



How to walk:

In this series we'll be discussing 'how to' get your horse to do any number of things like turning, stopping, backing, shoulder-in, half-pass, etc. Before you can get your horse to do any of these things, though, there are some basic building blocks that need to be in place.

The aids work best when they are used to communicate your wishes to your horse's mind so that he or she can carry them out - not to physically move your horse around. This is a subtle distinction and a very important one. The aids only result in easy, fluid movement if they are light and your horse chooses to respond to them. So before we attempt anything else, let's take a look at how to get horses to move and respond.

If riding, an easy way to get your horse moving is to ask for forward motion by briefly and gently touching his or her sides with both calves and then immediately releasing them. This signal is something that horses have to learn, however, not something they are born understanding. You will need to have some method of backing up the signal if your horse doesn't recognize it as meaning something. A stick is actually a great tool for this since you can use it very precisely without compromising your balance and a tap with the stick behind your leg will usually produce forward movement unless you are blocking with tight legs or reins. You may be surprised at just how little your horse considers to be blocking! Using a stick in an educated way like this will enable you to avoid abusing your horse's mouth or sides with strong physical aids. You'll need to tap as much as is necessary to produce a response and as little as possible so as to train your horse to listen to whispers.

One easy way to figure out the natural aids is to notice how your horse makes you move your own body while riding and then exaggerate it – very slightly – to give signals. Once your horse is walking, you'll notice that the belly swings from side to side with the rhythm of the steps. To increase the walk, first follow this movement by *very* gently hugging your horse's sides with your calves (not knees or thighs) while allowing your hips to move as freely as possible. You'll find there's a natural moment to 'touch' with your right calf as the right side of the horse's belly rotates in and under and a simultaneous natural moment to 'open' the other calf as it moves up and away on the other side. To ask your horse to increase the walk, all you need do is slightly exaggerate this alternate touching and (especially) opening of the calves. Again, you may need to back up this gentle signal if your horse doesn't recognise it as meaning something. Remember you are riding the horse's mind, not his or her body.



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(How to walk cont.)

One way to signal your horse that you'd like to slow or stop is to minimise or eliminate the freedom of movement in your legs, hips and pelvis by introducing some muscle tension. A good way to do this is simply by stretching up tall in the saddle (you can also breathe in simultaneously) which will straighten your spine slightly and reduce the play of the joints along and below it. When you try this you'll notice that it has very little power, however, so unless your horse is calm, relaxed and totally paying attention to you you'll probably need more than just this signal from 'the seat' to achieve reliable slowing or stopping. We'll take a deeper look at that in the next article.