

Horse Psychology and Handling

Lesson Aim

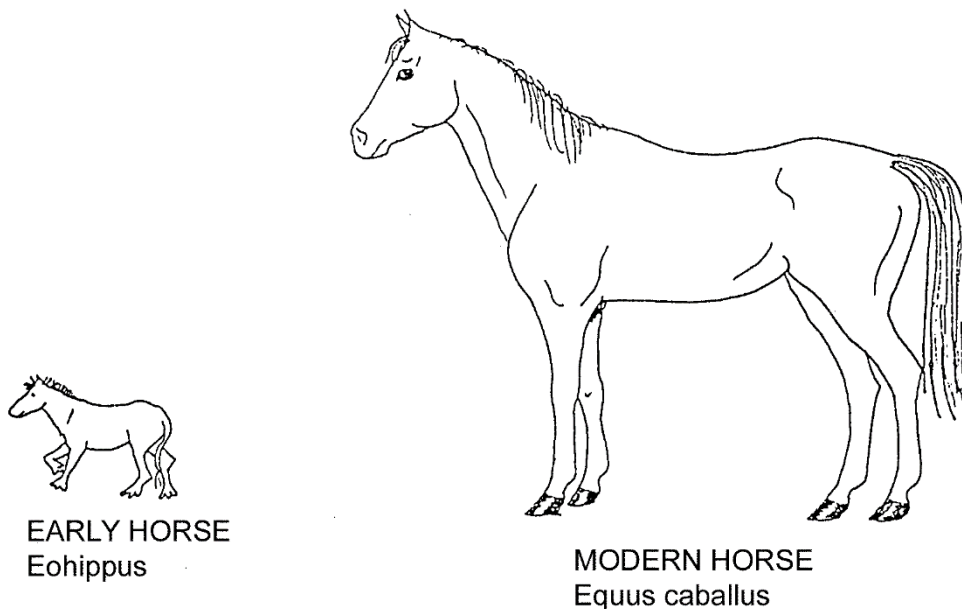
To differentiate between the different procedures used for the handling of horses.

HORSE PSYCHOLOGY

To handle horses well and to gain maximum enjoyment from them, we need to understand them. To do this, we need to look at the origin of the horse and learn how horses lived in the wild. This will give us an insight into the natural behaviour of horses.

The Early Horse

Sixty million years ago the horse was the size of a Labrador dog. It had toes instead of hooves and a smooth tail tufted at the end. Its mane had coarse erect hair. It was a herbivore (grass eater) grazing on vast plains. It was hunted by carnivores (meat eaters). This had a great effect on its behaviour.



Early horse estimated to be on earth 60 million years ago, and modern horse as we know and recognise today. This image is to scale.

Survival Mechanisms of the Early Horse

To escape from its enemies, the horse had to run away swiftly. It developed good hearing and keen eyesight over long distances. It responded quickly to danger signals like sudden movement or noise. It was extremely alert to anything suspicious. Early horses which lacked these characteristics were easily caught and eaten by carnivores. The horses which had good survival skills lived to pass on these characteristics to their offspring. For example, longer legged early horses could run faster and survive better than those with shorter legs. Gradually, over millions of years the horse grew in size

A further survival mechanism of early horses was to live in large groups or herds. This way, there was protection in numbers. There were more pairs of ears to listen for danger. Predators (hunters) could only kill one or two of the herd, the rest would survive.

The Modern Horse Behaviour

The modern horse is a descendant of those early horses who were the swiftest and most alert and with the strongest herd instinct. Even though the horse is not threatened by hunting carnivores today, it still has the same survival traits as its predecessors. The modern horse will react in the same way as the early horse to fear or excitement. It will gallop away, buck (kick up its hind legs), kick and shy (jump sideways).

The modern horse still has a strong herd instinct. We talk of horses being "gregarious" - they like to be with other horses. We can see the horse's herd instinct when one horse will refuse to be led away from his companions, or when a badly frightened horse gallops back to his companions. In both cases, the horse wants to be with the "herd" where there is safety and reassurance.

