

Range Etiquette and Staying Safe

Note – This article is a re-print of an article originally posted on Maryland Shooters by a contributor using the handle “HolePunch”.

I see a lot of new members lately and many are asking very basic questions about gun safety, and I'm glad there so many people jumping in to offer help. One thing I thought I would add is a basic run down of what's expected of everyone at the range.

Rules specifics vary from range to range, but the basics are pretty global no matter where you are. There are a simple set of conditions and expectations of everyone during those conditions that are in place to keep everyone as safe as possible at all times. You should not even approach the firing line until you understand these several simple rules. They are not hard to remember, but I can't count the number of times I've seen them broken over and over again in the few short years I've been shooting and at the 6 or 7 shooting ranges I've visited in that short time. I admit I've only been to one indoor range and I realize that things can be a bit different (often more strict!) indoors, but I will leave specifics for certain ranges to others to post after me. I will just attempt to cover the basic universal stuff.

This is a work in progress and all members are encouraged to comment and contribute.

I. Fundamental Safety Rules

These go without saying. These rules apply everywhere, all the time. Sometimes they are shortened to "TAB-K". If that helps you remember them, then so be it.

1. Treat every firearm as if it were loaded; ALL THE TIME.
2. Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction. Sometimes this is said "Never point your weapon at anything you do not intend to destroy" or simply referred to as "muzzle control".
3. Be sure of your target and what is beyond it. Bullets go through things so you need a backstop capable of stopping the projectile. Be aware of height-over-bore; just because you have a clear line of sight doesn't mean the barrel does. Don't shoot at anything that could cause a bullet to ricochet. If you're hunting don't just shoot at movement. I could go on and on.
4. Keep your finger off of the trigger until you are ready to fire. Sometimes this is referred to as "trigger control", or my personal favorite "Keep your booger hook off of the bang switch".

There are many more rules than these, such as be sure you're using the correct ammunition for your gun, wear hearing and eye protection while shooting, and the gun's mechanical safety should be on until you're aimed down range and ready to shoot, but

this isn't the place for that. Show me a gun accident that was not a ka-boom and I'll show you one of these four basic rules being broken.

II. Range Basics

1. Rules. Follow them. Every range is different and that's covered in section VI below.
2. RSO or sometimes RO. Range Safety Officer. This might be a full-time employee of a commercial range, a club member volunteering their time, a park ranger who's showed up to make sure everyone's being safe, or just a regular guy who's taken charge of the situation in the absence of the above. Bottom line is their word is law. If they call a ceasefire (we'll get to that in a minute) then everyone stops shooting. In the absence of an RSO the visitors of a public or private range are expected to police themselves. If you see something unsafe you need to speak up. If you get yelled at consider it a learning experience and don't let it discourage you. Safety is first!
3. Never handle a weapon behind the line. This is big no-no at several ranges I've been to, while at others the rules are a little more relaxed. If you're not sure then just assume that firearms are to be handled only at the firing line and only while the range is "hot" (we'll get to that in just a second). Often times you are expected to only uncase or un-holster a weapon up at the firing line. In this case you will carry the case up to the line, orient the case so the weapon is pointed downrange, and then uncase it.
4. Weapons are only to be loaded at the firing line and only while the range is hot. I have seen some ranges that permit loaded handguns behind the line so long as they are holstered and remain that way. If you're not sure, ask an RSO. Otherwise assume there are no loaded weapons behind the line. It is however usually permitted that you may handle ammunition and load magazines behind the line.
5. Muzzles are to be pointed in a safe direction at all times. This usually means downrange. Remember "A" from TAB-K. Always keep it pointed in a safe direction. I cannot stress the importance of this enough. This goes right along with the above rule because when you uncase the weapon at some ranges it is expected to already be oriented downrange. Think about how you cased the gun as you put it away and try and have it so that when you open the case it is already pointing downrange. Same with holsters. As you draw a handgun from and return it to the holster be sure that it never points in an unsafe direction. "Cross draw" holsters and fast draws are prohibited at some ranges because it is too easy to "sweep the line" meaning you could accidentally point the weapon, even momentarily, at other shooters during the draw or while re-holstering. If you're not sure, then ask someone.
6. Always shoot into a backstop. This goes right along with the "B" in TAB-K. Your targets should always be positioned such that after the bullet passes through the paper it safely hits the backstop. Consider that you might miss. Where would the bullet go? Orient your target and your shooting position so that the trajectory ends in the backstop. You should not be shooting into the sky or the ceiling. Don't place targets "on the berm"; in other words targets should be in front of the backstop, not on top of it. If you're at an indoor

