

# Trigger Pull

By [Schuyler Barnum](#)

One of the most neglected points of shooting well by many shooters is trigger pull. This simple concept is, in my experience, the primary culprit after poor position in messing up accuracy, much more so than breath control.

One of the problems on this subject is the fact that there is no definitive "right" trigger pull. It really depends on what you're shooting at and what kind of gun you are using. In this article I will try to explain how to correctly pull a trigger. However, the best way to get the feel for the correct trigger pull is to practice. "Dry firing" (practicing at home with an EMPTY gun) is crucial to success on the range or in the field.

The type of firearm is the most important factor in determining the trigger pull of the gun. This part of trigger pull is the one that doesn't take as much practice to understand. In short, it is simply what type of gun you are using, shotgun, rifle or pistol.

Shotgun triggers are meant to be "slapped," or pulled quickly, as the timing of the shot is the most important factor. As you have a substantial "kill zone" with a shotgun's pattern, absolute pinpoint accuracy is not as important as timing and leading the target correctly. The fact that the most popular shotgun sports, including skeet, trap and bird hunting, require a quick shot means that timing takes precedence over trigger finesse. I have seen more than one rifle shooter gently squeeze the trigger back, and by the time the gun went off the clay was almost in the trees.

Rifle triggers, on the other hand, are meant to have a slow, gentle squeeze. In most rifle shooting situations, including most hunting, precise shot placement is more important than speed. Actually, in target shooting, unless you're in the biathlon or some sort of action shooting contest, you really don't want to know when the rifle goes off. Anticipating the shot is a major culprit when it comes to flinching. Instead of pulling a rifle trigger back suddenly, you gradually add pressure at the same rate to the trigger, with the sights correctly aligned, until the rifle fires. This keeps the rifle pointed steadily at your target and helps to avoid flinching. This kind of trigger release is called a "surprise break."

Achieving a good surprise break is even more crucial to top accuracy with a handgun than it is with a rifle. This is because a pistol is lighter in relation to the weight of its trigger pull than a rifle. For example, my .270 hunting rifle weighs 9 pounds with scope and has a 3 pound trigger pull. The trigger pull is thus 1/3 the weight of the rifle. If squeezed gently and properly, the trigger should release without appreciably moving the much heavier rifle. Now consider a 3 pound hunting revolver that also has a 3 pound trigger pull. The trigger pull is suddenly 100% of the weight of the gun! Clearly, applying enough force to the trigger of that revolver to make it go off is much more likely to move the gun. Unless the shooter is a *very* experienced pistolero, a surprise break is absolutely essential to achieving any kind of accuracy with a handgun. The two key factors to shooting a handgun are focusing on the

front sight (not the target) and *squeezing* the trigger until the gun fires, seemingly by itself (a perfect surprise break).

The second part of trigger pull, and this is equally true of rifles and handguns, is adapting to the gun itself. Different firearms have different trigger pulls, and this means that you must adjust your technique to the gun.

At Camp Pioneer's range (where I served as a shooting instructor), there were two scoped rifles, a Ruger 77/22 and a brand-X rifle that I can't remember the make of for the life of me. The 77/22 had very light trigger pull and therefore I had no problem achieving a surprise break with normal pulling strength. The other rifle, however, had an unusually heavy trigger pull (I'd estimate at least 5.5 pounds). This one I actually had to have two breath stages in order to ensure that I could get the shot off right. In between I didn't add more pressure to the trigger. In short, what I'm trying to explain is that you need to become completely familiar with a particular firearm to become good with its trigger.

Most triggers on sporting and target rifles and handguns today are single stage triggers. These ideally have no movement before releasing at their set weight, and when they fire they move only far enough rearward to release the sear. Such a trigger is a great asset to achieving a surprise break. The feel of a perfect single stage trigger is often compared to that of breaking a glass rod. Most triggers supplied on brand new guns today are single stage triggers, but are not properly adjusted.

A second type of trigger mechanism is the two stage trigger. This is common on military rifles and is supposed to be safer than a good single stage trigger. (Real firearms safety, of course, is between the ears of the shooter and has nothing to do with trigger type.) A two stage trigger has a long initial movement. The shooter pulls the trigger back to take up this slack until a sharply increased resistance is felt. (That is the first stage.) Then the actual surprise break trigger pull that will fire the rifle is begun, and from that point on the two stage trigger operates like a single stage trigger.

The third type of trigger mechanism is a wonderful little device called a "set trigger." This almost exclusively appears on older, expensive European, or reproduction black powder rifles. There are single set and double set triggers. The former is pushed forward to "set," and then pulled rearward to fire. The latter is simpler and more common. This consists of two triggers within the trigger guard of a single-barreled rifle, usually a bolt action or a single shot. (The Mannlicher-Schoenauer bolt action is perhaps the most famous example of a hunting rifle that is often seen with a double set trigger.) The trigger in front is the firing trigger while the one in back is the set trigger. Normally (un-set) the front trigger would have a trigger pull of about 4 pounds, and simply pulling the front trigger (although it may feel heavy and creepy) will fire the rifle. However, when one first pulls the rear set trigger back until it clicks, you have typically reduced the front trigger pull to less than half a pound. You must still pull the front trigger to fire the rifle, but after being set it is very light and clean.

I personally like a set trigger. I find that it makes accurate shooting much easier, as less effort is used to fire the rifle. But, and I can not stress this enough, DO NOT use a set trigger without testing it repeatedly BEFORE shooting live ammunition. Otherwise it will surprise you with how little effort it takes to set the thing off. Even major shooters who have mastered a nearly perfect, repeatable trigger

pull will tend to jerk the trigger once it is set. It is that drastic a change. Use set triggers carefully; they can be far more dangerous than conventional single stage triggers because of the extremely light final pull weight.

Set triggers are best reserved for target shooting. In the field, a set trigger slows the shot. Also, a hunter experiencing the shot of adrenaline that usually comes in the presence of a trophy on the hoof is likely to accidentally fire prematurely when using a set trigger. Set triggers should particularly be avoided on any rifle that might be used to hunt dangerous game.

In conclusion, understanding proper trigger pull is crucial to good marksmanship. Effectively using the right kind of trigger, properly adjusted, can improve your accuracy for the rest of your life.