process that can take a considerable amount of time. For that matter, there are some aspects of mindset that will be a lifelong pursuit. So don't worry too much if some of this is difficult to accept at first. Focus on progress, not perfection.

Let's look at several components of a proper mindset.

Understand and accept that you are “unconsciously incompetent”

One of the saddest things for me when speaking to a prospective student is for that person to tell me that he doesn't need my services because “I already know how to shoot”. The reason this makes me so sad is because it is very likely that this person is exactly where I was before I was properly trained, and has the same false sense of security. I've had hundreds of students who “knew how to shoot” before they attended the class, only to discover that they didn't know how to shoot after all, at least not effectively enough to save their own life from a criminal attacker.

I don't blame these people. In fact, they can't help it. They are what is known as “unconsciously incompetent”.

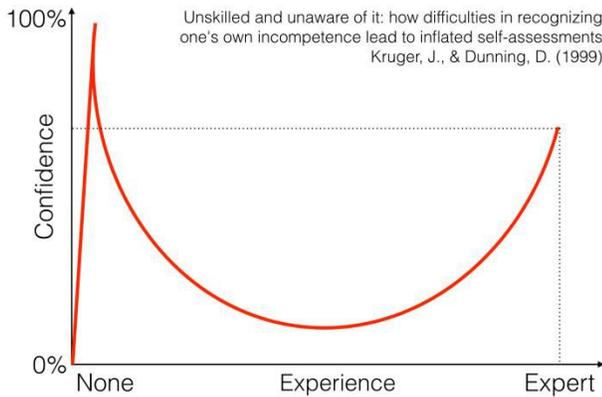
Being Unconsciously Incompetent means you don't know what you don't know

Everyone starts out being Unconsciously Incompetent. It's the default level for any skill, be it shooting, skiing, or underwater basket weaving. You don't even know what goes into the skill. You wouldn't even know what questions to ask.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of gun owners are unconsciously incompetent about their guns and how to use them for self-defense. Again, this isn't because there is anything wrong with them. They have just never had someone show them what they need to know to use their guns effectively for personal protection. And most problematically, they don't even know that they lack this knowledge.

Even people who have been shooting for years are often unconsciously incompetent. Guns lend themselves to overconfidence, because a cursory understanding of their operation can still generate an exciting, if ineffective, result. Because they can load the gun, make it go “bang”, and cause a hole to appear somewhere in their target, they assume they know what they need to know.

Dunning-Kruger Effect



People with a minimal amount of training are often the most overconfident about their abilities. This is a documented phenomenon known as the “Dunning-Kruger Effect”, named for the researchers who discovered it. The Dunning-Kruger Effect states that the more inexperienced a person is, the more likely that person is to significantly overestimate their ability. It explains perfectly why so many people don't believe they need training like the type I provide. Because they have a cursory understanding of guns and shooting, their confidence level is considerably higher than their competence level.

In order for learning to occur, you must understand and accept that you don't know what you don't know. This act of humility is a first step towards building a proper skill set, and the inability of many to perform it is what keeps them from being truly prepared and proficient with their tool of personal protection. Just this step alone will put you into an elite club.

Understand that a gun is not the solution to most problems

There is an old saying: When your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Carrying a gun causes some people to look for an excuse to use it.

Let me be candid: If you're looking for a reason to use a gun, you should not carry a gun.

A gun is a tool of last resort. You should pray that you never have to use it, because if you do, your life will never be the same. Using deadly force brings many consequences, including legal, social, financial, and psychological repercussions. You should only use deadly force when absolutely necessary to protect innocent life.

There is a flip-side to this coin, however. When your gun IS the solution, nothing else will do. When a 5-foot, 100-pound young woman encounters four men, twice her size, who are intent on raping and murdering her, what tool gives her any real chance at stopping them? When a psychopathic criminal hopped up on PCP breaks into an elderly widow's home in a drug-induced homicidal rage, what hope does she have of preventing her own murder? When a disgruntled worker storms into his office building with a shotgun, intent on causing as much mayhem as possible, what will cut short his killing spree?

It is for these situations that we keep and carry guns. In these instances, there is no other defensive tool that will so effectively allow you to prevent tragedy from befalling you or those around you. A 911 call, assuming you can even make it, is highly unlikely to bring police in enough time to save you. A rape whistle will not summon a white knight to fight for you. Stun guns and pepper spray frequently fail against dedicated or drug-crazed attackers. The gun is the great equalizing tool that gives you a fighting chance.

By all means, carry a gun. And pray you're never in a situation where you have to use it.

Commit to developing your situational awareness

Awareness of your surroundings is the greatest defensive tool at your disposal. The great thing about mental awareness is that it is an effective self-defense tool that you can carry with you everywhere, even if you are not carrying a gun. Simply being aware of what is happening around you makes it significantly less likely you will have to use your gun in self-defense, because you will naturally avoid dangerous people and situations. If you are required to use your weapon in self-defense, you already have an advantage, because you've had time to observe your threat and orient yourself to it.

If you see the fight coming, you are much more likely to prevail.

By the same token, if you are caught by surprise, you have almost no chance of success, unless your attacker is completely inept. It will take you several seconds to figure out what is happening to you, process the information, and decide how to respond. That is time you don't have.

Set yourself up for success. Develop and practice your ability to stay aware of what is happening around you. Start right now.

You must be willing to fire on your attacker if necessary to save your life

Some people keep a gun, expecting that all they will have to do is display it to dissuade an attacker. They think simply racking the shotgun will scare off the burglar. Or they think that if necessary, they can drive off an attacker with warning shots (which are a bad idea for many reasons).

Could those things work? Sure, maybe. And if they do, that's a win. But what if they don't? You must be prepared, mentally and physically, to fire on your attacker. And I'm not talking about shooting to cause a flesh wound, such as a leg shot. I mean firing incapacitating shots into the thoracic cavity.

Criminals are generally pretty good at reading people. They will likely know whether or not you are confident and prepared to use your weapon against them, simply by your demeanor. If they sense weakness, they may just be emboldened to attack anyway.

Do not carry a gun if you believe that you will not be willing to press the trigger on an attacker.

Why? Because now that gun has become a liability. If your attacker calls your bluff, the first thing he is going to do is try to take the gun from you. The last thing you need is for your own weapon to be used against you. If you're going to carry the gun, be willing to use it effectively.

You must be prepared for the possibility that your attacker will die

The vast majority of human beings are naturally wired to avoid killing a fellow human. We should be very grateful for this, as this is what allows us to live together peaceably. It is only the psychopathic and sociopathic among us who lack this compunction to do harm to others. And indeed, these very psychopaths are the reason that we arm ourselves, in case we are ever faced with one of them intent on doing harm to us or someone we care about.

However, this natural resistance can be a double-edged sword. Even when faced with a deadly threat, many people will find themselves unwilling to do what is necessary to prevail. As unbelievable as it

may sound, a subconscious concern for their attacker's well-being causes them to hold back, giving their psychopathic attacker the advantage.

In his ground-breaking book *On Killing*, Dave Grossman documents the phenomenon of vast majorities of trained soldiers intentionally shooting to miss the enemy soldiers. As he explains, this is a byproduct of the natural inhibition to killing another human being. An important aspect of human nature becomes a hindrance to success in combat, just as it does in self-defense.

Understand, you are not trying to kill your attacker. In a self-defense situation, your goal is simply to end the deadly threat against you or your loved ones. However, the possibility exists that your attacker may die because of your use of deadly force in response to the deadly threat. This is something that you must accept ahead of time in order to ensure you act decisively in the critical moment.

It is not your goal to kill your attacker, but you must be willing to accept that your adversary may die as a result of your actions.

Decide to be the victor, not the victim

Above all, make up your mind that you will do everything in your power to avoid becoming a victim. Victory should be the only acceptable outcome in a self-defense encounter. You should be absolutely dedicated to doing what is necessary to prevent yourself from being victimized.

Dedication is arguably the most important determining factor in who wins a fight.

Developing this dedication takes time and training, but it can start right now by simply making the decision in your own mind that you will commit to being the victor instead of a victim. Without this commitment, much of the rest of your preparation is academic.

Step 2: Get a gun

What's the first rule of a gunfight? Bring a gun!

Much of the rest of this guide is academic if you are without a firearm, so if you don't have a gun already, you'll want to get one as soon as possible. Even if you already own a firearm, you should ensure that it is really the best choice for you regarding your personal protection. If you find that your current choice of self-defense weapon doesn't meet the criteria we'll discuss in this section, it may be time to discuss a trade with your local gun seller.

The first question you'll want to answer is: handgun, shotgun, and/or rifle? Most people choose a handgun because of the portability and convenience. The downside to a handgun is they are woefully under-powered when compared to a shotgun or rifle. Long guns also make it easier to hit your target. There's an old saying that the purpose of the handgun is to fight your way back to your long gun. However, since it's rather impractical (not to mention uncomfortable) to carry a concealed shotgun or rifle, the handgun is pretty much a necessity for protection anywhere other than on your own property.

Considering all of that, my suggestion is to own a handgun to carry with you when you leave home, and keep a long gun (a rifle or shotgun) for home defense. Given that a long gun packs far more punch than a handgun, you would do well to put that power at your disposal where practical to do so.

Let's look at some of the points you'll want to consider about each of the three types of defensive firearms.

Handguns

When considering a handgun, first you'll want to decide: **Revolver or semi-automatic?**

The following table gives you some points of comparison between semi-autos and revolvers. Keep in mind that these are general points, and there are exceptions with specific models of handguns, but this will give you a general sense of the pros and cons.

<u>Semi-Auto</u>	<u>Revolver</u>
<i>Higher ammunition capacity</i>	<i>Lower ammunition capacity</i>
<i>Lighter, easier trigger</i>	<i>Longer, heavier trigger</i>
<i>Rapid loading and reloading</i>	<i>More time-consuming loads</i>
<i>Three types of malfunctions</i>	<i>Only one type of malfunction</i>
<i>Uses a slide, which requires practice to operate</i>	<i>Uses a cylinder, which is simple to operate</i>
<i>Limited selection of calibers</i>	<i>Wide selection of calibers</i>

I recommend a semi-automatic for 95+% of people. Out of the thousands of students I've trained, I can count on one hand the number who have benefited from switching to a revolver, while dozens

have benefited from a change to a semi-auto. In my experience, the revolver simply takes more training, practice, and dedication to learn to run proficiently.

The two most common reasons that people give for believing a revolver is a better choice for them is lack of malfunctions, and simplicity of operation. Both of these issues are easily overcome with a modest amount of training.

