



Gun Grammar

By **John Rains**

Pity the copy editor groping through a story involving firearms. The chances of missing a mistake—or making one—are enormous. The subject of guns probably is the source of more errors in writing than anything except grammar itself.

The subject has a grammar of its own, in the sense of a body of rules and principles, but as with English grammar, the internal logic is sometimes obscure and the exceptions and quirks and arcana can give you a headache. A copy editor who doesn't know the grammar of guns can be as lost as the foreigner wrestling with English—like the one who wrote the sign in the dress shop telling ladies to go upstairs and have a fit.

Errors fall into several categories: factual mistakes, loaded language, mistaken assumptions.

Let me try to help with some tips.

Learn a basic vocabulary. Sorry, there is no shortcut. You need to know enough about what guns are, how they work and how one kind differs from another so that you know what to question and how to find answers. (See the sidebar for definitions of some common firearms terms.)

Get some reference works. A good one is the Non-Fiction Writer's Guide from the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute. It's free and, despite the title, can be useful to the fiction writer as well as the nonfiction writer. This one gives you a good start on that vocabulary I mentioned. Other useful works:

- * *Armed and Dangerous / A Writer's Guide to Weapons* by Michael Newton. It's available from Writer's Digest Books.

- * A copy of the annual *Gun Digest* or the *Shooter's Bible*, in either of which you can find pictures of many modern firearms and information about their features, as well as ballistics data and extensive listings of cartridges.

Use the Internet, where you can find sport-shooting groups, firearms manufacturers, advocacy groups (on both sides of the gun-control debate),

photos and technical data, collectors' clubs, and chat groups. An excellent glossary is here: <http://www.gunnery.net/glossary/index.html>. You have a wealth of information available. But as always, you need to know enough to sift out dubious information. That's how the next tip can be invaluable.

Line up a source. Look for a contact (better yet, two or three) who has a broad knowledge of firearms and is willing to be a sounding board for you. You might start with a local gun club or ask for referrals from a sport-shooting association. Many people are happy to share their expertise, especially if they know you are trying to be accurate and fair. Such sources can tell you whether a particular gun makes sense in a given scenario.

One caution about that last tip: Don't assume expertise on the part of the clerk behind the sporting-goods counter or the average cop. Many police officers have little knowledge of or interest in guns, except for what they need to qualify with their issued weapons.

Common Mistakes

Here are some of the most common mistakes writers make about guns. Again, you will find definitions in the sidebar.

- * Confusing revolvers and semiautomatic pistols.
- * Unclearly or improperly designating calibers and gauges.

Wrong: .12-gauge shotgun.

Right: 12-gauge shotgun.

Wrong: .10 mm pistol.

Right: 10 mm pistol.

Wrong: 410-gauge shotgun.

Right: .410-gauge shotgun (the only gauge written with the period).

Usually acceptable: .38-caliber revolver.

But clearer: .38 Special revolver (distinguishes it from other .38-caliber cartridges).

Usually acceptable: .22-caliber rifle (or pistol).

But clearer: .22-caliber rimfire rifle.

Even more clear: gun chambered for the .22 Long Rifle cartridge (distinguishes it from .22 Magnum and from .22 centerfire cartridges).

- Confusing shotguns with rifles, or assuming that they are synonymous.
- Mislabeling semiautomatic rifles as “assault rifles.”
- Confusing bullets with cartridges.
- Stereotyping gun owners. It is estimated that more than half the households in most parts of America have one or more guns. They can't all be crazies, rednecks or wackos. Most are ordinary people. Only a tiny minority of guns are ever used in crimes.
- Trying to impress readers with gun terms the writers don't understand (“point-blank range”) or with breathless adjectives (“powerful 9 millimeter”). “Point-blank range” is a technical term meaning the range at which a gun will hit a given area on a target without having to adjust the sights or hold over the aiming point. Depending on the gun, the range can be hundreds of yards. And “power” is a relative term, but a 9 mm isn't especially powerful.

Loaded Language

Copy editors should watch for loaded words and phrases, including these:

Arsenal. Many people own a variety of guns for a variety of reasons, including collector value, historical interest and even aesthetic appreciation. Labeling any gun collection an “arsenal” is silly.

Assault weapon. By definition, a weapon is an instrument of assault, so the term is a meaningless redundancy. Knowledgeable readers assume the writer is ignorant or is engaged in propaganda.

Assault rifle. This has a specific meaning, but only limited utility. It distinguishes a full-auto rifle from other classes, such as hunting rifles or target rifles. But many reporters erroneously use the label for any rifle that has a military look. And it is telling that you seldom see the term used when actual “assault rifles” are being used by military troops or police teams.

Cop-killer bullet. There is no such magic bullet. That phrase was originally used in reference to a bullet designed to penetrate a bullet-resistant vest. But that particular bullet was sold only to cops, not to cop killers. The fact is that any bullet made strong enough to hold together will penetrate soft body armor if is driven at a high-enough velocity. That includes many common hunting bullets.

