

LEADER LESSONS

- *Demonstrate safe leading from near side, both in barn and through doorways/gates.*

OBJECTIVE: As soon as the halter is fastened, it is time for the student to move onto the next stage of interacting with the horse: leading in hand. **Leading is a critical skill to teach as it establishes the dynamic between horse and handler**, setting the tone for any mounted work. It is also an area where **many equestrians tend to lapse into careless habits**. Teaching and requiring safe leading practices from your students can prevent accident and injury to both horse and handler.

Red Level students should learn **the difference between the near side and the off side**; correct **placement of hands on the lead rope** and how to manage the excess (in **folds, not coils!**); how to walk safely **through stall doors** and position horse while opening and closing; how to maneuver safely **through gates** (including crowd control for horses pastured in herds); and how to **communicate and control** the horse with voice, posture and pressure. Note that all leading at this level should be practiced at the walk—they'll get to trot in hand in Yellow Level!



CHECKING IT OFF: Leading is such a fundamental skill, you will have no difficulty at all incorporating it into routine lessons; even if horses are saddled and ready to go when students arrive for a riding lesson, they'll still have to lead the horse into the arena and position them for mounting! It is also worth devoting an entire lesson to the topic, even with experienced students. This can be a good choice for a rainy day if you have a large enough aisle or covered workspace, or a frozen day when students must be kept active and warm.

Because leading is such a commonplace skill, you may be tempted to check this one off without testing it thoroughly, but make sure students can demonstrate all components of this skill *with* confident leadership. If the horse continually grass dives or pushes the student around, they're not there yet.

You'll know they've got it: if they can safely and confidently maneuver the horse through the barn and in and out of the stall and pasture, opening and closing gates as they go.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

"Why do you think it is important to open stall doors wide before leading your horse through? What can happen if the space is too narrow?"

"What do you think you should do if you ask the horse to halt and he keeps on walking?"

"Imagine you are leading your horse out of the pasture and a dominant horse in the herd runs up behind you. How can you and your horse get through the gate safely?"

"Why might it be a bad idea to lead a horse without a lead rope, with your fingers hooked into one of the halter rings?"

FOLLOW
THE
LEADER!

DRESS REHEARSAL

Just as when learning to approach and halter a horse, it is best for students to **practice leading techniques without the equine variable** their first time out. This can easily be combined with a lesson on catching with the student acting as the “horse.” Once the “horse” is haltered, students can practice asking for walk and halt transitions, turning to the inside and outside, and managing the lead rope. Challenge more experienced students by blindfolding their “horse,” which requires them to develop a clear system of pressure and release.



On a rainy day, expand this to a full lesson by setting a small “in hand” obstacle course and having students lead each other through each task before practicing on a live horse. If space is tight, use just one horse and set up a relay for your group lessons, passing the patient horse from one student to another.

Beginners are often fine when leading the horse in a straight line but struggle with the multitasking needed to work a gate. Practice with arena/stall gates before moving to an occupied pasture where mistakes may result in loose horses! We suggest teaching an **order of operations** for students working gates, such as:

1. **Stop** by gate and **scan** for nearby horses or distractions.
2. **Unfasten** gate and swing **open**, wide enough for horse’s hips to clear with ease.
3. **Walk through** ahead of horse and **pivot** horse to face gate.
4. **Fasten** gate and **turn away** to lead horse onward.



SAFETY FIRST

- Is the student correctly attired in barn-safe shoes and a helmet?** For safety’s sake, require both during all of your horse handling lessons!
- Is the student holding the lead rope in the right place?** The hand closest to the horse should be positioned approximately 6” from the halter or bit, *not* holding metal. Many students hold too close, restricting the natural movement of the horse’s head and endangering their fingers if the horse should pull away.
- Is the excess lead rope folded neatly in the student’s outside hand?** Loops and coils that could tighten around the hand can develop easily—many handlers are not even aware of it happening.
- Is the student looking where they are going?** A handler that looks back at the horse communicates indecision and a lack of confidence, and can block the horse from going forward.
- Is the student positioned safely with the horse’s head by their shoulder?** It is common for beginners to get ahead and in front if the horse lags behind, increasing the risk of them getting stepped on and/or creating nippy herding behavior in the horse. While students should practice leading from both sides, their default position should be on the near side, especially with an unfamiliar horse.
- Is the horse quiet and attentive?** Ensure that all horses used for Red Level work are solid citizens who are unlikely to spook, balk, pull, or nip while leading. While we always want to encourage our students to think like a horse, beginner students shouldn’t have to be horse trainers! Provide school horses with an in hand tune-up as needed.

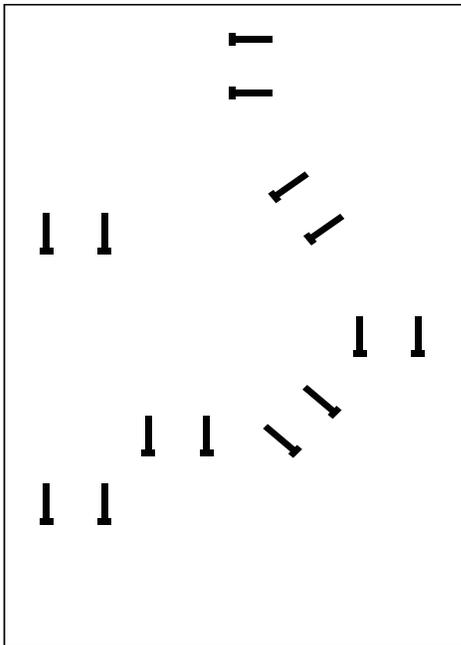


INVISIBLE COURSE

A simple way to practice leading skills—especially in a group environment—involves an **“invisible course,”** or a course consisting of empty jump standards and/or paired cones or poles. Students may **lead the horse through the standards** in one flowing track, as though riding around a course of jumps, or perform transitions at all or some of the obstacles. (To help your students remember the pattern, you can coordinate your equipment: for example, standards equal *walk through* while cones equal *halt*, or halts take place at only the *red* standards.)

