CHAPTER THREE

Firearm Safety

Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

A. State the four basic rules of firearm safety.

B. Describe the proper procedure for accepting a firearm from another person.

C. State the five steps required to **PROVE** a firearm is unloaded.

D. Identify a safe method for transporting a firearm in a vehicle.

E. Demonstrate six methods for carrying a firearm safely in the field.

F. Identify a safe method for handling a firearm in a treestand or boat.

G. Define "safe zone of fire" and state its importance.

H. Describe the procedure for safely cleaning a firearm.

Introduction

You are at a friend's house when he asks if you want to see his new bolt action rifle. As the rifle is being handed to you, you notice that the action is closed. What do you do?

There are some general rules about how to handle and operate a firearm safely. A responsible hunter knows and follows them. These practices become habit to the experienced hunter. The principles of firearm safety apply to all firearms—rifles, shotguns, handguns, BB guns, muzzleloaders, and pellet guns. A firearm's size does not determine its ability to harm someone or something. A .22 deserves the same respect as a .30-06. Both can kill.

A. Basic firearm safety rules

Safe handling of firearms begins with **four basic rules**. **Know these rules and follow them at all times!**

1. Always point the muzzle of your firearm in a safe direction.

Never point the firearm at yourself or others, even if you are certain it isn't loaded. Determine the safest available muzzle direction (at the ground or in the air) and keep your firearm pointed in that direction.

2. Always treat every firearm as if it were loaded.

Even if you are certain a firearm is unloaded, act as if it were loaded. Consider any firearm that you have not unloaded yourself to be loaded and treat it accordingly. Even double-check yourself!

3. Always be sure of your target and beyond.

Never point your firearm at something you do not intend to shoot. You must positively identify what you are shooting at and know what lies in front of and beyond it

4. Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire.

The natural instinct when picking up a firearm is to put your finger in the trigger guard. DON'T! This could cause an accidental discharge if the firearm is loaded.

Once you pull the trigger, there is no way to bring the bullet or shot back. THINK about your actions before, rather than after, you touch the trigger.

Key Words

Four rules of firearm safety	PROVE	Zone of fire
	Field carry	Hunter orange

Point **R** **O** **V** **E**	**1. Point the firearm in a safe direction.** Normally this is at the ground or in the air, in a direction away from others and yourself. Maintain constant control of the muzzle direction.
Point **Remove** **O** **V** **E**	**2. Remove all ammunition.** Open the action to remove any cartridges from the chamber. If the firearm is a semi-automatic with a detachable magazine, remove the magazine from the firearm first. This prevents the semi-automatic from chambering another round if the action closes. For virtually all other actions, open the action to remove any cartridges from the chamber first. Remove any detachable magazine and all other cartridges from the firearm. If your firearm does not have a removable magazine, it may be necessary to activate a latch button or other device, or work the action several times to remove the ammunition. Once all ammunition has been removed, leave the action open.
Point **Remove** **Observe** **V** **E**	**3. Observe that the chamber is empty.** Check your firearm's chamber to ensure no ammunition or empty casings are present. If so, remove by hand or by working the firearm's action.
Point **Remove** **Observe** **Verify** **E**	**4. Verify that the feed path is empty.** A firearm's feed path is the route by which ammunition stored in its magazine is moved to the chamber where it will be fired. Only repeating firearms will have a mechanical feed path. To verify it is free of ammunition and obstructions, you must work the firearm's action and visually check the feed mechanism and magazine.
Point **Remove** **Observe** **Verify** **Examine**	**5. Examine the bore for rust, excessive oil, or obstructions.** If present, clean the firearm before it is fired.

B. Accepting a firearm

When accepting a firearm from another person:

- Check that the action is open before touching the firearm. If it isn't, either ask the person who is handing you the firearm to open it for you or have him PROVE it unloaded.
- Visually check that the chamber and magazine are empty of ammunition before touching the firearm.
- Grasp the firearm with both hands, keeping the muzzle pointed in a safe direction. *(Exception: when two hunter cross an obstacle, one hunter has to hold two firearms.)*
- Say "thank you" to alert the passer to release the firearm.

Source: Ohio Division of Wildlife

C. Loading and unloading a firearm

Unloading

Before learning the procedures described here for loading and unloading firearms review these guidelines:

- Have someone familiar with the firearm give you guidance. Don't do this on your own!
- Whenever possible, do not use live ammunition. Use deactivated or "dummy" ammunition to learn how to use your firearm.
- Keep your finger outside the trigger guard.
- Practice! The more comfortable you are with the operation of your firearm the more safely you will handle it.

