

Accuracy - Tips for “Spot-On” Casting

by Dave Cleaves

“...to deliver a fly consistently to a square inch of water – overhead cast or roll cast, off-shoulder or side-arm, windy day or still, short cast or long.”

-- Joan Wulff. Fly-Casting Accuracy. 1997.

Accuracy is important in any fly fishing experience and it doesn't just happen. You must work at it, in practice and on the water. Having an accurate “experience” is one thing, but consistent and efficient precision - achieving a high percentage of casts of any type at any distance easily - is another.

Look at a cast from the fish's point of view. If the fly doesn't arrive close enough, he never makes your acquaintance. If it splashes down on top of his head, he's just had an emotional experience and not likely to respond to anything for a while.

You should try to be spot-on accurate across a wide range of conditions with a minimum number of strokes and false casts. Accuracy is the core skill for good overall presentation.

Here are some tips for improving accuracy.

Position:

- Change your stance to better face the target with both eyes and to align the hand and rod more directly with the target. Try standing square to the target or putting your casting-side foot (right for a right-handed caster) a little forward. Keep foot, casting arm, and nose in the same plane.
- When possible, cast in a vertical plane, keeping the rod close to your shoulder. This allows you to line up directly with the target, bring the rod back directly from it, using your body as a stabilizer. It also allows you to make the forward stroke directly in line with where your eyes and your body are pointing.
- Although longer casts may demand longer strokes and more of a side-arm style, you should try to keep the distance from your eye to your casting hand as small as possible so that your forward stroke follows the smallest angle to the target.

Pointing:

- Don't just look at the target; look into it. Pick out a small spot on the target and then a smaller spot on that. As the military marksmen say, “Aim small, miss small.” You will be amazed how easily your hand flows to that tiny fixation.
- Keep your eye on the target throughout the cast. That may mean learning to not watch your back cast on every cast. Turning to look at the back cast causes you to take your eye off the target perhaps even twisting the body to do so, and then readjust. It breaks the focus. Learn to feel the rod's flexing behind as you start the forward cast rather than relying solely on the visual back cast triggers every time. Cast a little faster in the back to really flex the rod so you can stroke slower forward to guide the tension where it needs to go.

- Keep the line hand tight to the body. Hauling with the line hand aggressively out to the side can pull the whole stroke off to side and cause unintentional curves (usually on the line-hand side) and reduce accuracy. Try to keep the line hand work “in-line” right below the reel.
- Use your thumb or forefinger, depending on how you grip the rod as a sighting device. Stop the forward stroke to launch the cast when the end of digit is just above the target. You can also point the reel to help guide the stroke; move the reel straight like a wheel rolling toward the target helps you keep the rod free of twists and turns that send the loop off to the side of the target.
- Check your grip and experiment. The finger-on-top of the handle may provide more sensitivity and a longer sighting plane especially for shorter casts. For longer casts, you can switch back to a thumb-on-top grip. Check to make sure your middle finger beneath the handle doesn’t slip down and allow your hand to rotate. The thumb or index finger (depending on your choice of grips) on top should be perpendicular to the middle fingers on the underside to provide a base for squeezing the rod to a stop right where you want it.

Practice:

- Practice controlling the size and shape of the loop. If you can’t control the loop and minimize slack, you can’t control the fly. Slack is casting “noise” that robs you of the sensitivity with the line to guide the cast into place.
- Always cast to a target. Follow each stroke down through the leader to the fly. The leader must unroll to drop the fly onto the target. Don’t be satisfied with just getting the line out there somewhere “close”.
- Practice nasty. Windless is nice, but not assured on the water. Stuff happens, and you must adjust to be consistently accurate. Practice when it’s windy, cold, obstructed, and in odd casting positions – like sitting on the ground as if in a kayak. And practice casting to moving targets, especially if you are preparing for a saltwater experience since these fish always seem to be going somewhere. The squirrels in my backyard are also always moving and are the objects of my casting practice affections as I try to place the fly ahead of them.
- Mix it up. Cast to different targets of different sizes at different distances and vary the order. Make yourself adjust the distance between each cast and give your line hand practice in holding, giving, and taking line. It teaches you to be ready to retrieve, pick up drift, or mend sometimes immediately after the fly arrives at the target.
- Inside and away from the fly rod, you can still practice accuracy. Throw M&M’s into Dixie cups at different distances or toss paper clips into the dispenser on your desk --- on a slow day. Darts, anyone? Anything to keep the hand-eye coordination and adjustments mechanisms oiled and to bake in your abilities to focus your whole body on a tiny part of any target.

Dave Cleaves of North Potomac is a IFFF certified fly-casting instructor (CI, MCI), who teaches fly casting and guides in Maryland, Dave is retired from the US Forest Service and has worked for Trout & About (Phil Gay) and the LL Bean Outdoor Discovery schools. He is a member of the Seneca Valley Trout Unlimited Chapter.

*** end ***