The Art of the Precision Rifle: A Modern Treatise on Handloading

Synthesizing Classical Wisdom with 21st-Century Ballistics

In recognition of the foundational work by
Sinclair International, Bryan Litz, and the benchrest community

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Introduction

Handloading means assembling ammunition from its components: case, primer, powder and bullet. Done for accuracy, it aims to make each cartridge as close as possible to the others, so that the rifle, and not the ammunition, sets the size of the group. This guide covers that work, from new or fired brass arriving at the bench to the shot on the target.

Sources

The methods described here come mostly from two bodies of work. The *Sinclair International's Precision Reloading & Shooting Handbook*, by Bill Gravatt and Fred Sinclair [Gravatt and Sinclair, 1999], sets out the case preparation and bench practice of benchrest shooters at the end of the 1990s. Bryan Litz's *Applied Ballistics for Long-Range Shooting* [Litz, 2015] and its companion volumes [Litz, 2014] base external ballistics and bullet performance on measurement. The powder and bullet makers' manuals listed in the Sources chapter supply load data and safety rules. Where this guide departs from these sources, or where a figure was computed for it, the text says so.

What has changed since the Sinclair handbook

Several instruments have become common at the bench since 1999: electronic scales resolving 0.02 grain, Doppler radar chronographs that measure velocity over a stretch of the flight rather than at a single point, bullets of higher ballistic coefficient, including hybrid ogives, and powders made less sensitive to temperature. They make smaller differences measurable; they do not replace the methods.

Contents

After the safety rules, the chapters follow the order of the work: the loading area (Chapter 1), tools (Chapter 2), case preparation (Chapter 3), assembling the cartridge (Chapter 4), load development (Chapter 5), diagnosing a rifle that does not group (Chapter 6), shooting from the bench (Chapter 7), the atmosphere and the wind (Chapter 8), bullet coatings

(Chapter 9) and cleaning (Chapter 10). Four appendices give a comparison of loads on the target, a patch and jag guide, the distribution of case weights, and the statistics used throughout.

This guide is not a load manual. Charges come from the powder makers' published data, starting from the published starting load and working up as they direct.

Safety

Reloading puts primers, powder and pressure vessels on the bench. The rules below come first, before any technique.

The Ten Commandments of Firearm Safety

1. Treat every gun as if it were loaded.
2. Always be sure of your target and what is beyond it before you pull the trigger.
3. Always be sure the barrel and action are clear of obstructions.
4. Never point your gun at anything you do not want to shoot.
5. Never leave your gun unattended unless you unload it first.
6. Avoid alcoholic beverages and mind-altering substances both before and during shooting.
7. Never climb a tree or cross a fence with a loaded gun.
8. Never shoot at a hard, flat surface or the surface of water; always ensure you have a safe backstop.
9. Store firearms unloaded and, when possible, with the action open or disassembled.
10. Store firearms and ammunition separately under lock and key, out of reach of children and unauthorized persons.

Sinclair's Rules for Reloading Safety

In addition to general firearm safety, precision reloading carries its own set of critical precautions:

1. **Secure Storage:** Store your reloading supplies (primers, powder) in a cool, dry place, away from children, from sources of heat or ignition, and—a point often missed—*not in the same space as solvents or flammable gases*, which on a reloading bench means keeping the powder cabinet away from the cleaning supplies. Keep powder in its original approved containers and never decant it. Spread the risk: several small containers in more than one place are safer than one large stock.

   On quantity thresholds and cabinets. Figures such as "above 20 pounds (9.1 kg), and up to 50 pounds (22.7 kg), use a wooden cabinet with walls at least one inch (25 mm) nominal thickness" come from the United States fire code (NFPA 495) and apply there; the industry body itself publishes no quantity of its own and directs the reader to local regulation, which differs from one country to the next. Find out what applies where you live, and treat any figure quoted in a book—including this one—as an illustration of the shape of the rule, not as the rule.

   One design point does travel, and it is worth stating because intuition gets it backwards: a powder cabinet is *not* a safe. Its walls are thick to resist an outside fire long enough to matter, but the cabinet must be built of insulating material and left able to **vent itself**—a weak wall, seam or joint—and must never be tightly confined. Smokeless powder burns; it becomes an explosion only when what surrounds it is strong enough to contain the gas. A sturdy, sealed, well-braced box is the one thing you must not build.

2. **Follow the Manuals:** Always use reputable reloading manuals when beginning to load for a new cartridge. **START LOW AND WORK UP SLOWLY** while watching for signs of excessive pressure or case fatigue.

3. **Minimize Distractions:** Perform your reloading in a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. If you are distracted, stop, secure your components, and return only when you can focus entirely on the task.

4. **Do Not Mix Powders:** Never mix different types or brands of smokeless powder. Keep powder in its original container to avoid confusion. Powder should never be left in measuring hoppers for extended periods; double-base powders containing nitroglycerin can etch or misshape certain plastics (like polystyrene) used in inexpensive hoppers.

5. **Segregate Brass:** Do not mix brass from different rifles, even if they are the same caliber. Understand the concept of headspace and how it relates to your specific firearm.

6. **Inspect Frequently:** Check cases often for signs of metal fatigue, split necks, incipient case head separation, and primer pocket looseness.

7. **Military Brass Considerations:** Be aware that military brass often has thicker walls and lower internal capacity than commercial brass. Initial loads should be at

least 10 to 15 % below the published data for commercial cases [Gravatt and Sinclair, 1999, p. 10].

Identifying Deteriorated Propellant

While modern smokeless powders are remarkably stable, they can deteriorate over time, especially if subjected to extreme heat or improper storage. Identifying these signs is a critical safety skill. The first indication is usually smell: open the container and sniff the contents. Deteriorating powder produces a sharp, irritating acidic odor that is distinctly different from the normal solvent smell of fresh propellant. Visually, look for a reddish-brown "dust" or fumes on the surface of the powder or coating the inside of the container—this is a byproduct of the chemical decomposition of nitrocellulose.

Never attempt to salvage or blend deteriorated powder. The decomposition process is autocatalytic, meaning it accelerates over time and cannot be reversed. The safest method of disposal is to spread the powder in small, shallow piles—no more than one pound (0.45 kg) per pile, not exceeding one inch (25 mm) deep—in an isolated outdoor location, and ignite it using a slow-burning fuse or trail of powder that allows for safe retreat. Those two figures are the ones the propellant makers themselves publish, and neither is a round number to be rounded further. Deteriorated powder should never be disposed of in household waste, as it remains a combustible material.

Recognizing Pressure Signs

One of the most critical safety skills is the ability to identify signs of excessive chamber pressure. After firing each round during load development, examine the fired case carefully.

The primer offers the first visual clue. A normally-pressured primer will show a slight flattening where the firing pin struck, while still retaining a rounded edge. An overpressure primer will be severely flattened, with the edges pressed flush against the case head. In extreme cases, the primer may "crater" (showing metal flowing back around the firing pin indent) or even pierce, allowing hot gas to escape rearward into the action. Note, however, that primer appearance alone can be misleading. Some rifles have oversized firing pin holes that produce cratering even at safe pressures, and a few kernels of powder that have fallen through the flash hole into the primer pocket flatten a primer badly at ordinary pressure. Sharpe demonstrated it by seating primers over three kernels of powder: a laboratory read the fired primers as a sign of about 70,000 psi and told him to reduce the load, while the same load, measured in its pressure barrel, gave 32,260 psi [Sharpe, 1953, p. 250]. Primers should therefore be interpreted in context with other indicators; in his words they "tell very little about pressures", but a flattening that keeps increasing as the charge goes up shows that the load is too heavy [Sharpe, 1953, p. 250].

On a bolt-action rifle, the effort required to lift the bolt handle is one of the earliest and most sensitive indicators of rising pressure. If bolt lift becomes noticeably stiffer compared to known-safe loads, you are approaching the pressure limit and should not increase the charge further. This is a particularly valuable sign because it can be felt before visible case damage occurs.

For a quantitative pressure indicator, use a micrometer to measure the expansion of the case head just above the extractor groove. A reading that exceeds 0.0005" of expansion beyond the initial firing typically indicates that pressures are becoming elevated. Ejector marks—bright, circular impressions on the case head where the ejector has been pressed into the brass under pressure—provide further confirmation. Pronounced ejector swipes indicate that the case is being driven rearward with excessive force.

The most dangerous sign is incipient case head separation, visible as a bright ring or groove on the outside of the case body, just above the web. This case must be immediately retired and destroyed. Continued use can result in the case breaking in two during firing, which can cause catastrophic damage to the firearm and serious injury to the shooter.

Table 1: Pressure Signs: Severity and Response

Indicator	**Severity**	**Recommended Action**
Slight primer flattening	Not conclusive alone	Compare with primers fired at the starting load
Stiff bolt lift	Early warning	Do not increase charge further
Full primer flattening	Elevated	Reduce charge by about 5 % [Lyman Products, 2002, p. 101]
Ejector marks on case head	High	Reduce charge significantly
Primer cratering or piercing	Dangerous	Stop immediately; reduce load
Bright ring above web	Critical	Retire case; inspect firearm

International Pressure Standards: The C.I.P. Framework

The safe operation of firearms depends on rigorous pressure standardization. In Europe, the **Commission Internationale Permanente pour l'Épreuve des Armes à Feu Portatives** (C.I.P.) sets the definitive standards for ammunition pressure limits. In the United States, a similar role is played by the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute (SAAMI). René Malfatti, in his authoritative *Manuel de rechargement* [Malfatti, 2004], gives a clear practical exposition of the C.I.P. pressure criterion, with a worked example [Malfatti, 2004, p. 42]. The derivation of the tolerance factors below is ours; the published factors are those of the German proof ordinance [Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2006].

The Proof Testing Protocol

Before a firearm model is approved for sale, it must undergo a *proof test*: the firing of special cartridges loaded to a standardized overpressure. The coefficient is not universal, and this is the point at which the literature most often goes wrong:

Family	**C.I.P. tables**	**Proof overpressure**
Rifled centerfire arms	I, II, III	+25%
Pistols and revolvers	IV	**+30%**
Rimfire arms	V	**+30%**

Applying +25% to a revolver or to a rimfire arm understates by five points the margin actually required at proof. Smoothbores follow no coefficient at all: table VII prescribes absolute pressure triplets per gauge and chamber length, so for a shotgun the proof pressure is read, not calculated.

Do not confuse this coefficient with the +15% of the next section. That figure is the *statistical* margin on an individual cartridge, it applies to every family without exception, and it says nothing about how the firearm was proved. This margin ensures that the firearm possesses a structural safety factor beyond the pressures it will encounter in normal service.

Maximum Individual Pressure

While $P_{\max}$ defines the upper limit for the *mean* pressure of a production lot, it is not sufficient to guarantee that every individual cartridge remains safe. Manufacturing variability means that some rounds within a lot will inevitably develop higher pressures than others. To address this, the C.I.P. defines a **Maximum Individual Pressure**:

$$P_{\text{ind}} = 1.15 \times P_{\max}.$$

No single cartridge within a test sample may exceed P_{ind}. This +15% margin over $P_{\max}$ provides a safety buffer below the proof level, ensuring that even the hottest round in a batch remains well within the structural limits of the firearm.

Statistical Compliance Testing

Simply checking that no measured round exceeds P_{ind} is insufficient when samples are small—a five-round test might miss the tail of the distribution entirely. The C.I.P. therefore requires a statistical compliance test: with 95% confidence ($\gamma = 0.95$), at least 99% ($p = 0.99$) of the entire production population must fall below P_{ind}. This is expressed as an upper tolerance bound (see Appendix D, Section D.7 for the general theory):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Upper Bound} &= \bar{x} + k \cdot s \\ &\leq P_{\text{ind}}, \end{aligned}$$

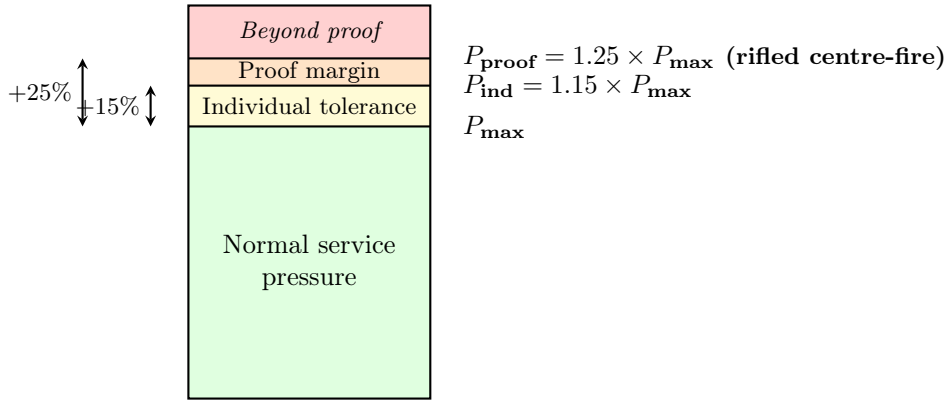

Figure 1: C.I.P. pressure hierarchy for *rifled centre-fire* arms. No individual round may exceed P_{ind}; the firearm is proof-tested at P_{proof}. **The proof coefficient is not universal**: C.I.P. tables IV and V require **+30 %** ($1.30 \times P_{\text{max}}$) for handguns and rimfire, not +25 %.

where $\bar{x}$ is the sample mean pressure, s is the sample standard deviation, and k is a tolerance factor that depends on the sample size. The mathematical derivation of k—which involves the non-central t-distribution—is detailed in Appendix D, Section D.8.

Table 2: C.I.P. tolerance factors k ($\gamma = 0.95$, $p = 0.99$), one-sided, computed from the non-central t distribution (exact values 5.741, 3.981, 3.295, 2.862). Published values, as transposed in German law [Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2006, Anlage III, Table 4]; the table rounds 5.741 up to 5.75 but 3.981 and 2.862 to the nearest.

Sample size (n)	**Tolerance factor (k)**
5	5.75
10	3.98
20	3.30
50	2.86

The large values of k for small samples reflect the substantial uncertainty inherent in estimating a distribution's tail from limited data. With only 5 rounds, the factor is 5.75—nearly six standard deviations above the mean—because the sample standard deviation is itself a very imprecise estimate of the true variability.

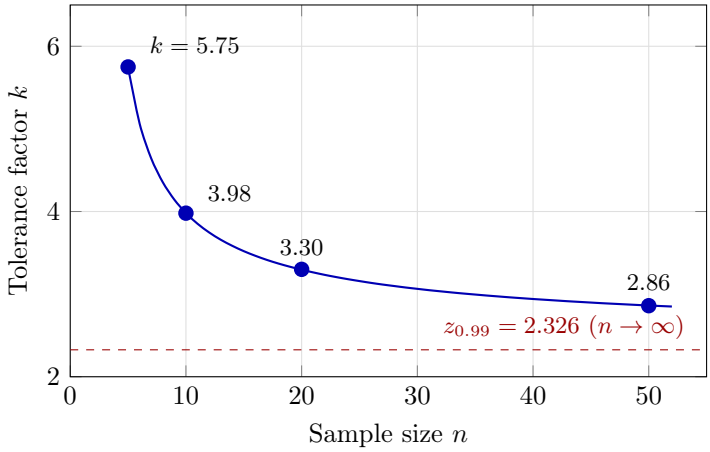

Figure 2: C.I.P. tolerance factor k as a function of sample size ($\gamma = 0.95$, $p = 0.99$). The asymptote $z_{0.99} \approx 2.326$ is reached as $n \to \infty$.

Practical Application for the Handloader

Consider a handloader who fires $n = 5$ test rounds and measures a mean pressure of $\bar{x} = 3{,}000$ bar with a standard deviation of $s = 50$ bar. The statistical upper bound is

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Upper Bound} \\ &\quad = 3{,}000 + (5.75 \times 50) \\ &\quad = 3{,}287.5 \text{ bar}. \end{aligned}$$

If the caliber's maximum individual pressure P_{ind} is below 3,287.5 bar, the load is statistically non-compliant—*even though none of the five rounds individually exceeded* P_{ind}. This illustrates why small samples demand conservative factors: a five-round test simply cannot reveal the full extent of a load's pressure variability.

Increasing the sample size dramatically tightens the bound. With $n = 20$ rounds showing the same $\bar{x}$ and s, the upper bound drops to $3{,}000 + (3.30 \times 50) = 3{,}165$ bar. This underscores the value of larger test strings during load development—not merely for better accuracy statistics, but for pressure safety as well.

Modern Safety Considerations

Eye and hearing protection are non-negotiable at both the bench and the range. Always wear safety glasses when priming cases or working with compressed loads. Primers are energetic components that can detonate if mishandled; a primer detonation at the bench, while rare, can propel fragments with sufficient velocity to cause permanent eye damage. At

the range, always wear properly rated hearing protection—either plugged, muff-style, or electronic—as repeated exposure to the impulse noise of rifle fire (typically 155–165 dB for a centerfire rifle) causes cumulative and irreversible hearing damage.

Lead exposure is an often-underestimated hazard. Many primers contain lead styphnate, and handling fired brass exposes you to lead residue. Wash your hands thoroughly after every reloading session and consider using a HEPA-filtered vacuum for your bench area. Lead-free primers from CCI and Federal are increasingly available and are now viable even for precision applications. Never eat, drink, or smoke at the reloading bench, as ingestion is the primary route of lead exposure in this environment.

Digital scale verification is essential for safe charge weights. Periodically verify your scale's accuracy with certified check weights. Environmental factors—fluorescent lighting, nearby cell phones, air conditioning drafts, and static electricity—can all interfere with digital electronics and cause erroneous readings. A scale that reads 0.1 grain high could push a maximum load into dangerous territory.

The single-powder discipline is a simple rule that prevents catastrophic mistakes: have only one container of powder on the bench at any given time. This eliminates the possibility of accidentally charging cases with the wrong propellant. Using a fast-burning pistol powder in a rifle case, for example, can result in immediate catastrophic failure of the firearm.

Finally, **squib load awareness** can prevent the most destructive type of accident at the range. If a fired round produces noticeably less recoil or a muffled report, **stop immediately**. Do not fire another round. A squib load—one with insufficient or no powder charge—may have lodged a bullet partway down the barrel. Firing a subsequent round into this obstruction will almost certainly destroy the firearm and can cause severe injury to the shooter and bystanders.

Chapter 1

The Loading Area

Precision loading needs a stable bench, good light and a place where the work can be done without interruption. This chapter covers the fixed bench at home, loading at the range, and the control of temperature and humidity where powder and primers are kept.

1.1 The Stationary Bench

The core of any reloading setup is the bench itself. This is not a place for lightweight, folding tables. Every time you pull the handle on a reloading press, you are exerting significant mechanical force, and a bench that flexes, tilts or walks under that force makes the operation harder to judge and less safe.

It is worth being exact about *why* it matters, because the obvious reason is not the right one. A flexing bench does not change the dimensions of your cartridges. When the ram drives a case into the die, the sizing load travels a closed path—ram, case, die, press frame, back to the ram—entirely inside the press. The bench never carries that load; it carries your hand. A bench that gives under the lever lets the whole press shift as one piece, and shifting the press bodily does not alter the distance between the die and the shellholder by one micron. That distance is set by the press frame, which is why Chapter 2 asks for rigidity *there*, and why the flex that does move shoulder bump is frame flex, rising and falling with the sizing force—and therefore with how hard the brass has become since its last annealing (Chapter 3).

What a rock-solid bench buys you is the thing the next paragraph describes, and it is not a small thing: **feel**. Seating a primer by hand or sizing a neck, you are reading a force through your arm, and you cannot read it on a platform that is moving. That tactile feedback is how outliers in a lot announce themselves. A heavy bench also keeps a heavy press from tipping the whole assembly toward you at the bottom of a stroke, which is a safety matter rather than an accuracy one.

Build it with mass and rigidity in mind: heavy timber posts—North American 4x4 or

6x6 stock, whose *actual* section is about 90 or 140 mm square rather than the 100 or 150 mm the name suggests—or a steel frame. The work surface should ideally be two to three inches (50–75 mm) thick, in laminated hardwood or high-density plywood, and the bench should be anchored to the floor or to the wall studs.

