

Red Level Horsemanship

A Study Guide for the Mounted Learning Levels Curriculum



HorseSense Learning Levels

Welcome to the

Red Level Guide to Horsemanship!

The Red Horsemanship Level is an introductory level, designed to give students a safe overview of basic mounted and unmounted skills.

Red Level is appropriate for all students age 8 and up, including returning riders who want to refresh their basics as well as those with no prior horse experience. Our goal is for Red Level students to come away from their initial lessons with a balanced seat, an appreciation for the horse/human relationship, an understanding of basic terminology, and most importantly, a desire to continue their equine education.



This guide will take you through each of the required objectives for Red Level Horsemanship, explaining them in further detail, as well as offering helpful hints and activities for accelerating your progress.

Please remember that this guide is meant to be a supplement to regular lessons, and not as a replacement.

The activities mentioned in this guide should be practiced only under the supervision of an instructor or another knowledgeable adult!

Here's what you'll learn in Red Level Horsemanship:




blankets and boots
conditioning
equine behavior
flatwork skills
gaits and movement
grooming
ground handling
hoof care
horse ID
jumping skills
mounted safety
tack
unmounted safety

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A Note About the Levels Program

The Learning Levels program is our unique method of tracking progress in students as they develop into versatile, well-rounded riders and horsemen. Students work to master specific skills in each of the levels, and receive recognition for completion when they are able to consistently demonstrate each of the skills to their instructor. In many cases, achievement of one level is a prerequisite for learning more advanced skills such as jumping.

The Levels are divided into three branches to reflect the main areas of study within our riding school:

-  The *Horsemanship Levels* concentrate on the rider's ability in the saddle, culminating in a rider who is balanced, educated and confident and can ride a schooled horse with skill and tact on the flat, over fences and in the open.
-  The *HorseSense Levels* focus on the extensive body of knowledge needed to care for and work with horses successfully, testing students on horse handling, veterinary and stable management skills.
-  The *HorseCentered Levels* introduce training and groundwork skills, allowing students to apply training techniques in a wide variety of situations while increasing communication and connection with the horse.

If you are not already a participant in the Levels Program and you are interested becoming one, please ask your instructor for more information.

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<https://HorseSenseLearningLevels.com>

Visit our website to learn more about the Learning Levels program.



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Special thanks to all of the HorseSense students and horses who are featured here.

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and Evan Surrusco.

Photographs by our amazing
barn family volunteer
photographers.

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Red Horsemanship Objectives

The Red Level is an introductory level,
designed to start you on the journey of becoming a safe and skilled equestrian.

Let's take a look at the requirements for Red Level.
You can use this checklist to set goals and assess your progress.

- ☐ Brush, pick hooves, saddle and bridle, with assistance only if necessary. Show awareness of basic horse safety techniques.
You should be able to prepare your horse for a lesson, with a basic understanding of grooming and tacking up. This means learning safe behavior in the barn and the basics of horse psychology.
- ☐ Mount and dismount independently (with mounting block if needed).
- ☐ Perform warm-up stretches independently.
You will learn several stretches that will loosen your muscles and help you to develop a correct, balanced seat. You should be able to perform these without prompting, with one hand on the reins.
- ☐ Perform an emergency dismount at the halt and walk.
- ☐ Demonstrate a pulley rein and a safety seat.
- ☐ Halt by disengaging pony's hips ("moving the tail") from walk, once on each rein.
You should be able to easily demonstrate several survival skills that you can use in an emergency. It's important to have an action plan if your horse spooks, bolts, or bucks.
- ☐ Drop stirrups and pick up again, without looking down, at the halt.
- ☐ Shorten and lengthen reins correctly.
- ☐ Perform walk/halt transitions, maintaining balanced position.
- ☐ Demonstrate the following maneuvers:
 - ☐ Change of direction across diagonal
 - ☐ Half-circle reverse
 - ☐ Half-turn
 - ☐ Large circle**You should be able to communicate with the horse well enough to ride independently at the walk. You can test this by changing gait and guiding him accurately through various ring figures, or shapes.**
- ☐ Ride in two-point at the walk and over poles.
- ☐ Ride a simple ground pole course at walk, demonstrating jumping position and good approaches.
You can practice preparing to jump by riding in two-point position. You should feel balanced and secure in a jumping position at the walk, and demonstrate how to ride a course over ground poles.
- ☐ Ride on the rail at a posting trot, once around in each direction.
Your big challenge at the Red Level will be learning to take the bounce out of the trot. You need to be able to maintain control and a steady posting rhythm as you trot around the arena.

A SPECIAL NOTE FOR RED LEVEL STUDENTS:

There are many different paths to becoming an educated equestrian. You might take regular weekly lessons at a riding school, or attend a summer camp. Your early experiences might not include riding at all, instead providing an introduction to working with horses and caring for them on the ground.

HorseSense Learning Levels is divided into two separate tracks for this very reason. If your equine experience is primarily based around riding lessons, you will likely be studying the Horsemanship Levels, while the HorseSense curriculum covers unmounted topics. For the most part, these two courses of study cover different material. **In Red Level, however, you will notice some overlap** - both the Horsemanship and the HorseSense guide discuss horse safety and essential ground handling skills.

We feel that these topics are **important enough to discuss twice**, so if you are a student of both Horsemanship and HorseSense Levels, we encourage you to review any section that appears twice. Careful readers will also notice that certain information only appears in one guide, or may be expanded to include further detail.

Whether you are a new rider or an experienced equestrian, we hope you use this deliberate repetition to refresh your knowledge and awareness.

The more you learn, the safer and happier both you and your horse will be!

Safety First

It is very special to be able to interact with horses. They can transport us to another place and be our best friends! However, it is important to remember that they are horses, and they think and act differently than we do. You will need to understand the basics of **horse psychology** in order to work with them safely.

Eat and be eaten



Don't be this guy!

Horses are **prey animals**. That means that unlike humans, they exist at the lower end of the food chain, and have survived through the years by using their alert senses and reactivity.

Prey animals think that anything scary is a threat to their lives. They can perceive a wide variety of "normal" things as a threat: loud noises, sudden movement, and objects flapping in the breeze are top on a horse's list of things better investigated from a distance.

Humans are natural predators. That means that our normal mannerisms and behavior can make a horse uncomfortable. When working with a horse, you'll need to practice thinking like a prey animal and **not** acting like a horse-eating predator.

When we are startled, we usually try to figure out what it is that has scared us.

Horses will save themselves first and ask questions later.

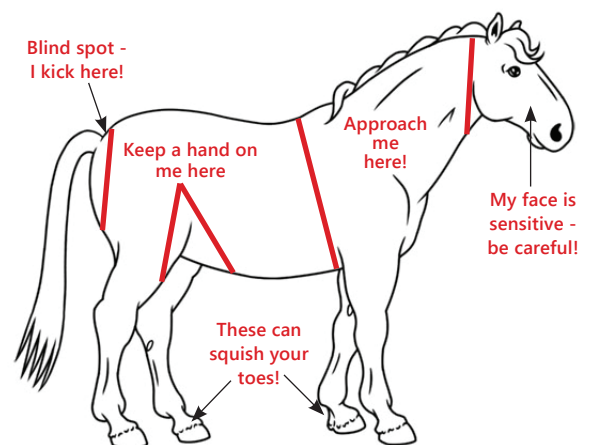
When a horse is frightened, he only thinks about one thing: staying alive. He might not remember that you are on his back, or holding his hoof.

Like most prey animals, horses usually choose **flight over fight**. But if they feel trapped, or discover that fleeing is not an option, they will defend themselves with hooves or teeth. **When people get kicked, it is usually because they have startled the horse in some way.**

In the zone

Horses have eyes placed on the sides of their head, which gives them a wide range of vision. They cannot see directly behind or in front of them, however, and are easily startled if you suddenly pop up in their **blind spots**.

When you approach a horse, you should always **walk up to his neck or shoulder** wearing a relaxed and friendly expression. Once you have made contact with the horse there, you can move your hands back toward his hindquarters or forward to his face. You can even pass close behind him. **But only if your horse gives you permission!** If he is not comfortable with you working around him, he will let you know with his **body language**.



Horse Talk

Your horse can't speak English, so you'll need to learn to speak horse. You can start by learning to recognize your horse's **body language**. Horses use their ears, eyes, and body position to communicate fear, pain, aggression, curiosity, and much more.



These pinned ears mean
"Be careful - I'm angry!"



These pricked ears mean
"I'm alert and interested!"



These droopy ears mean
"I'm bored... or not feeling well."



This swishing tail means
"I'm irritated!"



These white eyes mean
"I'm frightened!"

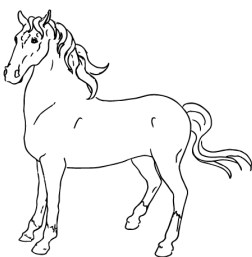


This clamped tail means
"I'm tense and might kick."

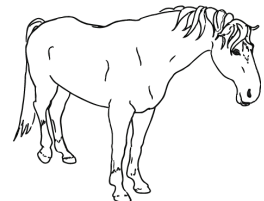
Horses are also very good at reading **our** body language - including the messages we don't mean to send. If we are tense, afraid, impatient or upset, they know. They might even react to our emotional state. When it comes to working with horses safely, **attitude is everything**.

How can you put your horse at ease using your body language?

- 🐾 **Walk the "Horse Walk"** by approaching your horse calmly and confidently. Sneaking and running is predator behavior and not okay in a barn.
- 🐾 **Leave the loud behind** and talk in a quiet and friendly voice around your horse. High-pitched or raised voices can upset him, and hissing sounds may startle him.
- 🐾 **Don't panic when things go wrong**, even if your horse frightens you. Take a deep breath and remember: If you want him to be calm, you must be calm first!



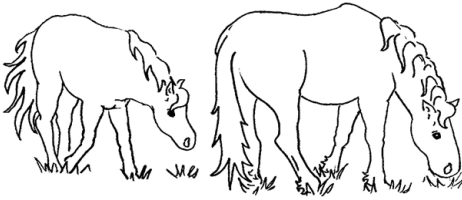
What do you notice about these two horses?
How would you approach each one?
Which one would you be willing to ride?



Personal Space

Horses are **herd animals**. They prefer to live in a group with other horses, and are unhappy on their own. Understanding how herd animals behave will keep you safe and help you become the kind of partner your horse likes and trusts.

Life in the herd



Horses will graze together, water together, play together, and may form deep bonds with each other. You may discover that your horse becomes upset if you ask him to move away from his buddy.

In the wild, the **mares** raise their offspring and often decide where the herd will graze and go for water. The **stallion** defends his herd from predators and other stallions.

Mare = adult female horse

Gelding = castrated male horse

Foal = baby horse

Stallion = adult male horse that can reproduce

Filly = female baby horse

Colt = male baby horse

Stick with me - but not too close

Although they like to stick together, horses are naturally **claustrophobic**, which means that they hate to be enclosed in tight places. Prey animals always like to have an escape route. You could accidentally trigger your horse's claustrophobic tendencies by crowding him, asking him to squeeze through narrow spaces, or restraining him in some way, such as tying him.

Horses can be defensive of their own personal **space bubble** and may kick or bite any horse that invades it. Be careful that you don't lead or ride your horse too close to another horse!

Some horses are particularly aggressive or dominant around food. This behavior is called **resource guarding**.



Don't burst the bubble!

You also have a space bubble. To keep your horse from walking all over it, you'll need to create some gentle but firm boundaries. If your horse gets too close, you can **ask him to move away by applying pressure**.

This might be **physical pressure**, such as a brief push against his shoulder or hindquarters. Motion can also be a form of pressure. If your horse puts his head in your space bubble, wiggle your elbows like chicken wings. This reminds the horse of your position and motivates him to move away.

Be respectful of your horse's personal space. But make sure you also protect your own.