Saturday night special. This is a vague term with racist connotations. It is both unclear and elitist. The closest you can come to defining the term is that it means a cheap and perhaps poorly made handgun. The question is, cheap by whose standards? And is the cost relevant?

Weapon. Of course, almost any gun can be a weapon. But consider the context. In a feature story about a trap shoot, it can seem ludicrous to keep saying “weapon” when the shotgun involved is being used for nothing more lethal than breaking clay disks. If the story involves a crime, then sure, call it a weapon.

Weapon of mass destruction. That sounds ominous, doesn’t it? But when the term is applied to a sawed-off shotgun, it is ludicrous. Writers will sometimes defend this term on the grounds that it is the language used in warrants. But when did we forfeit our right to use clear generic language? A sawed-off shotgun (one with the barrel shortened below the legal limit) is no more a weapon of mass destruction than any other shotgun. It is merely more concealable. In news reporting, all we need say is that the person was charged with having an illegal sawed-off shotgun.

While we’re watching our language, why don’t we discard some of the journalese? Start with these: gunned down (better: shot); bullet-riddled; hail of gunfire/lead; lone gunman; shotgunned; opened fire (better: began shooting); trigger man; shooting spree (too lightweight for a murderous rampage); targeted.

Misconceptions

Watch out for misconceptions that seem to have a half-life of forever. Such as:

“Plastic guns” are terrorists’ favorites because they foil security screening. This has never been true. Guns with plastic frames contain more than enough metal to be easily detected by screeners.

Handguns are inaccurate beyond a few feet and have no useful purpose. Nonsense. Some handguns are accurate beyond a hundred yards, and they are used for target shooting and hunting.

Guns are designed only to kill people. More nonsense. True, most firearms can be lethal. But many are designed for target shooting and other nonlethal sports. By the way, even the military’s infantry rifles are not designed solely to kill—they can certainly kill, but their primary purpose is to cause casualties, not necessarily fatalities, among an enemy. A wounded soldier can be a bigger liability to a fighting force than a dead one. Under international rules of war, the military uses jacketed bullets that are less efficient at killing than are hunting bullets, which are designed to expand.

A bullet fired in an airplane will cause it to depressurize and crash. No, it won’t. Despite those silly scenes in the movie “Goldfinger,” a bullet hole or several in the skin of a jet aircraft won’t do much of anything except let some air out.

Firearms are less regulated than common household products. This one infuriates many readers who know how false it is. The manufacture, sale and use of firearms are heavily regulated under federal, state and local laws.

Guns are mysterious objects that somehow only the cops and the crooks can use competently. No, no, no. The subject of firearms is vast. But a gun itself is a fairly simple mechanism. Anyone with ordinary physical ability and some common sense can learn to use a gun safely.

Two Last Tips

If you write or edit stories involving guns, it would be well worth your time to take a short course from a firearms instructor or get a knowledgeable friend to take you to a shooting range. Grab the chance to see firsthand what it is like to handle and shoot different kinds of guns. This won't make you an expert, but it will make you a much more confident writer or editor.

The last piece of advice: Assume nothing; question everything. If the story says the character thumbed the safety off his Glock, ask: Do Glocks have an external safety latch? No. (A best-selling novelist made this error in a recent book.)

If the police report says the shooter used a .380-caliber pistol, don't assume this is a typo because you never heard of a .380. It isn't as well known as the .38 Special, but it exists.

Question everything, and help keep writers from shooting themselves in the feet.

Common firearms terms

Action The working parts of a gun, the parts that make it fire.

Ammunition Cartridges or shells used in pistols, rifles, shotguns and other guns. Shooters often shorten the word to "ammo." A cartridge or shell is often called a "round."

Assault rifle Be wary of this term. It is loaded language as well as a redundancy. To the military, an assault rifle is a rifle capable of automatic fire—that is, capable of firing more than one shot with a single pull of the trigger. And a military assault rifle fires a medium-power round. The term should not be applied to a semiautomatic gun—no matter how much it may look like a military arm.

Automatic, semiautomatic A semiautomatic gun is one that ejects a fired

case and automatically loads a fresh cartridge each time the trigger is pulled. Semiautos are sometimes called “autoloaders” or “self-loaders.” An automatic will continue to fire as long as the trigger is held back, until it is empty. Automatics are used primarily by military forces. Civilians can own and use them, but the owners must register the guns and pay a federal tax on them.

Birdshot Small shotshell pellets used for hunting small game of all kinds, birds included You may also hear it called “small shot” or “fine shot.”

Buckshot Large shotshell pellets used for shooting big game (and people).

