

BUYING A HANDGUN FOR THE FIRST TIME

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First, the information here is simply my personal recommendations of things to look for. I don't pretend to be an expert, but I have pulled a trigger a few times over the years. Other people might have things that they feel should be added, and they may disagree with some of the things that I feel are important. That's fine, and I recommend that you listen to them because they might be right. I will update this document from time to time based on information that is passed on to me. If you have something that you feel should be added or changed, feel free to drop me a line.

Another thing to keep in mind is that these are not rules, they are simply guidelines and they are biased by my own personality. Any person can learn to shoot any firearm given enough time. These guidelines were meant to make the learning curve short and easy.

The shooters who frequent the rec.guns newsgroup provided a lot of input to this document, directly because I asked them to comment on it and indirectly by the vast amount of information that is available on that newsgroup. They were kind enough to point out some errors, provide some additional information, and just generally help improve the information presented here. If you are interested in guns I strongly recommend this newsgroup to you. The people who frequent it are highly experienced, and you can get intelligent answers to virtually any firearms question you can imagine.

The question about buying a first handgun comes up very frequently, and regardless of what your friends advise there is no clear-cut answer. You need to decide what is best for YOU and not worry about what is best for THEM. Following are some guidelines that will help you in choosing something that works for you. The list is not meant to be all-inclusive, nor is it meant to favor one particular manufacturer or style. Its sole purpose is to point out some of the terms you may run across that may affect how well you enjoy your firearm and some of the choices that you will need to make when looking at guns.

There are several things to look for in buying a gun, and several decisions to be made beforehand. The main thing, though, is to buy one that YOU like. You are the one that will carry and use it, and you are the only one that has to like it and feel comfortable with it. There are a lot of fine firearms around today, and just because your buddy recommends a particular one does not mean it is the right one for you. When you get past all the hype and personal recommendations and advertisements and reviews, the bottom line is that virtually all of the firearms made by the major manufacturers are going to be accurate and reliable, and the argument that this one is better than that one really does not hold water. While it might be the best one for a particular person does not mean it is the best one for you.

WHICH GUN IS BEST FOR ME?

As mentioned above, that is something that you will have to answer. Getting recommendations from friends is fine, but temper it with judgment. Just because a friend has a personal favorite doesn't mean it is the best choice for you. A lot of my friends shoot Glocks, but they don't feel right in my hands so I don't shoot them. I like Berettas, but some people think they are too big or too heavy.

That doesn't mean that one is better than the other, only that they are different guns and handle differently. Give the following steps a try:

1. Decide WHY you want a gun in the first place. If you want one to simply put in the night stand without ever learning how to shoot it safely and properly you might be better off with a baseball bat. Learning to shoot safely and accurately takes some time, and there is nothing in the world more unsafe than a firearm in the hands of someone who does not know how to handle it safely.
2. Decide on the general type of handgun that you want; revolver or semi-automatic.
3. Decide on the caliber range that you are interested in. Do you want a magnum caliber with a lot of stopping power or an intermediate caliber that is easier to control or a small caliber for target shooting?
4. Decide the features that you are interested in; finish type, type of sights, type of safety, trigger style, things like that.
5. Decide on a price range. Handguns can range from very inexpensive to very expensive. Choose a range that you want to spend, and then look for guns in that range.
6. Decide on a group of manufacturers and models that fit your requirements, and go look at them. Most gun stores will have a limited stock, and you may not find the gun you want if you narrow it down to one choice. Pick several that you like and look for them in the stores.
7. When you find them, pick them up and see how they fit in your hands. Make sure you can reach everything, make sure it holds naturally.
8. If you can find a place locally that rents firearms, by all means take advantage of that and try some out before you buy one. Also, most pistol clubs welcome visitors and beginners, and you will see a wide variety of guns at a match. Check with your friends to see if they have something similar to what you are interested in. This is a lot easier than buying a gun and then finding out that the recoil bothers you and you can't shoot it accurately or that it just plain doesn't fit your hand very well.
9. Buy it, practice with it, and learn to shoot it safely.

SAFETY

No discussion of firearms is complete unless it starts out with the safety aspects. This is something that cannot be repeated enough. The person with the gun in his hand has the ultimate responsibility for handling it safely.

There are four basic rules to gun safety:

1. ALWAYS keep the muzzle of your gun pointed in a safe direction, and keep in mind that if your gun happened to go off it will probably destroy whatever it happens to be pointing at

2. ALWAYS keep your finger completely off the trigger and out of the trigger guard until you are ready to shoot. When your finger is on the trigger it means that you are fixing to fire a shot. If you are not going to fire the gun your finger should be outside the trigger guard.
3. ALWAYS treat every gun as if it were loaded. Never ASSUME that a gun is unloaded, VERIFY that it is unloaded. If a gun leaves your sight for any reason, check it when you pick it up again.
4. ALWAYS be certain of your target and what is behind it. Bullets have a lot of energy and can go through things like thin walls, hay bales used for target stands, and so on. Be certain that if the bullet goes through the target that whatever is behind it will not be damaged. Also be certain that if you miss the intended target there will be no damage to something else in the vicinity

These are the four "Accepted" rules of firearms safety. I would like to add four more rules:

5. Guns are not toys. If you want to play with something, get a toy. If you want to have a Show And Tell with your guns, be very careful with them. Guns should be kept in cabinets or other safe places when not in use, and they should be kept in a holster until they need to be used when they are carried.
6. The only absolutely reliable, guaranteed infallible safety is the shooter. Whether the mechanical safety is on or not is absolutely immaterial because the ONLY safety that is worth having is between your ears. If you use your head and pay attention to the previous four rules you will NEVER have a negligent discharge from a firearm, you will NEVER cause any damage with a firearm, and you will NEVER cause anyone to be harmed with a firearm.
7. Take an approved safety course. Regardless of how experienced you think you are, regardless of how careful you think you are, and regardless of how long you have been shooting, you can still learn something from a good firearms course. We are all human and we tend to forget things and become complacent over time. Take a course! From time to time, take a refresher course!
8. When you pull the trigger, you just bought whatever that bullet hits! It is YOUR responsibility to ensure that you do not cause harm or damage with your gun. It is NOT the responsibility of the firearm manufacturer or the government or your daddy, it is YOUR responsibility. If you cannot accept that responsibility do NOT get a gun!

These rules may seem obvious, but keep in mind that EVERY firearm accident that has EVER occurred has happened because someone forgot to pay attention to one of these rules. If everyone with a gun in their hands remembered these rules all the time there would NEVER be another firearms accident.

These rules also apply when you are simply looking at guns that you are interested in purchasing. If the salesman hands you a firearm without first verifying that it is not loaded, check it yourself. If you don't know how to check it, ask the salesman to clear it for you. If he tells you that he knows it is unloaded, then tell him that you would feel a lot better if it was checked. If he takes offense just thank him for his time and go somewhere else. When you raise the gun to aim it, don't point it at the salesman's head or out the window of the store or at anything else you would not be willing to shoot. Keep these rules in mind at all times and you will never have an accident. Forget one of them and you probably will sooner or later.

DEFINITIONS (maybe not "Official" but realistic)

NEGLIGENT DISCHARGE - This is what happens when a shooter forgets to obey one of the laws of gun safety. It is also important to note that the ONLY way that a negligent discharge can occur is when one of the laws is violated.

A Negligent Discharge is often referred to as an Accidental Discharge. Some of us feel that this term is incorrect because it infers that the cause of the discharge was because of some sort of mechanical failure on the part of the gun or because some sort of accident outside of the control of the shooter caused it to happen. This is never the case. If you adhere rigidly to the laws of gun safety it will never happen to you.

HANDGUN - A firearm with a short barrel that is able to fit in a holster and be concealed on one's person. While this definition can also refer to short-barreled rifles or shotguns, you get the idea. Handguns are normally divided into two groups, "Pistols" (which refers to autoloading handguns) and "Revolvers".

BULLET - The projectile that is fired from a gun. NOT to be confused with a cartridge!

CARTRIDGE - The entire assembly that is loaded into a firearm. It consists of a bullet, a case, gun powder, and a primer. NOT to be confused with (or called!) a "Bullet" because the "Bullet" is only the projectile that is fired out the barrel.

CALIBER -- The "Caliber" of a firearm defines the size of the rifling in the barrel of the gun, and is normally approximately the same as the diameter of the bullet. For example, a 9mm handgun has rifling in the barrel that is 9mm in diameter and fires a bullet that is nominally 9mm in diameter. Larger caliber guns typically have a larger cartridge, and more stopping power. They also have more recoil. For defensive handguns, most people do not recommend anything smaller than a 9mm

CLIP - A device for holding cartridges to be loaded into a firearm. NOT to be confused with a "Magazine".