1.2 Lighting

Precision is impossible if you cannot see the details of your work. Relying on a single overhead bulb is a recipe for error. A modern reloading bench requires multi-layered lighting. The foundation is strong ambient illumination: high-output LED panels providing a flicker-free, daylight-balanced environment (5000–6000 K color temperature) that eliminates shadows and eye strain during long sessions. On top of this ambient layer, adjustable task lighting—high-intensity articulated lamps—must be positioned to illuminate specific work areas. You will frequently need to look directly into the mouth of a case to verify powder levels or to inspect the quality of a primer seat, and only a focused task light makes this possible. Finally, a lighted magnifying lens is indispensable for close inspection work: examining case heads for pressure signs, verifying chamfer quality on the case mouth, or checking the primer pocket for signs of looseness.

1.3 Loading in the Field

For many shooters, the "real work" happens at the range. The ability to load on-site allows for immediate validation of load development theories. However, the challenge of field loading is maintaining the same level of precision as the home bench in a more chaotic environment.

Modern mobile setups often utilize specialized tool chests or custom-built range boxes. These units must be organized such that every tool has a specific home, preventing the loss of small parts in the grass. High-quality portable presses, such as those from Harrell's Precision, are designed to clamp directly to range tables, providing a surprisingly stable platform for neck-sizing and seating. The key to successful field loading is preparation: perform the "heavy" operations like full-length sizing, trimming, and priming at home, and use the range time for the "tuning" variables like powder charge and seating depth.

1.4 Environmental Control: Temperature and Humidity

The precision reloading bench is a metrology laboratory in miniature, and like any laboratory, it benefits from environmental stability. Temperature and humidity affect not only the reloader's comfort but also the behavior of critical instruments and components.

Electronic scales—particularly the high-sensitivity magnetic force restoration balances favored by precision reloaders—are sensitive to temperature gradients and air currents. A

scale that was zeroed in a cold garage may drift significantly as the room warms up during a loading session. Ideally, the reloading room should be maintained at a stable temperature (between 65°F and 75°F) and should be free of drafts from air conditioning vents or open windows. Allow your scale at least 30 minutes to thermally stabilize after power-on before beginning to weigh charges.

One more thing belongs in a chapter about the room rather than about the bench: **this is also where the powder and the primers live**, and where the cleaning solvents live. They should not live together. Keep the component cabinet away from solvent shelves, away from any heat source, and out of the path of the mechanical or electrical equipment this chapter has just recommended you install. The rules for the cabinet itself—and why it must be able to vent rather than contain—are in the safety chapter.

Humidity is equally important, particularly in its effect on static electricity. Low humidity environments (common in winter or in air-conditioned spaces) promote static buildup, which causes powder kernels to cling to the walls of dispensers, hoppers, and scale pans. This "clinging" can result in charges that are consistently light or erratic. A room humidity of 40–60% is ideal. If your environment is chronically dry, consider using a small humidifier or placing anti-static dryer sheets near your powder handling equipment.

Note the apparent conflict with the storage advice above, and resolve it the right way round. Every propellant maker says to store powder in a *dry* place, and smokeless powder does take up moisture from damp air, which costs velocity. There is no contradiction here, since a room at 40 to 60% is ordinary indoor air and not a damp cellar, but the humidifier belongs near the *dispensing* equipment, where the static is, and not in a closed component cupboard. Keep the containers shut, and the question does not arise: the powder in a sealed factory container does not care what the room is doing.

1.5 Ergonomics and Flow

Finally, consider the "flow" of your workspace. Precision reloading is a repetitive process, and repetitive strain can lead to a loss of focus. Position your press, scale, and components such that you can move through the steps of the process with minimal wasted motion. Many experienced reloaders arrange their benches in a linear sequence that mirrors the order of operations: sizing at one end, trimming and preparation in the middle, and priming, charging, and seating at the opposite end. This creates a natural left-to-right (or right-to-left) workflow that minimizes the risk of skipping a step or double-processing a case.

Whether you prefer to stand or sit, ensure your stool or posture allows you to look directly at your scale and into your dies without straining. A comfortable reloader is a consistent reloader. Many competitive reloaders favor adjustable-height stools or standing desk configurations that allow them to alternate positions during long loading sessions, reducing fatigue and maintaining the concentration required for sub-MOA work.

Table 1.1: Comparison of Loading Environments

Feature	**Home Bench**	**Field Setup**
Primary Goal	Maximum Consistency	Immediate Feedback
Bench Type	Fixed, Heavy, Anchored	Portable, Clamped
Lighting	Multilayered, Daylight	Natural / Battery LED
Storage	Shelving, Cabinets	Tool Chests, Range Boxes
Operations	Full Cycle (Prep to Seat)	Tuning (Powder/Seat)

Chapter 2

Tools

Basic equipment can produce acceptable ammunition; the tools described here are chosen for repeatability, so that each case comes out of an operation as close as possible to the previous one. This chapter covers presses, dies, case preparation tools and measuring instruments, with what each one controls.

2.1 Reloading Presses

The press is the engine of the reloading process. Its primary function is to provide perfectly linear vertical movement under significant mechanical pressure. For the precision handloader, the choice usually narrows down to high-quality single-stage presses. Progressive presses, while excellent for high-volume pistol or tactical rifle shooting, typically introduce too many mechanical variables for the extreme accuracy required in benchrest or long-range competition.

2.1.1 Threaded Single-Stage Presses (7/8”-14)

Standard threaded presses are the workhorses of the industry. They utilize the universal 7/8”-14 thread pitch for mounting dies. Among the most distinctive designs is the *Forster Co-Ax*, which stands apart from the traditional “O” or “C” frame presses. The Co-Ax uses a dual-guide rod system and a universal jaw that allows the shellholder to float slightly. This float permits the case and the die to self-align during the sizing operation, significantly reducing the introduction of concentricity errors—a feature that is particularly valuable for shooters who do not use custom-fitted dies.

At the other end of the design spectrum, heavy cast iron presses such as the *RCBS Rock Chucker* or the *Redding UltraMag* prioritize sheer mass and rigidity. Their heavy frames minimize flexing even when resizing large magnum cases, ensuring that the headspace and shoulder bump set in the die remain consistent throughout a 100-round lot.

The most recent generation of presses, represented by units like the *Area 419 ZERO*, applies aerospace-grade machining and linear bearings to the reloading press. These designs eliminate the mechanical play found in traditional cast units, providing a level of repeatability previously only available in custom-made tools. For the shooter willing to invest in the finest equipment, these modern presses represent the state of the art.

2.1.2 Arbor Presses and Hand Dies

Arbor presses represent a fundamentally different approach to reloading. Instead of threaded dies, they utilize "hand dies" pioneered by L.E. Wilson. The arbor press provides a simple, direct vertical force, and because it lacks the massive mechanical leverage of a threaded press, the reloader can *feel* the resistance of the bullet as it enters the case neck. This tactile feedback is one of the best ways to identify inconsistent neck tension—a critical variable in velocity consistency. A case with a neck that is too tight or too loose will feel distinctly different under the press, alerting the experienced reloader to a problem that might otherwise go undetected.

Hand dies also offer an inherent alignment advantage. Because the die completely captures the case within a precision-machined sleeve, and because it is not threaded into a press frame, the alignment is governed solely by the interface between the die and the case. The result is often superior concentricity compared to threaded dies, making the arbor press a favorite of benchrest competitors who seek the lowest runout in their finished ammunition.

2.2 Reloading Dies

The die is the most precise component of the reloading system. It is responsible for reshaping the brass back to a chamber-compatible state while maintaining the integrity of the cartridge's centerline.

2.2.1 Bushing Dies: Controlling the Neck

Traditional sizing dies utilize a fixed-diameter internal neck. This often results in the neck being "over-worked"—sized down too small and then expanded back up with an internal expander ball. Precision shooters utilize **Bushing Dies**, which allow the user to swap out internal bushings in 0.001" increments. This allows for precise control of "neck tension"—the amount of grip the brass has on the bullet. By sizing the neck only as much as necessary, you extend the life of your brass and improve the uniformity of bullet release.

2.2.2 Seating Dies

The seating die must ensure that the bullet is started perfectly straight and pushed to a consistent depth. Advanced competition seating dies from *Redding* and *Forster* achieve

this through a sliding internal sleeve that supports the entire case body before the seating stem makes contact with the bullet. This pre-alignment ensures that the bullet and case are coaxial before the final seating pressure is applied, preventing the introduction of runout at the very last step of the loading process.

Equally important is the ability to make fine, repeatable adjustments to seating depth. Micrometer-style die tops provide granular control, typically with 0.001" per graduation, allowing the reloader to explore the relationship between seating depth and accuracy with laboratory precision. This capability is essential for the "tuning" phase of load development, where finding the specific bullet-to-rifling distance that a particular rifle prefers can transform a good load into an exceptional one.

2.3 Case Preparation Tooling

Consistency in case dimensions is the hallmark of the precision reloader. This requires tools that can trim, chamfer, and uniform brass with laboratory accuracy.

2.3.1 The L.E. Wilson Case Trimmer

While many trimmers utilize a collet to hold the case head, the Wilson trimmer holds the case in a caliber-specific holder that mimics the taper of the rifle chamber. This ensures the case is perfectly square to the cutter. When the cutter makes contact, it trims the case mouth perfectly flat and at a precise 90-degree angle to the body—a small detail that ensures uniform bullet release and consistent pressure.

2.3.2 Uniforming Tools

Precision work often involves "cleaning up" the manufacturing defects present even in high-quality commercial brass. Primer pocket uniformers—small carbide cutters—ensure that every primer pocket is machined to an identical depth. This allows the primer's anvil to be seated with consistent mechanical preload, which is the key to uniform ignition. Flash hole deburring tools address a related issue: the punching process used to create the flash hole in most commercial brass leaves a small burr on the interior wall. This burr can deflect or partially obstruct the primer's flame as it enters the powder column. Removing it ensures an even, centered flame path, reducing the velocity variance that stems from inconsistent ignition.

2.4 Measuring Instruments

You cannot manage what you cannot measure. A precision bench requires high-end measuring instruments.

2.4.1 Powder Handling

Charge weight drives muzzle velocity, and how tightly you can hold the first sets a floor under how tightly you can hold the second. Two fundamentally different technologies compete on the reloading bench: mechanical beam scales and electronic scales.

How much does a weighing error actually cost? The answer is not a constant, and it is worth having the order of magnitude before choosing a scale. Fitting the published charge ladders we hold—291 ladders across six cartridges—gives a median slope of **72 fps per grain** of powder, but the spread is wide and it tracks case capacity: about 27 fps/gr in a .338 Norma Magnum, 66 in a 6.5×47 Lapua, 88 in a 6 mm BR, and **200 fps/gr in a .221 Fireball**. A small case punishes a weighing error roughly seven times harder than a large one.

Table 2.1: What a weighing error costs in velocity (median slope, 291 published ladders)

Weighing error	**Typical case**	**Small case (.221 Fireball)**
±0.1 gr (beam scale)	±7 fps	±20 fps
±0.02 gr (EMFR scale)	±1.4 fps	±4 fps

Set these against a match-grade velocity standard deviation, which runs around 3.5 m/s (11 fps). Because variances add rather than magnitudes, a beam scale held to ±0.1 gr accounts for something like a third of that variance in a normal case—a real and worthwhile target for improvement. An EMFR scale held to ±0.02 gr accounts for a couple of percent, at which point the charge is no longer what limits you: powder temperature alone (Chapter 8) moves velocity by 0.5 to 1.3 fps for every degree Celsius, so a ten-degree swing across a match day outweighs it. The conclusion is not that weighing does not matter; it is that *weighing stops being the limiting variable once you weigh well*, and that the smaller the case, the later that point arrives.

Mechanical Beam Scales

The mechanical beam scale—also called a balance scale—has been the reloader's standard since the earliest days of handloading. Its principle is elegantly simple: an unknown powder charge in the pan is balanced against calibrated counterweights sliding along a graduated beam. When the beam settles to its zero mark, the weight of the charge equals the sum of the counterweight positions.

Quality beam scales such as the *RCBS 505*, *Redding No. 2*, or *Hornady Balance* typically resolve to 0.1 grains and are accurate to ±0.1 grains when properly leveled and zeroed. A magnetic damper accelerates beam settling, reducing the time per charge. Beam scales have three decisive advantages: they require no power source, they have no electronics to drift, and they provide a first-principles measurement that is immune to electronic interference.

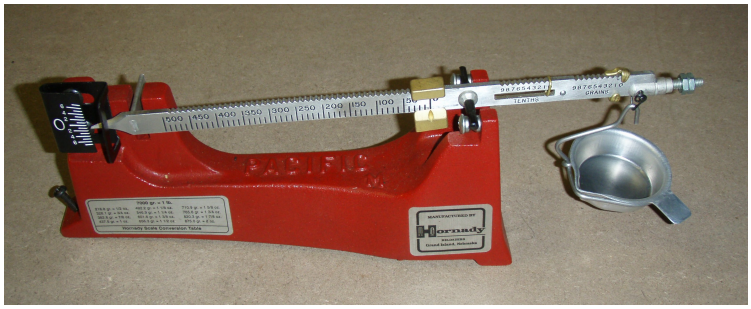

Figure 2.1: A Hornady mechanical beam scale for powder weighing. The graduated beam provides 0.1-grain resolution, and the magnetic damper (left) settles the beam quickly. Beam scales require no power source and have no electronics to drift, making them an essential backup even on a modern bench. Photo: Arthurrh, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

They are not exempt from checking, however: their zero depends on the scale being level and is verified at the start of every session, and a knock can upset the beam—which is what a set of check weights is for [Lyman Products, 2002]. For these reasons, even reloaders who have adopted electronic dispensers keep a beam scale on the bench as an independent verification tool.

Their limitation is speed: manually trickling powder onto the pan and waiting for the beam to settle is inherently slower than an automated dispenser. For a precision shooter loading 20 rounds for a match, this is acceptable; for someone loading 200 rounds for a training session, it becomes a bottleneck.

Electronic Scales and Automated Dispensers

Modern electronic scales have transformed the reloading bench. Digital dispensers like the *RCBS ChargeMaster* or *AutoTrickler* operate in two stages: a fast volumetric throw that brings the charge close to the target weight, followed by a slow gravimetric "trickle" that adds individual kernels until the exact weight is reached.

The highest-precision electronic scales, such as the *A&D FX-120i*, do not rely on a strain gauge alone. Their sensor is a *hybrid*: it combines electromagnetic force restoration—which supplies the resolution—with a parallelogram load-cell structure that supplies the settling speed. That pairing is exactly why such a scale works with an automated trickler, where a pure force-restoration balance would be accurate but too slow to follow the kernels. In grain mode the FX-120i displays in steps of **0.02 grains**, five times finer than the best beam scale, which is enough to see a single kernel of extruded powder land in the pan. When paired with an automated trickler, they deliver ±0.02-grain consistency at a rate of one charge every 15–20 seconds, a combination of speed and precision that no manual method can match.

However, electronic scales are susceptible to environmental factors that do not affect beam scales: temperature drift, electromagnetic interference from nearby motors or fluorescent lights, air currents from HVAC systems, and the static electricity generated by many powder types. Periodic verification against a set of certified check weights is essential.

Practical Recommendations

The ideal bench setup combines both technologies. Use an electronic dispenser for primary charging and keep a beam scale zeroed and ready as a cross-check. Verify the electronic scale against check weights at the start of every session and spot-check charges on the beam scale every 10–20 rounds. This dual approach catches electronic drift before it contaminates a batch.

Two additional hazards deserve emphasis. First, never leave powder in a measuring hopper overnight. Many modern propellants are "double-base," containing both nitrocellulose and nitroglycerin. The nitroglycerin can chemically react with inexpensive plastics—particularly those containing polystyrene—leading to etching, clouding, or permanent deformation of the hopper. Always return powder to its original factory container immediately after a loading session. Second, static electricity is the invisible enemy of consistent charges: it causes powder kernels to cling to hopper walls and scale pans, producing charges that are either consistently light or erratic. Wiping down equipment with anti-static dryer sheets, maintaining adequate room humidity, or using grounded metal scale pans can mitigate this effect.

2.4.2 The Micrometer and Caliper

A precision caliper (digital or dial, with 0.001" resolution) is the workhorse measuring instrument on any reloading bench. It is used to measure overall cartridge length, case length, shoulder datum, and a host of other critical dimensions. For the highest accuracy, a *Mitutoyo* or *Starrett* digital caliper with an absolute encoder is preferred, as it does not lose its zero position even when the battery is removed.

However, a caliper alone is not sufficient for all measurements. A micrometer (with 0.0001" resolution) is essential for measuring case neck wall thickness during neck turning operations and for checking bullet diameters. When combined with specialized attachments—such as a bullet comparator (which measures to the ogive rather than the tip) or a headspace comparator (which measures to the shoulder datum)—the caliper becomes a complete cartridge geometry analysis system. These comparator inserts are available from *Hornady*, *Sinclair*, and *Whidden Gunworks*, and they transform a standard caliper into a tool that can measure the dimensions that actually matter for accuracy, rather than the dimensions that are merely easy to reach.

Table 2.2: Essential Tooling Specifications

Tool Category	**Precision Requirement**	**Preferred Example**
Press	Zero Flex / Self-Alignment	Forster Co-Ax / Area 419 ZERO
Dies	Bushing-Controlled Neck	Redding Type S / Wilson Hand Dies
Trimmer	Square to Case Body	L.E. Wilson Case Trimmer
Scales (electronic)	0.02 gr Sensitivity	A&D FX-120i (EMFR)
Scales (beam)	0.1 gr Resolution	RCBS 505 / Redding No. 2
Calipers	0.001” Resolution	Mitutoyo Absolute Digital

Chapter 3

Case Preparation

The brass case is at once a pressure vessel, a gas seal and the container that holds bullet and powder in line. A case is reused many times, and each firing and sizing changes it. This chapter follows the case from selection through first preparation, annealing, cleaning and sizing.

3.1 The Selection of Raw Materials

Precision begins with the metallurgy and manufacturing tolerances of the raw brass. While it is possible to find "good" batches of standard commercial brass, the competitive reloader typically begins with premium-grade cases from manufacturers who prioritize consistency over volume.

Among the premium manufacturers, *Lapua* (Finland) has long been the benchmark for consistency. Lapua brass is prized for its uniform wall thickness, tight weight tolerances, and exceptional primer pocket longevity. Their manufacturing process minimizes work hardening during forming, allowing for a higher number of reload cycles before the material becomes brittle. For many competitive disciplines, Lapua brass is the default choice.

Alpha Munitions (USA) has more recently revolutionized the concept of "ready-to-load" brass. By utilizing advanced manufacturing processes and specialized packaging—foam inserts that protect the case mouths during shipping—Alpha ensures that cases arrive with perfectly round necks and virtually zero runout. Their "OCD" (Optimized Case Design) features prioritize consistent internal volume and pressure resistance, reducing the amount of initial preparation the reloader must perform.

Peterson Cartridge (USA) occupies a similar premium tier, with a particular focus on robust case designs for high-pressure applications. Their cases are manufactured with thicker webs and reinforced primer pockets to withstand the stresses of Extreme Long Range (ELR) shooting, where cartridges like the .300 PRC or .375 CheyTac operate at or near maximum pressures.

Table 3.1: Premium Brass Manufacturers: Key Characteristics

Manufacturer	Origin	Primary Strength
Lapua	Finland	Wall uniformity, primer pocket longevity, reload count
Alpha Munitions	USA	Ready-to-load consistency, minimal initial prep
Peterson Cartridge	USA	Robust web/pocket design for high-pressure ELR cartridges
Norma	Sweden	Good uniformity, wide cartridge selection

3.2 Phase 1: Initial Preparation (The "Once-Off" Tasks)

When a new lot of brass arrives, several tasks must be performed to ensure every case is an exact duplicate of its neighbors. These tasks are typically performed only once in the lifecycle of the case.

3.2.1 Weight Sorting and Internal Volume

Weight sorting is a proxy for measuring internal volume. In a lot of 100 cases, you should seek to identify a "core" group that falls within a narrow weight range (typically +/- 0.5 grains for a .308-sized case). Cases that are significantly heavier likely have thicker walls, which reduces internal volume and increases pressure. Conversely, exceptionally light cases may indicate thin spots in the web or walls.

3.2.2 Measuring Internal Volume Directly: Water Capacity

Weight sorting only *ranks* cases; to obtain an actual volume—needed, for example, when entering a measured case capacity into an internal-ballistics estimator—the case is weighed dry and then filled with water (1 grain of water $\approx 0.0648\,\mathrm{cm}^3$). Two distinct quantities must not be confused.

