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GET THE MOST OUT OF DEFENSIVE TRAINING

# MAXIMIZE IT



**D**eciding to seek firearms training comes with many considerations, including the quality of the training, your personal goals, the skills and style of the instructor, the focus of a particular class, the cost and location, and more. Assuming you have chosen a safe and reliable instructor or training institute, there are a few steps you can take to ensure you're a good student of defensive training and to reap maximum benefit from the experience.

### BEFORE THE CLASS

Obviously, making sure you pick an instructor who is a good match for your goals and expectations is key. You'll also want to be sure you're happy with the instructor's qualifications.

Once you have found an instructor or academy that is a good fit, the first step is to make an honest assessment of your current skill sets. How are your fundamentals of shooting: your grip, stance, sight alignment and trigger press? A good measure of this is whether you place rounds where you want at the distances at which you normally practice, and this can be untimed and not under pressure. If your rounds aren't going where you want them to, regardless of your previous experience, you likely need to take a class that focuses on basic shooting skills. If you're hitting where you aim, then it's time to assess your fundamental mechanics: loading, reloading, malfunction clearances and drawing to target.

If you haven't automated these processes to the point where they are second nature, make sure you are taking classes focused on those kinds of mechanical fundamentals. If those fundamentals are rock-solid, then focus on tactics: target engagement while under stress, tactical movement, post-engagement scanning and the rest of the skills that will help keep you alive in a violent confrontation.

The goal of this kind of self-assessment is to determine what you honestly need to work on before moving forward. Once you have an honest appraisal of your current skills, it is much easier to find the right class to meet your needs. It is also worth noting that you may need to take prerequisite classes just to get to the level at which you need to train. If this is the case, take them humbly, with a focus on further refining your current skills. Knowing where you are can also help you set realistic short-term goals (as in for the next class) and long-term goals for improvement.

### BASICS FIRST

*Nothing beats making sure you have your basics covered. Never let yourself miss out on training time because you forgot the most fundamental of items, so triple-check that range bag.*

Before showing up to a class, make sure your gear — gun, magazines, ammo, holster, flashlight and the rest — matches the class you're taking. Check your gear, and then check it again. Depending on the class, consider bringing extra ammo, extra magazines, extra optics and flashlight batteries, backup eye and ear protection — the works. Don't miss out on a great class experience because you forgot something or because some of your gear is damaged.

### DURING THE CLASS

Show up early, find the restrooms beforehand and otherwise get your bearings. Meet the other students before the class and during breaks. What's the point of the gun community without building connections with other gun owners?

It is also important to understand that a class with limited time and for which everyone has spent their hard-earned money is not the place to try out new gear. Similarly, if your main purpose is increasing your defensive skill set, don't bring your "competition gun" because you shoot it better. This defeats the purpose; bring the gun and equipment that best matches what you would use outside of the class while still remaining within the limits of needed gear for the class. This becomes especially important when it comes to holsters and magazine carriers, as many classes mandate

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outside-the-waistband holsters and belt-mounted mag carriers.

Every instructor will have a "style," and being aware of that style can be very important. Pay attention to the instructor's body language during the class — especially when he or she is asked questions. You may decide this instructor's style is not a good match for you, but bringing this up during class is disruptive and rarely the time — the exception being issues of safety that may need to be addressed promptly.

I encourage all of my students to ask any questions they have, but I also expect them to respect the time constraints of any course I am teaching. Generally, a good rule of thumb before posing a question in a class is to ask yourself whether it is a legitimate one that may help other students. Is it a short example that may further support what the instructor is teaching? Is this more about disagreeing with the main points being discussed, or maybe even grandstanding your own knowledge? If it is a legitimate question, ask away. But if it is more about disagreeing with the main points being discussed or grandstanding, hold that thought until after the class or during a break. Your goal is to learn what you can without overstepping your role as a student.

Many instructors have taken courses as students and wound up with instructors who had less experience and skill than they did. Don't be quick to judge. Instead, focus on what you can learn. Listen to the material. Take notes. Integrate it into your own understanding and frame of reference. If you are not currently shooting, you should be observing, watching others conducting drills and listening to the instructor's advice. It is a great way to get a bigger picture of what's being taught. I have never taken a class from which I didn't learn something valuable, even if it was just watching the instructor's unique teaching method.

You should also look to assist the class in any way you can to help it run smoothly. If the instructor is moving targets and you don't have anything you should be doing,

offer to help. The more time saved, the more time there is for instruction (and for you to maximize your training dollar).

### AFTER THE CLASS

Once the course is completed, thank your instructor. Offer to help with cleanup or, at a minimum, make sure you leave with all of your belongings and any trash you generated.

Though I adore someone willing to take multiple training classes and continue to advance through the levels of instruction, I also cringe when I realize that the last time he or she shot was during the last class. Your goal after any class should be to practice the key skills and concepts you learned. This practice should be driven by your personal goals and should be evaluated with the same honest assessment in which you engaged prior to the class. For example, if your last class focused on mechanics, then practice those mechanics dry and during range sessions until they become automatic. Most sequences of instruction will introduce new skills and techniques in each class that build on previous skills.

Because of time constraints, a single class will rarely provide enough repetitions to build muscle memory. A multi-day training course is designed to be extremely repetitive so as to increase the building of that muscle memory, but if it's a shorter class, be aware that you will need to take it upon yourself to work through those skills on your own afterward.

It is up to you to practice those skills and drills to obtain and then maintain proficiency. Review your notes and reach out for further clarification if you need it. After practicing what you've learned, ask yourself what needs further refinement. Set a level of proficiency that you intend to maintain and decide what next level you intend to obtain before attending the next class.

And never forget that it is completely acceptable to take the same class more than once to help cement in the core skills learned. Look for classes

that address your deficiencies, not necessarily the next class in a progression. Ask yourself if you should go back or seek training elsewhere. A quality instructor is key, but so is recognizing that there are sometimes facility limitations — specifically in the context of an indoor versus an outdoor range.

### PERFECT YOUR APPROACH

A good student's proper mindset is a positive mental attitude (PMA). A good student is focused on learning and maximizing the personal benefits of the training. The goal of attending a class should not be to show what you know but rather to be open to the instruction and to learn. These goals may shift, but even when I take a relatively basic class, I ask myself what I can learn and what I can work on. You're likely learning new material, and you're not going to be good at it right away. Keep that in mind. Even if you are taking a class as a prerequisite, that PMA is still important because you can learn plenty from hearing familiar material explained in new ways.

Sometimes an instructor teaches a technique that I know doesn't work well for me, but I am open to trying it, being mindful of how he or she is teaching it, and thinking about the rationale given and for whom the technique might work. I may not incorporate the technique into my own training, but I recognize its value for some and the methods being used to teach it. A mindset focused on honest evaluation and tailoring goals goes a long way in maximizing your experience before, during and after the class. And a good mindset will enhance your fellow students' experiences as well and permit you to become a student the instructor hopes to see again.

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