MAGAZINE - A device for holding cartridges to be loaded into a firearm. NOT to be confused with a "Clip". The normal difference between a "Magazine" and a "Clip" is that a "Clip" actually clips the cartridges together (normally using the groove near the base of the cartridges) whereas cartridges are simply inserted into a magazine. Virtually all autoloading pistols use a Magazine and NOT a Clip!

DOUBLE-STACK MAGAZINE - A magazine for an autoloading pistol that has the cartridges arranged in a staggered stack. If the magazine was transparent and you looked at it from the rear, the cartridges would be arranged in two columns. This allows the length of the magazine to be shorter for a given number of rounds, but at the cost of making it wider.

SINGLE-STACK MAGAZINE - A magazine for an autoloading pistol that has the cartridges arranged in a single stack. If the magazine was transparent and you looked at it from the rear, the cartridges would be arranged in one column. This causes the magazine to hold fewer rounds in a given size, but also allows the magazine (and the butt of the gun) to be smaller.

AUTOMATIC - A firearm that fires continuously while the trigger is held down. Not to be confused with an autoloading pistol.

AUTOLOADER - A handgun with a single firing chamber that automatically loads another cartridge from the magazine when it is fired. While this type of firearm is frequently referred to as an "Automatic" this is actually a misnomer. The correct term is Autoloader or Semi-Automatic and not Automatic. A "Pistol" is normally an autoloader; a machine gun is an automatic.

REVOLVER - A handgun with a rotating cylinder with multiple firing chambers that hold the cartridges. Compared to a magazine-fed autoloader, revolvers normally hold fewer rounds, and are a bit slower to reload for most shooters, but they normally have fewer moving parts and are considered by some to be more reliable and more accurate than autoloaders.

SPEEDLOADER - A device for quickly reloading a revolver, similar in some respects to a magazine for an autoloading pistol. Speedloaders are specific to a particular model of revolver, and hold the correct number of rounds positioned so that they drop easily into the chambers of the revolver's cylinder.

FIREARM MANUFACTURERS

There are a large number of manufacturers around today, and there is a list of many of them on my web page at <http://www.craigcentral.com> in the Guns And Shooting section. Virtually all of them produce handguns that are accurate and reliable in various styles, models, and calibers. The choices can be confusing and hard to make, but the bottom line is that virtually all of them WILL be accurate and reliable. Most of the majors have a long-standing reputation to uphold and will not sell something that is unreliable, inaccurate, or unsafe.

If you stick with one of the major brands you will never be sorry and never need to second-guess your choice. If you buy something that nobody else has ever heard of you may be throwing your money out the window. The difference between a \$500 handgun and a \$1,000 handgun may be minor as far as function and reliability goes, but I can assure you that the difference between a \$100 piece of junk and a \$500 handgun is significant. You can buy a \$100 handgun, but what you usually get is something that will function when it feels like it and will break more often than it shoots. Stick with the major manufacturers and you won't be sorry.

REVOLVER OR PISTOL?

There are basically two types of handguns, Revolvers and Pistols. The two are distinctly different in operation and form.

A **REVOLVER** has a rotating cylinder that holds 5 to 7 rounds of ammunition in individual chambers. As the gun is fired, the cylinder rotates and brings a fresh cartridge into firing position. It is loaded by swinging the cylinder out and placing cartridges in each of the chambers in the cylinder. Speedloaders can be used to simplify the reloading process, but they are still normally slower than reloading an autoloader. Revolvers have the distinct advantage of having fewer moving parts so they are frequently less prone to feeding problems than pistols.

A **PISTOL**, also known as an "Automatic" (an incorrect term), a "Semi-Automatic", or an "Autoloader" automatically loads cartridges from a magazine when it is fired. Spare magazines can be carried to quickly and easily reload the gun when it is empty. Most shooters can reload an autoloader much quicker than they can a revolver, and this is one of a pistol's advantages. The other advantage is that

most pistol magazines hold 10 rounds or more (although some of the "Single Stack" 45 caliber autoloaders hold 7 or 8 rounds) giving it a much higher capacity than a revolver. The major disadvantage of autoloaders is that with all the moving parts involved, they are more prone to feeding problems than revolvers. Keep in mind though that revolvers are NOT immune to feeding problems (a cartridge with a bullet seated too long can solidly lock up a revolver) and most modern autoloaders have a very low number of misfeeds. Most modern pistols that are properly maintained and fed good quality ammunition will be utterly reliable. In all fairness to the revolver fans though, I will admit that with only one exception all of the misfeeds and jams I have ever seen were in autoloaders.

Another difference between revolvers and autoloaders is the size of the butt. The butt is the part of the handgun that you hold onto. Autoloaders all have a magazine that is inserted into the magazine well in the butt. This makes the butt of the gun quite large, especially those that use high-capacity "Double-Stack" magazines. Revolvers do not have this problem since they do not use magazines. If you have small hands this makes a significant difference since you might not be able to get your fingers all the way around the butt of an autoloader.

TRIGGER STYLES

The trigger is, obviously, what the shooter pulls to make the gun fire. Before buying your first handgun you should be aware that there are several different trigger styles, and they can significantly affect how well you can shoot a gun because of how they work.

SINGLE ACTION - The simplest trigger style, the single-action trigger only performs one operation; it releases the hammer to strike the firing pin. The hammer must either be cocked manually or by the action of the slide in the case of an autoloader. A single-action gun CAN NOT be fired until the hammer has been cocked.

DOUBLE ACTION - The double-action trigger can perform two operations; it can release the hammer to strike the firing pin (the same as a single-action trigger), but it can also cock the hammer if it is not already cocked. A double-action gun can be fired even if the hammer is not cocked by pulling the trigger.

It sounds like a double-action trigger would definitely be the way to go, but the catch is that the trigger pull is much heavier in double-action operation because it must resist the hammer spring to cock the hammer. Thus, on guns that might have a single-action pull of 4 pounds the double-action pull might be 8 to 12 pounds. This is most prevalent with double-action autoloaders. Since the action of the slide cocks the hammer for second and subsequent shots, the first shot has a very heavy trigger pull and the others are much lighter. This takes a little getting used to, but it is certainly not something that cannot be overcome, it is just something that you get used to with practice.

DOUBLE ACTION ONLY - To resolve the difference in trigger pulls, most manufacturers offer guns in "Double Action Only". These firearms do not cock the hammer automatically after the first shot, so all shots are fired with a heavier trigger pull. While this may sound strange, it does have the advantage of all trigger pulls being the same even though they are heavy pulls.

SAFE ACTION OR STRIKER FIRED - These guns are a variant of a double-action only trigger. Instead of a hammer and firing pin, they use a striker assembly that does not require a trigger pull that is as heavy as a normal gun. The result is a gun that emulates a double action only gun in that

all trigger pulls are they same weight, but they are normally about the same weight as a single-action trigger.

Trigger style is very much a matter of personal preference, and regardless of the style chosen you will get used to it over time.

SAFETIES

There are generally two types of safeties, and numerous variants of those. The basic types of safeties are the "Traditional" safety and the "Decocker". The Traditional safety operates by blocking the trigger and / or hammer from moving when the safety is engaged. This frequently gives the shooter the impression that the gun cannot be fired until the safety is disengaged, but this is not always the case. Some older firearms can be fired even when the safety is on by striking the hammer (such as might happen if the gun is dropped).

A Decocker is, in reality, not a safety at all. Decockers are found mostly on autoloaders, and they simply decock the gun. When a single-action or double-action autoloader is fired, the action of the slide leaves the hammer cocked and the gun ready to fire the next shot in single-action mode. If you do not want to fire again, you are left holding a cocked gun that is ready to fire. Until decockers came on the market, the only safe way to lower the hammer was to unload the gun (magazine and chamber) and then pull the trigger to lower the hammer. Decockers perform this action safely, and can be used with the gun loaded. They block the firing pin from being struck by the hammer, and lower the hammer to its rest position.

There are also many guns available without any safeties. Double Action Only autoloaders normally don't have a safety of any type, however there are exceptions. The logic is that the heavier trigger pull of the DAO gun is the safety. Most revolvers have no safety, and many people who carry revolvers do so with the hammer resting on an empty chamber.

There is also a trend toward redundant safeties. Beretta is a good example. Beretta pistols have a firing pin block that raises as the trigger is pulled allowing the hammer to strike the firing pin. Whether the manual safety is engaged or not, you can bang on the hammer of a Beretta all you want to and the gun will not go off because there is a piece of steel preventing the hammer from hitting the firing pin. You have to pull the trigger to raise the firing pin block. This will not prevent accidents if the gun is dropped and the trigger is snagged, but it will help in preventing other negligent discharges. This trend is becoming common among gun makers, and there are several that have redundant safeties on them.

The type of safety that you choose is entirely up to you, but I would remind you once again that the only absolutely reliable safety is the one between your ears. A safety is a mechanical device and it can fail. Murphy's Law also indicates that the point at which it will fail will be a terribly inconvenient time for it to do so. ALWAYS remember that only YOU can prevent negligent discharges! Firearms safety is a shooter action and not a mechanical action.

