



Horse Handling Handbook

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Horse Handlers: Assist staff and other volunteers with leading horses inside and outside of classes, including participating in turn in and turn out and helping to put horses away after a class.

Job Duties:

- Participate in turn in and turn out.
- Collect horse from the appropriate stall or pasture using the Buddy System.
- Groom and tack horse as directed by instructor.
- Lead the horse to the arena as specified by the instructor and hand over to volunteer or staff responsible for horse during class.
- Maintain safety outside of the arena by keeping horse at a safe distance from other horses, people, fences and other objects.
- Un-tack horse as directed by instructor.
- Take the horse back to the appropriate stall or pasture, using the Buddy System.
- Follow all instructor and staff directions.
- Ensure compliance with all Topfield policies.
- Work as a team with staff and volunteers.

Qualifications:

- Capable of performing all tasks assigned.
- Volunteers must be at least 16 years of age with 3 years or more of horse experience.
- All volunteers must participate in a Horse Handler training prior to volunteering.
- Mature, dependable, and responsible.
- Able to frequently sit, stand, walk, bend and lift up to 50 pounds.
- Able to physically react with agility and swiftness to maximize control of the horse.

Reminders:

- All interactions with horses and all leading experiences at Topfield must follow the policies and procedures outlined in this handbook. **They may differ from what you have learned, experienced or encountered in other environments.** However, it is imperative that, at our facility, you follow our methodology as our policies and procedures are specifically tailored for our unique therapeutic riding atmosphere and our horses.
- Each staff person, volunteer, and horse come into the barn environment with their **own unique personality characteristics.** If, at any time, there is a conflict between any of these personalities, please make the Volunteer Coordinator aware of the situation so that a positive solution is achieved for all involved.
- Keep your commitment and are on time for your commitment
- Listen to all staff and understand that the instructor is in charge in the lesson environment
- Accept feedback from instructors regarding your work and understand that their goal is to offer the best and most effective riding experience for each rider
- Stay alert, listen, and learn from instructors and other volunteers
- Give us your best effort, maintaining enthusiasm and goodwill at all times



Participating in Turn Out and Gathering from paddocks

- We require that you use the **buddy system** when bringing a horse to or from pasture. For your safety, you must always have another volunteer or staff member with you.
- If you are operating a gate always keep a hand on it. Never allow gates to swing open.
- Always check the pasture turnout board in the barn area. This will tell you where horses are and where they need to go. These items are subject to change daily so please check them first and every time you come out.
- Always **check with the Barn Manager** about horses that may only be led or caught by staff.
- Check the lesson schedule, and do not turn out horses if they have a class before 11:30 am.
- Only use the halter that is assigned to that particular horse. Only un-clip the halters from the throat latch (never the crown piece).
- Put fly masks on before turning out and take fly masks off while doing turn in (summer). In winter please ask staff if blankets need to be taken off (turn out) or put on (turn in).
- **Do not allow any hand grazing**, even while opening and closing gates, as this teaches the horses very bad manners and makes them harder to use on the sensory trail, and any time out of the arenas.
- **If you are uncomfortable** handling any horse on the property at any time, please find an horse staff member and ask them to turn in/out that horse.
- **If there is anything concerning** about a horse or the property, please let a staff member know immediately.



Preparing for Lessons

As a horse handler, you may be asked to help prepare horses for a lesson. First find the instructor for that lesson and check the schedule in the grooming area for all information about the lesson.

If there are horses in the cross-tie area with a volunteer or staff member, please do not come up to or pet the horse. If riders are present, the horse is in class, being groomed or tacked as a part of the curriculum, please do not interrupt their session. We ask that you respect the rider's time with their horse and not provide a distraction from the relationship building that is occurring.

Catching an Equine: Find the horse, whether they are in their stall or out in the pasture. We require that you use the **buddy system** when bringing a horse to or from pasture. For your safety, you must always have another volunteer or staff member with you.

