[**BREATHING, TRIGGER CONTROL AND FOLLOW THROUGH**](https://www.anstonftc.co.uk/breathing-trigger-control-and-follow-through/)

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Breathing, trigger control and follow-through are fundamental to consistent shooting.

It should be pretty obvious that if you want to hit what you’re aiming at you need to keep the gun as still as possible when you take your shot. Some shooting positions are more stable than others, but even if your shooting position is rock solid there’s still a living, breathing, moving shooter pulling the trigger.

Getting it right takes time and practice and it’s something that should be re-visited and practiced regularly.

**Breathing**

To make an accurate shot you need to hold your breath while you take your shot, but how you hold your breath and for how long can make a big difference.

Technical shooting manuals concentrating primarily on 3 position target shooting disciplines normally recommend that you should hold your breath for not longer than about 10 seconds.  I’ve found for HFT 10 seconds is far too long.

The reason that you shouldn’t hold your breath for too long is that when you stop breathing your body is starved of oxygen and the body’s functions start to deteriorate.  Your muscles will begin to shake, your eyesight will deteriorate, you’ll be mentally distracted and you’ll start to move involuntarily.

When you get down to take a shot, you have a lot of things to consider before you commit to the shot – is there something in the way of the kill-zone, what’s the range to the target, what’s my aim point for this distance, did I load a pellet, what’s the wind doing etc.  You need to make all of those decisions before you commit to your shot and you don’t want to be doing that while you’re holding your breath.

When the wind blows it’s not just the pellet that gets buffeted by the wind, you’ll also find that you get blown about too – especially in the kneeling and standing positions, you also don’t want to be holding your breath while you are waiting for a lull in the wind to be able to take your shot.

For those reasons, you should be aiming to hold your breath and get your shot off within a couple of seconds.

If you ask a non-shooter to hold their breath, they’ll almost always take a deep breath in and when their lungs are full of air that’s the point that they’ll hold their breath.  That’s a reasonable strategy to use if you intend on holding your breath for the longest time, but for HFT that’s a bad idea.

If you fill your lungs with air your muscles won’t be relaxed and you’ll also find that your inflated chest lifts you up off the ground making it difficult to get a consistent head position on your cheek piece.

**How to breathe**

While you’re making all the decisions you need to make before taking your shot you should be breathing normally, when you commit to your shot, breathe about half the air out of your lungs and then hold your breath.

If you find that you’re not able to take the shot within a couple of seconds, then you should re-compose.  To re-compose, relax and start breathing normally again to re-oxygenate your blood, then breathe out half of the air in your lungs, hold your breath again and take the shot.

Sounds obvious and simple, but you’d be surprised at how many people don’t do it correctly.  It’s something you need to practice so that it becomes second nature to you.

**Trigger control**

Boiled down to its most simple explanation, trigger control is about firing your rifle without transmitting any movement to the gun in the process.   You definitely don’t want to be transmitting any sideways movement to your gun when you take your shot.

The position of your hand and trigger finger is vital if you want to avoid pulling your shot to the left or right.

As everyone’s hands are different and stocks are made for average shooters you will probably need to experiment to find out what works best for you.  The basic principle is that any movement that isn’t down the centreline of your rifle is not a good idea.  The less muscles you use, the less chance you have of pulling a shot or ‘snatching’ a shot.  So you should try to find a hand position where the muscles in your hand are as relaxed as they can be when the pad of your trigger finger is rested on the trigger blade.

  

Your trigger finger should be in a position that allows you to pull the trigger blade backwards down the centreline of the rifle. There must be no tendency for the finger to push the trigger blade to either the left or right. The hand must be positioned so that on releasing the trigger no lifting or pulling down on the rifle occurs.

With regards to grip pressure and thumb position, this is something that comes down to a personal preference.  I prefer a very light grip, sometimes only having the pad of my palm and the tips of my fingers touching the grip.   I shoot with my thumb around the pistol grip rather than adopting a thumb up hand position, but it’s best to experiment yourself to find out what works for you.

**Trigger pull weight**

Most HFT guns have a 2-stage trigger (or at least a pseudo 2 stage trigger).  This type has a degree of movement before a further resistance is felt (known as the first stage). Further movement beyond this point will release the mechanism (known as the 2nd stage).

2-stage trigger mechanisms usually have adjustment for length of pull and weight of the first stage and weight of the 2nd stage.  You’ll need to consult your owners’ manual or ask on one of the airgun bulletin boards if you’re not sure how to adjust the trigger on your rifle.

Again, the trigger weight is a personal thing but try to avoid setting your trigger too light.  Very light triggers run the risk of at best going off before you meant them too losing you 2 points in a competition and at worst being very dangerous.

If you have a long length of travel on your trigger’s first stage, make sure that the pad of your trigger finger is at 90 degrees to your trigger blade when the 2nd stage is reached rather than at the start of the 1st stage.