Anytime you pick up or are handed a firearm you must **PROVE** it is unloaded and safe to handle. **PROVE** stands for the following steps:

Loading

Follow the steps below to safely load a firearm. Do not load a firearm until you are able to safely and legally discharge it. It's best to have an experienced person show you how to do it.

1. Make sure there is no ammunition in the firearm or any obstructions in the barrel. In other words, **PROVE** it safe.
2. Point the firearm in the safest available direction. Know the location of other persons around you.
3. Determine if the firearm can be loaded with the safety on. If it can, apply the safety.
4. Make sure to use the correct cartridge(s) or shell(s) for the firearm by matching the data stamp on the firearm with the data stamp on the ammunition.
5. Load the firearm. How you do this is determined by the type of firearm you are using. As a general rule:
   - **Single shot firearms**: place the ammunition directly in the chamber and then close the action.
   - **Lever or pump action firearms with a tubular magazine**: make sure the action is closed, load the magazine, and then cycle the action to bring a round from the magazine to the chamber.
   - **Firearms with a removable box magazine**: load the magazine first and then insert it into the firearm. Close the action to load the chamber.
   - **Firearms with a nonremovable box magazine**: load directly into the magazine and then close the action to load the chamber.
6. If you were not able to do so before, put the safety on now.

The firearm is now loaded and ready to use. It requires continuous care and attention until it is unloaded.

D. Transporting, casing and uncasing firearms

Transporting

An important part of hunting is getting yourself and your firearm(s) to your hunting location safely. In almost all instances, this will mean transporting your firearm in a vehicle. NEVER carry a loaded firearm in a vehicle.

Follow these rules when transporting a firearm:

- Unload your firearm! PROVE it safe.
- Place it in a protective case separate from ammunition.
- Keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction when putting it into or taking it out of the vehicle.
- Never pull the firearm toward you muzzle first!
- Secure the firearm so that it cannot move during travel.
- Position it so that the muzzle will not be pointing at anyone or any animal traveling in the vehicle.
- If you have to leave the vehicle, store the firearm and ammunition in a locked place.

Casing a Firearm

1. *Completely unload and check firearm.*

2. *Close action after making sure it is empty.*

3. *Open case, place firearm inside, close case.*

4. *Place unloaded firearm securely in vehicle.*

Uncasing a Firearm

1. *Carefully remove firearm from vehicle, maintaining muzzle control.*

2. *Lay firearm on solid surface (muzzle in safe direction), open case and open the action before removing the firearm from the case.*

3. *Check that the firearm is unloaded and check bore for obstructions.*

E. Field carries

A **field carry** refers to the position in which you carry your firearm while hunting. Be sure to protect the trigger area! Six commonly used methods are shown below.

Two Hand/Ready Carry

Grasp the firearm with both hands. Carry it muzzle-up across the body. Cover the trigger guard with your hand. Never put your finger on the trigger.

This carry gives you the best control and can be one of the safest carries.

Sling Carry

Hang the firearm from one shoulder by the sling, keeping the muzzle pointed upward. Hook your thumb under the sling while walking or standing.

This carry is one of the most comfortable but least secure.

It is not well suited for walking in rough terrain or heavy brush.

Do not use this carry if someone is behind you.

Elbow Carry

Tuck the firearm under your armpit and allow it to hang across your elbow, keeping the muzzle pointed at the ground in front of you.

This carry has the least muzzle control.

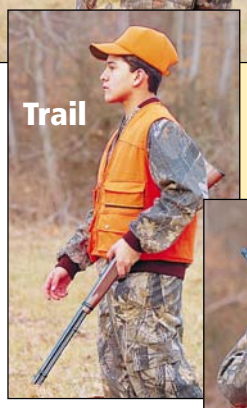
Use it only when no one is in front of you and there is little or no brush to catch the barrel.

Cradle Carry

Cradle the barrel in the bend of one arm while holding the stock with the other hand.

This is a comfortable carry and will not tire your arms.

Do not use this carry if someone is walking on the side toward which the muzzle is pointing.

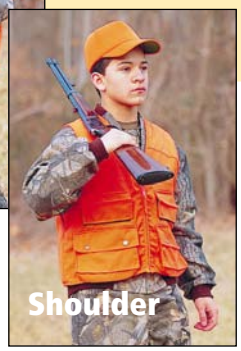


Trail Carry

Grip the stock with one hand, muzzle pointing down and in front of you.

