How to Start a Fire: Every Method, Easiest to Hardest

Thirteen ways to start a fire, ranked from lighters and stormproof matches to ferro rods, flint and steel, and friction, with fire lays, wet-weather tips, safety, and a printable kit checklist.

By Master · November 27, 2026



This guide ranks every common way to start a fire from easiest to hardest. It assumes total shutdown: no electricity, no stores, and no help for days. It leans on the US Army's survival manual and standard scout practice, and it gives you one standard method so you can act fast. Print the checklist and put a fire kit in your pack, your car and your kitchen drawer.

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HOW-TO · FIRE

Every Way to Start a Fire

Easiest to hardest. Start at the top, move down only when you must. Gather tinder, kindling and fuel before you strike.

6 

FRICTION
Bow drill, hand drill, fire plow
Practice at home first. Takes hours to learn.

5 

SUN AND STEEL
Lens, flint & steel, fire piston
Sun needed. Stainless steel will not spark.

4 

SPARKS
Ferro rod, magnesium, battery + wool
Fine dry tinder is the key.

3 

STARTERS
Tinder that takes any spark
Cotton + petroleum jelly, fatwood, char cloth.

2 

MATCHES
Stormproof lasts in wind
Store in a sealed, waterproof case.

1 

LIGHTER
Flick and light
Keep one warm in a pocket in deep cold.

BEFORE YOU LIGHT IT

- Gather tinder, kindling, fuel first
- Light from the upwind side
- Never use gasoline or other accelerants
- Burn outdoors only (carbon monoxide)

WET WOOD
Split it; the heart is dry

LAY
Tepee first, log cabin for coals

BURN BAN
Check your county first

PUT OUT
Drown, stir, feel

SOURCES *US Army FM 21-76; Boy Scout Handbook; US Forest Service; CDC.*

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The fire ladder, easiest to hardest. Print this page or save it as a PDF.

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The Ladder at a Glance

#	Method	Skill (1-5)	Wet or windy?	You need
1	Lighter	1	Weak in deep cold or if soaked	A lighter with fuel
2	Matches (stormproof)	1	Stormproof: yes. Plain matches: no	Waterproof case
3	Starters and tinder	1	Fatwood and jelly cotton: yes	Prepped before you need them
4	Ferro rod	2	Yes. Wipe it dry	Fine dry tinder
5	Magnesium block	3	Yes	Ferro rod and a knife
6	Battery and steel wool	2	Keep the wool dry	9-volt and 0000 steel wool
7	Magnifying lens	3	Needs bright sun	A lens and dry tinder
8	Flint and steel	3	Sparks work wet, tinder must be dry	Flint, carbon steel, char cloth
9	Fire piston	4	Yes, if the char cloth is dry	Piston and char cloth
10	Potassium permanganate and glycerin	2 (hazardous)	Mostly	Both chemicals, kept apart
11	Bow drill	4	No, needs dry wood	Fireboard, spindle, socket, bow
12	Hand drill	5	No	Spindle and fireboard
13	Fire plow	5	No	Hardwood shaft, softwood base

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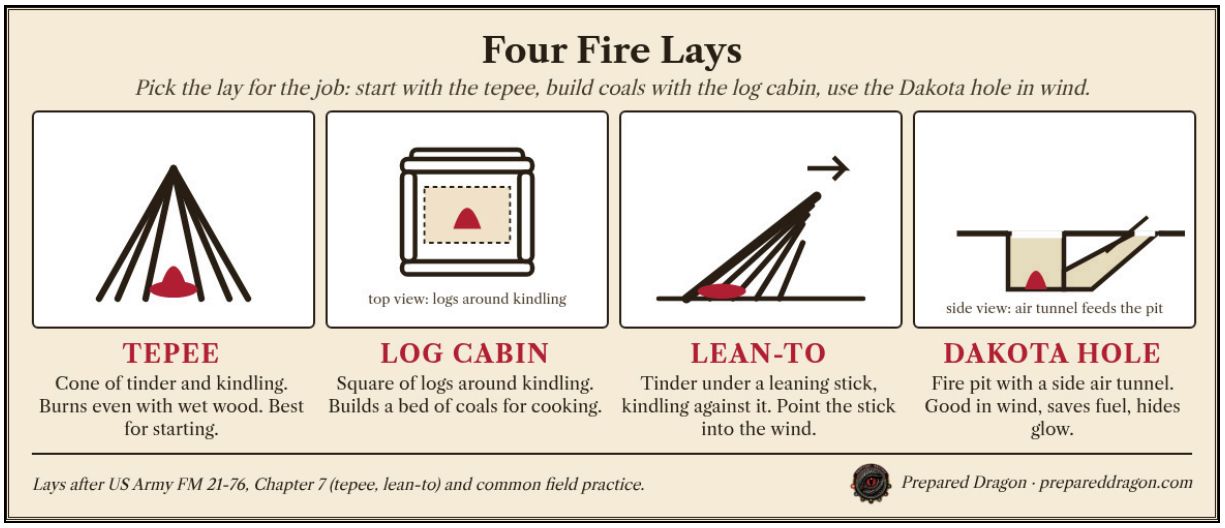
Before You Strike Anything: Fire Basics

A fire needs three things to burn: oxygen, heat, and fuel. Without any one of them the fire goes out.