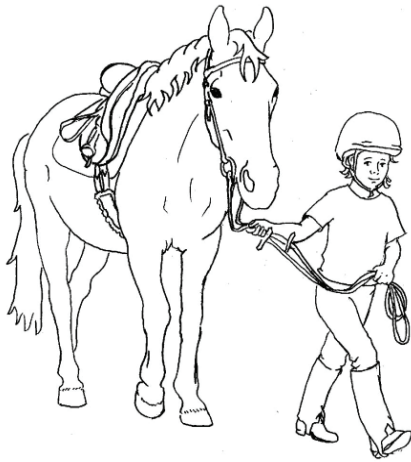
A pushy horse isn't being mean, but he can still be dangerous!



Take the Lead

When you interact with a horse, you must practice being a good leader. If you are calm and confident, he will likely agree that you are the decision-maker and follow your directions willingly.

If you are rough, impatient or unpredictable, your horse will not trust you. However, he will also feel uncomfortable if you are timid and unsure of yourself. He might decide he needs to be the leader in order to stay safe, and you might not like all of his decisions!



It is important to be kind to your horse.

It is even more important for you both to feel safe.

Your mission is to learn how to communicate clearly with your horse, so that he **understands you without being afraid of you.**

At the same time, practice asking, "What could possibly go wrong in this situation? **Is there a safer or better way I could do this?**"

There are many different approaches to handling and riding horses. Often there is no single "right way," only the "best way for my situation."

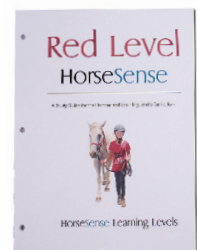
Many equine accidents are preventable.

Learn to think critically and ask questions about everything you do.

This gives you the HorseSense you need to make decisions that keep you and your horse safe!

What else can you do to stay safe around horses?

- 🐾 **Always wear sturdy footwear in the barn - preferably boots,** with a closed toe and plenty of ankle support.
- 🐾 **We recommend wearing an ASTM-SEI approved helmet while learning to handle horses** on the ground. This includes catching, leading, grooming and picking hooves. Of course, you should **always** wear your helmet when mounted - helmet hair is much better than brain damage!
- 🐾 **Ask your instructor for additional opportunities** to practice working around horses and handling them from the ground. A busy instructor may not have time to supervise you herself, but can assign you to a mentor or arrange additional unmounted lessons.
- 🐾 **Study the HorseSense Levels along with the Horsemanship Levels.** The **Red HorseSense** study guide contains additional information on barn safety, including methods of keeping you and your horse safe in the barn, in the pasture, and when working in an arena.
- 🐾 **Stay curious and listen to your horse.** He has a lot to teach you!



Get Ready to Ride

Before you can ride off into the sunset, you have some preparation to do in the barn. Most lesson programs will teach you how to **catch, tie, groom and tack up your own horse**, and to **untack** and care for him after a ride. If your horse is already saddled when you arrive, ask your instructor how you can work ground handling skills into your lesson time.



Practice until you can
prepare your horse for a ride
all by yourself!

What has to happen before you can ride?

- 🐾 **You need to be dressed in safe riding attire.** If you are not already wearing your helmet, you must be able to get it without leaving your horse unattended.
- 🐾 **Your horse needs to be caught and led** out of his pasture, paddock or stall.
- 🐾 **Your horse needs to be safely tied or cross-tied**, unless you have someone to hold him.
- 🐾 **You need to give your horse a quick grooming** and **pick his hooves**.
- 🐾 **You need to tack your horse up**, or put on his saddle and bridle.
- 🐾 **You need to lead your horse to the arena** and do a final **safety check** before mounting up.

This end up

For most of your ground handling, you will be using two important pieces of equipment: the **halter** and **lead rope**.

The halter is the horsey headgear that allows you to safely **lead, tie** and **control** your horse on the ground. Unlike the bridle, it does not put pressure on the horse's mouth.

Sticking your fingers under the halter to lead the horse can be dangerous, so we use a lead rope. This rope is 6' to 10' long and snaps on the halter under the horse's chin.

There are many different types of halters. Before you try to use one, you should familiarize yourself with the **parts of the halter** and learn how it is fastened.



The next few pages are going to talk about ground handling skills you will likely be LEARNING in Red Horsemanship, but will not be TESTED on until Green Horsemanship.

Learning to catch a horse and tie a horse can take a lot of practice, so for now, it is okay if you have help with this!

Dressed for Success

Like most athletic activities, horseback riding has a recommended dress code designed to keep you safe and comfortable. Let's take a look at some of the essentials you will need to wear around the barn and in the saddle:



An ASTM-SEI approved riding helmet is a must-have that you need to wear **every** time you get on a horse. It can save your life if you fall!







Long hair should be pulled back to keep it out of your face and keep it from catching on tack. Ponytails aren't just for ponies!

Wear a close-fitting shirt so that your instructor can see if you are sitting correctly; loose ends should be tucked in. In cooler weather, wear layers so that you can take some off as you get warm from riding.

Gloves can help you grip the reins and are essential in the cold winter months. You will need gloves made specifically for riding, with rubber or suede grips on the palm.

Stretchy, comfortable long pants protect your legs from the saddle. Riding **jodhpurs, breeches** or **tights** are the best, but leggings and stretch jeans are acceptable.

Safe riding no-nos:

-  Bicycle or unapproved helmet
-  Sneaker, sandals, or flip-flops
-  Shorts
-  Dangling jewelry
-  Loose scarves or belts
-  Chewing gum or candy

Half chaps can give you extra security and protect the inside of your legs from the stirrup leathers on the saddle.

Sturdy boots are essential for working around horses. For riding, they should have a **heel of at least half an inch, cover your ankle,** and have a **smooth sole** - chunky waffle soles, often found on hiking boots, can get stuck in the stirrup. The heel will prevent your foot from sliding through the stirrup in a fall.

Where can you get riding clothes?

You can get helmets, boots, pants, and other attire made specifically for riding at **tack stores, online, or through horse supply catalogs.** If you buy your gear on the internet or through the mail, you may want to take a trip to a tack store to try on a few different brands first. You may be able to purchase gently used items secondhand from other riders.

Your helmet can only do its job if it fits correctly. It should be snug and sit level on your forehead, just above your eyebrows, with the chinstrap touching your skin. Make sure your instructor checks the fit of your helmet, and adjust it as necessary before every ride!



Catch Me If You Can

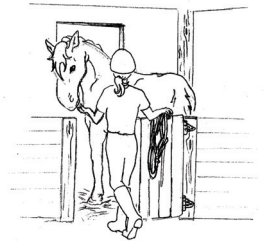
When you arrive for your first lessons, your horse might already be tied and waiting for you, but eventually you will need to catch him yourself. This means learning to **approach** a loose horse in a stall or pasture, to put the **halter** on, and to **lead** him through doorways and gates - without letting other horses get loose!



Catching a horse can be tricky. It requires you to be able to read equine body language and react appropriately. At Red Level, you should always bring in your horse with assistance from your instructor or another knowledgeable horseperson!

How to catch a horse

1. **Organize your halter and rope** ahead of time so you don't have to untangle it before putting it on.
2. **Talk to your horse and let him know you are coming.** Make sure he turns and at least looks at you before you approach him. This is particularly important if the horse is in a stall—**don't walk into an enclosed space if your horse has his hindquarters facing you and hasn't acknowledged you!**
3. **Walk up to his shoulder** whenever possible. Rub him to let him know you are friendly, but don't wait too long before putting on the halter.
4. **If your horse turns and walks away, don't chase him!** Stop and wait for him to stop moving. Hold out your hand and talk to him as you approach again.
5. For some difficult-to-catch horses, you may want to **bring a small treat** you can hide in your hand. Show it to the horse as you approach, but don't give it to him until you are ready to put on the halter, or he may eat and run.



How to put on a halter



1. Put the end of the lead rope over the horse's neck. This way, he will know he's caught and give you more time to fasten the halter.



2. Hold the buckle in your left hand and the crownpiece in your right. Slide the noseband over the horse's nose and lift the crownpiece up behind his ears.



3. Buckle the crownpiece. Make sure to pull it high enough that the noseband does not slide down to his nostrils.

For more on catching, haltering and tying, check out the Red HorseSense study guide. It covers working around other horses in a pasture, fastening rope halters, and more!

Tie the Knot

In general, tying a horse makes him much safer to groom and tack up. But **you must tie carefully**, or you can cause an accident instead of preventing one.

Tie or cross-tie?



The way you tie your horse will depend on how your facility is set up. Some barns are set up with **tie posts**, or solid posts equipped with tie rings. You can tie your horse to one of these using a **quick-release knot**.

If your barn tacks up in an aisle or wash rack, you might use **cross-ties** instead. Cross-ties are usually equipped with special **panic snaps** that allow you to release the horse in an emergency.



A third method, called **ground tying**, involves the horse standing next to you with his lead rope resting on the ground or over his neck. This is not recommended for beginners - if your horse can't be safely tied, ask someone to hold him for you.

How to tie a quick-release knot:



Safety rules for tying:

- 🐾 **Always tie with a quick-release knot**, so you can free your horse quickly if you need to.
- 🐾 **Always tie with a halter and lead rope, never a bridle.** If your horse pulls back wearing a bridle, the bit may injure his mouth.
- 🐾 **Tie him to a solid object, such as a heavy post.** Horses can pull away fence boards, doors, and even unhitched horse trailers.
- 🐾 **It is a good idea to use a breakaway halter, or a loop of breakable twine on your tie ring**, especially if your horse wears a nylon or rope halter. If he panics and falls backward, the string will break before he does! Some barns have special tie rings that will release in an emergency.
- 🐾 **Tie your knot level with your horse's eye** whenever possible. If you tie too low, your horse may be able to get a foot over the rope.
- 🐾 **Allow your horse about 18" of rope**, just enough that he can look around and doesn't feel trapped. If you tie too long, he will be able to move around too much and might get his head caught in the rope.
- 🐾 **Tie where you can work safely on both sides of the horse.** Remove anything from the area that the horse might paw at or get tangled in. Never tie in an area where other horses are loose!

Lead the Way

Even if your horse is already tied for you when you arrive at the barn, you will have to lead him to and from the arena for your ride. Leading your horse and working with him **in-hand** is a great way to practice your communication skills.

Follow the leader



When you are leading your horse, you should stand with his head at your shoulder and face forward. Hold the lead rope or reins about **six inches from the halter ring or bit**, and with the remainder carefully **folded** in your other hand.

To ask your horse to walk, step forward decisively and look where you want your horse to go. If you look back at him, he will feel blocked and the two of you will have a staring contest instead! You can encourage a slow horse by **clucking** or making a kissing sound with your tongue, or telling him, "Walk on."

To ask your horse to stop, still your feet and **quietly** say, "Whoa." If necessary, apply pressure to the halter by pulling the lead rope back toward the horse's chest.

Fun fact: we usually lead horses from the left side, which is also called the near side.

(The right side of the horse is referred to as the **off side**.)

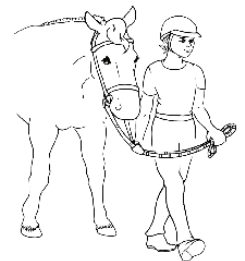
This is partly due to tradition but mainly because most riders and trainers are right-handed.

While it is useful to practice leading from both sides, **if in doubt, lead from the left!**

Leading dos and don'ts

Horses are natural followers, but they will take advantage of bad leading habits.

- 🐾 **DO hold onto the lead rope instead of the halter or bridle.** This will prevent your hand from getting caught if your horse spooks.
- 🐾 **DON'T coil the extra lead rope or reins around your hand.** This is dangerous! If your horse pulled away, the lead rope would tighten around your hand and you could get dragged.
- 🐾 **DO keep your lead rope off the ground.** Otherwise, you or your horse may trip on it.
- 🐾 **DON'T let your horse lead you.** Move with confidence and purpose. If your horse crowds you, protect your space by asking him to move away or wiggling your elbow like a chicken wing.
- 🐾 **DO look where you want to end up,** no matter where you think your horse is trying to take you.



**Look where you want your horse to go,
not where you are afraid he will go!**

Grooming

Before every ride, it is important to give your horse a quick **grooming**. If you put a saddle or bridle over a rough or dirty coat, the tack will chafe and create sores on the horse's skin. He can also become seriously lame if ridden with rocks or other debris in his hooves.

