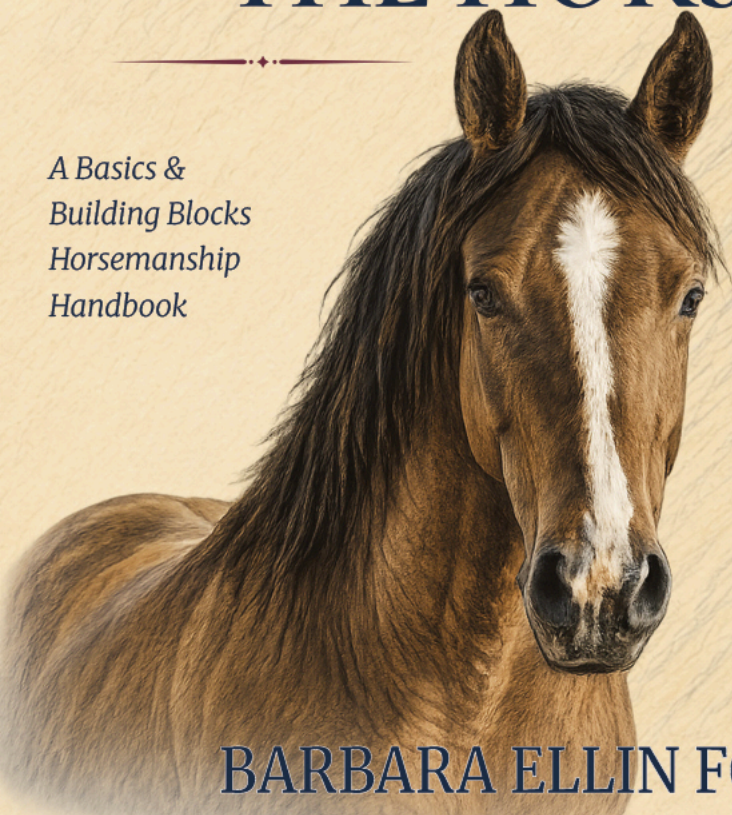




THE RIDING INSTRUCTOR
— SERIES —

UNDERSTANDING THE HORSE

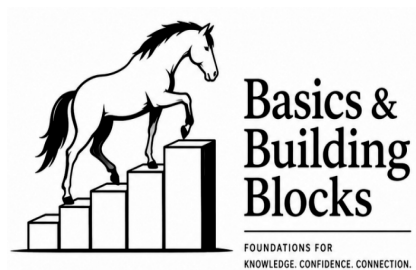
*A Basics &
Building Blocks
Horsemanship
Handbook*



BARBARA ELLIN FOX

UNDERSTANDING THE HORSE

A Basics & Building Blocks Horsemanship Handbook



BARBARA ELLIN FOX

THE RIDING INSTRUCTOR SERIES



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This book is intended for educational and informational purposes only. Horses are large, powerful animals and working around them involves inherent risk. Readers are responsible for seeking qualified instruction and exercising appropriate judgment when handling, riding, or caring for horses. Neither the author nor publisher assumes responsibility for injury, loss, injury, damage, or outcomes resulting from the use of information contained in this book.

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How to Use This Handbook

Understanding the Horse was designed to help new horse people develop a foundation with horses step-by-step. It may be used by individuals, families, homeschool programs, camps, riding instructors, or individuals who want to build a thoughtful foundation in horsemanship. Readers may work independently or alongside knowledgeable supervision and instruction.

The horse world includes many methods and perspectives. This handbook reflects the author's approach to safe, thoughtful horsemanship and is intended to encourage continued learning and observation.

Read in Order or Explore by Topic

You may read the entire handbook from the beginning to the end or jump to subjects that interest you. Each chapter builds skill that support later lessons.

Look for "If I Were a Horse"

These sections help you imagine situations from the horse's point of view and encourage thoughtful horsemanship.

"Remember"

Boldened **Remember** sentences contain information and thoughts that are worth repeating.

Learning horses take time. Ask questions, observe horse people, enjoy the journey, and be patient with yourself and your equine friends.

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Chapter 1 - The Horse's Nature

Why do horses react the way they do?



Have you ever wondered how a horse will react to you? Will he be friendly or nervous? Those are fair questions. Horses are large animals, and they don't speak our language.

The best ways to learn about the horse's nature are through observation, instruction, and hands-on practice; and through reading about them. As you learn more, the quality of your time with horses will increase.

Personality

Horses have as many personalities as people do. Some are nervous and always worried about what is going on around them, or what might happen next. Sometimes we use the word "flighty" for a nervous horse.

