

Common Firearm Terminology

Airgun -a weapon which expels a projectile by the release of compressed air. Most BB guns are airguns (some are spring operated). Please note that airguns **are not** firearms.

Automatic Weapon -a firearm which fires continuously when the trigger is depressed until the trigger is released or all the ammunition is expended. This is distinguishable from a semi-automatic weapon, which requires the trigger to be depressed once for each firing cycle.

Black Powder-an older form of propellant, now used mostly in primitive hunts and sporting events such as cowboy action shooting, and in weapons which do not employ a shell casing. It is distinguished from modern gun powder, which is generally referred to as smokeless powder, and which is substantially more powerful. (This stuff makes a lot of smoke).

Bullet-the actual projectile that leaves the weapon when it is fired.

Casing-the portion of a cartridge that holds the powder and the bullet.

Cartridge- refers to an unfired and complete unit of ammunition, including the casing and the bullet. Cartridge, Round and Shell all have essentially the same meaning. They are also known as metallic cartridges. These are further broken down into two basic categories-rim fire and center fire.

Center fire cartridge- a metallic cartridge which has a primer centered in its base. The firing pin of the weapon strikes the primer, igniting the powder, creating an explosion inside the cartridge, causing the pressure which expels the bullet.

Choke-a device that controls the diameter of the muzzle of a shotgun, and is used to alter the spread of the shot. Standard chokes, in order of less restrictive to more restrictive, are referred to as cylinder, improved cylinder, modified, full, and extra full. The more restrictive the choke, the tighter the pattern of shot as it leaves the muzzle.

Firearm-a weapon designed to or able to be converted to expel a projectile by means of an explosion.

Gauge-a reference to the diameter of the bore of a shotgun. A measurement whereby a number of pure lead balls of that diameter add up to a pound of weight. For example, 12 round lead balls the diameter of the bore of a 12 gauge shotgun will weigh one pound. The higher the gauge, the smaller the diameter of the bore.

Iron Sights-a reference to sights which do not involve a telescopic or electronic device. They are typically made up of a rear and front sight attached directly to the barrel or receiver of the weapon. The distance between a front and rear sight is known as the sight radius.

Machine Gun-a fully automatic weapon which fires rifle ammunition and is often, but not always, mounted in an airplane, on a vehicle, a tripod, or a bipod.

Magazine-The area in a firearm or a device which can be inserted into a firearm and which holds cartridges until they are fed into the chamber in preparation for firing.

Magnum-generally a reference to a more powerful cartridge or weapon than a cartridge or weapon of the same size that isn't a magnum. (How's that for a tautology?) For example, a .22 magnum has a slightly larger casing and is more powerful than a .22 long rifle. Most magnum rifle cartridges are distinguished by a belt of metal circling the base of the shell casing.

Muzzle-the very front of the barrel of a firearm.

Muzzle Loader-a black powder firearm which does not employ a metallic cartridge. The powder or other propellant is poured directly into the muzzle of the firearm, or cylinder in the case of a revolver, and the bullet or ball is then seated directly on top of the powder and forced into the cylinder or barrel. An exterior primer, or percussion cap, sets off the powder when struck, causing an explosion that results in pressure which expels the projectile.

Muzzle Energy-A measure of the amount of force a projectile generates as it leaves the firearm. The higher the muzzle energy, the more stopping power exhibited by a round. Typically expressed in foot pounds (the amount of energy required to lift a one pound weight one foot off the ground, e.g., if a cartridge is said to have a muzzle energy of 2900 foot pounds, the force it generates when fired is equivalent to lifting a 2900 pound weight to a 12 inch height.

Muzzle Velocity-the speed the projectile is traveling when it leaves the barrel of a firearm. Typically this is measured in feet per second.

Primer-a small round disc centered in the middle of the base of a shell casing which contains an explosive charge that ignites the powder in a shell when struck by the hammer or firing pin of the weapon.

Pyrodex-a modern replacement for black powder. It typically comes in pre-shaped, pre-measured cylinders which can be easily dropped into a gun barrel.

Rifle-a shoulder fired weapon with a rifled barrel.

Rifling-the machining on the inside of a gun barrel, consisting of a raised portion (lands) and an indented one (grooves). Rifling spirals, or twists, as it goes along the length of the barrel, causing the bullet to spin when exiting the weapon. This spinning is what imparts accuracy to the projectile.

Rim Fire Cartridge-a metallic cartridge that is activated by the hammer or firing pin of the weapon striking the rim of the base of the shell.

Semi-Automatic Weapon-a firearm which loads and discharges automatically every time the trigger is pulled, but which requires a separate trigger pull for each discharge.

Shotgun-usually a shoulder-fired weapon with a smooth barrel, i.e., one without lands and grooves, which fires shot (shells containing a number of small pellets) or slugs (shot shells containing a one-piece projectile, usually made of lead).

Submachine Gun-an automatic weapon which is hand held or shoulder fired and which uses pistol ammunition.

Telescopic Sight-Essentially a tube containing lenses which is attached to the exterior of a firearm and is used to aim the weapon at the intended target. Most often the lenses magnify the image of the target.

Wad-a plastic or composite cup which encases shotgun pellets inside a shot shell and separates the shot from the powder. The purpose of a wad is to protect the barrel from wear, friction and lead buildup and to keep the shot together until it exits the barrel, providing uniformity of pattern.