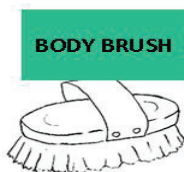
Good reasons to groom:



- 🐾 **It increases the horse's comfort and prevents sores.** If your horse gets a girth or bridle sore, you might not be able to ride him.
- 🐾 **It gives you the opportunity to check your horse thoroughly for cuts or swelling.** These are easy to miss otherwise and might need doctoring, or make it uncomfortable for the horse to work.
- 🐾 **It keeps the horse's coat healthy** and shiny.
- 🐾 **It is a great way to get to know your horse.** Most horses enjoy being groomed, so you can think of the time you spend preparing for a ride as bonding time.

How to groom before riding:

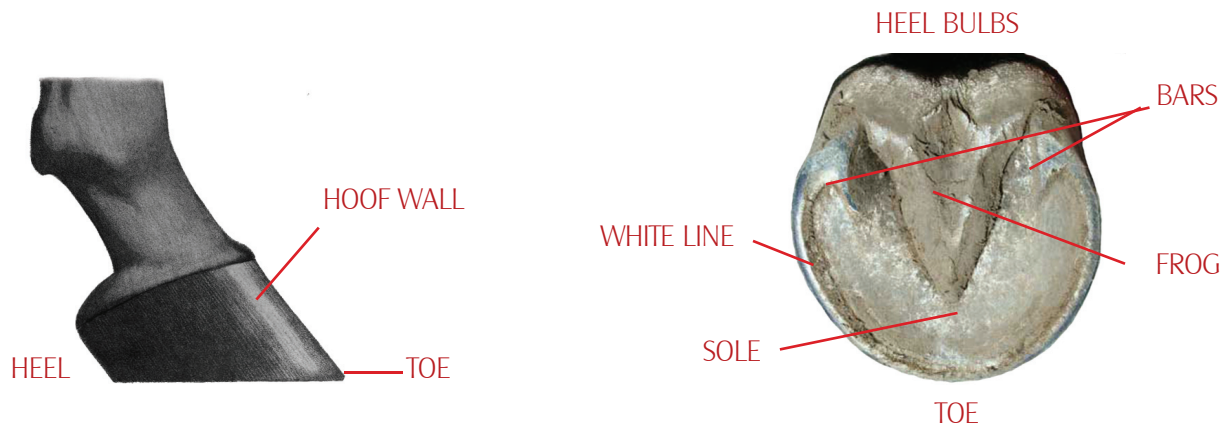
1. **Tie your horse in a safe and quiet place**, using a quick-release knot or cross-ties. Make sure you have all your grooming tools assembled.
2. **Pick the horse's hooves** (see next page).
3. Use a rubber or plastic **currycomb** to break up mud and bring all the dirt to the surface of the horse's coat. This tool is used in small circles. Start at the horse's neck and move down to his shoulders, back and hindquarters. Avoid the flanks and other delicate areas - the currycomb is too rough for these places! If your horse is already very clean, or he objects to currying, it's okay skip this step.
4. Use a **dandy brush**, or hard brush, to whisk dirt and loose hair from the horse's coat. Start at the top of the horse's neck and brush with firm strokes in the direction of the hair growth.
5. Exchange the dandy brush for a **soft body brush**. Use this brush to carefully brush around the horse's ears and face and under his belly, paying particular attention to where the girth will fasten.
6. It isn't necessary to brush your horse's **mane or tail** before every lesson, but you may comb away big tangles or shavings. It is better not to brush the tail too often, since hair falls out of the tail easily.
7. In the summer, finish by applying **fly spray** to your horse's chest, belly and legs.



Check out the Red HorseSense study guide for more on grooming tools and techniques!

No Hoof, No Horse

Imagine you had a rock trapped in your shoe, and someone jumped on your back and asked you to run. OUCH! **Picking the horse's hooves** before every ride can prevent bruising and lameness, and helps keep your horse's hooves healthy.



How to pick hooves:

1. Stand with hoof pick in hand, **facing the horse's tail**. Place your hand on the horse's shoulder and run it down his leg to let him know what you're about to do.
2. **Ask your horse to lift his hoof by squeezing the chestnut on the inside of his forearm.** You will feel a knobby piece of hairless skin; this is mildly sensitive, so if you squeeze it between your fingers, the horse should lift his hoof. You can also try squeezing the back of his tendons.
3. As he lifts his hoof, **run your hand down and grasp the hoof firmly by the toe.** Use the hoof pick to dislodge packed dirt until you can clearly see around the frog and the edges of the hoof wall or shoe. It is safest to scrape from heel to toe.
4. When you are finished, **gently release the hoof** - but watch your toes!
5. **Proceed to the hind leg and repeat.** The chestnut is less sensitive on the hind legs, so try lightly squeezing the point of the horse's hock to encourage him to lift his hoof.
6. **Keep your legs straight and your head up** so that you will stay safe if the horse pulls his foot away.

Tips for hoof picking:

- 🐾 **Work quickly** - those hooves are heavy!
- 🐾 **If your horse doesn't want to lift his hoof, he may have all his weight on that foot.** Lean against his shoulder to help him adjust his balance.
- 🐾 A deep groove runs on either side of the frog. If the horse is **barefoot**, clean out the top of the grooves first to loosen packed dirt. If the horse wears **shoes**, start by scraping around the inside of the shoe.



If you have trouble with hoof-picking, ask your instructor or another experienced equestrian for help!

Tack Room Tour

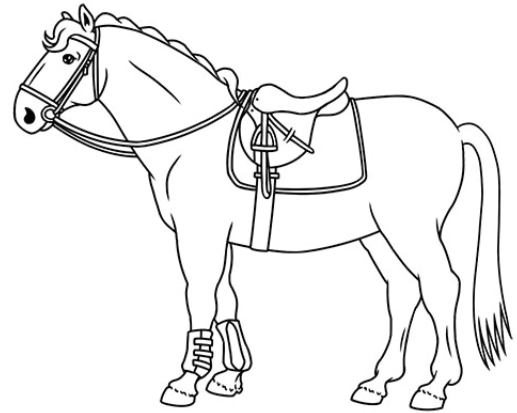
Learning to **tack up a horse** can be one of the biggest challenges of your first few lessons. There are a lot of straps and buckles, and it can be hard to keep everything straight! Let's get started by taking a look at some common equipment we use to ride.

Just the basics

No matter what style of riding you do, you will likely be using a:

- 🐾 **saddle**
- 🐾 **saddle pad** (or **saddle blanket**)
- 🐾 **girth** (or **cinch**)
- 🐾 **bridle**

Your horse might need protective boots, or a **half pad** or **riser pad** under his saddle. Some horses wear special pieces of equipment such as a **martingale** or **breastplate**.



A name for everything

You will find it much easier to understand instructions for tacking up once you know the basic **parts of the saddle and bridle**. Keep in mind that many of these tack pieces can have variations in style - for example, **peacock stirrups** and **Fillis irons** are different types of **stirrup irons**.

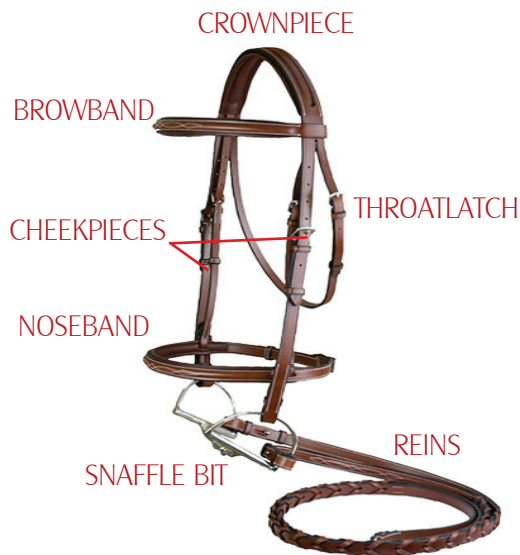
The main two saddle types are English and Western. The type of saddle you use will depend on the style of riding, or **discipline**, that you practice in your lessons.



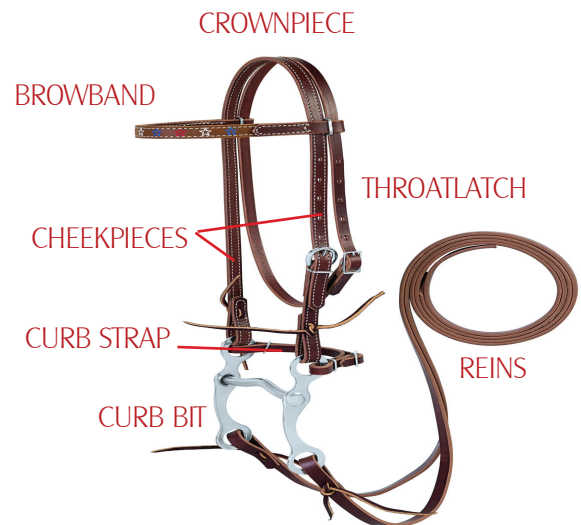
Tack Room Tour, cont.

The **bridle** is used to help you **communicate and control** your horse while riding. There are many different types of **bit** and bridle - some bridles don't even use a bit at all. The type you use will depend on the style of riding you practice and the individual preference of your horse.

English bridle



Western bridle



Some horses need to wear **splint boots, bell boots, polo wraps or other protective leg gear** while they are working. Ask your instructor to show you how to apply the particular boots or bandages your horse wears, and put them on *before* the saddle and bridle.



How to learn more about tack

- 🐾 **Check out the Red, Yellow and Blue HorseSense guides**, which discuss different types of tack in more detail.
- 🐾 **Visit a tack shop**, or request a **catalog** from a tack company.
- 🐾 **Ask your instructor questions.** Why does your horse wear this particular bit? Does his bridle have a noseband? Why does he need a riser pad under his saddle?



It is very important that your tack fits your horse. Ask your instructor if you are not sure if a saddle or bridle is adjusted properly.

Tack must also be in good condition to be safe. Don't ride with loose stitching (shown here), cracked leather, or loose or broken fasteners. **Your life could be riding on that piece of leather!**

saddle Up

Following these steps in order will help you develop an efficient, considerate routine for **saddling a horse**. If you are small and find it difficult to lift the saddle onto the horse's back, it is okay to ask for help!



1. Set the saddle pad carefully over the withers, with the Velcro straps in the front. Make sure there are no folds or wrinkles!

If your horse wears a **riser pad or half pad**, place it on top. Some riser pads are thicker in the back and some are thicker in the front, but they will usually be contoured to match the shape of the horse's back.



2. Lift the saddle as high as you can and set it gently on top of the withers. Slide the saddle and pad back slightly until they rest behind the horse's shoulder blade.

Check that all the flaps are lying smoothly against the horse's side. The **sweat flap** on the underside of the saddle can easily curl up and create a **pressure point!**



3. Pull out the saddle pad tabs with the Velcro ends. Lift the flap of the saddle and secure the **saddle pad tabs** around one of the billet straps, *above* the buckle guard.

A saddle pad that is too tight across the withers is uncomfortable and can rub the horse raw. Lift it until you can slide your fingers under the pommel of the saddle.



4. Begin fastening the girth on the horse's off (right) side. If your girth has elastic at one end, start with the **non-elastic side** - this will make it much easier to tighten later! Slip the girth under the loop on the pad and attach to the **billet straps**.

A girth that fits properly will buckle several holes from the bottom of the billet strap. If it does not seem to reach, you can start with the girth set lower.



5. On the near (left) side, carefully reach under your horse to pick up the girth. Pull it up through the saddle pad loop and attach to the billet straps. Just put it on the first hole for now.

In stages, gradually tighten the girth - on one or both sides of the saddle - until you can just fit your fingers between the snug girth and the horse's belly.

Tightening the girth all at once is uncomfortable for your horse and can even make him angry. Try to raise it a small amount several times, and don't forget to check it before you mount up!

Bridling

The bridle should be **the very last thing you put on the horse**, right before you head out to ride. Leaving the horse unattended with the reins loose can be dangerous!



1. Pull the reins over the horse's ears so they rest around the neck, safely out of the way. This should always be **the first step when putting the bridle on**, and the **last step when taking it off**.