The Horse's Memory

The horse has a very long memory and this is useful in training. The horse will remember that he was rewarded for certain behaviour and will usually choose to behave this way again. He will not often repeat behaviour for which he was punished. Handlers must be consistent in rewarding and punishing horses so that the horse clearly knows what behaviour is expected.

Horses remember frightening things for a long time. If the horse is reminded of a frightening experience he will show signs of fear. An unsympathetic handler will punish the horse for behaving badly. This is unjust. A good handler will reassure the horse so that he loses his fear and behaves well again.

USING PSYCHOLOGY TO HANDLE HORSES

In one way, the modern horse is different from the early horse. It has grown taller and stronger. A horse is always stronger than its handler and could choose to run away or attack us with hooves and teeth. We are able to handle horses because they are not aware of their strength and because they like to please. At all costs, we should avoid situations where the horse learns he is stronger than his handler. We must also preserve the horse's goodwill by treating him fairly at all times. Firm but kind handling is the key to successful horse management.

All handlers of horses should try to learn as much as possible about Horse Psychology. This will increase their understanding of their horse's behaviour and make them better horsemen/women. There are many good books and videos on horse psychology and handling that may be obtained at book and saddlery stores.

Horses are considered to have memories second only to elephants, so a well-trained horse never forgets its training, nor does a poorly trained horse. Bad habits need to be recognised and corrected early if later problems are to be avoided.

Unlike humans, horses cannot rationalise, but learn from experience. They tend to repeat behaviour that brings a favourable response, and avoid behaviour that causes an unfavourable response from the rider or handler. Horses learn through a system of REPETITION, REWARD and CORRECTION. Horses have no reasoning powers. They are unable to connect a reward or correction given several minutes after an action. If a rider or handler is quick to reward a job well done with an encouraging word or pat, the horse will associate that action with an enjoyable sensation and he will be more willing to perform properly next time.

It is most important to correct the horse. Correction must immediately follow the action so that it is clear to the horse what the rider is punishing it for. It is also important to remember that the horse has a relatively short attention span and all educational work should be restricted to set periods suitable to the individual horse's education and age.

Rewards can be verbal; tactile or edible. Make the desirable things easy and the undesirable things difficult.

Handling Horses

Using our understanding of horse psychology, we can handle horses safely and with ease. Remember that the horse is gregarious. It will be easier to bring all the horses from a paddock rather than just one. Avoid making sudden noises or movements around horses. Build up the horse's trust in you by being calm and confident.

Handle horses:

- Calmly
- Confidently
- Patiently and slowly

- Talking quietly

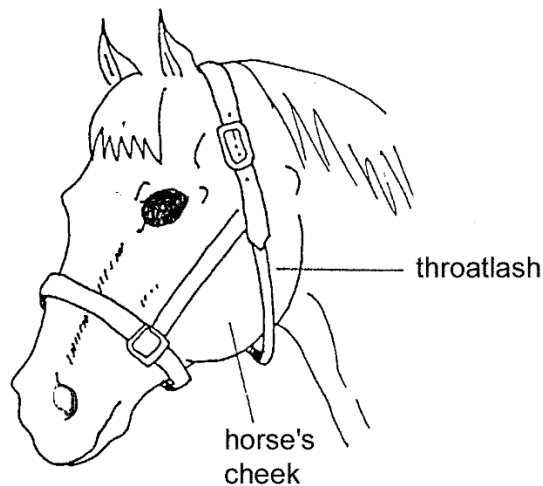
Catching a Horse in the field or stable

Always warn a horse of your approach. Speak to it quietly but so it can hear you. A horse will quickly learn to recognise your voice and words you repeat often. Never approach a horse silently as your sudden appearance will frighten him badly. This is particularly dangerous in the stable when the frightened horse will want to flee but will be constrained in a small space.

Walk steadily towards the horse's shoulder so he can see you. (The horse's eyes are at the sides of his head so he has difficulty seeing directly in front of him). When you reach the horse stand at his shoulder and gently pat or stroke him. Keep talking quietly. You could give the horse a small titbit (piece of bread or horse cubes) to reward him for not running away from you. Hold your hand flat as the horse feeds from it he might mistake an upturned thumb for a juicy carrot.

