

ORGANIZING A LESSON

Organization and Focus of a Lesson

In general when developing a lesson plan, there are three phases to consider: warm-up, work, and cool-out. All lessons for students or schooling sessions for the horse should include these phases.

Warm-up Phase

If you are teaching a new student for the first time, there should be a brief introduction in which you exchange names and discuss goals and any limitations of horse or rider. Always carry out a safety and tack check. Instruct the student through a period of 10-15 minutes, which includes:

- Stretching the horse (allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the hands)
- Straight lines
- Curved lines
- Accurately ridden corners
- Transitions between the gaits
- Basic school figures in all three gaits

During this time, assess the seat and position of the rider and consider the quality of the horse's way of going in relationship to the Pyramid of Training (see illustration on page 14). At the end of the warm-up phase, allow the horse and rider a walk break while you discuss the next part of the lesson.

Work Phase

In this phase you will address the needs of both the horse and rider to further training. Keeping in mind that you are working with a partnership, you must develop your student's skill level and the training of the horse simultaneously. Your objective must be clear, even to other riders observing the lesson. Your objective must be appropriate for the horse and rider, both mentally and physically, and you must be able to accomplish it in the time of the lesson. Remember that in every lesson the seat and the use of the aids must be consistently addressed by the instructor. The work phase may include:

1. Bending exercises and a variety of figures to improve lateral and longitudinal suppleness.
 - Turn on the forehand
 - Leg yield
 - Serpentine – both across the arena and shallow single and double loops along the wall
 - Circles and voltes located in a variety of places in the arena, such as center line, quarter lines, long and short walls, and corners
2. Transition work to improve throughness and self-carriage.
 - Transitions between gaits on bending lines
 - Transitions within the gaits
 - Increasing the polish and difficulty of transitions
 - Half-halts
 - Halt, rein back
 - *Überstreichen* with one and with both reins
3. Lateral work to improve looseness and supple the horse, to improve straightness and, in the more advanced work, to develop and improve collection.
 - Turn on the haunches
 - Shoulder-fore
 - Shoulder-in
 - Travers
 - Renvers
 - Half-pass

Cool-out Phase

Direct the student to stretch the horse (allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the hands), and after that, walk on a loose or long rein. Review with the student the concept or focus they were working on. Ask if they have any questions.

Recommend homework—what they should work on before the next lesson and perhaps some suggested reading on the subject. Did your student leave with at least one clear idea, feel, or concept from the lesson?

Time considerations apply to all three phases of the lesson. In planning the lesson, assign a segment of time to each phase of the lesson. Typically the warm-up phase will be 10 to 15 minutes, the work phase 30 to 40 minutes plus several walk breaks, and the cool-out phase should be 10 minutes. The instructor should avoid undertaking work that is more difficult than either horse or rider can achieve. Both the mental and physical expectations for horse and rider have to be realistic.

Teaching with a consistent focus provides the best results. After assessing the rider and horse, determine your objective and explain it clearly to the rider. Avoid drifting into other unrelated ideas throughout the lesson. While the instructor maintains focus throughout the lesson, he or she must also be able to make appropriate adjustments in exercises to reflect the ongoing needs of the horse and rider.

In order to provide high-quality lessons over a long period of time, the instructor must provide variety in the program. Some examples of techniques that foster variety are changing horses between students during the lesson, having students observe one another, having the student give a detailed explanation of the subject to the instructor, using cavaletti and jumping, as appropriate, and including hacking and hill work.

Teaching for Understanding

After assessing the rider and horse in the warm-up, the instructor should spend a few minutes explaining his objective for the lesson. Be certain to have the rider's full attention. Have him or her turn in and actually halt and listen. Be precise. A few minutes are all that is needed to convey the objective and the exercises.

Teaching “what” the exercise is

Make certain the rider understands the exercise and its objective. Is the rider clear about the aids and the mechanical aspects of the exercise (e.g., location of figures and transitions)? Through questions, the instructor should determine the depth of understanding and whether or not the rider's related knowledge is complete and correct.

Teaching “why” to do the exercise

Explain how this exercise relates to the Pyramid of Training and how it also relates to previous work the rider has been focusing on. The instructor should discuss the theoretical concepts at a level appropriate to the rider's age and experience.

Teaching “how” to do the exercise

Give clear directions. Determine if the rider has the correct feel for the quality of the horse's way of going throughout the exercise. Explain to the student what you expect to see during and as a result of the exercise. Incorporate tools such as cones or drawing on a board to further clarify an exercise. Be able to explain the exercise in several ways. Some students are visual learners; you may need to get on and demonstrate. Some students are tactile learners; they learn by feel of the exercise. Some students benefit from the use of imagery; they hear the instructor's descriptive words, internalize them, and learn as a result of his or her response to those words. Seek feedback from students as to their understanding and perception of how they and their horses are going.

