The NEW Four Rules of Firearm Safety
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The four firearms safety rules as laid out by Jeff Cooper are a safety standard that have helped numerous students, instructors and the firearms industry for decades. There is no doubt the concise and well-thought out rules have been incredibly helpful in making people safe with their firearms. The contribution by Jeff Cooper to this subject cannot be minimized. I personally, have benefited greatly by learning Cooper’s rules. But like many concepts, things change and evolve over time.

In the following article, I will present a different perspective on Cooper’s Rules. Words are important and the words we chose mean things, so in the following paper I will examine the words used and present an updated perspective of the rules that better apply to a tactical environment.

My intent is that this article is an homage of Cooper and his achievement. It is simply to ask questions and challenge instructors to train better, smarter, safer and more efficiently. We need to continually out think the bad guys and make ourselves better and safer.

Posing this question of a “new” set of rules is controversial because instantly the critics will incorrectly hear that someone is advocating unsafe gun handling and are too lazy to adhere to the tried and true method of “safe gun handling” as defined by Cooper. But this is not the case. I challenge those critics to open their minds and look at the concept exactly as I am explaining it, not as they perceive it. My proposal should be read in context of the entirety of the concept, not seen as simply a contrarian rejection of Cooper. I am certainly not advocating sloppy gun handling or laziness or any sort of mindset that says “I’m too good for Cooper’s rules, I’m better than that.” Anyone who thinks that they “have arrived” or that “a negligent discharge will never happen to me” is ignorant and prideful. Safety is a mindset that comes from an attitude of humility that needs to be intentionally cultivated every day of our lives.

In training, I learned early on that it was important to clarify if you are training for techniques or tactics (Howe, Pagni, Pannone). For communication purposes of this paper, techniques could be defined as a specific motor skill or a concept like marksmanship. Tactics could be defined as the process of strategic thinking and using those techniques in combat against an opponent. I believe Cooper’s Rules primarily have a “technique-focus” but are lacking in the “tactics-focus” area. Let’s start at the beginning.
History of Cooper's Rules

Jeff Cooper has stated that the basis for the rules started to come together in the late 50s and early 60s. They were most likely compiled from ideas in the Marine Corps and the Southwest Pistol League (Schaefer). There was originally one rule:

1. All guns are loaded.

Although this rule should have been enough, Jeff Cooper was a student of human nature and other rules were added to help insure better safety. Jack O’Connor’s book, Complete Book of Shooting (1965) contains a section by Cooper listing the original three standard rules as:

1. Guns are always loaded.
2. Muzzle in a safe direction.
3. Be sure of your target.

By 1986, Cooper still taught these three rules but talked about a “fourth rule” to be added (Schaefer). Different instructors have modified the rules over the years and taught the concepts slightly different. However, the framework and relation to Cooper cannot be ignored. For communication purposes of this article, the four rules that we will be using for reference is the version written in 2003, in Jeff Coopers’ Commentaries. Where he states the rules as:

The Standard Rules of Safe Gun Handling

1. All guns are always loaded. Even if they are not, treat them as if they are.
2. Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy.
3. Keep your finger off the trigger till your sights are on target.
4. Identify your target, and what is behind it. Never shoot at anything that you have not positively identified (Cooper).

The wisdom and brevity of the four rules make them memorable and easy to learn. One has to violate at least two of the rules in order for someone to become injured. The rules have a built-in redundancy, something that is always helpful when it comes to safety. There are few other such wise and concise statements that have added as much benefit to the shooting community as Cooper’s rules.

I have been fortunate enough to participate in a good deal of firearms and combatives training over the years, and especially these last few years where the market has had no shortage of firearms instructors. I have been fortunate to learn from many high quality and Tier 1 instructors. During my years of continual training, I began to pick up little, subtle differences that each said or hinted at during their classes. Over time, I heard many consistencies and began to compile each instructor’s version of the rules and compare it with others. Each one of these instructors had clearly thought out their exact wording in detail. But I found it interesting why each instructor decided to highlight a somewhat different focus or use slightly different words. I frequently noticed that Cooper’s rules were stated primarily for an “administrative
setting” yet another set of rules were sometimes used for practical training purposes on the range. One thing is for sure, every instructor who mentioned the rules always respected Cooper’s contribution, however many of them would provide their own commentary or opinion on the rules.