Unfasten the horse's halter. You can set it aside **or** slide the noseband off and buckle the crownpiece around the horse's neck - the method you choose will depend on your tie setup and location. Your instructor will help you determine the safest way to exchange your halter and bridle.



2. Stand on the horse's near side, facing forward. Lift your right arm and hold the crownpiece of the bridle between your horse's ears. You can also reach under his jaw and grasp the cheekpieces instead.

Use your left hand to guide the **bit** against the horse's teeth. Keep your hand flat so your fingers don't get bitten! Once he takes the bit, lift the crownpiece and gently slide his ears through.



3. Make sure the bridle is sitting level on the horse's head and not pinching him anywhere. Slide the **browband** up or down if necessary so that both sides rest in the hollow right under the horse's ears. Tuck the noseband under the cheekpieces, and pull the horse's forelock free of the browband and/or crownpiece.



4. Fasten the throatlatch. You should just be able to fit a fist between the strap and the horse's head. Too loose, and it won't hold the bridle on his head. Too tight, and it may restrict his breathing.

Tuck the loose end of the strap into the two extra loops to secure it. We call these loops the **keeper** and the **runner**.



5. Check that your noseband is level and fasten it under the horse's jaw. You should be able to easily fit two fingers between the strap and the horse's head.

Double check that all your straps are tucked into their keepers and runners. Finally, **take the reins back over the horse's head** so you can easily lead him to the riding arena.

If you have difficulty with any part of the tacking up process, don't be afraid to ask for help!

Final Check

Your horse is groomed, tacked up and ready to go -- but don't put your foot in the stirrup quite yet. You should perform a quick **pre-ride safety check** on yourself, your horse and your tack before every ride.

The one time you forget to do a final check will be the one time you forget to tighten the girth or buckle your helmet.

Most accidents can be prevented by becoming a stickler for safety.



Safety checklist for YOU:

- ☐ Are you wearing **layers appropriate for the weather**? Is your jacket at least partially **zipped** to prevent it from flapping in the breeze?
- ☐ Have you already **applied sunscreen**, if necessary?
- ☐ Is your **helmet fastened** and **adjusted correctly**?
- ☐ Have you spit out your **gum**?
- ☐ Are your **bootlaces** securely tied?
- ☐ Any **dangling jewelry** (such as earrings or necklaces) you need to remove?

Safety checklist for YOUR TACK:

- ☐ Is all your tack **clean and comfortable** for the horse? Is it fitted correctly, with no wrinkles, folds or bulges against his skin?
- ☐ Is **all the tack in good condition**? No cracked leather or loose stitching?
- ☐ Is your **girth tight enough** that you can only slip a finger or two between it and the horse's belly?
- ☐ Are all your **buckles and fasteners secure**?
- ☐ Are the **reins straight**? Place them over the horse's head as soon as you arrive at the arena.
- ☐ Are the **stirrups adjusted correctly** for your height? Pull them down right before mounting.

Safety checklist for YOUR HORSE:

- ☐ Is your horse **clean and comfortable**? Is his mane and forelock pulled free of the bridle?
- ☐ Is he **protected from flies** with fly spray, an ear bonnet or fly mask?
- ☐ Is he **calm and relaxed**? Will he stand quietly for you to mount?



If your horse is white-eyed, spooky, snorty, or tense, don't mount until he is calm. Try speaking to him in a low, soothing voice and walking him around. If he is seriously hyper or upset, ask your instructor or another knowledgeable horseperson for help.

All Aboard

Once you are satisfied that you and your horse are safe and ready to go, it's time to hop on and ride!

Mounting correctly can take some practice, but it is important to make sure you do it right every time to avoid hurting your horse.



It is usually best to use a mounting block if you have one available.

The block doesn't just make it easier to reach the stirrup - it also reduces the strain on the horse's back and helps keep your saddle from shifting.

Walk your horse up to the block so that it is positioned close to your left stirrup and ask him to halt. Make sure the horse is standing in balance, with his weight distributed evenly. You can move the block a little if you need to.

If you don't have a mounting block or want to practice mounting from the ground, ask your horse to halt well away from the fence, with his legs as square as possible. Position yourself next to the horse's shoulder, facing his tail.

Whether you are mounting from the block **or** the ground, you should hold the reins in your left hand, short enough that you can stop the horse from moving. Rest this hand on the horse's neck, and grab a bit of mane if necessary.



Easy as 1, 2, 3:



1. Lift your left foot and place it in the stirrup. Bounce a time or two until you face the withers. Watch that your toe doesn't jab the horse's side, or you will get a grumpy face like this!



2. Grip reins and mane in your left hand and the *pommel* of the saddle in your right. Spring up from your right foot until you are standing on your left stirrup. Swing your right leg over the horse's hindquarters and sit down gently in the saddle.



3. Use your toe to pick up your right stirrup and settle it on the ball of your foot. Practice scooping up your stirrups with your toes until you can do it without having to look down or use your hands.

Mounting is like saying "Hello" to your horse - make sure it is a friendly greeting!

On Again, Off Again

Dismounting correctly is one of the most important safety skills you will learn in the saddle. Be prepared to practice many times until you can jump off quickly and safely!

Exit this way:



1. Take both feet out of the stirrups.

This way you will not lose your balance if your horse walks off mid-dismount. Put your reins in your left hand and place this hand on the horse's neck.



2. Lean forward as though hugging your horse and swing your right leg over the cantle of the saddle. Swing your leg high and straight-legged - no knees on the saddle. Be sure you don't kick your horse by mistake!



3. Turn your body as you jump down so that you land next to your horse's side, facing forward. Bend your knees on the landing to absorb the shock. Take the reins over your horse's head and roll up the stirrups.



For safety's sake, the stirrups of an English saddle should always be rolled up immediately after dismounting. Loose stirrups can catch on gate latches or the horse's bit, scaring your horse at best and injuring you both at worst.




Slide the stirrup iron up the back of the stirrup leather. Hold it up off the flap while you pull the entire stirrup leather through and under the iron.

Time to bail

Most of the time, when things go wrong while riding, it is safest to stay aboard and work to regain control. However, there are situations where it is necessary to bail off quickly - even if your horse is not standing perfectly still.

To perform an **emergency dismount**, use your usual dismounting technique, but with added speed so that you jump off and land in one smooth motion. **Always make sure your feet are clear of the stirrups before you jump**, and land facing forward, ready to move off next to the horse. Practice this at a halt and walk until it is easy and fun!

You might have to perform an emergency dismount if:

-  Your saddle slips off to one side.
-  Your horse trips and falls down.
-  The reins fly out of your hands and over your horse's head.



In Good Form

Your **position** is the way you sit on your horse, and it is one of the most important things you will practice in your lessons. Sitting in a **correct balanced position will keep you safe and secure** and make you comfortable for your horse to carry. Bad position habits can make you vulnerable to falls and upset your horse, or even hurt him. It takes some effort to learn to sit correctly, but it is well worth the practice.

All lined up



If your horse disappeared out from under you, would you land on your feet? A good rider uses **balance** and **alignment** to stay on their horse instead of holding on with hands or legs.

In a **basic balanced position**, you sit centered in the saddle, looking straight ahead. A straight line should run **from your head through your shoulder and hip to your heel**. Your **elbows should be bent** and hanging at your sides, creating a another line that runs from your elbow to the horse's bit.

Here are some tips for perfecting your form:

- 🐾 **Your stirrups should be adjusted so the bottom of the stirrup iron reaches the middle of your ankle bone.** Correct stirrup length is very important! Your instructor will help you find the length that is right for you and adjust the leathers. Make sure the stirrups are even when you sit squarely in the middle of the saddle.
- 🐾 **The stirrup iron should rest across the ball of your foot, with the outer branch next to your little toe.** Drop weight into your heels until they are the lowest point of your body and they feel like they are sinking toward the horse's hind legs. You might find it helpful to think of lifting your toes up toward your knees.
- 🐾 **Let your legs hang relaxed against the horse's side**, so your toes point forward or slightly to the outside. You should feel contact between your calf muscle and the horse's barrel on both sides. Resist the temptation to grip with your knees - this blocks the horse's forward movement and can make you stiff and insecure.
- 🐾 **Keep your eyes up and look through the horse's ears.** Your head is surprisingly heavy, so looking down or slouching can have a dramatic effect on your position and control - and not for the better!
- 🐾 **Don't forget to breathe!** Deep breathing will help you sit tall, relax, and follow the horse's movement.

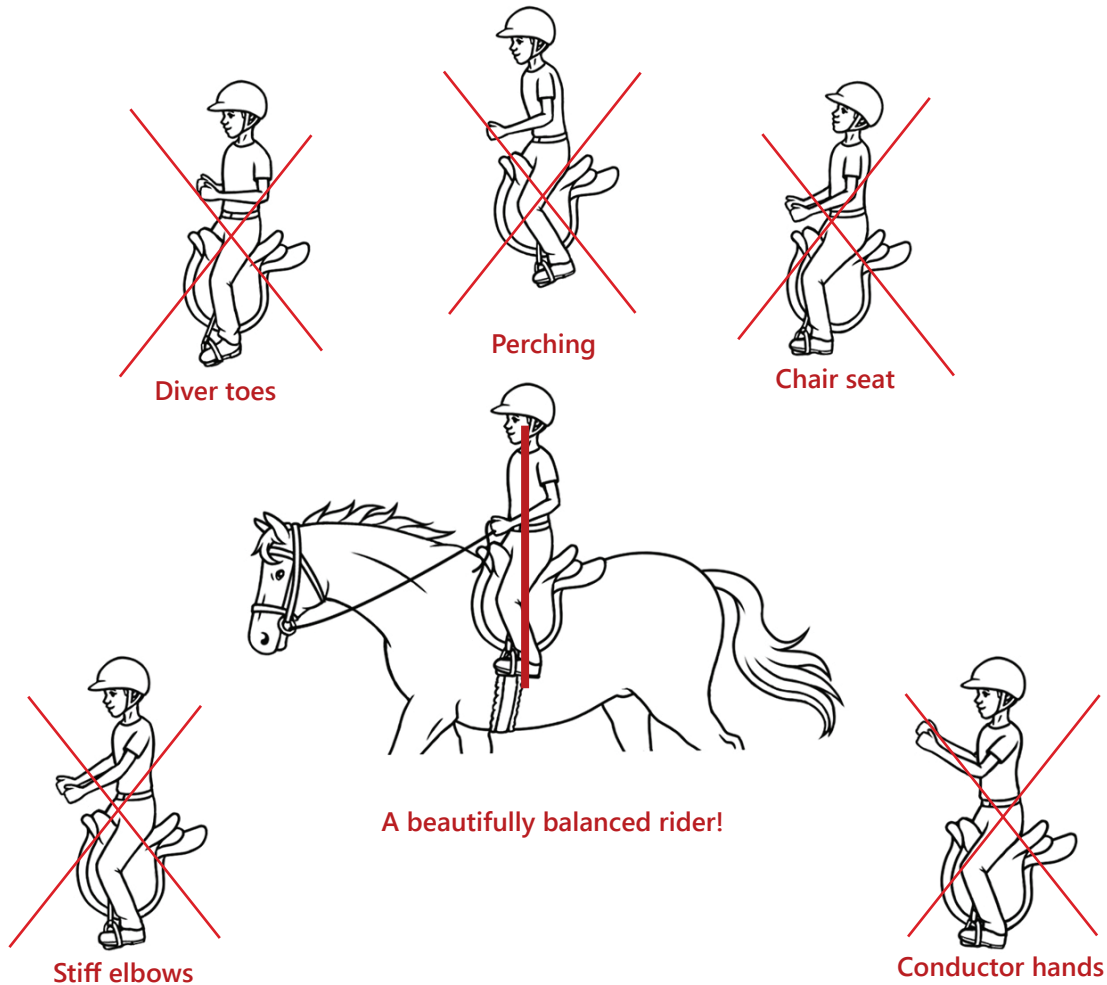
Congratulations! You are now sitting in a balanced position. If this sounds like a lot of work, don't worry. With practice, your body will learn to stay in this position automatically.



