

LESSON VOLUNTEER DUTIES

Instructor Guidelines

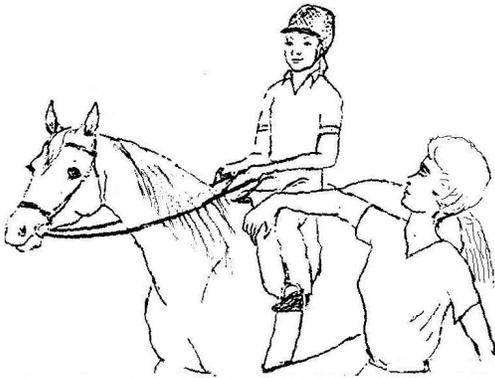
Instructors need to ensure there are enough volunteers to assist in the class. Submit a request to the Volunteer Coordinator, if you have a need for additional volunteers.

Prior to mounting, double check the tack to ensure it is appropriate and in good condition. Ensure the rider is wearing his/her helmet and that it fits correctly. If you are using the mounting ramp or mounting block, ensure the rider and assistants are placed. Have the leader bring the horse in position for mounting.

Mount the rider and make any necessary girth and stirrup adjustments. Before leaving the mounting area, ensure your rider is settled in his/her seat, ask the riders that may be in the arena to halt, then have a separate volunteer open the gate to allow the rider to be led into the arena and then close the gate behind the rider.

Sidewalker Guidelines

The volunteers who walk beside the horse to assist the rider are called “sidewalkers.” The sidewalker(s) should always be aware of the rider. They are the ones who normally get the most hands-on duties in therapeutic riding. They are directly responsible for the rider. As such, they have the capability to either enhance or detract from the lesson. They should walk abreast of the rider’s leg, close enough to provide necessary assistance to the rider but not in the way of the horse or the rider’s progress. Generally, the best position is by the rider’s knee. Being too far forward or back will make it very difficult to assist with instructions or provide security if the horse should trip or shy.



There are two ways to hold onto the rider without interfering. The most commonly used is the “arm over the thigh” hold. The sidewalker grips the front of the saddle (flap or pommel, depending on the horse’s size) with the hand closest to the rider. Then the fleshy part of the forearm rests gently on the rider’s thigh. Be careful that the elbow does not accidentally dig into the rider’s leg or the horse’s hip. Sometimes pressure on the thigh can increase and/or cause muscle spasticity, especially with the cerebral palsy population. In this case, the “therapeutic hold” may be used. Here, the leg is held at the joints, usually the knee and/or ankle. Check with the instructor/therapist for the best way to assist. In the (unlikely) event of an emergency, the arm-over-thigh hold is the most secure.

Avoid wrapping an arm around the rider’s waist. It is tempting, especially when walking beside a pony with a young or small rider, but it can offer too much and uneven support. At times, it can even pull the rider off balance and make riding more difficult. Encourage your students to use their own trunk muscles to the best of their abilities.

If there is only one sidewalker, it is best for that sidewalker to be on the rider’s weaker or affected side. If it doesn’t matter if you are on the right or left, you may want to walk on the inside in order to be better able to hear the instructor.

If the instructor chooses to use a safety belt on your rider, be very careful not to pull down or push up on it. As your arm tires it’s hard to avoid this, so rather than gripping the hand firmly, just touch your thumb and finger together around it. This way you are in position to assist the rider if needed, but you will neither give unneeded support nor pull him off balance. When you are ready for relief for your arm, ask the leader to move into the center to stop and trade sides, one at a time, with the other sidewalker. (Instructors: if your rider has serious enough balance problems to warrant a safety belt, you should probably be using two sidewalkers.)

Conversation should be encouraging but minimal because many of our riders have difficulty focusing on instructions. (Conversation before the lesson actually begins is perfectly OK.) Sidewalkers help the rider focus his/her attention on the instructor, assist the rider with balance, and help him/her understand and follow directions. Too much input from too many directions is very confusing to anyone, and to riders who already have perceptual problems, it can be overwhelming. If two sidewalkers are working with one student, one should be the “designated talker” to avoid this situation.

Some riders need minimal or occasional support; others need continuous support. Listen to the instructor’s directions so that you can be ready to reinforce them if necessary, nonverbally if possible. When the instructor gives a direction, allow your rider enough time to process the information before you assist (usually three to five seconds). For example, if the instructor says, “Turn to the right towards me,” and the student seems confused, gently tap the right and say, “Right,” to reinforce the command. You will get to know the riders and learn when they need help and when they are just not paying attention.