These other well-respected instructors were not saying the Cooper’s rules were wrong, but that the rules may be missing a few things. This article is my attempt to compile those thoughts into one system. I have chosen what I believe to be the best presentation of the rules. I will highlight which versions I have selected and the reasons why below. Let’s look at each rule one at a time.

Rule #1: All guns are always loaded. Even if they are not, treat them as if they are.

Pat McNamara has an interesting view on Rule #1. We understand the intent of rule #1 as stated, however, the concept appears to need further cultivation. We understand that we need to treat them like they are loaded and not get careless and complacent by thinking “this gun is unloaded so it doesn’t matter what I do it” and similar thoughts. In reality, not all guns are always loaded since sometimes we do have to disassemble them, clean them etc. McNamara’s focus on the idea is more accurate and worth our time to discuss. McNamara states the rule a bit differently by saying, ‘you need to understand the status of your weapon system.’ He goes one to say ‘Because, in a gunfight, the weapon does not belong to you alone. It belongs to the person you are saving or the guy who’s six you are covering.’ (McNamara). I will restate the concept beginning with “Always” (for reasons I’ll explain later) so it reads, **Always know the status of your weapon.** This is also consistent with Dustin Salomon’s opinion of the rule when he states, “There is nothing fundamentally unsafe about an unloaded firearm. The danger lies in uncertainty about a weapon’s condition at any given time and in failing to build associative habits that eliminate or at least greatly reduce the possibility of tragic accidents” (Salomon).

This focus on the same idea seems to be a bit more specific, yet offering the same level of safety. If you know the status of your weapon then you will know how to treat the gun if it is loaded and if it is unloaded. This doesn’t mean that one should carelessly handle guns in an unsafe way just because it is unloaded. It is simply saying, know how to safely and properly handle your gun whether it is loaded or unloaded, and be aware enough to know when that status changes. After all, having your gun go “click” when you expect it to go “bang” is just as dangerous as having your gun go “bang” when you expect it to go “click” because it demonstrates that you are not aware and not paying attention to the tool that is under your control. I believe Cooper’s rule may be lacking in a tactical setting since, not knowing the true condition of your weapon, may actually be creating a bad habit and a wrong mindset about the firearm if you are not going to pay attention to its actual status. I believe the intent of Cooper and McNamara are the same. McNamara’s version is just stated more accurately and contains a tactical mindset.

McNamara’s statement of the rule is more directed toward someone who is training with this gun in order to learn how to potentially save their life during a violent encounter. In a more practical, confrontational type setting, this version of the rule will serve us well. It will allow us
to train safely, with the proper combat mindset and still not violate the rule if we have to use the gun for self-defense. So I would advocate for McNamara’s version of rule #1 to be the standard. *Always know the status of your weapon* (Pat McNamara).

**Rule #2: Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy.**

Again, we understand the intent behind the rule but the words could be modified a bit to more accurately express its intent. I have heard various versions of the idea but for me the best way I found to state the rule’s intent is, **Always keep the gun pointed in the safest direction possible.** In using the new version, the responsibility is still on me as the gun handler to not point it at anything that I shouldn’t. However, what if I find myself in a situation where I DO have to point the gun at something that I am not willing to destroy? For instance, what if I am sitting in my office and I draw my gun to take it out and clean in? I may have to point the muzzle at the floor or the wall in order to unload it, then I may have to point it at the wall or my desk to disassemble it. I do not want to destroy my desk, the wall or the floor. I am making a conscious choice in that moment to point the gun at the corner of the wall because in that moment that is the “safest direction possible.”

Dustin Salomon has insightful thoughts on rule #2. He states, “Off the range, particularly in an urban environment, it is almost impossible to use a firearm (even if it is not fired) without at some point violating this rule. Where, for example, inside a multilevel apartment building, could a muzzle be pointed that does not violate this principle?” (Salomon).