Full capacity (empty case). Weigh a fired, neck-sized case with its spent primer left in place (to plug the flash hole) to obtain M_{empty}. Fill it with water to the case mouth using a syringe, forming a flat meniscus, and weigh again as M_{full}. Then

$$\begin{aligned}&\text{Full capacity (gr } \mathrm{H_2O})\\ &\quad = M_{\text{full}} - M_{\text{empty}}.\end{aligned}$$

This is the quantity most often quoted and is ideal for comparing lots or brands.

Usable capacity (bullet seated). The volume actually available to the powder is smaller, because the seated bullet intrudes into the case below the mouth. It can be obtained

directly—and exactly, without any estimation factor—by displacement: additionally weigh the bullet alone (M_{bullet}), fill the case to the brim, seat a bullet to your intended cartridge overall length (the excess water overflows), wipe the exterior dry, and weigh the whole as M_{total}. The water remaining occupies precisely the powder space, so

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Usable capacity (gr } H_2O\text{)} \\ = M_{\text{total}} - M_{\text{empty}} \\ - M_{\text{bullet}}.\end{aligned}$$

Because loading density (and therefore pressure) depends on the *usable* volume, this bullet-seated figure is the one to feed to a simulator. As a rough guide, usable capacity is on the order of 0.85–0.90 of full capacity for rifle cases (lower for handgun cases, where the bullet is seated comparatively deeper); but the displacement method above is preferred whenever accuracy matters.

3.2.3 Flash Hole and Primer Pocket Uniforming

Commercial brass is often manufactured by punching the flash hole, which leaves a small burr on the interior of the case. This burr can deflect the primer's flame, causing inconsistent ignition. Deburring the flash hole ensures a clear, centered path for the ignition flame.

Similarly, primer pockets may have slight manufacturing variations. Using a carbide uniforming tool ensures that the floor of the pocket is perfectly flat and cut to a consistent depth. This allows the primer's anvil to be seated with uniform pressure, ensuring that every primer in the lot requires the same mechanical energy to detonate.

3.2.4 Outside Neck Turning

Neck turning is perhaps the most advanced of the initial preparation tasks. The goal is to uniform the wall thickness of the case neck. Even in premium brass, there is often a "high side" and a "low side" to the neck wall. If the wall thickness is inconsistent, the bullet will be slightly off-center when seated.

By removing a small amount of brass from the exterior of the neck (typically 0.001” to 0.002”), you ensure that the neck wall is perfectly uniform all the way around. This removes one source of runout: a neck wall thicker on one side, which pushes the seated bullet off the case axis. It is not the only one — the chamber, the sizing die and the seating die each contribute, and Chapter 6 shows how to tell them apart by measuring runout at each stage.

The target wall thickness follows from the loaded round rather than from the empty case. A loaded neck measures the bullet diameter plus *two* wall thicknesses, and that outside diameter must remain smaller than the chamber neck by the intended clearance:

$$t = \frac{D_{\text{chamber}} - D_{\text{bullet}} - c}{2} \tag{3.1}$$

where t is the wall thickness, D_{chamber} the chamber neck diameter, D_{bullet} the bullet diameter and c the total chamber clearance. For a 6.5 mm chambering with a 7.47 mm chamber neck, a 6.71 mm bullet and 0.03 mm of clearance, $t = (7.47 - 6.71 - 0.03)/2 = 0.365$ mm, giving a loaded neck of $6.71 + 2(0.365) = 7.44$ mm.

Note that the clearance is subtracted *before* halving, because it is shared between the two walls. Adding it afterwards is a common slip and yields 0.41 mm here—a loaded neck of 7.53 mm in a 7.47 mm chamber. Such a round will not chamber, and if forced, the neck cannot expand to release the bullet: the result is the pressure excursion described earlier in connection with over-length cases. Always verify the result by recomputing the loaded neck diameter. Typical clearances run from 0.025 to 0.05 mm total in tight benchrest chambers, and 0.05 to 0.08 mm in standard ones.

Chamber clearance should not be confused with *neck tension*, which is the interference between the sized neck bore and the bullet shank. Clearance is set by turning; tension is set by the sizing bushing. They are independent quantities.

3.3 Annealing

One of the most significant advancements in modern case preparation is the widespread adoption of annealing as a routine step in the case lifecycle. Every time a cartridge is fired and subsequently resized, the brass in the neck and shoulder region undergoes "work hardening"—a metallurgical process in which the grain structure of the metal becomes increasingly rigid and brittle. Over multiple firing cycles, this hardening leads to inconsistent neck tension, split necks, and ultimately case failure.

Annealing is the controlled application of heat to the neck and shoulder of the case, which restores the brass to a softer, more uniform state. The goal is to heat the neck to approximately 700°F–750°F (the recrystallization temperature of cartridge brass, which is typically a 70/30 copper-zinc alloy) without allowing heat to conduct down into the case head and web, where hardness is essential for structural integrity.

Colour cannot serve as the indicator—and this is the trap of torch annealing. A solid does not begin to glow visibly, even in a darkened room, until around 525°C: that is a threshold of thermal emission, not a property of brass. At the 700°F–750°F (370°C–400°C) target, **the case shows no colour at all**. Heating "until a dull red just appears" therefore puts the neck 125°C–155°C *above* target—and an over-annealed neck is too soft, which is a safety matter, not a cosmetic one. Working in the dark is useful, but to see the red one must *not* reach, never as a target. What actually indicates the temperature is a calibrated temperature-indicating lacquer, or a dwell time calibrated once on a sacrificial case.

3.3.1 Methods of Annealing

The traditional method uses a propane torch: the reloader rotates the case in the flame while watching for the onset of a faint glow, visible only in dim lighting. This approach is inexpensive but highly operator-dependent, and achieving consistent results across a batch of 100 or more cases requires considerable skill and patience.

Modern induction annealers have largely supplanted the torch for serious precision work. Machines such as the *AMP Annealer* (Annealing Made Perfect) use precisely controlled electromagnetic induction to heat the case neck. The system delivers a calibrated pulse of energy tailored to the specific cartridge dimensions and brass alloy, ensuring that every case receives exactly the same heat treatment. This level of repeatability—combined with speed and ease of use—has made induction annealing the gold standard for competitive reloaders.

A third method, salt bath annealing, involves dipping the case necks into a bath of molten salt (typically a mixture of potassium nitrate and sodium nitrite) held at a precise temperature. Because the dwell time in the bath is only a few seconds—far shorter than a torch flame's contact time—the bath itself must run considerably hotter than the 700°F–750°F target quoted above for torch annealing: typical salt bath temperatures are on the order of 930°F–1,020°F (500°C–550°C) [Chambers, 2021]. Since the heat source is constant rather than a hand-held flame, there is no risk of overshooting through operator error, which is what makes the higher bath temperature safe for a brief immersion. The setup is more complex and requires careful safety precautions due to the high temperature of the molten salt and the hazards of the chemicals involved. The first of them is that the cases must be *perfectly dry*: any trace of water carried into the molten salt flashes to steam and throws the salt out of the pot. Annealing salts are sold to handloaders for use at the home bench [Chambers, 2021], and the method lends itself to batch work.

Table 3.2: Comparison of Annealing Methods

Method	**Cost**	**Repeatability**	**Best For**
Propane Torch	Low	Operator-dependent	Small batches
Induction (AMP)	High	Excellent	Competition use
Salt Bath	Medium	Very Good	Batch work; home bench

3.3.2 When to Anneal

The optimal frequency of annealing depends on the cartridge and the degree of sizing performed. For a precision bolt-action rifle where cases are neck-sized only and shoulder-bumped minimally, annealing every two to three firings is typically sufficient. For cartridges that undergo full-length sizing (such as those used in semi-automatic rifles), annealing after every firing is recommended. The key indicator is neck tension consistency: if your seating force begins to vary noticeably across a batch, the brass is overdue for annealing.

3.4 Brass Cleaning

Before fired cases can be resized, they must be cleaned to remove carbon residue, powder fouling, and range debris. Uncleaned brass can scratch the interior of sizing dies, introduce abrasive particles into the primer pocket, and make accurate measurement of case dimensions difficult.

The three most common methods are vibratory tumbling, wet tumbling, and ultrasonic cleaning.

3.4.1 Vibratory Tumbling (Dry)

Vibratory tumblers use a bowl filled with dry media—typically ground walnut shell or corn cob—that vibrates at high frequency, allowing the media to polish the exterior of the cases through abrasion. Walnut shell is more aggressive and is best for heavily tarnished brass, while corn cob produces a higher polish. A small amount of case polish additive (such as *Dillon* or *Lyman* brass polish) mixed into the media accelerates the cleaning process.

3.4.2 Rotary Wet Tumbling

Wet tumbling, using a rotary tumbler with stainless steel pins and a small amount of dish soap and citric acid, has become increasingly popular because it cleans both the interior and exterior of the case simultaneously. The stainless pins reach inside the case to remove carbon from the interior walls and the primer pocket, producing cases that are virtually spotless. The disadvantage is the need to thoroughly dry the cases after tumbling. A food dehydrator or a warm oven (set no higher than 150°F) for one to two hours is the standard drying method.

3.4.3 Ultrasonic Cleaning

Ultrasonic cleaning uses high-frequency sound waves to create microscopic bubbles (cavitation) that collapse against the case surfaces, stripping away carbon and fouling. This method is particularly effective at cleaning primer pockets and case interiors without the mechanical aggression of stainless steel pins.

A widely circulated "cocktail" for ultrasonic cleaning mixes white vinegar, warm water and a drop of dish soap, often half vinegar and half water. Acetic acid does attack brass, but slowly: in laboratory tests on a brass with 36 % zinc at 20°C, acetic acid from 0.25 to 2 M (half-diluted vinegar is about 0.4 M) removed 0.04 to 0.11 g of metal per square metre per hour—a few nanometres in a half-hour cycle—and stirring raised the worst case to about $0.9\,\mathrm{g/(m^2{\cdot}h)}$, still well under a micrometre [Avdeev et al., 2024]. Heat and ultrasound speed the attack up; a short cycle followed by a thorough rinse costs the case nothing measurable. **Citric acid** is preferable, and solutions sold for brass more so still.

1. **Preparation:** Deprime cases using a universal decapping die to ensure all surfaces and flash holes are exposed.
2. **Cleaning Cycle:** Submerge cases in the solution for approximately 20–30 minutes.
3. **Neutralization:** Rinse in a baking soda and water solution. **This step is critical**: an acid left unneutralized keeps working and weakens the neck.
4. **Rinsing:** Perform a thorough rinse with hot water, followed by a final distilled water rinse to prevent spotting.
5. **Drying:** Allow cases to air-dry or use a low-heat dryer.

Aqueous solutions only. An ordinary ultrasonic tank must never be charged with a flammable solvent. Isopropyl alcohol, mineral spirits and alcohol-based screen wash all have flash points at or below room temperature; an ultrasonic tank heats its bath in normal operation, concentrates vapour above the liquid surface, and contains electronics capable of producing a spark. This is the textbook configuration for a flash fire. Home-brewed cleaning recipes circulating in shooting forums sometimes call for large fractions of alcohol-based fluids—these belong on a hand-applied cloth, not in a tank. Where a flammable solvent genuinely is required, only purpose-built explosion-proof equipment is appropriate.

A second caution applies to any recipe combining *hydrogen peroxide with ammonia*. Copper ions leached from the brass form ammine complexes that catalyse peroxide decomposition; the reaction is exothermic and self-sustaining once initiated, and it liberates oxygen. Such a mixture must never be stored in a sealed container, and should be made up only in the quantity needed immediately.

Regardless of the method chosen, cases should be cleaned before sizing rather than after, so that the sizing die operates on a clean surface.

3.5 Phase 2: The Sizing Operation (Maintaining the Fit)

After a case is fired, it expands to fit the dimensions of your rifle's chamber. Once cleaned, the sizing operation must return the case to a state that chambers reliably while minimizing the "working" of the brass.

3.5.1 Shoulder Bumping and Headspace

For a bolt-action rifle, you do not want to "full-length" size the case back to factory dimensions. Instead, you want to "bump" the shoulder back just enough to ensure the bolt closes with minimal resistance (typically 0.001" to 0.002" of clearance). This minimizes the amount of brass movement, reducing work hardening and significantly extending the life of your cases.

3.5.2 Neck Sizing and Bushing Selection

Using a bushing die allows you to control exactly how much you size the neck. The rule of thumb is to size the neck only as much as is required to provide consistent bullet grip. For most precision applications, a "neck tension" of 0.002” (meaning the sized neck ID is 0.002” smaller than the bullet diameter) is the standard starting point.

3.6 Summary of Case Preparation Workflow

Table 3.3: Case Preparation Decision Matrix

Operation	Frequency	Precision Benefit
Weight Sorting	Once (per lot)	Uniform Internal Volume / Pressure
Flash Hole Debur	Once (per case)	Consistent Primer Flame Path
Pocket Uniform	Once (per case)	Consistent Primer Anvil Seating
Neck Turning	Once (per case)	Reduced Runout / Uniform Tension
Annealing	Every 2–3 Firings	Uniform Neck Tension / Case Life
Shoulder Bump	Every Firing	Consistent Headspace / Case Life
Neck Sizing	Every Firing	Controlled Bullet Grip (Tension)

Gravatt and Sinclair open their chapter on case preparation with a line they present as already current among accuracy reloaders: “Precision reloading is a matter of trifles” [Gravatt and Sinclair, 1999, p. 37]. Each step in the table contributes little on its own; the consistency comes from doing all of them, on every case.

Chapter 4

Assembling the Cartridge

Assembly turns a prepared case into a cartridge: seating the primer, weighing the charge and seating the bullet. The aim is that every round matches the others; this chapter describes how each step is done and measured.

4.1 Primer Seating

Seating a primer is often underestimated as a simple mechanical task, but it is actually a delicate operation that dictates the consistency of ignition. The goal is to seat the primer until it firmly "bottoms out" in the uniformed primer pocket, ensuring the anvil is properly compressed against the priming compound.

4.1.1 The Importance of "Feel"

Precision reloaders almost universally prefer handheld priming tools (such as those from *Sinclair* or *K&M*) over the built-in priming systems on presses. A handheld tool provides direct tactile feedback. You can "feel" the primer as it enters the pocket and exactly when it makes contact with the floor. This allows you to detect pockets that are becoming too loose (a sign of high-pressure brass fatigue) or primers that are slightly out of round.

4.1.2 Anvil Pre-Load

For optimal ignition, the primer must be seated deep enough that the anvil is firmly bottomed and slightly pre-loaded against the priming compound. **Two different quantities are easily confused here.** What you *measure* is the cup's depth *below the case head*—the specification is 0.003” to 0.005” (0.076–0.127 mm), and that is what a depth micrometer reads. What you *achieve* is a crush of the anvil past its first contact with the pocket floor, of the order of a couple of thousandths. The two happen to be of similar magnitude, which is precisely why they get conflated; only the first is measurable on a finished round. This

ensures that when the firing pin strikes, the energy is efficiently transferred into the priming compound rather than being wasted by pushing the primer further into the pocket. A primer that is not fully seated (one that protrudes above the case head) is both an accuracy problem and a safety hazard: it can cause a slam-fire in semi-automatic actions, and the inconsistent ignition will produce erratic velocities.

4.1.3 Berdan versus Boxer Primers

Before discussing primer types by size and intensity, a more fundamental distinction must be understood: the two competing primer systems that have coexisted since the 19th century.

The **Boxer** primer, invented by Colonel Edward Boxer of the Royal Arsenal in 1866, is a self-contained unit: the primer cup holds the priming compound and its own anvil. The cartridge case has a single, central flash hole through which the flame passes to ignite the propellant. This design makes the spent primer easy to remove with a simple decapping pin pushed through the flash hole from inside the case. This is what makes Boxer-primed cases practical to reload.

The **Berdan** primer, developed by Colonel Hiram Berdan of the United States Army around the same time, takes a different approach: the anvil is an integral part of the cartridge case itself, formed as a raised post in the center of the primer pocket. The primer cup contains only the priming compound and sits over this built-in anvil. Two (or sometimes three) small flash holes are drilled around the anvil to convey the flame to the powder charge. Because there is no central hole, the Berdan primer cannot be pushed out with a decapping pin, making depriming and reloading difficult.

In practice, Berdan-primed ammunition is common in European military surplus and some commercial European brands, while virtually all American-made brass uses the Boxer system. For the handloader, this distinction is critical: *only Boxer-primed cases are practical to reload*. When purchasing brass or surplus ammunition for reloading, always verify that it uses Boxer primers. A quick visual inspection of the case head with a flashlight will reveal either a single central flash hole (Boxer) or two offset holes around a central post (Berdan). Throughout this manual, all procedures assume Boxer-primed cases unless explicitly stated otherwise.

4.1.4 Primer Selection: Types and Applications

The choice of primer is often overlooked, yet it profoundly influences ignition consistency. Primers are classified by size (small and large), by type (rifle and pistol), and by intensity (standard and magnum). Understanding these distinctions is essential for building safe, accurate ammunition.

Standard primers are appropriate for the majority of precision rifle cartridges with moderate case capacities and extruded (stick) powders. Magnum primers produce a longer, hotter flame and are intended for use with large-capacity cases or ball (spherical) powders

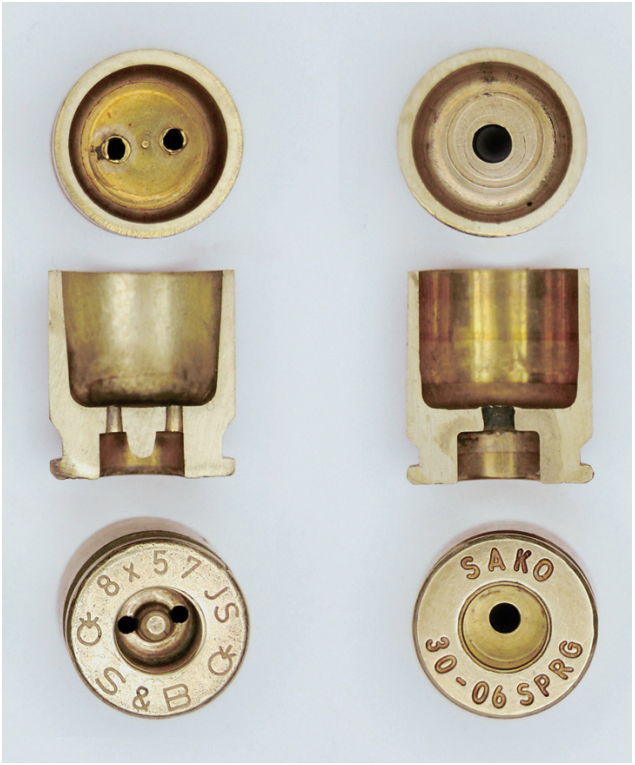

Figure 4.1: Berdan (left) versus Boxer (right) primer pockets. The Berdan pocket has a raised central anvil with offset flash holes; the Boxer pocket has a single central flash hole and no built-in anvil. Photo: Krakuspm, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

that are more difficult to ignite consistently. Using a magnum primer in a small-capacity case loaded with an easily ignited extruded powder can increase pressures beyond safe limits, so the primer type must always be matched to the specific cartridge and propellant combination. More generally, because primers vary in brisance and compound weight—even between brands of the same size and type—*any* change of primer brand, type, or intensity alters the pressure curve: treat it as a new load, backing the charge off by roughly 5% and working back up over the chronograph. And never substitute a pistol primer for a rifle primer: although the small and large sizes share the same cup diameters (0.175" and 0.210" respectively), the pistol cup is thinner and softer, and at rifle pressures it can be pierced by the firing pin, venting hot gas toward the shooter.

For the precision reloader, match-grade primers offer a measurable advantage. Manufacturers such as *Federal* (the Gold Medal 210M for large rifle and 205M for small rifle) and *CCI* (the BR-2 and BR-4) produce primers with tighter dimensional tolerances, more consistent priming compound weights, and more uniform anvil geometry than their standard counterparts. The practical result is a reduction in the velocity standard deviation of the finished ammunition—a difference that becomes significant at long range.

Driven by environmental regulations and health concerns, lead-free primers using compounds such as diazodinitrophenol (DDNP) are becoming increasingly available. Modern lead-free formulations from *CCI* and *Federal* have reached a level of consistency that makes them viable even for precision applications, and in some European countries they are already mandatory for certain shooting disciplines.