Stage	What it is	Examples
Tinder	Dry material that catches from a spark or small flame	Dry grass, cotton balls, char cloth, birch bark, dryer lint
Kindling	Small sticks that feed the flame from tinder	Pencil-thin twigs, split feather sticks
Fuel	Larger wood that keeps the fire going	Thumb-thick sticks up to wrist-thick logs

- ☐ Gather tinder bundle first
- ☐ Gather pencil-thin kindling
- ☐ Gather thumb-thick sticks
- ☐ Gather wrist-thick fuel
- ☐ Build on a dry platform of rocks or green sticks
- ☐ Keep water and a shovel ready

Pick a Fire Lay



Four fire lays. Start with the tepee.

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TEPEE

Arrange tinder and a few sticks of kindling in a cone shape. Light the tinder in the center. As the kindling burns the outer sticks fall inward and feed the fire. This lay works even with damp wood once the center catches.

LOG CABIN

Place two logs parallel on the ground and set two more across them to form a square around your tinder and kindling. Add more layers in the same pattern. The structure creates steady airflow and builds a bed of coals. It works well for cooking once the fire settles.

LEAN-TO

Push a sturdy green stick into the ground at a 30-degree angle so it points into the wind. Place tinder under the low end and lean kindling against the stick. Add more kindling as each piece catches, then fuel. The angled stick shelters the tinder from the wind.

DAKOTA HOLE

Dig a pit about a foot across and a foot deep with a narrow tunnel at the base for air to enter from the side. Set tinder and kindling in the pit and light from the top. The hole hides the glow and uses less fuel while the side tunnel supplies oxygen. It performs well in wind or when you need to stay low profile.

The Army's FM 21-76 also describes a cross-ditch lay that scratches a shallow X in the ground for airflow under the tinder and a pyramid lay that stacks logs in layers with the starter fire on top so the fire burns downward with little tending.

The Ladder: Every Method, Easiest to Hardest

Start with what is already in your pocket or pack. Move down the ladder only when the easier tools fail. Ratings: 1 is easy, 5 is hard.

1. LIGHTER

Press the button and hold the flame to your tinder bundle until it catches. Keep the lighter warm in an inner pocket because butane lighters become unreliable in deep cold. Use it first in any dry or sheltered spot where wind is low.

2. MATCHES, INCLUDING STORMPROOF MATCHES

Strike the match and cup the flame close to fine tinder so it ignites before the wind takes it. Stormproof matches keep burning even when rain or wind hits them. Carry them in a waterproof case and use them when a lighter fails or when you need a longer flame to start damp material.

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3. FIRE STARTERS AND TINDER

These items help every other method work faster and more reliably. Cotton balls smeared with petroleum jelly burn longer than plain cotton, fatwood lights even when damp, and char cloth catches a spark with little effort. Form a loose bird’s-nest bundle of any of them and place it where your spark or flame lands first.

4. FERRO ROD

Scrape or strike the rod with a hard edge to shower hot sparks onto fine dry tinder. The rod works after it gets wet once you wipe it dry. Use it when matches and lighters are gone or when you need sparks in damp conditions.

5. MAGNESIUM BLOCK

Scrape thin shavings from the block into a small pile on your tinder, then spark the shavings with a ferro rod. The shavings catch quickly and transfer heat to the tinder below. Keep the block dry and use it only after simpler spark methods fail.

6. BATTERY AND STEEL WOOL (9-VOLT)

Touch both terminals of a 9-volt battery to fine 0000 steel wool so the wool glows and burns into your tinder. The Army field manual also shows attaching wires to battery terminals and touching the bare ends together beside tinder to create sparks. Do not carry a battery loose in a pocket with metal objects because they can short and heat up.

> Warning: Short circuits from batteries and metal can cause burns or start unintended fires. Keep batteries separate from coins, keys, or steel wool at all times.

7. MAGNIFYING LENS AND SOLAR METHODS

Point a convex lens at dry tinder on a bright sunny day and hold the focused spot until the tinder smolders, then blow gently to flame. Use the lens from binoculars, a camera, or a magnifying glass. A clear water-filled bottle or an ice lens can focus sunlight but work slowly and often fail.

8. FLINT AND STEEL

Strike a piece of flint or another hard sharp rock with carbon steel only to throw sparks onto fine tinder. Stainless steel will not produce useful sparks. This method is reliable once you learn the loose-wrist motion, and you blow on the spark once it lands.

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9. FIRE PISTON

Place a small piece of char cloth inside the sealed cylinder, then give the plunger a fast hard push. The sudden compression heats the air enough to create an ember. Transfer the ember to your tinder bundle and blow it into flame.

10. CHEMICAL METHOD: POTASSIUM PERMANGANATE AND GLYCERIN

Place a small pile of potassium permanganate crystals at the fire lay and add a few drops of glycerin. After a short delay the mixture heats and flames. Use this only as a last resort.

