

Headstamps



Figure 1: Several different headstamps.

A headstamp is a marking on the head of a cartridge case used to help identify the cartridge type. Depending on manufacturer, the markings will vary greatly and provide different types of information. Most headstamps will denote the manufacturer of the cartridge and the cartridge's name or caliber, while others will include such information as the location of manufacturing, the date manufactured, and sometimes the load type. The headstamp marking does not always reflect the actual cartridge dimensions and may only specify the cartridge's name or accepted moniker.

All modern metallic cartridges are marked in some way. This includes rimfire, centerfire pistol, and rifle and shotgun cartridges. Because of their design and function, rimfire cartridges are marked in the center of the case head, while centerfire cartridges are marked around the flash hole. With centerfire cartridges, the markings may be featured above and below the flash hole, or around the circumference of it.

The information on the headstamp can be presented in several different ways. Letters, numbers, symbols, and even images have all been used to mark a cartridge for identification. Manufacturers will also use a combination of letters, numbers, and symbols to mark the case head. Often, information such as the manufacturer and the cartridge's name/caliber is abbreviated so that everything will fit on the case head. For example, a cartridge manufactured by the



Figure 2: Rimfire vs. centerfire headstamps.



*Figure 3:
A piece of Starline brass.*

Federal Cartridge Company may feature a headstamp that is marked FCC, while a .308 Winchester cartridge may be marked .308 WIN. Instead of an abbreviation using letters or numbers, Starline™ uses a small star followed by a line to mark their brass.

A Brief History

While the metallic cartridge has been around for hundreds of years, the metallic cartridge as we know it today has been around since the mid-nineteenth century. The first modern metallic cartridges utilized rimfire cases and did not initially feature a headstamp. These cases did not feature any markings because there were no other cartridges they could possibly be confused with. As more types and calibers of cartridges became available (and people began to have accidents), manufacturers felt the need to mark the cartridges for identification and began to brand their products. The .44 Henry rimfire cartridge (designed in 1860), was one of the first cartridges to utilize a headstamp. The .44 Henry featured an uppercase H in the center of the cartridge head for “Henry” and later an uppercase U for .44 Henry ammunition that was manufactured by the Remington Arms-Union Metallic Cartridge Co.



Figure 4: The .44 Henry rimfire.

One of the earliest centerfire cartridges, the .45-70 or .45-70 Government (introduced in 1873), was not marked until late after its adoption. Examples of .45-70 cartridges with headstamps can be found around the early 1880s, while more recent examples can be found as the cartridge is still manufactured by many companies to this day.

Exceptions

As with other things in life, there are exceptions to the rule; headstamps are no different. While most cartridges feature headstamps that provide such information as the cartridge's designation/caliber, military cartridges often do not. Military cartridges will often feature very little information on the headstamp and can be quite difficult to decipher if you do not have a prior knowledge of their marking system.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) oversees and regulates many aspects of their political and military alliance, including the manufacturing of ammunition for other member countries. The specifications for the ammunition used by member countries are standardized so that anyone from any member country can use ammunition manufactured by any other member country with no issue. NATO headstamps feature markings for the location of manufacturer, date (year) manufactured, and the NATO marking, which is a cross inside a circle. For example, a 5.56x45 cartridge manufactured to NATO specs may feature LC and 11 markings, denoting that the brass and cartridge were manufactured at the Lake City Army Ammunition Plant in Independence, Missouri, in 2011. The brass will also feature the circled cross, verifying that it is manufactured to NATO specs.

Other countries around the world may use a different system with markings that correspond with catalog information. The headstamp may be marked with various letters or numbers that have nothing to do with the caliber or moniker of the cartridge and can be difficult to decipher. The markings will typically correspond with a catalog that will specify the cartridge's specs, including name, caliber, manufacturer, and other pertinent information.



Figure 5: A NATO marked headstamp.



Figure 6: Converted brass.

Other exceptions to the headstamp rule is brass that is manufactured by one company and loaded by another, and brass that is converted from one caliber to another. Often, small ammunition companies will use components from other, larger companies to manufacture their own type of cartridge. Ammunition boxes will be marked with the loading company's name or logo, while the brass will be marked

by the case manufacturer. In other instances, cases may be converted from one caliber to another while the headstamp remains unchanged. For example, the 300 Blackout/Whisper was created by converting .223 Winchester/5.56x45 NATO brass. The cases are shortened, the shoulders are lowered, and the mouths are widened, but the original headstamps remain. Side by side, it is obvious that the Blackout and NATO cases are different, which makes a mismarked case less of an issue when loading firearms and magazines. Other conversions may not be as obvious.