Other horses are timid, like people are shy or introverted. Horses can be bold and exuberant in the same way a confident person meets new situations. Or they can be mellow and gentle. Others are stoic, rarely showing emotion. And some have a sense of humor.

Chapter 1 – The Horse’s Nature

Most horses like people, but because of their unique natural instincts, they don’t always react the way we do. If you see an angry or mean horse, chances are ignorance and bad treatment developed his attitude. Like a human, pain can make a horse crabby. Other times, horses that appear mean or angry are putting on a fierce front because they are scared.

Knowing about the horse’s nature, tendencies, and instincts, and then learning how to handle them are important keys for safety both for you and the horse. When you are first beginning, try to avoid difficult horses. You should learn with a calm, gentle horse until you are confident and capable of handling other types of horses.

A quiet school horse is not boring or dull. He is your teacher.

Safety & Learning Foundations: Why Understanding Comes First

Remember: Safety begins with understanding, not strength.

Three Foundations of Safe Learning

1. Understanding instinct prevents accidents.
2. Calm horses build confident riders.
3. Safety improves when you notice early warning signs.

IF I Were a Horse

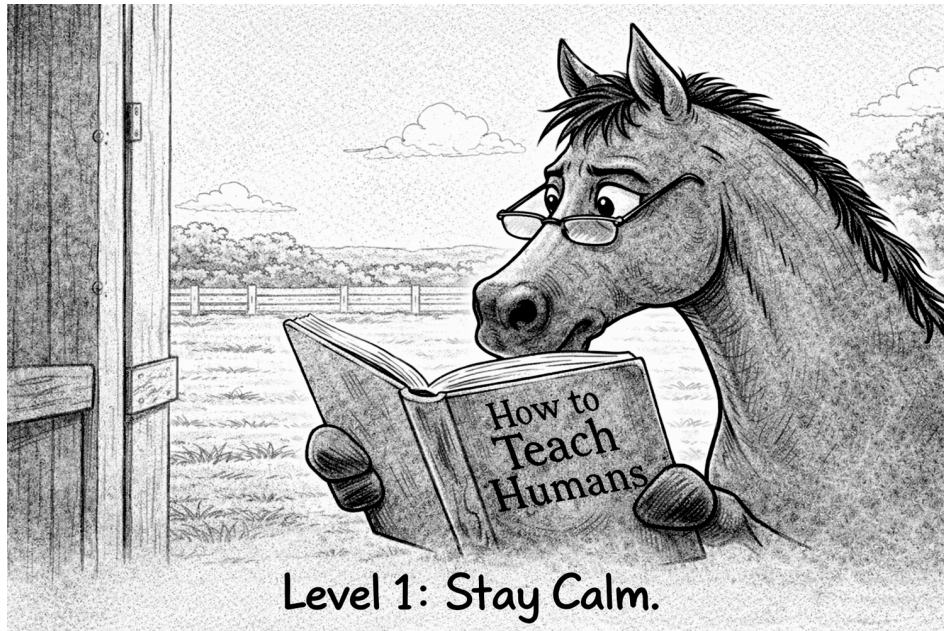
I would not know that you are a beginner.

I wouldn’t automatically understand that you are “just learning.” I react to energy, to pressure, to confusion, and when you are nervous

When you understand how I think, you become safer.

When you recognize my signs — pinned ears, tightening muscles, raised head, quick breathing — you prevent problems before they happen.

Chapter 1 - The Horse's Nature



Instinct

An instinct is an animal's natural way of reacting. It's behavior they don't have to learn. Examples include fish swimming, newborn foals standing and nursing within hours of birth, or birds sitting on eggs in their nests. Foals are baby horses.

Horses are cautious in new situations or when they are unsure.