Grooming and Tacking a Horse: You must attend a Groomer Training to Groom and Tack horses.

Delivering a Horse to Class: The horse should be brought **into the arena 15 minutes prior** to the start of the lesson and turned over to the horse leader responsible for them during the class. **Never leave an equine unattended.** If the horse leader is not available yet, wait for another volunteer or a staff person to take responsibility for the horse.



Specific Horse Handler Procedures

Communicating with Equines

Horses are direct reflections of the person leading them. As a herd animal, they look to you to be their leader and provide them with direction and security. Your body language and attitude are your most effective tools of communication. Horses can tell when you are stressed or anxious. A relaxed and confident horse leader is the most effective way to manage your horse.

Your Eyes:

- Look ahead and direct your gaze in the direction you wish to go.
- Look in the direction you are turning.
- Looking down toward the ground will slow down or even stop a horse.

Your Hands:

- Slow moving hands result in resistance free, well balanced and smooth movements.
- Fast moving hands result in nervous, quick and jerking movements from the horse.

Your Voice:

- Talk to the horse. They understand verbal cues, such as *Walk On*, *Trot*, and *Whoa*.
 - During a lesson, riders will give the verbal cues, which the leader will emphasize. Empower your rider by always letting them give the cues to start and stop.
- The tone of your voice will affect a horse's mood.

Your Feet:

- In general, if you move your feet, the horse will move theirs.
- Try to be in rhythm with the horse. This promotes resistance free handling.

Your Placement:

- When moving, you should be at the horse's shoulder
- When stopped for a period, especially with a mounted client, you should face the horse.



1. Approach: Talk to the horse. Quietly but confidently approach the left side of the horse's head, facing the same direction as the horse.
2. Halter: Stand in a similar position to the leading position (standing parallel to the horse, facing the same direction as them, and next to their neck). With your right hand, hold the halter by the crown piece, not by the nose band. With your left hand, guide the horse's nose through the nose hole, so that the nose band is on top and the throat latch is hanging open underneath. Clip the throat latch to the ring on the left side of the halter.
3. Lead: Lead the horse out of the pasture, holding the lead line in your right hand 18 inches from the halter. Hold the remaining lead line in your left hand, folded neatly. Never wrap a lead around your hand/wrist/etc.
4. Stall: Take the horse to their stall first so they can eat, drink, or relieve themselves prior to anything else, including grooming and tacking up for lessons. Halters should never be left on horses in their stalls.

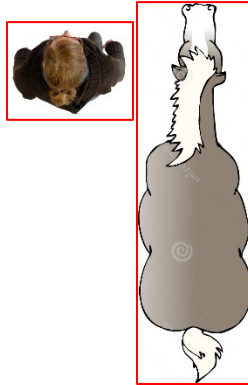
Gathering a Horse from a Stall: Before you open the stall door, make sure that the horse's hind end is not facing the door. If it is, open the door slightly and call to the horse. When they are in a position that you can easily approach the head, open the stall door just wide enough for you to slip through. Make sure the door is all the way open before taking the horse out.

Gathering a Horse from Pasture: Be constantly aware of the other horses in the pasture. They can quickly appear at the gate with you if they think it is time to come in!

Turning Out an Equine: When turning a horse back out in the pasture, shut and latch the gate, walk away from the gate a few feet and turn the horse's head towards the gate before taking the halter off. If other horses are being turned out in the same pasture, all handlers wait for each other and un-halter the horses at the same time.



1. Equine Space vs. Human Space: The horse and the leader have their own defined rectangles of space. The leader may enter the horse's space to direct but the horse may not enter the leader's space.



