

BLANKET BASICS

- ❑ *Blanket and remove blanket from horse safely.*

OBJECTIVE: In order for Yellow Level students to become **trustworthy helping hands** around the barn, they need to become comfortable performing a wide variety of stable management tasks. Along with feeding, watering, and mucking stalls, they should gain experience with **seasonal chores** such as blanketing and unblanketing horses.

Blanketing can be a controversial topic among horsepeople, which makes it a great opportunity for your students to practice **critical thinking**. Explain the criteria you use to decide if your horses need blankets - or not! Encourage them to consider **all** of the factors that go into blanketing and other horsekeeping decisions.

Of course, one of the most important skills to practice in the barn is accident prevention. This means learning and thinking about the **reasons for the rules** in **every** horse care routine. Blanketing is a great opportunity for students to practice thinking about the worst-case scenario and developing safe habits.



CHECKING IT OFF: Regular riding students may be able to practice blanketing as part of their pre-ride and post-ride routine, especially if you live in a cold climate. They should perform this task under supervision until you are confident in their ability to place and fasten a blanket correctly, without frightening or losing control of the horse.

Working students can be invited to help with winter barn chores, or you can teach blanketing as part of an unmounted lesson during a camp, clinic or rainy day. Even if you personally don't use horse blankets, students should still understand how to use them. Borrow a blanket if necessary!

You'll know they've got it: if they can put on and remove blankets with safe technique, keeping their body positioned out of harm's way. Students should be able to discuss correct fit, the order in which they fasten straps and buckles, and reasons a horse might need to wear a sheet or a blanket.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

"Do horses feel the cold the same way we do? How do you know if it is cold enough to blanket?"

"Do all horses need to wear a blanket? How does wearing a blanket interfere with the coat's natural defense against cold weather?"

"Why do you think it's a good idea to fasten a blanket's straps front to back? Why do we reverse this when we take it off?"

"What could happen if the surcingle straps on a blanket are allowed to hang low?"



BUNDLE UP!

TEACHING TERMINOLOGY

Teaching students about blankets is like introducing any other piece of tack - it comes along with several new terms, some of which can be confusing for a beginner. Your students will eventually need to be able to tell the difference between a **sheet** and a **blanket** as well as **turnout blankets**, **stable blankets**, and **coolers**. They'll need to know what you mean by **lightweight**, **medium weight** and **heavyweight**, to say nothing of surcingle straps! Add in the wide variety of brands and you have a case of information overload.



Whenever possible, **give your students physical examples to touch and handle**. We're guessing that if you've been in the horse business for a while, you've accumulated some blankets even if you don't use them regularly. If not, see if you can borrow some from horsey friends.

You can also **arrange a visit to a tack shop**. Show students the variety of options available and help them sort through the relevant information. Sure, that pink zebra blanket is cute, but will it fit Pebbles? Will this water-*resistant* blanket actually keep Diva dry in the pasture?

A PERFECT FIT

While you're doing some imaginary blanket shopping, you can teach your students **how to measure a horse for a blanket** and **make adjustments** to the fit. After all, an ill-fitting blanket can be worse than no blanket at all.

Tie or stable quiet, cooperative horses and ponies - while you can teach this lesson with a single horse, it can be a huge benefit to have a variety of sizes and shapes to compare. Start with a **soft measuring tape, pencil and paper**. Demonstrate how to measure for a blanket from chest to buttock and then ask students to **estimate the size**, in inches, of each horse or pony before they perform their own measurement.

Provide a stack of catalogs and invite students to go shopping. Maybe that really cute heart-print blanket comes in a size just above or below their horse's measurement - can they still buy it, or will they have to look elsewhere?

Return to your patient equine models, this time with two or three old blankets in different sizes. Put them on to show students the difference a few inches can make. Then **choose a blanket that is the correct size or close to it, and help students adjust all the straps**. Show them where they should be able to fit a fist and how to keep leg straps from rubbing delicate skin. Discuss the danger of loose belly straps and how to prevent blanket rubs.



ON AGAIN, OFF AGAIN

When it comes to hands-on skills such as blanketing, there's no substitute for repetitive practice. Tie or cross-tie a patient school horse and **demonstrate** putting on and removing a blanket before asking students to do the same. Repeat several times, until students can perform each step in order and explain the rationale behind them.