> Warning: Potassium permanganate stains and irritates skin and eyes. Keep it away from skin, other chemicals, and children. Store the two substances separately and mix them only at the fire lay. Never mix them in a closed container.

11. BOW DRILL

Assemble a fireboard with a small notch cut in it, a spindle, a socket, and a bow with cord to spin the spindle against the fireboard. The friction grinds hot wood dust into a glowing ember that falls into the notch. Tip it onto a tinder nest and blow it into flame. The method takes steady effort and persistence.

12. HAND DRILL

Spin a straight spindle between your palms against a fireboard to create hot dust that forms an ember. The technique works the same way as the bow drill but without the bow, so it demands more sustained effort. Keep your hands moving quickly and add pressure as the dust darkens.

13. FIRE PLOW

Cut a groove in a softwood base and plow the blunt tip of a hardwood shaft up and down the groove. Friction heats the wood particles until they ignite. Move steadily and keep the groove clear of debris.

Friction fire is a skill to practice at home before you need it.

> Prepared Dragon Standard Method: Tepee First, Ferro Rod as the Reliable Igniter
>
> Gather tinder, kindling and fuel first. Light a tepee from the upwind side with a lighter or stormproof matches, and carry a ferro rod and a tin of char cloth as backup. Where sources disagree on which lay or igniter is best, we choose the safest proven method.

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The Army manual lists the tepee as burning well even with wet wood, so we start there. Boy Scout and Army sources agree on the fuel ladder: tinder, kindling, then fuel. For friction methods, practice at home first.

Wet Weather and Wind: How to Light Anyway

- [ ] Use standing dead wood rather than wood lying on wet ground.
- [ ] Split wet logs to reach the dry heartwood inside.
- [ ] Shave feather sticks from dry inner wood to create fine tinder.
- [ ] Look for dead twigs sheltered under evergreen boughs.
- [ ] Build the fire on a platform of green sticks or rocks to keep it off damp soil.
- [ ] Shield the fire lay from rain with a tarp or natural windbreak.
- [ ] Dry damp wood near the fire before adding it to the flames.
- [ ] Carry a supply of dry tinder in a sealed bag at all times.

Fire Safety and Putting It Out

Keep a bucket of water and a shovel beside any fire. Build the fire at least ten feet from tents, vehicles, or dry grass and clear all overhanging branches. Never leave the fire unattended. Extinguish it completely before you walk away.

Warning: Never use gasoline or other accelerants. Never burn charcoal or run a grill or camp stove indoors, because of carbon monoxide risk. Burn wood indoors only in a fireplace or stove with a working chimney.

1. Drown the fire with water until no hissing or steam remains.
2. Stir the ashes and embers thoroughly with a shovel.
3. Feel for heat with the back of your hand, then touch carefully. Everything must feel cold before you leave.

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Texas Rules Before You Light

> Counties can order outdoor-burning bans in dry weather. Check the Texas A&M Forest Service burn-ban information and local rules before lighting an outdoor fire. In a true emergency a small contained cooking fire may be needed for survival, but wildfire danger remains real in Texas.

Printable Fire Kit Checklist

- ☐ Lighter
- ☐ Second lighter
- ☐ Stormproof matches
- ☐ Ferro rod
- ☐ Cotton balls in a sealed bag
- ☐ Fatwood pieces
- ☐ Char cloth in a small tin
- ☐ Fine steel wool
- ☐ Small knife
- ☐ Candle stub
- ☐ Metal cup or tin
- ☐ Dry sealed bag for tinder

Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS THE EASIEST WAY TO START A FIRE?

Strike a match or lighter onto a prepared bird’s-nest of dry tinder. Add kindling once the tinder catches, then larger fuel.

WHAT IF EVERYTHING IS WET?

Split wet wood to reach dry heartwood. Use standing dead branches and carry dry tinder in a sealed bag. Build on a raised platform and shield the lay from rain.

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CAN I USE A LIGHTER IN THE COLD?

Butane lighters often fail in deep cold. Keep one warm in an inner pocket and have a ferro rod or stormproof matches as backup.

IS THE CHEMICAL METHOD SAFE?

Potassium permanganate and glycerin works but stains skin and irritates eyes. Mix only at the fire lay in open air, keep the chemicals separate until needed, and store them away from children.

> Related: Read Hunting and Food Procurement for cooking and preserving game, and the 3-Day Power Outage Guide for cooking fire safety.

SOURCES

- US Army, *FM 21-76 Survival*, Chapter 7, Firecraft (public domain); and *ATP 3-50.21 Survival*, Army Publishing Directorate.
- Boy Scouts of America, *Scout Handbook* and *Fieldbook* fire-building sections (paraphrased, not quoted).
- US Forest Service / Smokey Bear, Campfire Safety
- CDC, What to Do to Protect Yourself During a Power Outage
- Texas A&M Forest Service, outdoor burning and burn-ban information, tfsweb.tamu.edu.

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