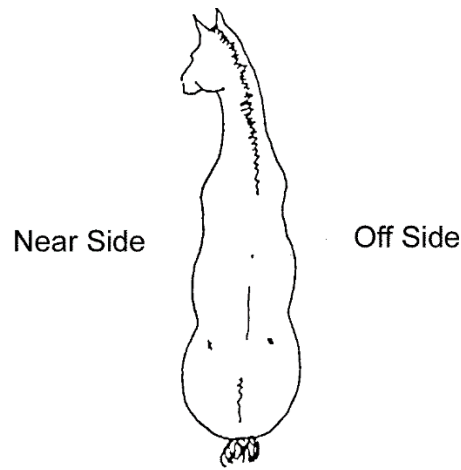
Putting on a Headstall/Headcollar or Halter

These are put on the horse so it can be controlled on foot. Before approaching the horse, make sure the headstall is ready to put on by undoing the buckle or loosening the rope. Place the rope around the horse's neck to stop him walking off. Gently pull the headstall/halter up over the horse's head until the NOSEBAND is around the horse's nose. Pass the HEADPIECE over the horse's ears and do up the buckle. If there is a THROATLASH it should not be buckled tightly. Your four fingers should fit at right angles between the horse's cheek and the throatlash.



Leading a Horse

The left hand side of the horse is called the NEAR SIDE. It is customary to mount, dismount, saddle, bridle and lead from this side. The right hand side of the horse is called the OFF SIDE. To lead the horse, stand at the near side shoulder. Your right hand should hold the headstall/headcollar rope about 10cms from where it is knotted to the headstall/headcollar. Your left hand should hold the slack of the rope. Speak to the horse and walk forward. Push the horse's head forward with your right hand on the rope. The horse should follow willingly. ever pull a horse by a lead rope.



The near (left) and off (right) sides of the horse.

If a horse is very unwilling to be lead, hold a stick in your left hand. If the horse still leads sluggishly, put the slack of the rope in your right hand and tap the horse smartly on the ribs with the stick. You should look ahead all the time and be ready to move forward when the horse responds to the stick on his side.

Leading a horse from a stable or through a gate

This is very similar to leading a horse in the open with one important difference. You must lead a horse straight out of a stable or through a gate. Remember the horse has a long body! If he is turned too quickly, a horse can badly bruise his hip on stable walls or gate posts, and expensive saddlery can be damaged. The collision with the wall will hurt and frighten the horse and he may jump forwards suddenly and knock you over.

Leading a horse up for inspection

On occasions, a horse has to be led up for inspection. This could be when the vet wants to look for signs of lameness or when a buyer wants to see how the horse moves or carries himself. When leading a horse up for inspection make sure the horse strides out well (carry a stick if necessary). Allow the horse to carry his head naturally. You do this by keeping your left hand well down on the lead rope so it is away from the horse's head. When the horse has free movement of the neck and head his movements will be natural.

The horse should be led up for inspection on a level firm surface. Walk the horse in a straight line away from the onlooker. Encourage a free, swinging walk. Then turn him and trot him briskly towards and past the onlooker. Finally stand the horse up so that he looks alert and has his weight squarely on all four feet. The horse can now be more closely inspected by the vet or potential buyer.

Putting on a Bridle

Before approaching the horse check that the throat lash of the bridle is undone (it is normally left undone when taken off). If the horse is new to you, loosen all the buckles so that adjustments can be made more easily once the bridle is on.

Hold the reins and headpiece in your left hand and approach the near (left) side of the horse. Speak to the horse and with your right hand slip the reins quietly over his neck. Now you have something to control the horse with. Hold the headpiece of the bridle in your right hand and cup the bit in the palm of your left hand. Gently draw the bridle up the horse's face. Insert the thumb of your left hand into the corner of the horse's mouth (there are no teeth there so don't be concerned at being bitten). The horse should open his mouth obligingly. As he does this gently draw the bit into the mouth while pulling the headpiece over his ears.

Once the bridle is on it must be fitted correctly.

- The bit should sit comfortably in the mouth.
- The lips may have the slightest crinkle but should not be pulled upwards.
- Equally the bit should not hang so low in the mouth that it knocks the teeth.

