A day at the range should be fun, safe, and productive. You should come away from the range feeling like you have improved your shooting skills and also have some goals in mind for your next range visit. The shooting sports offer a variety of challenges for every skill level. As any experienced shooter will tell you, there is always room for improvement. Getting there is the fun part! A few tips for your next range visit will serve to improve your accuracy. The fun level definitely goes up when you can consistently hit what you are aiming at.

A 22 caliber target pistol is an excellent pistol to improve your shooting skills. I recommend owning at least one .22 caliber pistol, preferably that one that has the controls in the same configuration as your competition pistol. The advantage of using this is that the .22 uses less expensive ammunition, has less recoil, has adjustable sights, and can be an excellent way to improve your shooting accuracy. As you get more familiar with your higher caliber firearm, you will discover that you are much more accurate and proficient without using a lot of the more expensive ammunition.

If you have taken an NRA basic pistol course, find your original handbook and rework the fundamentals of shooting before going to the range. Reviewing the basic fundamentals will allow you to practice at home and then concentrate on improving your techniques. Dry fire practice is using an unloaded pistol to practice the fundamentals of pistol shooting. Dry firing at home can build your pistol skills without using any ammunition. First, be sure to check your owner’s manual to be sure that your firearm manufacturer approves of dry firing your particular handgun. Dry fire practice allows you to learn how to acquire a proper grip on the pistol. A consistent proper grip can go a long way to accurately shooting any firearm. If you keep repealing your trigger, shifting it between each shot, or if you are just not properly gripping the pistol, you cannot improve your accuracy.

Proper finger placement on the trigger is important. Improper finger placement can cause you to fail your aim of target with the trigger, or to accidentally fire the trigger. Proper finger placement is pointing your trigger finger halfway between the edge of your finger and your first joint. You can practice your trigger squeeze using a dummy round. A dummy round is a non-reloadable target pistol bullet point, try squeezing the trigger (holding it) for just a moment, then releasing it just until it "clicks." This is your trigger sequence and follow thru. Unless you are hearing and feeling the "click" in between each shot, you are not achieving proper trigger squeeze and follow thru. Trigger pressure should be a slow, steady pressure on the trigger until the gun is armed, then momentarily hold the trigger to the rear, and slowly release the trigger until you feel, and hear the click. The click tells you that the trigger has re-seated, and that you are ready for your next shot. Jumping off the trigger or removing your finger from the trigger between each shot is a bad habit that will not help accuracy. Now you are ready to go to the range.

First, review the 3 basic safety rules:

1. ALWAYS keep the gun pointed in a safe direction.
2. ALWAYS keep your finger OFF the trigger until you are ready to shoot (i.e. when your sights are on the target). 
3. ALWAYS keep the gun unloaded until ready to shoot.

Now, you can begin setting up your shooting station. Don’t forget your eye protection and hearing protection! ALWAYS keep your finger OFF the trigger until you begin to shoot, this allows you to determine (1) that the gun is functioning correctly, (2) that your ammunition is functioning correctly, (3) that YOU are functioning correctly, and that you are following the fundamentals of shooting and the firing sequence correctly. By using a shooting rest, you are able to concentrate on the fundamentals without having to think about maintaining your position.

Set the target at a distance of about 15 feet to begin with. Too often shooters will post their target 50-60 feet away and wonder why they are not able to hit the target. Start close, and as you develop your skill level, you can gradually move the target further out.

I like using the Birchwood Casey Shot-N-C targets, they are reactive, turning colors when you impact them, and it is easy to see when you are on (or off) the target. I bring a few sizes of the Shot-N-C targets to the range with me so I can change the range, the target size is perfect for bench shooting. Use the smaller “paster” targets ones to increase the degree of difficulty as you improve.

Get in a comfortable seated position, practice your position with an unloaded handgun and make adjustments to your position until you get a feel for what is right for you. Remember to keep your head up on the FRONT sight. Your eye cannot focus on the front sight, the rear sight, and the target all at the same time! By focusing on the front sight, you can keep your head up and properly aligned sights on the target. Start by bringing just 3-3 1/4 rounds of a target you are not practicing on the trigger until the gun is armed, and then safely pressing the trigger to begin making any adjustments. Sight alignment for the rear sight is adjustable. Always move the REAR sight in the SAME direction that the hits on the target should move. So, if your sight line is up and to the left, adjust the sight to the right and, up. Confirm the sight adjustment with another 3-3 1/4 round sight.

Remember to hold your breath while firing the shot. You cannot breathe and accurately shoot at the same time.

So, your shooting sequence is:

1. (Assume a proper grip on the pistol.
2. (Align the front and rear sights, and place the aligned sights on the target, while concentrating on the FRONT sight.
3. Place your finger on the trigger (proper trigger placement) breathe in, slowly let out half your breath, then hold your breath while slowly squeezing the trigger without causing any movement to the aligned sight(s).
4. (When the pistol fires, hold the trigger to the rear for just a moment, this is your follow thru. Then release the trigger and then place the properly aligned sights on the target. Start by bringing just 3-3 1/4 rounds of a target you are not practicing on the trigger until the gun is armed, and then safely pressing the trigger to begin making any adjustments. Sight alignment for the rear sight is adjustable. Always move the REAR sight in the SAME direction that the hits on the target should move. So, if your sight line is up and to the left, adjust the sight to the right and, up. Confirm the sight adjustment with another 3-3 1/4 shot.

Once you have improved your group, you can increase the degree of difficulty by moving the target farther away, assuming a standing position, by increasing the distance, etc. Keep a log book of your day at the range will allow you to study what you need to work on at your next range session and allow you to see improvement.

Common errors I see are:

(A) Bobbing the head to see where each shot impacts. Bang! Head bobbles around trying to see where shot impacted. Not good! Learn to re-acquire the target as soon as possible. To begin the firing sequence again! Frustrating and uncecssary! Learn to adjust your eye from the front sight, to the target, back to the front sight without moving your eye.
(B) To follow thru. Shooter jerks trigger, then jumps the trigger finger off the trigger and often outside the trigger guard. Never do this! Don’t do this! The trigger must be depressed all the way back in position, and resume the firing sequence. Less movement = better accuracy.
(C) Closing their eyes or shutting their eyes while shooting. Often a shooter doesn’t realize they are doing this, this is just a bad habit. You cannot shoot accurately if you are not looking at the front sight, lining up on the target, and then placing the properly aligned sights on the target.
(D) Slowly release the trigger (taking in your next breath) until you hear a distinctive “click,” letting you know that the trigger has re-seated and you are ready for the next shot. Begin the firing sequence again.

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