SIGHTS

There are as many styles of sights as there are guns. The most common sights are the old standard "Notch And Post" sights, but there are a lot of variants on that style. The front sight is simply a post

that sticks up and the rear is a notch of some sort. Align the post in front with the notch in the rear and the bullet should hit what is in front of it at the time.

There are also "Optical" sights for pistols. These are typically of two variants, telescopic sights or "Scopes" and "Red Dot" or electronic sights. Scopes magnify the view, just as looking through a telescope does, and makes things look closer than they are. At the distances we normally shoot pistols and revolvers at this is of questionable benefit.

Red dot sights are definitely beneficial under certain circumstances. They consist of a tube that has a glass viewing screen in it upon which a red dot is projected. When the sight is properly adjusted, where you put the dot is where the bullet is going to hit. Unlike a laser the dot is not a projected light, it is only visible by looking through the sight. The disadvantage until recently has been that these sights have been quite bulky and hard to fit into a "Normal" holster. There are some out now that are not a lot bigger than an adjustable rear sight, and they are worth looking into.

"Night Sights" are another form of sights; I absolutely love night sights. They are normally of the standard notch and post design, but three tiny glass vials of Tritium gas are installed into the sights (normally there are three, one in front and two in the rear, but there are other variations as well). Lenses are placed over the tiny holes in the sights, and these lenses are frequently different colors. Some shooters like the front sight to be a different color from the rear. Tritium gas glows and at night or in low light conditions it is like looking at three glowing dots. Line them up and you are ready to shoot. Once you shoot a gun at night that is equipped with night sights you will fall in love with them.

The Tritium gas in the vials is a radioactive gas (don't worry it won't hurt you), and has a half-life of 12 years or so. After that time the sights will get progressively dimmer until, at some point, they will need to be replaced.

LASERS

Don't believe everything that Hollywood shows you; a laser sight is not the ultimate sighting tool. If you need a laser to shoot well, you haven't practiced enough. Take this test; get a cheap laser pointer, hold it out at arms length and have someone pull down on your arm enough to simulate the weight of a gun. At 7 yards or so, how still can you hold that pointer on a small target? For most of us it dances all over the place, and as range increases so does the movement of the pointer. Add to this the fact that if you ever have to use your gun in a defensive situation you are going to be nervous as hell and your hands are going to be shaking terribly.

Other disadvantages are: 1) In bright light the dot is virtually invisible (even Hollywood always manages to find a low-light situation for them to be used in), 2) In some situations, especially in dusty environments or fog, the laser is visible from many angles, and points right back to you, and 3) Lasers use batteries and sure as hell the one time that you really need it the batteries will be down.

If you are absolutely sold on laser sights, check into those made by Crimson Trace (<http://www.crimsontrace.com/>) or LaserMax (<http://www.lasermx-inc.com/gunsight/index.html>). I have refrained from mentioning specific brands throughout this document, but these two items deserve special attention. The Crimson Trace model fits into the grip of your gun and does not hang down below the barrel where it can get knocked out of alignment. The LaserMax model replaces the guide rod in certain autoloaders, and as with the Crimson Trace laser there is nothing outside the gun. Failing this get a gun with an accessory rail and a laser mount that fits the rail and holds the

laser solidly. If you have a laser hanging below the barrel it is sooner or later going to get knocked out of alignment. You will also have a tough time finding a holster for a gun with a laser on it.

CALIBERS

As mentioned above, the caliber of a firearm determines the size of the bullet that it fires (actually it is a measurement of the rifling in the barrel and indirectly indicates the size of the bullet). For self-defense handguns, the 9mm Luger is frequently viewed as the minimum caliber for reliable stopping power. Larger calibers provide more stopping power, but at the cost of more recoil from the gun. This is something that you will have to determine for yourself.

Calibers are always denoted with a number that indicates the size of the rifling in the barrel, and indirectly, the size of the bullet. For example a 22-caliber firearm fires a bullet that is approximately 0.22" in diameter. Likewise, a 45-caliber firearm fires a bullet that is approximately 0.45" in diameter. The reason that I mention that the caliber indirectly indicates the bullet size is that it is not always exactly the same. The 357 Magnum and 38 Special cartridges, for example, can normally both be fired through a gun chambered for the .357 Magnum cartridge, and both actually have a bullet diameter of 0.357".

Normally, if the word "Caliber" is used the decimal point is omitted since the word caliber automatically denotes decimal inches. .22 caliber is actually incorrect since it would technically denote a barrel with 0.0022" rifling (a lot smaller than an ordinary straight pin!). You will see things written as .22 caliber or .45 caliber though, so just ignore it when you do.

To complicate matters though, you will also see certain cartridges (not calibers, but cartridges) denoted with a second number. For example the famous .30-06 Springfield or .30-30 Winchester (note that since the word "Caliber" is not used that a decimal point is used in front of the first number!). The second number can, and frequently does, have different and inconsistent meanings. In the case of both the .30-06 Springfield and the .30-30 Winchester, the ".30" at the beginning denotes 30 caliber. The "-06" in .30-06 Springfield denotes the year in which it was developed (1906), however the "-30" in .30-30 Winchester denotes that it is comparable in power to a 30 caliber cartridge that used 30 grains of black powder. There is no consistency in how these cartridges are named, it is entirely up to the person or company that developed them to come up with a name for them. The history of many of them is quite interesting and worth reading about if you are interested in that sort of thing.

Back to the discussion of handguns, the most common handgun cartridges today are probably:

25 ACP A 25 caliber cartridge (the ACP stands for "Automatic Colt Pistol") that is far too small for reliable self-defense.

32 ACP A 32 caliber cartridge that is also very small for reliable protection.

380 Auto Also referred to as a 9mm Short, this is a common cartridge but one that is very marginal for reliable self-defense.

9mm Luger Also referred to as the 9mm Parabellum or 9x19 this is probably one of the most common self defense cartridges around today. First developed in 1902 the

cartridge was adopted by the German military in 1904 and has not changed since. This cartridge is viewed by many as the minimum cartridge for reliable self-defense.

- 38 Special** Probably the most famous revolver cartridge of all times. The 38 Special can also normally be fired from most guns chambered for the 357 Magnum.
- 357 Sig** Relatively new on the scene, the 357 Sig uses a 40 S&W case necked down to a 9mm bullet. Viewed as some as being the best of both worlds, the 357 Sig is gaining in popularity.
- 357 Magnum** Actually the 357 Remington Magnum this is a very powerful revolver cartridge. On a self-defense scale, this one has to be ranked right up near the top. It also has the distinction that most guns chambered for the 357 Magnum can also fire 38 Special cartridges.
- 9x18 Makarov** A Russian 9mm cartridge, the 9mm Makarov is a shorter variant of the popular 9mm Luger cartridge. It is comparable in power to the 380 Auto.
- 40 S&W** Released by Smith & Wesson in 1990, the 40 S&W cartridge is an in-between cartridge that is extremely popular and quite powerful. It falls right between the 9mm and 45 ACP in virtually every respect; recoil, power, and cost.
- 10mm Auto** Originally developed in 1983 and adopted by the FBI in 1990, the 10mm cartridge is very powerful. Its downfall is that the recoil is difficult to control for some people.
- 44 Magnum** Actually the 44 Remington Magnum, this is an extremely powerful cartridge and you can find both rifles and handguns chambered for it. The recoil from a 44 Magnum handgun is quite significant although it is not a bone breaker like some would have you believe.
- 45 ACP** Adopted in 1911 for the venerable Colt Model 1911, this is an extremely popular handgun cartridge, and viewed by many as the best all-around self-defense cartridge.
- 45 Colt** Originally developed in 1873 this is the original "Colt 45 Peacemaker" cartridge. You can still find revolvers chambered for the "Colt 45" but the main reason I mention it here is to point out that it is NOT the same cartridge as the 45 ACP.

There are certainly others (in fact this is not even half of the handgun cartridges listed in most reloading manuals), but to keep things simple these are the most common cartridges that you will run across today.

IMPORTANT NOTE!! Be certain that the ammunition is the proper ammo for your gun. The proper ammunition for YOUR gun (not just one that looks like yours, but YOUR gun) will be engraved on the barrel. Many calibers sound similar but are significantly different. For example the common 9mm is normally either the 9mm Luger, 9mm Parabellum, or 9x19. There are also 9mm Makarov, 9mm Kurtz, 9mm Short, 9x21, 9x23 and some others. When you buy ammunition, LOOK AT THE BOX. When you get to the range and start to load your magazines, LOOK AT THE BOX. Loading the wrong ammunition in your gun is a good way to ruin your day; it might load right, it might chamber right, it might even fire, but you may not like the results.