- The bit must be the right width so that you can fit one finger between the bit and the skin at each side of the mouth.
- If the bridle has a cavesson noseband, adjust it so that 2 fingers can be placed between the noseband and the jaw.
- The throatlash must be done up loosely. You should be able to place 3 fingers of your hand (thumb facing to you) between the side of the cheek and the throatlash. In this way, there will be plenty of room for the horse to bend his head and breathe comfortably.

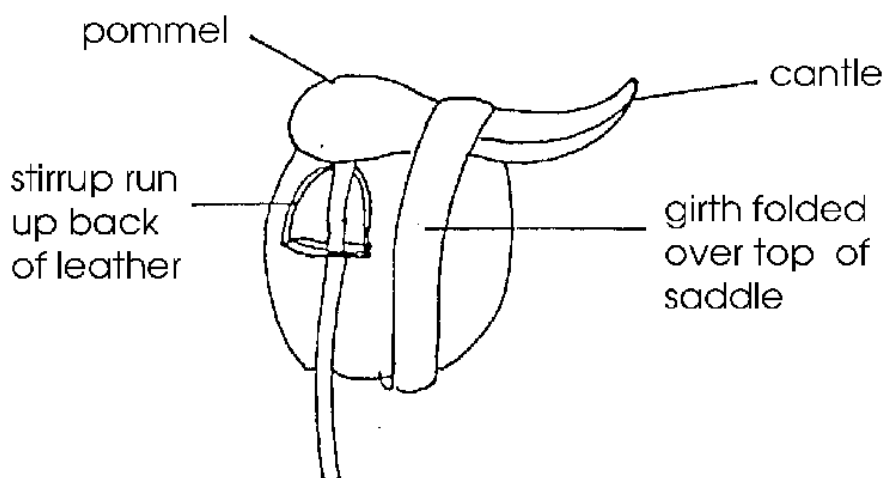
Taking off a Bridle

Undo the throat lash. Place the reins over and around the neck and hold them under the neck with the right hand. Gently draw the bridle over the horse's ears with the left hand but allow the horse to open his mouth and drop the bit. If you try to drag the bridle off quickly, you will make the bit knock into the horse's teeth. Hang the bridle up on a peg. Rough bridling and unbridling can make a horse HEAD SHY (Nervous when your hands are near his head). Be patient, slow and gentle so that the horse can trust you and not be afraid.

A technique that is commonly practiced but allows for no control over the horse if it wants to pull away is as follows: With your right hand draw the reins up to the headpiece. Grasp both the reins and headpiece in your right hand. Cup the palm of your left hand under the horse's mouth.

Putting on a Saddle

Before approaching the horse make sure the girth is laid across the saddle and that the stirrups are either crossed over the saddle, or better, run neatly up the stirrup leathers. Girths and stirrups that flap about while saddling takes place can frighten the horse. There is always a chance that a horse snaps at a fly on his side and accidentally catches a hanging stirrup in his mouth. This would severely frighten him. Play safe and keep the stirrups safely run up the leathers until you are ready to mount.



Carry the saddle on your left arm, the pommel (front) of the saddle should face your elbow and the cantle (back) should face your hand. Approach the near (left) side of the horse. Remember to talk quietly.

Some saddles are counter lined with a cloth-like material (e.g. felt) which needs to be protected against the ravages of sweat. This is achieved by using a saddle cloth made of an absorbent material such as wool or thick cotton. The size should be approximately 100cm X 80cm. This allows approx. 30cm to be folded back at the front to give extra protection over the withers. This folded back portion must be uppermost so as the edge of the saddle cloth is not in contact with the withers area.

Place the saddle too far forward over the withers. Now draw the saddle back into place so that it sits comfortably on the back. By drawing it back this way, you make sure that the horse's hair is lying flat under the saddle. This is important for the comfort of the horse.

Now go to the off (right) side of the horse and pull the girth so that it hangs down freely. Never push the girth off the top of the saddle from the near side of the horse. The girth will fall down at speed and the metal buckle

will bang painfully against the horse's legs. This could make the horse edgy when it is saddled again. Run the stirrup iron down the leather or uncross the offside leather from over the seat.