Their ignition characteristics do differ from lead styphnate, however, and in one respect the difference matters for safety rather than for accuracy. Comparative testing of lead-free primers has recorded a perceptible interval between firing-pin strike and ignition across a majority of shots in a test string, together with an outright misfire; performance also degraded more sharply than styphnate primers after conditioning in heat and humidity. That interval is the definition of a *hangfire*. The practical consequence is unchanged from any other suspected misfire, but it deserves restating because these primers make the case less rare: keep the rifle pointed downrange and wait at least thirty seconds before opening the bolt. Lots stored in a damp environment warrant particular care.

4.2 Weighing Powder

In precision reloading, we have moved beyond "throwing" charges by volume. While high-quality mechanical measures are still useful for bulk loading or field work, accuracy work weighs every charge.

4.2.1 The Modern Standard: A Hybrid Sensor

Modern electronic scales, such as the *A&D FX-120i*, do not rely on a strain gauge alone. Their sensor is a *hybrid*: it combines magnetic force restoration—which supplies the resolution—

with a parallelogram load-cell structure that supplies the settling speed. The distinction is not pedantry, because the second half is what makes the scale usable at the bench: a pure force-restoration balance of the same resolution is a laboratory instrument that settles too slowly to follow a trickler kernel by kernel. In grain mode such a scale displays in steps of 0.02 grains—enough to see a single kernel of extruded powder land in the pan. Paired with an automated dispenser like the *AutoTrickler*, it delivers weight consistency that was previously available only in laboratories.

What that consistency is worth in velocity is quantified in Chapter 2: about 1.4 fps in a case of ordinary capacity, against roughly 7 fps for a beam scale held to a tenth of a grain.

4.2.2 Powder Lot Management

One of the most common causes of unexplained velocity shifts is a change in powder lot. Manufacturers work hard to maintain consistency, but variations in burn rate are inevitable. When switching to a new lot of powder:

1. Reduce your current load: by 5 %, which ADI states is normally all that is necessary [Powders, 2013, p. 32], or back to the published starting load, as Hodgdon requires for any new lot number [Hodgdon Powder Company, 2024, p. 69].
2. Re-verify your velocity across a chronograph.
3. Incrementally work back up to your target velocity, watching for pressure signs.

4.3 Bullet Seating

The seating operation is the final act of assembly. It determines the "jump"—the distance the bullet must travel before it engages the rifling.

4.3.1 Determining the Lands

Every rifle chamber has a specific point where the bullet ogive will contact the rifling (the "lands"). This point changes over the life of the barrel as the throat erodes. Using a tool like the *Hornady O.A.L. Gauge*, you must find this zero-point for every bullet type you use. This measurement serves as the baseline for all your seating depth experiments.

4.3.2 Seating Depth and Pressure

Seating a bullet deeper has two opposing effects on peak pressure. It lengthens the jump, which lets the bullet gather speed before it meets the resistance of the rifling and tends to *lower* the peak. But it also pushes the bullet further into the case and reduces the volume left to the powder, which *raises* it—and the second effect can dominate. The powder makers

are explicit: “the deeper the bullet, the higher the pressure” [Alliant Powder, 2012], and in handgun cartridges a shorter overall length “may double chamber pressures” [Vihtavuori, 2026]. Seating-depth experiments therefore start from the published load and never go below the minimum overall length listed in the load data [Powders, 2013]. Conversely, seating a bullet "into the lands" (negative jump) can significantly increase pressure and should only be attempted by experienced reloaders who have carefully worked up their loads.

Table 4.1: Assembly Critical Parameters

Operation	**Target Specification**	**Verification Tool**
Primer Depth	0.003” to 0.005” (sub-flush)	Depth Micrometer / Tactile Feel
Powder Weight	+/- 0.02 grains	MFR Scale (e.g., A&D FX-120i)
Seating Depth	+/- 0.001” (to ogive)	Bullet Comparator + Calipers
Concentricity	$<$ 0.002” Runout	Concentricity Gauge

Chapter 5

Load Development

Load development looks for a combination of components and dimensions that groups well in a given rifle and keeps doing so when temperature, pressure or component lot vary slightly. This chapter describes the usual test methods and what the statistics allow one to conclude from them.

5.1 The Aim of Load Development

Every rifle barrel has a unique harmonic vibration pattern when fired. The combustion of the propellant creates a pressure wave that travels the length of the barrel, causing it to flex and vibrate in complex standing-wave patterns. A "node" is a point in the powder charge or seating depth range where the barrel's vibration is at an extreme (peak or trough) and is relatively stable. At these nodes, the position of the muzzle at the instant of bullet exit changes very little even if the bullet's velocity varies slightly from shot to shot. If you can time the bullet's exit to coincide with one of these nodes, your point of impact will be less sensitive to minor variations in velocity. This is the goal of all tuning methodologies.

The concept is analogous to a guitar string vibrating at different frequencies. Just as a string has fixed points (nodes) where no motion occurs, a rifle barrel has configurations of charge weight and seating depth where the muzzle position at bullet exit is at a local extremum—either the peak or the trough of its oscillation. At these points, slight variations in velocity cause the bullet to leave at nearly the same muzzle angle, producing tighter groups.

5.2 Systematic Methodologies

5.2.1 Internal Ballistics Simulation

Before heading to the range, modern reloaders rely on internal ballistics simulators such as *Gordon's Reloading Tool* (GRT) or *QuickLOAD*. These tools use the Noble-Abel equation of state and thermodynamic numerical integration (e.g., RK4) to model powder combustion, peak chamber pressure, and predicted muzzle velocity. By inputting exact case volume, barrel length, and seating depth, shooters can identify safe starting charges and estimate optimal barrel time (OBT) without risking overpressure.

The internal ballistics estimator on our own platform is *not* such a solver, and the distinction matters. It uses an energy–efficiency model—velocity from the powder's energy through a ballistic efficiency η_b, pressure through a piezometric efficiency η_p—calibrated against several manufacturers' guides, without the proprietary form function a thermodynamic solver requires. It publishes its own limits: cold, velocity to $\pm 10\,\%$, and pressure as an indication only—about $20\,\%$ RMS error, with a bias in the wrong direction, since the model most often *under*-estimates pressure, and discrepancies of 25 to $35\,\%$ have been recorded on some charges. It also produces no barrel time at all. Use it to plan and bound a ladder; use the manufacturer's published data for anything bearing on safety.

5.2.2 Optimal Barrel Time (OBT) Theory

Developed by Christopher Long, the Optimal Barrel Time (OBT) theory postulates that the rifle barrel vibrates similarly to a tuning fork when a shot is fired. The ignition of the powder charge generates longitudinal shock waves that reflect back and forth through the barrel steel at the speed of sound (approximately 5,920 m/s). To achieve maximum accuracy and minimize the influence of velocity spread (ES) on the vertical dispersion, the bullet should exit the muzzle when it is in a state of minimal longitudinal deformation—a "node".

The optimal barrel transit time (in milliseconds) for a specific node N is empirically determined based on the barrel length L (in inches, measured from the bolt face to the muzzle) using the following mathematical formulation:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathrm{OBT} = (A \cdot N + B) \cdot L \\ + C \cdot N + D \end{aligned} \tag{5.1}$$

The coefficients A, B, C, and D vary depending on whether the target node N is an odd or even number. Internal ballistics simulators calculate your load's predicted barrel time, allowing you to tune the powder charge so that the bullet exits exactly on one of these theoretical nodes.

Is 5,920 m/s the right wave speed? It is not the thin-rod longitudinal velocity $\sqrt{E/\rho}$, which for steel is about 5,170 m/s. It is the *dilatational* wave speed of an unbounded solid,

$$c_L = \sqrt{\frac{E(1-\nu)}{\rho(1+\nu)(1-2\nu)}} \tag{5.2}$$

which yields 5,921 m/s for $E = 210$ GPa, $\nu = 0.29$ and $\rho = 7{,}850$ kg/m^3. The choice is defensible: a steep shock front has a wavelength short compared with the barrel diameter, the regime in which the bulk velocity—not the thin-rod one—applies.

Does the oscillation have time to establish itself? This is the question that defeats many arguments about barrel vibration, and here the answer is favourable. On a 26-inch (660 mm) barrel a round trip takes $2L/c = 0.22$ ms; for a barrel time of 1.5 to 2.6 ms the wave therefore completes **7 to 12 round trips** before the bullet exits. This is the opposite of the fundamental *bending* mode, of which the bullet sees barely a tenth of a cycle. The two theories do not describe the same physics, and the "no time to establish" objection—valid in bending—does not carry over to the longitudinal case.

The shape of the formula is consistent with that mechanism. The spacing between consecutive nodes is $A \cdot L + C$, growing linearly with barrel length, exactly as a round trip $2L/c$ does. Our reading is that the L term should equal $2/c$, about 0.0086 ms per inch of barrel—a check the reader can apply to whichever coefficients they use.

The required precision exceeds that of the models. Consecutive nodes are about 0.22 ms apart, so aiming at one rather than another presupposes knowing the barrel time to considerably better than that. Yet barrel time is a *model output*, not a measurement. For one and the same 26-inch barrel, our own work on muzzle tuners gives 1.5–1.7 ms by analytical estimate and 2.57 ms from the coupled model that governs: nearly a millisecond apart, more than four nodes. Until barrel time is known to better than a tenth of a millisecond, OBT designates a node at random within the ladder.

OBT is thus a physically serious hypothesis, which no published measurement has yet shown to govern accuracy, and whose practical application founders on the uncertainty in barrel time. It is best read as a *candidate explanation* for the charge nodes that the methods below find empirically—not as a substitute for those methods.

5.2.3 The Satterlee / Velocity Ladder Test

The velocity ladder test (often associated with Scott Satterlee) is designed to find "powder nodes"—ranges of charge weight where the velocity remains relatively flat despite increasing the amount of powder.

1. Load 10 to 15 rounds, increasing the powder charge in 0.2-grain increments.

2. Fire these rounds over a high-quality chronograph (e.g., LabRadar or Garmin Xero) while aiming at a consistent point on a 100-yard target.

3. Plot the velocity on a graph. Look for "plateaus"—where two or three consecutive charges produce nearly identical velocities.

4. The middle of this plateau is likely a stable powder node where the load will be less sensitive to temperature changes or slight weighing errors.

5.2.4 The Optimal Charge Weight (OCW) Test

The OCW method, popularized by Dan Newberry, focuses on the point of impact rather than just velocity. It seeks to find a charge weight where the "center of mass" of the groups remains consistent.

1. Load three-shot groups in 1% increments of the powder charge.

2. Fire the groups at separate targets, maintaining a consistent point of aim.

3. Compare the groups, looking for two or three consecutive charge weights that share the same point of impact relative to the bullseye.

4. This "scatter node" is where the barrel is most stable.

5.2.5 The Classic (Audette) Long-Range Ladder

The original ladder test, attributed to Creighton Audette, predates the chronograph-centric Satterlee method and reads the barrel's behaviour directly off the target at distance rather than from velocity alone.

1. Load a *single* round at each charge weight, starting roughly a quarter-grain above the starting load and increasing in 0.2-grain steps (or in 0.1-grain steps from one grain below an estimated charge), up to but never exceeding the maximum.

2. Fire the rounds in charge order at a single aiming point at **300 yards or more**. The distance is essential: it magnifies the vertical displacement that short range conceals. Number each impact on the target and record velocity if a chronograph is available.

3. Read the vertical position of the impacts. As the charge increases the group climbs the target, but at a node the consecutive impacts *stall*—several charges land at nearly the same elevation before the climb resumes. This vertical flat spot is the "sweet spot".

4. Choose the charge in the middle of the flat spot, which leaves margin on either side for hot- and cold-day pressure swings.

The physical rationale is identical to the velocity ladder: at the flat spot a change in charge—and therefore in velocity—produces little change in elevation, so the load is tolerant of the inevitable shot-to-shot velocity spread.[1]

5.3 A Critical Perspective: Do Charge Nodes Survive Statistics?

The ladder and OCW methods are widely used, and many accomplished shooters trust them—but their classical single- and three-shot forms rest on a statistically fragile foundation that the careful reloader should understand.

The difficulty is sample size. A single-shot ladder confounds the signal it seeks—the barrel's response to charge weight—with the noise it ignores: ordinary shot-to-shot dispersion. With one shot per charge, a "flat spot" of two or three consecutive impacts at the same elevation, or three velocities within a few feet per second, can arise purely by chance. Re-shot the next day, the same flat spot often appears in a different place, or not at all. The three-shot OCW group is better but still thin: as the verification section below stresses, three rounds cannot reliably estimate a load's true dispersion.

This critique has been made forcefully by Hornady's engineers (notably in their podcast series), who argued from large datasets that perceived charge-weight "nodes" frequently fail to replicate, and that much of what shooters attribute to a magic charge is sampling variation. Their prescription is to stop chasing nodes in small samples and instead (a) choose a safe charge with acceptable velocity, (b) confirm it with a large sample—ideally twenty rounds or more—and (c) judge it on its standard deviation and on-target dispersion measured with enough shots to be meaningful.

The pragmatic synthesis, and the one this manual recommends, is to treat the ladder and OCW as inexpensive *screening* tools that narrow a wide charge range to a sensible candidate—never as the final word. Whatever charge they suggest must then earn its place through the large-sample SD/ES and long-range vertical validation described next. A flat spot that disappears under a twenty-shot string was never real; one that survives is worth keeping.

How many shots "enough" really is—and how to bound a load's **true** dispersion (or its hottest expected round) from a finite sample—is precisely the question answered by the tolerance factors of Appendix D, and in their exact form by the non-central t-distribution of Section D.8. The lesson is quantitative: for small n the multiplier k applied to the sample standard deviation s is very large, which is exactly why a "flat spot" read off a handful of shots carries so little information, and why the magnitude of the correction shrinks only as the sample grows.

[1] See, for example, the procedure documented at `loaddevelopment.com/load-development-ladder-test-method`.

5.4 Fine-Tuning Seating Depth

Once a stable powder charge is identified, the final variable is the seating depth. Seating depth affects the "entry" of the bullet into the rifling and can have a dramatic effect on group size. The standard approach is to load several groups starting from the lands (0.000" jump) and moving away in 0.003" to 0.005" increments, firing each group onto a separate target while maintaining a consistent point of aim.

Most rifles will show a clear preference for a specific jump distance. The magnitude of this preference varies significantly with bullet design. Secant-ogive bullets like the *Berger VLD* are notoriously sensitive to seating depth and may prefer being seated into the lands or with a very specific, small jump—sometimes as little as 0.010". Tangent-ogive bullets like the *Sierra MatchKing* are generally more "jump tolerant" and will often shoot well across a broader range of seating depths. The modern hybrid-ogive designs from *Berger* (such as the Hybrid Target line) were specifically engineered to combine high ballistic coefficient with reduced seating-depth sensitivity, making them an excellent choice for the reloader who wants both performance and ease of tuning.

5.5 Verification and Long-Range Validation

A load that performs well at 100 yards may not be optimal at 1,000 yards. At short range, velocity variation is masked by the proximity to the target; at long range, even small differences in muzzle velocity translate into significant vertical dispersion as gravity has more time to act on the bullet. Velocity consistency therefore matters more as the distance grows; it is measured on the chronograph, and the load is still judged on the target.

Two metrics are used to quantify velocity consistency: Extreme Spread (ES) and Standard Deviation (SD). The extreme spread is simply the difference between the fastest and slowest rounds in a string, while the standard deviation is a statistical measure of dispersion around the mean. Of the two, SD is the more meaningful metric because it describes the overall consistency of the population, whereas ES can be skewed by a single outlier. In a 20-round string at an SD of 5 fps, whose ES is typically 18 fps, a single round 15 fps below the mean raises the median ES to 24 fps (+30 %) and the SD to 5.8 fps (+19 %) (simulation). Both respond, the ES more, since it describes only two rounds; but its real flaw lies elsewhere: its expected value grows with the number of rounds, so strings of different sizes cannot be compared.

Statistical rigor demands adequate sample sizes. Three-shot groups are useful for preliminary screening, but they provide an insufficient sample size to reveal the true dispersion of a load. For serious validation, use 10-shot or even 20-shot strings. The larger the sample, the more confidence you can place in the resulting SD and ES figures. A three-shot group with an SD of 3 fps may simply have gotten lucky; a 20-shot string with an SD of 5 fps tells you something meaningful about the load's character.

Finally, confirm your ballistic data at distance. A load that performs well at 100 yards may not be optimal at 1,000 yards: at short range, velocity variation is masked by the proximity to the target, but at long range, even small differences in muzzle velocity translate into significant vertical dispersion as gravity has more time to act on the bullet. If your vertical dispersion at 600 yards is greater than expected based on your velocity SD, re-evaluate your seating depth or powder node. Causes of unexplained vertical at distance include inconsistent neck tension, temperature-sensitive powder, and—less obviously—bullet stability issues that worsen as the bullet decelerates and approaches transonic flight (approximately Mach 1.0–1.2).

Table 5.1: Load Development Testing Sequence

Phase	**Objective**	**Measurement Tool**
Initial Safety	Identify Pressure Limits	Visual Case Inspection / Bolt Lift
Velocity Ladder	Identify Powder Nodes	Chronograph (e.g., LabRadar)
OCW Testing	Identify POI Stability	100-Yard Targets / Calipers
Depth Testing	Minimize Group Size	100-Yard Targets / Comparator
LR Validation	Confirm ES/SD Stability	600-1000 Yard Vertical Dispersion

Record every string, change only one variable at a time, and judge a load on the target as well as on the chronograph.

Chapter 6

Diagnostics

When a rifle and its ammunition group worse than expected, the cause is usually mechanical: a cartridge out of line, a loose part, a component out of tolerance. This chapter covers how to find it, starting with the geometry of the cartridge—concentricity and runout.

6.1 Concentricity

Concentricity is the measurement of how well the centerline of the bullet aligns with the centerline of the cartridge case. In a perfect world, these two axes would be identical. In the real world, manufacturing tolerances and sizing operations introduce "runout"—the degree to which the bullet is canted or offset from the centerline.

6.1.1 The Impact of Runout

If a bullet is seated crookedly in the case, it will enter the rifling at an angle. This "canted" entry causes the bullet to become slightly deformed as it is swaged into the grooves. This deformation unbalances the bullet, causing it to "wobble" during flight (precession), which significantly opens up group sizes at longer distances.

6.1.2 Identifying the Geometric Source

To solve a runout problem, you must perform a geometric audit of your process. Use a concentricity gauge to measure the runout at each stage:

1. **Fired Brass:** If fired brass from your rifle shows significant runout, your chamber or bolt face may be out of square. This is a job for a qualified gunsmith.

2. **After Sizing:** If the runout increases after sizing, the issue is your die or press. Often, an off-center expander ball in a standard die is the culprit, "pulling" the neck out of alignment as the case exits the die.

3. **After Seating:** If the runout only appears after seating the bullet, the problem lies in the seating die or the relationship between the seating stem and the bullet tip.

6.2 Systematic Troubleshooting

When group sizes open up unexpectedly, follow a systematic checklist rather than making random adjustments to your load.

6.2.1 Mechanical Integrity

Before questioning your handloads, verify the integrity of the rifle itself. A loose screw in a scope base or ring is the single most common cause of sudden accuracy loss, and it is the easiest to fix: check all mounting hardware with a quality torque wrench, applying the manufacturer's recommended values (typically 15–20 in-lbs for rings and 30–45 in-lbs for bases). Similarly, ensure the action screws that secure the barreled action into the stock are properly torqued. Variations in action screw torque change the bedding stress on the receiver and barrel, which in turn alters the barrel's vibration nodes and shifts the point of impact.

Finally, inspect the muzzle crown for nicks, dings, or carbon build-up. Even a tiny defect at the exit point of the barrel can unevenly vent the propellant gases that are still accelerating the bullet, "kicking" it sideways as it leaves the muzzle. A damaged crown is easily identified with a magnifying lens and can often be re-cut by a competent gunsmith without re-barreling.

6.2.2 Analyzing the Group Shape

The shape of your groups on the target provides diagnostic clues to the underlying problem—but only once enough shots have been fired to make the shape mean anything. Group shape is dominated by sampling noise at the sample sizes commonly used at the bench, and the reader who skips this paragraph will diagnose noise.

