

<http://www.usconcealedcarry.com>

## The Armed Senior Citizen: Individualized Handgun Training Makes a Difference

**Bruce N. Eimer, Ph.D.**

When I teach concealed carry permit classes, I seldom fail to be surprised by the numbers of students who demonstrate inadequate, faulty, and even dangerous gun handling skills. People with varying levels of firearms experience register for our classes. We instruct people who have never touched a firearm before as well as people who have been around guns since childhood and who have been shooting for years. Students run the gamut from those who do not even own a firearm to those who own numerous firearms. Many of our students have never taken a handgun safety class, while others have taken defensive handgun courses taught by big name instructors at big name schools.



Most people who are new to the world of firearms quickly realize that they are going to need more intensive instruction than what is offered in a beginning handgun safety class. Likewise, as we address the basic issues pertinent to armed personal protection both inside and outside the home, many students who have some experience with firearms also conclude that they could benefit from more intensive instruction on the defensive use of the handgun. Having been around guns all your life does not mean that you have developed good gun handling habits or competent shooting skills. When it comes to gun handling, many individuals have been exposed to poor role models. Shooting a handgun effectively for personal defense is a different thing entirely from Sunday plinking in the woods, target shooting, or shooting a hunting rifle.

Fortunately, training opportunities abound. However, going to gun school can be very expensive both in terms of time and money if you have to travel out of town to take a three to five day course. Many people choose instead to find a local, certified firearms instructor who can provide them with competent, individualized, private instruction on the defensive use of the handgun. With competent private instruction, students can begin or continue their handgun training at a point which takes into account their background, personal defense needs and goals, and unique life situation. With appropriate training and practice, the student will learn to employ the fundamentals of good marksmanship for accurate defensive shooting.

So, what should be covered in a half-day to full-day one-on-one course of study? The answer in part depends on the student's particular needs. While just about every student of the handgun wants to improve his or her marksmanship skills to increase both speed and accuracy in shooting a handgun, there are other areas that must be covered. I have borrowed from a good training template for curriculum development that is provided by the Utah Department of Public Safety's Minimum Training Curriculum for Concealed Firearm Courses ([www.des.utah.gov/bci/concealedinstructors.html](http://www.des.utah.gov/bci/concealedinstructors.html)). What follows is one model curriculum for private instruction.

### **Assess the student**

We typically begin an individualized, private instruction session by assessing the student's level of firearms experience, goals, and needs. Why is the student seeking firearms instruction at this time? What types of firearms experience has the student had? What types of firearms has the student shot before and how much experience has the student had with these firearms? What makes and models of firearms does the student own, if any? What does the student want and need to learn at this time? How does the student live with or intend to live with firearms? In other words, how do firearms fit into the student's lifestyle? What specific types of firearms does the student intend to work with? What are the student's reasons for owning firearms? Does the student want to cover the use of a firearm for home defense? Does the student want to carry a concealed handgun? With whom does the student live, and in what kind of dwelling? Is the student looking for guidance in purchasing a firearm? By examining these types of questions, we can be sure to meet the student's individual needs and requirements.

### **Basic legal issues**

Next, we review the current legal standards that define lawful self defense and the use of force by private citizens, including the lawful use of deadly force for self defense. We then cover the prevailing legal standards relating to the transportation and concealment of firearms.

### **Handgun safety**

We typically cover or review the safe handling, checking, loading, unloading, storage, and carrying of both revolvers and semi-automatic pistols. A thorough review of the elements of firearm safety and the basic and universally applicable firearm safety rules is always part of the curriculum. We review proper range etiquette, handgun safety principles, and rules which must be followed when on the shooting range. We also cover safe concealment techniques and safe storage of firearms and ammunition.

### **Mechanical operation of handguns**

We cover the mechanical operation of both revolvers and semi-automatic pistols. This involves a review of handgun nomenclature and identification of the basic parts of a handgun and how it functions. We then talk about different types of mechanical safeties and how they work, emphasizing that no mechanical safety is a substitute for safe handling of a firearm. The student is shown how to check both a revolver and a semi-automatic to ensure proper function of both the firing and safety mechanisms.

### **Ammunition Basics**

We cover various types of ammunition, and discuss the differences between centerfire and rimfire. The student learns the components of a round of ammunition: case, primer, propellant, and bullet. We discuss the physics of handgun fire and the types of ammunition most commonly used for personal protection. We talk about how to choose the appropriate ammunition for the student's firearm given the considerations of caliber, bullet type, and what the ammunition will be used to accomplish. We also discuss how to inspect ammunition for imperfections and the potential problems that can occur with the use of light loads, heavy loads, and reloads.

### **Fundamentals of marksmanship**

I can't count all of the experienced people we have trained who demonstrate faulty habits and poor technique when shooting a qualification course on the range. Therefore, we make sure to cover the fundamentals of shooting a handgun and the basics of marksmanship. First, we identify the student's dominant eye, and teach the student how to grip the handgun properly with one hand and two hands. We help the student find the best two-handed shooting stance for that individual: Isosceles, Weaver, or a hybrid of the two. Then we explain to the student the fundamentals of sight alignment and sight picture. We cover how to smoothly press the trigger so the student learns good trigger control. Finally, we work on integrating all of these components into one smooth flow and teach the student how to follow through after each shot. In some cases, with beginners, I start with one-handed point shooting at very close range--two yards and closer. Every student leaves knowing how to shoot with two hands and with one hand.