On a rainy day... teach blanketing along with applying protective boots. Assemble a variety of sheets, blankets, coolers, splint boots, bell boots, shipping boots, and any other horse clothing you have handy. Divide students into teams and assign items for them to put on, or let them choose from the pile. Once each team is comfortably and correctly putting on their blankets and boots, it's time to swap!

NO HORSE, NO PROBLEM

Your Yellow Level students need to learn how to put on a blanket - but it's 100° outside and all your blankets are still in winter storage. Or maybe it's pouring rain as well as gusting wind and your muddy horses are running around with wild eyes and tails in the air.

Luckily, there are a couple of ways you can still make a blanketing lesson happen:

-  **Practice on a model horse first.** If you can't find a model horse blanket with accurately designed straps, you can make one relatively easily with felt, ribbon, eye hooks and craft glue. But shop around first - there are several realistic options sized for Breyer Model Horses online, including a few on Amazon!
-  **Work with what you've got.** If wind is not a problem, blanketing can easily be practiced on a porch railing. Miniature horse blankets can be put over a saddle rack, or even a willing human volunteer playing "horse" on their hands and knees. If you have a blanket small enough for human students to wear - and the "horse" spooks in the middle of blanketing - this can be a laughter-filled lesson they won't soon forget.



BUCKLE UP

For many students, the challenging part of putting on and removing a blanket isn't maneuvering the blanket itself - it's the buckles. **The fasteners commonly used on blankets are often unfamiliar to students**, especially small children. Just because you find them intuitive doesn't mean their young hands will! Take the time to demonstrate how each fastener works, especially **claw snaps** and the **hook and loop** closures often found on surcingle straps.



By the way, poop happens... and the buckles on real life leg straps are probably going to be crusted with it. Gently point out to your squeamish students that even dirty straps have to be unfastened. If they are genuinely grossed out, they can always wear gloves!

MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

Of course, experienced horse people know that the hardest part about blanketing is deciding whether to put the thing on the first place. Even though your students probably don't have to make this decision on their own right now, they might someday!

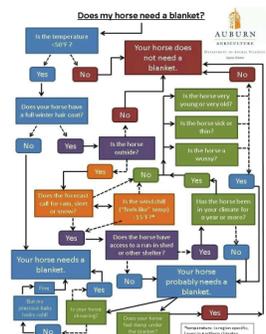


Where we teach in Georgia, temperature swings are a routine part of life from October through April. It might be 35° F when an adult student arrives in the morning, and 58° by the time they turn the horse out after their lesson. It gives us peace of mind knowing that our students and lessees can make an informed decision to put a blanket back on or leave it off.

Your criteria for making this decision depends on a lot of factors - including your personal philosophies on blanketing. Modify this list to suit your barn's practices and provide it to students as a class handout or as part of an information packet.

- 🐾 **At what temperature is this horse normally blanketed?** Do you know the owner's reasoning?
- 🐾 **What is the low temperature predicted to be,** including wind chill?
- 🐾 **If the cold weather is coming in later, can you safely blanket the horse now without him sweating?** A sweaty horse can be worse off than an unblanketed horse.
- 🐾 **Is the horse clipped?** If he is only partially clipped, does the clip reach his topline? If unclipped, has he grown a substantial winter coat?
- 🐾 **Does the horse live inside or out?** Will he have plenty of hay and freedom to move?
- 🐾 **How old is the horse?** Does he regularly suffer from stiffness or arthritis?
- 🐾 **What is the horse's body condition?** Is he otherwise healthy?
- 🐾 **Will it be raining or snowing?** Is the horse's blanket completely waterproof?
- 🐾 **Is his blanket warm enough to make up for the flattening of his winter coat?** A thick, healthy coat left to its own devices is often the best insulation against cold there is!

The internet is full of helpful and hilarious flowcharts on blanketing, including this colorful version from Auburn University. Got some time on a rainy day? Challenge your students to create a similar chart for their own horse, guiding potential future caretakers through the decision process. They can be as serious or as funny as you like, but encourage students to make them useful enough to post on a stall door!



You can also download a printable version of our criteria above at:

<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource-center/resources-by-level/yellow-level-resources/>