Consider a rifle with *no* directional error whatsoever, whose dispersion is perfectly circular. Its groups still look strung. At three shots, 80 % of them show an elongation of 2:1 or more, and only one in five looks round; because the long axis falls in a uniformly random direction, 20 % read as "vertical stringing" and another 20 % as "horizontal". At five shots it is still 13 % each. The pattern only becomes evidence at around twenty shots, where fewer than 2 % of groups from a circular process reach 2:1. This is the same small-sample trap that Appendix D treats for velocity: three or five shots estimate a mean tolerably and a *dispersion* not at all.

Read the table below, therefore, as a list of hypotheses to test—by firing more, or by changing one variable and firing again—never as a diagnosis to be made from a single small group.

Vertical stringing is the most common pattern and typically indicates a velocity variance. Check your powder charge consistency, neck tension uniformity, and primer seating depth. Vertical stringing can also result from inconsistent barrel temperature: as the barrel heats up during a string, the point of impact may "walk" vertically. Allow sufficient cooling time between shots during load development to eliminate this variable.

Horizontal stringing is most commonly caused by wind or by inconsistent rifle positioning on the bench—particularly side-loading the rear bag. If horizontal stringing persists even in calm conditions, suspect a loose scope mount, an improperly torqued action, or a barrel that is making contact with the stock at the forend. A simple diagnostic test is to slide a strip of paper between the barrel and the stock channel; it should pass freely along the entire length without binding.

Diagonal stringing frequently indicates a bedding issue or a barrel that contacts the stock intermittently as it heats up and expands. Diagonal dispersion can also be caused by a scope with an internal tracking problem, where the erector tube shifts slightly under recoil.

A **circular "shotgun" pattern**—uniformly large in all directions, without a clear directional trend—typically indicates a fundamental concentricity problem in the ammunition. Check bullet runout with a concentricity gauge. If the ammunition measures well, inspect the muzzle crown for damage.

Finally, if your shots consistently cluster into **two distinct groups** (a "dual point of impact"), the most likely cause is a scope whose erector tube is shifting under recoil and returning inconsistently. This is more common in lower-quality optics and can be confirmed by testing with a known-good scope. If a known-good scope reproduces the same two groups, look at the bedding: a pinch point in the epoxy—common where a factory has bedded only the recoil lug—gives the action two resting positions instead of one, with the same signature.

Table 6.1: Group Shape Diagnostic Guide

Pattern	Most Likely Causes
Vertical stringing	Velocity variance, inconsistent neck tension, barrel heat walk
Horizontal stringing	Wind, bag setup, loose scope mount, barrel-stock contact
Diagonal stringing	Bedding issue, barrel-stock contact under heat, scope tracking error
Circular (shotgun)	Ammunition concentricity, crown damage
Dual point of impact	Erector tube shift in scope, loose mount, bedding pinch point

Table 6.2: Geometric and Diagnostic Tolerances

Variable	Max Acceptable	Diagnostic Action
Bullet Runout	0.002" (Match)	Audit Sizing/Seating Dies
Neck Wall Variance	0.0005"	Outside Neck Turn Brass
Shoulder Bump Var.	0.001"	Check Press Rigidity / Die Lock
Scope Torque	+/- 2 in-lbs	Use Quality Torque Wrench

Chapter 7

Shooting from the Bench

Shooting from the bench aims to reduce the shooter's influence so that the accuracy of rifle and ammunition can be measured. The result still depends on the supports and on technique. This chapter covers supports, body position and recoil management.

7.1 A Stable Platform

The objective of shooting from a bench is to create a system that is perfectly neutral. This means that the rifle should be supported such that it points naturally at the target without the shooter having to "force" it into position. Any tension you introduce—whether by muscular effort or by an improperly set rest—will translate into inconsistent recoil and, consequently, larger groups.

7.1.1 Bench and Stool

A precision shooter is only as stable as the surface they are sitting on. Ideally, a shooting bench should be an immovable mass, such as reinforced concrete anchored into the earth. If you are shooting on a wooden or portable bench, you must be extremely mindful of your body weight distribution. Leaning into the bench or resting your feet unevenly can cause the bench to flex, subtly shifting the point of aim between shots. An adjustable stool lets the shooter sit upright and relaxed, which limits muscular fatigue.

7.2 Rests and Bags

7.2.1 Front Rests

The front rest supports the forend and provides the primary mechanism for elevation and windage adjustments. Traditional pedestal rests, such as those from *Hart* or *Sinclair*, use a heavy base and fine-threaded screws for elevation control. They are simple, robust, and

exceptionally stable—virtues that have kept them relevant for decades. Modern high-end rests, like the *SEB NEO*, take a different approach: a coaxial ("joystick") mechanism controls both elevation and windage simultaneously with a single input. This lets the shooter re-align the rifle quickly between shots, which matters in benchrest competition when a group is "run" during a lull in the wind.

7.2.2 Rear Bags

The rear bag supports the buttstock and provides the fine elevation control that complements the coarser adjustments of the front rest. Quality bags from *Protektor* or *Edgewood* are made of heavy leather or Cordura and should be filled with "heavy sand"—zircon or chromite—which is much denser and more stable than standard play sand. The denser fill resists compression under the weight of the rifle, maintaining a consistent support height from shot to shot. Fine elevation is achieved by gently squeezing the ears of the bag with the non-trigger hand, or by using the "speed screw" on the front rest. The goal is to make these adjustments without disturbing the natural "track" of the rifle in the bags—the grooves worn by the forend and buttstock that ensure the rifle returns to the same position after every recoil cycle.

7.3 Technique

7.3.1 Neutral Alignment (The "Natural Point of Aim")

Before firing, you must ensure the rifle is naturally aligned. Set the rifle in the bags and look through the scope. Now, close your eyes, take a breath, and relax. When you open your eyes, if the crosshairs have moved off the bullseye, the rifle is not in its natural point of aim. Adjust the **rests**, not your body, until the rifle points perfectly at the target while you are completely relaxed.

7.3.2 Recoil Management: To Hold or Not to Hold?

How you interact with the rifle during recoil is one of the most debated topics in precision shooting. Two schools of thought dominate this discussion. The **firm hold** technique is essential for lighter hunting or tactical rifles: the shooter pulls the rifle firmly into the shoulder and maintains a consistent grip on the forend or pistol grip. This prevents the rifle from "jumping" out of the bags and ensures it returns to the same position for every shot. The consistency of the hold is what matters—the same pressure, the same contact points, the same shoulder placement, every time.

At the other extreme, the **free recoil** technique is common with heavy, custom benchrest rifles. The shooter barely touches the rifle, making contact only with the tip of the trigger finger. The rifle is allowed to slide rearward freely in the bags, completely unimpeded by

human muscle. This is the purest way to eliminate the human variable from the equation, but it places stringent demands on the equipment: the rifle must be perfectly balanced, the bags must be slick and consistent, and the entire system must track straight under recoil without the guidance of the shooter's body.

Whichever you choose, choose it *before* you tune, and then do not change it. This is not a matter of taste when a barrel tuner is fitted (Chapter 5). The models used to predict a tuner setting assume free recoil, and a rifle resting in bags is a fair approximation of that assumption; a rifle pulled hard into the shoulder is not. Shouldering adds effective mass and constrains the rotation the muzzle undergoes while the bullet is still in the bore, so a tuner position found shooting free recoil has no particular reason to remain optimal when the same rifle is held firmly. That coupling is a prediction rather than a measured result—nobody appears to have tested it—but it costs nothing to avoid: settle the hold first, tune second, and keep the hold you tuned with.

7.4 Follow-Through

Follow-through is the discipline of maintaining your shooting position, trigger finger pressure, and visual focus through and after the moment of firing. Many shooters unconsciously "flinch" or relax at the instant the trigger breaks, subtly disturbing the rifle before the bullet has left the barrel.

It is worth knowing how long that window really is, and where it begins, because the answer is not where intuition puts it. The interval that matters runs from the *trigger break* to the *muzzle*, and it has two parts:

- **Lock time** is the first part and the longer one: the firing pin's time of fall, from sear release to primer strike. Instrumented measurement on a conventional bolt action gives about **2.4 ms**; custom actions with lighter pins and stiffer springs cut this substantially.
- **Ignition and barrel time** is the remainder, from the primer strike to the bullet clearing the muzzle—roughly **1.5 ms**, and it shortens as muzzle velocity rises.

Together, about **4 milliseconds** elapse between the moment the trigger breaks and the moment the bullet leaves. The distinction is not academic. The clock starts at the trigger break, not at the primer, and the first and larger half of the window is precisely where a flinch occurs—the shooter reacts to the break itself, and the firing pin has not yet reached the primer. Any movement during those four milliseconds goes into the bullet's trajectory. This is why the rifle must be allowed to fire and recoil without help, and why a shorter lock time is worth having in positions where the rifle is not fully supported.

Proper follow-through means maintaining your cheek weld and shoulder contact through the entire recoil impulse, keeping the trigger finger pressed fully rearward until the rifle has settled. The shooter should observe the impact through the scope—or at minimum note the

reticle's position on the target at the moment of recoil—to "call" the shot. Only after the rifle has settled should the trigger be released, the target reacquired, and preparation begun for the next shot.

The ability to "call your shots"—to predict where each bullet struck based on what you saw through the scope at the moment of firing—is the hallmark of an experienced marksman. If the bullet impacts where you called it, your technique is consistent. If the bullet consistently impacts somewhere other than your call, a mechanical issue in the rifle or ammunition is likely.

7.5 The Psychology of the Bench

Concentration matters at the bench: be aware of your breathing and of the pressure of your finger on the trigger. The trigger break should always be a surprise. If you find yourself "anticipating" the shot, stop, step away from the bench, and reset.

Each heartbeat also moves the rifle slightly. Studies that relate the moment of the shot to the cardiac cycle agree that the phase matters, but not on which phase is best. Six Finnish rifle and pistol champions fired during diastole in 115 shots out of 120, while three beginners fired in both phases, as chance would have it, and scored better in diastole; a laser on the gun showed it jerking about 0.2 s after each beat [Helin et al., 1987]; twenty non-elite air-rifle shooters did best early and late in the interval between two beats, and worst between 50 % and 70 % of it [Konttinen et al., 2003]; the best shots of thirteen biathletes avoided the window 200 to 300 ms after the R wave at rest [Gallicchio et al., 2019]. These are associations, not proof of cause, and all were measured in the standing position [Gallicchio et al., 2019]; none was made at a bench or from a rest, where the effect has not been measured. Helin and his co-authors attribute the champions' timing to a reflex acquired over years of training, below the level of consciousness; but they compared experts with beginners and followed no one's training, and none of these studies shows that a shooter can learn to time the shot to the heartbeat at will. Similarly, the respiratory cycle causes the chest to rise and fall, moving the point of aim. The classic breathing technique is to take a natural breath, exhale, pause, and begin the trigger press during this respiratory pause. Experienced military marksmanship coaches fitted with breathing and trigger sensors fired consistently within that pause [Chung et al., 2011, p. 38–39]. It helps to know the physiology behind the advice, which military marksmanship manuals set out precisely: a respiratory cycle lasts four to five seconds, of which inhaling and exhaling take about two, leaving a *natural* pause of two to three seconds. That pause can be stretched to ten seconds with no special effort and no unpleasant sensation—but eight to ten seconds is the maximum safe period. Past it the body registers an oxygen deficit and answers with involuntary diaphragm movement, which is worse than the breathing it replaced. Aim to break the shot inside the natural pause; if it has not broken in five to eight seconds, stop well short of the limit, breathe normally, and restart the cycle. Attempting to "hold on" through multiple heartbeats or

breathing cycles introduces muscular fatigue and tremor that will inevitably degrade the group.

Table 7.1: Bench Technique Checklist

Step	**Objective**	**Verification**
Bag Alignment	Zero Torque on Forend	Rifle Slides Freely in Bags
Natural POA	Neutral System	Crosshairs Stay on Target when Relaxed
Body Position	Relaxed Posture	No Reticle "Jump" with Heartbeat
Trigger Pull	Linear Pressure	Shot is a Complete Surprise
Follow-Through	Maintain Position	Sight Picture Retained After Break

Chapter 8

Atmosphere and Wind

A load that groups well in the calm of the morning may not do so in the heat and wind of the afternoon. This chapter covers the effect of air density, wind and mirage, the temperature sensitivity of powders, and the instruments used to measure them.

8.1 The Physics of the Atmosphere

The air through which your bullet travels is a fluid medium. Its density—determined by temperature, pressure, and humidity—directly affects the amount of drag exerted on the bullet.

8.1.1 Density Altitude (DA)

Modern shooters have moved away from tracking individual environmental variables in favor of **Density Altitude** (DA). DA is a single composite number that expresses how "thick" the air is, regardless of your actual physical elevation. It synthesizes the effects of temperature, barometric pressure, and humidity into one value that directly correlates with aerodynamic drag. On a hot, humid day at sea level, the DA might be 3,000 feet, meaning your bullet will experience the same reduced drag as if you were shooting at 3,000 feet of elevation on a standard day. A high DA indicates thin air—less drag and a higher point of impact—while a low DA indicates dense air with correspondingly more drag and a lower impact point. For the long-range shooter, a shift of 2,000 feet in DA can change the drop at 1,000 yards by several minutes of angle, making this a variable that cannot be ignored.

8.2 Reading the Wind

Wind is the single greatest cause of missed shots at long range. Unlike gravity, which is constant, wind is variable in both intensity and direction across the entire flight path of the

bullet.

8.2.1 The Cumulative Effect

A common misconception is that the wind at the target is the most important. In reality, wind near the **muzzle** has a far greater effect on the final point of impact. A 10 mph crosswind "kicks" the bullet only about 0.01 degree (0.7 MOA) off-course at 50 yards, but that angle keeps acting over the remaining 950 yards, and the wind over the first yards weighs six to twelve times more than the wind over the last ones. By the time the bullet reaches a 1,000-yard target, that early deflection has grown into a large part of the miss.

8.2.2 Using Wind Flags

For the competitive benchrest shooter, wind flags are non-negotiable. They are the only way to see what the air is doing at multiple points along the range. Each flag conveys two pieces of information simultaneously: the vane shows the direction of the wind, while the angle of the tail (streamer) indicates its intensity—a limp tail means light air, while a stiff, horizontal tail indicates a strong wind. The experienced shooter learns to read the entire array of flags at once, building a mental picture of the wind's behavior across the full flight path.

Wind rarely blows at a constant speed. It typically "pulses" or cycles, rising and falling in intensity over intervals of seconds to minutes. A master wind reader identifies a specific "condition"—a particular combination of flag angles across the range—and fires only when those flags return to that same state. This technique, known as "shooting the condition," is the single most important skill in competitive benchrest and long-range shooting. It transforms the wind from an uncontrollable enemy into a predictable pattern that can be exploited.

8.3 Mirage

Mirage is the visual distortion caused by heat waves rising from the ground. While it can make the target appear to "dance" or "boil," it is also one of the most accurate ways to read the wind.

8.3.1 Reading the "Boil"

By focusing your scope slightly short of the target (typically one-third to one-half of the distance), you can see the mirage moving across your field of view. When the mirage rises vertically—a "boil"—it indicates either dead calm or a pure headwind or tailwind. Be aware that a vertical boil can cause the target to appear slightly higher than its actual position, inducing a subtle aiming error. When a crosswind is present, the mirage will "run" at an

angle that corresponds to the wind speed: a gentle slant indicates a light wind of 3–5 mph, while mirage running nearly flat (horizontal) typically indicates a wind exceeding 10 mph. Above approximately 12 mph, the mirage becomes too turbulent to read reliably, and the shooter must rely on flags and other indicators. Mirage reading is a skill that takes years to develop, but it provides information that no mechanical instrument can duplicate—a real-time, continuous picture of the air mass between you and the target.

8.4 Propellant Temperature Stability

While wind and air density are external variables, the temperature of the ammunition itself is an internal variable that can dramatically shift the point of impact.

8.4.1 Load Tables Have a Reference Temperature

A point rarely made, and one that gives the rest of this section its point: published load data is not valid in the abstract. Vihtavuori states that the figures in its tables were obtained at 68°F (20°C) and 55 % relative humidity. A charge read from a manual therefore assumes some twenty degrees Celsius—and it is precisely the gap between that reference and the temperature on the firing line that the sensitivity coefficient serves to estimate.

There is one place where a manufacturer does put a number on it, and it is a safety instruction rather than a performance one: Vihtavuori advises against N570 in heavy charges below −20°C (−4°F), for risk of high pressure, and directs the reloader to N568 instead. All other N500-series powders are given as safe below 0°C. Cold does not only cost velocity—with some powders it *raises* pressure.

8.4.2 Temperature Sensitivity and Velocity

Traditional smokeless powders are sensitive to temperature changes. As the ambient temperature rises, the rate of combustion increases, leading to higher pressures and higher muzzle velocities. Conversely, in cold weather, velocities can drop significantly.

The sensitivity coefficient invoked above has a value, and it is the number to ask a powder for. Expressed in metres per second of muzzle velocity per degree Celsius, a **very stable** powder sits below **0.15 m/s/°C**; one is **sensitive** above **0.40 m/s/°C**.

What that costs downrange is worth integrating rather than guessing. Taking the .308 Winchester 168 gr of Chapter 5 and a swing of 20°F—some 11°C—the stable powder shifts the point of impact by about **6.5 cm** at 1,000 yards, the sensitive one by **17.5 cm**. “Several inches” is right, and the spread between a good powder and a poor one is a factor of nearly three.

> **Where these coefficients come from.** The two thresholds above are reference points of this guide, not a standard: 0.15 m/s/°C is 0.27 fps/°F, 0.40 m/s/°C is

0.73 fps/°F. Most makers qualify their powders—"temperature stable", "insensitive to hot/cold temperatures"—without a number; Reload Swiss is an exception and publishes a coefficient for each of its powders, from 0.20 to 0.90 m/s/°C [Reload Swiss, 2019]. Published measurements place the thresholds: from 0.02 to 0.48 m/s/°C with powders sold as temperature stable, depending on the test [Hodgdon Powder Company, 2012, Zant, 2025, Haviland, 2022]; mostly 0.33 to 0.71 m/s/°C with conventional powders and factory loads [Castleman, 2022, Jackson, 2013]. The same powder can differ by a factor of ten between two tests, and a few loads shoot faster when cold [Barsness, 2017]. The centimetre figures say what the *ranking* is worth downrange, not what a given lot will do; the coefficient to use is the one measured with one's own load.

8.4.3 Temperature-Stable Powders: Claims and Measurements

Makers have answered the needs of precision shooters with powders sold as temperature insensitive. Hodgdon describes the *Extreme* line—including *Varget*, *H4350* and *H1000*—as insensitive to hot and cold temperatures, and its *IMR Enduron* powders (*IMR 4166*, *IMR 4451*) as insensitive to temperature changes, with a copper-fouling eliminator [Hodgdon Powder Company, 2024]. The measurements bear the claim out unevenly. H4350 stayed at or below 0.12 m/s/°C in the three tests found [Hodgdon Powder Company, 2012, Zant, 2025, Zant and Middlebrook, 2016]; Varget ranges from 0.03 to 0.48 m/s/°C depending on the test; IMR 4451 was the most sensitive of the four powders of one test, at 0.32 m/s/°C [Zant and Middlebrook, 2016], and one load of it shot faster at 0°F than at 70°F [Barsness, 2017].

Vihtavuori qualifies N140 and N150 as stable without a figure [Vihtavuori, 2026]; in the .308, N140 measured 0.22 and 0.67 m/s/°C in two tests, N150 0.23 m/s/°C [Hodgdon Powder Company, 2012, Castleman, 2022]. Reload Swiss's own coefficients do not follow the surface treatment: its camphor-coated RS50 and RS62 are the most sensitive of the range, at 0.70 and 0.90 m/s/°C, while its nitroglycerine-impregnated grades run from 0.20 (RS80) to 0.55 m/s/°C (RS52) [Reload Swiss, 2019]. No independent measurement of these was found, nor of the N500 grades Vihtavuori sells as temperature stable (N555, N568). Whatever the powder, a load worked up in cold weather should be re-verified in summer heat.

Choosing a temperature-stable powder is a fundamental step in building a "robust" load—one that performs reliably regardless of the season or the environment. For the shooter who competes in both winter and summer conditions, or who travels to matches at varying altitudes, temperature stability in the propellant can eliminate one of the most insidious sources of unexplained vertical dispersion.

