

I made a partial list below (I'm sure Duane Thomas can add to it) of dumb things I see in novels and comics and movies in the area of firearms. A few of these (for dramatic license) I make myself. But they're still dumb.

THE SILENCED REVOLVER If you're dumb enough to put a silencer on a revolver then you'll discover that all the noise you hoped to suppress will escape from around the cylinder. See, an automatic is a sealed system allowing gas to vent only from the end of the barrel. So all your sound is coming from the barrel as well. A revolver is not sealed. There's a gap twixt the cylinder and the barrel where they meet. This gap allows the cylinder to turn. It also allows gas and noise to escape.

THE "EMPTY" AUTOMATIC We've all seen the scene where an adversary has the drop on another at the end of a gunfight. One guy holds out an automatic to the other guy's head, says a take away line ("This is where the rubber meets the road, scumbag.) and then...click. The gun's empty! Well, when an automatic has fired its last cartridge the slide atop the action locks back. They would both know the gun was empty. At the same time the firing mechanism locks back as well so no "click". If you need to have a scene like this make sure your character's armed with a revolver.

THE SUPER ACCURATE SNIPER SCOPE This one's common. I do it myself but only because most audiences don't understand how bullets track. It's the scene where we're looking through the sniper's scope and the crosshairs land on the intended quarry square on his or her head. There it is the president, the Queen mum, the guy who made it off of Survivor island and the posts are placed right on their kissers. This might work if the sniper was standing thirty yards away. But the problem is that bullets don't fire in a flat, straight line. The longer a bullet is in flight the slower it begins to travel and the more it loses altitude. This is called "the drop". A sniper must take into account the drop, the temperature, barometric pressure and wind direction and velocity when lining up a money shot. So, over a long distance you want to have your crosshairs above the target. If all is right under God's heavens then the bullet will then "drop" where you want it. I cover this one by having my shooters mention this aspect of long range sniping. And never aim for the head. You want a "center shot" or chest shot.

"THE CORDITE THICK AS FOG." Man, did I feel dumb about five years ago when Larry Hama went on a rant about this common gaffe. Everyone at one time or another mentions the "cordite stink" of gunsmoke in their stories. But it turns out that cordite was a chemical ingredient in gunpowder for only a very short time in the late 19th Century. So, unless you're writing about Highlanders fighting their way down the Khyber this one is a major boo-boo. I don't know who immortalized this error. Probaly a yellow journalist back then. It entered the lexicon of cliches next to "grieving loved ones" and "armed conflict" that are in every reporters bag o' cliches. I cringe now when I see even writers I admire refer to cordite.

KER-CHAK! We've all seen this one. The good or bad guy had been holding a shotgun on his opposite number for a while and, just for dramatic emphasis, racks back the pump to chamber a shell. Loud Ker-Chak! Then a take-away line. "Be sure to say 'hi' to your mama when you get to Hell!" This is very cool and dramatic and I do love that sound effect. But what this actually means is that the character has been threatening everyone with a gun that has no chambered round. If he pulled the trigger nothing would happen.

SHOOTING SIDEWAYS Your gangstas just have to be different. So they aim their handguns sideways and hunch over and kind of glare along their arm in lieu of actually aiming. In fact, when they do this their eyes aren't even looking at the site but at their victim. Intimidating your intended victims is all well and good. But it comes to naught if, when you finally start busting caps, you miss the other guy by six city blocks. There's a reason we hold guns vertically. It's a more natural pose considering that the barrel of a gun is going to leap up and back when each round goes off. It's a lot easier to lower that site back to it's original position than it is to go searching for them over a 180 degree radius. Ever see Davey Crockett hold his flintlock sideways? This way is just plain dumb.

THE STARKY AND HUTCH WALL SLIDE This one's common. The cops are in a bunch with handguns held in both hands, barrels pointed skyward and arms tight to their chests as they sideways-slide along a wall down a hallway toward the lair of some badguys. The problem with this is, that when the shooting starts, plater walls do not a bunker make. Also, in a real life gunbattle, bullets bounce, tumble and tend to track along flat surfaces like walls and floors. In real life, cops blast off a few shots and hunt for substantial cover. From this cover they shout out dire threats of retribution until the bad guys give up, run away or are determined to have died in the first hail of gunfire. If you read enough police reports about firefights those hoods pumped to the double and triple digits with lead begin to make sense. The only way to even the odds in a gunfight is to take the other guy down in a hurry in the first few seconds of the fight.

"LOOKS LIKE A NINE OR A THIRTY EIGHT" The detective shows up at the homicide scene. Takes one glance at the bulletholes in the victim and pronounces the exact caliber of the murder weapon. Maybe, I say maybe, if the victim was a piece of plywood you could do this. But a bullethole in a person quickly fills with fluid and the area around it swells. All of this masks the true size of the bullethole. Even if you were good enough to tell the diameter of the various calibers of bullets at a glance (which would be difficult if you were looking at their exact diameters drawn on a piece of paper.) that talent would be useless on a fresh corpse.