Sitting Pretty

It takes time to be able to feel when you are sitting correctly in the saddle, and we all have bad habits to overcome. The best way to check out your position is to **take a photograph and use straight lines** to see if your body is in the right place. Imagine you are a pile of building blocks. If the horse vanished, would you stay balanced or topple over?

Watch out for these common position faults:



How to develop a great position:

- 🐾 **Ask your instructor for exercises you can practice at home.** Sometimes position problems are caused by a lack of strength or flexibility. She might also have specific exercises for you to practice on the horse, such as standing up in the stirrups or walking without your feet in the irons.
- 🐾 **Frequently get photos of yourself riding, from the side, front and rear.** You can use the “**Picture Perfect**” page in the back of this study guide to paste in photos and evaluate your progress. Use a ruler to check your straight lines, and try to identify your **biggest position goal** as well as something you think you do well.
- 🐾 **Watch riders you admire, preferably those with excellent form.** Your body will unconsciously imitate something it sees over and over again!

Aids

Horses don't understand English, but we can communicate with them using different parts of our body. We call these **aids**. Think of an aid as a signal you use to influence your horse. If you use your aids well, you can change the horse's speed, direction of travel, and posture. You can even energize or relax him!

There are two different types of aids: natural and artificial.

Natural aids are signals from a part of your body. These include your seat, legs, hands, and voice.

Artificial aids are sometimes used to reinforce natural aids. These include crops, whips and spurs.

Seat



Your horse can feel the movement of your seat through the saddle and will respond when you **shift your weight**. If you **swivel your eyes and shoulders** to one side, it will change the pressure of your seat and encourage your horse to turn, too.

You can also use your seat to change the length of your horse's stride and transition between gaits. Just make sure you sit tall and straight - leaning to one side or another will unbalance your horse and make it harder for him to move.

Leg



Your lower leg is your gas pedal. You can **briefly squeeze with both legs** to ask your horse to go forward, and use the **pressure from one leg** to ask your horse to turn or move to the side.

It is important to use your leg correctly to keep your horse from getting dull. Always ask politely with a light squeeze first. If the horse doesn't respond, repeat with a firmer squeeze, gradually increasing the pressure until you get a response. **As soon as he moves off, relax your leg!**

Reins



Your hands hold the **reins**, which give you a line of communication with your horse's mouth. You must always handle the reins smoothly and gently - **jerking or pulling upwards on the reins will hurt the horse!**

You can apply pressure to **both** reins to ask your horse to slow down or stop, and to **one** rein to ask your horse to bend his head or neck. Moving **one rein out to the side** helps guide your horse through a turn.

Voice



Your voice can back up your other aids if your horse needs extra encouragement. **Clucking** with your tongue in your cheek may help a lazy horse get moving, and a gentle **"Easy"** or **"Whoa"** can encourage him to slow down or stop.

The **tone of your voice** is very important - a low and soothing tone will calm and steady your horse, while a higher or sharper sound will excite him. Don't forget to **praise** him with a "Good boy!" frequently!

Taking up the Reins

In your first few lessons, your instructor may direct the horse herself while you practice staying in your balanced position. When you are ready to steer on your own, you will take control of the reins. Handling the reins correctly can be tricky, but it is essential to develop what riders call "good hands." Horses quickly learn to hate riders who use the reins roughly!

Get a grip



Hold the reins with your thumbs on top, pointing toward the horse's ears.

English riders normally ride with one rein in each hand, held in a **soft fist**, with your **fingers closed** just tightly enough to keep the reins from slipping through.

The best way to pick up your reins is to use your three middle fingers to scoop up the reins from your horse's neck. The rein should enter your palm between your pinky and your ring finger, and the ends should lie under your thumbs.

If you need to hold **both** reins in one hand, slide one rein under the fingers of your other hand without changing your grip. Don't just let go of one rein - this creates a dangerous loop by your horse's foreleg.

The long and the short of it

It can take practice to learn how adjust your reins correctly, but it makes a huge difference in how well you are able to communicate with your horse. At Red Level, you should have a little slack in the reins, but you should still be able to apply light pressure to the bit by tightening your fingers, as though squeezing water out of a sponge.

If your reins get too long, **shorten** them by reaching over and grasping one rein **above** your hand with your opposite thumb. Relax your fingers and slide them towards the bit, then release your thumb. Repeat on the other side so **both** reins are the same length. This is the safest way to shorten your reins as it prevents you from dropping one and losing control.



Tips for terrific hands:



These reins are held too high!

- 🐾 Hold both reins **just a few inches over the horse's withers**. If the reins are too low or too high, the bit will create uncomfortable pressure in the horse's mouth.
- 🐾 **Relax your elbows and let them hang by your ribs**. Releasing tension in your arms will help your hands to be quiet.
- 🐾 To keep the right tension in your fingers, **imagine you are holding two baby birds**. You don't want to crush them, but you don't want to drop them either.
- 🐾 **Remember that reins are for communicating, not balancing**. If you need to hold onto something to feel secure, you aren't ready to ride on your own yet!

Whoa and Go

Once you have the correct position in the saddle and your reins are organized, it's time to put your horse in motion! To do this, you need to learn how to ride **transitions between the halt and the walk**.

What is a transition?

The word **transition** means *to change*. We use the word to describe the moment when a horse changes from one gait to another. If a horse is walking and starts to trot, we say he has performed an **upward transition**. If he is trotting and you ask him to walk, you have ridden a **downward transition**.

The **halt**, where your horse remains at a standstill, also counts as a gait. In Red Level, you will first learn transitions between the walk and the halt, and later the walk and the trot.



Your goal: for the horse to move promptly and smoothly between each gait, while you maintain your balanced position.

Let's go!



1. Stretch **tall** and **look** where you want the horse to go.
2. Gently **squeeze your calf muscles** against the horse's side. Squeeze just as long as it takes to say the word, "Go."
3. If he does not move off, **follow up with a firmer squeeze** or a nudge with your heels. You can also **use your voice** to encourage him. Cluck, kiss, or say, "Walk on!"
4. As soon as he starts to walk, relax your hips and elbows to **follow the movement** of his walk.

Let's whoa!



1. Take a **deep breath** and **stretch tall** so your shoulders hang back and your hips move forward. Imagine your **seat becoming still** in the saddle.
2. **Exhale** so your seat and thighs feel heavier on the saddle. You can even say, "Whoa" in a low, soothing voice.
3. **Squeeze the reins and/or resist slightly with your elbows** to apply brief pressure on the bit, if necessary.
4. When the horse stops moving, **relax** and **release all pressure**.

Sometimes a very lazy horse may need encouragement from a training aid called a **crop**. A crop is carried along with the reins in one hand. *If* he ignores your leg, seat and voice, put your reins in **one** hand and reach back to give the horse a firm tap with the crop, behind your leg. Take your reins in two hands again when he moves forward. **Your instructor will help you decide if a crop is appropriate for you and your horse.**



Take a Turn

To ride the horse on your own, you'll need to be able to guide him out to the **rail**, through simple turns and **changes of direction**. To do this you will use your natural aids: **seat, leg, and reins**.

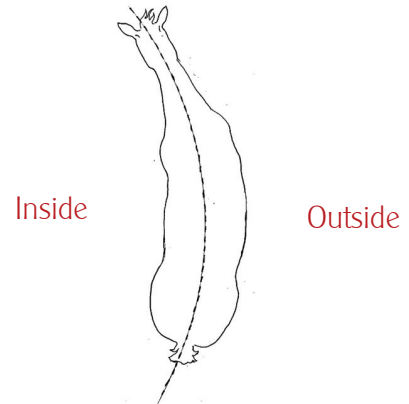
To understand turning your horse, you need to know the difference between *inside* and *outside*.

(Your instructor will use these terms a lot!)

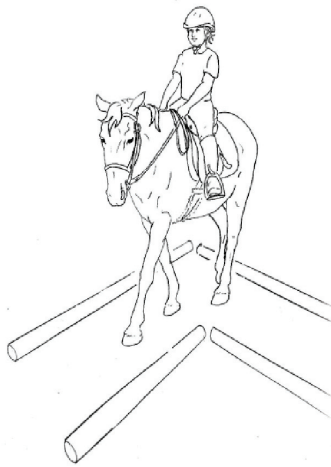
Whenever you ride a turn or circle, your **inside aids are on the side you are turning or bending toward**. For example, if you are turning to the left, your left leg is your inside leg, and your left rein is the inside rein.

Your **outside leg and rein are the farthest from the center of your turn**. If you are riding on the rail, or next to the arena fence, your outside aids are the leg and rein closest to the fence.

In order to turn the horse, we need to talk to his whole body. This means using inside **and** outside aids.



How to ride a turn:



1. **Look in the direction you want to go.** Turn your eyes, then your shoulders and belly button.
2. **Keep your inside leg at the girth, and move your outside leg back a few inches.** You may have to give your horse a squeeze with the inside leg if he tries to cut in.
3. **Take your inside rein and move it outward,** guiding your horse's head in the direction you want to go. Keep your hand low and soft, using just as much pressure as necessary. This is called an **opening rein** or **leading rein**.
4. **Allow your horse's body to bend** through the turn by keeping your outside rein quiet, with your hand near the horse's withers.
5. **Straighten the horse after the turn,** if necessary, by applying light pressure with your outside leg and rein.
6. **Relax your aids as soon as your horse moves in the direction you want.** This lets him know that he's doing the right thing.

But he won't turn!

Most turning problems are caused by rider error. If your horse seems determined to ignore your turn signals, ask yourself the following questions:

- 🐾 **Am I clearly looking where I want to go** - not where the horse wants to go?
- 🐾 **Am I sitting up straight?** Leaning in or collapsing your body makes it hard for your horse to turn.
- 🐾 **Are my reins even?** Are they **short enough** that the horse can feel my opening rein?

Emergency Brakes

If you are riding on your own, or **off the leadline**, you'll need to learn some important control techniques that will keep you safe in an emergency. Even the quietest horse can get frightened and act unpredictably. Having the tools to deal with these moments can keep you from getting seriously hurt!

It can be really scary when a horse spooks, particularly if you lose control.

Although accidents and falls will happen, most of them occur when riders freeze, panic, or scream. Frequently practicing emergency drills will help you respond appropriately in a real crisis.

Stay calm to help your horse become calm!



Safety seat first

Whenever your horse unexpectedly shies, changes speed or direction, bucks, or bolts, a **safety seat** is your first defense. You need to be sure that you are going to stay on before you try to regain control!



Sit deep in the saddle and bring your shoulders back as you push your heels firmly down and forward. If you need to, you can grab onto some mane or the pommel of the saddle for extra security.

The one time you shouldn't use your safety seat is if your horse rears. If that happens, lean forward to help push him back to ground... and then get off. Rearing horses can be dangerous!

Take charge

A frightened or determined horse might ignore your usual request to stop. **One way to solve this problem is to turn him.** This redirects his attention, and his speed will naturally decrease as you tighten the circle.

If the footing is not too slippery, you can apply an emergency brake by using a **one-rein stop**. In your safety seat, shorten one rein and apply steady pressure as you look towards the horse's tail. Hold it until he stops moving forward and swings his hindquarters sideways - we call this "**disengaging the hindquarters**". A horse cannot run forward and move his hind end over at the same time!



Get serious

A **pulley rein** is a strong rein aid used to regain control. It is hard on your horse's mouth, so **only** use it if you can't safely turn or your horse is ignoring your other aids.

To use a pulley rein, choke up on your reins so they are quite short, and plant one hand firmly on your horse's neck. With your other hand, lift the rein up sharply as you lean back in a strong safety seat. Immediately release the pressure, moving your hand in an up and down motion. Repeat as necessary.



Pulling back on both reins just invites the horse to play tug of war... a game you will not win!

Riding at the Walk

Before you learn to ride at faster speeds, you'll want to spend plenty of time getting comfortable with **basic riding skills at the walk**. If this sounds boring, don't worry - there are lots of things you can do at the walk, no matter how long you have been riding!