Many people recommend a 22-caliber handgun for the beginner, and there are merits to this choice. A .22 is inexpensive to purchase and practice with, and it will allow you to develop good habits such as trigger control, sight alignment, and sight picture, and you can learn to shoot without having to deal with recoil and noise problems. My feeling is that if you are going to go this route that you might as well just purchase a pellet or BB pistol and practice with it. Don't laugh, that's one of the practice methods that I use and I can do it in my basement without having to go to the range. Practice is practice, and regardless of the method used it is seldom wasted.

My feeling regarding a 22 as a first purchase is that if you are going to purchase one pistol, and if that pistol is going to be used for self-defense, then a .22 is not a good choice. A .22 pistol is not powerful enough for reliable self-defense, if it were every police department and military branch in the world would adopt it as their standard sidearm. If you try and defend yourself with a .22 you might get lucky and stop the attacker, but you probably won't. I recommend that people practice with what they carry because the whole idea behind practicing is to get good with the gun. Just because you can punch the center of a target with a .22 doesn't mean that you can do the same thing with a 9mm or a .40 or a .45. .22's and BB guns and pellet guns are great practice aids, just as dry firing is, but they should not take the place of practicing with your "Carry Gun".

RECOIL

Recoil is probably the most misunderstood aspect of firearms that there is. Terms like "Kicks Like A Mule" and "Bone Breaker" are common, and they are also dead wrong. Admittedly some guns do have a lot of recoil, and some guns can cause your shoulder or wrist to hurt the next day if you shoot several hundred rounds through them. Also admittedly there are a few guns that I just don't really want to shoot more than once or twice, but I have never been physically hurt from shooting a gun once.

Recoil is not a "Kick" like many people initially think. When I envision "Kick" I see a mule pulling those legs forward to get a good start and then letting go with everything he has. A gun does not "Kick", it recoils. Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion states that "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction". Where firearms are concerned this means that the pressure of the gasses generated by the burning powder pushes against the base of the bullet, forcing it out of the barrel, and also pushes backwards against the breech face, pushing the gun against your hand. The pressure builds up quickly and the energy is expended quickly, thus making the pressure against your hand feel quick and sharp. The greater the pressure, the faster the bullet flies, and the more the firearm recoils.

This recoiling action of the gun is then transmitted to the shooter. In the case of a rifle or shotgun it is transferred into the shoulder and then the whole upper torso. In the case of a handgun, it is transferred to the hand, then the wrist, the arm, the shoulder and upper torso. If the firearm is held properly, the result is simply that you just feel it pushing against you when you fire and see the muzzle going up. If you are concerned about recoil, and have never shot a firearm before, you are going to be disappointed when you realize that all of your concerns were about nothing. A 9mm Luger cartridge in a 32-ounce pistol has a recoil energy of about 3 1/2 pounds.

In the case of handguns primarily, because of the way the human arm is hinged at the elbow and wrist, recoil causes the gun to be pushed back and the muzzle to rise upwards. There is not any pain involved (except, possibly, with the monster calibers), but it does cause the muzzle to rise and second and subsequent shots take longer to get back on target. The greater the amount of recoil, normally the greater the amount of muzzle flip. A handgun chambered for the 44 Remington

Magnum is going to have a lot more recoil than one chambered for a 9mm Luger, and the muzzle is going to rise a lot more when shooting the 44 Magnum.

In reality, the problem most beginning shooters have is not the recoil but the noise. It is frequently blamed on the recoil, but it is actually the noise of the cartridge firing that causes people to flinch and jerk the muzzle off target. If you are having a problem along these lines, try using double ear protection (muffs and plugs) and see if your shooting improves.

Virtually anyone can handle the recoil of a 9mm. In fact most experienced shooters can fire the 9mm with virtually no muzzle flip. When you get up to the 10mm or .45 it can become a problem for smaller people; the muzzle rises high enough that it takes a significant amount of time to get the gun back on target for follow-up shots. The "Magnum" calibers are even worse. A .357 or .44 Magnum is a handful for most people to get back on target quickly. Again, it does not hurt, but the time involved to get back on target can be significant. From a defensive standpoint, which is more valuable; 3 aimed shots from a 9mm or one from a .44? If there are three people attacking you this question becomes very important and the answer very obvious.

The amount of recoil that you can control is just something that you will have to decide for yourself, and it is going to vary from one person to the next. Find something that you are comfortable with and you will get accustomed to shooting it.

FIT

A gun has to fit your physique or you will have to spend a lot of time adapting to it. You will just have to pick some up and find out what fits you properly. There is nothing that you can't adapt to and learn to shoot well with practice, but the better things fit from the start the quicker you will learn to shoot it properly. Things to look for are:

Grip - When you hold the gun does your hand wrap completely around the butt of the gun? Is the butt so short that your little finger goes beneath it with nothing to rest on? When you pick up a gun, the backstrap fits into the web between your thumb and forefinger. If it fits properly your thumb will slightly overlap your other fingers; the trigger will hit your forefinger on the first pad or at about the first joint. If it is too big you will have to stretch to reach the trigger or the magazine release or the slide release. If it is too small you will have a lot of finger left everywhere, and the gun may be hard to hold onto when it recoils. Revolvers typically have smaller grips than autoloaders because autoloaders have to be large enough for the magazine to fit into the butt of the gun.

Controls - Make sure you can reach all the controls. This is even more important if you happen to be left-handed. Many modern guns have ambidextrous controls so that most of them can be easily reached by left-handed shooters, but some do not (a notable exception to this rule is Beretta. All Berettas come with the magazine release set for right-handed shooters, but most of them can be quickly and easily swapped to the other side for left-handed shooters). You should be able to reach the safety, magazine release, slide release, and / or cylinder latch without having to move or rotate the gun in your hand. The less you have to change your grip to operate the controls, the better off you will be.

Angle - When viewed from the side, the angle of the butt is in relation to the barrel affects how the gun lines up with your eyes. If you close your eyes and raise the gun in front of your face like you were preparing to shoot it, the sights should be approximately lined up vertically. If you have to raise or lower the muzzle to line them up a gun with a different angle might be better suited for you.

Sights - Make sure you can easily see the sights. Some are small and hard to see, others are big and easy to see. Your eyes will determine what is best suited for you.

Concealment - If you are planning to carry the gun concealed, make sure that you can do so comfortably. Large guns on small people are hard to conceal. Very large guns on ANYONE are hard to conceal. Small guns are easier to conceal, but harder to shoot accurately.

These are all things that you can adapt to, but choosing something from the start that limits what you have to adapt to makes things a lot easier for the beginner.

FINISHES

There are basically three types of firearm finishes these days; "Finished", stainless steel, and polymer.

Finished - The days of blued guns are long gone. Virtually every manufacturer these days is using some form of industrial coating as opposed to bluing. These coatings are stronger, last longer, and are more resistant to rusting than bluing ever thought of being. The most popular color is black, but guns can also be found in other colors as well (an example is the olive drab color available on the Walther P99)

Stainless Steel - Stainless steel is, as the name implies, unfinished stainless steel. Stainless steel is virtually impervious to rust so no additional finishing is needed. Unfortunately it is also heavy, and most autoloader manufacturers only use stainless for the slide; the other components are regular steel or even polymer.

Polymer - Polymer is a plastic, but is an exceedingly strong plastic, and has become increasingly popular in firearms manufacturing. It combines the lightness and rust resistance of plastic with the strength and rigidity of aluminum. In most cases polymer guns are autoloaders (I don't know of any polymer revolvers, but there may be some), and even then it is normally used only for the frame and magazines. The slide and other components will still normally be made of steel or aluminum. One other advantage of polymer construction is that it is simply molded plastic, and is cheaper to manufacturer than machined steel or aluminum. While this savings may not be passed on to the customer, it is still a real savings to the manufacturer.

In many cases you will see a combination of finishes on a gun. A Glock is far and away the most common of the polymer guns, and Glock owners love to brag about how their guns will never rust. They should keep in mind though that only the frame of their pistol is polymer. The slide is finished steel, and all of the internal components are steel or aluminum. Most stainless steel autoloaders are the same way. The slide will be stainless steel, but the other components will be polymer or finished steel or aluminum.

SIZE AND WEIGHT

How much a firearm weighs, and how physically large it is, is going to be important if you plan on carrying it all day. Lighter, smaller guns will be much more comfortable over the long run than a heavy one. The drawback is that lighter guns also recoil more than heavier guns because the weight of the gun itself dampens some of the recoil. In my opinion, the weight of a gun is not a significant

reason to base a purchase on in most cases. If a particular gun happens to be slightly ("Slightly" being the operative word!) heavier than another model, that weight should not be the sole deciding factor as to whether or not to buy it. There are other features that are more important than the weight of the gun.

There are exceptions, of course. Hollywood loves to show their actors with BIG guns. The S&W Model 69 of Dirty Harry fame and the MRI Desert Eagle that has seen more film time than some actors are good examples. Drop by your local gun shop and heft one of these monsters some time and see if you would like to haul them around all day. And while you are at it, try and figure out where you are going to carry it and how fast you could get it out if you needed to.