This carry offers poor muzzle control, especially should you stumble or fall.

Do not use this carry when you are walking behind another person.



Shoulder Carry

Hold the stock, and lean the firearm against your shoulder with the muzzle pointing up.

Do not use this carry if someone is behind you.

It works well in high brush, but is not secure.

F. Firearm safety in the field

You will encounter many different situations in the field that will demand special consideration for the way you handle your firearm. Rugged terrain or improper footwear, getting into or out of tree stands and boats, crossing obstacles such as fences, ditches or streams, or even simply carrying your firearm can all present unusual challenges to handling your firearm safely and responsibly. Below, you will learn about some of the ways you can minimize the risks in special circumstances.

Preventing falls

A fall or stumble while hunting with a firearm can lead to severe injury or even death. To minimize the likelihood of a fall or stumble, follow these guidelines:

- Never jump or run while carrying a loaded firearm.
- Always unload your firearm when on poor footing such as loose rock, steep hillsides, or when crossing obstacles such as fences, streams or ditches.
- Do not try to cross a stream by walking on a fallen log! Find another place to cross or wade if possible.
- Wear proper footgear! Deep treaded lace-up hunting boots provide good traction and ankle support.
- If you do stumble or fall, make every effort to control the firearm and maintain muzzle control so that it is pointing away from you and your hunting companions. After a fall, point the firearm in a safe direction, open the action, unload the firearm and check for any barrel obstructions. Even a tiny amount of mud, snow or other debris can be extremely dangerous.

Firearms in treestands

Follow these steps to get your firearm safely into a treestand:

1. Unload your firearm and leave the action open. PROVE it safe.
2. Lay it on the ground with the muzzle slightly elevated to prevent dirt and debris from getting into the barrel.
3. Tie a short rope or cord around the stock and attach the other end to the barrel. This "bridle" will give you a means to attach your hoist rope. If your firearm has a sling, use it instead.
4. Tie or attach the hoist rope securely to the center of the sling or bridle so that the barrel does not point up when the firearm is lifted. Make sure the hoist rope is a bit longer than the height of the treestand above the ground.
5. Climb the tree with the hoist rope attached to your belt where it will not become easily entangled while you climb.
6. Once you are secure in your treestand, haul up the firearm and remove the haul line and bridle.
7. Check the firearm barrel for obstructions. Reload it.
8. To lower the firearm, PROVE it safe. Attach the rope the same way you did when hoisting the firearm up. Gently lower the firearm to the ground. Once you are back on the ground, check the barrel for obstructions.

Firearms in boats

PROVE a firearm safe before entering a boat, and if possible, case it.

If you are hunting alone, place the firearm muzzle-first in the boat before getting in yourself. Make sure you have put it in a secure place where it will not be jarred loose by the movement of the boat.

If hunting with a companion, place the first unloaded firearm in the bow of the boat pointing forward. After the first hunter is in the bow of the boat, place the second unloaded firearm in the stern, pointing backward. The second hunter can then shove off and take his or her position in the stern. Do not allow the ends of the firearms to extend past the sides of the boat where they can catch on brush or other vegetation.

Crossing obstacles

You are certain to have to cross many types of obstacles when you are in the field. The method of crossing is different depending on whether you are alone or with a companion.

If you are alone, follow these steps to safely cross an obstacle:

Step 1: *Unload your firearm and leave the action open.*

Step 2: *Carefully place your firearm on the ground under the obstacle, with the muzzle pointing in the direction away from you. Keep the muzzle and action away from mud and debris.*

Step 3: *Cross the obstacle far enough from the firearm so that if you fall, you won't fall on the firearm. Then retrieve the firearm by approaching the firearm's stock end, not the muzzle end.*

If you are with others, follow these steps to safely cross an obstacle:

Step 1: *Unload your firearms and leave the actions open.*

Step 2: *One hunter crosses the obstacle while the second holds both firearms.*

Step 3: *The hunter who has not yet crossed passes the firearms over the obstacle to the first hunter and then crosses the obstacle.*

Remember: Always unload a firearm before crossing any obstacle. Do not lean a firearm against the fence or obstacle while you are crossing it.

Before shooting, you must be able to answer YES to these three questions:

Is it safe?

Is it legal?

Is it ethical and responsible?