On the other hand, a considerable amount of training and practice is required for most people to learn to accurately fire a revolver, given its heavier trigger. Ironically, some people believe that a lack of hand strength means they need a revolver, because it will be too difficult to run the slide, only to discover the heavy trigger pull requiring (you guessed it) hand and finger strength. But in truth, it's easier to learn a technique to run the slide than to run the heavy trigger.

Unless you have a compelling personal reason why you need a revolver, you're probably better off with a semi-auto.

Size

The next question to address is one of size. Being that many people buy a handgun to carry concealed, they naturally gravitate towards a smaller gun. Likewise, people with small hands, particularly women, think they need a small gun. However, very often bigger is better.

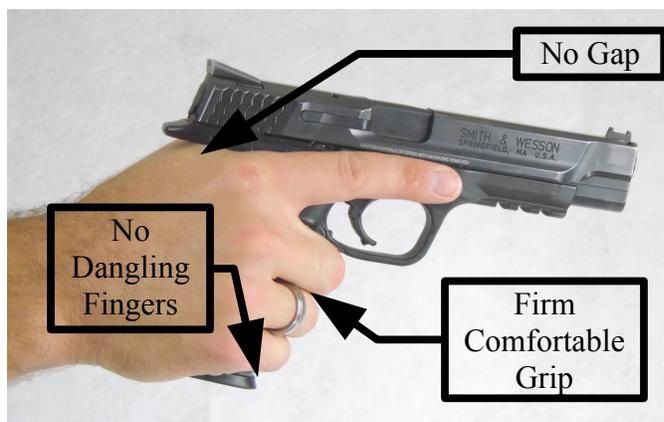
Small guns are designed to be easy to conceal, not easy to use

The smaller gun comes with a trade-off, which is that it holds less ammunition, and is more difficult to operate, shoot accurately, and manage recoil. A larger gun has larger controls and more grip surface, making it easier to operate and manage the recoil. In general, you should buy the largest gun that you can conceal, given your intended use of the gun. If you plan on keeping the gun only at home, a small gun will provide you no benefit over an equivalent larger gun.

Fit

This leads into the next point, which is that your gun should fit your hand. Obviously, the gun cannot be so big that you can't get your hands around it.

Checking the fit of the gun is fairly simple. Hold the gun in your dominant hand, placing your hand as high on the grip as you comfortably can, with the gun forming a generally straight line with your forearm, and the trigger finger placed along the frame above the trigger guard. With this grip, the gun should feel comfortable in your hand, with a firm grip and good control of the gun. No fingers should “dangle” below the bottom of the frame. There should also be no gap between your hand and the tang of the gun (that is, the projection at the back of the frame, just below the slide).



Then, without moving your hand, place the pad of your trigger finger onto the face of the trigger. The trigger finger should comfortably rest on the trigger. Move the trigger finger back above the trigger guard. Repeat this a few times. You should be able to naturally move the trigger finger between these two positions, without having to adjust your grip.

If the gun passes these two tests, congratulations. Your gun and hand are a good match.

Action

There are two basic action types for handguns: single action, and double action. Single action means that when you press the trigger, one thing happens, which is that the hammer or striker falls, firing the shot. A double action gun means that when you press the trigger, two things happen; the hammer or striker is first cocked, then dropped. Double action guns will generally have a little bit heavier trigger. Single action guns will have a lighter trigger, and often come with a manual safety.

These days, striker-fired guns are very popular. A Glock and Smith & Wesson M&P are examples of striker-fired guns. Whether striker-fired guns are double action or single action depends on who you ask, but in my opinion, most striker-fired guns function more like a single action gun than a double action in terms of how the trigger operates.

In general, I would advise that you stay away from double action/single action (DA/SA) guns. On these guns, the first trigger press is double action, meaning the hammer is cocked and dropped. On subsequent shots, the hammer will already be cocked, so the gun functions in single action mode. These guns require you to master two different trigger presses. Simplicity is your friend when it comes to defensive shooting.

Caliber

If you are just getting started, I would recommend a 9MM handgun. It provides adequate ballistic power while being affordable, abundant, and having manageable recoil. 40S&W and 45ACP are also good choices for defensive rounds, but have the drawbacks of reduced ammo capacity, increased felt recoil, and higher cost.

There are a lot of urban legends out there about 9MM being an inadequate defensive round, but they are just that: myths. The FBI did a comprehensive study published in 2013 which found no practical difference between 9MM, 40S&W and 45ACP in term of their relative abilities to stop an attacker. There is a reason 9MM is the most popular round used by law enforcement.

Model

If you follow the guidelines above, the specific model of handgun you purchase is largely a function of taste and budget. Below are a few models that meet the criteria laid out in this section.

Glock 17

Glock 19

Smith & Wesson M&P

H&K VP9

Walther PPQ

Shotguns

The shotgun is the quintessential home defense gun, and for good reason. They are inexpensive, provide significant stopping power, and have a wide variety of available ammunition types. There is, however, a caveat. The shotgun is also the least forgiving when it comes to bad technique, and will require more training to learn to run effectively when compared to a rifle.

The shotgun is like a wild mustang: full of power, but requiring the proper approach to control.

A shotgun is a great choice for home defense, but you must be willing to put in the time and training necessary to learn to run it properly. If you don't, expect a significant amount of pain, both physically and mentally. Because the shotgun is capable of shooting a variety of different types of ammunition, you must also learn the capabilities, limitations, and proper application of these ammo types. If you're not willing to put in the effort, you're probably better off with a rifle.

Action

Defensive shotguns come in two varieties: pump-action and semi-automatic. (Break-action or double-barreled shotguns are not good choices for a defensive gun.)

Semi-automatic shotguns have many advantages, including simpler operation and lower felt recoil. The primary disadvantage is price, as a good semi-automatic will be two or three times the price of a pump-action.

Another perk of pump-action shotguns is that they will fire almost any type of ammunition without issue, assuming the ammo is of the proper gauge. While some ammunition will not reliably cycle the action on some semi-auto shotguns, the manual cycling of the action on a pump-action eliminates this issue. This alone isn't a major issue, since you can always switch ammo until you find one that runs through your semi-auto, but it is something to be aware of nonetheless.

Fit

Proper sizing of your shotgun is even more important than with other types of guns. If the shotgun does not fit you, it will beat you up each time you fire it, tempting you to box it up and head for the nearest pawn shop. Avoid bruised shoulders and cheeks by checking the fit as follows.

1. Grasp the grip portion of the stock with your dominant hand. Place the trigger finger straight along the receiver. Perform the trigger finger test as with the handgun above, moving the trigger finger between the receiver and trigger several times.
2. Hold the shotgun vertically, with the muzzle pointed straight up. Bend your dominant arm at a 90-degree angle, holding your upper arm horizontally. When held in this position, the pad of the stock should barely rest against your upper arm, just inside the elbow. If it doesn't, the stock is probably too long or too short for you, which will make it difficult (and likely painful) to shoot. If the stock is adjustable, make the proper adjustment until it passes this test. If the stock is not adjustable, you'll need a different stock, or a different shotgun.

Gauge

12 gauge is by far the most common type of shotgun, and it will serve you well in a defensive context. There are bountiful choices of ammunition, and it packs plenty of punch.

If you are of a smaller stature or are concerned about your ability to handle the recoil of a 12 gauge shotgun, a 20 gauge is also a good choice. While not as powerful as a 12 gauge, it still provides ample power and plenty of ammo choices. The recoil on a 20 gauge is very manageable, so that even children can learn to shoot them comfortably.

Ammo

As I mentioned, one of the great strengths of the shotgun is the versatility of the ammunition that you can fire through it. With the right ammo, you can even turn your shotgun into a flamethrower, or plant a garden with seed-filled shells! Setting aside the specialty loads, there are basically three types of ammunition for a shotgun: bird shot, buckshot, and slugs.

As the name implies, bird shot is used primarily for hunting birds. Due to the small size of the pellets, bird shot generally has very shallow penetration and cannot reliably be expected to produce fight-stopping injuries on an attacker. Therefore, bird shot is generally unsuitable for defensive use.

Buckshot consists of multiple larger pellets and is the best self-defense load for the vast majority of situations. 00 buckshot is most popular and widely-available type of buckshot, and will work well for self-defense. Most 00 buckshot loads have 8 or 9 pellets, providing plenty of stopping power. While 00 is the most common, there are other sizes available. Just keep in mind that the higher the number, the smaller the pellet size and the more pellets in the load. Any size buckshot down to 2 is effective for defensive use.

Slugs fire a single projectile through your shotgun. While extremely effective as a defensive load, slugs are generally best kept for specific situations. Loading your shotgun exclusively with slugs essentially turns it into a rifle, but without the ammunition capacity and lower felt recoil of the rifle. However, it is advantageous to keep slugs with your shotgun (usually in a side-saddle or ammo cuff) in case you need to take a shot where buckshot is unsuitable, such as a longer-ranged shot or one where there are innocent bystanders nearby who might be hurt by a stray pellet. If you keep slugs with your shotgun, you also need to be proficient at a "select load", which is a technique by which you can rapidly change the type of ammunition in the chamber of your shotgun.

Pattern

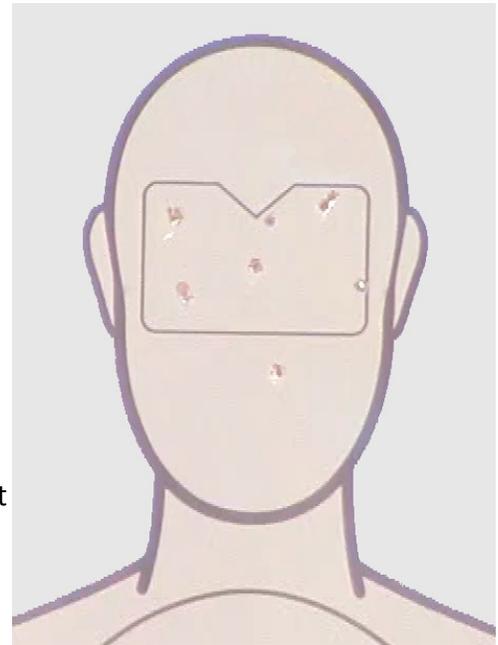
There is a popular misconception that shotguns are lead fountains that pepper an entire room with shot. This leads people to believe that there is no need to aim a shotgun, that a bad guy anywhere in the general area the muzzle is pointed will be hit by the massive spray of pellets. **Don't buy it!** You must aim a shotgun! (I've missed what should have been easy shots with a shotgun more times than I care to admit.)