8.5 Spin Drift and Coriolis

Beyond wind and air density, two additional forces act on the bullet during long-range flight. While their effects are small at moderate distances, they become significant—and non-negligible—at ranges beyond 800 yards.

8.5.1 Spin Drift (Gyroscopic Drift)

A bullet fired from a rifled barrel spins at extremely high rates—typically 200,000 to 300,000 RPM. This spin, while essential for gyroscopic stability, induces a subtle lateral drift in the direction of the rifling twist. In a rifle with a right-hand twist (the most common configuration), the bullet will drift slightly to the right over the course of its flight. At 1,000 yards, spin drift for a typical 6.5mm Creedmoor load amounts to approximately 6–10 inches—enough to cause a miss on a precision target if not accounted for. Modern ballistic solvers such as *Applied Ballistics* and the *Kestrel* with AB software automatically calculate spin drift when provided with the barrel twist rate and bullet parameters.

8.5.2 The Coriolis Effect

The Coriolis effect is a consequence of the Earth's rotation: because the Earth turns beneath the bullet during its time of flight, the apparent trajectory is deflected relative to the ground. It has two components, and they do *not* depend on the same things—confusing them is the usual mistake.

The **horizontal** component deflects the bullet to the right in the Northern Hemisphere and to the left in the Southern, *whatever the direction of fire*. It scales with the sine of the latitude: nil at the equator, maximal at the poles. At 1,000 yards and 45 degrees of latitude it comes to roughly 6.4 to 7.6 cm for a common rifle cartridge—smaller than spin drift, but of the same order.

The **vertical** component is the one that depends on the firing azimuth, and it is the one properly called the **Eötvös effect**: it scales with the cosine of the latitude and the sine of the azimuth. Firing east lands *high*, firing west lands low, and firing due north or south produces none of it. The magnitude is modest—a .308 at 1,000 yards and 50 degrees of latitude comes in about 5.8 cm high to the east.

At extreme long range, one mile and beyond, both components must be integrated into the firing solution rather than estimated.

8.6 Electronic Instruments

The days of relying on a wet finger and a guess are over. Modern shooters utilize integrated ballistic systems. The *Kestrel* weather meters have become nearly ubiquitous among precision shooters. These handheld units measure density altitude, wind speed, temperature,

and barometric pressure. When equipped with *Applied Ballistics* software, they compute a complete firing solution—elevation and windage corrections—based on your rifle's specific ballistic profile, the current atmospheric conditions, and the target distance.

Equally transformative has been the advent of Doppler radar chronographs. Units like the *LabRadar* and *Garmin Xero* track the bullet's velocity at multiple points along its flight path, revealing exactly how much speed the bullet loses as it travels downrange. This data allows the calculation of a "Personal Drag Model" (PDM) for your specific bullet and rifle combination—a far more accurate prediction method than relying on published G1 or G7 ballistic coefficients alone. The PDM accounts for the actual aerodynamic behavior of your bullet at the velocity range in which you are shooting, eliminating one of the largest sources of error in long-range ballistic prediction.

Table 8.1: Environmental Impact Matrix

Variable	**When It Increases**	**Effect on Bullet**
Temperature	Thinner air	Higher impact, lower drag
Barometric pressure	Thicker air	Lower impact, higher drag
Humidity	Thinner air (counter-intuitive)	Higher impact, lower drag
Wind intensity	Greater deflection	Drift away from wind source
Mirage (boil)	Optical displacement	Image moves with the air flow [U.S. Army, 1994]; refraction can raise or lower it
Spin drift	Increases with distance	Lateral drift in twist direction
Coriolis effect	Horizontal part grows with latitude; vertical part depends on azimuth	Right in the northern hemisphere; high firing east, low firing west, none north or south [Litz, 2015, p. 113]

Chapter 9

Bullet Coatings

Coating bullets with a dry lubricant became widespread in the 1990s, presented as a way to eliminate copper fouling and extend barrel life. Results have been mixed. This chapter covers the coatings in use, how they are applied, and their advantages and drawbacks.

9.1 Reducing Friction

A bullet traveling down a barrel at 3,000 fps (about 915 m/s) is subject to extreme friction and heat. This friction not only wears the barrel but also causes a microscopic layer of the bullet's copper jacket to be "smeared" into the rifling. This copper build-up eventually degrades accuracy. The goal of bullet coating is to introduce a barrier of lubricity between the jacket and the bore.

9.1.1 Molybdenum Disulfide (Moly)

Molybdenum disulfide (MoS_2) was the first mainstream bullet coating. It is a solid lubricant—the same compound used in high-performance automotive and aerospace applications—that, when applied to a bullet's surface, reduces the coefficient of friction significantly. Application is typically performed by "impact plating": tumbling bullets with small steel balls and moly powder in a sealed container for one to two hours. The steel shot mechanically drives the moly into the microscopic pores of the copper jacket.

Early adopters in the 1990s reported reduced copper fouling and higher velocities at equal chamber pressure. That last point is often misquoted. At an *equal powder charge*, the coating *lowers* both velocity and pressure: Vaughn measured 3,175 fps and 54,000 psi uncoated against 3,083 fps and 47,000 psi coated, on the same 68-grain 6 mm bullet—2.9 % less velocity for 7,000 psi less pressure. The velocity gain comes from *raising the charge* back to the original pressure. The same test, alternating coated and uncoated bullets, showed **no residual effect** of the coating on subsequent shots.

That raised charge is the trap. It is worked up again from the starting load, like any new load; and it belongs to the coated bullet alone. Fired behind the same bullet *uncoated*, it loses the margin the coating provided (7,000 psi at equal charge in the test above) and lands above the pressure it was developed to. Coated and uncoated bullets therefore get separate load development and are never mixed on the bench.

The practical drawback is the pervasive black residue, which coats the reloading room and requires specialized solvents. A moly-fouled bore left uncleaned is widely held to corrode; the mechanism offered varies between sources, and **we have no measurement to set against it**—the usual caution (clean and dry after a session) remains sensible, but we do not present it as established fact.

9.1.2 Hexagonal Boron Nitride (hBN)

Hexagonal boron nitride, commonly known as "white moly," has largely superseded molybdenum disulfide in the competition world. hBN is chemically inert and does not attract moisture, eliminating the corrosion concerns that plagued moly. It is a white powder that produces far less mess during application and does not leave a persistent residue on equipment. Its lubricity is comparable to or better than moly's, providing a consistent, dry film that is extremely effective at reducing copper jacket smear in the bore. For the reloader who chooses to coat, hBN represents the superior option by virtually every practical measure.

9.2 The Application Process: Impact Plating

For the DIY reloader, impact plating remains the most effective way to apply these coatings.

1. **Aggressive Cleaning:** Bullets must be surgically clean and degreased. Any oil or residue from the manufacturing process will prevent the coating from adhering. Warming the bullets to 120°F–140°F helps the plating process.

2. **Tumbling:** The bullets are tumbled with steel shot and the lubricant powder. The steel shot "peens" the lubricant into the surface of the copper jacket.

3. **The Wax Seal (Optional):** Some reloaders follow the coating process with a brief tumble in carnauba wax. This "seals" the coating, making the bullets less messy to handle and providing an extra layer of protection against the elements.

9.3 Propellant-Based Fouling Reduction (CFE Technology)

The most significant modern evolution in the battle against fouling is the introduction of chemical additives directly into the propellant.

9.3.1 Copper Fouling Eraser (CFE)

Pioneered by Hodgdon and IMR, CFE technology involves the inclusion of a proprietary chemical agent in the powder that physically reacts with copper during the combustion process. CFE stands for *Copper Fouling Eraser*. The manufacturer claims a strong reduction in copper deposition but **does not publish the mechanism**, which it holds as proprietary. It is often written that the additive prevents copper from metallurgically bonding to the barrel steel; that explanation is plausible and widespread, but **no published source establishes it**. What is documented is the effect, not its cause. For the precision shooter, CFE powders (such as *CFE 223* for rifle applications) offer the benefits of reduced fouling without the labor-intensive process of impact plating bullets with hBN or moly. This allows for significantly longer shooting strings between cleanings, maintaining accuracy for dozens or even hundreds of rounds. The practical result is less time at the cleaning bench and more confidence that the rifle's accuracy will not degrade during a long match or a high-volume practice session.

9.4 Bullet Design and Gyroscopic Stability

The choice of bullet and its match to the barrel's twist rate affect both accuracy and fouling; this section covers them before the conclusions on coatings.

9.4.1 The Ogive and Ballistic Coefficient

The ogive—the curved forward portion of the bullet ahead of the bearing surface—is the primary determinant of aerodynamic drag. Modern precision bullets fall into several ogive categories: In a **tangent ogive** design, the curve blends smoothly into the bearing surface at a tangent, creating a gentle transition. Bullets with tangent ogives—such as the *Sierra MatchKing*—are generally less sensitive to seating depth and perform well across a wide range of chamber dimensions. Their ballistic coefficient is typically moderate to high, and their forgiving nature makes them an excellent choice for reloaders who value consistency over maximum aerodynamic efficiency.

The **secant ogive** takes a more aggressive approach: the curve intersects the bearing surface at an angle, creating a sharper, more streamlined profile. VLD (Very Low Drag) bullets from *Berger* use this design to achieve very high ballistic coefficients, but the sharper geometry makes them more sensitive to seating depth and they may require more careful load development to achieve their full potential.

The **hybrid ogive**, pioneered by *Berger*, represents a modern compromise that has become the dominant choice in precision rifle competition. It combines a tangent section near the bearing surface—which provides the seating-depth tolerance that makes tuning easier—with a secant section forward that delivers the aerodynamic efficiency needed for

long-range performance. The result is a bullet that shoots nearly as well as a pure secant design at distance, while being far easier to tune in a variety of rifles and chambers.

Going further: drag models and the ballistic coefficient.
A bullet's BC only has meaning relative to a *standard reference projectile* (G1, G7, ...). The choice of reference, the form factor $i = \mathrm{SD}/\mathrm{BC}$, and the reason the G7 standard yields a near-constant BC for modern boat-tail bullets are treated in detail—with the drag-coefficient-versus-Mach curves and the reference-shape diagrams—in the companion *Consolidated Competition Ballistics* manual, §"Standard Drag Models (G1 through G8)" (tireur.org/BallisticsGuide).

9.4.2 Twist Rate and the Stability Factor

The barrel's twist rate must spin the bullet fast enough to achieve gyroscopic stability. An under-stabilized bullet will "keyhole" (strike the target sideways).

It is often written that a marginally stable bullet flies well up close but *loses* stability as it slows through the transonic zone. **Gyroscopic stability does not work that way: it rises downrange, and keeps rising through transonic.** Spin decays far more slowly than velocity, and S_g scales as p^2/v^2. Integrating the .308 Winchester 168 gr of Chapter 5's worked example with measured spark-range coefficients, S_g climbs from 1.7 at the muzzle to 6.2 at 1,100 yards—the spin has lost 20 % while the velocity has lost 63 %, and the 29 % rise in the overturning-moment coefficient across transonic comes nowhere near offsetting it. McCoy draws the same conclusion from the same bullet: from a 12-inch twist at 2,600 fps, S_g rises from 1.7 at the muzzle to 5.8 at 1,000 yards [McCoy, 2012, p. 198], where the same integration gives 5.85.

What genuinely degrades at transonic is *dynamic* stability—the ability to damp a disturbance rather than the ability to resist overturning. The two are different criteria, and S_g is a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. McCoy describes the growing yaw of a bullet whose S_g already exceeds 2 as "not a gyroscopic instability" but a "small-yaw dynamic instability" [McCoy, 2012, p. 198], and notes that the effect of a boattail on dynamic stability "at transonic and subsonic speeds is generally negative" [McCoy, 2012, p. 84]. A bullet marginal at the muzzle is therefore a problem *at the muzzle*, where its S_g is lowest: that is where cold, dense air can push it under the threshold.

The Miller Stability Factor (S_g) is the modern method for evaluating bullet stability. An S_g of 1.5 or higher is considered fully stable under all conditions. Values between 1.3 and 1.5 indicate marginal stability that may become problematic in cold, dense air (which increases aerodynamic forces on the bullet). The formula takes into account bullet length, weight, diameter, and the barrel's twist rate, as well as air density. Bryan Litz's *Applied Ballistics* software provides an excellent calculator for determining S_g for any bullet-twist combination.

As a general rule, longer and heavier bullets require faster twist rates. The trend in modern precision cartridges toward long, heavy, high-BC projectiles has driven barrel makers to offer faster twists than were common a generation ago. For example, the .308 Winchester has moved from the traditional 1:12" twist to 1:10" and even 1:8" to stabilize modern 200+ grain bullets designed for extreme long-range shooting.

9.5 The Modern Consensus

Today, the use of bullet coatings is no longer considered a universal requirement for accuracy, and the decision to coat depends on the specific shooting discipline and round count. Coating remains highly valued by varmint hunters and high-volume competitors who may fire hundreds of rounds in a single session without the opportunity to clean their rifles; the reduction in copper fouling allows the rifle to stay in its "accuracy window" for much longer strings.

However, many top-tier benchrest and F-Class shooters have moved away from DIY coatings in favor of premium, uncoated bullets from *Berger* or *Sierra*, finding that the modern quality of match-grade barrels and precision bullet jackets has reduced fouling to a level where the marginal benefit of coating does not justify the additional process step. For these shooters, the consistency of uncoated, factory-inspected bullets is more valuable than the friction reduction offered by hBN or moly.

A middle ground exists in the form of factory-applied coatings. Manufacturers like *Winchester* utilize Lubalox (a black oxide coating), which provides a durable layer of lubricity without the mess and inconsistency of home-applied treatments. Similarly, some boutique bullet makers now offer hBN-coated bullets as a standard option, allowing the shooter to benefit from coating technology without investing in the equipment and process time required for DIY application.

Table 9.1: Comparison of Bullet Coating Materials

Material	Color	Stability	Primary Advantage
Moly (MoS2)	Black	Residue-heavy	Maximum Friction Reduction
hBN	White	Inert	Clean, No Corrosion Risk
Lubalox	Black	Durable Oxide	Factory-Applied / Consistent
Danzac	Grey	Proprietary	Ease of Application

Chapter 10

Cleaning

Carbon and copper fouling build up in the bore with each shot and change how the barrel shoots. This chapter covers cleaning equipment, solvents, a cleaning procedure, the borescope and barrel break-in.

10.1 The Nature of Fouling

Every time a rifle is fired, the bore is subjected to two distinct types of contamination:

1. **Carbon Fouling:** The byproduct of burnt propellant and primer compound. It forms a hard, baked-on layer that can eventually form a "carbon ring" in the throat, causing erratic pressure and velocity.
2. **Copper Fouling:** Microscopic layers of the bullet's jacket material that are literally smeared into the rifling. Copper fouling is progressive; once a small amount is deposited, it becomes a "magnet" for more copper from subsequent shots.

Modern advancements in propellant chemistry, such as **Copper Fouling Eraser (CFE)** technology, have significantly altered the management of copper. By using powders with CFE additives, the shooter can prevent the copper from adhering to the bore in the first place, shifting the maintenance burden from aggressive chemical removal to simple carbon management.

10.2 Cleaning Equipment

10.2.1 The One-Piece Cleaning Rod

The cleaning rod is the tool that touches the bore most. It must be a one-piece design made of a material that is softer than the barrel steel or coated in a protective layer (e.g., *Dewey*

coated rods or *Bore Tech* carbon fiber rods). A multi-piece rod is a danger to your bore, as the joints can develop burrs that will scratch the delicate rifling.

10.2.2 The Bore Guide

A bore guide is essential for protecting the throat of the rifle, where wear first affects accuracy. It centers the rod and prevents it from rubbing against the edges of the rifling as you work. It also prevents solvents from leaking into the action and trigger assembly, where they can cause mechanical failures or gumming.

10.2.3 Brushes and Jags

Bronze brushes are the standard tool for mechanical agitation of stubborn fouling; ensure the brush has a brass core rather than a steel one, as steel can scratch the bore. However, when using aggressive copper solvents, bronze brushes must be replaced with nylon alternatives. The ammonia in copper solvents reacts with bronze, producing a false blue-green color on the patch that mimics the appearance of dissolved copper—leading the shooter to believe the bore is still fouled when it may in fact be clean. For pushing patches through the bore, pierce-style jags are preferred over loop-style patch holders. A pierce jag holds the patch tight against the full circumference of the bore, providing maximum surface contact and ensuring that the solvent reaches every groove of the rifling.

10.3 Solvents

Modern chemistry has provided us with highly specialized tools for bore maintenance, each targeting a specific type of fouling. Carbon solvents—surfactants and penetrants such as *Bore Tech C4* or *Shooter's Choice*—are designed to break the bond between baked-on carbon and the barrel steel. They are typically the first product used in a cleaning session and can be left to soak safely for extended periods, as they are non-corrosive to steel.

Copper solvents operate on a different chemistry, using ammonia or modern chelating surfactants (such as *Bore Tech Cu+2*) to chemically dissolve copper deposits. Ammonia-based solvents are extremely effective, and their label sets a strict dwell time: *Sweet's 7.62* (5 % ammonia) must not be left in the barrel "for periods longer than 15 minutes", after which the bore is dried with a fresh patch and protected with a rust preventative (label of the product).

The reason usually given for that limit is wrong, and the mistake matters because it points the shooter at the wrong precaution. **Ammonia in solution does not attack barrel steel**: at least one barrel maker states it has never observed damage of that origin on its own products. What ammonia does attack is **copper and its alloys**—which is why bronze brushes and these solvents do not mix. The real hazard is that these solutions are *aqueous*. The ammonia is volatile and evaporates; what it leaves behind is residual water

loaded with salts, and that water is what pits the steel. Hence the only rule that matters after decoppering: **rinse, dry, oil**.

Read the dwell time on the label, never from a general table. Two solvents both containing ammonia can carry opposite instructions: *Sweet's 7.62* must not stay more than 15 minutes, while another maker specifies for its own ammonia product that it may act "for several hours, even overnight", and states that it attacks neither steel, nor nickel, nor chrome. That overnight permission carries a condition which is rarely quoted: the barrel must be **plugged and filled to the brim**. Leaving a barrel merely *wetted* with product is explicitly forbidden—it is precisely the pitting scenario described above. Ammonia-free formulations from *Bore Tech* and *Montana X-Treme* carry no dwell limit at all, which makes them the safer choice for the less experienced shooter.

For the most stubborn contamination, abrasive bore pastes such as *J-B Non-Embedding Bore Cleaning Compound* (whose abrasive, per its safety data sheet, is garnet) can be used for deep cleaning or for "lapping" a rough barrel. These pastes should be used sparingly and only when chemical methods have failed to remove a persistent carbon ring, as they do remove a very small amount of barrel steel with each application.

10.4 The Systematic Cleaning Procedure

1. **Wetting the Bore:** Push two or three patches soaked in carbon solvent through the bore. Let sit for 10-15 minutes to allow the chemicals to work.

2. **Brushing:** Use a wet brush to make 10-20 full passes. Bring the brush only the **strict minimum** past the muzzle, and reverse **without a jerk**. Pushing it fully out of the muzzle is a common instruction and a harmful one: the brush is the only thing centring the rod, so once it is clear the bare rod tip comes back bouncing on the tops of the lands—real damage, inflicted to avoid a theoretical one. It is the *force applied*, not the direction of travel, that does the harm: a rod pushed too hard bows inside the bore and rubs the rifling along its whole length, guide or no guide.

3. **Patching Out:** Push dry patches until they come out clean.

4. **Copper Removal:** If the bore is still showing copper (verified by a blue/green patch or a borescope), repeat the process with a copper-specific solvent.

5. **Neutralization and Protection:** Once clean, push a patch of isopropyl alcohol to neutralize the solvents, followed by a final patch of high-quality gun oil (e.g., *Shooter's Choice Rust Prevent*) to protect the steel.

10.5 The Borescope

Perhaps the single most valuable diagnostic tool for barrel maintenance is the digital borescope. Devices from *Teslong*, *Lyman*, and high-end units from *Hawkeye* allow the shooter to visually inspect the interior of the barrel with magnification, revealing details that are completely invisible to patch-based methods alone.