range with mechanical target holders don't shoot the mechanism or the track that it runs on.

7. Don't shoot across lanes. Shoot at the target in front of you. Not the one diagonally to the left or right. Not at your buddy next to you's target. Stay in your own lane. It's not just polite, it's also safe. The backstops are positioned where they are for a reason.
8. No drugs or alcohol should be consumed before or while shooting. Booze and guns do not mix.

III. Hang-fires and Squibs.

Even if you follow all the safety rules you could still have an accident and there are a few important things you need to know about how to stay safe. If you squeeze the trigger and get a "click and no bang", a "pop and no kick", or an abnormal sound or weak recoil you may have a hang-fire or a bullet stuck in the barrel. I feel I have to include these serious conditions here as their own separate section because I feel they are often overlooked, and because even if you follow the four basic safety rules you could still have an accident.

1. A hang-fire happens when the primer is struck but the round does not fire immediately. There will be no bang and no recoil. The round may just be a dud. Or the round may be a hang-fire. In the event of a "click and no bang" just to be safe keep the firearm pointed downrange for at least 30 seconds. If the round doesn't go off it is safe to eject it. Examine the problematic cartridge. If the bullet is still crimped into the case then you might have simply had a dud. This is common with some rim-fire ammo. Discard all duds so that they are not cycled into any firearm again. However, if the bullet is missing from the extracted case then it may be lodged in the barrel! Stop firing immediately and examine the bore for obstructions. Never fire a weapon with an obstructed barrel. It may result in an explosion which could lead to serious injury or death, which brings us to squib loads...
2. Squib load. If the powder does not ignite or if the round contained no powder at all you may have a squib load. I've never had it happen but I understand this is possible with old, surplus, or poorly kept ammo, with poorly made hand loads, and even with off-the-shelf commercially available ammo. A squib load will often appear as markedly reduced sound and recoil. Other symptoms include unusual sound, reduced or non-existent kick, failure to cycle some semi-autos, or smoke from the action instead of the barrel. If you get this "pop and no kick" you may have a bullet stuck in the barrel. Cycling and firing another round could cause the weapon to explode injuring or killing you or someone nearby. If you suspect this has happened immediately stop shooting, and with the weapon pointed downrange, wait for 30 seconds to be sure you do not have a hang-fire, then unload the weapon and examine the bore for obstructions. Also check the ejected case to see if the projectile is present. If there is a bullet stuck in the bore it must be removed before the gun can be fired again. This can usually be done with a cleaning rod. If the projectile is really stuck good in the bore you will need to take it to a competent gunsmith. If you are not sure how to safely examine your bore then ask an RSO or someone else knowledgeable in firearm safety.

IV. Condition: Range Is Hot

When the range is "hot" that means that shooters are allowed to commence firing.