I assure you, it's very possible to miss with a shotgun, even at close range.

The reason people believe this myth is because of a lack of understanding about **shot patterns**, which are the scattered arrangement the pellets will land in when they hit your target. Understanding your shot pattern is an important part of knowing the capabilities and limitations of your weapon and ammunition. Shot patterns will vary from gun to gun, from one type of ammunition to another, and even somewhat from shot to shot.

When the pellets leave the muzzle, they will start to spread outward in a conical fashion. Therefore, the further away your target is, the more spread out your pattern will be. A rule of thumb for pattern size when shooting buckshot is about 1 inch of expansion for every yard the shot travels. For example, a shot from 7 yards would likely produce a pattern roughly 7 inches in diameter. This is just a general trend, however, and it's important for you to understand the type of pattern that your particular shotgun/ammo combo will produce.

Consider that most self-defense shootings take place at 7 yards or less, and you can start to see how easy it can be to miss a shot. And remember, you don't just want to put one pellet into your assailant; you want the entire pattern to hit him. Learn to aim your shotgun, and put the shot where you need it.



*A typical pattern of 00 buckshot
fired at 7 yards*

Model

Below are a few suggestions for models. Bear in mind that several of these models come in a range of configurations, and you should select one that is configured for defensive use (often marketed as “tactical”), as opposed to hunting or trap shooting. The barrel length should be 18 to 20 inches.

Pump actions

Remington 870: An affordable and reliable staple, available in 12 or 20 gauge.

Mossberg 500/590: Its ambidextrous safety makes it a good option for left-handed shooters.

Semi-autos

Remington 1100

Benelli M4: Expensive, but rock-solid reliable and easy to shoot.

Beretta 1200/1300 series

Rifles

When I suggest to people that they might consider a rifle for home defense, they are often surprised. Especially given the media's attitude and subsequent reporting regarding the AR-15 and other rifles,

many people believe that rifles are suitable only for a hunting field or a battlefield. However, this is not the case at all.

Advantages To The Home-Defense Rifle

Plenty of Power

Higher Ammunition Capacity

Easy to Control and Shoot

Easy to Hit Your Target

Customizable

A rifle is a perfectly viable alternative to a shotgun for home defense, and in fact has the added advantages of additional ammunition and lower felt recoil.

Action

A semi-automatic is the only real choice as a defense rifle. While you might be able to get a bolt-action or lever-action to work for you, there is really no reason you would want to. Semi-autos are not appreciably more expensive than a good bolt-action rifle, and the increased complexity of operation and reduced ammo capacity of a bolt-action rifle offsets the benefits of any potential cost savings.

Size

With handguns, we said that bigger is better as a general rule. With long guns, the opposite is true.

Smaller is better.

All other things being equal, larger rifles have no real advantage over smaller ones in a home defense context. You'll want to choose a rifle without excess bulk, and with a shorter barrel. Federal law requires you to jump through some significant bureaucratic hurdles to obtain a rifle with a barrel shorter than 16 inches. Therefore, a 16-inch barrel is what you'll want.

Fit

Fit is not as essential with a rifle as with a shotgun, in part because the recoil is much lighter, and in part because many modern rifles feature an adjustable stock. You can test the fit of a rifle in a very similar manner to that described under shotguns above.

Caliber

.223 Remington (or 5.56 NATO) is probably the most popular rifle cartridge currently available, and is what the vast majority of AR-15 rifles shoot. It is what the US Army uses in its rifles, and has many desirable attributes for self-defense. I would recommend this cartridge, or a similar caliber, for your defensive rifle. Anything larger than that starts to become overkill, leading to more significant issues with over-penetration and less manageable recoil.

Sights

There are three basic sighting systems for rifles: iron sights, scopes, and electronic sights.

Scopes magnify the image in your sight picture, making them primarily useful for longer-ranged shots, such as while hunting. Considering that over 95% of defensive shootings happen at 10 yards or less, there is no practical reason you should use a scope on a home-defense rifle.

Electronic sights have become increasingly popular on rifles, and the technology behind them has come leaps and bounds in the past 10 years or so. There was a time I would have recommended steering clear of them for defensive use due to the probability of failure. However, this isn't not the case so much anymore.

A good electronic sight uses a laser or holograph to project a dot or aiming reticle onto a glass optic. Because the sight features only a single focal plane, there is no need to line anything up, other than the aiming reticle with your target. This allows you to visually acquire your sights faster in most cases, providing you a speed advantage.

That said, electronic sights are definitely a “get what you pay for” situation. Your equipment needs to work for you when your life depends on it, so if you're going to use an electronic sight, don't trust your life to a cheap \$100 one. The last thing you want is to pick up your rifle, only to find that the batteries have died or the sight has failed altogether. Spend the extra money for a high-quality one made by a company like EOTech, Trijicon, or Aimpoint.

Although some consider them archaic, iron sights are a perfectly viable sighting system. They are inexpensive and durable, and you never have to worry about the batteries going dead. I recently attended a rifle class in which, out of 16 students, I was the only one using iron sights. The instructor even jokingly referred to my gun as an “antique”. But guess what? I had no trouble keeping up with the other students who were using “modern technology”. Electronic sights are nice, but by no means a necessity.

Model

The AR-15 is the most popular rifle in the US, and not for nothing. It's reliable, easy to operate, easy to shoot, and highly customizable. You're almost guaranteed to find several variants of it on the wall of any gun store into which you walk. Look for a configuration with a 16-inch barrel and an adjustable stock.

If you are looking for something other than an AR-15, look for a reputable brand semi-automatic rifle that shoots the 5.56/.223 round. A couple other models you might consider include the **FN SCAR-16** or the **Ruger Mini-14** (although I'm not a fan of how the safety operates on this rifle).

“What about an AK-style?”, some of you are shouting at me. Personally, I'm not a fan. The primary advantage of the AK used to be that it was cheap, but they're not even that anymore. They are compact and shoot an effective cartridge, but carry many drawbacks. They are covered with sharp edges, are not ergonomic or intuitive to operate, and are more difficult to customize. If you're a fan of the AK-style, more power to you, but I wouldn't recommend one for most people.

First time, every time

Regardless of the type of weapon you select, among the most important factors is reliability. When

your life depends on it, you have to be certain that it will perform for you. The discussion of reliability applies not just to the firearm itself, but also the ammunition that you will use for personal protection. Naturally, you want to select high-quality ammunition, rather than the budget-grade ammo. However, some otherwise-reliable guns and ammo will not work well when paired together.

After deciding on the gun and ammo you will keep for self-defense, take both to the range with you. Fire at least 50 rounds of your defensive ammunition through the gun. It should function without a single malfunction. If you experience even one malfunction, there is probably an issue with the gun, the ammo, or the combination of the two. Try a different combination until you can put 50 rounds without experiencing a single malfunction.

If you have trouble finding a winning combination, seek the expertise of a competent gunsmith or instructor.

Accessories

When it comes to accessories, many people go crazy. The truth is, you only need a couple of key accessories. Anything more just adds to the weight that you're carrying, and makes you look like a mall ninja.

Holster

Naturally, this applies to handguns only. Choosing a holster is a significant topic unto itself, so I'll just make a few broad observations about choosing a holster. (And don't even think of just tucking your handgun into your waistband or pocket and heading out the door! A holster is a necessity.)

The first question you'll want to answer is where you'll be carrying your handgun. Choosing a carry location is about finding a balance between accessibility and concealability. Obviously, you'll want your handgun to be easily accessible if you need it, but you must also ensure that it is concealed. As a general rule, the more concealed a handgun is, the less accessible it becomes. This reduction in accessibility means not only that it will take you longer to present your gun from the holster, but also requires additional training and practice to ensure you can do so safely, efficiently, and consistently.

From an accessibility standpoint, the ideal place to carry a handgun is on your belt, worn on the point of your hip. Hip holsters come in two varieties: outside the waistband (OWB) or inside the waistband (IWB). Outside the waistband are more accessible, but less concealable, and vice versa for inside the waistband.

This type of holster may not be practical for you considering your lifestyle and typical attire. Here are a few other options for carry position to consider:

Appendix carry: Accessibility is somewhat reduced while sitting, may also be uncomfortable while sitting. Requires an extra measure of diligence regarding safety, as you are covering your leg with your muzzle any time you come into or out of the holster.

Small of the back: Accessibility slightly reduced while standing, but very poor while sitting. Concealability is good, as the gun tends to naturally hide in the hollow of the back.

Cross-draw: Good accessibility if you are sitting, but slower presentation and lower concealability.

Shoulder holster: Good concealability if you wear a jacket. Holsters that hold the weapon in the vertical position are preferable, as they control the direction of the muzzle better, and are easier to conceal.

Ankle holster: Poor accessibility and only practical for small handguns.

Thigh holster: Very accessible, but suitable only for open carry and impractical for concealed carry.

Below-the-belt: Excellent concealment, but reduced accessibility. Often uncomfortable as well, especially while sitting.

Fanny/chest pack: Good concealability, moderate accessibility, and not for the fashion-conscious.

Purse/briefcase: Practical, but among the slowest. Also, it is not difficult to become separated from your weapon if you set your purse or briefcase down.

Invest the extra money to get a quality holster. The cheap nylon one-size-fits-none holster might work fine on the range, but it will cause you no end of troubles when you carry out in the real world. Here are a few quality considerations for your holster:

- Ensure the trigger is completely covered when the gun is in the holster. This is essential for safe carrying.
- The holster should be custom fit to your model of handgun, holding the gun snugly in place while the gun is holstered.
- Kydex or reinforced leather are the best materials for a carry holster, being both durable and rigid.

Extra Ammo

There are two things you never have enough of in a gunfight: time and ammunition. Carrying extra ammunition is prudent in case you find yourself facing off against multiple adversaries.

For a handgun, this is a matter of carrying extra magazines with you, usually in a pouch or pocket. A good belt magazine carrier is not very expensive, and keeps extra magazines readily accessible. If you are keeping your handgun for home defense, you are naturally not going to take the time to strap on your magazine pouch, so you'll just need to stash an extra magazine or two near your firearm, or in your safe room.

For rifles and shotguns, your best bet is to attach the extra ammunition directly to the weapon. For a rifle, a couple options are a pouch that attaches to the stock and holds an extra magazine, or a clip that holds two magazines together side-by-side. For a shotgun, a side saddle that fastens to the receiver and holds additional shells is your best bet.

Step 3: Get Training

So you've got your gun... Now you need to learn how to use it.