For instance, if I am in a grappling situation with an attacker on top of me, in a dominant position intending to kill me and the only way to use my firearm in self-defense is to draw and point it at my own leg before pointing it at my attacker, then I have a choice to make. Violate the rule and save my life or don’t violate the rule and die? In this instance, making a conscious choice to safely muzzle my leg in a controlled manner with my finger in a registered position may be the “safest direction possible” for me in the moment. This is different than careless gun handling where one isn’t aware of where the gun is pointing. Cooper’s rule doesn’t allow one to do this, in this very specific circumstance. So, if there is an “exception” to the rule, then why not just state it that way from the beginning? I believe Cooper’s rule is inadequate for a tactical environment, since in a situation like this, the rule limits my options. My version of the rule keeps Cooper’s original intent, it is just stated more accurately and allows the combat mindset focus. So, why not use the version of the rule that encompasses both concepts?

I have seen this in training where for teaching purposes, a student was instructed to point a safe, inert training gun (verified to be unloaded with the barrel and chamber removed, physically unable to fire a live round) at a live role player and he refused to do so because he didn’t want to violate Cooper’s rule. In following Cooper’s rule, he was actually developing a bad habit and it created a negative training experience for him.

The same concept is true if I have to point the gun at a threat for self-defense purposes, and in that moment, the safest thing for me to is to point the gun at the human threat and take legal,
justifiable action. Because stopping the threat is the safest thing for me to do, in that moment. In a more practical, confrontational type setting, this version of the rule will serve us well. It will allow us to train safely, with the proper combat mindset and still not violate the rule if we have to use the gun for self-defense. So I would advocate for this version of rule #2 to be the standard. **Always keep the gun pointed in the safest direction possible.**

**Rule #3:** Keep your finger off the trigger till your sights are on target.

Craig Douglas has a very thoughtful perspective on Rule #3. When you are taking Craig’s courses he teaches the rule as, Keep your finger on the slide until you’ve made a conscious decision to fire (Douglas). Again, I will add “Always” to the rule to state: **Always keep your finger on the slide until you’ve made the conscious decision to fire.** For a register position, Craig recommends to curl the tip of the finger so it is on the ejection port of a semi-auto. This provides a tactile reference point so the finger has a very specific place to land. I agree with his thoughts on this but since the length of my fingers and my dexterity do not allow me to do this without breaking my grip, I use the crease between the bottom of the slide and the top of the frame for the same tactile reference point. This is also called a “high register” position and is a combination of Douglas’s technique and the high register position that was originally taught to me at Executive Security International’s Executive Protection Handgun Course (Pagni).

The only variable left is referring to a revolver and how to state the rule to include the wheel gun. Maybe the rule could state “slide/frame” to communicate the same intent but this creates other potential problem, it gives two places. I am not decided on this point yet. I am still on a journey. But for now, I have will use “slide” since the overwhelming majority of my students use semi-automatic handguns. And if a revolver shows up in my class, I will modify the rule for them to replace the word “slide” with “frame.”

Craig also points out that it is safer for us to always have a “defined positive reference point” instead of some “nebulous, undefined negative” (Douglas). Meaning if you just say, “keep your finger off the trigger,” that means one could have their finger in a dozen different locations and still not be breaking the rule. In a class of ten people, if they are all just “keeping their finger off the trigger” their fingers could be in ten different places. Or the same student could have their finger on the side of the trigger guard for one drill and then on the frame for another drill, then on the slide for another drill and then out in space for another drill. Then the instructor would have no reason to correct them since they are technically obeying the rule as stated.