Go back to the near (left) side and grasp the front of the saddle cloth with the left hand and the rear with the right hand. Lift until the saddle is well clear of the back and the saddle cloth has been forced up into the channel (groove under the saddle). This prevents the saddle cloth from being pulled tight over the back due to the weight of the saddle and rider. It also allows a tunnel for air to flow through and dries the sweat on the top of the withers and back.

Reach under the horse for the girth. Do it up gently. Some horses develop the trick of taking a big breath of air while you are doing up the girth. This is called "blowing himself out". Wait until he breathes out, or lead him around, and then do the girth up a little tighter if necessary.

If the horse is going to stand for a short while in the stable, there is no need to make the girth snug. It should keep the saddle in place but by being a little looser, the horse will feel more comfortable while he waits to be ridden. Try to avoid putting a saddle on a horse a long time before he is ridden. The horse may lie down and ruin the saddle. He will also be unable to rest comfortably.

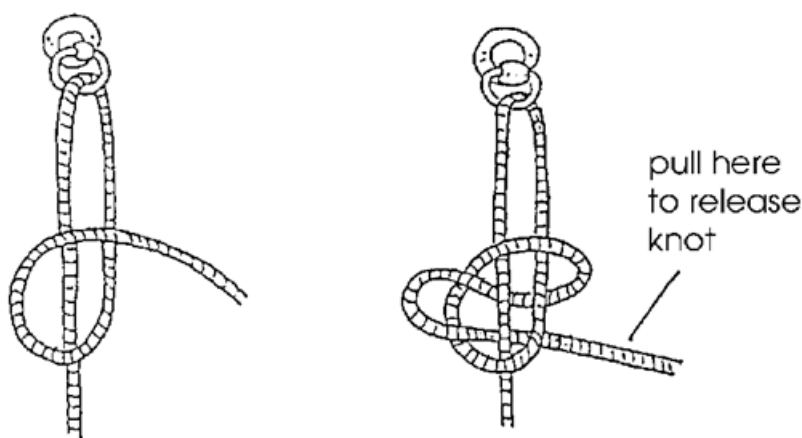
Taking Off a Saddle

From the near (left) side of the horse, place the stirrup iron over the seat, or run stirrup up stirrup leather, and undo the girth making sure you place it in the hanging position. Don't let it fall down as, again, it could hit the horse's legs. Now go to the off (right) side of the horse and put the girth and the stirrup iron over the saddle or run stirrup up the stirrup leather, so it is safely out of the way, go back to the near side. With your left hand under the pommel of the saddle and your right hand under the cantle, lift the saddle and saddle cloth clear of the horse's back. Place the saddle in the crook of your left arm. Hang the saddle on a saddle rack as soon as possible. Spread the saddle cloth out over the saddle to dry. These racks and "horses" hold the saddle off the floor and support the weight of the leather in the best way.

If you have to store a saddle on the floor, stand it on the pommel and lean the cantle against the wall. Place the girth over the cantle so that the leather is not rubbed. Protect the saddle from being knocked over and stood on if it must be stored on the floor.

Tying up a Horse

A QUICK RELEASE KNOT is used to tie up horses. It is a useful knot because it can be undone with one pull by the handler and yet a horse cannot undo it or tighten it by pulling backwards from it. Practise tying a quick release knot.



Summary of Safety Rules When Handling Horses

1. Speak. Let the horse know you are there.
2. Approach from the side of the horse.
3. Stand at the horse's shoulder.
4. Never stand directly in front of the horse.

5. Never stand directly behind the horse.
6. Don't make loud noises or sudden movements around the horse.
7. Never tie the horse to a loose or unstable object.
8. Never feed a group of loose horse's titbits in a paddock. They become jealous over food and could start kicking and biting.
9. Anticipate trouble, look ahead.
10. Handle horses firmly, kindly and with confidence.

The emphasis so far has been on understanding the mind of the horse so we know what sort of behaviour to expect from him. This helps us handle horses safely. If you respect the horse's strength and follow simple safety rules, handling horses will be a pleasure.

SET TASK

Set Task 1

If you have access to a horse use the techniques from the lesson to approach your horse, to put on and take off a bridle and saddle, and to tie up your horse. Keep in mind how you usually do these tasks and if the ways you have just tried are better (of course, they may be the same techniques you already use).