A good example of the other end of the spectrum would be the diminutive Walther PPK that James Bond carried. A fine gun by any definition, and one that can easily be carried all day without much effort. It certainly does not have the stopping power demonstrated in the movies, however, and shooting at something 100 yards away generally doesn't work very well.

Smaller, lighter guns are generally more maneuverable than large heavy guns. Which is easier to swing around in your hand and control easily, a tennis ball or a bowling ball? An exaggeration, certainly, but everything is relative. If it takes you a tenth of a second longer to change directions and get on target, that tenth of a second could be the one that saves your life.

Tiny little "Mouse Guns" may be comfortable to carry and easy to conceal, but they can also be difficult to shoot if you have large hands. The latest crop of "Compacts" have butts that are so small that many of us wind up with our little finger completely off of the grip. This is not conducive to accurate shooting, and if you can't hold it properly you won't be able to shoot it well. On the other hand, if you have small hands the current crop of double-stack automatics may have grips so big that you can't get your hand all the way around it. Again, this is not comfortable and not conducive to accurate shooting. Find one that fits your hands and not one that fits my hands or your friend's hands or anyone else's hands.

BARREL LENGTH

The length of the barrel of a firearm affects the gun in several different ways. The distance between the front and rear sights is known as the "Sight Radius". Since the front sight is usually mounted at the front of the barrel, the length of the barrel controls the sight radius. A longer sight radius is less prone to errors in alignment than a short sight radius, thus making a gun with a longer barrel appear to be more accurate than one with a shorter barrel. A longer barrel also provides more stabilization to the bullet, and honestly making the firearm more accurate.

A longer barrel also contains the bullet for a longer period of time (it takes the bullet longer to travel down a long barrel than a short barrel) allowing more time for pressure to build behind the bullet. Because of this, a firearm with a longer barrel will normally have a higher muzzle velocity than one with a short barrel. This is both good and bad because the higher velocity will increase the energy of the bullet and the stopping power, but it also increases recoil.

The barrel length also affects the balance of the gun. Longer barrels (and slide assemblies as in the case with semi-automatics) puts more weight at the muzzle end whereas shorter barrels puts more weight at the back end. More weight at the front will dampen muzzle flip to some extent.

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AMMUNITION

The ammunition that is fired through your gun is very important. Cheap ammo can cause a fine firearm to feed badly, fail to fire, or be inaccurate. The ammo from the major manufacturers such as Winchester, Remington, Federal, CCI and others go through stringent quality control checks and will virtually always work properly and never hurt your gun. Some older military surplus ammo is still available that has corrosive primers in it. You should avoid this type of ammo. Reloaded ammo can (not "Does", but "Can") contain badly seated primers, split cases, erratic case length, erratic powder charges, and a host of other problems. Don't get me wrong, I reload my own ammo and it is all I shoot in my guns, so I am a big fan of reloads. There are also some first-class reloads available, but there are also some junk reloads that I wouldn't shoot through anything I own.

Every gun seems to have a particular brand or style of ammo that it prefers, and it frequently takes some trial and error to find the best diet for your gun. If you experience feeding problems or accuracy problems, try a different brand or bullet weight or bullet style and see if that helps. New guns frequently experience a breaking-in period, so you may experience a few misfeeds with a new autoloader, but they should be few and far between.

Autoloaders can be very picky about their ammunition. Bullet weights vary even in the same caliber. . 40 S&W ammunition, for example, can be purchased with 180 grain, 165 grain, or even 200 grain bullets. Other calibers have even more choices of bullet weights, so you may have to find the one that shoots best in your gun.

There are also different styles of bullets; round nose, hollow point, truncated cone, wad cutter, and semi-wad cutter are the most popular. The difference among them is in the shape of the bullet. While not a big problem in revolvers, the bullet shape has a profound affect on the feeding reliability of autoloaders. When a cartridge comes out of the magazine, it must hit the feed ramp in the gun and tip up. Then, when the rear of the cartridge is released by the magazine, it must tip down and chamber properly. Bullets with a flat nose (truncated cone or semi-wad cutter) can sometimes dig into the feed ramp and not chamber properly. Again, this is just something that you may have to play with to find what works best in your gun.

Be certain that the ammunition is the proper ammo for your gun. The proper ammunition for YOUR gun (not just one that looks like yours, but YOUR gun) will be engraved on the barrel. Many calibers sound similar but are significantly different. For example the common 9mm is normally either the 9mm Luger, 9mm Parabellum, or 9x19. There are also 9mm Makarov, 9mm Kurtz, 9mm Short, 9x21, 9x23 and some others. When you buy ammunition, LOOK AT THE BOX. When you get to the range and start to load your magazines, LOOK AT THE BOX. Loading the wrong ammunition in your gun is a good way to ruin your day; it might load right, it might chamber right, it might even fire, but you may not like the results.

If you ever pull the trigger and the gun doesn't do what you expected it to do, or if it didn't feel right, FIND OUT WHY! If it didn't go off at all it could be a "Hang Fire" or a round that goes off several seconds after the trigger is pulled. Keep the muzzle pointed downrange for 30 seconds or so to ensure that it is not going to go off, then unload the gun and find out what happened. If the shot felt weak, check for a "Squib" load. This is normally caused by a cartridge that was loaded without any powder in it or a light powder charge. The primer has enough energy to get the bullet out of the case, but sometimes not enough to get it out of the barrel. Firing another shot can cause the barrel to rupture right in front of your face. Again, if ANYTHING felt wrong, find out why before you shoot again.

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A word of caution ... There are two types of ammunition that should probably be avoided most of the time. These are +P and +P+ ammunition. There is nothing wrong with this ammunition, but it is extra power ammo, and in some guns can cause excessive chamber pressures. Every caliber has a maximum chamber pressure, and exceeding it can cause the chamber to rupture. If you feel like you must shoot +P or +P+ ammo, be sure your gun can handle the extra pressure or you might wind up wearing parts of it.

One final word about ammunition ... Cost. In general, the larger a cartridge is the more it is going to cost. .22 ammunition costs a LOT less than 44 Magnum ammo. If you plan on shooting a lot, plan on spending some money. 9mm Luger ammo runs about \$8 to \$10 for a box of 50 (prices vary, of course, and you can get bulk ammo for less), and shooting 100 rounds per trip to the range is very common. Make your practice sessions count. I have seen people at ranges blasting rounds out as fast as they could pull the trigger. On looking at their targets I can only assume they were either trying to see how fast they could move their finger, trying to see how much noise they could make, or trying to impress the uninformed, because they sure as hell didn't hit anything. Try and learn something each time you squeeze the trigger. All you will learn from shooting fast in the beginning stages is that you can mechanically make the trigger move pretty quick, you won't hit very much and you won't learn very much. As your ability to hit the target reliably increases, the speed in which you can do so will automatically increase right along with it.

COMPENSATORS AND PORTING

Compensators and porting both do the same thing. They are basically slots or holes that are cut into the barrel of the gun right at the muzzle. As the bullet passes the ports or comp slots, part of the high-pressure gas exits through the ports or slots and provides a "Jet" effect that compensates for the muzzle flip. The result is that the muzzle does not rise as high and allows the shooter to get back on target quicker.

I do not like porting or compensators except for competition guns. The noise level is increased dramatically, there is a lot of high-pressure, high-temperature gas expelled right in the face of the shooter, and at night your night vision is gone because of the flash that comes out of the ports. In competition, where the rules allow them, comps do provide a distinct advantage but I do not like them for a defensive handgun.

MAINTENANCE

Guns like to be clean, and an occasional cleaning is going to be a requirement. Some guns are easy to disassemble and clean and others are more difficult. Revolvers are usually a lot easier to clean than autoloaders, and also tend to be less prone to problems when they are dirty. Powder residue and dirt build up in the mechanisms can affect the feeding of autoloaders. Most modern guns function just fine when they are dirty, but some really start to get temperamental when they are dirty. A gun that is difficult to disassemble would not prevent me from buying it, but one that doesn't function properly when it is dirty would cause me to move on to the next choice, so this is an item when a friend's opinion is very valuable.

GUN TRIGGER LOCKS AND CHILD SAFETY

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It is a parent's responsibility to keep guns out of the hands of their children. Any parent who knowingly allows a firearm to be in a place where a child can play with it is negligent in their duties. It is also the duty of the parents to ensure that, as the children get older, they know to stay away from the gun and / or know how to handle it safely. I learned to shoot when I was 9 years old, and there have been guns in my house all my life (nope, they weren't my father's guns, they were my mother's guns; my parents were divorced when I was 3 years old). I was taught at an early age that guns were NOT something for me to play with, I was taught what they were capable of doing if handled incorrectly, and I never even considered playing with any of them because I understood the harm I could cause with them.

