

What Beginners Do Wrong

...and how to do it right

There is a sense in which archery is simply a matter of finding your own style; something is "right" only insofar as it works for you. However, no style will be right unless it is reproducible consistently, so that you shoot each arrow in exactly the same way. Some things will always cause inconsistency and the beauty of most of these is that they are easy to correct.

In that spirit, here are some of the problems that I encountered in that awkward year between first getting to grips with a bow and being able to put in 500+ Portsmouths. Although there is no substitute for direct tuition from an experienced coach, I hope that this page will be of some use.

(Throughout the text, a right-handed archer is assumed. Ever-suffering sinistrals will doubtless be practised at swapping right for left. Also, the guidance is aimed at recurve target archers.)

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Your stance is poor

Having watched OUCofA's 1997 crop of novices, I feel compelled to put this piece of advice right at the top of the page. Almost every one of them took constant attention to make sure that their stance was correct, with terrible results when it wasn't.

You should stand side-on to the target, with your feet about shoulder-width apart pointing along the shooting line. (Actually, most archers find it more comfortable to have their toes slightly further from the line than their heels.) You should not point your feet or your knees towards the target.

Once you have the feet sorted out, you must pay attention to your upper body. The only parts of your body that should move when you shoot are your arms and your head. You should not rotate your torso towards the target, nor tilt your neck at all. I'm told that a good way (used by the Koreans, so it must work) to make sure you don't move to meet the string is to put 80% of your weight on your back foot.

Until a good stance becomes a habit, you might like to try this routine:

1. Stand on the shooting line as described above.
2. Facing directly along the shooting line, stand up straight with your head level, as if you were about to have your height measured.
3. Keeping your neck still, turn your head until you are looking down the range to the target.
4. Moving only your left arm, lift up your bow and hold it out towards the target.
5. Moving only your right arm, *not twisting your torso at all*, reach up and grip the string as usual.
6. Again moving only your right arm, draw the string back to your face. Do not bring your head down to meet the string.

Better would be to study (good) experienced archers and try to copy their stance. Unfortunately it's difficult to know what you look like when you draw, although practising in front of a mirror can help. Best of all is to get an experienced archer to examine your stance and offer advice.

The string hits your arm

It may seem obvious, but I recently watched someone shoot half an Albion, wondering why all his arrows fell short, until it finally dawned on him that the string was catching on his shoulder. (If you habitually shoot in a heavy jumper, now might be the time to move to t-shirts.)

If the string connects with the shoulder of a bulky garment, or the flapping sleeve of a t-shirt (always a problem when shooting outdoors), it will be slowed down by a random amount. The arrow will similarly be slowed down, and it will be impossible to get a consistent vertical group - often it will be impossible even to hit the target.

The solution? Wear a light top, preferably not too loose-fitting. A chest guard (roughly a tenner from your friendly archery suppliers) will also help hold your clothes in check. Rolling up an awkward t-shirt sleeve can be useful.

A related (but infinitely more painful) problem can occur if you have a nobbly elbow that sticks out into the path of the string. Many are the hideous bruises I have taken home from a shooting session. But this need never happen! This problem is caused by locking the left arm, in the belief that this will (a) hold the bow steadier or (b) get a longer draw. Actually, (b) is true enough, but any benefit is thoroughly outweighed by the disadvantage of the string hitting the elbow.

The solution? Relax the left arm a bit and rotate the elbow slightly clockwise, so it sticks out to the left a bit. You'll probably find that it's harder to stay at full draw in this position, but your muscles will soon adapt to the increased strain. If you're using a clicker, there's a good chance you won't be able to draw far enough any more - just shoot without it for a while.

There's more advice on this matter in the [additional comments](#) at the bottom of the page.

You grip the bow too tightly

When you are at full draw, the tension in the string will force the bow to align itself in a certain direction. When you release, this tension vanishes and the bow aligns itself in whatever direction the position of your hand suggests. If these two directions aren't exactly the same, the bow will rotate slightly and give the arrow a kick to the side. You can tell when you're doing this, because the arrow will wiggle from side to side ("fishtail") while it's in flight, and your horizontal grouping will be poor. You should also notice that when you draw, the bow twists in your hand from its original position.

