Horse Trick Training

HOW TO GET STARTED

100% HORSE FRIENDLY TRAINING
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Gender Note: Throughout this ebook I refer to all horses as male (he/him). It just makes it easier than having to say him/her, he/she every time. No discrimination intended. My experienced trick horse is a gelding, but I am also training a clever little mare.

Language Note: Trigger and I are from Australia. I’ve tried very hard to write without Australian slang or words, so that people from other countries will be able to understand me, but sometimes Australian slang just sneaks in. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Disclaimer: While everything in our ebooks work for Trigger and I, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury, or inconvenience sustained by anyone using these ebooks.

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Introduction

Hi, I’m Jain and this is my friend / trick horse, ‘Trigger’.

We’d like to show you step-by-step how to teach your horse some simple tricks.

I became interested in trick training when I couldn’t ride one of my horses for several months due to an injury and I was looking for something else to do with him.

I found it was an excellent way to keep my smart (and bored) horse occupied while I couldn’t ride him. He really enjoyed it (and so did I) and the benefits were greater than I expected! He became super interested in learning, his focus and attention increased, and he really wanted to spend time with me.

We started to have lots of fun together and I felt we had really become friends.

So while this ebook is about teaching your horse tricks, it is also very much about using trick training as a way to build a better relationship and connection with your horse.

We hope you (and your horse) enjoy trick training as much as we do!

Jain & Trigger

Join us!
For more trick training videos & tips:

YouTube: www.youtube.com/horsetricks
Facebook: www.facebook.com/horsetricks
Is this eBook Right for You (and Your Horse)?

This ebook is written for horse lovers who have never taught their horse tricks, or those who may have tried to teach their horse some simple tricks, and would like to start an easy step-by-step trick training program.

You will like Horse Trick Training if...

- Your horse is a friend not “just a horse”.
- You want your horse to enjoy your time together.
- You are looking for activities other than riding.
- You want your horse to be calm when introduced to new things.
- You want to increase your horse’s attention and focus.
- You are interested in how horses learn.
- You want to improve the relationship and bond with your horse.

Friends...
enjoy being together.
trust each other.
have fun.
Why Teach Your Horse Tricks?

Some reasons people teach their horses tricks include:

**Alternative training**
Trick training provides a fun form of training when your horse is injured or the weather is bad and you can’t ride.

**Make life easier**
There are loads of tricks that you can teach your horse to make life easier and also teach him good manners. For example, you can ask him to lower his head for bridling, to pick up his feet by just pointing at them, or to wait politely for his dinner rather than being pushy.

**Entertain your friends**
We all like to impress our family and friends. Trick training is a novel way to do this. Most people (even non-horsey folk) really love to see a horse perform tricks.

**Trust & problem solving**
Teaching a horse simple tricks is a great way to slowly build trust. Your horse will become more willing to try new things because of this increased trust. You can use the exact same method to help your horse overcome problems he might have. For example, standing still, accepting treatments eg de-worming, or loading into a trailer.

**A change from the routine**
Trick training makes a change from doing the same routine training every day (which gets boring for you and your horse). Instead of schooling or riding your horse out for exercise, have some fun and try some trick training.

**Bombproof your horse**
Trick training teaches your horse to get used to all sorts of strange objects, and to do things he normally wouldn’t do. This increases your horse’s confidence when dealing with new objects and situations, such as when you are out on trail rides or at shows.

**Bonding & relationship building**
Teaching your horse tricks, is a wonderful way to bond and build a very special relationship with your horse.
Most horses will happily do anything you ask if these 3 principles apply:

1. The horse is **physically** able to do it.

2. The horse **understands** what you want him or her to do.

3. The horse believes there will be a **benefit** if they do it.

Most horses will happily do anything you ask if these 3 principles apply:

1. **The horse is physically able to do it.**
   Your horse must be able to physically do what you are asking, and it must not cause him any pain or discomfort. If your horse finds something difficult or painful they just won’t want to do it. (And we want trick training to be lots of fun for you - and your horse).

