

The purpose of the HorseCentered Levels is to deepen understanding of the horse while developing practical, hands-on training skills.

Learning why horses behave the way they do, and how to modify behavior ethically as well as effectively, can prevent frustration and suffering in both horse and handler. These Levels are designed to accommodate a variety of different groundwork approaches, with the goal of creating well-rounded trainers who can choose and use methods while prioritizing partnership and the horse's well-being.

INTRODUCTION – THE BIG PICTURE

Training sessions must be safe for horse and handler. Students must learn how to conduct themselves around horses appropriately and practice basic horse handling skills before attempting any kind of groundwork.

*For a list of suggested prerequisites and educational resources, see the **Red HorseSense Level** in the Learning Levels Curriculum: <https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/learning-levels/the-levels-curriculum/>*

Hands-on ground training skills should be practiced under the supervision and guidance of an experienced instructor. This instructor should have a reputation built on kind, effective horsemanship; not all riders or instructors are good trainers!

To complete an objective, the handler must demonstrate the skill using the lightest cue possible - no rough handling allowed. Care should be taken that the horse is performing the skill *only* when cued, for the handler's safety.

The horse's well-being should take priority over achieving any objective, particularly within a specific time frame. Handlers should listen as carefully as they command and watch for signs that the horse is experiencing anxiety or discomfort.

Ground training should be fun for everyone involved! Handlers should keep practice sessions short and positive, and approach every skill with the spirit of investigative play.

TERMS & DEFINITIONS

There are many training philosophies and systems for working with a horse on the ground. These systems often use their own terms and phrases to describe common exercises.

The HorseCentered Levels use terminology designed to universally apply to different training styles. As you read through each Level's objectives, refer to the following definitions:

YIELD: Asking the horse to move one or more body parts in a specific direction. This may be accomplished through an application of pressure, a tactile cue, or a directional cue using a target. At all Levels, the goal is for the horse to willingly respond to a light cue.

SEND: Directing the horse to move to a specific location. This can include asking the horse to move around, over or onto obstacles.

TARGETING: Asking the horse to touch an object with a specific body part. Although only stationary targets are required in these Levels, a moving target may be used to cue other behaviors.

PATIENT POSITIONING: The default posture a horse should adopt in the absence of cues, standing still in a state of relaxation. This skill is particularly critical when utilizing training methods based on positive reinforcement and food rewards.

CIRCLE: The horse moves in a circle around the handler, at the end of a lead rope, long line or at liberty. Regardless of style and equipment choices, the horse's comfort, balance and soundness should be taken into consideration whenever working on a circle.

LIBERTY: The handler works with the horse without the assistance of a lead rope or other restraints. Cues may be delivered entirely through body language or light touch; appropriately-utilized tools such as a target or directional whip are permitted.

DESENSITIZING: The process of teaching a horse to calmly accept a stimuli such as a frightening object or sound. Care must be taken to build true confidence and avoid creating learned helplessness.

REQUIREMENTS & EQUIPMENT SPECIFICATIONS:

Each Level may be completed with any horse (or combination of horses) that can safely and comfortably perform the required tasks. Beyond a safe, preferably enclosed workspace, minimal equipment is required. A few suggestions:

- 🐾 **Boots** for the handler are a must! A **helmet** and **gloves** are strongly recommended, especially for novice handlers. Secure long hair and remove dangling jewelry or loose clothing.
- 🐾 Initial training skills should be practiced in a **carefully-fitted halter or cavesson**.
- 🐾 The exercises in **Pink Level** can be achieved with a regular **lead rope**; a 10' length is recommended. Avoid slick or stiff nylon that may burn the hands.
- 🐾 More advanced circling skills will require a **longer training rope or longe line**, 25' to 35' in length. Remove chain attachments.
- 🐾 A **dressage whip or "carrot stick"** is allowed for all ground training skills, provided it is used for directing and applying cues, **not** for administering punishment.
- 🐾 Students who wish to train via positive reinforcement may prefer to carry a **target stick** of any length. If food rewards are used, handlers should feed from a designated **pouch** (not pockets).
- 🐾 **2 or more cones** are recommended for use as markers and as stationary targets. Blocks or buckets may be used instead.
- 🐾 You'll need a minimum of one **stationary target that the horse can stand on** comfortably, such as a mat or shallow rubber pan.
- 🐾 **Obstacles** can take can many forms, provided they are safe for horses. Horses can cross ground poles, tarps or bridges; navigate cone mazes; and jump over straw bales or barrels, depending on their physical ability. Don't be afraid to use your imagination!
- 🐾 For **Gold Level**, access to a **mounting block** or similar structure is required, as well as to a **securely-hitched horse trailer**.