2. Location: Stand parallel to the left side of the equine, **next to the throat latch** on the horse's halter, so they cannot turn in front of you. Stand approximately one foot from the horse so they can see down the length of their body and you can see their head in front of you.
3. Posture: Stand with an **authoritative posture**, standing tall, straight and square. The horse should be standing straight, with their head on the center line. Do not allow the horse to move out of the halt until both your position and theirs is correct.
 - a. The best way to influence the horse is through your body language and your movements, not through the lead rope.
4. Look Up: **Look up** and towards where you want to be moving. Horses react to your body language and being looked at while leading can make them feel preyed upon.
5. Lead Rope: Hold the lead rope, **18 inches from the halter**, in the right hand. The remaining rope is folded like a figure eight and held in the left hand.
6. The leading arm should be carried with the elbow slightly bent and fingers forward with the palm facing downward (hand over hold).
7. Do not allow the rope to drag or sag below the horse's knees.
8. Purpose: Walk purposefully at an active pace, engaging your core. Do not allow the horse to get ahead of you, fall too far behind you, or walk right behind you.
9. Pace: Maintain a steady, even pace. Avoid sharp turns or abrupt changes of gait. Maintain two horse lengths between horses.
10. Soft Commands: Do not pull the horse along. Use voice commands, such as "Walk On" and "Whoa," to reduce dragging on the lead rope.
 - a. Use the word "And" before all voice commands to cue the horse that a transition of some kind is coming.



Interacting with the Horse:

1. Petting: Petting should only occur on the neck or shoulder, not the head or face.
2. Discipline: **Never discipline a horse.** The instructor and equine staff are responsible for disciplining a horse. The only time where it is appropriate for a horse leader to discipline a horse is if the instructor or an equine staff member has specifically shown you how and you have been given direct permission.
3. Maintaining Horse Space vs. Human Space: An attentive horse leader should be aware the minute a horse's head moves out of the center line, facing straight forward. If the horse moves their head towards you or enters the human space, use your whole arm and hand to gently push them back into their space.



Halting:

1. Slow down your pace and shorten your stride.
2. Say “**And Whoa,**” asking the equine to halt.
3. Stop walking. Once the horse has halted, release the pressure on the lead rope.
 - a. **The halt does not need to be immediate** so that the horse is allowed time to prepare for the halt. Gradual halts help the horse to stand square when halted.
4. **For short halts**, stay in the leader position, looking in the direction of travel.
5. **For long halts**, stand facing the horse’s shoulder, at a 45° angle, in front of the horse’s head, with both hands on the lead rope at least 18 inches away from where the lead rope attaches to the halter. Your left hand should be closest to the halter, with your right hand further away.

At the Walk:

1. Using your right hand, guide the lead rope forward, away from the horse’s chest.
2. Say “**And Walk On,**” asking the horse to walk.
3. Begin walking and the horse will follow your example and move at your speed.
 - a. Once the horse has begun to walk, release the pressure on the lead rope. Do not have constant tension on the lead rope. Never pull on the horse or the lead rope.
4. Allow the horse to move their head freely up and down as they walk.
 - a. As they walk, all horses bob their heads up and down. This rhythmical movement starts at the head and moves all the way down the horse’s spine.
5. Do not make sharp turns.
 - a. To turn away from the horse leader, move your hand underneath the horse’s chin to turn their head away from you.
 - b. To turn towards the horse leader, ensure the horse remains an arm’s length away from you, while gently guiding the horse’s chin inward.



Summary: Horse Handling in a Nutshell

Turn In/Turn Out:

- Wear comfortable clothes, suitable to the weather and season and appropriate for equestrian activities, including close-toed shoes and clothing that is not revealing.
- Check the Lesson Schedule and the Pasture Turn Out Schedule
 - a. Do not turn out horses who have a class before 11:30 am. Check with staff about horses who may only be led by staff.
- Use the buddy system.
- Stay focused on horse when leading.
- When in doubt about where a horse goes or about fly masks or blankets – always ask.