Presentation Skills

Command of the Arena

The instructor should stand to teach in the best location to view the rider's body for symmetry, balance, correctness of

position, and application of correct aids. It is also important for the instructor to be able to see the horse from many angles to thoroughly view straightness. The ideal position from which to teach will change depending on the exercise being ridden.

Etiquette

Correct teaching etiquette means the instructor does not sit or lean on a wall to teach. He or she must be fully involved in the lesson, aware of all of the riders in the ring at all times in order to correctly manage the lesson and avoid unsafe situations. Prior to beginning, the instructor should be certain that all riders understand “ring rules.” (See Appendix for Ring Rules.)

Etiquette is important because it influences learning and conveys professionalism. Avoid foul language, and never humiliate or mock the student. Like the horse, the rider deserves our respect and can only progress if he or she is relatively free of tension and able to assimilate the experience. Use language appropriate to the rider’s age and experience.

Poise

The instructor should project self-confidence through appropriate use of voice and body language. He or she should demonstrate sincere interest in the rider’s development. A positive and professional manner will serve to instill confidence in the rider.

Voice

The instructor’s voice influences the tone of the lesson. Speech that is too fast or too slow is as difficult to understand as volume that is too loud or too soft. The instructor must have good enunciation to be understood, especially when teaching in a large area indoors or outdoors. Vary your tone to avoid the dullness of monotone teaching. Allow the students ample time without words so they can mentally process on their own what they are learning. A constant barrage of words and directions from an instructor produces students who are dependent and develop less feel since they never function independently from the instructor’s voice.

Vocabulary

Use terminology correctly (see the *USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*). Avoid use of truisms in teaching. For example, saying that a horse “needs to be straight” is not enough. Discuss how the horse is crooked, stiff, or hollow. What is interfering with potential straightness? Is it a rider problem specifically (e.g. lack of outside aids)? Is it developmental? Has the horse acquired crookedness (asymmetry) through years of incorrect training, or is it that the horse does not respond to basic leg aids and must acquire this in order to then be made straight? An articulate instructor communicates concepts and theory successfully.

Group Lessons

After a series of lunge lessons, beginner riders can be taught in small group lessons. Limit the number of riders to six or fewer for safety and control. Put together riders of similar ability in order to enable you to use one lesson plan for all. Ideally, horses should have the same level of training or quiet, reliable school horses should be used. Choose an experienced leading file to be at the front of the ride. Limit the space to an enclosed 20 x 40-meter arena to further supervise and control the ride.

Safety is always an important concern. In order to maintain high safety standards, the following rules are helpful:

1. Begin the lesson with all horses lined up along the center line facing the instructor. Keep a distance of four feet between each horse.
2. The instructor should supervise the students checking the fit and safety of the tack, such as adjusting the stirrups to the correct length and tightening the girth.
3. Designate leading file and explain the order of riders and the terminology used to direct them around the arena. Explain how to determine the correct distance of two horse lengths from the horse in front of you. (The rider should see the hind feet of the horse in front of him through the ears of his horse. If he sees the hocks he is too close; the ground behind the hind feet, he is too far away.)

Managing the Ride

1. Always use the term “Prepare to” prior to giving a command so that your riders are organized and ready to follow directions.
2. Teach the riders to follow the leading file with correct distances unless directed otherwise. This develops his or her ability to regulate tempo, maintain regularity, use of half-halts and ride with foresight.
3. Be clear in your commands and explanations. For example “whole ride” indicates that they will be performing an exercise together. “Riders in succession” means that they will execute the exercise one at a time following their leading file.
4. Teach riders to pass correctly with a safe distance between horses as they are instructed to do so. Teach riders to pass left hand to left hand if they are tracking in opposite directions. Teach riders to move to the inner track if they are walking or working in a slower gait.
5. Use exercises that are appropriate for the skill level of the rider and the training of the horse.
6. During the ride, direct individual corrections to each rider regarding position and how the horse is going. If a rider has difficulty, you must be skillful at continuing the ride while addressing the individual. Use the technique of dividing the riders, working in succession, or even switching riders between horses in order to solve difficulties. The instructor’s goal for each group lesson should be to achieve improved performance for both horses and riders. Exercises should be chosen with knowledge as to what will not only focus on the riders’ learning but also will help horses further develop in terms of the criteria of the Pyramid of Training.

Group lessons provide a good format to develop camaraderie among students. They also provide a good opportunity for students to measure their progress, become somewhat independent through having to establish control over their horses, and be exposed to the skills required to ride in a group, much like riding in the warm-up arena at competitions.