1. Firearms can only be discharged on a "hot" range. If no one is shooting and you are not sure if the range is hot, please ask. Don't just start shooting. Someone may still downrange changing targets.
2. Weapons may only be handled while the range is hot. Often times weapons may only be handled while the shooter is at the firing line and while the range is hot. At some ranges I've seen people safely handling weapons behind the line while the range is hot. If you are not sure of the specific rules at a given range, just assume that you may only handle weapons while at the line and while it is hot. If you're not sure just read the posted rules and/or ask an RSO.
3. Remember "A" in TAB-K! Always keep it pointed in a safe direction. This almost always means downrange. If for whatever reason you cannot keep it pointed downrange it may be permitted that you point it skyward. If you're not sure ask an RSO. Never point a weapon downward at concrete or any hard surface which could cause a ricochet. Make sure that you don't "flag" (or "sweep") the line while reloading, casing/holstering or uncasing/un-holstering any firearm. Remember to shoot only into approved backstops and only at your own target in your own lane. By keeping a gun pointed in a safe direction, even IF you had an accidental discharge no one would get hurt.
4. Personal protective equipment including safety glasses and hearing protection ("eyes and ears") are to be worn by anyone and everyone on the firing line at all times while the range is hot. At many ranges you are expected to wear your eyes and ears at all times while the range is hot, regardless if you are shooting or not. If you are in doubt, just wear it.
5. While the range is hot NO ONE may step forward of the firing line. This should need no explanation. You are to be behind the line while shooting, and all shooting should occur at the line. If at any time people or animals are seen downrange while the line is hot, a ceasefire should be called immediately.
6. All shooting must occur from the firing line. The line may be the edge of a concrete pad, an imaginary line at the front of the benches, or even an actual line painted or taped onto the floor. If you are not sure where the firing line is, ask someone.

V. Condition: Ceasefire & Range is Cold

Once a ceasefire has been called everyone must stop shooting immediately. Don't finish your magazine. Don't get in one more shot. Stop what you're doing, unload your weapon, and make it safe. Ceasefires tend to occur in several stages and may look something like this:

1. First someone, typically an RSO, will call for a "ceasefire". This can happen for many reasons. There may be a safety concern such as a safety infraction or a serious malfunction may be observed. There could be an injury, or even an animal on the range. Or more likely other shooters would simply like to go downrange and set up or change targets. At commercial ranges ceasefires may be called at regular intervals to give everyone a chance to retrieve targets. At indoor ranges with mechanical target movers ceasefires may be few and far between since shooters can retrieve targets without ever stepping beyond the firing line. At private ranges or public land where an RSO is not available it may be up to visitors to decide when it's appropriate to call a ceasefire. For instance one shooter might simply speak up and ask "can we get a ceasefire?" and if everyone is in agreement then it may be decided to call a ceasefire at that time.
2. Once a ceasefire has been called all shooters are to immediately stop what they are doing, unload their weapon and make it safe, and either holster, case, or set down their weapon on the bench, gun rack or where ever is appropriate. One exception to this rule may be for muzzleloaders where if you've already loaded and have not yet fired you may be required to discharge the gun in order to make it safe. At most ranges it is also appropriate to open the action of a firearm that is left out on the bench during a ceasefire, or anytime it is not being used. Magazines should be removed. Revolvers should have the cylinder open if possible. If an automatic pistol is left out the slide should be locked back. Optionally handguns may usually be holstered, depending on range rules. Bolt actions and pump actions can simply have their actions open and rearward. Other rifles with bolt-hold-open mechanisms should have their BHOs in use. At certain ranges chamber flags, brightly colored plastic plugs which are inserted into the chamber to indicate an empty chamber and to prevent ammunition from being fed, are required during a ceasefire. In the absence of chamber flags an empty shell casing lodged in the action perpendicularly and visibly sticking out, will oftentimes suffice. If the weapon has a safety this should be activated if possible. You should plan ahead and have a good idea of what's expected of you when a ceasefire is called. The sooner all weapons are cleared and made safe the sooner the range can go "cold". Once a ceasefire has been declared it is typically safe to remove your safety glasses and hearing protection if you choose to. Do not step forward of the firing line until the range has been declared "cold". At some ranges you are required to step back from the firing line to indicate to others that you are no longer shooting.
3. When it's decided that no one is handling any firearms and everyone is aware of the ceasefire the range may be declared "cold" or "clear" by an RSO. At this time, and no sooner, you may advance forward of the firing line and onto the range to retrieve or replace targets. Make absolutely certain no one is handling any firearms before venturing downrange. Which brings us to...
4. During a ceasefire there is NO handling of weapons of any kind at any time. If you cased up your gun, leave it in there until the range is declared hot again. Holstered handguns will remain holstered. Everything you needed to do to your firearm should have been done before the range was declared cold. If there's a problem please report it to an RSO. Things you may do during a ceasefire include handling ammunition and loading

detachable magazines with ammunition. Some ranges will permit you to insert a magazine into a holstered handgun so long as the weapon stays holstered the whole time.