A borescope inspection reveals details that are completely invisible to patch-based assessment. It can show the precise location and extent of copper fouling, which often accumulates in specific zones—particularly just ahead of the chamber throat and in areas where the rifling is roughest. It reveals carbon ring formation in the throat, a common cause of erratic accuracy that occurs when carbon builds up in the constriction between the chamber and the start of the rifling, altering the bullet's entry angle. Perhaps most importantly, the borescope reveals the degree of throat erosion: the network of fine "fire cracks" that develop in the throat area over the barrel's life. A barrel with severe fire-cracking is approaching the end of its useful accuracy life, and the borescope provides an objective way to monitor this progression rather than waiting for accuracy to degrade on the target. In new barrels, a borescope allows the shooter to assess the quality of the bore finish and make an informed decision about whether a formal break-in procedure is warranted.

For the serious precision shooter, a borescope transforms barrel maintenance from guesswork into a data-driven process. Rather than cleaning on a fixed schedule, you can inspect the bore and clean only when fouling has reached a level that is likely to affect accuracy.

10.6 Barrel Break-In: The First 50 Rounds

The "break-in" process is designed to smooth out the microscopic manufacturing marks in a new barrel. While controversial to some, most precision shooters follow a "fire and clean" routine for the first few dozen rounds. This prevents copper from being "smeared" into the manufacturing marks, allowing them to be "ironed out" by the passage of subsequent bullets.

A common break-in protocol is as follows: for the first five rounds, clean the bore completely (carbon and copper) after each individual shot. For rounds six through twenty, clean after every three shots. For rounds twenty-one through fifty, clean after every five shots. After the break-in period, the bore should foul less aggressively and maintain accuracy over longer strings. However, it should be noted that some barrel makers (notably Krieger and Bartlein) state that their lapped barrels do not require a formal break-in procedure, as the lapping process has already smoothed the bore to a high polish. A borescope inspection of a new barrel can help you decide whether break-in is warranted for your specific barrel.

Table 10.1: Cleaning Equipment and Chemical Compatibility

Cleaning Agent	**Brush Type**	**Max Soak Time**
Carbon Solvent	Bronze / Nylon	*Per label*
Ammonia Copper Solvent	Nylon ONLY	*Per label* (15 min, Sweet's)
Modern Copper Solvent	Nylon ONLY	*Per label* (no limit on steel, Cu+2)
Bore Paste	Patch on Jag	No Soak (Mechanical Only)
Gun Oil / Preventative	None (Patch)	Indefinite (Storage)

Sources and Resources

This chapter lists the books, manuals, manufacturers and organisations the guide draws on. The full bibliography follows this chapter; the site's bibliography, with BibTeX export, is at tireur.org/bibliographie.php.

Books and Manuals

The *Sinclair International's Precision Reloading & Shooting Handbook* [Gravatt and Sinclair, 1999] describes case preparation and bench technique step by step; much of Chapters 3 and 7 follows it. The *Hodgdon Annual Manual* [Hodgdon Powder Company, 2024] gives load data and safety warnings, and describes Hodgdon's CFE and temperature-insensitive powders.

Bryan Litz's *Applied Ballistics for Long-Range Shooting* [Litz, 2015] covers external ballistics, drag models and the measurement of ballistic coefficients. His *Modern Advancements in Long Range Shooting* is a multi-volume series documenting the ongoing work of the Applied Ballistics laboratory; the first volume [Litz, 2014] addresses twist rate and its effect on muzzle velocity, ballistic coefficient and precision, spin-rate decay, and the evolution of modern rifle, bullet and optic design, while later volumes extend the same experimental method to further questions.

Warren Page's *The Accurate Rifle* [Page, 1973] covers benchrest rifle building, load development and competition. Its component recommendations are dated.

Finally, comprehensive reloading manuals such as the *Nosler Reloading Guide* [Nosler, Inc., 2021] and the *Hornady Handbook of Cartridge Reloading* [Hornady Manufacturing, 2021] provide load data, component specifications and cartridge dimensions. Keeping two current manuals from different publishers allows cross-checking: where they disagree, extra caution is warranted. *Precision Shooting Magazine*, though now out of print, published benchrest and accuracy articles for several decades; back issues are still useful.

Manufacturers and Suppliers

The tools and components mentioned in this work represent the current state of the art in the industry. The following table summarizes the principal manufacturers and suppliers referenced throughout this manual.

Table 10.2: Key Manufacturers and Suppliers

Category	Manufacturer	Website
Hardware	Sinclair / Brownells	brownells.com
	L.E. Wilson	lewilson.com
	Area 419	area419.com
	Forster Products	forsterproducts.com
Measurement	A&D Weighing	andweighing.com
	Bore Tech	boretech.com
	Kestrel Instruments	kestrelinstruments.com
Brass	Lapua	lapua.com
	Alpha Munitions	alphamunitions.com
	Peterson Cartridge	petersoncartridge.com
Bullets	Berger Bullets	bergerbullets.com
	Sierra Bullets	sierrabullets.com
Powder	Hodgdon	hodgdon.com
	Vihtavuori	vihtavuori.com
	Alliant Powder	alliantpowder.com
	ADI	adiworldclass.com.au

Organizations

Engaging with the competitive community is the fastest way to accelerate your learning. The NBRSA (National Bench Rest Shooters Association) and the IBS (International Benchrest Shooters) are the governing bodies for group and score benchrest competition. Benchrest is the discipline that has historically pushed the boundaries of reloading precision, and many of the techniques described in this manual originate from the benchrest community.

The Precision Rifle Series (PRS) and National Rifle League (NRL) represent the modern homes of practical, long-range tactical competition. PRS and NRL matches test both shooting skill and the ability to engage targets at unknown distances under time pressure, placing a premium on consistent, well-developed ammunition that performs reliably across a wide range of conditions.

F-Class shooting—governed in the United States by the NRA, and internationally by the ICFRA (International Confederation of Fullbore Rifle Associations), which standardises the rules across countries—is a growing discipline that combines the precision demands of benchrest with extended-range shooting at distances from 300 to 1,000 yards. Competitors shoot from the prone position using either a bipod (F-TR class) or a front rest (F-Open class), and the discipline rewards both precise ammunition and skilled wind reading.

For those interested in Olympic-style shooting disciplines, the ISSF (International Shooting Sport Federation) and the national federation of your own country—the Fédération Française de Tir in France, the URSTBf in French-speaking Belgium, the Fédération sportive suisse de tir in Switzerland, and their equivalents elsewhere—provide structured competition pathways, though these events typically use factory or purpose-built ammunition rather than handloads.

Final Word: Precision is not a destination, but a state of mind. Use these resources as a starting point, but let the target be your final instructor. The road to the one-hole group is long, but it is one of the most rewarding journeys a marksman can take.

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Appendix A

Benefits of Handloading: A Case Study

To demonstrate the improvement in accuracy that can be achieved through precision handloading techniques, a test was conducted using a standard factory rifle.

A.1 The Test Rifle

A factory Remington 700 chambered in .308 Winchester with a 20" sporter barrel was selected. The rifle was tested in its original factory configuration, with no bedding work or trigger adjustments, although it was placed in a Hogue overmolded stock for consistency.

A.2 Ammunition Batches

Three types of ammunition were compared:

1. **Basic Handloads:** Sierra 168 grain MatchKings loaded into Winchester brass. The only case preparation performed was chamfering the case mouths. Flash hole burrs were present but ignored.

2. **Premium Factory Ammunition:** Federal Premium match ammunition loaded with 168 grain MatchKings. At the time of testing, this was considered the industry standard for match-grade factory ammo.

3. **Sinclair Precision Handloads:** Sierra 168 grain MatchKings loaded into Norma brass. The brass was fully prepared, including neck turning, flash hole deburring, primer pocket uniforming, and chamfering. The seating depth was set to 0.010" off the rifling.

A.3 Results

Ten three-shot groups were fired for each ammunition type. Before reading the table, note what a protocol of this size can and cannot settle: as Chapter 6 sets out, a three-shot group is a very noisy estimate of dispersion, and ten of them are barely enough to separate two loads that differ by less than a third.

Table A.1: Comparison of Ammunition Performance (3-Shot Groups, Inches)

Group	Basic Handload	Federal Premium	Precision Handload
1	1.190	0.670	0.410
2	1.150	1.000	0.430
3	0.515	1.090	0.830
4	0.810	0.640	0.900
5	1.060	0.330	0.470
6	1.170	0.880	0.804
7	0.250	0.750	0.520
8	2.100	0.660	0.510
9	1.700	0.850	0.570
10	1.160	0.630	0.840
Aggregate	**1.111**	**0.750**	**0.628**

A.4 Conclusion

The Sinclair-prepared loads aggregated 43% smaller than the basic handloads and 16% smaller than the Federal Premium ammunition. Those two results do not carry equal weight, and it is worth being explicit about which one the test actually established.

The advantage over the basic handloads is real. A Welch two-sample test on the ten aggregates gives $t = 2.71$, $p = 0.020$: a difference this large is unlikely to be an accident of ten small groups. Neglecting case preparation cost roughly four tenths of an inch, and the conclusion stands.

The advantage over the premium factory ammunition is not established by this test. The 16% gap amounts to 0.122", against a 95% confidence interval on the difference running from $-0.058''$ to $+0.301''$—an interval that includes zero. The Welch test returns $p = 0.20$ and the rank-based test $p = 0.19$. This is not evidence that the prepared handloads are no better; it is a test that could not have shown it either way. Simulating this exact protocol—ten three-shot groups per lot—against a genuine 16% improvement, the difference reaches significance in only about one campaign in six. The experiment had roughly a one-in-six chance of detecting the very effect it reports.

A word, finally, about the spread between best and worst group. The basic handloads do range far more widely in absolute terms, from 0.250" to 2.100", and that is a real observation—but a great deal of it follows arithmetically from their larger average, since dispersion scales with size. Measured as a coefficient of variation, the basic loads are indeed the most erratic at 48%, while the Federal ammunition sits at 29% and the prepared handloads at 30%. Relative to their own group size, the prepared handloads were *not* more consistent than the factory match ammunition. The honest summary of this test is that methodical case preparation clearly beats careless handloading, and that separating it from good factory match ammunition would require a far larger sample—which is precisely the lesson of Chapter 6.

Appendix B

Patch Selection and Jag Guide

Selecting the correct patch size is critical for effective cleaning. A patch should be tight enough to feel resistance but not so tight that the cleaning rod flexes significantly.

B.1 Patch Selection by Caliber

The following recommendations are based on using pierce-style jags and double-napped cotton flannel patches. The correct patch size should feel firm when pushed through the bore—tight enough to provide good contact with the rifling, but not so tight that the cleaning rod flexes significantly.

Table B.1: Recommended patch sizes by caliber, from Sinclair's tests [Gravatt and Sinclair, 1999, Appendix 11, pp. 163–164]: pierce-style jags, often one caliber smaller than the bore, and Sinclair flannel patches. Makers' current charts, written for jags matched to the bore, give smaller patches.

Caliber	**Patch Size**	**Notes**
.22 Rimfire	1-1/8" square	—
.224 Centerfire	1-3/8" square	1-1/8" for Dewey/Bore Tech jags
6mm (.243)	1-3/4" square	May need off-center stab for first pass
6.5mm (.264)	2" round or 2-1/4" square	—
7mm (.284)	2" round	—
.30 cal (.308)	1-3/4" to 2-1/4" square	Varies with jag manufacturer
.338 cal	2-1/4" square	—

B.2 Jag Measurements

Table B.2: Jag dimensions as measured by Gravatt and Sinclair [1999, p. 164] in 1999. Current models may differ: Bore Tech now specifies $0.245'' \times 2.645''$ for its .30 Proof-Positive jag.

Jag Type	**Diameter**	**Length**
.22 cal Sinclair	0.165”	2.69”
.22 cal Dewey	0.183”	2.69”
6mm Sinclair	0.178”	2.68”
.270 cal Sinclair	0.222”	2.66”
.30 cal Sinclair	0.250”	2.68”
.30 cal Bore Tech	0.254”	2.31”
.338 cal Dewey	0.290”	3.08”

Appendix C

Case Weight Distribution

Sorting brass by weight is a proxy for measuring internal volume consistency. When weighing a large batch of brass from the same manufacturer and lot, the distribution typically follows a normal "bell curve."

The table below shows what such a batch looks like: 500 pieces of .223 Remington brass sorted into classes 0.2 grain wide, each labelled by the first and last 0.1-grain reading it contains. By identifying the most frequent weight range (the peak of the curve), shooters can select a highly uniform subset for match ammunition while setting aside the outliers for practice.

> **This table is a model, not a measurement.** Its counts follow a normal curve closely—their mean is 92.07 gr and their standard deviation 0.35 gr—and it is offered as an illustration of the *shape* to expect. A real batch rarely falls this neatly: a chi-squared goodness-of-fit test on these counts, with the mean and standard deviation taken from the table, returns $\chi^2 = 0.67$ on 8 degrees of freedom, a fit that a genuine sample of 500 reaches about once in 2,500 batches. Use the table to recognise the pattern, and your own scale for the numbers.

C.1 Sorting Benefits

Weight sorting is useful because case weight and internal volume are related—but the relationship is looser than it is often presented, and it is worth being precise about its limits.

Within a single manufacturer and lot, heavier cases do *tend* to have less internal volume, which in turn tends to raise chamber pressure and shift muzzle velocity. The effect is most pronounced in small-capacity cartridges such as the .223 Remington or the 6mm BR, where a one-grain difference in brass represents a larger fraction of the powder space. Across different manufacturers, however, the correlation largely breaks down: head and web geometry vary

Table C.1: .223 Remington case weight distribution — modelled 500-piece batch

Weight Range (Grains)	**Number of Cases**	**Percentage**
91.0 – 91.1	2	0.4%
91.2 – 91.3	8	1.6%
91.4 – 91.5	24	4.8%
91.6 – 91.7	58	11.6%
91.8 – 91.9	92	18.4%
92.0 – 92.1	**114**	**22.8%**
92.2 – 92.3	98	19.6%
92.4 – 92.5	62	12.4%
92.6 – 92.7	31	6.2%
92.8 – 92.9	9	1.8%
93.0 – 93.1	2	0.4%
Total	**500**	**100%**

far more between brands than wall thickness does, and two cases of identical mass can enclose noticeably different volumes.

The reason is geometric. Most of the mass variation in a batch of brass sits in the *head and web*—the thickest part of the case, and the part that contributes least to the powder space—rather than in the neck and body walls that actually bound the charge. Weight therefore *ranks* cases usefully, but it does not measure the quantity that governs pressure. When the actual number matters—when entering a case capacity into an internal-ballistics estimator, or when chasing the last few feet per second of consistency—measure water capacity directly, as described in Chapter 3. Weight sorting is the screening step; volume measurement is the arbiter.

Weight sorting also provides a genuine safety function, and this benefit does not depend on the volume correlation at all. Exceptionally light cases in a batch may indicate thin spots in the walls or a weak web, making them more prone to failure at high pressures. These outliers should be set aside for practice ammunition or discarded entirely. At the other extreme, unusually heavy cases will *tend* toward reduced internal volume and higher pressures at the same powder charge—a tendency worth accounting for when working near maximum loads.

For the highest levels of competition, sorting into lots of 50 or 100 rounds—all within a window of 0.3 to 0.5 grains—ensures that every shot in a match is fired from a near-identical case. The remaining cases that fall outside this window are perfectly serviceable for practice or training, where absolute consistency is less critical.

Appendix D

Statistical Foundations for Precision Shooting

The evaluation of ammunition performance—muzzle velocity consistency, group size, point-of-impact stability—is fundamentally a statistical problem. A shooter who fires five rounds and computes an average velocity has performed a statistical estimation, whether consciously or not. This appendix provides the mathematical framework needed to draw rigorous conclusions from small samples, as is typical at the loading bench.

D.1 Sample Mean

Given n observations $x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n$ (e.g., muzzle velocities from a chronograph), the **sample mean** is

$$\bar{x} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n} x_i. \tag{D.1}$$

The sample mean is an unbiased estimator of the population mean μ. Its precision improves with n: the standard error of $\bar{x}$ is $\sigma/\sqrt{n}$, where σ is the population standard deviation.

D.2 Sample Standard Deviation

The **sample variance** is

$$s^2 = \frac{1}{n-1} \sum_{i=1}^{n} (x_i - \bar{x})^2, \tag{D.2}$$

and the **sample standard deviation** is $s = \sqrt{s^2}$. The divisor $n - 1$ (Bessel's correction) yields an unbiased estimate of the population variance σ^2. In practical terms, s quantifies the typical deviation of a single round from the mean—a direct measure of load consistency.

For computation, the equivalent form

$$s^2 = \frac{1}{n-1}\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} x_i^2 - n\bar{x}^2\right) \tag{D.3}$$

is sometimes more convenient when working from a running total on a calculator.

D.2.1 Extreme Spread versus Standard Deviation

Most chronographs report the *extreme spread* (ES), defined as $\mathrm{ES} = x_{\max} - x_{\min}$. While intuitive, ES is a poor metric for comparing loads because it is highly sensitive to sample size: a 10-round string will almost always show a larger ES than a 5-round string from the same ammunition, even if the underlying consistency is identical. The standard deviation s does not suffer from this bias and should be preferred whenever rigorous comparison is needed.

D.3 The Normal Distribution

The statistical methods in this appendix rest on the assumption that the measured quantity follows a **normal** (Gaussian) distribution. The assumption is sound for *muzzle velocity* and for *case weight*, where the variation arises from the superposition of many small, independent factors (powder charge tolerance, primer brisance, neck tension, ambient temperature, etc.). By the *central limit theorem*, such sums converge to a normal distribution regardless of the distribution of the individual factors.

> **Group size is the exception, and an important one.** A group size is not a sum of small effects: it is the *largest* distance among the shots fired—an extreme-value statistic of a two-dimensional distribution. The central limit theorem does not apply to it. Its distribution is bounded below by zero and skewed to the right, and simulation of a perfectly circular dispersion gives a skewness of about +0.4 at three shots and +0.4 again at twenty: unlike an average, *the skew does not fade as the sample grows*. The tools of this appendix—confidence intervals on the mean, tolerance bounds—are built for velocity and for case weight; they must not be carried over to group sizes without further care. Chapter 6 gives the practical consequence at the target.

D.3.1 Definition

A continuous random variable X follows the normal distribution with mean μ and variance σ^2, written $X \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu,\, \sigma^2)$, if its probability density function is

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{\sigma\sqrt{2\pi}}\, e^{-(x-\mu)^2/(2\sigma^2)}, \qquad -\infty < x < \infty. \tag{D.4}$$

The distribution is symmetric about μ and is completely determined by its two parameters μ and σ.

D.3.2 The Standard Normal Distribution

The **standard normal** distribution is the special case $Z \sim \mathcal{N}(0,\, 1)$. Any normal variable can be standardized:

$$Z = \frac{X - \mu}{\sigma}. \tag{D.5}$$

The cumulative distribution function $\Phi(z) = P(Z \le z)$ cannot be expressed in closed form and is tabulated below.

D.3.3 Properties

The normal distribution satisfies the well-known probability rules:

- $P(\mu - \sigma < X < \mu + \sigma) \approx 68.27\%$,
- $P(\mu - 2\sigma < X < \mu + 2\sigma) \approx 95.45\%$,
- $P(\mu - 3\sigma < X < \mu + 3\sigma) \approx 99.73\%$.

For the handloader, the "3σ rule" means that a round deviating from the mean by more than three standard deviations is expected roughly once every 370 rounds.

D.3.4 Standard Normal Quantile Table

The table below gives z_p such that $P(Z \le z_p) = p$ for the standard normal distribution. By symmetry, $z_{1-p} = -z_p$.

D.4 Student's t-Distribution

D.4.1 Origin and Motivation

When σ is known, the standardized sample mean $(\bar{x} - \mu)/(\sigma/\sqrt{n})$ follows a standard normal distribution. In practice, σ must be replaced by the sample estimate s, and the resulting

Table D.1: Standard normal quantiles z_p where $P(Z \leq z_p) = p$

p	z_p	p	z_p
0.500	0.000	0.950	1.645
0.600	0.253	0.960	1.751
0.700	0.524	0.970	1.881
0.750	0.674	0.975	1.960
0.800	0.842	0.980	2.054
0.850	1.036	0.990	2.326
0.900	1.282	0.995	2.576
0.925	1.440	0.999	3.090

quantity

$$T = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu}{s/\sqrt{n}} \tag{D.6}$$

no longer follows a normal distribution. William Sealy Gosset, publishing under the pseudonym "Student" in 1908, showed that T follows a distribution with heavier tails than the normal, now called **Student's t-distribution** with $\nu = n - 1$ degrees of freedom.