LEVEL ONE - PINK

Objectives: Students will gain familiarity with basic equine behavior and training principles while practicing a variety of foundational groundwork exercises. Students are encouraged to prioritize the horse's enjoyment and develop awareness of the horse's posture and mental state.

- Discuss approaches to training, to include the difference between positive and negative reinforcement.
- Discuss benefits and cautions to using food rewards with horses, to include appropriate timing, reinforcing only desired behavior, and safe methods of food delivery.
- Identify major and minor stress signals in the horse.
- Demonstrate leading skills from near and off side:
 - Transitions between the walk, trot and halt
 - Turns and changes of direction
 - Backing up
- Demonstrate basic yields:
 - Yield hindquarters on both sides
 - Yield shoulders on both sides
 - Back up for a minimum of 10'
 - Lower horse's head
- Send horse:
 - Through gate or stall door
 - In a figure-eight pattern around two cones, at the walk
- Circle at walk and trot, with safe technique, showing awareness of horse's balance and relaxation.
- Target a stationary object.
- Discuss strategies for helping a horse overcome fear.
- Discuss how to approach everyday horse handling tasks with partnership, including catching and grooming.
- Create an enrichment activity for horse's enjoyment.
- Identify a training goal and create a written plan showing step by step progression.

LEVEL TWO - WHITE

Objectives: Students will expand on previous skills and apply various training techniques to more sophisticated groundwork, including targeting exercises and introductory liberty work. Students are encouraged to consider the impact of a horse's environment on the training process and to utilize obstacles safely and creatively.

- Discuss what is meant by a species-appropriate environment and how it impacts training.
- Demonstrate familiarity with operant conditioning quadrant, providing examples of reinforcement and punishment and relating to common horse handling practices.
- Teach horse polite, patient positioning for food delivery.
- Demonstrate leading at liberty:
 - Transitions between the walk, trot and halt
 - Turns and changes of direction
 - Backing up
- Demonstrate basic yields at liberty:
 - Yield hindquarters on both sides
 - Yield shoulders on both sides
 - Back up for a minimum of 10'
 - Lower horse's head
- Send horse:
 - Over an obstacle
 - In a figure-eight pattern around two cones, at the trot
- Circle on long line at all three gaits, with safe technique, showing awareness of horse's balance and relaxation and an appropriately-sized circle.
- Target a stationary object with hooves (mat, rubber pan, pedestal, etc.).
- Create a safe, appropriate obstacle for horse. Discuss mental and physical benefits of using this obstacle during training.
- Introduce a potentially frightening object and observe horse's body language and emotional state. Discuss and/or demonstrate safe, methodical desensitizing designed to encourage horse's confidence and curiosity.
- Train horse to perform trick of choice in response to cue.
- Create a written training plan designed to improve aspect of horse's routine handling (tying, feeding, hoof care, trailer loading, etc.).

LEVEL THREE - GOLD

Objectives: Students will deepen awareness of equine body language and knowledge of advanced training concepts, demonstrating partnership and communication throughout all groundwork exercises. Students are encouraged to consider the potential physical benefits of ground training and to apply problem-solving skills to a variety of common training scenarios.

- Discuss ethical horse training practices, to include appropriate use of negative and positive reinforcement and methods of creating two-way communication between horse and handler.
- Define terms: trigger stacking, fear threshold and flooding. Discuss methods of reducing a horse's anxiety/tension.
- Discuss and/or demonstrate methods for safely and effectively reducing food aggression.
- Demonstrate advanced leading skills at liberty:
 - Draw horse to handler in arena or pasture
 - Transitions between walk, trot, canter and halt
 - Maneuvering through and over obstacles
- Demonstrate advanced yields:
 - Sidepass away from handler
 - Sidepass toward handler
 - Cue horse to back up from rear
- Send horse:
 - Onto a mat, pedestal or similar stationary target from a distance
 - Onto a horse trailer
- Circle at liberty, prioritizing relaxation and balance in the horse, demonstrating transitions between gaits and multiple changes of direction.
- Demonstrate advanced targeting skills by teaching horse to:
 - Push ball through goal
 - Pick up object
- Demonstrate three different lateral maneuvers in hand.
- Teach horse to "pick up" rider at mounting block, using minimal cues.
- Demonstrate minimum of three groundwork exercises that can be used in rehabilitation and discuss physical benefits.
- Create a written training plan designed to address a common "problem" behavior (horse pulls back when tied, rushes jumps, etc.). Plan should explore possible causes due to health, soundness, environment, etc.