This step is absolutely vital, but sadly it is one that the vast majority of gun owners never fully complete. Many make an attempt at it, but only receive a fraction of the training they really need.

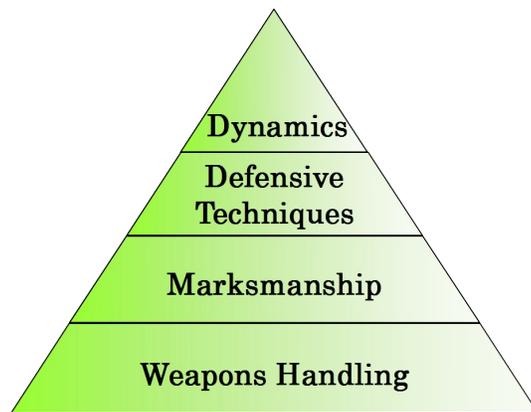
There is a great moment in the movie *The Mask of Zorro*, where Don Diego de la Vega, played by Anthony Hopkins, is preparing to train his protege Alejandro, played by Antonio Banderas. Alejandro is very eager to get into action, and wields his sword excitedly. De la Vega gestures towards the sword and asks "Do you know how to use that thing?" Alejandro answers, "Yes... The pointy end goes into the other man."

It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that using a gun is easy, just as Alejandro did with the sword. But there is much more than knowing how to load it, point it, and pull the trigger. Making a hole appear in the target vaguely near where you wanted it is not enough.

That's where training comes in. Proper training shows you what you should be able to do, how to do it, and the level at which you should be able to do it.

The Training Pyramid

Let's examine the full range of skills that go into defensive shooting. The Training Pyramid that you see below is a visual representation of this skill set, the categories of skills within it, and how those skill relate to one another.



A pyramid is a solid, almost indestructible structure. In the same way, if you build your skill set in the fashion described here, it will be rock-solid, in the top 1% of gun owners.

Just like a real pyramid is supported by a wide solid base, the skills at the bottom of the pyramid serve as the foundation for your skill set. Each level in the pyramid supports the levels above it, so the stronger your foundation, the easier it is to master the more advanced skills.

Weapons Handling

At the bottom of the pyramid is **Weapons Handling**. This is the foundation of your skill set, and as any builder will tell you, your foundation can never be too strong. These skills must be second-nature to you, because they serve as the basis for *everything* you will do with your gun. Weapons handling includes:

Safety
Weapon Familiarity
Stance

Muzzle Consciousness
Chamber Check and Magazine Check
Operation of Controls

Trigger Finger Discipline
Grip
Loading and Unloading

In my experience, the most common training mistake people make is thinking that they don't need to work on Weapons Handling. In truth, a significant majority of shooting issues, and nearly 100% of safety issues, can be traced back to inadequate mastery of Weapons Handling.

Your foundation can never be too strong!

Marksmanship

Marksmanship, roughly speaking, is the ability to place your shot exactly where you want it.

As a skilled marksman, you should be able to hit your target every time.

Now, you'll notice I say you should *be able* to hit your target, but in reality, that doesn't mean that you *will* hit your target every time. After all, there are two types of shooters: those who miss, and liars. But as a skilled marksman, when you miss, you should know why you missed.

Well-rounded marksmanship involves shooting at both small and large targets, and both near and far targets. As your marksmanship improves, you should constantly be challenging yourself with further and smaller targets.

So, you might ask, if you can hit a smaller, further target, why then would you need to practice against large, close targets? Because, in defensive marksmanship, you must not only be able to hit your target, but also do so quickly. Speed is an important element of defensive marksmanship, and you must learn to deliver your shots as rapidly as possible, while still ensuring you hit your target. So your marksmanship skill should include not only the ability to hit a small target from long range, but also the ability to hit a large, close target in under a second.

Defensive Techniques

Defensive techniques are practical application of weapons handling and marksmanship to specific defensive situations. This is an extremely broad and diverse set of skills, many of which don't even involve shooting, but all of which have a specific purpose or application. Here is just a portion of the skills in this category:

Mindset and mental preparation	Moral and ethical lethal force guidelines	Psychological and physiological issues
Legal considerations	Post-encounter actions	Escalation of force
Primary and alternate shot placement strategies	Carrying and presenting a handgun	Using or presenting a rifle or shotgun on a sling
Malfunction clearances	Reloading procedures	Alternate shooting positions
One-handed techniques	Low-light shooting	Movement

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and there are even subsets within the skills listed. So you can see how much there is to this category. But if you have trained properly on the weapons handling and marksmanship skills that support defensive techniques, developing this level of skills won't be difficult.

Dynamics

The capstone of your skill set is Dynamics, which is the ability to effectively apply defensive techniques to changing, unpredictable, and stressful situations. I divide the skills involved in Dynamics into three categories:

- **Rapid decision-making**
- **Tactics** (this is, moving in and using your environment to your advantage)
- **Stress inoculation**

Dynamics can only be effectively trained through stressful, realistic, and unpredictable training. Probably the simplest form of Dynamics training is adding stress through time pressure or competition. More advanced Dynamics training includes scenario-based training and simulators.

The best kind of Dynamics training is “force-on-force” training, which involves pitting your skills against another human being, using real weapons with simulated ammunition. This is the closest thing you can get to a real gunfight without real bullets flying. It tests every aspect of Dynamics under realistic conditions, and induces stress by imposing a physical (and mental) pain penalty when you get hit.

A word of warning about Dynamics training: This is the kind of training that everyone wants to do, because it's fun, and because it's a true test of your preparedness. A very common mistake that people make regarding their training is jumping into Dynamics too soon. You must build the supporting skills in the lower three levels to support Dynamics. You can't build the top of a pyramid without the support beneath it. If you jump into Dynamics before you've built the supporting skills, you'll just be wasting your time.

On the other hand, if you've built your pyramid from the bottom to the top, with a rock-solid foundation of weapons handling and proficiency in marksmanship and defensive techniques, Dynamics training becomes easy. Dynamics is simply application of fundamental skills at a high level to a specific situation. The better your underlying skills, the easier it becomes.

Building Your Pyramid Upwards

Now that you understand the Training Pyramid and how these various categories of defensive skills relate to one another, let's look what this means in practical terms for how you should approach your training.

Like any other pyramid, you'll need to start by building the bottom. As I mentioned earlier, your foundation of Weapons Handling can never be too strong. Yet unfortunately, a great many gun owners dismiss these skills as only marginally important. Once you've built this lower level, you're ready to move up to the next level, and so on until you've constructed a full Training Pyramid of skills.

This is not to say that you must obtain complete mastery of each level before touching anything at the next level. (In fact, for a true student of the gun, you never obtain *complete* mastery of any of these skills.) However, you must have more than a basic level of knowledge and proficiency at each level before moving to the next.

If you begin working on the next level and you find that the skills at the lower level(s) start falling apart, you're working up the pyramid too quickly.

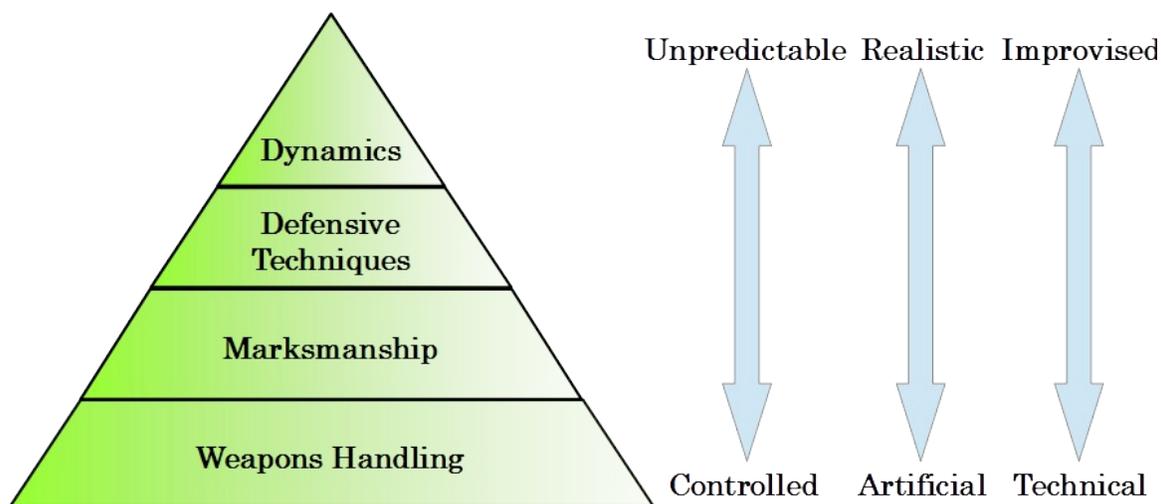
Only build up as fast as you can without sacrificing proper performance.

It can be difficult to stay patient, because all of us have the natural tendency to want to skip to the “good stuff”. It's true, Defensive Techniques and Dynamics are the most fun parts of training. But unless you have the supporting skills below it, working on these levels will largely be an exercise in futility. That would be like a driver's ed student wanting to jump straight to driving in downtown traffic. Set yourself up for success by building one level at a time.

Training Changes As You Build

Developing the lower levels of skills is best done in more controlled, predictable circumstances that allow you to focus on the details of the technique and repetitively hone your proficiency. As you master the lower levels and start working upwards, your training will become more realistic, less predictable, and more stressful. It will require you to apply techniques dynamically and even improvise to achieve success. And even as you develop your upper levels, you'll still want to periodically spend some time strengthening those lower levels through more static training. The important thing is to understand the difference between the types of training available and how to use each effectively depending on your current skill set and training goals.

The style of training you undertake will change depending on which level you are building.



When you are building your foundation, the training you'll undergo will be very controlled and predictable. You'll probably be on a traditional shooting range, under the watchful guidance of an instructor who is walking you step-by-step through the technique, topic, or procedure. You'll probably be shooting at a paper target, which may or may not bear a resemblance to a human being. In fact, a sizable chunk of the training will probably not even involve shooting.

There are those who say that this kind of training will not prepare you to defend yourself. They say that only realistic, stressful training will ensure you can prevail against a criminal attack. People who advocate such an approach have the right idea. After all, you certainly want to train those Defensive

Techniques and Dynamics to ensure you have a full skill set. However, they are proposing the wrong approach to accomplishing that goal.

What such people are suggesting, essentially, is to jump to the top of the pyramid, without building the lower supporting levels of Weapons Handling and Marksmanship. Stress-filled and unpredictable training is unsuitable for building your foundation. That style of training should be reserved for the upper levels, especially the Dynamics level.