Leading 101:

1. Stand parallel to left side of horse, next to throat latch, with an authoritative posture.
2. Hold the lead rope 18 inches from the halter, with the palm facing downward, and do not allow the rope to drag.
3. Look forward and walk purposefully with a steady, even pace.
4. Do not leave your horse's side. Refrain from petting and never discipline a horse.
5. Use slow, steady transitions and never abruptly halt a horse.
6. Staff are responsible for all emergency situations.

Preparing for Lessons:

- Refer to above for leading horses.
- Do not leave an horse unattended. Walk around the front of the horse, never behind.
- Only instructors or qualified volunteers may groom and tack up horses, including picking out hooves, tightening girths, etc.



Appendix: Understanding Equine Behavior

When working with equines, communication is key. It is critical to provide a safe environment for equine assisted activities. Learning to understand equine senses, instincts and body language is a step in predicting behaviors, managing risks and increasing positive relationships.

Equine Senses

Smell: The equine's sense of smell is thought to be very acute and it allows the animal to recognize other equines and people. Smell also enables the equine to evaluate situations.

Hearing: The equine's sense of hearing is also thought to be very acute. Often, an equine "hearing and not seeing" is the cause of the fright/flight response.

Sight: Equines can see in front of and almost all the way around their bodies, though they do have blind spots: directly behind and in front of them. Equines focus on objects by raising and lowering their head. Equines are thought to see quite well in the dark, due to the eyes' large size.

Touch: Touch is used as a communication between equines and between equines and people. Equines are sensitive to touch of any kind with a person's hands or legs.

Taste: Taste is closely linked with the sense of smell and helps the equine to distinguish palatable foods and other objects.

Sixth Sense: Equines have a "sixth sense" when evaluating those around them. Equines can be hypersensitive in detecting the moods of their leaders and riders.

Equine Instincts

Fright or Flight: As prey animals, equines would rather run away from danger than fight it. At a sudden movement or noise, an equine might try to flee, kick out or rear.

Herd Animal: Equines like to stay together in a herd with one or two equines being dominant and a pecking order amongst the rest. An equine may not like being alone. If the equine in front of a line is trotting or cantering, the following equines may also attempt to trot or canter.

Equine Body Language

Eyes:

- Whites Visible: Anxious, angry.
- Half Closed: Tired, relaxed, sleeping.
- Blinking: Processing information, thinking.
- Soft Eye: Gentle, relaxed, learning mode.
- Hard Eye: Tense, resistant.

Ears:

- Turned Back: Focused on something behind, tired.
- Pointing Forward: Attentive, curious.
- Droopy: Tired, sleepy, bored.
- Pinned Back: Threatening, aggressive, angry or warning.



- Pointing in Different Directions: Focused on two things at once.
- Rotating: Lots going on, curious, nervous, indecisive.
- Neutral: Normal.

Muzzle, Lips and Nostrils:

- Tight/Hard Lips: Anxious, tense.
- Wrinkled Muzzle: Nervous, worried.
- Licking/Chewing: Stress release, digesting ideas, acknowledgment.
- Drooping Lip: Relaxed, bored.
- Swishing/Mobile Muzzle: Curious, extroverted.
- Flared Nostrils: Nervous, excited, alert, working.
- Relaxed Nostrils, Soft Muzzle: Neutral, relaxed.
- Flapping Lower Lip: Unfocused, sensitive, or nervous.

Head and Neck Set:

- Low: Accepting, relaxed.
- High: Fear, anxiety, defiance.
- Level: Neutral, focused.

Tail:

- Swishing: Annoyed, irritated, flies.
- High/Raised: Attentive, excited, happy.
- Low: Submissive.
- Neutral/Level: Focused, normal.
- Clamped Down: Fearful.

Legs:

- Pawing: Frustrated.
- Standing Square: Attentive.
- Hind Hoof Resting: Relaxed.
- Hind Leg Lifted: Warning, defensive.
- Stamping: Flies, mild irritation.
- Striking: Angry, threatening, fighting.
- Dancing Around: Nervous, excited, frightened.