5. The range remains cold until all shooters are finished all business downrange and have returned, everyone has put their "eyes and ears" back on, and it is decided by an RSO, or in the absence of an RSO, by everyone present that it is safe to go "hot" again. Check and double check that there is no one downrange before going hot. Be sure to replace your safety glasses and hearing protection before going hot if you took them off earlier. No firearms are to be handled until the range has been declared hot again. If for any reason anyone is not ready to go hot yet you must wait for them to finish up their business.

VI. Range Specific Rules

Every range has rules posted. Read them. Most ranges have some weird rule your were not expecting. Don't be that guy that gets caught doing something boneheaded. It's VERY embarrassing. Some range specific rules you might encounter are:

1. Sometimes certain calibers or types of ammunition are prohibited. Common rules include "No .50BMG", "No buckshot" or "No armor piercing". Sometimes indoor ranges only permit ammunition sold there by them.
2. Most ranges in Maryland do not permit full auto.
3. Some ranges, especially outdoor ones, you must bring your own target stands. Find out first if stands, frames or backing is provided. Some ranges provide or sell paper targets. At public ranges you must bring your own.
4. Some ranges prohibit rapid fire or have a "one shot per second" or similar rule in place. Some range require all shots to be aimed fire to ensure the backstop is hit and range facilities are not damaged.
5. Certain types of holsters may be prohibited in order to prevent sweeping the line with your muzzle while un-holstering or re-holstering. Some ranges may prohibit holstered guns behind the firing line entirely.
6. Some ranges do not permit targets with images representing a person.
7. Many ranges have specific benches or lanes which are limited to pistol, shotgun, black powder or rim-fire firearms. If the range you are visiting has such restrictions be aware of them and be sure to only shoot the permitted weapons in those stations.
8. Some ranges have a "3 rounds max in a magazine at a time" or similar rule.

These are just a sprinkling of some of the range specific rules you might encounter.

VII. Courtesy

1. No Tomfoolery. No horseplay. No bad attitudes. Be polite to your fellow shooters.
2. Watch where your brass goes. Sometimes it's hard, but if possible try not to shower your neighbor with hot brass. It can hurt, cause burns, and it's just plain distracting.
3. Don't commence shooting if you see that your neighbor is still putting their hearing protection on. Also, remember that foam plugs take a moment to swell up and start working.
4. Don't hog up the bench or lane. If you see that others are waiting their turn and you've been shooting for a while let them have a turn. This of course does not apply if you've paid for a time slot in your lane. If you paid then try and be packed up and ready to leave when your time is up. Don't have the RO come and tap you on the shoulder and tell you your time is up.
5. Don't shoot at other people's targets.
6. Don't make a mess and have a bazillion guns and junk laying around hogging up your station. By unloading and making each weapon is safe before moving on to another you won't have multiple guns to make safe should a ceasefire be called. Also consider casing up each weapon as you're done shooting it so you don't have a mess to clean up when you pack up and leave.
7. Don't be a mall ninja. Just Google it.
8. Don't take all day changing targets. The range cannot go hot again until you're back so don't stand out there picking your nose and admiring your awesome skills. You'll have plenty of time to do that when you get back to the line.
9. Pick up your brass when you are done. Some ranges don't care. Some ranges want you to simply sweep it all forward of the line. At some ranges you are expected to pick up every last case. If you're not sure just be polite and clean up after yourself.
10. Ask before picking up someone else's brass. Maybe they reload and they were planning on picking it up themselves.
11. If more shooters arrive they may want to find a bench and set up targets. If your junk is strewn all over multiple benches pick it up so they have somewhere to sit. Or better yet clean as you go. Consider calling a ceasefire so they can go downrange and get started setting up targets.
12. If you see a new shooter who needs help give them a hand.