Private and Semi-Private Lessons

In teaching one or two students at a time, the instructor has the luxury of giving more attention to fewer students. The objective of improving the rider is more easily met with fewer students.

Throughout the lesson, the instructor will:

- Correct the rider’s seat and position,
- Make the rider aware of the use and effectiveness of the aids,
- Help the rider develop the ability to detect slight variations in the horse’s way of going,
- Reorganize and improve the horse, and
- Achieve an improved level of “feel” in the rider.

Additionally, the instructor must be certain the student understands the purpose and requirements of a given exercise or movement. In this format lesson, the instructor is able to demonstrate theory and explain concepts more fully.

Also, the objective of improving the horse may be more easily met in the smaller lesson. The instructor must always keep in mind the guidelines of the Pyramid of Training—for example, the regularity of the gaits. If the gaits are not regular, is the source of the problem with the rider? The goal is to develop the horse systematically utilizing appropriate school figures and exercises that address the correct priorities in training.

Regardless of lesson type, the instructor must use humane and classical methods that result in a relaxed, correct and confident horse-and-rider team. The requirements for teaching a productive lesson remain the same regardless of the type of lesson (private, group, or lunge) being taught.

Lectures and Theory Lessons

It is beneficial for even the most novice rider to receive instruction on theory. Opportunity should be created by the instructor to provide lectures on the theory of training the horse and rider. Students should be required to read texts and develop an understanding that will improve their physical skills. Instructors should be able to communicate in an organized and clear way utilizing a variety of presentations, including videos, transparencies, hand-out materials, and demonstrations. Instructors should encourage students to participate in and audit educational opportunities. Through the understanding of classical theory, the student will be more able to recognize correct training in the horse and understand

the relationship of the rider's skill and feel to the quality of performance in the horse. With a good knowledge of the theory and an ability to apply it practically, the instructor will have provided the student with a means to ride and develop horses that are correct and confident in their way of going.

Teaching Versus Coaching

Coaching has a different purpose than teaching. In the competition arena, the instructor may adopt the role of coaching the student to prepare for a test. In this situation, the instructor provides rapid feedback to the student in the form of directions and corrections. Coaching seeks to address a flaw with an immediate correction.

In teaching, the instructor provides information that is pertinent to the rider analyzing, thinking and feeling the correctness of the horse's way of going. Teaching requires a structured progression of work based on educating the rider about the training of the horse. Instructors must be clear to avoid coaching in lessons, as the rider will not learn to think and feel independently and will not acquire a real understanding of the development of the horse.

Goal Setting

Goal setting, and the use of goal sheets, can provide invaluable communication between the instructor and student. The instructor can enhance his or her teaching program by incorporating goal sheets (see Appendix for Short and Long Term Goal Sheets), in which the student can outline his or her short- and long-term goals. This process can ensure that both student and instructor understand each other and can work more cohesively towards a shared result.

Competition Goals

Instructors should encourage their students to view competition as a tool to evaluate and enhance their educational goals. Guidance from the instructor to the inexperienced competitor is helpful in determining a realistic competition goal for the rider-horse combination. Together, instructor and student must set honest expectations that are free from misguided ego or deception as to ability.

Alternative Educational Opportunities

A good instructor takes advantage of the variety of materials available today to enhance dressage education. Although articles, books, and videos are no substitute for hours in the saddle, they are invaluable in furthering learning. The majority of students are visual learners who benefit from observing and participating in guided discussion of what they see in a clinic or competition. Small groups of students may be encouraged to read and discuss textbooks and articles together and with an instructor. Dressage videos can be used to demonstrate many aspects of position and training theory. Videotaping the student in a lesson and viewing the tape together can be very beneficial, particularly if done several times a year in order to assess progress. Videotaping should be done from several locations in the arena in order to provide footage that shows the rider from both sides as well as from the front and behind.

The instructor will also want to demonstrate for the student during some lessons so that the student can see a correction, get back on the horse, feel the correction through the change in the horse's way of going and then discuss it. In this way, the instructor can capitalize on several learning pathways— visual, kinesthetic, and auditory—at the same time.

Dressage Competitions – The Instructor's Perspective

Competitions can be useful in assessing realization of long-term goals. Students must be fully prepared to meet with success at a competition. Realistic goals, positive attitude, knowledge of the USEF Rule Book, and understanding of the purpose and theory of dressage tests is mandatory. Instructors should teach riders competition protocol, require good sportsmanship, and provide leadership to develop positive relationships with show personnel. The responsibility of mailing complete entries on time, requesting special scheduling accommodations politely, and expressing thanks to the show organizers and to sponsors can be demonstrated and reinforced by the instructor.