In fact, such training becomes necessary to fully develop Dynamics. The most effective Dynamics training puts you in stressful situations, where the situation is unpredictable and rapidly changing. It should replicate, to the extent possible, the exact conditions you'll find yourself in when your life is truly in danger. And under such conditions, you'll be less concerned about perfect technique and more concerned about effectively resolving the situation as the victor.

“Square range” training is not obsolete, as some suggest. In fact, it is necessary. However, it does have limitations, which become more apparent the higher you build your pyramid. As you reach higher levels, you will need training that allows you to exercise your skills in a more fluid and improvised manner.

Assessing Defensive Techniques

So far we've talked a bit about the skills involved at each level, but what about the specifics of how those techniques are performed? In truth there are many perfectly valid ways to accomplish most items on the list of topics above. However, there is also a right way and a wrong way to do everything. In fact, as an old instructor of mine liked to say:

There are several ways to do something right. There are infinite ways to do something wrong.

If an instructor or school says that their way is the only way, you should probably look elsewhere.

Even though there is more than one way to do things, you will want to find a single method that you use for each task or purpose. Having more than one way to accomplish the same purpose will significantly increase your response time under stress, because your brain has to decide which technique you'll use at that moment. (This is a principle known as “Hick's Law”.) Having a single method eliminates this decision point and improves your response time.

So how do you know if a technique is “right”? For defensive shooting, a technique must meet four criteria:

1. **Effective:** Each technique has a purpose. The technique you choose must be expected to reliably accomplish its intended goal. It should also accomplish its purpose without inducing any negative side effects.
2. **Efficient:** You have no time to waste in a gunfight. A technique should accomplish its intended purpose in as little time as possible.
3. **Practicable:** You must be able to reasonably expect that you can perform the technique, without having to warm up, even when accounting for the stress you'll experience in a

gunfight.

4. **Justifiable:** Your actions must be seen as reasonable by others. To the extent possible, you want to minimize your likelihood that you will face criminal or civil legal liability after a self-defense encounter.

If a technique meets these four criteria, you can consider it “right” for the purposes of defensive shooting.

By all means, compare and contrast various methods, but once you find one that meets the above criteria and works well for you, stick with it. Retraining previously ingrained skills is time consuming and challenging.

Keep The Main Thing The Main Thing

When training, you should focus on the skills that are most important to you in a defensive encounter; that is, the skills that will apply in the vast majority of situations. It is helpful to keep the Training Pyramid in mind while making this assessment, and remember that the lower the skill is on the pyramid, the more likely you are to need it. Weapon Handling is important, not only in 100% of defensive encounters, but virtually any time you are handling a firearm. Marksmanship is vital in 100% of situations that require you to shoot.

Correspondingly, your training should constantly be reinforcing those skills, even as you work on the upper levels. If you ever reach the point where your fundamentals start to suffer, you're probably training beyond your current capabilities.

It is when you reach Defensive Techniques that you might start to run into trouble. Because of the sheer volume of skills, topics, and techniques at this level, you must prioritize which of these you are going to spend the most time training on.

It's common to evaluate a defensive training course based on the sheer number of techniques that it teaches, but this alone is a poor measure of the course's content. Many defensive courses will spend time working on skills like shooting under a car, supine (on your back) shooting, starting with your gun in a disassembled state, and so forth. These skills, while useful in certain circumstances, are niche skills that only apply in relatively rare situations. Your training time is better spent on things that you'll need in 90% of situations, given how most self-defense encounters play out. This is something I call The 90% Principle:

Spend 90% of your training time on the skills you'll need 90% of the time.

In my opinion, here are a few critical defensive skills that should feature prominently in any training program. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but a training program that lacks any of them is, in my view, severely deficient. And bear in mind, these skills are in addition to the weapons handling and marksmanship which should be interwoven throughout any training course.

Shot-Placement Strategies: Where you should try to hit your adversary, and under what circumstances.

Weapon Presentation: Rapidly bringing the weapon on target from a ready position or the holster.

Escalation of Force: Resolving a situation using the minimal amount of force necessary.

Situational Awareness: Using your awareness to avoid an encounter, and staying aware of your surroundings during and after an encounter.

Moral and Legal Decision-Making: Understanding the moral, ethical, and legal ramifications to enable you to make sound decisions about when and where to use deadly force.

Train For The Worst

Make no mistake: The 90% Principle does not mean that you should not train for contingencies. In fact, I'm a firm believer in Murphy's Law: If it can go wrong, it will. Therefore, The 90% Principle actually mandates that you should train for the possibility that something will go wrong so that you have a plan, and the necessary skill, to fix it and fight on.

For instance...

What if your weapon malfunctions during the fight?

What if you shoot the gun empty?

What if your adversary continues to attack after you shoot him? After you shoot him again?

What if he's wearing body armor, or hopped up on drugs?

What if he hides behind a brick wall?

What if there are innocent bystanders?

What if he uses a human shield?

What if you are injured during the attack?

What if there is more than one attacker?

What if you're attacked in low light?

Train for contingencies.

You need to have a plan for dealing with common problems and contingencies, like the ones above. Obviously, it will take time to develop your plan and skills to be prepared for all these contingencies, and you can't be expected to train on them all at once. But your overall training plan should feature answers to these questions, among others.

Finding a Trainer

So how do you go about finding an instructor and training course that will provide you the training that you need? There is no one right answer, but here are a few guidelines that should steer you in the right direction.

Training takes time: Expect to spend a few days training, even if those days are spread out over some

period of time. And anyone who claims to be able to teach you what you need to protect yourself in 8 hours or less is straight up lying to you (or lying to themselves).

You get what you pay for: You'll find a wide range of options and costs when it comes to training. You'll find classes for as little as \$25-\$50, while quality training costs up to \$350 per day. I suggest erring on the side of spending too much rather than too little. If you have a \$50 life, get \$50 training.

Avoid "boot camps": Unless you really get off on being shouted at and cursed out, steer clear of courses that promote a militaristic or stress-filled training environment, especially when you're first starting out. You will learn better when you are able to focus on learning, rather than on avoiding the wrath of the instructor. There is a place for stressful training, but that place is in an appropriate training scenario or drill, and only then once you are training on Dynamics.

Police or military background is not critical: Many people naturally think that a current or former police officer or military member will have the background needed to teach them. However (and I say this as a military man myself), this is often not the case. Even if such people have proficiency with a skill, they don't necessarily have the ability to teach that skill to you. Furthermore, some are often unable to make the transition to applying those skills to a civilian context, and teach concepts that are only considered justifiable in a law enforcement context. The most important measure of an instructor is not their level of skill, but their ability to develop skill in their students.

Find their current and former students: The best way to determine an instructor's effectiveness is by hearing what their students have to say. At the very least, you should be able to find some testimonials of the results students got from a course or instructor.

Professionals will give you professional results: Most firearms instructors teach as a hobby or side business. They have a full-time job and teach occasional classes. Most of the time, these instructors will not give you the results that you will get from a professional instructor, whose job is teaching people to shoot. A full-time instructor or training academy will have vastly more experience and expertise in teaching these skills, and are much more likely to give you the results you need.

YouTube is not training: You might be tempted to learn what you need from the Internet. I say this with all love and care: ***Don't even think about it!*** First, it can be very difficult to sort the quality information from the dreck on the Internet. And let me assure you, there is plenty of dreck out there. Furthermore, like all motor skills, skill at arms is not something that most people can learn simply by watching someone else do it. Would you learn to ski or do gymnastics from the Internet? Almost inevitably, bad habits will creep in, and without the watchful eye of a coach to correct you, you'll ingrain those bad habits.

It's a Process

Does all this seem little overwhelming? That's OK! In fact, that's normal. When my eyes were opened to the full range of skills that I needed to develop, I was a little bewildered too.

Training isn't something that happens overnight. It's not a one-time event. It's something that you'll do repetitively throughout your life. We'll discuss this more in the remaining steps. For now, don't worry! There might be a lot to it, but it's not as hard as it might seem.

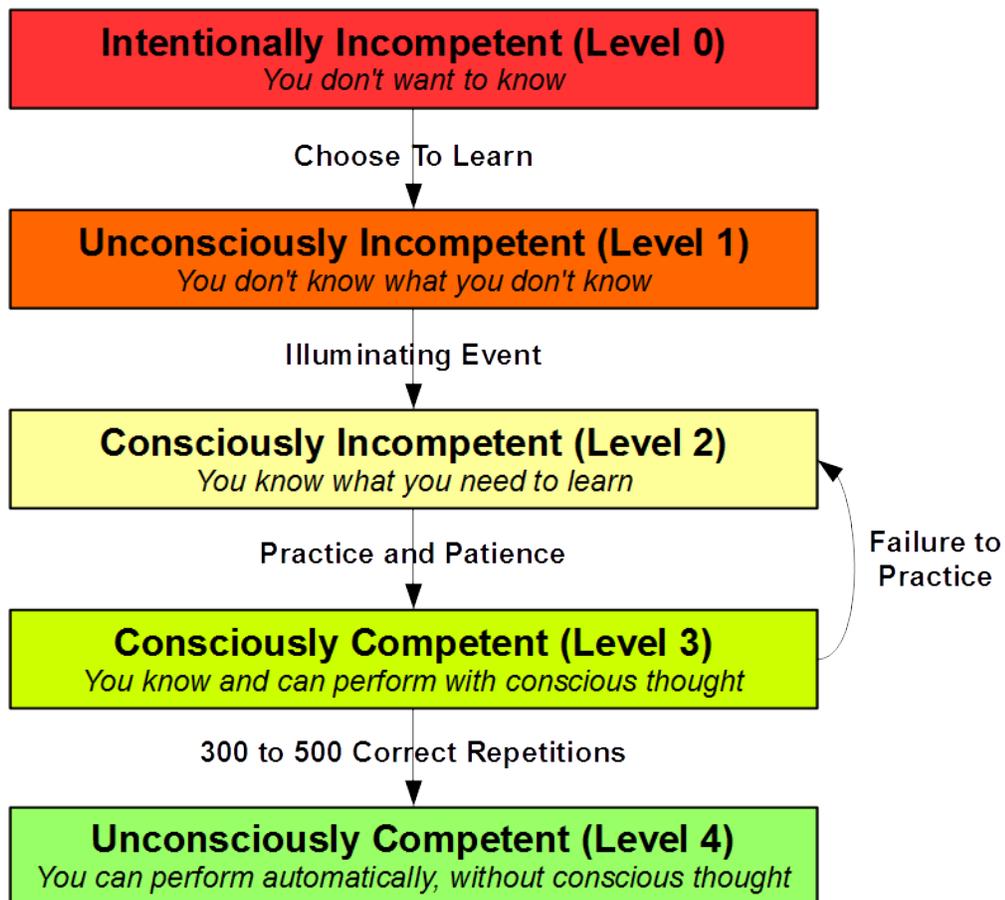
Step 4: Practice

Now that you've received training on your self-defense skills, it's time to master those skills through practice.

