



# Using learning style preferences to teach more effective riding lessons

Karen L. Waite, M.S., Specialist, Michigan State University Extension, and Instructor, Department of Animal Science, Michigan State University

## ► What are learning styles?

### ► Introduction

*Think back to when you first learned to ride a horse with any finesse; that is, when you learned to ride correctly, rather than to just stay on, the horse.*

For some of us, it may have been years ago. For others, a few months. For some who prefer to “just ride around,” it may never have happened at all. The chances are good that learning to ride well was frustrating sometimes, depending on your physical ability, enthusiasm and motivation, the cooperation of your horse, and of course, your instructor.

As a 4-H leader, it may be hard for you to remember what it felt like and how difficult it was for someone to teach you where to put your legs, hands, arms and head and – oh yes – to “get your heels down!” Now that you’re the instructor, you’re probably experiencing some of the same frustrations you did when you first learned to ride. Only this time, it’s because some of your *students* “just aren’t getting it!”

You may be faced with a child who seems unable to improve or respond to your lessons the way the other kids do. This bulletin is designed to help you both in communicating with a rider who is having challenges and in improving all of your group members’ skills by considering something called “learning style differences.”

*Educational research has shown that everyone has a preferred way to learn – the way we learn most effectively (Sasson-Edgette, 1996).*

While the research on learning styles is extensive and complex, we’re going to focus on a set of preferred learning styles called “sensory modalities.” According to Keefe (1987), these are the sensory channels or pathways through which people prefer to give, receive and store information such as how to ride a horse. While most people are able to use all learning styles at least a little, individuals generally have strengths and limitations in one or more of the channels or pathways. The three basic sensory learning preferences or pathways are visual, auditory and kinesthetic.

### Visual

**Visual learners** tend to learn best by seeing. They think in pictures and have vivid imaginations. Seeing what it is they’re trying to absorb helps visual learners build their skills most effectively. They tend to learn best through demonstrations, pictures, videos and similar methods. Visual learners comprise about 60 to 65 percent of the population.



### Auditory

**Auditory learners** prefer to learn by listening and talking about what to do. They acquire knowledge best through lectures or descriptions of what to do. About 30 percent of the population are auditory learners.



### Kinesthetic

**Kinesthetic learners** (also called tactual learners) prefer to learn by touching and manipulating things. They learn best by doing and tend to express their feelings physically. Interestingly, most students who do poorly in school are kinesthetic learners. One reason for this is that teachers generally gear their lessons toward visual and auditory learners. Consequently, kinesthetic learners fall behind, lose confidence and may eventually come to resent school. Kinesthetic learners make up about 10 percent of the population.



### Effective learning opportunities take into account all learning styles

It would seem that most naturally talented riders, based on their preference for learning by doing and their strongly developed sense of feeling, would most likely be kinesthetic learners, but we don’t know that for certain. We do know that, regardless of the situation, the most effective learning opportunities take into account all learning styles. Doing so gives all riders an equal chance to learn. For that reason, incorporating activities that include all three sensory learning styles will enhance the effectiveness of riding lessons.

## ▶ Learning styles and riding

When most of us learned to ride a horse, we rode in a circle and tried to comply as someone in the center of the circle told us where to put our feet, legs and hands, how to cue our horses, and so forth. Occasionally, we might watch another rider and try to copy his or her technique, but more often than not, we listened. In lessons such as this, riders with strong auditory learning styles tend to improve their skills rapidly, while other riders may struggle. Riders may improve quicker with the help of lessons that incorporate all three learning styles.

Consider two fundamental riding techniques that riders often struggle to master:

- ▶ Recognizing when a horse is on the correct lead.
- ▶ Posting on the correct diagonal at a trot.

Sample lesson plans that incorporate all three learning styles in helping riders to master these skills appear on pages that follow. Remember, though, that with a little thought you can incorporate learning style preferences into any lesson plan.