### **Appropriate distances**

We begin shooting at close in targets to develop and imprint basic marksmanship skills, and to build the student's confidence. Distance is gradually increased. We do drills that involve shooting from the on-target position and from the ready position. With more advanced students, we work on drawing and shooting from the holster. The students also practice retrieving their handguns from a shelf on the shooting lane and firing at the target.

### **Dry fire drills**

Dry fire drills are also built into the training in order to diagnose faulty techniques and to reinforce good habits. We typically provide the student with a safety-conscious dry fire routine for practicing marksmanship fundamentals which integrates grip, stance, sight alignment, sight picture, and trigger control.

### **Single and multiple shot strings**

We begin with one-shot strings of fire and then gradually progress to multiple shot strings. We teach students how to double tap two rapid shots at close range, both one-handed and two-handed.

### **Sighted and unsighted techniques**

We teach the student how to shoot using the handgun's sights and also how to point shoot without using the sights at close range targets. We work on these skills using both two-handed as well as one-handed shooting grips. With targets at close range, we teach point shoulder shooting, as well as retention shooting techniques with the handgun held close in to the body to prevent a gun grab. We teach when each type of defensive shooting is appropriate.

### **Malfunction clearances**

We teach the basic "tap, rack, re-assess" and other routines and steps to follow if the student has a malfunction on the range, such as a stove pipe failure to eject, a double feed failure to extract, a magazine not fully seated, a hang fire, a squib round, and so forth. We also teach how to reload the handgun in an emergency, how to perform a tactical reload, and safe procedures for administrative unloading and reloading.

### **Maintenance and cleaning**

This includes discussing the importance of regular cleaning and maintenance of firearms, safety considerations when cleaning a firearm, and specifically how to clean the student's pistol.

### **Mindset**

We discuss situational awareness, mental preparedness, confronting a threat, management of the fear, and the fight or flight body alarm reaction. We also teach a mental rehearsal technique for developing and fine tuning mental preparedness for self defense.

### **What to look for in a basic defensive handgun training class**

I encourage interested readers to seek out competent training by shopping around and conversing with prospective trainers (and their students if at all possible.) It is important to note the general atmosphere in each training environment in order to determine the best instructor to meet one's individual training needs. You have to feel comfortable in order to absorb information and learn. Seek out an instructor whom you feel is genuinely concerned with your survival and who has a full working knowledge of firearms, defensive tactics, and strategies. Research the instructor's credentials.

Qualified, experienced firearm instructors should have certain qualities. These include a genuine concern for their students, and experience in providing personalized training. Egos should be put to the side and focus should be placed where it belongs, on learning survival skills. Qualified instructors must have a thorough working knowledge of firearms, their components and operation. They should be able to demonstrate non-lethal as well as lethal self defense measures, so that the student can have those alternatives. Finally, good instructors should provide training in a fun atmosphere in order to help students relax and absorb the information.

### **Summary**

Every shooter can benefit from a good refresher course every once in a while. Advanced techniques require the ability to be able to competently perform the basics. Concealed carry is a commitment that requires knowledge about a variety of pertinent topics. The same thing applies to employing firearms for home defense. Knowledge combined with the right attitude and skill is powerful, so the ideal combination is good instruction followed by regular practice.

With private instruction, you should begin at your particular skill level and learn material that meets your specific needs. Time should not be wasted. Your instructor should gauge your learning style and adjust the firearm instruction to fit. If a beginning shooter is shopping for a defensive handgun, the instructor should be able to set aside personal biases and help his student to determine what type of firearm to purchase that is right for that particular student. Then, the instructor should teach the student how to safely handle and maintain the handgun they have chosen. Appropriate instruction can save much time and money, and avoid much grief.

\*\*\*

Bruce N. Eimer, PhD, is a licensed clinical and forensic psychologist, NRA certified firearms instructor, Florida and Utah concealed firearms instructor, and a professional writer who co-authored *The Essential Guide to Handguns: Firearm Instruction for Personal Defense and Protection*. As a co-owner of Personal Defense Solutions, LLC ([www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](http://www.PersonalDefenseSolutions.net)), Bruce offers individual shooting instruction and teaches concealed carry and handgun safety classes. He can be reached at [Dr.Bruce@PersonalDefenseSolutions.net](mailto:Dr.Bruce@PersonalDefenseSolutions.net).

### **Contacts**

*Essential Guide to Handguns: Firearm Instruction for Personal Defense and Protection*  
by Stephen R. Rementer & Bruce N. Eimer (2004)  
Looseleaf Law Publications: [www.LooseleafLaw.com](http://www.LooseleafLaw.com)

Utah Department of Public Safety  
[www.des.utah.gov/bci/](http://www.des.utah.gov/bci/)  
(801) 965-4445