

# The Most Common Mistakes Beginning Rapier Students Make - Their Consequences and How to Avoid Them.

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As with most demanding disciplines, fencing has its set of common beginners' mistakes. Having practiced, taught and observed historical fencers of all levels for over a decade, I have compiled a list of the more obvious and recurring ones. Interestingly, these are mistakes that, if not cured early, crystallize into bad habits that are very hard to amend later on.

These mistakes are in both understanding and performance - often in both at the same time (the former being a prerequisite for the latter).

I have outlined each point so as to list the mistake, the negative consequences deriving from it and my recommendations on how to correct it. Although I have purposely confined this discussion to the rapier, please note that many of these mistakes/habits are applicable to other fencing disciplines.

Also, please note that the actions and situations I describe imply a somewhat formalized training intent based on historical sources. Many who enjoy swords casually and do not have the opportunity to train more formally may not identify with these points.

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**Mistake:** Obsessing too much about ideal rapier length.

**Consequences:** Illusion that technical or theoretical shortcomings are "the rapier's fault," resulting in failure to address them.

**Correction:** Get a well-balanced rapier that works for you and then give it no more thought. Masters such as Alfieri and Capoferro specify that a rapier should be proportionate to the height of the fencer - it should comfortably stand under the armpit. A good practical way to measure whether a rapier fits your proportions is this: stand it in front of you - if the quillons are as high as your navel (Marcelli says "belt"), it's a go. After this, think no more about it. Any mistakes you make with this sword are most likely the result of faulty techniques or imperfect training.

**Mistake:** Failing to learn how to stand in guard.

**Consequences:** Poor balance, compromised defense, impairment in required mobility, sloppiness, sub-standard fencing performance.

**Correction:** First, understand that a guard is not just a randomly-chosen starting position. It is a carefully-formed defensive posture designed also to maximize mobility, offensive potential and effectiveness of everything you do while fencing. Then, study the guard(s) of your period-master of choice very meticulously. Analyze the relative positions of the limbs and body the way you would with a life-drawing model. Get a precise idea of where the weight is placed (hint: for most 17th-C Italian masters it will be on the rear foot). Lastly, learn to duplicate this posture with your body and your sword until it becomes second nature. In this regard, a mirror helps immensely. Remember: if you can't do it, it's because of you, not because "the period master had no sense of balance."

**Mistake:** Rocking and wiggling to settle in the guard.

**Consequences:** If you do so out of measure, you will look like Donald Duck playing golf. If you do so in measure against a good opponent, you will give him a great tempo in which to strike you.

In either case, this is one of the worst habits in rapier and one that should be eliminated without mercy.

**Correction:** Practice dropping into your guard and staying there without any further motion (which is actually a great warm-up drill). Stand up straight, with your feet joined at the heels and pointing 90 degrees apart (the right towards the opponent, the left to your left), your sword to your left side as if in a scabbard. Visualize your guard in your mind. Inhale slightly. In one fluid and solid motion, form your guard, dropping into it while exhaling slightly - but do so without any stiffness. Without moving, check your weight, the position and alignment of your feet, limbs, sword, etc., making sure that it is exactly the position you desire. If it is not, do not correct the posture from there - stand up straight and begin again. Repeat until this becomes second nature and until you can sense that your body is in the right position even without the aid of a mirror.

**Mistake:** Keeping the right arm and wrist too stiff.

**Consequences:** Inability to perform many techniques correctly and in tempo, early fatigue.

**Correction:** Put the sword down and practice this exercise (since in most historical Italian rapier styles the arm is more extended than withdrawn, this will apply to all of them). Get in your in-guard position. Observe your arm and your (empty) hand. You should look as if you were casually extending your arm/hand to offer someone an apple. Make sure there is a bend in your elbow - how much of one depends on your guard - but it should always be there. Make sure that your hand is in a perfectly natural position, without any strain on it (holding an apple doesn't call for any force). If you have a training partner, she should be able to make your arm bend without effort just by simultaneously tapping down at the bend of your elbow and up at your wrist. Once you are comfortably familiar with this "feel," add the sword, gripping it gently and without tension. Remember this. The only limb that is ever completely locked in historical Italian rapier is the left leg at the moment of completion of the lunge. So keep your right arm supple and you'll be amazed at the increased mobility and finesse you'll be able to achieve.

