

How To Fix The Top Pistol Shooting Errors



Learn how to correct these top six pistol shooting errors both new and, sometimes, experienced shooters commit in our insightful guide!

A Guide to Fixing the Top Pistol Shooting Errors: Episode 1

Error 1: Anticipation



If you shoot with your right hand, are your shots consistently landing low and left of the bullseye? If you're left-handed, are your shots going low and right, or are they just landing a bit low, even though you know

your sights are on? It has happened to all of us at one time or another — anticipation is, by far, the most common shooting error.

The cause: Anticipation, often called flinching, causes the low and left or right hits phenomenon. The cause is the shooter anticipating the noise and motion of recoil just before it happens. A similar problem, what I call “attacking” the trigger, or pressing it too hard and fast, can also be the cause of shots going low — though there is another we will cover in the next installation.

The fix: There are many methods of addressing anticipation and trigger mashing. For me, the secret to fixing the problem is getting a good feel of it. If you’re teaching yourself or training with an equally or less-skilled pal, here are some ways to fix the issue:

- [Dry fire with an empty case](#). Be sure to unload the firearm with the slide closed. Get in position to shoot, [sights on target](#), safety off. Have a buddy balance a spent shell casing on top of your front sight. Press the trigger until it clicks, such that the casing stays put. If your sighting is slanted and won’t balance the case, put it as far forward on the slide as you can. It’s not quite as effective, but if you’re a major masher, this will still be a challenge.

A dime works, but not quite as well, for this drill if you’re practicing at home. Of course, you’ll need to reset your slide between every trigger press.

- **Ball and dummy drill.** Invest in a snap cap or two, available at most shooting supply stores. Snap caps are dummy rounds for dry firing. Plain plastic dummy rounds, with no metal “primer” in the base, are okay for occasional practice, but watch out for deterioration and always inspect the barrel after using them.

Load up, or better yet, have a buddy load up, a magazine that alternates real and dummy rounds at intervals you don’t know. Load up and start shooting. The idea here is that, especially for people who don’t understand what they’re doing when they anticipate, that closing of eyes, clenching of the jaw, and slight lurch forward suddenly isn’t rewarded with recoil. For shooters willing and able to connect the dots between dummy and real firing, they’ll self-adjust to maintaining stance during the shot.

This drill does involve knowing how to clear malfunctions and as such is free practice for that, as well.

- **Finger flows like water.** Yeah, it sounds weird. But for some folks, simply thinking of the trigger press being like water flowing over a rock in a gentle brook, with the moment of firing being just the rock, is the secret to mastering trigger press as a steady, single-speed motion while firing is, as I often say, the gun’s job. Your job is to deliver a steady press of the trigger.

Error 2: Pistol Shooting Grip



Control of recoil begins when you pick up or draw the pistol. A grip is, above all else, the recoil management system. Keeping the web of your firing hand as high as reasonably possible on the backstrap, close your fingers around the grip. Of course, your trigger finger is straight and resting at home base, on the frame.

Editor's Note: [Legal "Loophole" Allows You To Carry Concealed In 28 States](#)

Closing the fingers of your non-firing hand around your other hand, be sure you feel direct contact with the trigger guard above your index finger. Keeping your fingers next to one another, not spread out, nestle the bottom joint of your support-hand thumb into the cradle created by the bottom joint of your firing thumb.

[When done correctly](#), the thumbs will both point in the direction of the target and be nested together like spoons. Don't stack the heels of your hands on one another; the support hand's heel will be in front of the firing hand. You want as little of the gun's grip exposed as possible.

Many people like to hook the index finger of the support hand around the front of the trigger guard. It's not a fatal flaw, but it will induce uneven lateral pressure on the muzzle. In other words, it makes you less accurate, especially as distance increases.

Regardless of the stance you use, It's helpful to think of pushing forward with the firing hand and pulling straight back, towards your sternum, with the support hand. If you want to bend the support side elbow, fine, but let it fall naturally in front of your body, not out to the side.

Error 3: Pistol Shooting Stance



Leaning away from the gun is another pistol shooting mistake. Shooting and basketball are two of the few pursuits demanding that players carry weight on the balls of their feet, not the heels, for an effective stance. Except for the largest humans, the stance is also part of recoil management and a forward-oriented one will serve you well when firing multiple shots.