### Identifying learning preferences

- ▶ While a variety of analytical tests and tools can help identify a rider's preferred learning style or styles, the simplest way to do so may simply be to watch him or her ride. How has the person responded in the past? Does he or she prefer to discuss the new skill? If so, perhaps the person has an auditory preference. Does another rider need to see or do things to grasp them effectively? This is probably either a visual or a kinesthetic learner. Most likely you already know your riders' learning preferences, you just haven't thought about them in this context.

### Trouble spots

Identifying every rider's preferred learning style and tailoring a riding lesson to each person would be a lot of work. A more effective teaching method is to incorporate each learning style into every lesson, and only tailor a lesson to a particular rider when that individual is having trouble. While it may take some getting used to, incorporating preferred learning styles into riding lessons will take you far toward improving both the riding ability and the self-concepts of your students . . . and isn't that what 4-H is all about?

### References

Keefe, J. W. (1987). *Learning style: Theory and practice*. Reston, VA: National Association of School Principals.

Sasson-Edgette, J. (1996). *Heads up! Practical sports psychology for riders, their families and their trainers*. New York: Doubleday.



### Acknowledgments

**Editor:** Priscilla Martin, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension

*Produced by ANR Communications*



MSU is an affirmative action/equal opportunity employer. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Thomas G. Coon, Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned. The name "4-H" and the emblem consisting of a four-leaf clover with stem and the "H" on each leaflet are protected under Title 18 U.S.C. 707.

# Recognizing leads at the canter

## ▶ Objectives

The participants will be able to recognize and explain:

- ▶ When a horse they are watching from the ground is cantering on the correct or incorrect lead in either direction.
- ▶ When a horse they are riding is cantering on the correct or incorrect lead in either direction.

## ▶ Materials

- ▶ Tacked up horse (any riding seat)
- ▶ Two different colored leg wraps or boots
- ▶ Safety helmets (one per rider)
- ▶ Lunge line
- ▶ Whip (optional)

## ▶ Time

45–60 minutes

## ▶ Setting

Space with room for horses to canter in small circles and for participants to watch from a safe place

## ▶ Background information

The way most riders seem to learn to detect which lead their horse is on at a canter or gallop is to lean waaaaay over to see which of their horse's forelegs is reaching farther to the front with each stride. Next, as riders become a little more skilled, most learn to detect their horses' leads by glancing quickly at the horse's shoulder. Eventually – and ideally – they can tell by the feel of the horse's movement which lead it is on.

This lesson is designed to help participants watch (from the ground and from the saddle), listen to the instructor and feel (from the saddle) to learn how to recognize which lead a horse is on.

**(Note:** Some riders learn quickly enough to move straight from leaning over to being able to detect a lead by feel or even from glancing at the shoulder to being able to detect a lead by feel. A fortunate few start off being able to tell which lead a horse is on by feel.)

Be sure to remind all riders in your group to wear safety helmets during this lesson.



## ▶ Procedure

### Visual

As mentioned earlier, the most time-honored method of teaching a rider to recognize a correct lead is to have him or her look down to see if the horse's inside foreleg is reaching out farther than the outside foreleg. Unfortunately, instructors often forget to have riders also look at the outside leg to make the comparison.



Visual learners might benefit from starting off by watching a riderless horse canter on a lunge line. Wrap the horse's forelegs with different colored wraps or boots to help the learners actually see when the horse is moving on the correct lead.

Explain to the group that they're going to learn how to tell which "lead" a horse is on when it is moving at a canter. A horse is said to be "on the correct lead" when its inner foreleg reaches farther forward than its outer foreleg does when the horse is turning or circling. (That is, the left foreleg reaches farther forward if the horse is turning to the left, the right foreleg reaches farther forward if it is turning to the right.)



When they seem to have learned to recognize the leads from the ground, have an experienced teen leader ride a horse (again with its forelegs wrapped with different colored wraps or boots) in a circle on the correct and incorrect leads. Have the participants identify when the horse is on the correct and incorrect lead.

Finally, have each learner ride a horse at a canter in both directions and look for the proper lead.