Many people confuse training with practice, but they are not the same thing. To put it simply, training is **learning** the skill, while practice is **ingraining** the skill. You must have the training first to ensure that you are practicing the right things, in the right way. Without training, you're flying blind and you'll almost certainly practice the wrong things. Proper training should also show you how to properly practice once the class is over to ensure you can continue to improve on your own.

The Five Levels of Competence

Earlier, we talked about being Unconsciously Incompetent. This state is one of the Five Levels of Competence.



Intentionally Incompetent: You don't want to learn the skill. Believe it or not, many gun owners fall into this category, perhaps because they are afraid to admit they don't know, they think it will be too difficult or time-consuming to learn, or some other reason. The fact that you are reading this guide is a very good sign that you are not Intentionally Incompetent.

Unconsciously Incompetent: You don't know what you don't know. As we discussed earlier, this is where most people are regarding their guns, and you can only leave this level when some external event or person helps you realize what it is you need to learn.

Consciously Incompetent: You are now aware of what you need to learn, but you have little knowledge or ability about how it's done.

Consciously Competent: You can perform the skill, but it requires conscious thought and concentration.

Unconsciously Competent: You have ingrained the skill and can perform it without conscious thought.

Proper training should get you to Conscious Competence. Proper practice will get you to Unconscious Competence.

The ultimate goal of practice is to ingrain the skills you are practicing to the Unconsciously Competent level. For the average person, that means practicing a skill about 300 to 500 times. That might seem like a lot, but if you structure your practice right, you can practice that many repetitions in a week or two.

By contrast, if you fail to practice after reach Conscious Competence, over time the skill will start to degrade. Like all motor skills, skill at arms is a perishable skill. As your memory of what you learned fades, your skill deteriorates and you will eventually regress back to Conscious Incompetence.

Let me give you a personal example. In spite of a year of Tae Kwon Do lessons I took as a kid, I couldn't show you a single strike or block today. On the other hand, despite the fact that I haven't played regularly for years, I can sit down behind a drum kit and start playing. With some minimal rehearsal time, I could probably play with a band. The difference is I didn't practice Tae Kwon Do enough to reach Unconscious Competence, and I consequently lost the knowledge. On the other hand, I played drums regularly throughout high school and college, ingrain that knowledge to the point that I can still call upon it when needed.

That's the level of skill you must achieve with your weapon. When your life is in danger, you should be able to perform well enough to win. And remember, you'll only perform about half as well in a gunfight as you do in practice. You won't rise to the occasion; you will sink to your level of training. Practice enough to bring your skills to Unconscious Competence, and set yourself up for success.

Practice Does Not Make Perfect

When you were young, your mom probably told you that “practice makes perfect”. I hate to break it to you, but your mom was wrong.

Practice makes permanent. Only perfect practice makes perfect.

Every time you practice a technique, you are building habits and “muscle memory”. (To be more technically correct, you are strengthening the neural pathways involved in performing that technique, but “muscle memory” is a common term that most people understand.) Each time you do something,

whether right or wrong, it becomes more and more ingrained. Eventually, if you practice enough, you'll build the skill to Unconscious Competence. If you practiced correctly, this is a valuable benefit, as you'll now be able to perform the skill instantly, at a moment's notice, without having to think about how it's done. In a gunfight, you have no time to waste, and you must have the necessary skills at your fingertips.

On the flip-side, if you practice bad habits, you'll build those to an unconscious level. That's why it's important to be diligent in your practice to ensure that you are doing it correctly. Practice is like so many other things: you get out what you put in. If you practice wrong, you'll get really good at doing it wrong. If you practice correctly, you'll eventually become a master.

It is very tempting, once you start to learn the skill, to start going fast. After all, we all want to look like John Wick, or Vincent from *Collateral*. (Incidentally, Keanu Reeves and Tom Cruise both underwent significant amounts of professional firearms training preparing for those respective roles.) However, you should only practice as fast as you can perform correctly. If your speed starts causing you to be sloppy or start missing shots, you need to slow down a bit to ensure you are ingraining good habits.

Speed is a natural by-product of proper practice.

Be patient with yourself. The speed will come. Work first on doing it correctly. Build speed only after you are consistent.

Dry Practice

The good news about practice is that you can do a lot of it without using ammunition, and often in your own home. This is what is known as “dry practice”. You'll notice I use the term “dry practice”, rather than “dry fire”. Dry practice is a more descriptive term, since not all dry practice involves pressing the trigger. And in truth, you cannot fire a dry gun.

When dry practicing, it is vitally important that you do so safely. There are many stories (and YouTube videos) of embarrassing, even tragic, mishaps occurring during not-so-dry dry practice. Lest you become the next such story, here is a procedure that will ensure you are performing your dry practice safely:

#1: Establish a designated dry practice area. This is the one and only place in your house or yard that you will dry practice. Your dry practice area should ideally feature a backstop that will stop a bullet, such as a brick or stone wall, a gun safe, or the like. Your target should be placed against this backstop. At the very least, your target should be situated so that, if you were to have a negligent discharge, the bullet would travel in a direction where it would cause little or no damage, and there is no possibility of injury.

#2: Set a time limit. Optimal time for a dry practice session is fifteen to twenty minutes. Beyond this, you'll begin to lose focus, reducing the benefit of your practice and increasing the chances of making a mistake. If you wish to dry practice more than twenty minutes, break it up into several sessions of appropriate length.

#3: Remove all ammunition. Prior to beginning your practice, unload your weapon and thoroughly check your person and all your equipment for ammunition. This includes magazines, pouches, pockets, ammunition carriers, and so forth. Place all of this ammunition outside of your dry practice area, preferably in another room or inside a sealed container.

#4: Place your target. Set your target up in your dry practice area against the aforementioned backstop. This target must be something that is temporary and can be removed after your session is complete.

#5: Double-check your weapon. Before your first iteration of practice, check one more time that your weapon is unloaded and that all magazines and equipment are free of ammunition.

#6: Focus on your dry practice. Avoid distractions and concentrate on your practice. If something draws you attention away from your session, such as a phone call, someone at the door, question from someone in the house, etc., stop dry practicing and attend to the distraction. Once you are ready to resume, go back to the beginning of this sequence and start over.

#7: Remove your target. Once you have completed your dry practice, take your target down to ensure you will not be tempted to try “one more time”.

#8: Remind yourself that you are done dry practicing. Say to yourself, out loud, something like “Dry practice is over.” This helps you mentally leave the dry practice session and affirms that you that will not perform any more repetitions of practice.

#9: Place your weapon in the condition of your choice. Now that you have removed your target and left the dry practice session, you may load your weapon if you wish.

Range Practice

Every so often, you'll want to hit the range and see the fruits of your dry practice labor. Use these range sessions judiciously. A common mistake that people make, especially when they are first learning, is shooting too much. In general, about a **five-to-one ratio of dry practice to range time** is a good guideline. For example, if you are going to the range twice a month, you should be dry practicing about ten times a month.

To make the most of your time at the range, here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

Have a goal: Just blasting away at a target repetitively is an inefficient use of your time and ammunition. Before you begin, decide on one or two aspects of your skill set that you want to improve. Maybe it's increasing the speed of your weapon presentation, improving your trigger control, smoothing out your reload, or working on your balance between speed and accuracy. Concentrate on drills and activities that will work you toward these goals.

Take breaks: Unless you are fortunate enough to have a range in your back yard, you probably will want to spend at least an hour or two at the range to make your trip worth it. However, just like dry practice, you will start to reach a point of diminishing returns if you practice more than about 20 minutes at a stretch. Take a 5-minute break every so often in order to reset your attention span and fight off the fatigue factor.

Mix it up: Another way to fight the attention-span limit is to mix up your activities. Work on one drill for fifteen minutes or so, then switch to something else. Switch between live fire and dry practice drills. Work on speed for a while, then slow down and do something that requires more precision.

Use dry practice to reset: If your marksmanship is suffering, unload the gun and do ten to fifteen iterations dry. It is very common to start ingraining flinches and anticipation into your shooting after you've been shooting for a while. Dry practice is the most effective cure for this. Watch your front sight for movement and concentrate on getting a good clean break of the trigger. After you're able to get a clean trigger break with no flinch, load up and go live again. Usually, the dry practice will get you re-centered on proper technique.

End with fundamentals: Always finish your session with something that will work your marksmanship fundamentals and focus you on accurate shots. For example, I like to end my sessions by firing five or so shots into a 1-inch black diamond on my target. You might try placing something representing an innocent bystander in front of your target and taking some hostage-rescue shots. Or fire a shot to a blank spot on your target, then try to fire a handful of shots that touch the first bullet hole.

Step 5: Assess Yourself

Now you've practiced for a while and have built your skills to an appreciable level. At this point, you might start to wonder how you stack up. Obviously, you want your skills to be good enough to prevail in a self-defense situation. But how good is good enough?

The goal of this step is to answer that very question using one or more assessments. This is a vital step that all-too-many gun owners neglect. Some neglect it because they are unsure how to assess themselves, while others are unwilling to subject themselves to something that might show them that they are not as skilled as they might have thought.

Here is a vitally important point to keep in mind during this step:

The purpose of assessment is to measure your ability, not to build your ability

I know what you'll probably be tempted to do. Once you're done reading this step, you're going to head to the range to try some of the drills I outline here. Then, once you're done, staring unhappily at your target, you're going to think "Hmm... I need to practice this thing a whole bunch so I get better at it." **This is exactly backwards.** There is a reason that Train and Practice come first. If all you do is practice an assessment, you'll get really good at that assessment. Sure, you'll gain some proficiency of the skills involved. But a better use of your time is to train and practice the individual skills that make up that drill, as outlined in Steps 3 and 4. Once you've built the skills, assessments become easy. We'll talk more about this in Step 7.

Speed or Accuracy? Or Something Else?

Most assessment standards will test some mixture of your accuracy and shooting speed. Some assessments will weight one more heavily than the other. There is value to measuring both, as well as measuring a balance between the two. Ultimately, in defensive shooting the goal is to place accurate, fight-stopping hits on your adversary as quickly as possible. This generally means striking a balance between speed and accuracy. Obviously, your bad guy is not going to stand by patiently while you line up an ultra-precise shot. On the other hand, only hits count, and you can't miss fast enough to win a gunfight. That said, you should spend some time assessing both your speed and accuracy, but concentrate on assessments that measure both.