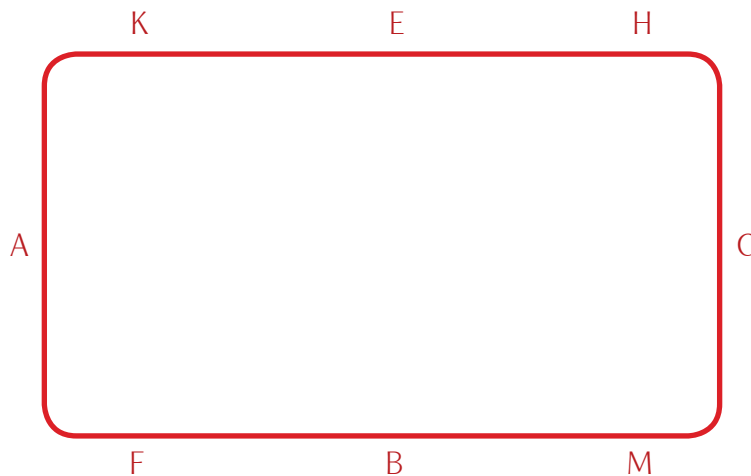
Horses can move in several different ways, called **gaits**.

The walk is the slowest and easiest to ride. As your horse walks, you will feel his back swing gently from side to side. Relax your seat and allow your body to follow the movement of the walk as you maintain your balanced position. Don't forget to breathe!

Different horses have different speeds to their walk. Some drag their feet and poke along, while others move with a great deal of energy - but all horses walk with the same **footfall pattern**. If you close your eyes, can you feel when each of your horse's legs move underneath you?



There are four beats to the walk.



A **riding arena** gives you a safe, enclosed place to practice. It also provides you with many opportunities to test your communication and control. Some arenas are marked with **letters** to give you specific points to ride turns and transitions.

Riding **on the rail** challenges you to keep your horse separated from the herd and your instructor. Can you keep your horse from cutting corners or drifting toward the middle of the arena?

Some fun things you can practice at the walk:

- 🐾 **Ring figures** such as circles, half-circles and figure-8s.
- 🐾 **Riding without stirrups**, or with your reins in one hand.
- 🐾 **Obstacle courses** with chutes, cones, bending poles and other fun obstacles to challenge your steering.
- 🐾 **Patterns** made up of various figures and **transitions**, designed to test your accuracy.
- 🐾 **Mounted games** often involve props that have to be moved from horseback. They can be played individually or with a team.



Warm-up Exercises

One of the first things you may practice at the walk is **balancing and suppling exercises**. Your instructor will choose exercises she thinks will be particularly beneficial for you. After a bit of practice, you can use these as your own **warm-up routine** while your horse warms up at the walk.



Why practice balancing and suppling exercises?

- 🐾 **They warm up your muscles** and allow you to stretch at the beginning of your ride.
- 🐾 **They improve your seat** by centering you deep in the saddle.
- 🐾 **They make you stronger** and **improve your flexibility**.
- 🐾 **They give you confidence** in your own balance and security.
- 🐾 **They are challenging and fun!**

As you practice your exercises, make sure to keep your weight in both heels so your lower leg stays anchored at the girth. Put your reins in one hand, and keep this hand low. It is okay to grab a bit of mane along with your reins - your horse won't mind, especially if this keeps you from pulling on his mouth!

Here are a few exercises you can try.

For an additional challenge, repeat each stretch without stirrups!



ARM CIRCLES



POLL TOUCH



CROUP TOUCH



ANKLE CIRCLES



TOE TOUCH



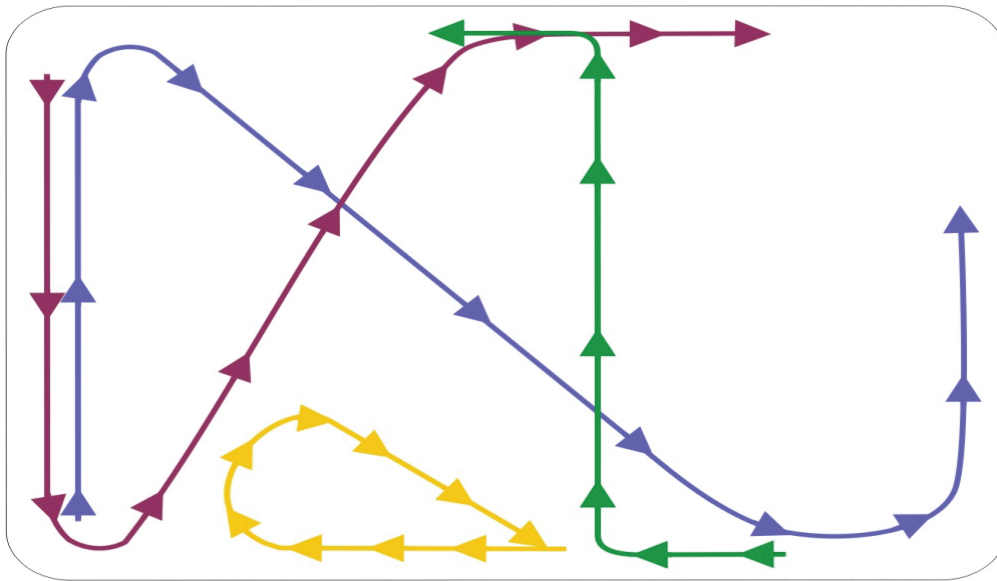
ALTERNATE TOE TOUCH

Changing Direction

Like people, horses need to stretch evenly in both directions to keep from getting sore and crooked bodies. It's a good idea to **change direction every few minutes** when riding in an arena.

You will find it helpful to know several different methods for changing direction.

If your instructor doesn't tell you specifically how to reverse, ride the turn that best suits your speed, surroundings and situation.



Half-Turn Reverse

Ride approximately halfway down the arena's long side, then **turn 90°** so you are traveling **straight across the middle of the arena**. As you approach the other side, start looking in your **new** direction and make another smooth 90° turn to return to the rail.

Change of Rein Across Diagonal/Short Diagonal

Ride **completely through the short side** of the arena, so that you pass through both corners. Turn off the rail and **ride diagonally across the arena to the opposite corner**. When you get there, smoothly return to the rail and ride through the next two corners. You might find it helpful to imagine riding a large letter **Z**. You can also ride a **short diagonal** by returning to or leaving the rail halfway down the long side.

Half-Circle Reverse

Turn off the rail to the inside and ride **half of a small circle** before straightening out and returning to the rail. A good half-circle reverse is **shaped like an ice cream cone** and is large enough that your horse can continue walking or trotting in the same rhythm. Use your inside rein as little as possible, and look ahead!

"Riding on the right rein" = riding around the arena clockwise. Your right rein is the **INSIDE** rein.

"Riding on the left rein" = riding around the arena counterclockwise. The left rein is the **INSIDE** rein.

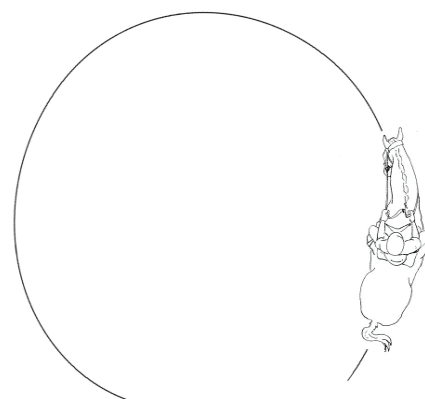
Circles

A **ring figure** is a shape used to practice communicating with the horse and to stretch or strengthen his body. The first ring figure you will learn to ride is a round circle. You might think this sounds easy, but for many riders, this is the trickiest skill to master in Red Level.

What makes a good circle?

A correctly-ridden circle is **round like an orange, not a pear or a watermelon**. Horses, however, don't know about geometry. They frequently fall in on one side of the circle and drift out on another, particularly if it gets them closer to their herd or the gate.

To create a round circle, the horse needs to **bend** through his body. You will learn more about bending your horse in later Levels. For now, simply pay attention to the curve of his spine as you ride through your turns. Is he curving in the direction he's traveling, or is one part of his body leaving the path? Why do you think this is happening?

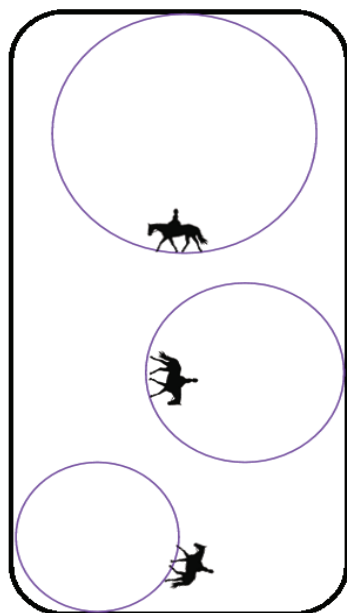


To ask the horse to circle, use your normal turning aids, but apply a very small amount of pressure, so the horse turns gradually all the way around the circle. Many riders use too much inside rein and cause the circle to shrink. Look ahead to the next quarter of the circle, all the way around.

Remember that a circle ends in the exact same place it begins.

Make note of where your horse leaves the rail or track, and try to return to the same spot!

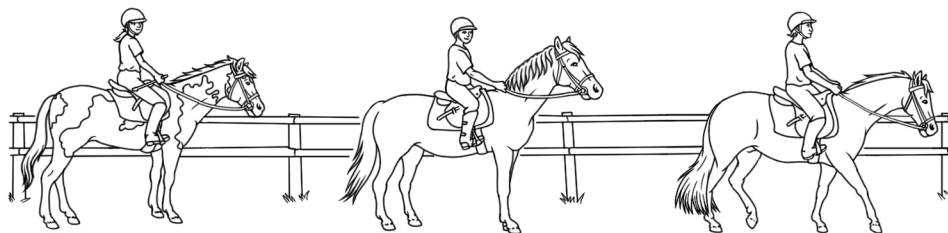
Some tips for successful circles:



- 🐾 **At this Level, your circles should be quite large.** They might even fill the whole width of your arena, depending on the size of your workspace. If your circle is too small, it will put stress on the horse's body and make him reluctant to move forward.
- 🐾 **Momentum is your friend.** The slower a horse walks, the more likely he is to drift. Ask him to move energetically by rhythmically squeezing your inside leg at the girth.
- 🐾 Your **inside leg also helps prevent the horse from falling in.** If you notice the circle getting too small, stretch tall and apply pressure at the girth. Make sure your inside rein is not pulling and causing the problem!
- 🐾 **If the horse drifts out, apply pressure with your outside leg,** including your knee and thigh. Imagine that your outside leg and rein are creating a wall, containing the horse's body.

Ring Rules

Even if you take private lessons, it won't be long before you have to share an arena with other riders. Working in a group of riders is a lot like driving a car through traffic. You need to learn the rules of the road, communicate with other riders, and look ahead to stay safe!



Remember the space bubble?

When riding, your horse's space bubble is usually **twice the size of his body**.

Invading another horse's bubble can start a horse fight -
something you do not want to be caught in the middle of!

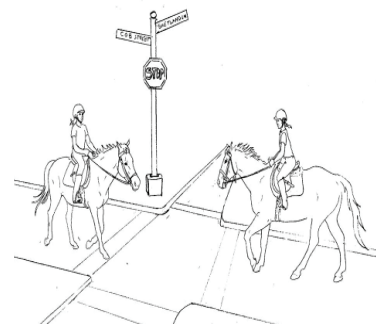
You will practice maintaining spacing when riding **single file**, or in a line of horses moving the same direction. There should be **at least one horse length of space between each horse**. If the horse in front of you is traveling too slow, you have three choices:

- 🐾 **Cut across the middle of the arena.** Return to the rail, traveling in your original direction, on the other side.
- 🐾 **Ride a full circle.** This allows you to keep traveling the same speed and direction, and there will be lots of space between you and the next horse by the time you return to the rail.
- 🐾 **Pass the horse in front.** You should **always move to the inside when passing** - squeezing in between another horse and the rail can be dangerous! Ride a full horse length away from the rail, and ask your horse to move forward energetically. Be sure that you are a full horse length in front of the other horse before you return to the rail. The corners are the easiest place in the arena to pass.

What if you meet head on?