D.4.2 Definition

The probability density function of the t-distribution with ν degrees of freedom is

$$\begin{aligned} f(t) = {} & \frac{\Gamma\left(\frac{\nu+1}{2}\right)}{\sqrt{\nu\pi}\,\Gamma\left(\frac{\nu}{2}\right)} \\ & \times \left(1 + \frac{t^2}{\nu}\right)^{-(\nu+1)/2}, \\ & -\infty < t < \infty, \end{aligned} \tag{D.7}$$

where $\Gamma(\cdot)$ is the gamma function. Like the normal, the t-distribution is symmetric about zero, but its tails are heavier: extreme values are more probable, reflecting the additional uncertainty from estimating σ.

D.4.3 Relationship to the Normal Distribution

As $\nu \to \infty$, the t-distribution converges to the standard normal. The convergence is rapid: for $\nu \geq 30$, the difference is small; for $\nu \geq 100$, it is negligible for most practical purposes. Table D.2 illustrates this convergence.

D.4.4 Quantile Table

Table D.2 gives the upper quantiles $t_{p,\nu}$ such that $P(T \leq t_{p,\nu}) = p$ for selected values of p and ν. The column $p = 0.975$ is used for two-sided 95% confidence intervals; $p = 0.950$ is used for one-sided 95% bounds.

Table D.2: Upper quantiles $t_{p,\nu}$ of Student's t-distribution

	p					
ν	0.900	0.950	0.975	0.990	0.995	0.999
1	3.078	6.314	12.706	31.821	63.657	318.31
2	1.886	2.920	4.303	6.965	9.925	22.327
3	1.638	2.353	3.182	4.541	5.841	10.215
4	1.533	2.132	2.776	3.747	4.604	7.173
5	1.476	2.015	2.571	3.365	4.032	5.893
6	1.440	1.943	2.447	3.143	3.707	5.208
7	1.415	1.895	2.365	2.998	3.499	4.785
8	1.397	1.860	2.306	2.896	3.355	4.501
9	1.383	1.833	2.262	2.821	3.250	4.297
10	1.372	1.812	2.228	2.764	3.169	4.144
12	1.356	1.782	2.179	2.681	3.055	3.930
14	1.345	1.761	2.145	2.624	2.977	3.787
16	1.337	1.746	2.120	2.583	2.921	3.686
18	1.330	1.734	2.101	2.552	2.878	3.610
20	1.325	1.725	2.086	2.528	2.845	3.552
25	1.316	1.708	2.060	2.485	2.787	3.450
30	1.310	1.697	2.042	2.457	2.750	3.385
40	1.303	1.684	2.021	2.423	2.704	3.307
60	1.296	1.671	2.000	2.390	2.660	3.232
120	1.289	1.658	1.980	2.358	2.617	3.160
∞	1.282	1.645	1.960	2.326	2.576	3.090

D.5 The Chi-Squared Distribution

D.5.1 Origin and Motivation

The chi-squared distribution arises naturally when assessing the variability of a sample. If $X_1, X_2, \ldots, X_n$ are independent standard normal variables, the sum of their squares

$$Q = \sum_{i=1}^{n} X_i^2 \tag{D.8}$$

follows a **chi-squared distribution** with n degrees of freedom, written $Q \sim \chi^2_n$.

In practice, the chi-squared distribution governs the sampling distribution of the sample variance. Specifically, if $X_1, \ldots, X_n \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu, \sigma^2)$, then

$$\frac{(n-1)\, s^2}{\sigma^2} \sim \chi^2_{n-1}. \tag{D.9}$$

This relationship is used to construct confidence intervals for σ^2, and it governs the uncertainty of s that tolerance factors must absorb (Section D.7).

D.5.2 Definition

The probability density function of the chi-squared distribution with ν degrees of freedom is

$$\begin{aligned} f(x) = {} & \frac{1}{2^{\nu/2}\,\Gamma(\nu/2)} \\ & \times x^{\nu/2-1}\, e^{-x/2}, \quad x > 0. \end{aligned} \tag{D.10}$$

Unlike the normal and t-distributions, the chi-squared distribution is defined only for $x > 0$ and is *not* symmetric: it is right-skewed, with the skewness decreasing as ν increases.

D.5.3 Properties

- **Mean:** $E[\chi^2_\nu] = \nu$.
- **Variance:** $\mathrm{Var}[\chi^2_\nu] = 2\nu$.
- **Additivity:** If $Q_1 \sim \chi^2_{\nu_1}$ and $Q_2 \sim \chi^2_{\nu_2}$ are independent, then $Q_1 + Q_2 \sim \chi^2_{\nu_1+\nu_2}$.
- **Normal approximation:** For large ν, $\sqrt{2\chi^2_\nu} - \sqrt{2\nu - 1}$ is approximately standard normal [Fisher, 1922].

D.5.4 Quantile Table

Table D.3 gives $\chi^2_{p,\,\nu}$ such that $P(\chi^2 \le \chi^2_{p,\,\nu}) = p$. The lower quantiles (small p) are needed for upper confidence bounds on σ^2; the upper quantiles (large p) are needed for lower bounds. Both appear in tolerance factor calculations.

Table D.3: Selected quantiles $\chi^2_{p,\nu}$ of the chi-squared distribution

	p					
ν	0.025	0.050	0.100	0.900	0.950	0.975
1	0.001	0.004	0.016	2.706	3.841	5.024
2	0.051	0.103	0.211	4.605	5.991	7.378
3	0.216	0.352	0.584	6.251	7.815	9.348
4	0.484	0.711	1.064	7.779	9.488	11.143
5	0.831	1.145	1.610	9.236	11.070	12.833
6	1.237	1.635	2.204	10.645	12.592	14.449
7	1.690	2.167	2.833	12.017	14.067	16.013
8	2.180	2.733	3.490	13.362	15.507	17.535
9	2.700	3.325	4.168	14.684	16.919	19.023
10	3.247	3.940	4.865	15.987	18.307	20.483
12	4.404	5.226	6.304	18.549	21.026	23.337
14	5.629	6.571	7.790	21.064	23.685	26.119
16	6.908	7.962	9.312	23.542	26.296	28.845
18	8.231	9.390	10.865	25.989	28.869	31.526
20	9.591	10.851	12.443	28.412	31.410	34.170
25	13.120	14.611	16.473	34.382	37.652	40.646
29	16.047	17.708	19.768	39.087	42.557	45.722
30	16.791	18.493	20.599	40.256	43.773	46.979
40	24.433	26.509	29.051	51.805	55.758	59.342
50	32.357	34.764	37.689	63.167	67.505	71.420
60	40.482	43.188	46.459	74.397	79.082	83.298
99	73.361	77.046	81.449	117.407	123.225	128.422

D.6 Confidence Intervals

A single value of $\bar{x}$ is a *point estimate* of μ. A **confidence interval** provides a range that is expected to contain μ with a specified probability.

D.6.1 Known Variance

If σ is known and the observations are normally distributed (or n is large), the two-sided $(1-\alpha)$ confidence interval for μ is

$$\bar{x} \pm z_{\alpha/2}\,\frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{n}}, \tag{D.11}$$

where $z_{\alpha/2}$ is the upper $\alpha/2$ quantile of the standard normal distribution (Table D.1). For a 95% interval, $z_{0.025} = 1.960$.

D.6.2 Unknown Variance (Student's t)

In practice, σ is unknown and must be estimated by s. The confidence interval then uses Student's t-distribution with $\nu = n - 1$ degrees of freedom:

$$\bar{x} \pm t_{\alpha/2,\,n-1}\,\frac{s}{\sqrt{n}}. \tag{D.12}$$

For small n (typical at the loading bench), the t-distribution has heavier tails than the normal, producing wider intervals that correctly reflect the additional uncertainty from estimating σ. The relevant quantiles are found in Table D.2.

D.6.3 Practical Example

A handloader fires $n = 10$ rounds over a chronograph and records a mean velocity $\bar{x} = 2{,}750$ fps with $s = 12$ fps. The 95% confidence interval for the true mean velocity is

$$\begin{aligned} &2{,}750 \pm 2.262 \times \frac{12}{\sqrt{10}} \\ &= 2{,}750 \pm 8.6 \text{ fps}, \end{aligned}$$

i.e., [2,741.4, 2,758.6] fps. Although the sample mean is 2,750 fps, the true mean could plausibly lie anywhere in this range.

D.7 One-Sided Confidence Bounds and Tolerance Factors

In precision shooting, a common concern is not the average but the *worst case*: what is the maximum velocity (and hence maximum pressure) that a load might produce? This calls for a **one-sided upper confidence bound** rather than a two-sided interval.

D.7.1 One-Sided Upper Bound on the Mean

A one-sided $(1-\alpha)$ upper confidence bound for μ is

$$\mu \leq \bar{x} + t_{\alpha,\,n-1}\,\frac{s}{\sqrt{n}}. \tag{D.13}$$

Note that this uses $t_{\alpha,\,n-1}$ (not $t_{\alpha/2}$), since the entire α risk is concentrated in one tail.

D.7.2 Upper Tolerance Bound for Individual Values

A bound on the mean tells us about the *average* round; it does not tell us how fast the hottest round in a large production run might be. For that, we need a **tolerance bound**: a value that, with confidence γ, will exceed at most a fraction β of all individual values.

Under normality, the one-sided upper $(1-\beta)$-content tolerance bound with confidence γ is

$$U = \bar{x} + k(n, \beta, \gamma)\, s, \tag{D.14}$$

where the tolerance factor k depends on the sample size, the coverage proportion β, and the confidence level γ.

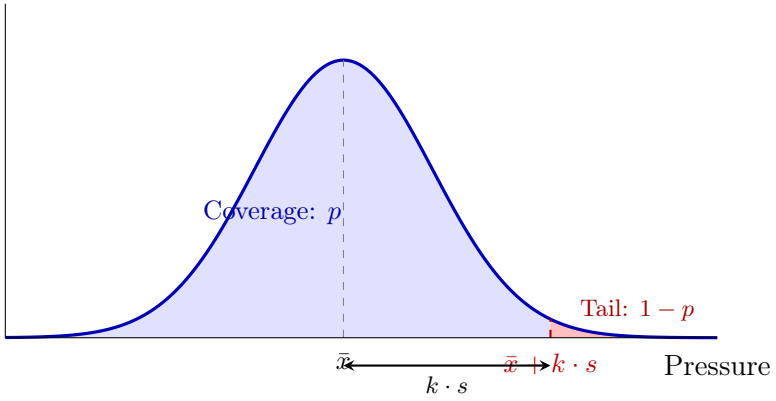

Figure D.1: One-sided upper tolerance bound. The shaded blue area covers a proportion p of the population; the red tail represents the fraction $1-p$ that may exceed the bound $\bar{x} + k \cdot s$.

D.7.3 Natrella's Approximation

The exact factor requires the non-central t-distribution (Section D.8). Where it is not available, Natrella [1963, p. 2-15] gives a closed-form approximation using only normal

quantiles. For a one-sided bound covering a proportion p of the population with confidence γ,

$$\begin{aligned} a &= 1 - \frac{z_\gamma^2}{2(n-1)}, \\ b &= z_p^2 - \frac{z_\gamma^2}{n}, \\ k &\approx \frac{z_p + \sqrt{z_p^2 - a\,b}}{a}, \end{aligned} \tag{D.15}$$

where z_p and z_γ are the standard normal quantiles of order p and γ. The same formula is given in the NIST/SEMATECH *e-Handbook of Statistical Methods* (§ 7.2.6.3).

Table D.4: One-sided upper tolerance factors k (95 % coverage, 95 % confidence): exact values and Natrella's approximation

Sample size n	**Exact** k	**Natrella**	**Deviation**
5	4.203	4.190	−0.3 %
10	2.911	2.875	−1.2 %
15	2.566	2.542	−0.9 %
20	2.396	2.378	−0.7 %
30	2.220	2.209	−0.5 %
50	2.065	2.058	−0.3 %
100	1.927	1.923	−0.2 %
∞	1.645	1.645	—

Two features of this table deserve attention. First, from $n = 5$ the approximation is within 1.2 % of the exact factor, and slightly *below* it: a tolerance factor that is too small produces a bound that is too tight—the permissive direction. Where the bound is used for a safety decision, use the exact value, rounded *up*. Second, the approximation fails for the smallest samples: at $n = 4$ it overstates the factor by 2.9 %, at $n = 3$ by 25 %, and at $n = 2$ the quantity a is negative and the formula gives no usable value. Below five rounds, only the exact factor will do.

Note also how large these factors are. At $n = 5$ the multiplier is 4.20—more than four standard deviations—because s computed from five rounds is itself a very imprecise estimate of σ. A confidence level is not free: demanding 95 % rather than 90 % raises the factor at $n = 5$ from 3.40 to 4.20, a difference of nearly a quarter.

D.7.4 Application: Establishing a Maximum Expected Velocity

Suppose a handloader fires $n = 10$ rounds and measures $\bar{x} = 2{,}750$ fps with $s = 12$ fps. Using the exact $k = 2.911$ from Table D.4, the one-sided upper bound covering 95% of all

rounds with 95% confidence is

$$\begin{aligned} U &= 2{,}750 + 2.911 \times 12 \\ &= 2{,}784.9 \text{ fps.} \end{aligned}$$

The handloader can state with 95% confidence that at least 95% of all rounds from this load will not exceed approximately 2,785 fps. (Natrella's approximation would have given 2,784.5 fps—close, but on the optimistic side.) This is directly useful for checking that a load remains within the pressure ceiling specified by the cartridge manufacturer, even accounting for round-to-round variation and the limited sample size.

Conversely, if the maximum safe velocity for a given cartridge is known (from published data or pressure testing), one can work backwards: a load is acceptable only if U falls below that threshold. This discipline transforms load development from guesswork into an engineering decision bounded by quantified risk.

D.8 The Non-Central t-Distribution and Exact Tolerance Factors

Natrella's approximation (Section D.7) provides a convenient formula for tolerance factors. However, the *exact* tolerance factors—including those prescribed by the C.I.P. for pressure compliance testing—are derived from the **non-central t-distribution**. Malfatti [2004, p. 42] sets out the criterion, mean $+ k \cdot s \leq 1.15\, P_{\max}$, with $k = 5.75$ for five rounds and a worked .44 Remington Magnum example; he does not derive k, and his values for 10, 20 and 50 rounds (3.94, 3.27, 2.85) fall slightly below both the exact factors and the published table. All four of his values are those of Natrella's approximation, $k = \left(z_p + \sqrt{z_p^2 - ab}\right)/a$ with $a = 1 - z_\gamma^2/(2(n-1))$ and $b = z_p^2 - z_\gamma^2/n$ [Natrella, 1963, p. 2-15], rounded to the hundredth (5.7504, 3.9400, 3.2743, 2.8546); it understates the exact factor by 1 % at $n = 10$. This section develops the derivation.

D.8.1 Problem Statement

Let $X \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu, \sigma^2)$ represent the pressure of a single cartridge, where both μ and σ are unknown. From a sample of size n with sample mean $\bar{X}$ and sample standard deviation s, we seek the factor k such that the one-sided tolerance bound $\bar{X} + k \cdot s$ covers at least a proportion p of the population with confidence γ:

$$\begin{aligned} &\mathbb{P}_{\bar{X},\, s}\big(\mathbb{P}_X\big(X \leq \bar{X} + k \cdot s\big) \geq p\big) \\ &\quad = \gamma. \end{aligned} \tag{D.16}$$

D.8.2 Reduction to the Non-Central t

The inner probability condition requires

$$\frac{\bar{X} + k \cdot s - \mu}{\sigma} \geq z_p, \tag{D.17}$$

where $z_p = \Phi^{-1}(p)$ is the standard normal quantile of order p. Rearranging and multiplying both sides by $\sqrt{n}$:

$$k\sqrt{n} \geq \frac{\dfrac{\bar{X} - \mu}{\sigma/\sqrt{n}} + z_p\sqrt{n}}{\dfrac{s}{\sigma}}. \tag{D.18}$$

We identify two classical random variables in the right-hand side:

- $Z = \dfrac{\bar{X} - \mu}{\sigma/\sqrt{n}} \sim \mathcal{N}(0,1)$, since $\bar{X} \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu,\, \sigma^2/n)$.
- $V = \dfrac{(n-1)\, s^2}{\sigma^2} \sim \chi^2_{n-1}$ (Equation D.9).

Writing $s/\sigma = \sqrt{V/(n-1)}$, the right-hand side of (D.18) takes the form

$$\frac{Z + \delta}{\sqrt{V/(n-1)}}, \tag{D.19}$$

where $\delta = z_p\sqrt{n}$ is a fixed constant.

D.8.3 Definition of the Non-Central t-Distribution

If $Z \sim \mathcal{N}(0,1)$ and $V \sim \chi^2_\nu$ are independent, the ratio

$$T' = \frac{Z + \delta}{\sqrt{V/\nu}} \tag{D.20}$$

follows the **non-central t-distribution** with ν degrees of freedom and non-centrality parameter δ, written $T' \sim t'(\nu,\, \delta)$. When $\delta = 0$, this reduces to the ordinary (central) Student's t-distribution of Section D.4. The non-centrality parameter shifts the distribution away from zero: a positive δ shifts the entire distribution to the right.

D.8.4 Solution for the Tolerance Factor

The confidence requirement (D.16) is satisfied when $k\sqrt{n}$ equals the γ-quantile of the non-central t-distribution:

$$k = \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}}\, t'_{\gamma,\, \nu,\, \delta}, \tag{D.21}$$

where $t'_{\gamma,\,\nu,\,\delta}$ denotes the value such that $P(T' \leq t'_{\gamma,\,\nu,\,\delta}) = \gamma$, with $\nu = n - 1$ and $\delta = z_p\sqrt{n}$.

D.8.5 Verification: C.I.P. Parameters

The C.I.P. standard specifies $\gamma = 0.95$ (95% confidence) and $p = 0.99$ (99% population coverage), giving $z_{0.99} \approx 2.3263$. For a sample of $n = 5$ rounds:

- Degrees of freedom: $\nu = 4$.
- Non-centrality parameter: $\delta = 2.32635 \times \sqrt{5} \approx 5.2018$.
- Non-central t quantile: $t'_{0.95,\,4,\,5.2018} = 12.8375$.

Therefore

$$k = \frac{12.8375}{\sqrt{5}} = 5.7411,$$

which the C.I.P. publishes as **5.75**. The remaining factors follow by the same procedure:

Table D.5: C.I.P. tolerance factors via the non-central t-distribution ($\gamma = 0.95$, $p = 0.99$); published values from Bundesrepublik Deutschland [2006, Anlage III, Table 4]

n	$\nu = n - 1$	$\delta = z_{0.99}\sqrt{n}$	$t'_{0.95,\,\nu,\,\delta}$	k (published)
5	4	5.202	12.8375	5.7411 → **5.75**
10	9	7.357	12.5894	3.9811 → **3.98**
20	19	10.404	14.7364	3.2952 → **3.30**
50	49	16.450	20.2406	2.8624 → **2.86**

The published table (German proof ordinance, which applies the C.I.P. criterion $\bar{P}_n + k_{1,n}\, s_n \leq 1.15\, P_{\max}$ to centre-fire ammunition) agrees with the exact factors to within 0.009 for every n from 5 to 100. It is not rounded uniformly upward: 5.741 becomes 5.75 and 5.062 becomes 5.07, but 3.981 becomes 3.98 and 2.862 becomes 2.86. A handloader who uses such a bound for a safety decision may round up; the official values are those of the table. These are the values used in the safety chapter, and they must agree with it.

Natrella's approximation of Section D.7 avoids the non-central t tables by using normal quantiles only. At the C.I.P. parameters ($p = 0.99$, $\gamma = 0.95$) it gives 5.750 at $n = 5$ (+0.2 %), then falls slightly below the exact factor from $n = 6$: −1.0 % at $n = 10$, −0.6 % at $n = 20$, −0.3 % at $n = 50$, never more than 1.1 %. Malfatti's coefficients are these values. A criterion built on it is therefore marginally *more permissive* than the exact one. For safety-critical work such as C.I.P. pressure testing, use the exact factors of Table D.5, which are the prescribed ones.

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