Good defensive assessments should measure your ability to balance speed and accuracy

There is a vital third element of your abilities that you also need to assess, one that often goes overlooked: **consistency**. Many of us have a tendency to quit while we're ahead. That is, once we've shot an assessment and attained a satisfactory result, we check it off the list and move on. For instance, if a law enforcement officer struggles to pass his or her qualification, he or she is likely to call it a day after shooting a passing score. This is a dangerous tendency that you should avoid.

It's not about what you can do once. It's about what you can do consistently.

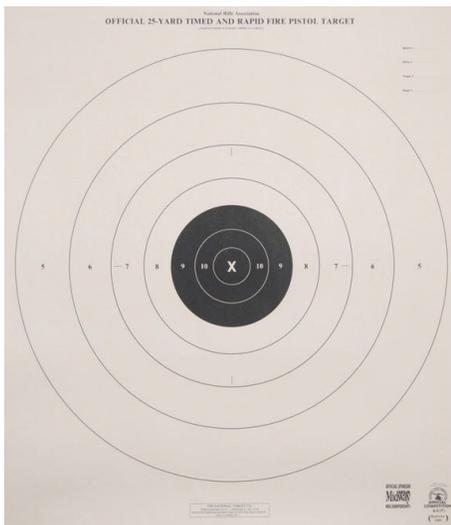
Remember The 50% Rule? You always need to keep it in mind during your assessments, lest they give you a false sense of security. You can't trust that your best performance on an assessment is

indicative of how you will perform under stress. Instead, you need to look at what you can do consistently. Otherwise, you're essentially trusting to luck, hoping that you'll perform at your peak when it counts the most. Consistency is king!

The very best test of your consistency is to step onto the range cold, without warming up, and perform the assessment. If you perform well enough, you're on the right track. Do a few more cold attempts, and if you are successful each time, you've developed consistency.

Accuracy Drills

Accuracy drills are primarily a test of your marksmanship under ideal conditions; that is, without time pressure or other stressors.



Bulls-Eye Target

A straightforward, tried-and-true assessment of your accuracy is a good old-fashioned bulls-eye target, like the one pictured here. Fire ten shots, attempting to place each one in the X ring. Then tally your score, with each shot being worth 10 points and a perfect score being 100.

You can also use fun drills, like a Pistol Poker target, which have a deck of cards displayed on the target. You build “hand” by firing a shot to each of the cards in your hand. You can either simply track your best “hand” over time, or play against a friend for a little added competitive fun.

Accuracy drills can be shot at varying distances to scale the challenge to a level appropriate for your current skill. For instance, you can start by shooting the bullseye target at something like 7 yards. If you can score 90 or above with consistency, increase the challenge by pushing it out a few yards and see how you do.

Timed Drills

As mentioned, you're not going to have all day to make your shots in a defensive encounter, so it's important to measure how quickly you're able to place accurate hits on your target. This is where timed drills come in.

A shot timer is an invaluable diagnostic and assessment tool, and I strongly recommend purchasing one. A good one will typically cost around \$100 to \$150. You can also buy an app for your smart phone that accomplishes the same purpose. The apps tend to be cheaper, but are often of questionable quality, so buyer beware. I've always used a dedicated timer, because I believe that a tool designed for a specific job will usually do that job better.

Running a timed drill is usually scored in one of two ways. The first is to shoot the drill and use the time of your last shot as your score. In this case, your goal is to decrease your time as you improve your skills and are able to complete the drill faster. Such drills usually impose a time penalty for missed or marginal shots on the target. The second scoring method is to impose a “par” time on the

drill, and simply attempt to fire the drill within the allotted time. In these cases, your score is usually determined by the placement of your shots on the target, with a penalty or a disqualification if you fail to beat the par time.

A classic timed drill is El Presidente, developed by Jeff Cooper. In this drill, you start with a loaded handgun in your concealed holster, standing with your back to three silhouette targets, 10 yards downrange, and your hands in the surrender position. On the start signal, turn to face the targets, present your handgun and fire two shots to each target. Reload your handgun, and fire two more shots to each target. Jeff Cooper considered anyone who could perform this drill with 100% thoracic cavity (upper chest) hits in under 10 seconds to be an expert handgunner.

Beware of any timed drill that rewards shooting fast, marginal (or even missed) shots over slightly-slower but accurate hits. Such drills do not reflect the reality of successful self-defense shooting, since only hits will be of benefit to you in a defensive encounter.

Tests

There are a wide range of shooting proficiency tests out there, all of which are built to test a particular skill test. They range from very simple to highly involved. Some measure just shooting ability, while others might include a test of additional skills, such as reloads, malfunction clearances, alternative shooting positions, one-handed shooting, and so forth.

Virtually every law enforcement agency has a test they use to qualify their officers. The challenge level varies from one agency to the next. The majority of departmental qualifications are, in my opinion, woefully easy to pass. The FBI's qualification is a moderate challenge, and the Federal Air Marshal qualification is more difficult.

Here's a short list of some of the tests that are out there that you might be able to use. I've listed them in ascending order of the level of challenge (in my opinion). If you're interested in finding the specifics about any of them, a Google search should give you the specifications of each. In my opinion, as a capable defensive shooter, you should be able to shoot a perfect or near-perfect score, every time, on a test at least as difficult as the FBI Qualification.

NRA Defensive Pistol Qualification (Distinguished Expert)

U.S. Army Alternate Pistol Qualification

U.S. Army Alt-C Rifle Qualification

NRA Tactical Rifle Qualification (Distinguished Expert)

NRA Defensive Pistol II Qualification (Distinguished Expert)

FBI Qualification

Federal Air Marshall Test

Handgun Combat Master Test

Competition

Competitions add an element of stress that comes from pitting your skills against another human being. (If you're highly competitive, as I am, placing your ego on the line can really get your heart pumping.) Most competitions will put you through a variety of stages that will test a wide range of skills. Chances are very good that there is at least one competitive shooting organization in your area. The US Practical Shooting Association (USPSA) and the International Defensive Pistol Association (IDPA) are two well-known competitive shooting leagues.

Some competitions are more game-like than others. For example, some competitions allow you to walk the stage ahead of time and plan your strategy, a luxury you obviously won't have in a real gunfight. You'll also find competitive stages that require you to charge towards your targets, lean out a window to hit all your targets, or burst through a door and engage multiple targets simultaneously. These are tactics that would be highly ill-advised against actual armed opponents.

Even "game" style competitions provide you many of the benefits of assessment, and at the very least will measure your marksmanship ability under some imposed stress. However, in my opinion, the closer the competition attempts to mimic actual self-defense encounters, the better it will suit your purposes as a self-defense shooter.

Competition doesn't need to be so formal, either. Even a simple head-to-head competition with one of your friends to see which of you can shoot a drill faster or more accurately can test your performance under the pressure of competition. (However, if you can consistently beat all your friends, you need to find some friends who can shoot better. Otherwise there's no challenge!)

Scenarios

Scenario-based assessment involves putting yourself into a simulated gunfight. Here are a few examples of scenario:

1. A shoot house with paper targets that simulate the other people in the scenario. These targets may be on some kind of pop-up, swinging, or turning target system to induce movement and provide the element of surprise.
2. A video simulation, where the scenario plays out on the screen. Most such systems use a laser gun and track where your shots hit.
3. Force-on-force simulations, which involve live role-players. Force-on-force training uses simulated ammunition and/or weapons, such as laser guns, Airsoft, or Simunitions.

Scenario-based assessment is rather different from other assessment methods. First, it obviously requires a significantly greater amount of time and resources, including special facilities and equipment. This can make it difficult (and expensive) to undertake.

Another way that scenarios are different is that the performance measures tend to be more subjective. The assessment methods I've mentioned previously give you a numerical score, an objective measurement that you can use to concretely track your performance over time. Scenarios provide you no such number or grade. While there are a few metrics you can track, such as the

location of your hits, there are considerable shades of gray when assessing yourself in a scenario. It is up to you (and your instructor) to identify your areas of strength and weakness.

This is a double-edged sword. While on the one hand it makes it difficult to track your performance from one assessment to the next, it also is the closest thing you can get to a real gunfight and, assuming the scenario is well-designed and well-executed, it will give you a fairly accurate picture of how you would actually perform in a fight. It's also one of the few ways to test your Dynamics skills at the pinnacle of your Training Pyramid, such as rapid decision-making. Scenarios are also a valuable way to develop stress inoculation, with greater benefits the more realistic the scenario is.

Scenario-based assessment also does not lend itself to repeatability. If you undertake the same scenario over and over again, you will naturally get better at it. However, this improvement is due to becoming more familiar with the scenario, not necessarily because you are truly improving your skills. It's like driving your car while trying to navigate downtown in a city you've never visited before, versus driving to your house. You'll tend to drive much better in a familiar neighborhood.

Here again, consistency is king. If you can perform well under a scenario that you've never seen before, you are truly building the peak of your Training Pyramid.

As a final word on scenarios, let me reiterate my earlier warning. Remember when we discussed the Training Pyramid, I spoke of the temptation to jump straight to the Dynamics level, because it's the most fun. Scenario training is exhilarating, and extremely valuable. But make sure you've built the lower levels of your Training Pyramid on the range to support the Dynamics level. Otherwise you are wasting your time, and very likely ingraining bad habits along the way.

Step 6: Be Ready

Now that you've put in the hard work of training, you've begun a practice regimen, and you've gained some sense of your proficiency, it's time to integrate everything you have learned up until this point into your daily life. If you have performed the previous steps properly, this step should be the easiest of them all.

This step starts with the acknowledgment of the fact that a self-defense situation, however improbable it may be, can arise suddenly and unexpectedly. Very often, it is difficult to predict when and where there might arise an occasion that requires the use of your firearm. The purpose of this step is to ensure you have the tools and a plan when that occasion presents itself, and are not caught unprepared. **This brings us back to the first rule of a gunfight: Bring a gun.** All the training in the world will amount to nothing if you don't have your weapon ready to use at the critical moment.

Because the need to use a firearm is (thankfully) an incredibly rare occurrence, there is a natural tendency in our minds to minimize the need to have a firearm accessible at all times. We leave the guns all locked in the safe, or take a handgun when leaving the house "only if I think I need it". But this is akin to only buckling your seat belt when you expect to be involved in an auto accident. (And if you're going somewhere where you think you'll need a gun, you might want to ask yourself if you really need to go there!)