Nobody wants to collide on horseback! If you and another rider meet while traveling the opposite directions, there are two rules to follow:

- 🐾 **If in doubt, always pass left shoulder to left shoulder.** Move to the right, just like you are a car passing another car on the road. This means if you are traveling on the **right rein**, you will pass on the **inside**, and if you are traveling **left**, you will pass on the **outside**.
- 🐾 **If you have a plan, shout it out.** You can call, **"Outside!"** if you want to stay on the rail, and **"Inside!"** if you mean to move toward the middle of the arena. Call out loud and clear, so the other rider can hear you!



If somebody calls "Heads up!", come immediately to the halt. This phrase is used when a rider falls or loses control of their horse. Be prepared to dismount if necessary!

Two-Point Position

Up until now you have been riding in a **full seat**, also called a **three-point position**, which means that you sit deep in the saddle; your two seat bones and your crotch are the three points that connect you to the horse. Now you are ready to begin practicing **two-point**, also called **half seat** or **jumping position**.

Why do I need this skill?



- 🐾 **Two-point position improves your balance and leg position.** It is not possible to ride in a secure two-point if your lower leg is in the wrong place, or you are bracing on the stirrups.
- 🐾 **It strengthens your leg and core muscles.** You need these muscle groups to be toned before you start riding the horse at speed!
- 🐾 **It frees up your horse's back,** helping him move forward and negotiate obstacles such as hills, poles and logs.
- 🐾 **It prepares you for advanced riding skills.** Later, you will jump and gallop in two-point to help the horse and to stay in balance.

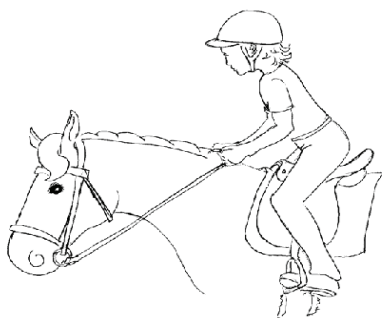
How do I ride in two-point position?

To get into two-point, shift your weight out of your seat and into your lower legs so you can **rise slightly above the saddle**. You should feel your weight sinking into your hips, knees and heels. Bend forward from your hips, not your waist, until your shoulders are over your knees.

Imagine you are standing on the ground with your knees bent. To squat, you move your shoulders forward and hips back. Your strong lower legs support the weight of your body. This is exactly how two-point position should feel!



A helping hand



A good release is VERY important when jumping!

In order for this position to feel natural and comfortable, you will need to **reach forward with your hands**, until they rest about one third of the way up the horse's neck. Keep your fingers closed and rest your knuckles against the horse's **crest**. You can even grab a little bit of mane to hold along with your reins.

This hand position is called a **release**. It supports your upper body and prevents you from accidentally pulling on the horse's mouth.

Remember that moving your hands forward lengthens your reins. You might need to shorten the reins to maintain control when practicing two-point at the walk.

On Course

Although you are nowhere near ready to launch your horse over big fences, you can start practicing the skills you will need for jumping now. Developing a good two-point position is the first step. From there, you can practice walking your horse over **ground poles** and other small step-over obstacles.

What are ground poles?

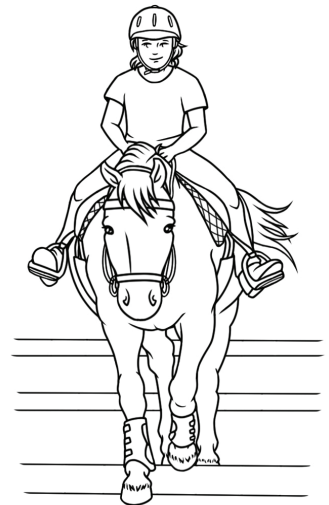


Ground poles are rails placed flat on the ground, creating an obstacle no more than 6" high. They are used to improve balance and jumping technique in both horse and rider.

At this Level, you can practice ground poles two different ways: in a **grid**, with two or more poles set in a row, or in a **course**, with the poles spaced to allow large turns between each obstacle.

How to "jump" a ground pole:

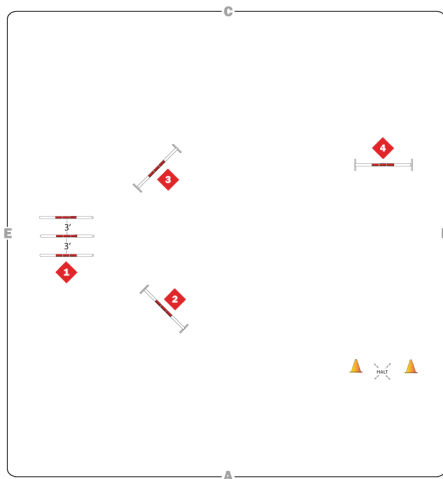
1. **Line your horse up with the center of the pole.** His body should make a T shape with the pole well before he has to step over it. This helps the horse understand he is supposed to go over the pole and not around!
2. **Set the pace** by approaching at an energetic walk.
3. **Focus on a destination or target on the other side of the pole.** You might be tempted to look down as your horse steps over, but this unbalances you and might make him stop.
4. **Fold into two-point right before the horse steps over the pole.** Don't forget to release! Once all four of his feet have stepped over, sit gently back into the saddle and ride straight for several strides before setting up for your next obstacle.



No shortcuts allowed

A good jump course depends on how well you ride the **track**, or the path you take to link the jumps together. Your track should include:

- 🐾 **Good approaches and departures.** The horse should remain lined up with the center of the jump before, during and after.
- 🐾 **Wide turns that flow smoothly from one jump to the next.** Horses hate abrupt turns! You might ride all the way out to the rail between one jump and the next to accomplish this.
- 🐾 **A plan.** Think about how you want to line up for each jump before you ride the course. Once you begin, look ahead and think ahead!



All About the Trot

Once you are comfortable at the walk, it's time to learn how to **trot**. The trot is the horse's second fastest gait and is about the same speed as a person jogging. The trot is much bouncier than the walk, so be prepared to spend some time learning to ride it well!

Why is the trot so bouncy?

There are **two beats to the horse's trot**, which means he picks up his legs and puts them down in pairs. The horse's left hind leg and right foreleg step forward at the same time, as do his right hind leg and left foreleg. We call these pairs "**diagonals**."

In the walk, you felt the horse's back sway from side to side. At the trot, the side to side motion will be very slight. Most of his energy travels upward, pushing you out of the saddle. Don't worry - there are several tricks to making the trot easy to ride!



The two beats of the trot

Three ways of riding the trot:

1. **Sitting trot.** Your first experience with trot will probably be a sitting trot. To maintain your balanced position and absorb the bounce of the trot, you need to stay relaxed through your hips, knees and ankles. Imagine that all these joints are springs that absorb the shock. Keep your shoulders back and remember to breathe deeply. It's okay to hold onto the pommel of the saddle at first.

You'll know you've got it if... your seat stays glued to the saddle, and you feel most of the motion in your **core** (stomach and lower back). Sitting trot gives you great abs!

2. **Two-point position.** You can also ride the trot in two-point position. Again, the joints in your legs act as shock absorbers, so let your ankles, hips and knees sink down and back with every stride. This allows your upper body to remain balanced over the saddle. Hold mane until two-point feels easy and natural.

You'll know you've got it if... you can remain above the saddle as your horse trots and your upper body feels still and quiet. This position can be fatiguing, so trot only short distances at first.

3. **Posting trot.** The posting trot can be tricky to learn, but once you master it, you'll find it is the easiest way to ride the trot by far. To post, you swing your hips up and down in time with the horse's trot.

You'll know you've got it if... your seat rises and falls in rhythm with the two beats of the trot. A good posting trot feels soft and effortless - your horse likes this, too!



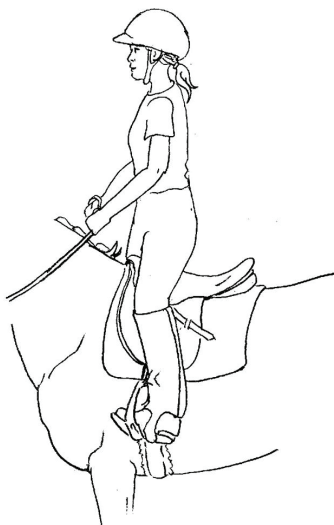
No matter how you trot, remember the rules of a balanced position:

Eyes and toes up, hands and heels down, a straight line from head to shoulder, hip and heel.

Ups and Downs

Before you learn to post, you should be comfortable **standing up in your stirrups** at the halt and walk, **without** pulling or leaning on your hands. This is essential for your balance and the horse's comfort.

Take a stand



A great exercise to prepare you for posting trot and test your balance is the **stirrup stand**. Stand all the way up in your stirrups, pushing your hips up and over the pommel of the saddle. If your legs remain in the correct place, with knees bent and heels down, you will find a position where you can balance even with your arms outstretched.

Stirrup stand is not the same as two-point. In stirrup stand, your **hip angle** is open to allow to stand up straight. Your hips move **forward** to stay aligned with your shoulders. In two-point position, your hip angle is closed. Your seat folds and shifts **back** as your shoulders move over your knees.

Unlike two-point, stirrup stand is only used as an exercise. It is helpful for you, but doesn't usually have a lot of benefit to the horse.

Learning to post

Once you are great at stirrup stand and two-point position, you can try **posting** to the trot. In the beginning, the horse will probably be controlled by your instructor or an assistant. This allows you to focus on your balance and rhythm without worrying about directing the horse or adjusting his speed.

First, find the rhythm. At a steady sitting trot, feel for the rhythm of the horse's feet. Count out loud in time with his steps: "One, two, one, two."

Got it? On the next beat, use the swing of the horse's back to propel your hips **UP** and **FORWARD**, as though you are going to stand up in your stirrups. On the second beat, **lower your seat back to the saddle**. Try to just touch it - your horse doesn't want you to fall down heavily on his back.

Now keep it up. Count along with your instructor: "Up, down, up, down, up, down." You might hold onto some mane or a neckstrap until the posting feels smooth. Holding onto the pommel of the saddle is okay, but can push you into a chair seat if you're not careful.

Keep practicing until you can maintain the posting rhythm for a full circle, or a lap of the arena.



Posting - Beat 1



Posting - Beat 2

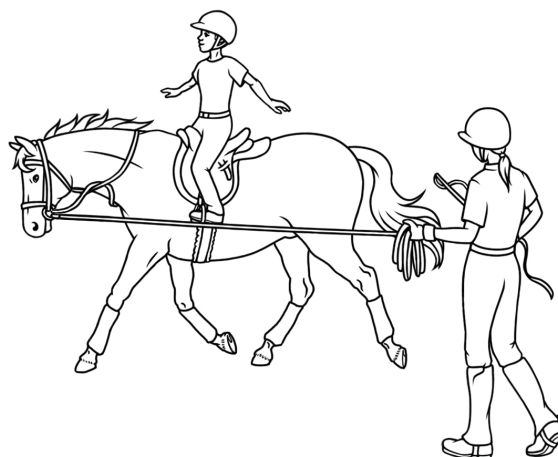
Tips for Posting Trot

If posting is difficult or awkward for you at first, don't worry - you aren't alone. Some riders find the posting rhythm natural, while others need to practice for weeks before the movement becomes smooth. The good news is, once you get it, your body will remember how to post for the rest of your life.

Hands free

Once you are comfortable with posting, if you have help from your instructor or a leader, you can try **posting with one or both arms outstretched**. When you can post smoothly without your hands, you are ready to start practicing with reins.

Holding the reins at the trot can be tricky. While you move up and down, the horse's head stays relatively still. You'll need to relax your elbows to allow your hands to stay at the withers as you post. Imagine your elbow joint is a hinge that opens as you rise and closes as you sit.



Longe line lessons are a great way to learn to trot!