You agree with that, right? At least in principle. Well, here is the catch: Gun trigger locks are probably the most worthless things in the world. It is only thanks to the political clowns in Washington that you get to pay for one when you purchase your new gun because they are utterly worthless. Sure, all manufacturers provide them "Free Of Charge" with every firearm purchase, just like you didn't pay for the tires that were on your car when you bought it.

Maybe a trigger lock will keep a young child from being able to get to the trigger on your gun, but what good does that do? It does NOT keep the gun out of their hands, and a determined older child can have it out in a few minutes! Young children can still take the cartridges out and play with them by throwing them in the fireplace or something equally annoying (this is probably a good place to point out the fact that it isn't a good idea to store ammunition where children can get to it either!). I thought the idea was to keep the guns out of their hands completely, not make them semi-unusable for anyone.

There is also the fact that having your trigger locked to keep your child from playing with it will also do the same thing for you when you need it RIGHT NOW! If you ever have to use your gun at home, you are not going to have a minute or two to find the key to the trigger lock (you wouldn't dream of keeping the gun and the keys in the same place would you? Or even worse, always ensure that your gun has the trigger lock in place, but then leave the key in the lock so you can get to it quickly), get it in the lock (most likely in the dark), and then get the lock thingy out of the trigger guard. You will most likely have a few seconds to wake up, realize something is wrong, and get to your gun.

Don't get me wrong, I am a strong advocate of keeping guns out of the hands of children, but an idiotic trigger lock is not the way to do it. There are better ways. If you plan on having several guns, or if you already have some rifles or shotguns, look into a locking gun cabinet or, even better, a gun safe. If you only have this one handgun there are several single-gun safes that are designed for the purpose of safely securing a gun yet allowing it to be accessed quickly when needed. They can be mounted to the wall or to the frame of your bed. They have combination locks that are designed to be opened in the dark. Most have a series of pins that you push in a certain sequence to unlock the safe, and some even have a molded hand on them so you just slap your hand into it and push the tips of your fingers down in a certain sequence. They are fast, they are reliable, and most importantly, they are far more "Childproof" than a trigger lock. Best of all, they don't cost an arm and a leg. \$150 will get you a good one, and you can find them at virtually any good gun store.

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HOLSTERS

If there is anything more prolific in the firearms industry than holster makers, I honestly don't know what it is. It seems that every day there are a few more holster makers who swear their offerings are the best to be had. I started to leave this section out simply because there are so many choices and options that it is really hard to even know where to start and where to stop.

What makes one holster better than another? In reality I honestly don't know. I can tell good leather work when I see it, and I can tell when a holster fits a gun properly, but as far as telling you why one holster is worth \$50 and another one that looks virtually the same and fits the gun equally well is worth \$150, I can't do that because I don't know. The holsters that I use run about \$50 each, they fit the gun fine, they are well made, and I like them so I keep using them.

My web page at <http://www.craigcentral.com> has links to many of the major holster manufacturers in the Guns and Shooting section. Currently there are as many styles and models and makes of holsters as there are guns, and picking the proper one is a hard choice. As with all the "Gun Stuff" above, I'm just going to mention a little bit about what is available and you can determine for yourself what works best for you. There should probably be more listed here, but this should be enough to give you an idea of what to look for or at least get you pointed in the right direction.

Regardless of your choice the holster should hold the gun properly. It should be formed to fit the gun and hold it without straps or any other retention device. A well-made holster does not need retention straps because the holster itself is designed to hold the gun. You don't want the gun just flopping around in the holster or the holster flopping around on your belt. Everything should be held securely so that you always know where to put your hand when you need to.

MATERIALS - There are basically three materials in current use for holsters; Nylon, Leather (either cowhide or horsehide) and Kydex. Nylon holsters are normally inexpensive and generic. One holster will fit several different guns, but it doesn't fit any of them properly. If a holster is compared to a glove, then the nylon holsters would be similar to a mitten. Leather is self-explanatory, but for those who aren't familiar with it, Kydex is an extremely tough plastic. Kydex holsters are molded to fit a particular make and model of gun, and they hold them snugly and correctly. I've never owned a Kydex holster but I know a lot of people who do and they all swear by them. They also tell me that the wear on the gun's finish is no worse than a leather holster.

STYLES - There are so many styles of holsters I'm not sure I can remember them all. In fact, I almost need to break them up into sub styles. The major styles are "Strong Side", "Cross Draw", "Shoulder", "Ankle", and "Small Of The Back".

Strong side holsters are worn on your strong or dominant side. If you normally hold the gun in your right hand, then your right side is your strong side. As far as drawing speed goes, a strong side holster will normally win every time (yeah, I know there are exceptions, but an average person can normally draw from a strong side holster faster than he can anything else).

Cross Draw holsters are worn on the opposite side, and normally closer to the front of the body. If you are right handed a cross draw holster would be worn about where the left-hand pocket of your trousers would be. In some situations a cross draw holster (or a shoulder holster) can allow you to get to your gun faster. Specifically when driving or in your car. Shoulder harnesses and seat belts make it difficult to reach your arm back to a strong side holster, and in situations like

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that a cross draw or shoulder holster is more convenient. These holsters have a disadvantage though. Every time you draw from one you effectively "Sweep" everything in front of you with your gun. When you draw from a strong side holster you just pivot the gun forward and it is pointed at the target. When you draw from a cross draw holster you pull it out and it is pointed behind you. You have to pivot it around to point at a target in front of you, and as you do so you "Sweep" it across everything in its path. If you had a "Negligent Discharge" at this point, it could cause real problems.

Shoulder holsters are also worn on the weak side, but a harness goes over your shoulder and allows it to hang beneath your armpit. The shoulder holster may be slightly more concealable than a cross draw holster, but the same advantages and disadvantages apply. When you draw from a shoulder holster you will "Sweep" everything in front of you.

Small of the back holsters are worn in the center of the back. If you think sitting on a strong side holster is uncomfortable, try one of these. They may be very concealable but they are difficult to get to, hard to draw from, and extremely uncomfortable when sitting.

Ankle holsters are worn around the ankle. With all but the smallest guns they are virtually worthless. Trying to get a gun out of one is a chore even when there is no pressure.

Now, in addition to these styles, there are other "Sub Styles", and they can be applied to any of the belt holsters mentioned above.

Belt holsters. Plain, old vanilla, run it over your belt style holsters. The old standby and the most common.

IWB or Inside The Waistband holsters. These also fit over your belt, but are worn on the inside of your trousers. This holds the gun closer to your body, keeps most of the holster out of view, and makes the gun much more concealed. I've never used one but I know some people who do and they like them very well.

Canted and Vertical - The holster can be canted so that the muzzle points to the rear, to the front, or the gun is held vertically. I like mine canted with the muzzle slightly to the rear, but that is strictly personal preference.

Yaqui Slide holsters - I'm not sure exactly where to put this, so I'll put it here. A Yaqui slide is basically a thick, stiff loop of leather about 2" to 3" tall. They are somewhat generic in that one holster will fit several guns, but unlike the generic nylon holsters they do hold the gun securely. They are not form-fitted to a particular gun, but even so are excellent holsters. I know several people who use these holsters and love them.

One more thing. Whatever holster you buy, make sure the manufacturer will stand behind it. I own one holster that is made by one of the premier holster makers, and one of the most popular companies. Even though I like the holster, and it will probably last for many years, it is the only one from them that I will ever own. The warranty that was with the holster states:

Terms of Sale

All "Name Withheld" products are sold as is and "with all faults". The entire risk as to the quality and performance of the product is with the buyer. Should the product prove defective following its purchase, the buyer and not the manufacturer, distributor or retailer assumes the entire risk of all necessary servicing or repairs.

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It goes on with more of the same garbage, but the bottom line is "If it breaks or doesn't work, that's tough. We've got your money and that's all we wanted." I will not buy products from manufacturers who will not stand behind them. If I had noticed this before I bought it, I would not even own the one that I have. I won't mention the name, so don't bother sending me an email message to ask. All I'll say is check the warranty before you buy.

PARTS, ACCESSORIES, AND WARRANTY

There is nothing worse than spending a lot of money on a gun and then finding out that you can't get parts from the manufacturer or find holsters or magazines or ammunition for it, except for finding out that warranty service is handled in another part of the world. Find out what the warranty period is, and where the gun has to be sent to get it fixed if it breaks. Anything less than a 1-year warranty is not acceptable to me, and I want a repair center in this country. I can have parts for my Beretta in my hands the next day if I need to, and that means a lot to me.

Support from the manufacturer is also important. I've called Beretta on several occasions, and always been able to talk to a human and gotten an answer to my question or a resolution to my problem. I expect the manufacturer to stand behind their product, and to help me out when I have a problem or a question. I don't want answering machines or voice mail that is never returned or ambiguous answers to questions; I want help and I have always been able to get that from Beretta. There are several other manufacturers with the same reputation, but there are also some that are not so helpful. Find out these things beforehand, it may save you a lot of problems.

