



The 4 Cardinal Rules of Firearm Safety

They Mean More Than You Think They Do

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These rules have unfortunately become rote to most of us. We may be able to recite the rules, we may follow these rules automatically since they have been engrained in us, but how often do we think about what each of these rules really means to us all in a practical, relevant manner beyond their immediate definitions? If we think beyond the words of the rules, internalize the meaning of the rules and further our application of the rules; one would not be stretching to state that it would improve knowledge, skill and safety of the responsibly armed citizen. It is now my attempt to expand on each of these rules and verbalize their greater meaning and application.

1) Always treat every firearm AS IF it were loaded.

This rule has been said many ways: "All firearms are always loaded", "Always assume your firearm is loaded"; but the reality is, sometimes we will be handling an unloaded firearm and we know it is unloaded. Sometimes we will be standing at a firing range and we will ensure it is only loaded while on the firing line. Furthermore, some of us, either by choice or vocation will go out into the world armed, depending on our firearms to be loaded.

Pat McNamara very succinctly restated this rule as, knowing the status of your firearm at all times. I can think of no better way to conceptualize this rule. Having intrinsic knowledge of the firearm platform you are handling, determining its ability to function as needed and ensuring its intended status as loaded or unloaded is the very nature of the first cardinal rule.

This is a great reason why performing a "**status check**" (*see box to right*) on your firearm each and every time you pick it up should become engrained in your routine, whether stepping up to the firing line at your local range, or strapping on your concealed firearm. This is of paramount importance if this is our defensive firearm as your life may, in fact, rely on its function.

This series of checks, while seeming like a long list, take less than a minute or two to complete. Every time you pick up your firearm after a period of non-use or rest, these checks should be performed so that you maintain awareness of the status of the firearm under your control; and ensure its readiness should cause arise to use your firearm. These checks can also be used if you recover a stray firearm in the middle of a critical incident, like an active murderer scenario, and need to understand the condition of that firearm in the

Steps for Performing a Status Check on Your Firearm

1. Clear the firearm – remove magazine and cycle the action (slide, charging handle) to ensure no ammunition is present.
2. Visually examine chamber to confirm it is empty
3. Pointing the firearm in a safe direction, Drop hammer/striker to ensure proper function of the firing mechanism
4. Examine sights/optics to make sure of proper function/tightness.
5. Examine magazine, if m4 or similar style magazine, which side is the first round on?
6. Insert loaded magazine and chamber a round.
7. Ensure slide/bolt is forward and seated. Tap forward assist if platform has one.
8. Chamber check – is there a round in the chamber...either check to see if a round is present in chamber or examine magazine (top round should be on opposite side of the magazine from your observation of the pre-inserted magazine) to determine if a round has been retrieved from the magazine.
9. If a manual safety is present on the platform, turn the firearm to safe. For DA/SA firearms, if a decocking lever is available, decock the hammer and set to DA.
10. Holster or sling the firearm.



case that you may need to use it in a defensive manner.

2) **Always point your firearm in a safe direction unless defending yourself or others.**

This one is pretty simple... you should take care that the muzzle of your firearm does not cover any living person or animal at which you would not want to send chunks of lead, copper, steel or depleted uranium barreling in at high velocity with the ultimate possibility of ending central nervous and/or cardiovascular activity in the previously mentioned life form.

One should regard that in a defensive situation, pointing the firearm at the evil-doer who means harm to you and your loved ones may, in fact, be the safest direction; as either the assailant will decide you are too dangerous to accost, or they will force you to shoot them until you stop the threat. Either way, the safe direction is in fact, pointed at the bad guy.

This rule also has some different variations you will find in the basic firearm safety literature. The most common version I have seen is "Do not point your firearm at anything you do not wish to destroy". I find this version of Cardinal Safety Rule # 2 to be inaccurate. The reality is, there are very common situations where we are going to point our firearms in directions where the muzzle points at something "we do not wish to destroy". When demonstrating firearms manipulations, when performing dry practice, when performing a system check of the platform you are manipulating, all of these incidents require you to point your muzzle at something more substantial than the vacuum of outer space. To be succinct and responsible in our usage of rule # 2, I am adamant about the verbiage above.