More tricks to posting trot:

1. **Keep your chin up and look straight ahead.** Looking down will throw your upper body out of balance and confuse your horse.
2. **Every time you rise, let your heels sink down and *back*,** toward the horse's ***hind*** legs. Bracing on the stirrups and pushing your heels forward makes posting difficult as you will fall heavily into the saddle.
3. **Match the horse's speed** with your posting rhythm. A common mistake is to hang in the air too long before sitting. This throws you and the horse out of sync and creates an extra bounce on the sitting beat.
4. **All horses trot differently.** If you are riding a horse with a very smooth trot, you might only need to rise an inch or two out of the saddle. If you are riding a horse with a bouncy trot, he might catapult you into the air! Post just as high as the horse pushes you, so your posting is energy efficient and smooth.

On your own








Before you know it, you'll be ready to trot around the arena independently. This means you'll be riding **transitions between the walk and the trot**.

To **trot**, sit up straight and squeeze energetically with both legs. Back up your request with a kiss, cluck or firmer squeeze if necessary. Make sure your hands are low and quiet - if you pull on the reins, your horse won't want to trot! To **walk**, sit deep in the saddle and close your fingers on the reins. Sink your weight into your thighs and heels and keep your shoulders back, or you may tip forward! You will learn more about riding great walk-trot transitions in **Yellow Horsemanship**.

Rider Fitness

Horseback riding is a sport, and **equestrians are athletes!** You will quickly discover that riding works unfamiliar muscles, and can leave you quite sore and tired. It is important to treat riding like a sport and to take care of your body so that you can ride at your best.

Signs you are a good athlete:

-  **You practice on a regular basis**, both during and outside of lessons, if possible.
-  **You stretch before and after a workout** to prevent soreness and injury.
-  **You learn your body's physical capabilities** and work to improve them.
-  **You eat well-balanced meals and drink plenty of water.** Poor nutrition and dehydration make you fatigue quickly.
-  **You get plenty of sleep** so you are mentally sharp for your ride.



Good athletes cross-train!

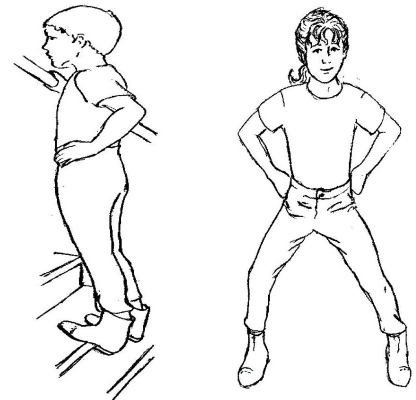
What other activities do you enjoy that you think would help your riding?

If you show up for a lesson exhausted, stiff, or full of sugar, you will find it harder to ride effectively.

Riding horses can be dangerous. Don't take your own fitness lightly!

Just like any other sport, you have to train your body to behave in a new and different way. This takes time and repetition, so don't get frustrated if it seems like your progress is slow. Your mind will learn much faster than your muscles do.

If you are only able to ride once a week, you can improve your strength and balance by practicing **exercises off the horse**, such as the **stair stretch** (which helps keep your heels down) and **squats** (which strengthen your legs and simulate your riding position). Your instructor might have some specific exercises to recommend.



You should always get clearance from your doctor before starting any exercise program, especially if you have an existing health condition.

You will learn a lot more about rider fitness in upcoming Levels, especially as you prepare to canter and jump.

The journey continues with **Yellow Horsemanship** - enjoy the ride!

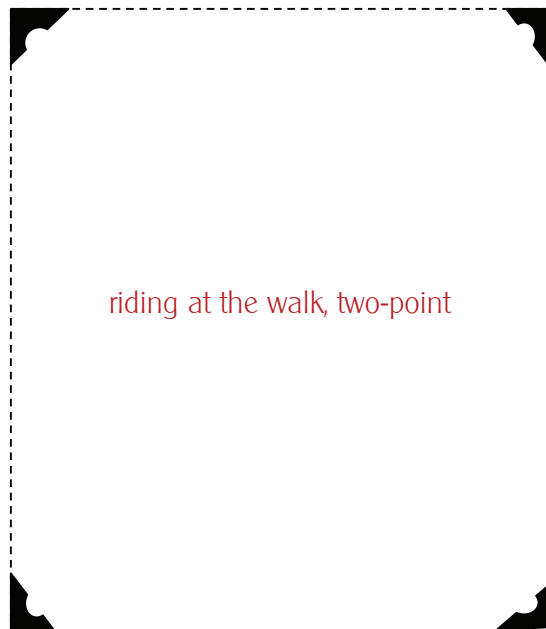
Picture Perfect

One of the best ways you can work on riding outside of lessons is by regularly reviewing photos and video of yourself in the saddle. It can also be fun to look back at these photos months later to see your progress. Use this page to paste in your favorite action shots. **What are you doing well? What can you improve?**



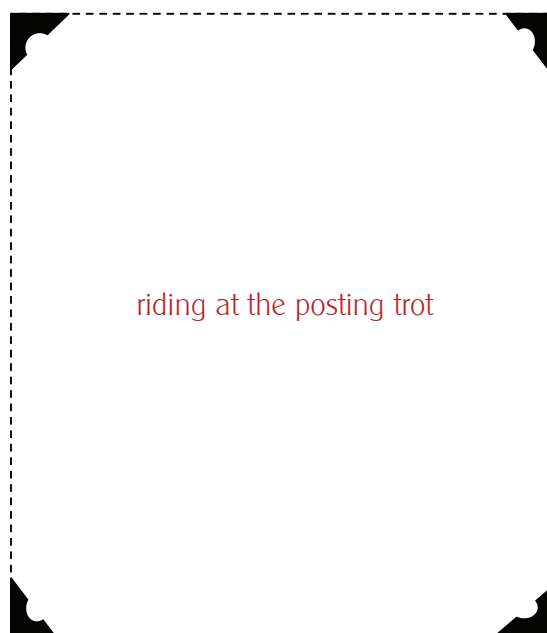
riding at the walk, full seat

Date: _____



riding at the walk, two-point

Date: _____



riding at the posting trot

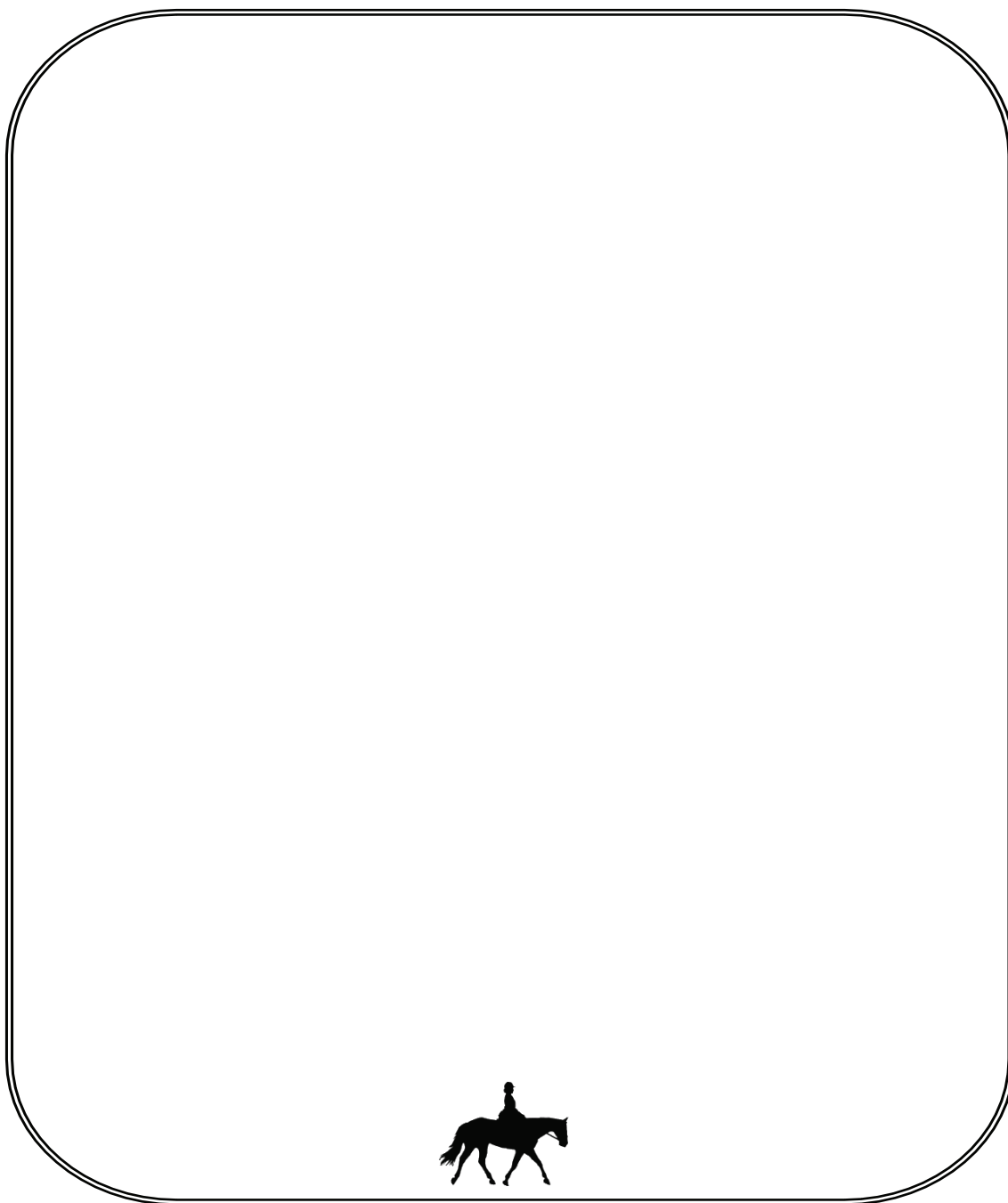
Date: _____

BALANCED POSITION CHECKLIST:

- ☐ If I'm **sitting**, can I drop a **straight line** from the **center of my head** through my **shoulders and hips** to my **heel**?
- ☐ If I'm in **two-point**, can I draw a line from my **head** through my **shoulders and knees** to the **tips of my toes**?
- ☐ Are my **heels** lower than my **toes**?
- ☐ Is my **stirrup leather** **straight up and down**, perpendicular to the ground?
- ☐ Is there a **straight line** from my **elbow** through my hands **to the horse's bit**?
- ☐ Are my **eyes and thumbs** up?

Practice Arena

Here is a **practice arena** that you can use to draw **changes of direction, circles,** and the other **patterns that you ride in your lessons.** Try drawing each figure in a different color, or taking small toy horses and letting them go for a ride.



If you want to reuse this arena, be sure to draw lightly in pencil!

For Further Study

We hope this guide has served as a helpful companion to your Red Level education. If you are interested in learning more, look for the following resources:



Download the **full HorseSense curriculum** and get updates on **online courses**:

<https://horsesenseridingacademy.com>

Harris, Susan, 2012. **The USPC Manual of Horsemanship - D Level - 2nd ed.** One of the best how-to books of horse care and riding ever written for beginners, with simple and clear explanations and illustrations. Strong emphasis on safety, with special sections for parents.

Henderson Pinch, Dorothy, 1998. **Happy Horsemanship.** How-to riding manual full of whimsy and great drawings.



Hill, Cherry, 2006. **How to Think Like a Horse.** One of our favorite resources! This fully illustrated book covers all aspects of equine behavior, helping you understand why horses do the things they do and how you can work with them safely.

McNeil, Hollie. 2011. **40 Fundamentals of English Riding.** A thorough overview of English riding basics, including balanced position, use of aids, and riding correct ring figures.



We have a **playlist of recommended videos** for Red Horsemanship saved on the official **HorseSense YouTube channel** - with a library of Learning Levels videos coming soon! <https://www.youtube.com/@horsesenselevels>



Follow HorseSense Learning Levels on Pinterest and browse Pins for every Level.

<https://pinterest.com/horsesenselevels/boards/>



Join our Quizlet classroom and test your horsey knowledge!

<https://quizlet.com/HorseSense>

Equine magazines:

Expand your horsey knowledge by subscribing to an equine periodical. Here are a few of our favorites:

www.practicalhorsemanmag.com

www.equusmagazine.com

www.horseillustrated.com

www.youngrider.com

Are you an **instructor** interested in **lesson plans, patterns, courses, challenges** and **incentives** that can help you teach Red Level? Visit:

<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com>