Accessory manufacturers lag behind firearm manufacturers, so don't be surprised to find out that there isn't much available for a brand new model of gun. Additionally, there are not many accessories for guns that are not terribly popular. Manufacturers won't spend a lot of money designing and manufacturing accessories unless there is a good market for them. Stick with the popular models and you will be able to find what you need.

TRY IT OUT

Once you have determined what gun you want, you might be able to try it out, or at least one similar to it. Many pistol ranges have rental guns that you can rent. Also, most pistol clubs welcome visitors and beginners, and you will see a wide variety of guns at a match. Check with your friends to see if they have something similar to what you are interested in. This is a lot easier than buying a gun and then finding out that the recoil bothers you and you can't shoot it accurately or that it just plain doesn't fit your hand very well.

COMPETITION

At some point you may find that you are interested in pistol competition. At least I hope you do. Pistol competitions are absolutely the best way to enhance your shooting abilities and skills, and you do not have to be an expert to have a lot of fun and meet a lot of people who share your interest in shooting.

There are many different types of pistol matches, ranging from target shooting to combat shooting and cowboy-style shooting, so whatever your favorite style there is something for you. I am

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personally familiar with only two different formats, IDPA and USPSA, so I'll refrain from commenting on the others. If someone who reads this is familiar with other organizations and formats, I would appreciate it if you could write out a paragraph or so that I can paste in here.

IDPA (International Defensive Pistol Association) <http://www.idpa.com> - The IDPA has as its main focus defensive-style shooting. Virtually any off-the-shelf handgun will be competitive in IDPA competition. The format focuses on the type of encounters that you would have in a self-defense type of situation, and not strictly target shooting, so both speed and accuracy are important. Targets may be partially obscured or you may have to shoot from behind barricades or with only one hand. The stages are designed to be "Revolver Friendly" so the revolver shooters will be right at home in IDPA.

USPSA (United States Practical Shooting Association) <http://www.uspsa.org> - The USPSA is the United States affiliate of the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC). There are a lot of similarities between IDPA and USPSA/IPSC shooting, but in general USPSA focuses more on competition than on defensive applications. It is hard to draw a distinction between the two, and I enjoy shooting both formats. I have tried to compare the two formats, and you can read the comparison by going to <http://www.craigcentral.com/idpaipsc.asp>. One of the major differences is that USPSA has an "Open" class that allows shooters to explore the limits of what a handgun is capable of. Optical sights and compensators are the norm in the Open class, as well as internal modifications to the firearms. There are also classes for the "Box Stock" guns and those that are nearly so, as well as a revolver class.

I would like to emphasize one earlier comment; you do NOT have to be an expert to enjoy shooting competition. There are a lot of people at the matches I shoot who are still in the early learning stages, and they are the ones that learn the most. Just because you don't shoot that well is not a reason to stay away. I promise that you will be welcomed and you will see a dramatic improvement in the way you shoot after just a few matches. Give it a try and you will be hooked.

BEGINNING SHOOTER HINTS

There are a LOT of things that beginning shooters can do to cause accuracy problems. In fact there are a lot of things that experienced shooters can do to cause accuracy problems. The difference is that most of the time the beginner is willing to believe that the problem is him whereas the experienced shooter always wants to blame it on the gun. I promise that 99% of the time it is NOT the gun. Unless the gun is actually broken it will normally be more accurate than the shooter. Some people are good enough that they can shoot to the limits of their guns, but most of us aren't.

The only way to learn to shoot is to practice and then practice some more, but there are a few things that affect your shooting and you can do something about. Shooting, in theory, is dirt simple; Align the sights with the target and squeeze the trigger without affecting the sight alignment. What could be simpler? In practice it isn't quite that simple. There are a lot of muscles involved, and each one of them wants to make you miss your target. Keep practicing, watch for problem areas, and practice some more. I'm not going to write an article on how to shoot here, but I'll provide a few pointers that will get you started in the right direction. If you are a complete beginner, I cannot emphasize the importance of a good shooting class. Get some instruction, it will save you a lot of headaches, and make you a better and safer shooter.

LOCATION - Finding a place to practice can be a problem for some people. Just going out in your back yard and popping off a few rounds is not an option for us city dwellers, and may not always be a good idea for the country folks. Practice areas MUST be safe, they must have reliable backstops to

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capture the rounds and they must be able to contain EVERY shot safely (even the ones that get pulled Waaaay off target). Bullets can go a long way and they can cause damage a lot farther than you think. If you are shooting somewhere other than an established range, be very careful. Local gun stores can usually put you in contact with a local range or shooting club. This would be a good place to start looking for a place to practice.

SAFETY - Before you load your gun, review the basic safety rules in your head. Always remember that you cannot be too safe where guns are concerned, and if an accident occurs you are going to have to live with the fact that you caused it and not the gun or the range or the safety officers or the ammo or anything else. You are the one behind the trigger, you have the ultimate responsibility for handling your firearm in a safe manner, and you cannot blame anyone or anything else for an accident.

EYE AND EAR PROTECTION - Regardless of range rules you should never shoot without adequate eye and ear protection. Most ranges require both, and you will never shoot a sanctioned pistol match without them. Exposure to the noise from firearms can and will cause eventual deafness if you don't have adequate ear protection. Powder particles and pieces of ricocheting or deformed bullets can destroy eyes. Always wear adequate eye and ear protection. When shooting indoors, I recommend using both ear plugs and ear muffs even though it is slightly uncomfortable. Use your own judgment as to what is best, but remember that you only have one set of ears and one set of eyes.

GRIP - Verify that your gun is UNLOADED and the muzzle is pointed in a safe direction! Hold your gun in your strong hand pointed down at about a 45 degree angle. If you are right handed, this will be your right hand, and if you are left handed it will be your left hand. The web between your thumb and first finger should be high on the butt of the gun (but if it's an autoloader don't get it too high or you will soon find out how fast those slides move! Like the old saying goes, you can always tell an autoloader shooter by the railroad tracks on top of his strong hand). Keep your finger OFF THAT TRIGGER! Place your weak hand over your strong hand with the tips of your fingers about at the knuckles of your strong hand (this may have to be adjusted, keep reading). Your thumbs should lay on top of each other, normally with the weak-hand thumb on top.

Shooting with a two-handed grip, your strong hand does not do a lot of the gripping of the gun, most of it is done by the weak hand, it is usually about 40% strong hand and 60% weak hand. The strong hand controls the trigger, the weak hand controls the gun. The overall grip should be firm but don't tire and choke the gun, that will only tire out the muscles of your hand and make you start to twitch.

Now, fully extend your arms, close your eyes and raise the gun in front of you, then open your eyes without moving the gun. If the muzzle is pointed off to one side you need to adjust the position of your weak hand. If the muzzle is pointed toward your strong side, move the finger tips of your weak hand closer to the knuckles of your strong hand; if the muzzle is pointed toward your weak side, move the finger tips of your weak hand farther from the knuckles of your strong hand. Once you can raise the gun with your eyes closed and the sights are aligned, that is where your hands need to be.

If this doesn't feel "Natural" to you experiment until you find something that does, but ALWAYS verify that your gun is unloaded and keep your finger OFF THE TRIGGER. There is no perfect grip that works best for everyone, and the best grip for you is the one that works best.

EYE DOMINANCE - Everyone has one eye that is dominant, and that eye is normally the one that controls your sight picture. The best way to shoot is with both eyes open, but that's difficult for some people to do. If you can you will probably shoot better in the long run (you will certainly have better peripheral vision while you are shooting) but if you can't do it that way, don't let it bother you. I can't shoot with both eyes open, I've tried and I just can't do it.

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To determine which eye is dominant, here is a simple little test. Hold your arms out in front of you, with your hands crossed. Leave a small hole between your fingers that you can look through. Look through the hole, and focus on an object. It doesn't matter what, a spot on the wall, something in a picture, anything. Now start slowly moving your hands toward your face. When your hands touch your face one eye will be peeking through the hole and the other one won't. The one peeking through the hole is your dominant eye.

If you are right handed and right eye dominant or left handed and left eye dominant you should not have any problems shooting. If your dominant eye is not the same as your dominant side you will have some adjusting to do because you are going to have to hold your gun farther to one side than most people do. It is not something that is terribly difficult to do, but it may be something that you have to adjust your grip and stance to accommodate.

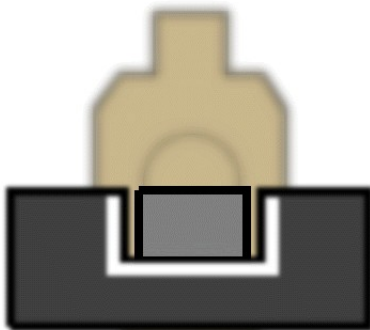
SIGHT ALIGNMENT AND SIGHT PICTURE - These are two different things. Sight alignment is how the sights are aligned in relation to each other. Assuming a standard "Notch And Post" sight arrangement, the front sight should be visible through the notch in the rear sight. There should be an equal amount of light on each side of the post, and the top of the post should be even with the top of the notch in the rear. If the post is off to one side in the notch the point of impact will be on that side. If it is lower than the notch the shot will hit low, and if it is higher the shot will hit higher.

