

Firearms Glossary

Action - the mechanical part of a firearm that causes the gun to fire; replaced earlier “locks”; has moving parts that enable the gun to fire.

Ammunition – ammo – the projectiles (bullets), primers, and fuses that can be fired from a gun or propelled.

Arm – a weapon, possibly a firearm, used by military; troops bearing arms.

Automatic – a repeating firearm that has an automatic chambering mechanism that will fire as long as the trigger is pressed and held until the ammunition is gone. Any firearm that will fire more than one shot with one pull of the trigger.

Barrel – the metal tube of a firearm through which the bullet or ball travels while it accelerates to exit the muzzle; originally made by “barrel-makers.”

Ballistics – the study of the physics of the performance of propellants and projectiles, including predicting and analysis of performance and flight.

Bead – a small metal piece on the muzzle of the firearm used for sighting.

Black powder – a low explosive mixture of charcoal, sulfur and saltpeter (potassium nitrate).

Blowback – a mechanism using some of the cartridge gases to eject the cartridge and operate the action for the next shot.

Bolt-action – a firearm that uses a bolt to move the mechanism that puts a cartridge in the chamber.

Bore – the diameter (space) of the inside of the barrel.

Breech – the part of the firearm directly behind the barrel.

Breechloader – a firearm that is loaded at the rear, or chamber, end of the barrel.

Bullet – a round, spherical or pointed cylindrical metal projectile that is fired from a firearm; bullet diameter determines caliber.

Caliber - the diameter of the inside (bore) of the barrel; the diameter of the cartridge; usually in hundredths or thousands of an inch. A .50 caliber gun has a bore with a diameter measuring 50 hundredths of an inch. The higher the caliber of a firearm is, the wider its bore.

Carbine – a rifle with a short barrel, to make it lighter; originally designed for use by mounted horsemen or cavalry.

Cartridge – a round piece of cardboard, metal or other material, containing a powder charge, a projectile (bullet) and a primer; ammunition used in a firearm.

Center fire – a cartridge that has the priming mixture in the center of the base of the cartridge; a firearm that uses center fire cartridges – the hammer strikes the center of the cartridge.

Chamber – a compartment in a firearm for the cartridge; breech of a rifle or cylinder in a revolver.

Charge – n. powder or explosive.

v. to load a firearm with an amount of explosive; charged the musket with powder.

Cock – the position of the hammer of a firearm; position when ready to fire a firearm.

Firearm – a mechanism capable of sending a projectile (bullet, ball) after pressure is generated (by compressed air, gas or a rapidly burning powder).

Grooves – the cur area inside a rifled barrel.

Gun – a generic term for firearm.

Gun powder – the explosive mixture used to ignite the charge.

Firing pin – the part of the bolt or breech of a firearm that strikes the primer and starts the charge to force out the projectile.

Flintlock – a firearm in which a piece of flint fixed in the hammer hits a steel “frizzen,” produces a spark that ignites the gun powder; also called a firelock. Pioneers used to make a fire start by striking flint against a piece of steel.

Half cock – the position of the hammer of a firearm when it is raised halfway and locked by a catch so that the trigger cannot be pulled.

Handgun – a firearm designed to be fired with one hand; but often shooters use their other hand for stability. Handguns include revolvers, pistols, single-shot and bolt action firearms.

Lands – the raised areas between the grooves inside a rifled barrel.

Load – n. a single charge of ammunition for a firearm.

v. to put ammunition in the firearm.

Lock – the mechanical part of a firearm that causes the gun to fire; originally made by locksmiths; replaced in later guns by the “action.”

Match Lock – the first known mechanism for firing a gun. A trigger moved a hammer (snake-shaped) that was that held a piece of hemp (string) that was lit and slow burning. It moved the “slow match” against the priming powder which ignited the propellant charge.

Misfire – to failure to discharge.

Musket – a long-barreled firearm with a smooth bore barrel; used before the development of the rifle.

Muzzle – The forward end of the barrel of the firearm where the bullet comes out.

Muzzleloader – n. a firearm that is loaded at the muzzle or front part of the barrel.

Pellet – a small bullet or piece of small shot.

Percussion lock – a firearm where a small hammer taps a metal cap that has an exploding pellet inside and causes a spark to light the gunpowder. This is similar to how a toy cap gun works. Also called “cap lock.” It led to the development of cartridges.

Pistol – a gun designed to be held and fired with one hand.

Primer – a cup with a small amount of material that ignites when hit and is used to start the main charge burning for firing a firearm; cup that fits in a cartridge base.

Propellant – something (gun powder) that causes something else (bullet, ball) to move forward.

Ramrod – rod used to force the charge into a muzzleloading firearm; rod used to clean the barrel of a firearm.

Recoil – the backward action of a firearm upon firing

Repeating firearm – a gun capable of firing several times without being reloaded.

Revolver – a handgun that has a rotating cylinder with several cartridge chambers, which can be manually cocked or cocked by pulling the trigger.

Rifle – a long-barreled firearm with a rifled bore barrel, designed to be fired from the shoulder

Rifling - cut spiral grooves in a gun barrel; causes projectile to spin which increases stability in flight.

Rim fire – a cartridge that has a priming mixture inside the rim of the base of the cartridge; a gun that uses rim fire cartridges. The hammer strikes the outer edge of the cartridge.

Round – a single cartridge.

Safety – a device, usually a button or lever, on a firearm that locks the guns from firing.

Self-loading – a firearm that has a mechanism which pushes the shell and chambers the next round (piece of ammunition) from the magazine (that holds the shells).

Semi-automatic – a repeating firearm with an automatic chambering mechanism that requires a separate trigger pull for each shot fired.

Shot – a solid piece projectile such as a bullet, pellet or ball, designed to be discharged from a firearm.

Shotgun – a shoulder-held firearm that fires multiple pellets through a smooth bore barrel.

Shooting iron – slang – a firearm

Sight – a device used help in guiding the eye for aiming.

Small-bore – a firearm of a small caliber, usually 30 cal. or less.

Smokeless powder – fast-burning compound of nitrated cellulose, sometimes mixed with nitroglycerin; developed to be more stable, ignite easier and be more efficient than black powder.

Stock – the rear handle of a firearm; attaches to the lock and barrel; can be wood, metal, plastic or composite.

Trigger – the lever pressed by the finger to discharge a firearm.

Unload – to remove the charge form a firearm.

Wad – a piece of material (cloth, plastic) used to hold the shot or powder in place.

Wheel lock – a mechanical system for firing a gun. Springs cause a steel wheel to spin, rubbing against a piece of stone (iron pyrite) that is held in a clamp, creating sparks that ignites the priming powder. This action is very similar to how a cigarette lighter works.