### **Auditory**



After the visual exercises, continue to describe to the riders what the correct lead should look like when they're on top of the horse. Have them focus on their horse's shoulders as they listen to you describe what the correct lead should look like. Then have them take turns telling you whether their horses are on the correct or incorrect lead, and encourage them to talk about what they are seeing and feeling. Be sure to have them work in both directions!

### **Kinesthetic**

Once the riders have watched and listened to you describe a horse working on the correct and incorrect leads, see if you can get them to feel the correct lead. Have them take turns cantering on a safe horse that you're controlling on a lunge line. If and when they feel comfortable doing so, have them close their eyes and work to feel what happens to their body when the horse canters on the proper lead. (Their inside hip should drop further than the outside hip and their inside leg may feel as if it's going farther forward than the outside leg.)



**(Note:** This exercise works if the rider keeps his or her eyes open, too. Just encourage the person to look straight ahead at the canter, not down at the horse's shoulders. The exercise is also useful when helping riders learn to sit the canter.)

# Posting the trot on the correct diagonal

## ▶ Objectives

The participants will be able to recognize and explain:

- ▶ When a rider they are watching is posting the trot on the correct and incorrect diagonal in either direction.
- ▶ When they are posting the trot on the correct or incorrect diagonal in either direction.

## ▶ Materials

- ▶ Tacked up horse (preferably hunter seat, but saddle seat is acceptable)
- ▶ Two leg wraps or boots
- ▶ Safety helmets (one per rider)
- ▶ Lunge line
- ▶ Whip (optional)

## ▶ Time

45–60 minutes

## ▶ Setting

Space with room for horses to trot in small circles and for participants to watch from a safe place

## ▶ Background information

This lesson plan assumes that participants are already familiar with the concepts of sitting and posting at the trot.

Be sure to remind all riders in your group to wear safety helmets during this lesson.

## ▶ Procedure

### Visual

Cover a diagonal pair of the horse's legs (left front and right hind or right front and left hind) with leg wraps or boots. Explain to the group that they're going to learn to identify whether a rider is posting the trot on the correct or incorrect diagonal. Have the horse walk, then trot, on the lunge line. Point out to the group that at a trot, the horse's diagonal pairs of legs move together in a two-beat gait. Have them compare the trot to the walk.

Have a teen leader ride the horse (off the lunge line) and post the trot on the correct diagonal in either direction. Point out that when the rider is on the correct diagonal, as he or she moves forward and up, the horse's foreleg nearest the rail should move forward at the same time. Next, have the rider post on the incorrect diagonal, and ask the group if they see any difference in the way the horse and rider are moving. Have the rider alternate between walking and trotting the horse, sometimes posting on the correct and sometimes on the incorrect diagonal. As this is going on, ask the group to tell you when the rider is posting correctly and incorrectly.



### Auditory

After the visual exercises, continue to describe to the group what the correct diagonal should look like from the top of the horse. Have them count out the beats of the trot and focus on the horse's shoulders as they listen

to you describe the correct diagonal. Ask for volunteers to tell you what they see. Remind them to “rise and fall with the leg on the wall.” Encourage them to talk about what they are seeing and feeling as they ride (that is, whether they are posting on the correct or incorrect diagonal).



### Kinesthetic

Now it's time to help the group learn to feel whether they're posting on the correct diagonal. While this is the ultimate goal for riders, some may have already mastered the skill just from the visual and auditory learning exercises.



Have the group members take turns trotting in either direction on a safe horse that you're controlling on a lunge line. If and when a rider feels comfortable doing so, have the person close his or her eyes and work to feel what happens to the whole body when the horse trots. (When they feel the horse's inside hind foot on the ground, the horse's outside foreleg is also on the ground and they should be sitting. When the legs leave the ground to move forward, they should be rising.)

**(Note:** If any riders are uncomfortable with closing their eyes, allow them to keep their eyes open. Just encourage them to look straight ahead at the trot, not down at the horse's shoulders.)