**Trigger technique**

There are two main methods of trigger technique that most shooters use:

* When ready to commit to a shot, take up the 1st stage of the trigger until the 2nd stage is felt then gradually increase pressure on the trigger blade until the shot is released.
* When ready to commit to a shot, take up the 1st stage of the trigger until the 2nd stage is felt and increase and decrease pressure on the trigger blade in a ‘pulsing’ motion.  Increasing pressure when the crosshairs are on target and decreasing pressure when the crosshairs move away from target – repeating this until eventually the shot is taken (which in some cases can come as a surprise to a shooter).

Either of these methods can work, again it’s something you should experiment with until you find what works best for you.

The only part of your hand that should be moving when you take a shot is your trigger finger and your trigger should be set up to give a predictable and repeatable let off point.

There are several mistakes that most often occur in trigger release:

* Snatching the trigger – that is a very rapid build up of pressure, made even worse if the finger takes a ‘run at it’ i.e. approaches the trigger blade at speed.
* Pulling through the first stage quickly and hitting the second stage pressure and continuing through.
* Taking up the first stage then releasing the pressure a little before snatching at the second stage.

All of the above will transmit large movements to the gun as it fires.

**Follow Through**

The aiming and firing process does not end when the trigger is released. The process of maintaining the aim during and beyond the release of the shot is called follow through.

Follow through is of vital importance, particularly in air rifle shooting, because the action of the air rifle is quite slow. In a pre-charged rifle the trigger releases the hammer, which moves forward to open the valve, air is released which accelerates the pellet up the barrel before it finally leaves the muzzle and only then is it free of the influence of the shooter. During this period (known as the ‘lock time’) if your aim is disturbed you might not hit your target.

There are several physiological reasons to follow through. When your crosshairs are where you want them to be, you release the trigger but the finger doesn’t move instantly. A reaction time delay of approximately 0.3 seconds occurs before your finger moves. Through this period the aim must be maintained.

Also, the gun is held in position by some muscular effort that must remain the same until the shot has left the rifle. Without follow through there is the chance that the muscles holding the gun might relax a fraction of a second early, before the pellet has left the muzzle, moving the gun and resulting in a poor shot.

Good follow through can be obtained by maintaining the aim of the rifle for about 1 second after trigger release. This is more than enough time to allow the shot to leave the rifle.  It’s good practice to try to watch your pellet in flight or at least watch your pellet strike the plate or killzone of the target.  It isn’t always possible to see your pellet in flight, but if you can see where you hit or miss on the target faceplate then this will help with wind estimation and range estimation for subsequent targets on the course.

**Putting it all together and practicing**

It will take some time and practice to perfect your breathing, trigger control and follow through but you will know you’ve got it right as you notice your groups starting to tighten with fewer and fewer ‘fliers’.  You’ll still have the odd flier or two (everyone does) but with enough practice you’ll be able to feel when a shot was good and often you’ll know that a shot was a bad shot even before it’s hit the target.

When practicing I find it works best for me to try to remove as many other factors as possible so that I’m just concentrating on the part of my shooting that I’m trying to improve.

For breathing, trigger control and follow through, you’re not too concerned about practicing a certain position and if you can you should try to avoid shooting at out of focus targets or targets that aren’t level.

Either shoot from a bench or from the rested prone position and use something to support your rifle to make it as stable as it can be – remember, you’re not practicing a shooting position, only trigger technique, breathing and follow through.

Set a target out at your scopes parallax setting (if you followed the scope setup guide, 25 yards is a good distance) and set a target out – if you use the 25 yard setup target from the HFT scope setup guide, make sure that the target is set up so that the paper is level (either by using a spirit level along the top edge of the paper) or a plumb line along the side of the paper.

The reason you want the paper to be level is that this will help you to hold your rifle level when shooting.  If your rifle isn’t level when you take a shot, this will affect the point of impact (POI) of your pellet.  This is known as ‘canting’ your rifle.

Once you’ve got everything set out and you’ve eliminated as many other factors as you can it’s time to start shooting some groups and experimenting with slightly different hand positions, thumb positions, grip and trigger technique until you feel you’ve nailed it.

Take your time with each shot and shoot groups of between 5 to 10 pellets before taking a short rest.  At 25 yards in reasonably still wind conditions you should expect to be getting very tight single hole groups of not much more than the size of a single pellet.  The red bulls eye on the HFT setup guide target is 9mm in diameter – you should be getting all of your shots inside that bulls eye with room to spare.  Keep practicing until you can.

When I first started competitive target shooting it took me around 3 months of practicing for a couple of hours twice a week to finally get some consistently good results.  It’s time well spent though and it will save you hours and hours of frustration further into your shooting career.

If you can’t shoot consistently tight groups – you can’t zero your rifle.  If you can’t tell when a shot was a good shot or a bad shot and analyse what you did wrong then it’s very easy to start blaming ‘unexplained’ fliers on a bad batch of pellets or a bad scope – parallax error, range finding error etc.

Getting it right and subsequently being able to tell the difference between what was a good shot and what was a bad shot (even before the pellet leaves the barrel in most cases) is going to really pay dividends in the long run.

A large part of target shooting is being able to learn from your mistakes, if you don’t know when you’ve made a bad shot then it’s all to easy to blame the wrong thing.