G. When is a shot safe?

There will be many times in the field when you are tempted to shoot. But before you do, you must be able to answer yes to three questions: Is it safe? Is it legal? Is it ethical? In this section we will talk about how you can recognize when a shot is safe, and identify some situations in which you should never shoot.

The safe shot

A safe shot is one in which you can see the animal clearly, are positively able to identify it, and are sure of what lies between you and your target, as well as beyond it.

The area into which you may safely shoot is called **zone of fire**. When hunting alone, your safe zone of fire is determined by:

s Your field of view.

s The presence of unsuitable targets such as trees, rocks or water.

s The range of your firearm.

When hunting with others, your zone of fire is determined by **all of the above plus**

- The location of others in the group.

It is crucial that each person in the group know exactly where the others are. For this reason, it is better if there are no more than two or three hunters in a group.

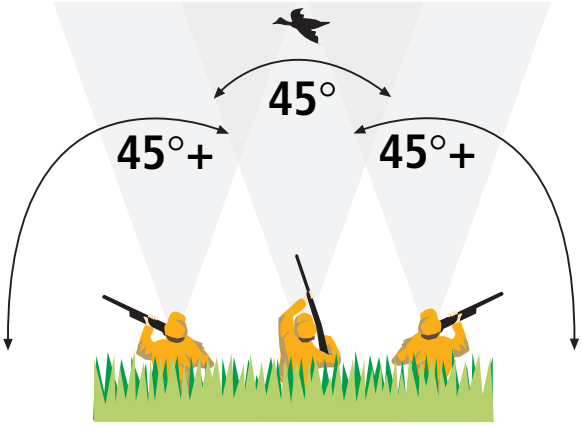
Finding the Zone. A common way to find a zone of fire when hunting with others is to imagine an area that extends in a 45° angle directly in front of you.

In situations where more than one hunter is shooting from a blind,

Source: Ohio Division of Wildlife

How to determine a 45° shooting zone:

- Start with thumbs up and out to the side.
- Focus on a point on the far wall.
- Draw arms straight in until both thumbs are in focus without moving your eyes.



Zone of fire for three hunters walking abreast.

Pheasant hunters often use zones of fire like this. To do this, walk in a straight line next to each other, making sure that no one goes ahead or lags behind. The area behind the hunters is off-limits – you cannot turn and shoot at anything behind you. The hunter at the center has the narrowest zone of fire: exactly 45°, while those to the left and right have a slightly larger zone since they can swing to the outside. Keep in mind, as your position changes, your zone of fire may change as well.

it is much safer for the hunters to sit close together in the blind. This way, it's less likely that one hunter will point a firearm at the other in the excitement and confusion of firing at moving targets.

"Skylined" Game Animals

Do NOT take an on-top-of-the-hill shot.

Unsafe shots

There are many instances in the field when you will be tempted to take the shot. If you find yourself in any of the following situations, DO NOT shoot.

- You see an animal you can't identify.
- You hear a sound or catch a movement out of the corner of your eye.
- Your target is "sky-lined"—standing at or moving over the top of a hill.
- If you miss your target, the trajectory and angle of travel of your bullet or shot might injure others.
- Your target is clearly out of range.
- There are objects in the foreground in your line of fire that could deflect your bullet and cause it to travel in unsafe directions.

Never shoot at a flock of animals. Pick out a single bird or animal when shooting. Flock shooting increases the chances of injury rather than a clean kill.

See and Be Seen!

Wearing **hunter**, or "blaze," **orange** clothing makes it much easier for other hunters to see you and therefore much less likely that they will mistake you for a target!

In Montana, the law requires that all big game hunters and anyone accompanying a hunter must have at least 400 square inches of hunter orange material above the waist visible at all times. That's 20 x 20 inches, or roughly four times the size of this sheet of paper. It's a good idea for bird hunters to wear hunter orange as well.

Never do anything that might make someone mistake you for game, or might cover up your hunter orange. For example, make sure your backpack doesn't cover your orange, don't carry a deer over your shoulders and avoid wearing tan, brown, or white clothing.

Alcohol and Drugs

Never consume alcohol or other drugs while hunting or when handling firearms. Do not hunt or shoot with anyone who has. Hunting while drunk or while drinking is extremely dangerous to yourself and others. Alcohol affects your mental and physical abilities and impairs your ability to make a good decision. Medicines that cause drowsiness can be especially dangerous when you are handling firearms, operating motorized vehicles or when hunting from treestands. Always stay fully alert when around firearms!