An off-duty police officer was attending a public gathering in his town. An older woman in the crowd spotted the officer's badge on his belt and his handgun in its holster, and approached him. She said to him, "I see you're carrying your gun, officer. Are you expecting trouble?"

"No, ma'am," he replied. "If I were expecting trouble, I'd have brought a rifle."

Just because you're not expecting trouble is no excuse to render yourself unarmed. We fasten our seat belts when we get in the car, even though serious car collisions are rare. We keep smoke detectors and fire extinguishers at home, even though house fires are rare. And we should have a gun ready for a deadly encounter, even though such encounters are rare.

Having It Handy

I rarely leave my home without a gun. Most of the time, I'm carrying my handgun using an inside-the-waistband holster, concealed beneath my t-shirt. At home, I keep both an AR-15 rifle and a pump-action shotgun, loaded and ready to go. I can access either in seconds if the need were to arise.

I'll be honest: it's not always easy to have a gun accessible. It will probably require you to make some minor lifestyle adjustments. For instance, when I started carrying concealed, I had to buy my pants and shirts one size larger, to accommodate the inside-the-waistband holster and provide a little additional concealment. (And then, of course, I had to be careful not to grow into those larger-sized clothes, but that's another battle.)

Likewise, you should consider what methods are most appropriate for you to ensure that you have access to your weapon in case you need it. At home, this means finding a method and location for

storing your self-defense gun. If you have young children, choose a method that allows you to quickly access your gun if you need it while keeping it secure from their curious fingers. When you leave home, you'll need a method of concealed carry.

It will probably take some experimentation to find the methods that work best for you. Don't be afraid to switch things up if your current method isn't working for you. If your method of carry is too uncomfortable or impractical, find something else, lest you decide that it's too much of a hassle, and start leaving the gun at home.

Make It Habit

If you received proper training in Step 3, you should now have a decent repertoire of methods and techniques for everything you might need to do with a gun on a routine basis, including handling with proper muzzle consciousness and trigger finger discipline, checking the condition of the weapon, loading and unloading, grip, and presentation and (for handguns) holstering techniques. Once you have learned a proper way to accomplish these things and have decided on the method you want to use, do it that way every time.

Every time you pick up your gun, it's a chance to practice.

We all have a tendency to switch “modes”, handling the gun differently when we're at home or engaging in “casual” shooting than when we're doing “serious” training. You do yourself a disservice when you do this. Handling the gun with a consistent methodology ingrains those techniques even further into your muscle memory, building you deeper and deeper into Unconscious Competence. It also maintains a sense of consistency, and helps fight Hicks Law. This, in turn, dramatically reduces the chances that you'll make a mistake, either while handling the gun at home or on the range, or (more seriously) when your life depends on it.

Mental Awareness

Mental awareness is your single greatest asset when it comes to self-defense.

If you don't see the fight coming, your chances of winning are significantly reduced. By the same token, you can almost always avoid a bad situation, assuming you see it far enough in advance. At the very least, being aware of a developing danger allows you to place yourself in a position of advantage.

We teach all of our students the Color Code of Mental Awareness, developed by Jeff Cooper, as a method for using mental awareness to see, avoid, prepare for, and ultimately prevail in bad situations. The hardest part for most people is avoiding the dreaded Condition White while out in the world. Condition White simply means that you're absorbed in what you're doing, focused on something specific in your environment, lost in your thoughts, or just zoned out.

Being ready means maintaining the level of awareness required to identify and respond to an attack in sufficient time. Maintaining this level awareness takes a certain amount of mental energy, so you can't be expected to stay there every waking hour of the day. (And quite obviously, you can't stay there while you're asleep!) So you must develop the discipline to recognize when and where you can afford to let your mind relax. At home in your living room (with all your doors and windows secured)

is generally a safe place to slip into Condition White. Crowded shopping malls or busy city streets... not so much.

Your Biggest Adversary: Complacency

On the morning of January 25, 1993, an angry man with a vendetta against the United States government pulled his vehicle up behind a line of cars waiting to turn into the main entrance of the CIA in Langley, VA. Exiting his vehicle with a rifle, he began to walk up the line of cars, firing into the vehicles. He fired a total of ten shots, killing two CIA employees and wounding three others. After (in his own words) “there wasn't anybody else left to shoot”, he returned to his vehicle and calmly left the scene, returning home. The CIA did not even identify him as a suspect until weeks later, and did not apprehend him until 1997.

What allowed this maniac to cause such chaos and make a clean getaway? While these CIA employees were not all trained field agents, it's safe to say that at least some of them had the training required to respond to a situation like that, and that some of them were armed at the time they were shot. Even the shooter later recounted that he was surprised that he didn't encounter armed resistance. While I don't know everything that happened there that morning, I feel confident in making this assertion: The shooter's attack was so devastating due, at least in part, to **complacency and a lack of mental awareness**.

It's easy to do: you settle into your familiar morning commute with your cup of coffee and radio on, and the brain naturally wants to slip into Condition White. Fighting complacency is hard. It takes effort to stay aware of what's happening around you. But it likely that if those CIA employees had made a little more effort to fight the complacency monster that morning, the killer might have been stopped.

When I was in Afghanistan, before every mission I would tell my soldiers “Don't let yourself think that this is 'just another mission'. That's when things go wrong for you. Be ready, always!”

Likewise, I challenge you: Don't let yourself think “It's just another day”. Be ready, always!

Preparation, Not Paranoia

To some, this level of preparation comes across as paranoia, like you're living your life as if everyone is out to get you. This is not the case at all. In fact, the opposite tends to be true. This kind of preparation helps you live your life free from fear, because you know that you have the means and ability to overcome a bad situation.

There are those who will never understand why people like us spend so much time and effort preparing for such an unlikely event. In truth, their confusion is very natural. After all, by historical standards we in the United States live in a very peaceful society. Statistically speaking, most of us, whether we choose to carry a gun or not, will never be a victim of a violent crime. But if that day comes, and you or a loved one are faced with a violent threat, all of your preparation will be worth every penny and every moment that you spent.

Step 7: Maintain and Grow

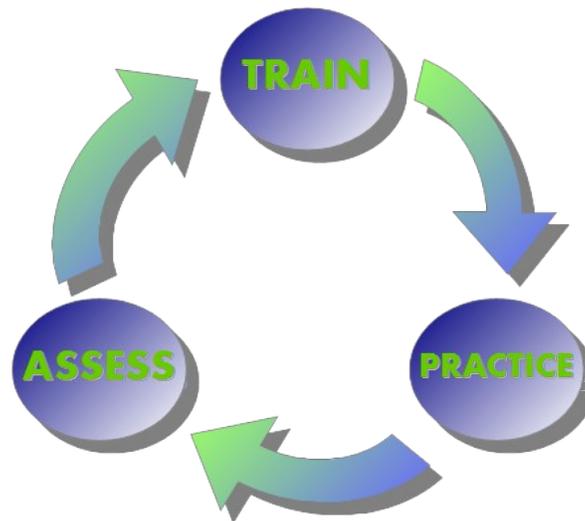
You've reached the final step! Down the home stretch towards the finish line, right?

Well, sort of... Once you reach this step, you'll have invested a considerable amount of time, money, and effort into developing your self-defense system. You've come a long way. But the truth is that the process never stops. Or at least, it shouldn't.

Sadly, many erstwhile gun students waste everything they put into their training through neglect. Like all motor skills, skill at arms is a perishable skill that must be maintained to keep it strong. And like virtually every other topic in the world, the more you learn about it, the more you realize you don't know. Chances are good that by the time you reach this step, you feel like you have more to learn than when you first started.

The Skill Growth Cycle

You can visualize the process of continuous skill growth as a cycle of three steps:



Does this Skill Growth Cycle look familiar? It should. It consists of the same three steps you underwent in Steps 3, 4, and 5. In each case, the steps are exactly as described before. Train to develop your skill, practice to build consistency, and assess to determine at what level you can perform.

Once you've completed an assessment or two, you should have a sense of where your weaknesses lie. (If your assessment didn't reveal any weaknesses, you need a harder assessment!) Use this assessment to inform how you will train and practice. For instance, maybe you can hit the target consistently, but your speed is lacking. This tells you that your next training event should focus on improving your speed while still achieving effective marksmanship. Once your training provides you the elements you need to work on, practice them on your own. After you've made progress to your proficiency with practice, take an assessment again to track your progress. Rinse. Repeat as necessary.

If this is starting to sound like it's turning into a part-time job, don't worry. The amount of time required to accomplish this is not overwhelming. Dry practice a few times a week for 10 to 15 minutes each. Go to the range once a month or so to check your progress with some live fire. Attend a few training classes a year, perhaps augmenting your training with some short workshops or seminars here and there. If you have the drive and can find the time to do more, that's great. But it doesn't have to dominate your life.

Never Good Enough

My final challenge to you is this: *Don't let "good enough" be good enough.* After all, these are skills that could save the lives of you and your loved ones.

We live in a world full of mediocrity. Rise above it.

Always be looking for ways to improve your understanding of your firearm and self-defense. Be honest with yourself about where you are weak. Seek the trained eye of someone who can help you reach the next level. It needn't occupy all your free time, but little steps, done regularly over time, will pay big dividends in the long run.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, these seven steps are not easy. That's why most people never undertake them. They settle for "good enough", or just hope that things will work out for them if they ever need a gun. They are essentially trusting to luck that everything will work out OK.

By seeing these seven steps through, you will place yourself in elite company. While I haven't found any specific surveys or studies that indicate how many gun owners undergo this level of preparation, I would estimate, based on my own experience, that fewer than 5% of all gun owners undergo anything resembling these seven steps, or build any serious level of proficiency with their firearms. (Sadly, the picture isn't much better among many of our law enforcement or military members.)

You can rise above the statistics. Use these seven steps as your road map, and once you've reached Step 7, keep striving to improve. Like any other journey of any worth, you won't get there overnight. But you needn't feel overwhelmed, either. You will make the journey the same way you would any other: one step at a time.

Thank you for reading. I am at your service to help you complete these seven steps. Please contact me with any questions you have about the material in this guide, or if I can help you in any way. And it would be my distinct honor if you would give me and my fellow Guncraft instructors the opportunity to train you at a Guncraft Defensive Firearm Course.

Until we meet again... May you never need your gun.

Aaron Marshall

Co-founder and Master Trainer, Guncraft Training Academy

aaron@guncrafttraining.com

www.guncrafttraining.com



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