**Mistake:** Even if the static guard is good, after the first step everything falls apart.

**Consequences:** Same as those of failing to stand in guard properly.

**Correction:** Eager-beavers are not going to like this... Footwork exercises! Seriously, these are essential, and a great way to build up accuracy, stamina and to warm up right before partner drills. The goal should be to be able to advance and retreat (with one or several steps) without disrupting a single element of the guard. At first, it will be awkward. When you are in guard, your weight should be on your rear foot - so in order to perform a single step forward, your weight will have to shift twice (move your front foot first, shift your weight on it, pull up your rear foot without dragging it and replace your weight on it). Then, if you add a retreat, you will have to shift your weight forward before you move your rear foot. Furthermore, your head should not bob - you should be like one of those catwalk models who can balance a stack of books on their heads as they strut down the runway. One last piece of advice: don't rush your steps and "fling" your limbs/body around. Always be deliberate, careful and controlled.

**Mistake:** Flinging the sword-arm forward in the course of a thrusting attack.

**Consequences:** The sword is weakened, point-control inaccurate and sloppy, and you develop the further habit of withdrawing the arm to prepare for the thrust.

**Correction:** This is a problem on which Fabris spends a long chapter in his book. While in early-16th-Century swordsmanship this technique was acceptable, by Fabris' age it had become anathema - and remained so throughout the Classical Fencing age. To correct it, make sure that as you deliver a thrust, the sword is carried by the body and the feet rather than by the arm. Depending on how

extended your guard is, the arm needs to move either very little or not at all (and always before the body and the foot). This is achieved by drilling repetition and careful self-observation. But once you develop the right technique, you will notice how much stronger your sword is vis a vis the opponent's (as your whole body-weight will be behind it) as well as how much more accurate your attacks are. Also, when you free-fence and your initial attack fails, learn to be humble and retreat rather than sloppily walking forward in the blind attempt to land one of your wild jabs on the opponent. A point so gained is worth much less than a point received in good form.

**Mistake:** Turning the front foot inward while lunging.

**Consequences:** Sloppiness, diminished strength and point-control.

**Correction:** This is the easiest one of all: practice the lunge and be aware of it until this bad habit disappears. Besides looking amateurish, lunging with a "crooked foot" disrupts your skeletal alignment and makes your lunge less accurate and much easier to parry.

**Mistake:** Always staying out of measure and developing your game around sniping at the opponent's forearm or hand.

**Consequences:** Fencers who make this their game run the risk of having 90% of the art fall into atrophy - ending up little more than one-trick ponies.

**Correction:** While arm-shots have their place in 17th-Century Italian rapier, they are a relatively negligible footnote of the art compared to body and head-shots. As Rosaroll Scorza and Grisetti say as late as 1803, real fencing involves taking the measure from the opponent's body. The best course against developing this habit is being honest with yourself and deciding whether you fence to score easy hits or to learn the complete art. If it is the latter, you must learn to sacrifice some easier shots for historically-correct (and more difficult) ones to the body. Two extremes at the opposite end of this spectrum are Fabris (who only shows hits to the chest and flank) and electrified sport epee (where the arm is the only target save for rare exceptions, and even the lightest touch can result in the buzzer going off). Both are valid disciplines - pick which one you want to pursue and stick with it. Also, for correctness' sake, when you fence an unfamiliar opponent, clarify which rules you want to use - there is nothing un-martial about it.

**Mistake:** Circling around the opponent to find an opening or a tempo.

**Consequences:** Besides being quite far out of style (no Italian master advocates this action), you will rapidly lose your form and achieve the opposite result than the one you are looking for. Your opponent can follow you very efficiently as a "turret" placed in the center of the circumference you describe while walking in circles - and every step you take is a good tempo for him to defeat you.