3) **Always keep your finger off of the trigger and up on the frame until you are ready to fire.**

This particular rule comes down to the cognitive decision making process. Before a modern firearm will function, the trigger must be activated by depressing it to the rear, releasing a hammer or striker. Barring any negligence of the user and having extraneous objects that should not end up in the trigger guard, this is done by taking the index finger, placing it on the flat of the trigger, and applying pressure. This is a process, which, if proper firearm manipulation is practiced, must be actively thought of, decided upon and enacted by the user.

Training your finger position to always remain up on the side of the frame until ready to depress the trigger, is training your cognitive ability to decide when you need to shoot. Without mincing words, in a defensive scenario, you are making a decision and carrying out an action, which has the intent of ultimately taking a life.

Proper manipulation of the firearm in this space requires us to not only keep our finger outside the trigger guard (another common phraseology in the basic firearms safety rules), but it should require us to place the trigger finger higher/more vertically up along the flat side of the frame of the firearm. This is done as a means to resist the sympathetic and startle responses the body undergoes under stress.

Under the stress of a critical incident there are two basic physiological reactions we need to be aware of that affect rule #3. Sympathetic response affects the tightening of one's muscles in preparation for fight-or-flight behavior. Think of it as the tightening/tensioning of a spring getting ready to release its energy in whichever action is more likely to help aid in survival from a lethal encounter. Startle response manifests itself as a sudden, quick clenching of muscles in response to an unexpected event. If you are simply keeping your trigger finger off of the trigger or outside of the trigger guard, these



clenching/tightening of the muscles may cause an inadvertent slip of the finger on to and depressing the trigger thus creating a negligent discharge.

4) **Always be sure of your target and what is beyond it.**

Let me also add, be sure of what is to the right and left of your target. This rule is the absolute application of situational awareness while manipulating your firearm. You must not only be paying attention to your backstop, you must be paying attention to the entire surrounding area. If you are so narrowly focused on the target alone, outside of a bull's-eye competition, you are missing critical information of the world around you.

In demonstration, I'd like to point out two scenarios.

There are times when you need to decide, when not to pull the trigger. I don't even need to create a hypothetical situation to discuss this. On December 11, 2012, a rifle-wielding murderer entered the Clackamas Town Center in Portland, Oregon, intent on taking as many lives as possible. Nicholas Meli, a former United States Marine and licensed concealed carrier, chose not to shoot the active murderer he had in his sights and very much could have made the shot. He chose not to because there were two young girls hiding in the storefront behind the assailant. He was aware that if he possibly had an errant shot, or shot through the assailant, there was a possibility of unintentionally hitting an innocent bystander. Luckily (and while this happens often with active murderers, we should never count on it) the assailant took his own life after seeing that he was being met with armed resistance.

There are times when you must broaden your perspective to realize there is not only one target at hand. **Wolves travel in packs.** It is likely that after you have put firing pin to primer and your primary target has been neutralized, there will be additional threats to engage. When dealing with gang violence, drug violence or violent home invasions, most criminals do not act alone. Depending on how resolved your group of assailants is to do you harm, you may need to transition to the next malevolent target and continue to defend yourself and your loved ones.

Rule # 4 is the embodiment of Situational Awareness in a GunFight!

5... Sort Of) **Always... Always use the word always.**

There is a funny way the mind works. If you tell someone not to look up, what is the first thing they do? 99.9% of the time, they always look up. If you tell a child not to do something, don't they always want to go do the forbidden? I'm afraid as adults, we haven't shaken that habit.

The very reason I always start every rule with the word "always", is to use a positive command. There is no weird psychology at play, which makes a person want to do the opposite. By saying always, we are telling people what they need to do, not what they should not do. We should always obey these four safety rules.

These are the cardinal rules... these help establish a basis for safety, but they are not the be-all, end-all. The purpose I have for writing this is to start to get people to think beyond the memorization of words and actions. I want people to truly understand the basis from which we build safety and responsibility. As a firearms instructor, I want to create students who can think... frankly, better than they can shoot.