In *Sharpening the Warrior’s Edge* (2005), Bruce Siddle explains Hick’s Law which gives evidence to the fact that an increase in the number of responses actually increases response time (Siddle). So giving students too many options is not a good idea. In *Building Shooters* (2016), Dustin Salomon explains neuro-science research supporting that it is inefficient to allow students to learn different variations of one motor skill (Salomon). I have witnessed this in IDPA matches and other pistol shooting competitions where there is disagreement between people on what “off the trigger” means. I suggest, simply defining it as Douglas does. Identifying the slide specifically, gives us a “defined positive” as well as provides a tactile reference point that
any finger and hand (not to include injury or deformity) can access without breaking the shooting grip. Again, it is one concise and specific rule that covers all of the bases. In a practical setting, it would be safer to have all students perform the same exact motor skill on the same spot, not learning different variations of the same concept. I believe Cooper’s rule is lacking a tactical focus since it allows the student to perform different variations of one technique. I believe the intent of Cooper and Douglas are the same. Douglas’s version is just stated more accurately and contains a tactical mindset.

Also, specifying the conscious “decision to fire” is more accurate than “your sights on target.” It may depend on what your definition of “target” is, but I believe there may be times when my sights are “on target” but I might not have to make the conscious decision to fire. So again, I advocate for Douglas’s definition. Adhering to Douglas’s version of the rule doesn’t hinder me in a lethal confrontation, and it actually increases my safety when handling the gun DURING that lethal confrontation when I am not shooting. In a more practical, confrontational type setting, this version of the rule will serve us well. It will allow us to train safely, with the proper combat mindset and still not violate the rule if we have to use the gun for self-defense. So I would advocate for Craig’s version of rule # 3 to be the standard. Always keep your finger on the slide until you’ve made the conscious decision to fire (Craig Douglas).

**Rule # 4: Identify your target, and what is behind it. Never shoot at anything that you have not positively identified.**

This rule helps you begin to look at more than just your target, it is a rule reminding you that you need to expand your awareness to more than your target alone. This rule is the longest of the three and contains the most complex information. This is also the rule that is most frequently worded differently. I have heard it taught in many different forms. The version I have selected comes from two other sources, Pat McNamara and Paul Howe. While keeping with Cooper’s original intent, McNamara includes a specific focus on the front of the target, the back of it, beyond it and left and right of it (McNamara). Basically, seeing the entirety of the target’s immediate environment.

Paul Howe also teaches a five-step Target Discrimination Process when dealing with human threats and potential threats. The last two steps include a focus on the immediate area of the target and the target’s foreground and background (Howe). Although, Howe does not use this process in explaining the four rules, it is a well thought-out process that applies to all targets. I see it as the tactical application of the rule. So the version I advocate for is an amalgamation of Howe’s process and McNamara’s teaching. Which I state as, **Always identify your target, its foreground, background and immediate area before shooting** (Howe, McNamara modified). I believe Cooper’s rule is lacking a tactical focus since it does not account for the other areas near the target, other than the background. I believe this version of the rule retains the original safety benefit yet it is better suited to a complex, tactical environment. It highlights the foreground and immediate area since the situation is dynamic and could change in fractions of a second.
I know that the target’s “background and foreground” are included in the phrase “immediate area” however, I believe it is reasonable to have a redundancy. The emphasis on the background is important since that seems to be the most difficult to see, as the view is blocked by the target and the area most endangered since they bullets are headed in that exact line of travel. This wording applies to all targets, paper bullseyes, hunting or human combat. It is one rule that covers all the bases. In a more practical, confrontational type setting, this version of the rule will serve us well. It will allow us to train safely, with the proper combat mindset and still not violate the rule if we have to use the gun for self-defense. So I would advocate for the combination of Howe and McNamara’s version of rule # 4 to be the standard. Always identify your target, its foreground, background and immediate area before shooting (Howe, McNamara modified).

The PROPOSED New Rules of Safe Gun Handling

The addition of the positive “Always” at the beginning of each rule is an attempt to reinforce a positive thought. In contrast to a negative thought of trying to teach people to “Never” do something. The theory is that it is better to teach someone to do something positive instead of teaching them to not do something negative. This comes from the psychological concepts of Thought Suppression and Mental Control. The concepts state that if you try to not think about a particular thing such as a polar bear, you will think about a polar bear. In his book, White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts, Daniel M. Wegner, PhD, Wegner explains this by describing experiments that demonstrate the concept. He states that “people do not do a good job of avoiding an unwanted thought” (Wegner). If we apply this principle to the rules, the theory states that if you continually try to teach someone to “Never point the muzzle at anything you’re not willing to destroy” then students may be constantly thinking about “pointing the muzzle at something they’re not willing to destroy” and then may actually do it because they’ve been thinking about it. Even if someone disagrees with this theory, I would submit that adding the phrase “Always” does not detract from the rule’s original intention.