How to Read Headstamps

With most modern cartridges, deciphering headstamps is straightforward. At the very least, they will always feature the name of the manufacturer and the name of the cartridge/caliber. The manufacturer marking will typically be composed entirely of letters and either be abbreviated or completely spelled out. The moniker/caliber information will be composed of both letters and numbers and may be abbreviated or completely spelled out. While most headstamp markings are fairly obvious, others can be a bit challenging. There are plenty of books and websites that provide information on various headstamps throughout history and around the world. One very good source is the Association of Firearm and Tool Mark Examiners (AFTE) headstamp guide: <https://afte.org/resources/headstamp-guide>.

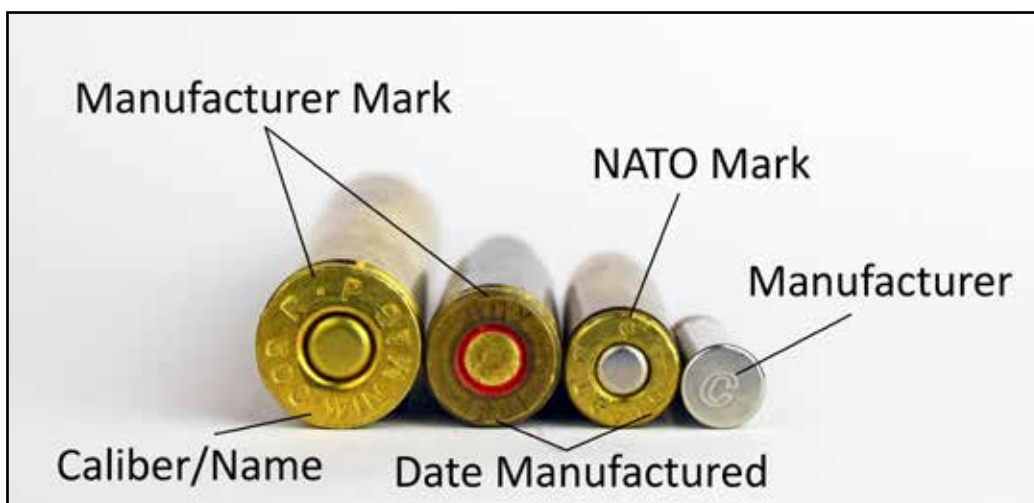


Figure 7: Reading headstamps.

A Quick Reference Guide

The following is a quick reference guide of the most popular headstamps.

Headstamp	Manufacturer
A-MERC	American Ammunition
ACP/A USA	Arms Corporation of the Philippines (Arm Scor)/ Arm Scor USA
Aguila	Aguila
AMTECH	Am-Tech International (ATI)
Barnes	Barnes
Barrett	Barrett Firearms Manufacturing, Inc.
Blazer	CCI/Speer Operations
Browning	Browning Arms Company
CCI/CCI NR	Cascade Cartridges, Inc.
Double Tap	Double Tap Ammunition
DRT	Dynamic Research Technologies
EXT SHK	Extreme Shock Munitions
FC/Federal/ Federal NT	Federal Cartridge Co.
Glaser	CORBON/Glaser LLC
Herter's/HRTRS	Herter's Inc.
Hornady	Hornady Manufacturing Co.
HPR	High Precision Range
Hydra-Shok	Hydra-Shok Corporation
IMI/IMI NATO	Israel Military Industries
Lapua	Nammo Lapua Oy
LC	Lake City Army Ammunition Plant

Headstamp	Manufacturer
Liberty	Liberty Cartridge Co
MKE	Makina ve Kimya Endustrisi Kurumu
Norma	Norma Precision AB
Nosler	Nosler
Perfecta	Perfecta
PMC/P.M.C	Eldorado Cartridge Company
PPU	Prvi Partizan
REM UMC/ REM-UMC	Remington Union Metallic Company
R-P	Remington Peters
SIG	Sig Sauer
S&B	Sellier & Bellot
Speer/Speer DWN	Speer Products Co.
SSA	Silver State Armory
Super-X	Winchester
S&W	Smith & Wesson Ammunition Co.
Tulammo	Tulammo
WCC/WCC NATO/ Winchester	Winchester Cartridge Co.
Weatherby	Weatherby Inc.
Wilson	Wilson Combat Custom Ammunition
Wolf	Wolf Performance Ammunition

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