Do not offer more support than the rider needs. Allow the When the rider is using body and leg aids and needs no support, do not touch the horse, saddle or pad since this may interfere with the rider’s aids.

Just remember that the goal is for the rider to develop independence, but not at the expense of safety. Riders needing support will require more attention than those who ride more independently. The instructor will advise you of the method of support during mounting. Please be sure you understand the method of support and are physically and mentally at ease with the instructions before moving into the arena.

Do not take your attention off the rider. Always be totally aware of your rider, the horse and leader, the instructor and the activities going on around you. Don’t lean on the horse.

Sidewalkers NEVER mount or dismount a rider. Wait for the instructor.

Never leave your rider’s side until he is safely dismounted. After dismounting, riders always walk in FRONT of their horses. See that the rider is returned to the responsible party. You may then assist in untacking the horses.

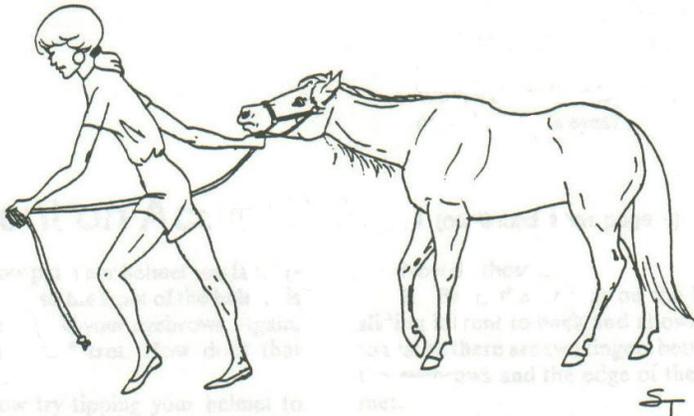
The sidewalker should get the instructor’s attention and/or ask the leader to bring the horse off the rail and stop if:

- ♥ The rider is off balance and cannot regain balance while the horse is moving;
- ♥ The saddle pad has slipped or the girth is loose;
- ♥ The stirrups need readjusting;
- ♥ The rider’s helmet needs adjusting,
- ♥ The rider is fatigued, in pain or needs to stop for any other valid reason. Be discreet when discussing a rider in his presence.
- ♥ You need to change sides because your arm is tired or you have having some difficulty and cannot carry our job in comfort and with safety. When changing sides, one volunteer changes at a time.

Horse Leader Guidelines

As a volunteer, one of the most challenging duties you could be assigned is the position of a horse leader. The volunteer who leads the horse is responsible for the horse and should be constantly aware of the horse. Additionally, the leader must also be constantly aware of the rider, instructor, and any potential hazards in or around the arena. In addition, as a leader, you must consider the sidewalkers and ensure there is enough room for them to walk along the fence, and around obstacles.

When handling the horse, be sure the lead rope is hooked to the halter and not to the bridle. Hold the lead rope 6-12 inches from the snap to allow for the natural motion of the horse's head. Horses are traditionally led on the left side (near side), but our horses are trained for right or left. It is OK to lead from the right in order to better hear the instructor.



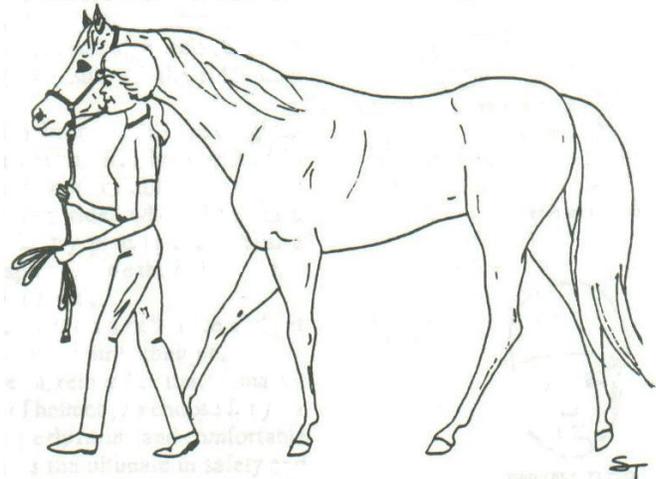
Hold the extra rope in your opposite hand. NEVER wrap the rope around your hand; instead, wrap it in a figure 8. The photo below depicts a few faults common among leaders. Here is a leader grimly marching along – head down, dragging the horse by the lead snap and the other end of the rope is coiled around the leader's hand. The leader is also trying to drag the horse. In a battle with a horse, you lose. You must get the horse to cooperate. You need to walk alongside the horse, about even with his eye. This helps keep him in a proper frame

which is more beneficial for everyone.