Courses should include turns both to the left and the right. You can increase the difficulty by including several tighter, rollback-style turns, or by varying the width of your standards so that some are generous while others are set as “skinnies” similar to a 4’ gate. This exercise is best suited for an arena or similarly enclosed space, but can be laid out in a large aisle or flat field if that is all you have to work with.

As students practice directing their horses in the walk, discuss the importance of **focal points**, or targets for them to look at and walk toward with purpose. One of the most common mistakes made by beginners when both leading and riding is taking their eyes off their destination. **Intention** is extremely important when working with horses, and students should begin practicing it as early as possible.



When handling horses, we must look where we **WANT** to go, not where we **AFRAID** they will go.

CROWD CONTROL

As when teaching mounted lessons, group leading lessons require you to practice safe **crowd control**. Students may lead their horses through the course one at a time, or in staggered starts if the course does not cross its own path and set up a collision. While staggered starts may be a better choice if you have a short amount of time and/or a large group of students, make sure you never have more students on course than you have eyes to watch them.

Remaining horses awaiting their turn should be spread out and positioned in pockets of space where they cannot interfere with the horse on course or each other. Groups of waiting horses breed trouble, as inattentive handlers may let them sniff, squeal or fight, and the magnetic draw of the herd affects the horse on course.



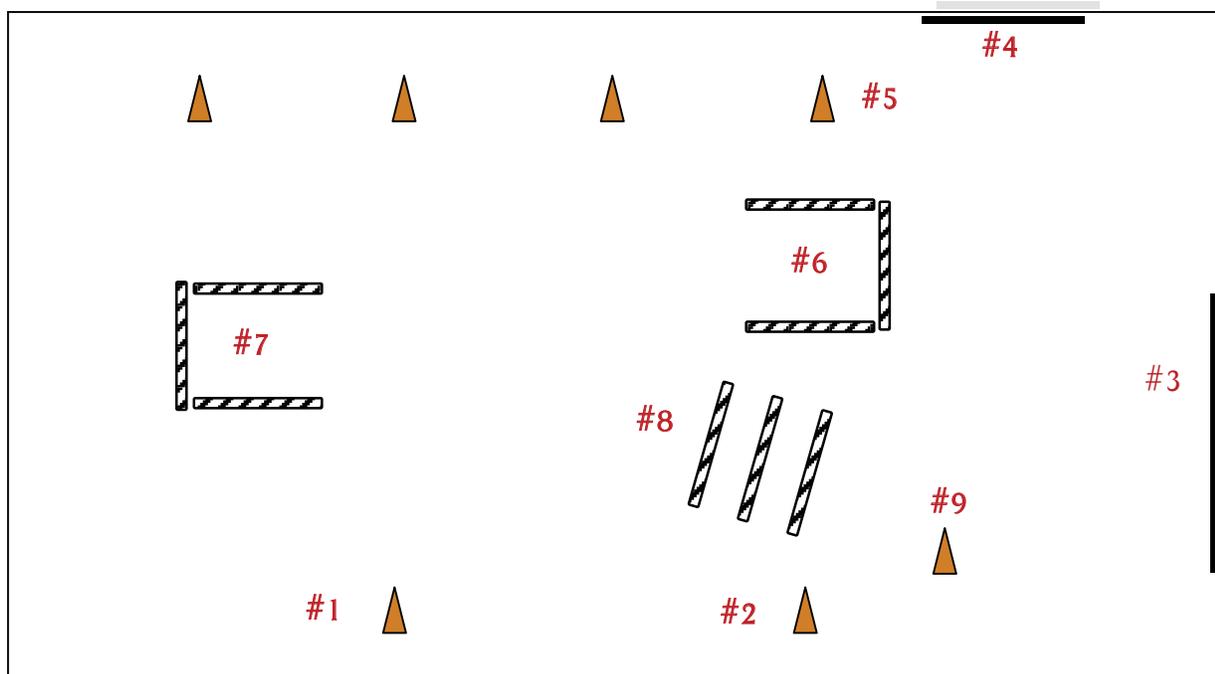
At all times, emphasize the need for horses to maintain personal space. Remind students that a horse’s space bubble is the length of its own body—much bigger than their own! When more than one student is leading at a time, establish rules for passing, yielding, and using circles to close or open space.

OBSTACLE COURSE

Challenge students to put their leading skills to the test by navigating an **in-hand obstacle course**, consisting of simple tasks such as transitions, inside and outside turns, weaving and gateways. This can be taught as an entire lesson, with students practicing each obstacle individually before linking together the entire course. You can combine lessons by having students go through the course first unmounted, then mounted. Or you can include the course in fun shows, groundwork sessions, or safety and handling clinics.

We often teach in-hand lessons in the winter when the footing is too hard to work above a walk. Students can bundle up and the active walking keeps everyone warm!

You may wish to offer a prize to each student that successfully completes all obstacles, or judge the course like a showmanship class. As you go, make sure to relate each obstacle to skills needed in the barn or when mounted.



SAMPLE IN HAND COURSE:

1. Walk horse to cone #1, halt and stand five seconds.
2. Proceed to cone #2, halt and stand five seconds.
3. Open large gate, lead horse through, close.
4. Open small gate, lead horse through, close.
5. Weave through cones.
6. Walk into box, turn horse *away* to reverse.
7. Walk into second box, yield hindquarters to reverse.
8. Walk over poles.
9. Halt and back up three steps.