Set Task 2

Visit at least one horse show or competition. Observe how different owners handle their horses, in preparation, in leading their horses up prior to competition, in the competition or show itself, and after the horse has been shown or competed. If possible, talk to several owners about how they handle their horses.

Set Task 3

Visit at least three facilities where horses are broken in. Three facilities may be described as

- your own location;
- a local horse breeding facility;
- another local or distant breeder.

Find out all that you can about the different methods used to break horses in. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method, what facilities and equipment are required, how long does each method usually take etc.

If you have difficulty visiting three real life facilities due to accessibility problems, you may undertake "virtual visits online and carry out appropriate research into breaking online too.

Assignment 1

Question 1

Describe in one sentence and in your own words, different psychological traits of a horse, including:

- herd instinct
- memory
- fright

Question 2

Explain how an understanding of horse psychology can assist with handling a horse. Write 200-300 words.

Question 3

In training, the horse is rewarded for good behaviour. He will choose or refuse to behave this way again. How might a horse be rewarded and punished for good and bad behaviour respectively?

Write up to 500 words discussing your understanding of this topic. Include examples. Illustrations may also be used to support your answer.

Question 4

Recommend appropriate strategies for handling a frightened horse. Make a list of steps or suggestions.

Question 5

briefly distinguish between two methods of horse breaking. You should attempt to make particular reference to the following:

- variations in procedures
- facilities required
- tack required
- time framework

Question 6

State why a horse should not be tied to a loose or unstable object? (Write one sentence).

Question 7

By submitting evidence, you should demonstrate how to perform a range of tasks including:

11. Putting on different pieces of tack, including:
 - a head stall
 - a bridle
 - a saddle
12. How to lead a horse
13. How to ride (walk and trot is sufficient)

For this question, there are three different ways you may submit proof:

Option 1.

A professional in this industry, such as a qualified instructor, can verify the demonstration by filling out and signing the Horse Riding Log (see below).

Option 2.

Ask someone to take sequences of pictures and submit those digital images as evidence.

Option 3. (provides the best communication to your tutor, but is more time consuming your you to compile. You do not need to choose this option but if it suits you and you prefer it, it will be acceptable)

Ask someone to record you riding and make a short video. Send your tutor the link to the where the video can be viewed or specifically submit the video file in whichever format possible.

HORSE RIDING LOG

This form should be used to conduct a practical assessment of a student's riding skills.

INSTRUCTIONS TO ASSESSOR:

If the answer to each question is yes, the student may then be determined to be competent.

If you determine the student to be competent, write "C" in the appropriate space.

If you determine the student to be NOT YET COMPETENT, write "N" in the appropriate space.

Competency	Assessment
TACKING UP	
Is the horse under control at all times? Is the procedure being carried out in a safe place for both horse and rider? Is the saddle cloth placed well forward, over the withers? Are the girth and surcingles tight? Was the horse walked before the girth tightness was checked?	
MOUNTING	
Are the reins being held short, and firm, in the left hand? Is the stirrup iron held with the right hand as the ball of the left foot is placed in it? Is the left knee pressed against the horse's shoulder during mounting? Is the right hand gripping the front of the saddle at the start of mounting?	
SITTING IN THE SADDLE	
Is the ball of the foot on the stirrup iron? Are the feet forward with the heels down? Are the hands low, or near the front of the saddle? Are the elbows close to the rider's side?	
WALKING AND TROTTING	
Is the ball of the foot still on the stirrup iron? Are the feet forward with the heels down? Is the rider's body fairly erect and straight but relaxed? Does the rider squeeze for forward motion using knees/thigh pressure?	
CONTROL	
Is the rider able to make the horse stand still without difficulty? Can the rider make the horse move forward without difficulty? Can the rider stop the horse from a walk, without difficulty? Can the rider stop a horse from a light trot, without significant difficulty? Can the rider do light turns at the trot, in any given direction?	
DISMOUNTING	
Are the reins gathered in short and held firmly? Are the reins (if joined), IMMEDIATELY taken over the horse's head after dismounting?	

Assessor (print name) _____

Assessor (signature) _____

Assessor Qualification _____

Assessor contact details (phone and/or email) _____

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