**Correction:** When you drill, force yourself and your partner to confine your lateral movements to the space of one foot or little more. I know that many like to think of rapier as a free-floating primitive style with no rules and, wanting to depart from what they are accustomed to see in sport fencing, they make it a point to "fence in the circle." But this is (possibly) even more historically inaccurate than if one were to adopt a perfect classical-foil style rapier in hand. If you don't want to take my word for it (and you should not), read all the extant Italian rapier treatises from Fabris to Di Mazo.

**Mistake:** Making wild and random hand-parries.

**Consequences:** This leads to the habit of chasing the opponent's point with the hand, thus becoming ineffective and exonerating the sword from its important defensive role.

**Correction:** Depending on which master you study, identify the hand parries he describes and illustrates. You will be amazed at how few there are - often they are only four (one per line) and very

precise. Then, make it a part of your drilling routine to practice them. Make sure that as you perform them, your gloved hand remains open or just barely cupped with all five fingers held together. Besides being the historically-correct way to perform hand-parries, this will prevent you from falling into the habit of grasping the opponent's blade - something deprecated by Fabris as "a miserable way to defend." Many judged non-SCA historical-fencing tournaments now deduct points for grabbing the opponent's blade (something on which I tend to agree).

**Mistake:** Being unable to slow actions down while drilling, and executing everything with jerky and uncontrolled motions.

**Consequences:** Failing to know how to slow actions down will seriously impair your ability to learn - period. Besides, you will end up looking like a hand-puppet when you fence.

**Correction:** Every functional human being has the capability to execute any given motion at various speeds, so when this does not happen sword-in-hand we need to identify and eliminate the root-causes. A very common one is extreme stiffness of the limbs. This stiffness inhibits the interaction between antagonistic muscles, and causes all motions to take the form of erratic shudders. So make sure that your body is extremely relaxed when you practice - from your hand-muscles to your neck and shoulders all the way down to your feet. Another cause is psychological. There is the illusion (even when drilling with a cooperative partner) that no action can succeed unless it is performed at blinding speed. Controlled speed should be the goal, not the starting point when building up fencing motor-skills. So make sure you can execute any action as slow as physically possible, remaining aware of what muscles are involved, where your weight is and how accurate and conservative your motions are.

**Mistake:** Transitioning directly from a martial, in-guard stance to a casual, purposeless and formless posture at the end of an action (both while free-fencing and while drilling) and vice-versa.

**Consequences:** In the body-language of any martial art, you should clearly communicate whether you are ready to fight, fighting or done fighting to your opponent and to whoever may be watching. This not only for the obvious aesthetic reasons, but also for the sake of martial soundness. Once developed, the habit of transitioning directly from your fighting stance to nothing will creep into your fencing, take my word for it. And when the opponent hits you as you do this, shame on you; his point is won fairly and squarely. As Fabris says: "When you have a sword in your hand, always assume you are in guard." No excuses!

**Correction:** We know from numerous forms of historical European sword-arts that starting and ending actions, stances and routines were taught, employed and encouraged. These range from the common salute to the elaborate solo-forms of the Bolognese school, or from the "first position" in Classical fencing to the gracefully complex salute in XVIIIth-Century French smallsword. At the very least, before and after any drill routine or free-fencing bout, every school should adopt an "at ease" position that is still martial while being somewhere between a fencing stance and the purposeless attitude of just a guy holding a sword. In our school, we use a position similar to Viggiani's first guard, in which we simulate having the sword in our scabbard. Thus, when we face one-another even for a drill, we begin in that position, we "unsheathe" the sword with our hand in prima and form the guard - at which point the drill can start. At the end of the drill, we "stand up" from our guard with the sword still extended at the opponent, and then "re-sheathe" it. This is an effective way to communicate to our partner and the spectators when we are about to start fencing and when we are done. Ditto when free-fencing, although in this case adding a salute is a necessary form of respect.