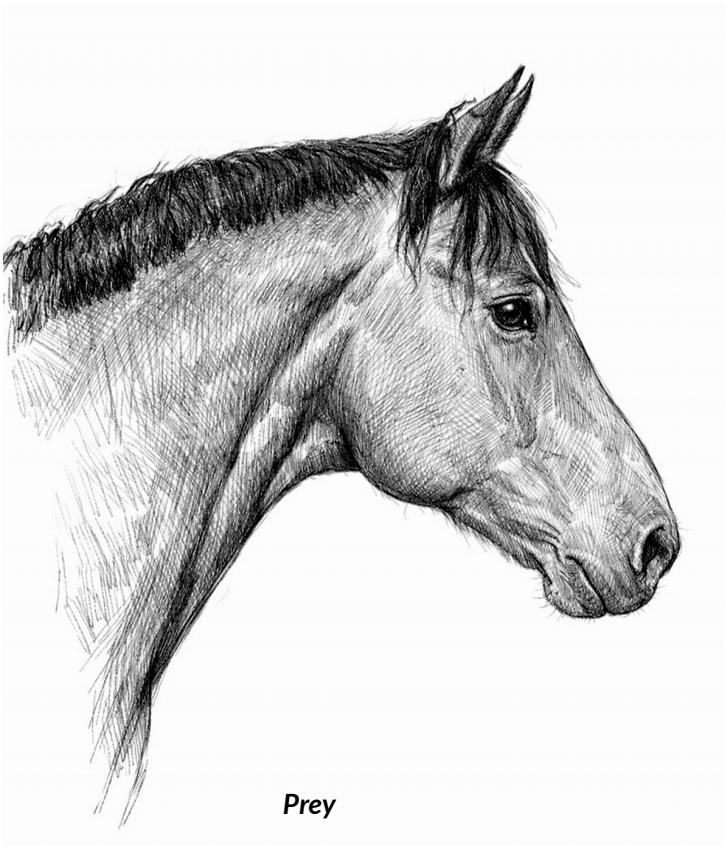
Prey vs Predator

Have you ever noticed that a horse's eyes are more on the sides of his head rather than in front like a dog's? This is because a horse is a prey animal. Prey animals are hunted by other animals.

The horse is an herbivore, which means he eats plants, not meat. Other prey animals are sheep, deer, and cows. They all have eyes that are more to the side than the front of their heads and can see predators sneaking up behind them.

Predators are hunters and they have eyes on the fronts of their heads. People, lions, wolves, and dogs are examples of predators.

Chapter 1 - The Horse's Nature



The horse's best way to protect himself is by running away. We call this his fight instinct. When you think about the horse being a prey animal with a flight instinct, maybe you can understand why a horse is alert and aware of his surroundings, and why sudden movement or strange sights and sounds frighten him.

When working with horses, we pay attention to how the horse interprets our movement.

Later, when you've learned about horses and have experienced being around them, you will learn how to influence their behavior through your movements and actions.

Sometimes, when you take riding lessons, a horse will frustrate you by not doing what you want. You may hear people say, "show him who's boss." Working with horses is not about showing who is boss. It is about developing leadership and influencing behavior to build a partnership. The patient lesson horse you think is

Chapter 1 – The Horse's Nature

uncooperative may be waiting for you to learn how to influence him before he pays attention.

Some breeds of horses, such as Thoroughbreds, Arabians, or mustangs, are more alert, while others, such as quarter horses or draft horses, are bred for a calm, working attitude. The horses you learn with should be calm or laid-back. In fact, your lesson horse might doze off during grooming. Calmness also comes from trusting surroundings and being handled regularly by people.

Self-Preservation

Horses have a strong survival instinct, and survival requires eating, reproducing, and the ability to protect themselves. In the horse's case, that means he depends on his ability to run away from danger. Since flight is a horse's first instinct for preservation, he will object to things that take away his freedom or things that restrain him. For instance, leaving a horse tied without supervision can make them feel unsafe and fearful, causing them to use their strength to break free.

A horse might refuse to do something that seems simple to us, like walking through a puddle or mud. And they may avoid puddles because they don't know what is under the water. If something tangles or restrains a horse's feet, he can't protect himself.

Instinct & Survival: Why a Horse Reacts Before He Thinks

Remember: Instinct is not disobedience. It is survival.

Three Things to Remember About Instinct

1. Horses react before they reason.
2. Sudden sights, sounds, and movement trigger flight.
3. Feeling trapped increases fear.

Chapter 1 - The Horse's Nature

If I Were a Horse

I would not stop to reason things out. I do not debate whether the shadow is dangerous, or if the plastic bag is harmless.

I react first. Survival is my strongest instinct.