The solution? The only real solution is to invest in a sling, so you don't have to grip the bow at all (you can leave your fingers open, and the sling stops the bow jumping out of your hand when you release). If you can, try out friends' slings first, because there are several different types and some people feel more comfortable with different ones. See also [the home-made finger sling](#).

Failing that, simply try to relax your grip a bit. You don't need to clench the handle tightly - thumb and forefinger should be enough, with your other three fingers held lightly out the way. For a while I even shot (reasonably successfully) with my thumb and forefinger merely making a loop around the handle, a bit like a sling - not really holding it at all. But you need long fingers for that.

Words of wisdom from John Tansley here:

Another mistake that people often make within the OUC of A is to be so intent on *not* gripping the bow that they hold the fingers of the bow hand utterly rigid which is just as bad and will cause exactly the same problem, not to mention wear you out.

You don't always anchor in the same place

It is vital that you draw the string back to exactly the same place every time, or you'll never get a consistent grouping. The easiest way to do this is to let your fingers rest against the underside of your chin, with the string touching the exact centre of the front of your chin.

Drawing to some indeterminate part of the air in front of your face will mean that your draw length varies from shot to shot, and the vertical grouping will be poor. Drawing to some randomly chosen part of your jawline will, unless you can feel that your fingers are in exactly the same place each time, lead to a nice horizontal line across the target.

Always anchor with your fingers just underneath the centre of your chin. (So important it needed to be repeated in a paragraph of its own.)

A related problem I had was corrected by all-round top bloke Adam Abbott, with an immediate improvement in my shooting. If you're using your chin to anchor, you obviously need to make sure your chin is in the same place every time. An easy way to get your head at a consistent angle is to let the string rest against the tip of your nose while you're at full draw.

This whole hand-chin-string-nose system should only come together at one particular angle, and it's easy to feel when you've got it right. It also seems to be one of the things our inexperienced archers are worst at remembering, so it could be the easy way to improve your shooting.

See the [additional comments](#) at the bottom of the page for more advice on this, and an alternative view to the centre-of-chin anchor.

You don't check the string picture

I did pistol shooting once. In that discipline, you find that pointing the pistol straight at the target is of minor importance; instead, it's vital that you line up the sights at the back and the front of the gun so that it's at the right angle. A small error in angle produces a much bigger discrepancy 20m away than a small error in left-right alignment.

Although the effect is less pronounced in archery (provided you have a consistent [anchor](#)), it is still the last thing that many beginners need to get right. When you're at full draw, you should see the string (albeit rather out of focus) at the same place each time. This is usually roughly in line with the centre of the riser, slightly to the right of the sight - but it's more important that it be in the same place each time than in exactly *that* place.

If you get a consistent string picture, the bow will be at a consistent horizontal angle, and your horizontal grouping should improve.

You don't meditate enough

According to John:

A good shot comes from within. Those oriental Buddhist coves have got it about right. If you are in the correct frame of mind you will be able to produce the same shot every time. We in the west are often too concerned with rushing into shooting and often do not lay down good foundations. If you are doing the same thing every time it should be unnecessary to perform all the little rituals mentioned on this page: you should be able to *feel* the shot, and know it is good. Eventually of course you should be able to shoot eyes closed.

Many stamina problems are caused by this inconsistency of draw/style. How many times have you seen someone come up, hold at full draw and then come down several times for every shot, and then the eventual shot be not that good? This kind of thing is brought about by any one of several little rituals being out of place, it generally results in a 100 or 120 draw portsmouth or a 200 draw albion. What would you rather do, put in the time when you learn, to get these things right or habitually shoot twice as many times as everyone else per event?

There are no short cuts.

I received an e-mail from ex-OUCofA member Steve Ellison about this hints page. He added so much stuff that I've decided just to reproduce it here rather than trying to paraphrase it:

Spot on with the importance of consistent anchoring. But the textbook centre of chin anchor is actually far from universal in top archers, and hasn't been part of standard coach training since before I first trained as a coach in about 1980. Darrel Pace's long-standing 1341 FITA record (only recently gone) was shot with a full side of face anchor. And of course, barebow field archers practically never use under-chin anchors at all (and they're a lot better than you'd expect!).