   If you have an older horse, or one that has injuries, then look at tricks that are easier for him to do. For example I rarely ask Trigger to do a **Full Bow** (down on his knee) because of his age. But there is a trick called the **Simple Bow**, which is much easier for older horses to do and still looks really nice.
2. The horse understands what you want him or her to do.
If a horse gets confused, then they may react by performing bad behavior, trying to escape or just not doing what you ask. Make sure your horse understands everything you are asking him to do.

Horses learn better if they are given simple, easy to understand tasks. So if you want to teach your horse a very complex task (or trick), then just break it down into simple parts and teach each part.

3. The horse believes there will be a benefit if they do it.
Horses do everything for one reason - they believe that there will be a benefit. This benefit could be to avoid something, such as punishment or discomfort (pressure), or the benefit could be to gain something such as a reward.

However, punishment and pressure encourage a horse to avoid things or try to escape (negative), whereas rewards encourage the horse to seek them out, and to try to earn them (positive). So it is important to look for ways to train your horse so they are rewarded.

If everything you do follows these 3 principles, your horse will do just about anything you ask!
Trust & Training

One of the most important ingredients to successful horse training is TRUST. If your horse trusts you and sees you as a friend they will become your willing partner. This makes the difference between a horse that is just doing his job, because he feels he must, and one that enjoys working with his human friend.

You can teach your horse to get used to just about anything... flapping bags, open umbrellas, water, or loud noises, by introducing him slowly to each of these elements. But there may come a time when your horse encounters something he has never seen or heard before. If he trusts you and has become used to you introducing him to new things, he will deal more easily and calmly with new objects and situations. If you show him that you believe it is okay and you are trustworthy, then your horse will believe it is okay.

Trust is something that is built over time. However, before you start trick training, you and your horse must have at least some basic level of trust in each other. You should be able to do some basic things around your horse that don’t cause him to get frightened or worried. These include catching him, putting a halter on, touching his legs, picking up his feet, and leading him around. If you can’t do some of these things, then I recommend working on them till you can, then start trick training.

Trick training is a great way to build a better relationship with your horse. As you introduce him to more new situations and objects, in a calm and fun manner, your horse will begin to trust you more and more.

Everything you do around your horse should increase the trust between you two. Then you will become true friends.

Here is a video about trust, where I am asking Bella to climb up onto a rock:

TRUST & COMMUNICATION VIDEO
How Long Will it Take to Teach a Trick?

The time it takes for your horse to learn a new trick will depend on several things. These include age, temperament, attitude, and previous training (both yours and the horse’s!).

Horses are very much like people, in that they learn at different speeds, and they find some things easier or more enjoyable than others.

Age
Older horses generally learn quicker than younger horses because they tend to have a longer attention span. There is also a good chance that a more experienced horse may have already done part of a trick you are teaching them. For example, the first part of teaching your horse to bow is to have him pick up a leg. Most older horses will be used to doing this when you are handling their feet.

Temperament
If your horse is the nervous, alert type this can work for you or against you. An alert type of horse tends to learn very quickly, as they are so aware of everything that is going on around them, and they tend to be enthusiastic learners. However, if your horse is very nervous and always worried or distracted, he probably won’t learn as quickly – because his mind will be elsewhere.

A quiet, calmer horse will tend to take a bit longer to learn new things, and be less enthusiastic but they are safer and more predictable. They also tend to be forgiving of mistakes and will accept new or strange objects easily.

Attitude
Attitude is different than temperament and is something that a horse develops, due to their experiences, rather than something they are born with. A horse that has had a hard life or has been abused is much less likely to trust or want to work with humans. This type of horse can be won over, but it takes a lot of time and patience.

Another type of horse whose attitude can make it harder to work with is the one that has
'switched off’. He or she might have done the same thing day in and day out for years, and they lack motivation. Usually trick training is an excellent way to motivate these horses again. Because you will be doing something new most days, and there is a reward at the end, you will see these types of horses come alive.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are horses that have a really positive attitude and love to learn. They are naturally curious and think humans are wonderful. These horses usually learn tricks very fast.

