



HOW TO CHOOSE THE **FIREARM** THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU





Buying a firearm, especially your first firearm, can seem like a daunting task. If you are new to shooting sports or to defensive/combat shooting, you might be overwhelmed by the multitude of options available. The purpose of this guide is to assist you in defining your own personal criteria and to save you time and money when purchasing a firearm.

Each gun has its champions, and there is no shortage of internet myths clouding the issue of what gun you should buy. Complicating matters is the fact that even though the men or women behind the counter at your local gun shop are almost certainly experienced professionals, their knowledge and advice can only do so much in the quest for you to get the sidearm that will best meet your personal needs. You can lean on their expertise, but you will still have to make the call on what will work best for you.

THERE ARE HUNDREDS, IF NOT THOUSANDS, OF PISTOLS FROM WHICH TO CHOOSE.

You need to narrow the list of contenders down to a manageable size of three to five guns. From that short list, you can then pick the gun that best fits your needs.

CALIBER

RESEARCH

Prepare to spend some time conducting research on the internet. Keep a pen and some paper handy so you can take notes; you should write down exactly what characteristics you need your new gun to have. Separate that list into “must-have” and “optional” features. Then make a list of every make of pistol you can think of that might fit your criteria.

Next, go to gun stores and see what they have. Take notes and check the manufacturers’ specifications against your list. Put them on a grid and start marking which models have what you’re looking for. If a gun doesn’t have one of your “must-have” criteria, delete it from the list. Sort the list by which guns have the most optional features. From there, you will form your short list.

PURPOSE

Why do you want this gun? Be as specific as possible. Are you looking for a pistol to clear caves in Afghanistan? Is it a primary carry pistol or a deep-cover pistol? Do you need a gun to carry in the summer when you are dressed in shorts and a T-shirt? How you intend to use the gun will help determine the necessary characteristics.

When I was a cop, I needed a backup gun. I reasoned that if I were to need the backup, it meant I had run my duty pistol dry or that it was disabled. There was also a good chance I might be wounded, so I wanted a gun I could use with either hand with minimal physical manipulation. I decided on a revolver, and the grid I came up with looked something like this:

Purpose: Backup for Primary Duty Pistol

FIREARM	MUST-HAVE			OPTIONAL			
	COMPACT	.38 +P/.357	REVOLVER	UNDER \$300	5 or 6 ROUNDS	LASER	HAMMERLESS
<i>Glock 27</i>	X				X		X
<i>Charter Arms Bulldog</i>	X		X	X	X	X	
<i>Smith & Wesson 640</i>	X	X	X	X	X		X
<i>Colt Cobra</i>	X	X	X		X		
<i>Smith & Wesson Model 36</i>	X	X	X	X	X		X

The following are some suggested criteria categories for you to consider. You can add or remove them as your situation dictates. Some criteria will automatically include or exclude other criteria from the list.

1 SIZE

Are you going to carry this gun in an ankle holster? If so, you might need a snub or a compact. If you are going to use a fanny pack (or if you usually wear a suit or sport coat), you can carry a full-sized pistol. The size of your body and how you plan on carrying will determine what size pistol you can conceal.



2 TYPE

Do you need a revolver or a semi-automatic? Striker-fired or double-action/single-action? If you have a department or agency policy governing what you can carry, then this is cut and dry. If not, it comes down to preference. Some people only want a striker-fired pistol, such as a Glock, while others don't trust a gun that doesn't have a more traditional hammer.





3 CARTRIDGE

On a strictly technical level, caliber is the diameter of the bullet, expressed in inches or millimeters. A .40-caliber bullet is 40/100ths of an inch in diameter. The diameters of .380, .38 Special, .357 Magnum, 9mm and .357 SIG rounds are all within a thousandth of an inch or so. The biggest difference between them is the amount of propellant behind them.

Ensure you have a caliber suited to your needs. For defensive purposes, look at what cartridges are commonly used by law enforcement. These are usually tested thoroughly before being issued to police, and some have decades of data in real-world shootings to back up their effectiveness. The most common law enforcement rounds for duty pistols are 9mm, .40 S&W and .45 ACP. In decades past, .38 Special and .357 Magnum were what most cops carried, and they're still quite viable for self-defense today.

In selecting a cartridge, it is important to consider the availability of ammunition for carry and training. A round that is not routinely available or is prohibitively expensive to train with will probably not be a good choice.

4 NUMBER OF ROUNDS

How many rounds can the gun deliver before you have to reload? If a 300-pound psychotic lunatic attacks you, how many rounds of your chosen cartridge do you want in your gun? I am quite comfortable carrying a .38 snub that holds five rounds, but I would feel woefully under-armed carrying a .380 Auto with a five-round magazine.





5 BUDGET

How much money do you have available to spend? Remember: You're going to have to buy the gun, spare magazines or speedloaders, a holster and carry ammunition. The tighter money is, the more it will factor into your decision. What you consider the perfect gun doesn't do you any good if you can't afford to buy it and the accessories it needs.

6 MECHANICAL RELIABILITY

After you have a list of possible guns, check the internet for known mechanical issues. Bear in mind that first-generation models can exhibit problems that are fixed in later generations. Check for how serious a problem is. Is it something that may be a minor inconvenience or something that turns the gun into a paperweight?

When I was working as a security contractor in Afghanistan, our pistols developed mechanical failures after a few rounds that rendered the guns unusable and required an armorer to fix. The logistics person who purchased the guns bought the least expensive guns that fit the requirements of the contract, and the problem was well-known with that particular generation of firearms. A quick internet search would have saved us a lot of problems.



