Blindly direct your arrow by your sense of feeling. Let go the string.
-Maurice Thompson, 1878

OVERVIEW OF THE SHOOTING PROCESS

There are seven basic steps to shooting archery—that sounds like a lot, but it all becomes automatic pretty quickly. We’ll discuss each step and explain what’s going on, so you can better teach it to others. All of the examples here are right handed, so you will need to reverse left and right in the directions for a left-handed archer. The steps are:

1. Stance
2. Load
3. Draw
4. Anchor
5. Aim
6. Release
7. Follow through

1. STANCE

The best stance is a comfortable one that can be maintained without great effort. Each archer will need to experiment with different variations until they discover one that is right for their body shape and shooting style, but everyone can start with the basics. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and turn so that you can draw an imaginary line through the tips of the toes, right into the center of the target. Right-handed archers will stand so the target is to their left, and they will look over their left shoulders to shoot.

1. According to Ascham, there are five steps to a good shot: Stand, Nock (load), Draw, Hold, and Loose (release). This is still a good system today, nearly 500 years after he wrote it. But when teaching beginners, it’s good to put extra emphasis on “aim”; Ascham’s students were soldiers being trained to fire volleys into large opposing armies, when aiming might not have been so important. “Follow through” is a modern concept appearing in most sporting endeavors, and likely would not have been known to him in these terms.
There are variations on this stance, such as the *open stance*. Here, you line up your feet as with the basic stance, then slide your leading foot backwards a little, so you face the target more. This stance is handy for longbow users and women with large busts, as it offers more string clearance. A *closed stance* is just the opposite, with your leading foot a little forward, so you are sort of shooting over your shoulder. There are also specialty stances, such as kneeling and prone, but those should be avoided in beginning classes.

2. **LOADING THE BOW**

The arrow goes on the bow so that the nock is fit to the string just beneath the nocking point indicator, with the index feather towards the shooter. The shaft of the arrow should be on the same side of the bow as the shooter’s arm, resting gently on the shelf or arrow rest. Though there are several ways to get the arrow from your quiver to the bow, the easiest method for novices is described in the sample lesson. In no case should your left hand ever have to leave the handle of the bow.

**Grip types: string hand**

Throughout history, there have been several ways mankind has drawn the bow. We’ll talk about a few of them, but the most popular today is the basic three-fingered draw. It uses the index, middle, and ring finger to grip the string, with the string crossing these fingers between the very tip and the first joint of each. The arrow fits to the string between the index and middle fingers. Your hand is open and flat, curving only at the finger tips, and the palm of your hand opens towards your face. To release, you let your fingers relax until the string slips crisply from your grasp. This is the easiest grip to teach and by far the most common.

A slight variation on the traditional three-fingered grip is to use all three fingers placed under the arrow. This
only works if you have a nocking point indicator affixed to the string; and on shorter bows, might cause excessive pinching of the ring finger. Avoid teaching this grip to kids.

In medieval Europe, the professional soldier-archers preferred a two-finger draw, and you still see it occasionally today. It’s similar to the basic grip, but uses only the index and middle fingers. Eliminating the ring finger reduces pinching, makes the string have a more even follow from top to bottom, and provides for a crisper release. However, it requires much greater strength in the fingers, and can’t be performed by most people on any but the lightest of bows. It was abandoned in favor of the three-fingered release in the mid-1500s.²

In central Asia, the Mongolian release prevailed for centuries. The hand is held palm down, and the thumb is hooked around the string at the first joint, with the arrow above it. The index finger is then latched over the thumb, creating a sort of mechanical lock. To release, the index finger is opened, and the thumb snaps open under string pressure. It allows the crispest release of all, as it has the least contact with the string. But the pressure built up on the thumb required Asiatic archers to use special rings to protect

² As described by Ascham.
their thumb from the string. This is a really tricky style, and not for the inexperienced.

As an interesting side note, the Yahi (a Native American tribe on the other side of the planet) developed a variation of this technique as well. However, the relatively low poundage of their bows made the thumb ring unnecessary.

**Grip: bow hand**

Right-handed shooters will grab the bow by the handle with their left hand. The grip should be loose and comfortable, with the wrist straight in alignment with the rest of the arm. If you are shooting a bow without a shelf or rest, the arrow shaft will sit atop the index finger knuckle of this hand.

3. **DRAW**

While holding the bow and arrow with the grip described above, raise the bow to shoulder height. An archer’s left arm should be straight, and the arrow already pointing in the general direction of the target. Now, with your right hand, pull the string and attached arrow back to your chin or face, whichever is your anchor point (more on that later). The draw should be smooth and unhurried. If an archer has to groan with exertion or point the arrow away from the target to draw, then they need a lighter bow.

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3. See the biography on Ishi for more on this. The technique is described by Saxton Pope in *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow* (p. 25)