Sight PICTURE is how the sights are lined up in relation to the target. This will vary with different sight configurations and different calibers and ranges, but in general for most handgun calibers and ranges, the bullseye should sit on top of the front sight post.

One thing to keep in mind ... The human eye can only focus on one thing at a time. You cannot focus on the rear sight, the front sight, and the target all at the same time. **WATCH THE FRONT SIGHT!** The target will normally be blurred and the rear sight will normally be blurred. The important one is the front sight because that is the one that the bullet is going to follow.

Proper sight alignment and sight picture will look something like the image shown here. The target is blurred, the rear sight is slightly blurred, but the front sight is sharp and clear. This is the sight "Picture".

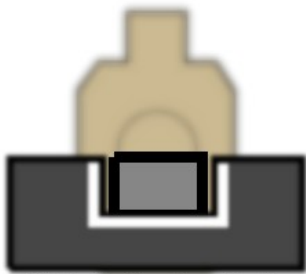
Also notice that the space between the edges of the rear notch and the sides of the front post are equal, the top of the front post is aligned with the top of the rear notch. This is the sight "Alignment".



This image also demonstrates a "Six O'clock Hold". The point on the target that you want to hit actually sits on top of the sights, or in other words the sights are at the point of impact's "Six O'clock" position. Here the point of impact will be in the center of the circle on the target, on top of the front sight post.

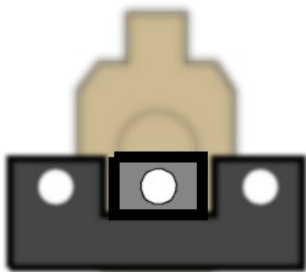
Here are some images of other common sight combinations.

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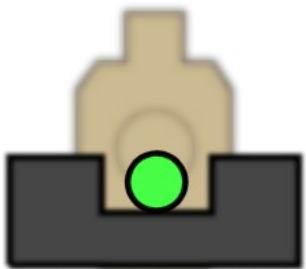
White Outline Rear Sight

This rear sight has a white outline. In dim light this makes the rear notch much more visible and allows the sights to be acquired more easily.



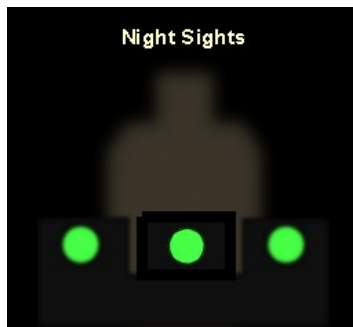
Tri-Dot Sights

Tri-Dot sight combination. Line up the dots and the sights are aligned. This combination is becoming very popular.



Fiber Optic Front Sight

Fiber Optic front sights glow brightly in direct light, and even in dim light they are quite visible. They are very quick to acquire but a bit more difficult to align in a standard square rear notch until you become used to them.



Night Sights are becoming very popular, especially on self-defense handguns. At night, when most attacks occur, they allow you to pick up your sights much more quickly. They are available in different combinations of bars and dots, and also in different colors.

Hint: There is a target in the image. If you don't see it try dimming the room lights! It is very faint, much like it would be at night.

FLINCH - Unquestionably the most common problem with new shooters. Flinch is what happens when the gun goes off and it bothers you. The noise and recoil are not normal to humans, and it is normal to flinch when the gun goes off. In most cases it goes away with practice, you just get to the point where you don't let it bother you any more. Flinch also relates to trigger control (see below). It

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is normal for new shooters to anticipate the trigger break and then yank the trigger the rest of the way. The result is the same, the muzzle is pulled off the target.

If you think you may have a flinch problem, the old "Ball and Dummy" exercise will tell you for sure. Have someone load a magazine for you, and stick a dummy round in there somewhere. You can also do it yourself if you are honest and don't know where the dummy round is. It's even easier with a revolver, just leave a chamber empty. If you are flinching you will know it when you hit the dummy round or empty chamber, the muzzle will jerk when you squeeze the trigger.

TRIGGER CONTROL - One of the hardest things to do, but also one of the most important. If you yank the trigger you are going to yank the muzzle off target. Squeeze the trigger, like you were squeezing a tube of toothpaste and didn't want to blow it everywhere. Never just yank back on the trigger, triggers are never "Pulled", they are always "Squeezed", slowly, smoothly, and evenly. All you do is continually increase the pressure on the trigger until it "Breaks". The trigger break should come as a complete surprise each and every time, you should not be able to anticipate the trigger break. If you are right-handed and your shots are falling low and left you are probably yanking the trigger. One trick I was taught was to count backwards from some number as you squeeze the trigger. This forces your mind to concentrate on something other than the trigger and makes for a smoother release.

TRIGGER CONTROL #2 - When you put your finger on the trigger the pad of your index finger should be on the trigger, not the first joint of the finger. Putting the pad of the finger on the trigger gives you more feeling of the pressure on the trigger and gives you more control of it. Think of your finger as a lever; the longer the lever the easier it is to move something, and if you choke back to the joint of your finger you are not utilizing your trigger finger to its fullest.

TRIGGER CONTROL #3 - When you squeeze the trigger, squeeze it STRAIGHT BACK. Hold your hand like you had a pistol in it, look straight down at it, and extend your index finger like you were pointing at something. Now move the index finger back like you were pulling a trigger. For most of us the finger will actually describe an arc over toward the thumb. This can cause the muzzle to go off to the side as the trigger is pulled because you are actually exerting sideways pressure on it. Practice pulling your finger STRAIGHT back and not letting it go to the side. It isn't as easy as it sounds, and it takes some practice, but it will make the trigger release a lot more even.

STANCE - Entire books have been devoted to the subject of shooting stances. The best stance for ANY shooter is the one that works best for him, regardless of what the books say. The two most popular stances are the Weaver stance and the Modern Isosceles stance. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and the bulk of us wind up using a modified version of one or the other of them. Find a stance that allows you to be comfortable and relaxed without your muscles tensing up, but at the same time is stable so that you don't rock from side to side or front to back. This is your stance, and it is the one that is best for you and only you.

DRY FIRING - Dry firing is basically shooting your gun without any ammunition in it. Most modern firearms will not be harmed by dry firing, but if you have concerns or if your gun manufacturer recommends it, you can use "Snap Caps" or dummy rounds to cushion the fall of the firing pin. Dry firing is excellent practice, and allows you to practice sight alignment and sight picture as well as trigger control without firing a shot. You must, however, remember to VERIFY THAT YOUR GUN IS UNLOADED and remember the basic rules! Make absolutely, positively, CERTAIN that it is unloaded before you squeeze the trigger, and even then point it in a safe direction. If you put it down for a little while and then come back for more practice, check it again. You cannot check it too many times but you can damn sure forget to check it one time too few.

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DRAWING FROM A HOLSTER - There are a lot of ways to make mistakes when drawing a gun from a holster and you must be very careful every time you do it. First, as usual, make ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN that your gun is unloaded. Face in a safe direction so that your muzzle will always be pointed safely. and be sure of what is behind the wall you are looking at. In short BE CAREFUL AND BE SAFE!.

The recommended method is a four-step procedure. Start with your gun in the holster, facing your target with your hands at your side.

1. Put your strong hand on the gun with the trigger finger pointed down and outside the holster, and at the same time move your weak hand to the center of your chest. You MUST have a firm grip on the gun BEFORE you draw it. DO NOT try and adjust the grip after it has been drawn, make sure you have a good grip before you draw.
2. Holding the gun firmly, draw it straight up to out of the holster, but KEEP YOUR FINGER OFF THE TRIGGER!
3. Move the gun up to the center of your body to meet your weak hand. The gun should be held close in to your body at this point. Put your weak hand over the gun and assume your normal grip.
4. Push the gun straight out away from you, and as you do so pick up the sights with your eyes. When your arms get to full extension, you should already have your grip established and your sights aligned, and all that is left is to put your finger on the trigger and squeeze it.

SUMMARY

The easiest way to summarize this is to simply find a gun that you like, that fits your physique and pocket book, and practice with it. If you stick with the major manufacturers, the gun is going to be accurate and reliable and the difference between two guns in that respect is going to be very minimal. The difference between two shooters is normally not the gun, but the shooter himself. Practice with your gun and you will get good with it, it's as simple as that.

But above all else remember SAFETY, first, last, and ALWAYS. NEVER allow yourself to become complacent with a gun. Firearms safety cannot be overemphasized because it is reality. If you handle guns you are handling something that is potentially dangerous and a moment's lapse can cause serious harm to someone or something. BE CAREFUL and never put yourself into a position where a mistake can cause an accident. NEVER forget this!

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