Bullet, cartridge Don't use bullet when you mean cartridge. The bullet is the projectile that comes out of the gun barrel. It is only one component of a cartridge, which consists of bullet, powder, shell and primer. There are two basic kinds of cartridges: rimfire and centerfire. In a rimfire cartridge, the priming compound is distributed around the rim at the base of the case or shell. The gun's firing pin strikes the rim and crushes the priming compound, causing it to explode and ignite the powder. In a centerfire cartridge, the primer compound is in a small cup inserted in the base.

Butt The back of the stock on a rifle or shotgun; the part of the stock that fits against the shoulder. The term is also used for the bottom part of the grip on a handgun.

Caliber General sense: Nominal diameter of the inside of a gun barrel or of the bullet. Specific sense: The name of the cartridge. For example, there are many different cartridges that use .22-caliber bullets, several that take .38-caliber bullets, many that take .30-caliber bullets. If you want the reader to know exactly which cartridge, use the specific term: .30-06 instead of .30 caliber, .22 Long Rifle instead of .22, 7 mm Remington Magnum instead of 7 mm.

Calibers that are listed in fractions of an inch take a period in front of the number (but not in front of the second number if there is a second number). .30-30, not .30-.30

Calibers listed in millimeters do not take a period in front. Wrong .9 mm
Right: 9 mm Right: 7.62 x 39 mm

Carbine A short rifle. Often a rifle model is made in several versions, including short-barreled carbines.

Chamber The part of a firearm in which the cartridge is enclosed for firing. In revolvers, the chambers are holes drilled in the cylinder, which rotates to align a cartridge with the barrel. Most other guns are designed with the chamber as an integral part of the barrel.

Handgun Any short firearm designed or modified to be fired with one hand (although a two-handed hold is best for accuracy). There are three basic kinds of handguns: revolver, single-shot, and semiautomatic. (There also are some oddities such as double- and four-barrel pistols). The AP Stylebook and some dictionaries use “pistol” for any handgun. Purists distinguish between revolvers, which have chambers separate from the barrel, and pistols, in which the chamber is part of the barrel. Watch out that you don’t confuse revolvers and semiautomatics.

Magazine The container that holds ammunition in a firearm. In some guns, the magazine is built in; in others, it is detachable. Detachable magazines are often erroneously called “clips.”

Machine gun, submachine gun These are fully automatic guns. Machine guns use rifle ammunition, generally in .30 or .50 caliber. Submachine guns use pistol ammunition, generally in 9 millimeter or .45.

Muzzle The opening at the end of the gun barrel where the shot or bullet exits.

Muzzleloader A rifle or shotgun from the black-powder era, or a modern version of such a gun. Muzzleloaders do not fire self-contained cartridges. Instead, the powder is poured down the barrel and tamped down, and a bullet is squeezed down the barrel and seated atop the powder. The powder is ignited by a hammer striking a percussion cap or by sparks from a piece of flint.

Pistol grip This term usually refers to a portion of a rifle or shotgun stock that is curved, rather like the grip of a pistol, to fit the shooting hand. Some guns, especially submachine guns, have a pistol grip in front of the action, to be gripped by the support hand

Rifles, shotguns Rifles and shotguns are designed to be fired from the shoulder. Under federal law, rifles must have barrels at least 16 inches long and shotguns must have barrels at least 18 inches long. To possess guns with shorter barrels, the owner must register them and pay a federal tax on them.

Like handguns, rifles have spiral grooves cut into their bores. The grooves, called rifling, make the bullet spin to give it stability in flight.

Rifles are designed for precise placement of bullets at much longer ranges than shotguns can reach.

Shotguns usually have smooth bores, and are designed primarily to throw lead or steel pellets, which are called shot. The pellets spread in a conical pattern, and lose velocity quickly. The shotgun is designed to hit moving targets, especially aerial targets, commonly at ranges of 20 to 40 yards, to a maximum of about 70 yards. The smaller sizes of shot are for use on game such as birds,

rabbits and squirrels. Larger shot, called buckshot, are for game such as bear and deer.

Although the shotgun was developed to shoot multiple pellets, it can shoot a shell containing a single projectile, called a slug. Slugs are effective beyond a hundred yards. Some shotguns now are equipped with rifled barrels especially for shooting slugs.

Shotguns are classed by gauge, not caliber. Gauge is a measurement based on a fraction of a pound of lead. A 12-gauge shotgun has a bore diameter equal to the diameter of a lead ball weighing one-twelfth of a pound. It is larger than a 20 gauge, confusing as that sounds, since the bore of a 20 gauges is equal to the diameter of a lead ball weighing one-twentieth of a pound.

One exception: The .410-gauge shotgun. While it is written as a gauge, the bore dimension is actually a caliber.

Sights Devices for aiding the eye in aiming a firearm. Not “sites.”

Stock The “handle” of a rifle or shotgun (and sometimes of single-shot handguns). It consists of buttstock and the fore-end or forearm (the part under the barrel).

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