If you're squared off facing the target, bend forward at the hip so that your shoulders are over your toes. If you're quartered away using the so-called Weaver stance, put your weight into the front of the foot closest to the target. In either stance, keep your feet at least shoulder width apart.

The larger the caliber and/or the lighter the shooter, the more important leaning into the gun is. Sooner or later, recoil catches up with everyone's size, so this is good advice for all shooters. I believe this is also a psychological advantage. "Leaning into the gun" encourages confidence and increases your control over recoil, not to mention, protects your spine, too.

If you're practicing for shooting in self-defense, the rearward lean telegraphs insecurity, whereas a forward lean indicates assertion. Make your body language work in your favor in practice, even though a defensive situation isn't likely to lend itself to a perfect stance. Correcting pistol shooting errors such as leaning away from the gun is pretty much straightforward.



Last week, we covered [tips](#) for diagnosing and fixing the most common pistol shooting errors. This week, we examine three classic mistakes that new and even experienced, but untrained, shooters sometimes make. These mistakes are usually the ones that prevent even seasoned shooters from achieving the next level of accuracy. The good news is, these mistakes are easily overcome with the right technique.

As for fixing these errors, first, of course, is understanding the problem. This advice, and the exercises I hope you'll practice, are building blocks on the path to better marksmanship. You'll notice none of this week's instruction is stuff you'll likely have time to think about if you must fire in a defensive encounter, or even in a shooting match. That's okay—the more you practice these skills and make them automatic, the better you'll perform in a stressful situation.

Error #4: Failure to focus on the front sight



Focused on the front sight look thru the rear.

The human eye, and most camera lenses for that matter, can only focus on one distance at a time. The rest of the view is a blur. Try it right now. Focus on any object and as you do, take note of the appearance of things more distant from it, as well as things between you and the object. That other stuff is blurry, huh?

Shooting is much the same. There are three distances on which we can focus, unless we're shooting with an optic of some sort. There's close (the rear sight, closest to the grip), medium (the front sight, closest to the muzzle), and far (the target, no matter the distance).

This is the one aspect of great marksmanship that goes against every instinct. It seems to make sense to focus on the target. Work with me here, though, and try this at the range. Having a fairly small target will help. An eight- or ten-inch paper plate, secured to a larger piece of backing material, is economical and ideal for starters. You can even draw a one-inch bullseye in the middle to help your aim.

Now, raise your firearm to a shooting position and align your sights. Hopefully you already know about centering the front sight between the dots, pillars, ears, or whatever the shape is of your rear sight. Do this as you look **through**, not **over**, the rear sight.



Sights on target

Center those aligned sights on target, so the top of your sights cover the bottom half of the target.

Pause here and check what's going on. Chances are, you're looking at the target, and getting really frustrated because the perfectly aligned sights refuse to stay perfect for more than a micro-second. That's alright, we're going to fix that, thankfully without stopping the glorious symptoms of life, like heartbeat and breath, that are the main cause. The wind may even be pushing your perfectly-gripped gun, and you in your perfect stance, around. It's still okay—we got this.

Now, move your focus from the target to the front sight. Notice when you're focused there, the target and the rear sight are just a blur. Now it's time to press the trigger, maintaining your focus on the front sight.

If you haven't tried this technique, you're reading this and thinking I've lost my marbles. You WILL, I promise, become a better shooter by practicing front-sight focus. Do it as described, with attention to sight alignment first, and you'll be able to make hits with your handgun at distances that amaze you.

If right now isn't a good time to go to the range, you can approximate this exercise anywhere, so long as you're not driving or something like that. Make a "V" with the index and middle fingers of one hand, and hold it at the approximate distance your handgun's rear sight is from your face when shooting. Now, extend your other arm to full length and center the index finger of that hand between the V. Line your fingernails up to represent a three-dot sight system, in other words, they need to be in a horizontal line as you view them, though they're separated if someone viewed you from the side. Now, pick something as a target—a doorknob or electrical outlet across an average-size room are usually good choices. Putting your aligned finger-sights over the target, practice focusing on the front sight, AKA the nail of your index finger. That's exactly what to do with your real sights and target when you get to the range.