7 ACCESSORIES

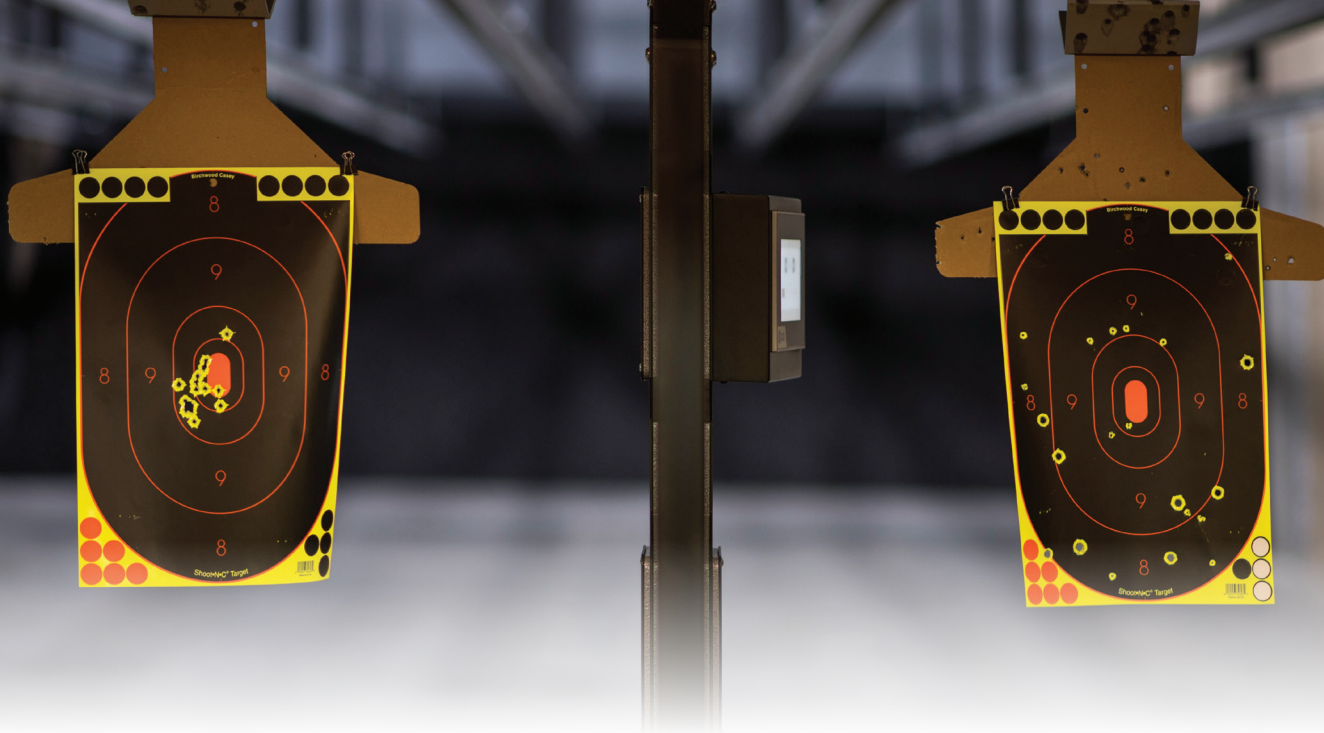
There are even more aftermarket accessories available to add to your pistol than there are pistols. For example, if you decide you need a light attached to your gun, then you will need a way to mount it, which will usually necessitate a rail. If you want low-light sights on the gun, are they an available option from the manufacturer? Can they be added later? The sights on some models can't be changed out, so this is something you are going to need to know and understand before you make any purchases.

DECIDING

After you've determined your short list, it's time to do some testing. The only testing you used to be able to do was to pick up a gun at the local sporting-goods store and see how it felt in your hands. If you were lucky, the clerk would let you dry-fire it. Fortunately, many ranges now have guns available for rent. Call around and see if any ranges close to you have the guns on your list available.

Some people think testing is too expensive, but it really isn't. Testing a couple of rental guns is far less expensive than buying a gun, finding out it isn't really what you want and having to buy another one. A friend of mine was talked into getting a small, lightweight pistol because the sales clerk thought it would be perfect for her. After shooting it a few times, she traded it in for the full-sized 1911 she still uses as her concealed carry gun. A little testing would have saved her quite a bit of money.

Use the same targets and same course of fire for each gun and, if possible, start from a bench. The hard part is putting enough rounds through a gun to be able to really understand the differences between it and others. Fifty rounds per gun would be the bare minimum, and 200 rounds would give you a far better representation.



ACCURACY POTENTIAL

Gun enthusiasts often espouse the belief that a specific cartridge or even brand of cartridge is the key to surviving a gunfight. In actuality, accuracy is the most important factor.

A HIT WITH A SMALL BULLET IS FAR AND AWAY MORE EFFECTIVE THAN A MISS WITH A LARGE BULLET.

Similarly, a slow hit is better than a fast miss. Several factors determine accuracy potential, but outside of the person handling the gun, the barrel length and sight radius (the distance between the front and rear sights) are likely the biggest factors.

In a defensive shooting, misses mean your attacker has more time to try to kill you, and you have put bystanders at risk, so it is easy to see why accuracy potential is of paramount importance.

COMFORT

If a gun is not comfortable to shoot, there is a great likelihood you won't train with it as often as you should. Even worse, you will be far less likely to carry it. Check the ergonomics of the gun. Can you easily manipulate all the controls? How easily can you find the safety, slide release and magazine release? Do you think you could change magazines if your life depended on it?

MECHANICAL RELIABILITY

Listed again is mechanical reliability, but this time it's where you leave the theoretical and get into the actual. Take your tentative top pick and test it with the ammo you plan on carrying and the magazines you plan on using. Shoot at least 200 rounds. If you don't have any feeding or extraction problems, then you know that combination of gun, ammo and magazines is reliable.



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