Examples of hunting skills impaired by alcohol and drugs include:

Ability	**Hunting skills negatively affected.**
Judgment	Ability to determine when to shoot and when not to shoot; safe zone of fire.
Coordination	Ability to safely handle firearms; cross obstacles or rough terrain; marksmanship; reaction time.
Speech	Ability to communicate clearly with other members of the hunting party.
Hearing	Game location.
Vision	Game identification.

H. Cleaning and storing your firearm

There is more to hunting and firearm safety than the field experience. The quality of your hunt is determined in large part by the care you give to your firearm both before and after you take it out into the field. In this section, you will learn how to clean and store your firearm properly and safely.

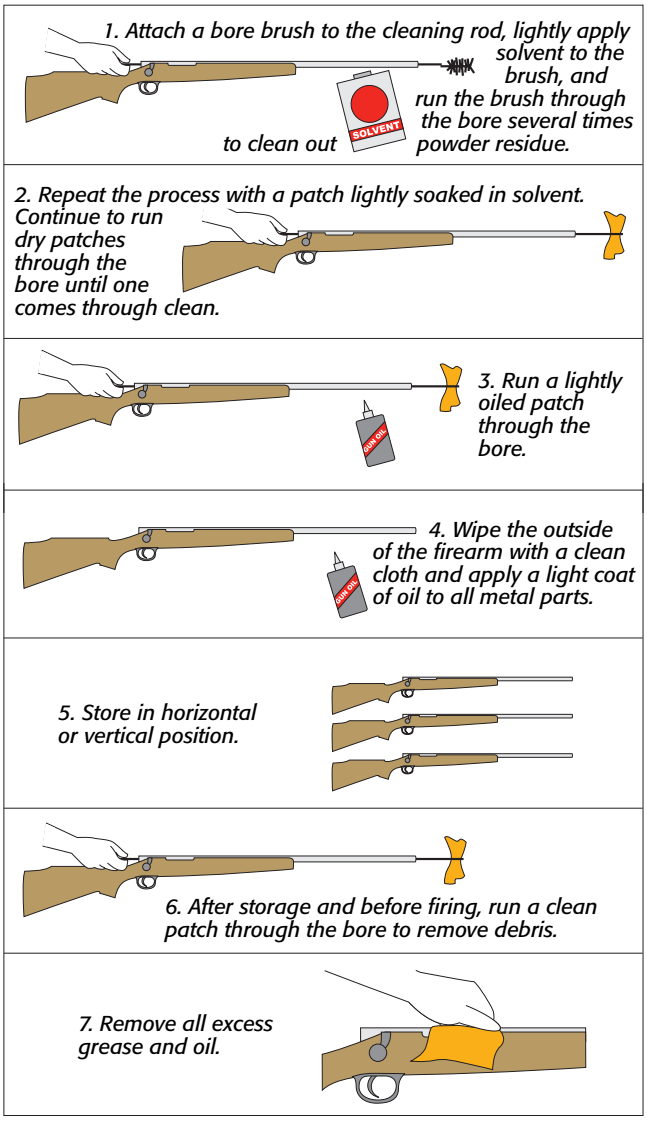
Cleaning

Proper cleaning of your firearm helps to keep it in safe and reliable operating condition. You should clean your firearm after every use, or after it's been stored for a long period of time.

Basic firearm cleaning materials are:

- Cleaning patches
- Powder solvent
- Gun oil
- Soft cloth
- Cleaning rod and attachments

How to Clean and Care for Your Firearm



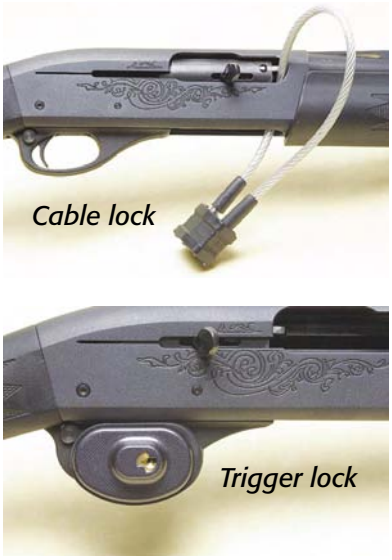
Most cleaning kits that you can buy contain these items. When purchasing a cleaning kit, be sure to select the correct gauge or caliber for the firearm(s) you own. It's also a good idea to carry a portable kit in the field in case you accidentally plug the barrel with snow, mud or other material.

Before cleaning: PROVE the firearm is safe and unloaded!