To identify this set of rules apart from Coopers, I have selected the term “Proposed New Rules” for communication purposes. I understand that the wording isn’t necessarily “new.” The citations at the end of each rule would not have to be stated when they are taught, I am just including them here to give credit where credit is due.

The PROPOSED New Rules of Safe Gun Handling could be taught in conjunction with Coopers’ so the student hears the original and the new simultaneously such as:

1. All guns are always loaded. Even if they are not, treat them as if they are (Cooper). 
   OR
   Always know the status of your weapon (McNamara).
2. Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy (Cooper).
   OR
   Always keep the gun pointed in the safest direction possible (Blocker).
3. Keep your finger off the trigger till your sights are on target (Cooper).
Always keep your finger on the slide until you’ve made the conscious decision to fire. (Douglas).

4. Identify your target, and what is behind it. Never shoot at anything that you have not positively identified (Cooper).

OR
Always identify your target, its foreground, background and immediate area before shooting (Howe, McNamara modified).

I also advocate for moving rule # 3 to the # 2 position. My thinking is, that you need to focus on your trigger finger before you focus on where you point the gun. You can’t point it at anything unless you touch it. So, it is a more logical progression, thinking about the gun, then touching, it, then pointing it, then firing it. Therefore, with my thinking explained I would advocate for a new version of the rules to read:

The PROPOSED New Rules of Safe Gun Handling:
1. Always know the status of your weapon (McNamara).
2. Always keep your finger on the slide until you’ve made the conscious decision to fire. (Douglas).
3. Always keep the gun pointed in the safest direction possible (Blocker).
4. Always identify your target, its foreground, background and immediate area before shooting (Howe, McNamara modified).

Other Factors:

Another way to look at it is to ask the question, do the rules need to differ in focus depending on whether you are training primarily for techniques or tactics? Do the rules apply differently to an administrative training designed solely for technique skill development such as marksmanship? And do they apply differently to a combative training designed solely for tactical thinking and combative purposes? If your objective is to shoot a .22 Bullseye competition or an IPSC match Cooper’s rules would be adequate. But if your objective is to build correct response selection and unconscious motor skills (Siddle) that give you the best chance of surviving an encounter in an undercover drug operation on the street, grappling in a car, in a conflict zone in a developing country or CQB in a war zone or any other complex and chaotic environment dealing with human combat, Cooper’s rules may be lacking.

Another question to ask is, is there a difference between rules for safe gun handling in an administrative training environment for beginning level shooters? And is there a difference when training advanced level shooters who need to operate in a real world chaotic, combative environment? Are Cooper’s rules the “level 1 rules” that the beginning gun handler needs to learn? Are the new proposed rules the “level 2 rules” that a combat operator needs to learn? If so, then we are at odds with concepts like Hicks Law (Siddle). Does training with a heavy focus on administrative safety rules that are unrealistic for the real world, create bad habits? Or do the new rules replace Cooper’s rules?
Using the New Rules ensures the student only has to learn one version. The New Version doesn’t hinder the safety focus of Cooper’s, yet doesn’t restrict the student from a combat mindset focus. It is important to note that the new version of the rules does not take away from the safety aspect that Cooper designed. It only adds to them. I believe this new version of the rules compiled as above adds an element of safety and adds a proper combat mindset focus. So a student doesn’t have to apply one set of rules to an administrative environment then learn a new set of rules for a tactical environment. The new rules actually require more awareness and an increased level of safety and seriousness in the training. This is a way to “raise the bar” of excellence instead of “lowering the bar” to the lowest common denominator. We must trust our students and expect more of them.