It helps to talk to the horse. They know the verbal commands, “walk,” “whoa,” and “trot.” Be careful not to “click” or “kiss” to the horse unless you want the horse to trot or canter. Most of our horses were trained to trot to a click sound and canter to a kiss sound.

Watch where you are going and what is happening around you. Do not walk backward to look at the rider. It is dangerous for everyone and the horses do not like to follow someone who cannot see where he/she is going.

The picture on the right shows the correct position for horse leaders. The lead shank is held with the right hand, 6-12 inches from the snap, which allows for free motion of the horse's head. This is more therapeutic to the rider and less irritating to the horse. The tail end of the lead is looped in a figure-8 in the opposite hand to avoid tripping over it. Again, never coil the rope around your hand. If the horse spooks and pulls on the rope, you could easily lose your fingers.



Students are urged to control their horses to the maximum of their abilities. Give the student three to five seconds to respond before stepping in to help. A leader must never take the place of the student, but should be there to assist with his progress and independence. When the rider is controlling the horse, you may allow a little more slack in the lead (about 12 inches or as directed) so as not to influence the horse unless for safety reasons. The horse may be confused if he feels a tug on both the reins and lead rope and may not respond to the reins as he should.

Communication with the riders is the same for leaders as for sidewalkers. Avoid the temptation to talk to the rider and/or sidewalkers. A rider may get confused too much input and not know who is in charge. (Instructors often make terrible leaders because they cannot keep their mouths shut!)

If the rider is unable to get the horse to walk, use a short tug. Using short tugs rather than a steady pull will help keep a lazy horse moving. The horse can set itself against a steady pull, but tugs keep him awake. Move out, about 1,000 steps per 15 minutes, to provide the most therapeutic benefit.

When halting, the rider should say “whoa.” If the horse does not stop, tug slightly backward, then release. If he does not respond immediately, repeat with several small tugs. When you halt for more than a few seconds, stand in front of the horse with your hands on the halter’s cheek pieces or loosely hold the lead line. Standing in front is a psychological barrier to the horse and it will stand more quietly.

NEVER hit the horse. Everyone has bad days and good days. If your horse is having a bad day, ensure you let the instructor know immediately and let the instructor take control of the situation.

If the horse steps on your foot - and we hope it won’t! - calmly lean into his shoulder to unbalance him and cause him to move away. This way you will not frighten the horse or the rider. Allow the horse to lift its hoof. Don’t try to pull your foot out from under the hoof. The horse probably will not even know he’s on your foot!

As mentioned earlier, the leader needs to always be aware of the sidewalkers. Remember where they are! Allow space for them when next to a fence or obstacles, going through gates or when on trail. The leader also needs to be aware of the rider’s height when walking under tree branches! Paying attention to the rider’s needs helps reinforce the rider’s attempts to control the horse. However, a horse leader should not execute an instruction for the rider before he has time to process the information and make an effort to comply. Sometimes, it may be appropriate to walk into the corner and stand until the student figures out what to do.

The leader should try to anticipate unusual/dangerous situations and, figuratively speaking, should stay one step ahead of the horse. Should an unusual circumstance occur, never let go of the horse. Read the horse’s body language. Be firm, calm and confident to give the horse confidence in you. The horse you are leading is your responsibility. Never leave your horse to assist a rider or another volunteer.

If there is an accident, the leader stays with the horse. There are other people to care for a fallen rider. The situation could easily become more dangerous if there are loose horses running around the arena. Move our horse as far from the fallen student as possible and keep calm. Listen for the instructor’s direction.

Leaders NEVER mount or dismount a rider. Wait for the instructor. The instructor will request that the leaders take the horses to the dismounting area where you will halt and stand in front of the horse. The rider will be dismounted and the leader runs up the stirrups irons (if using an English saddle) on the inside stirrup leather then takes the horse to the hitching post. Some riders will run up the stirrup irons as part of their lesson or untack the horse.

After class, check to see if your horse is to be used again for the next lesson and if it needs a tack change. Before leading the horse away, ensure the student had said his/her goodbyes to the horse as many enjoy thanking the horse for their lesson. When the horse's duties are finished, untack, groom and return it to its stall.