Firearm storage

Firearm safety rules apply at all times—not just when you're hunting. Firearms that are brought into the home or camp must be properly stored to reduce the risk of injury to children or others. Follow these guidelines to ensure the safe storage of firearms and ammunition.

- Store firearms and ammunition separately from each other and under lock and key.
- Store firearms unloaded. **PROVE** them safe.
- Have family members attend a hunter education class to learn firearm safety, even if they don't hunt.
- Consider using trigger locks and other such devices to make firearms safer during storage. In some jurisdictions, these devices are required by law.
- Know and follow the firearm storage laws for Montana. You are legally responsible for the proper and safe storage of your firearm 24 hours per day.



Trigger locks, cable locks and locking gun cabinets are all good ways to keep people from using your firearms without your knowledge and supervision.

Gun safe

Chapter Three Quiz

1. The first rule of firearm safety is to treat every firearm as if it were loaded. (Choose the correct answer.)
   _____ true
   _____ false

2. What lies beyond your target is relatively unimportant when hunting as long as you are sure you can hit what you are aiming at. (Choose the correct answer.)
   _____ true
   _____ false

3. Which of the following steps apply when accepting a firearm from another person? (Mark the correct answer(s).)
   _____ Make sure that the action is open and visually check the chamber and magazine before touching the firearm.
   _____ Grasp the firearm in both hands, keeping the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.
   _____ Thank the other person to let them know you have control of the firearm and then PROVE the firearm is safe.
   _____ All of the above

4. The first step to **PROVE** a firearm is safe is: (Mark the correct answer.)
   _____ remove all ammunition.
   _____ examine the bore for any obstructions.
   _____ point the muzzle of the firearm in a safe direction.
   _____ observe the chamber.

5. The first step when cleaning a firearm is to: (Mark the correct answer.)
   _____ run a bore brush with a light coating of gunpowder solvent through the barrel.
   _____ run a cloth patch with a light coating of gunpowder solvent through the barrel.
   _____ wipe the outside with a clean cloth and then apply a light coat of gun oil to the outer metal surface.
   _____ PROVE the firearm is safe and unloaded!

6. Firearms should always be stored unloaded, separate from ammunition, each in separate, locked storage cabinets or units. (Choose the correct answer.)
   _____ true
   _____ false

7. The first step when raising your firearm into a tree stand is: (Mark the correct answer.)
   _____ tie the hoist rope onto the sling or its bridle, if it does not have a sling.
   _____ tie a short rope or cord onto the firearm to serve as a bridle to attach the hoist rope.
   _____ put the firearm's safety on.
   _____ check that the firearm is unloaded and PROVE it safe.

8. The carry method that offers the best control of your firearm is: (Mark the correct answer.)
   _____ cradle carry
   _____ shoulder carry
   _____ two-hand carry
   _____ side carry

9. If you should stumble or fall while carrying a firearm: (Mark the correct answer.)
   _____ make every effort to control the direction of the muzzle so that it does not point at you or others.
   _____ unload the firearm and check the barrel for obstructions.
   _____ clean the barrel with a portable cleaning kit, if necessary.
   _____ do all of the above.

10. When crossing a fence with a firearm, the first step is always to unload your firearm and leave the action open. (Choose the correct answer.)
   _____ true
   _____ false

11. When two hunters, each carrying a firearm, are crossing an obstacle such as a fence: (Mark the correct answer.)
   _____ one hunter crosses over the obstacle first, and the loaded firearms are handed to him/her.
   _____ both hunters cross over at the same time, each carying their own firearms with the muzzles pointed in a safe direction.
   _____ one passes his or her unloaded, action open, firearm to the other, then crosses the obstacle first, and then the unloaded firearms with the actions open and the muzzles pointed in a safe direction are passed to him/her so the other hunter can safely cross the obstacle.

12. Would you consider it a safe or unsafe situation to shoot at the game in this figure? (Choose the correct answer.)
   _____ safe
   _____ unsafe

13. The use of alcohol or drugs impairs which of the body's abilities listed below? (Mark the correct answer(s).)
   _____ hearing
   _____ judgment
   _____ vision
   _____ coordination
   _____ all of the above

14. The main reason for wearing hunter orange clothing while hunting is to: (Mark the correct answers.)
   _____ make it more difficult for game to see you among the fall foliage.
   _____ continue an old hunting tradition.
   _____ make yourself more visible to other hunters.
   _____ confuse game.