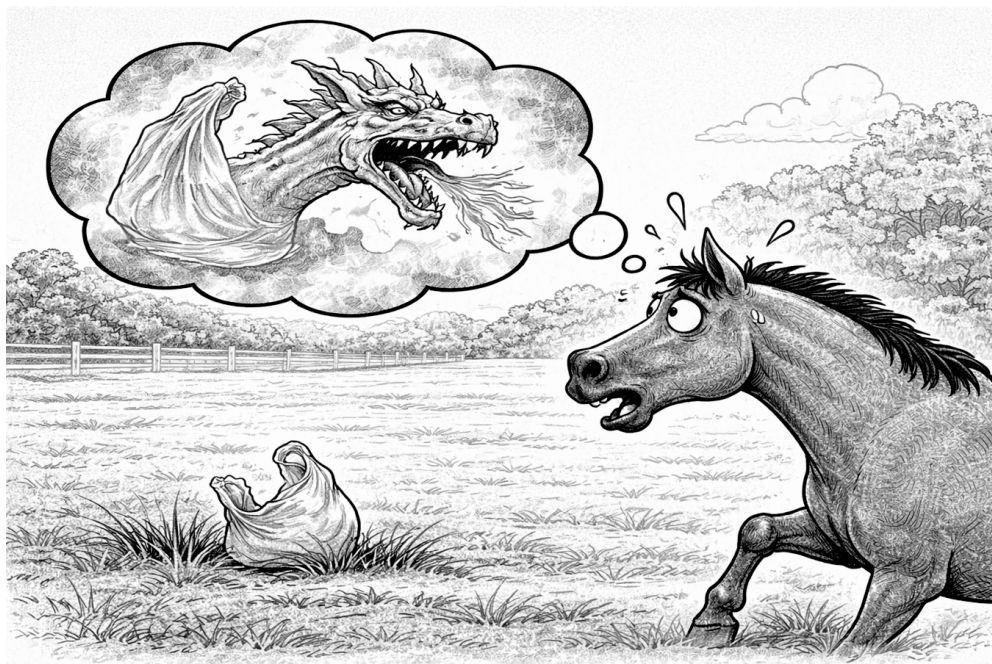
I am a prey animal. My eyes are built to scan for movement. My ears turn toward sudden sound. My body is ready to leave before you even notice what startled me.

When I jump sideways, it is not because I am dramatic. It is because something in my world changed.

It might be something simple, like mud that wasn't there yesterday. It could be a puddle reflecting the sky, or a jacket flapping on the fence. If it looks different I might worry.

When I feel trapped, for instance if I'm tied hard and fast, cornered, or unable to move — my instinct says: escape.

That instinct kept my ancestors alive.



Horses Are Herd Animals

Wild horses live in bands, which are groups or herds. The bands are their family and the primary source of protection for the horse. The horse's herd instinct does not change with domestication, even if a horse's ancestors have been domesticated for centuries. Horses still need the companionship of other horses.

Herds have "pecking orders". One horse will be more dominant than the others, and each horse has a place in the herd. This applies to domestic horses that are turned out in groups, too. One horse will be dominant, and one will be the low horse in the group. When two horses are dominant, they may bite and kick at each other until one proves he's the boss. This is called developing a hierarchy.

Herds or groups of horses are interesting to watch for their interaction. Often, you'll have to observe carefully

When domestic horses are turned out with other horses, they feed off the emotions of the herd. If one horse spooks, the rest will look to see what's wrong, and they may all take off running together because their instinct is to flee danger. Their need for the companionship of other horses may cause the horse or pony to become herd, or buddy sour. He may protest vocally, and physically, when you take him away from his friends.

Herd animals move around, spending most of their time roaming to graze. Even domestic horses like to be loose in a paddock or in the pasture. Standing all day in a stall without movement or grazing can make a horse restless and irritable.



Herd Life: Why Being Alone Feels Wrong

If I Were a Horse

I would not choose to live alone.

Out in the wild, survival depends on numbers. More eyes. More ears. More noses. If one horse startles, we all pay attention. If one runs, we all run. Safety is shared.

Inside every herd, there is an order. Not because we are mean, but because order keeps things calm. Each horse knows his place. That predictability lowers tension.

When you take me away from my herd, I don't think, "Oh good, private lesson time." I think, "Where did my safety go?"

And when I live in a stall all day without turnout or companionship? That tension has nowhere to go.

That's why I may whinny and pull toward the gate, dancing, or refusing to focus. It isn't stubbornness. It's instinct.

Remember: A horse without movement or companionship is a horse under stress.



Creatures of Habit

Horses are creatures of habit and will often repeat the same thing over again. They thrive on a routine, which is why the horse learns to expect things to happen at certain times. They have good memories.

Temperament, Environment & Routine: Why Predictable Feels Safe

If I Were a Horse

I would not wake up hoping for surprises.

I am built to notice change. It might be a new feeder in my stall, a different turnout buddy, or grain at a different time.

Some horses are bold and curious. Some are sensitive and alert. Some seem calm and steady. That is temperament. But even the calm ones rely on patterns.

When my world stays predictable, I relax. When feeding, turnout, and work happen in a steady rhythm, I feel secure.

When everything changes at once, my body goes on alert.

Routine does not make me dull. Routine makes me confident.

Remember: Predictability builds trust. Sudden change creates tension.

Three Things to Remember About Routine

1. Horses have individual temperaments — some react faster than others.
2. Predictable schedules reduce stress.
3. Sudden environmental changes increase alertness and add to stress.