Obviously you need a good, consistent face reference point, but current thinking is not to worry about where that is. It's at least as important to have a relaxed string hand and drawing arm aligned with the arrow, and the latter tends to take most people towards a side anchor, at least for a while. The same can be said of nose/chin referencing, particularly combined with a centre of chin reference. Like most things, it's dead useful if you can do it comfortably, but counterproductive if you can't. Most beginners shooting short bows can't do it easily. You will, though, see that good side anchor shooters almost invariably use nose contact, and nearly all top archers use a lot of face contact, including centre of chin by various means.

On the bow arm contact problem, bending the arm significantly is a good short term fix, but untenable as the bow weight goes up. I prefer to rotate the bow arm, usually clockwise for a right-handed archer without an inverted elbow. You end up with your bow hand rotated 45 degrees or so from a 'thumb vertical' position, making it easier to rotate the elbow out of the string path. A prerequisite is usually a good bow shoulder position - a shoulder rolled forward or carefully inserted in the left ear generally leads to some string contact. Shoulder set slightly down and back is the usual aim. Check it by leaning against a wall or drawing a bow. If the shoulder pushes up to your ear, it's mis-set. If it is genuinely solid (doesn't need holding in place) or tends to push back and down a little, you should be well set up. For a personal view; I suspect the problem often isn't in the bow arm at all, but in truly awful beginner's looses that send the string hard left. Strings never go straight, but the inward swing is less dramatic with a clean loose.

It may be better to give advice in terms of what you're trying to achieve, rather than what to do. For the 'anchor point' - you want a single, reproducible reference point that you can easily find and can verify by feel and/or eye. That may mean a centre of chin reference (easy to find and feel but awkward for some arms and shoulders) or a combined side of face anchor with nose contact and a visual string picture check. Or any combination. Just make it consistent and easy to find and check.

For bow arm setup, you want a stable bow arm set-up that doesn't interfere with the string. That usually means bow shoulder either just extended straight or held gently down and back (never up and forward), bow hand position rotated about 45 degrees clockwise from the 'thumb vertical' position (for right-handers) and hand not wrapped all the way round the bow (you can't get all four fingers tightly round a typical bow grip with this hand position). Arm should be fully extended but not usually forced to 'lock' (unnecessary hard work). You should be able to see plenty of clear space between the arrow line and your arm if you glance down from a pre-draw position. If

you can't, try rotating the arm until you can. This bit is best practised with a light bow or leaning against a wall - most people are too strained with their normal bow weight at full draw. Finally, get your bow arm set up before you draw and don't move shoulders and elbows unnecessarily during the draw.

Other classic early problems are excessive bow arm movement (before or after the shot), poor release and follow-through, and a bunch of contributory features like not standing up straight (unexpectedly a major cause of all sorts of stuff). Standard advice for dropped bow arms is to set up early, and to maintain aim throughout the shot - the sight should be on the target and stable, but not held rigidly when you release, and you should be watching the arrows into the centre. Shooting 'on the move' is verboten - spend time practicing coming up to a stable aim position without shooting the arrow, then extend that into a good rhythm like 'up... back... aim... off!' taking about 3-7 secs in the aiming period. You can go longer or shorter, but resist going shorter if trying to overcome 'snap shooting'.

Poor releases are harder to deal with, as it's a symptom, not a cause. 'Creeping' - the arrow creeping forwards during aiming - is a related problem. Generally, the solution is to make sure that the bow arm is fully extended forwards and held there, that the draw is fully extended and the load is transferred onto the back and shoulder muscles, leaving a relaxed wrist and hand, and to adopt a 'stretch the arms and straighten the fingers' approach to loosing. The result should be a natural backwards movement of the string arm after the shot, but that must happen naturally as a consequence of the draw, not deliberately in isolation. Al Henderson's description is that the final movement needed to get through the clicker (if used) or (paraphrasing) the final stretch, is that the drawing elbow should move towards a person standing directly behind you (as in back to back, rather than directly away from the target). I don't subscribe entirely to that method, but it sure worked for the US squads Henderson coached.

Just so that nobody thinks of suing me, I make no claims that following the instructions in this document *will* improve your scores, only that they should (unless you're doing it all correctly already).