Stay focused on the front sight after the shot

The front sight focus technique is simple, and will help you shoot more accurately. It's also easy to imagine forgetting all about the front sight if you're shooting under stress. Practice enough that you can raise the gun to target, and within five yards or less, learn to press the trigger when the front sight is visible to you on the target. This can even be done with dry-fire if you reset the slide of your unloaded semiauto after

every trigger press. That kind of practice will begin to meld the technique into something fast and accurate, which immensely benefits you in defense or competition.

Why did I say within five yards or less? At that distance, the rear sights are basically immaterial. As distance increases, and/or as the size of the target decreases, that initial rear/front sight alignment must be in place—if it's not, your shots may not hit the target at all.

Error 5: Failure to follow through

Although our focus here is handguns, this principle applies to other kinds of firearm shooting. Many folks, often in an admirable attempt to be safe and sometimes simply from being excited about shooting, pop their finger off the trigger the moment the shot breaks. While keeping your finger off the trigger is absolutely critical when you don't intend to shoot at that moment, you are indeed shooting now, and that snappy motion doesn't serve you for accuracy or efficiency in making follow-up shots. It also costs you the opportunity to learn from the shot you just took.



The shot just fired. Still holding the trigger back as I reestablish front sight focus.

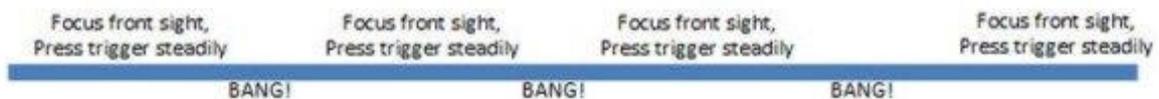
A fair amount of effort went into getting a good stance, grip, sight alignment, sight picture, and hopefully a steady, straight trigger press. If it's your intent to fire even one more shot in that moment, you've thrown much of that nice setup away in the moment your finger came away as if the trigger were suddenly a hot

iron. This change begins in slowing down your mental process while shooting. You must begin to see the trigger press, and the recoil that follows it, as nothing to get excited about.

You want to move from shooting multiple shots with the mercurial mind/finger connection represented by this graph...



...to firing shot sequences with a steady mindset that, if we graphed it, looks more like this:



I hope these graphics communicate that you need to breathe and simply concentrate on the front sight as your finger goes about its fairly boring job. The gun will fire just fine. Your job is to provide a stable platform.

You can help yourself by *maintaining physical contact with the trigger between shots*. This is best accomplished by *holding the trigger back—I mean all the way back-after the shot is fired*. Use that time to confirm that your sights are aligned again, and then decide to either take your finger to the straight/safe position, or allow the trigger to push it forward in preparation for the next shot.



Maintaining physical contact with trigger between shots

Borrowing a line from the excellent Appleseed rifle program, it's also helpful to *take a mental snapshot of where the sights were on the target at the moment the shot broke*. You must be focused on the front sight—or red dot or crosshairs if you're using an optic—in order to do that.

These fixes require that you keep your eyes, or at least your shooting eye, open throughout the firing sequence. Remember to breathe—for whatever reason, that'll help you relax your eyes *and* your trigger finger.

Error #6: Checking the target

Related to follow-through, especially when practicing multiple-shot sequences, is the error of what I call checking. That is, the person wants to see where the shot landed on paper instead of attending to the follow-through process. If your sights aren't broken or obviously out of whack, and you focused on the front sight with decently aligned sights, I promise you the shot is right in the bullseye or very close! Shooters who check prematurely soon begin to frustrate themselves with shot groups that are too low. In the time it took for the cartridge to ignite and send the bullet down the barrel, their quest for the perfect hit is foiled by the act of drooping the muzzle and raising their head to look at the target. The hole's position won't change in the moment it takes to follow through!



Checking pushes the muzzle downward

Checking is a less common error, but shows up often enough, usually in folks who are perfectionists off the range, that it bears mention. Perfectionistic traits usually serve their owners well....just resist premature checking of the target.

Putting it all together

Self-taught shooters, please try the techniques described here and in the first installment. If you have questions or requests for fixing other shooting challenges, please put them in the comments. I'm not always able to respond directly, but I do take comments into consideration for future articles. Shooting isn't a skill you can learn on the internet—you've got to get to the range. Happy shooting!