Since Cooper’s Rules were popularized, there seems to have two major factors that have happened that can influence this conversation. One is the number of years that America has been at war both formally (Iraq, Afghanistan etc.) and informally (ISIS, terrorism, the war on police etc.). This post 9/11 world has given this country over a decade and a half of increased recent experience in combat and opposition-based environments. Instructors and students have had years to train, test the training in combat, re-evaluate the training and re-enter combat. I believe this has provided a large pool of knowledge on the subject in a relatively short amount of time, that can be added to the discussion. The second factor is the advancement of published brain science research. We obviously do not know everything about the human brain, but we have made a significant advancement in this field of study in the last 20-30 years. I believe these two factors have contributed to the advancement of how we should view Cooper’s rules.

The legitimacy of these rules are already confirmed since instructors like I have mentioned have validated them by using them on their ranges for years with increased safety and training efficiency. In practice, many are already using the “PROPOSED New Rules” for the reasons I’ve outlined above, let’s just call it what it is. We have an ethical duty to train our students the very best way we can. Not just do what was taught to us because “that’s how we’ve always done it.”

I agree with the concepts of Dustin Salomon’s excellent book, Building Shooters: Applying Neuroscience Research to Tactical Training System Design and Training Delivery, and support his submission that the industry “consider a re-evaluation of a dogmatic adherence to Cooper’s principles” (Salomon). We understand that for safety purposes in a training environment, instructors need order when they conduct training. But Salomon raises a very important and insightful question. He asks, “If police officers in the aggregate are not capable of ensuring that their weapons are unloaded within the context of a formal, structured training evolution, then why should they be qualified to carry and use firearms professionally and make deadly force decisions in service to the general public?” (Salomon). He is advocating to “raise the bar” in training and I fully agree with him. The same question can be posed to civilian students, if we can’t trust them to maneuver in an “artificial training environment designed for safety” (Douglas) then how do we ethically expect them to maneuver in a real world, 360 degree environment? If an instructor is not competent and confident enough to set this environment in their classes, maybe they should re-evaluate their profession?
Paul Howe teaches what he calls “training close to the edge” meaning we have to find ways to better prepare soldiers and others for a more realistic view of combat, so, that they will respond better in combat. Executive Security International does this by utilizing a “hot range” concept for all of their firearms training. This is a combat mindset-focused concept that helps train the student to not falsely assume an “unloaded” gun is safe and should be treated differently than a “loaded” gun (Pagni). Ron Danielowski does a fine job of explaining a similar concept in his article Why Training with a Loaded Firearm is Safer Than Training with an Unloaded Firearm (Danielowski).

Conclusions:

These concepts the above mentioned qualified instructors demonstrate are the forward thinking that is needed in response to such a complex and chaotic world which we live in today. We need more forward thinking in our training. We need to balance the fear of liability with the need for better “tactics-focused” approach.

It is my conclusion that although Cooper’s rules were a significant achievement in firearm’s safety, they are best suited for a technique-focused environment. The vulnerabilities of the Cooper’s rules are exposed when applied to a tactical environment. I agree with Dustin Salomon’s view that “We submit that, rather than constructing a range-based safety infrastructure that does not adequately translate into the operational environment, it is ultimately more beneficial to use an infrastructure that works in all environments and to build the skill necessary to facilitate it’s effective use” (Salomon).

I would repeat what many of my instructors and mentors have taught me, “It is unsafe to NOT train this way (Kluck, Pagni).” We cannot eliminate all risk in firearms training because there is still the variable of human nature. The instructor sets the tone. Our job as instructors is to create the safest environment possible and manage the risk in the most professional and practical way; clearly state and set the expectations of safety parameters; ensure that students are cognitively paying attention and registering what we’re saying; hold them accountable if we see otherwise; and set the serious tone of the training course. We must emotionally inspire them to pay attention and motivate them to remain cognitively present in the moment and aware of what they are doing and what is going on around them. I submit that the PROPOSED New Rules of the rules will help us do this. If we can teach the student to do this on the shooting range, they will be better prepared to do it in an everyday environment.