**Previous training**

The more a horse learns the easier he becomes to train. An untrained horse straight out of the paddock has no idea what you want him to do. You have not formed a bond or a way to communicate with that horse. However as you teach a horse new things, he will begin to understand from the cues, body language, and words that you use what you are asking him to do. You will also find that your horse will learn each new trick faster than the previous one.

The more tricks you teach your horse, the better you will also become at teaching. Over time, you will work out the best way to teach your horse, the time you need to spend with him, and the best times and places to teach your horse, which will all decrease the time it takes to teach each new trick.

**Short regular training**

I always recommend teaching a horse in short regular sessions (for instance a few minutes several times a day), rather than longer sessions spaced farther apart. Training with frequent short sessions works well with your horse’s short attention span.

Each day practice a new trick (or part of one) for a maximum of ten minutes. Some horses will get the idea on the first day, while others may take a lot longer. It is worth continuing to practice even if your horse doesn’t seem to be ‘getting it’. You will find that all of a sudden they will make the connection. Once your horse ‘gets the idea’ continue to practice the trick for several days.

**Spend time on the basics**

Some folks are very keen to teach their horses a new trick, so they tend to rush through the basics. They don’t spend enough time making sure the horse thoroughly understands what they are asking before moving onto the next trick. This can cause a horse to become confused, and actually wastes time by having to ‘undo’ the incorrect training. Spend time making sure your horse understands each part before moving onto the next. You will find this will actually help your horse to learn tricks quicker than if you try to rush things.

**Reward trying**

Don’t expect your horse to do each trick perfectly from the beginning. Think about when you learn something new. You will be a bit rough for a while until you learn how to do it properly. Reward even the smallest try. For example if you want your horse to step
backward when you point at his nose, and you see him shift his weight backward even slightly, reward him. He is trying.

Memory
Horses have an amazing memory and the good news is that once you teach a horse a trick, if you teach it correctly, it’s there for good. I can ask my horse to do a trick that he hasn’t done for months, and once given the cue he will perform it perfectly.

Remember to have fun!
Most importantly have fun! There will be some tricks that your horse just won’t enjoy doing. Don’t force it – he will be good at other things. Trigger isn’t that interested in fetching objects, so I only ask him to do it every once and a while, and focus on tricks he enjoys – like saying yes, kiss, and hug. However, I owned a thoroughbred a few years ago that loved the fetch game. I could throw a ball way down the paddock and he would take off after it and canter back with it. I’d get bored with the game before he did!

I haven’t met a horse yet that couldn’t be taught tricks. Some horses, depending on their age, experience, or temperament, can take a bit longer than others. However, if you take your time teaching your horse the basics, and have fun, you will find that you are able to teach your horse just about anything!
When to Train - a Simple Training Schedule

The easiest way to schedule time for trick training is to fit your training around your day-to-day horse activities. Every time you see your horse, turn it into a mini trick training session.

Plus, horses learn much quicker if they are taught tricks in several, enjoyable, short sessions (about 5 minutes each) rather than one long one.

The perfect time to do a bit of trick training is when you are going out to feed your horse or to do your daily horse chores. This also means that you are adding some fun into your routine, rather than just making it all work for your horse (and you).

I recommend working on only one new trick each day, but you can also practice tricks your horse already knows well.

The following is an example of the trick training that Trigger and I might do each day and how I fit it around daily horse chores and riding.

8.00am – Mix up Trigger’s morning feed.
  ● Practice a trick that Trigger already knows such as giving me a kiss (1 minute).
  ● Practice touching a handkerchief, which is the start of a new trick of teaching Trigger to take it from my pocket (2 minutes).

8.05am – Feed Trigger & take off his rug.

10.00am – Clean out water trough.
  ● If Trigger comes up to me while I am in his paddock (which he does 99% of the time) then we will again practice touching the handkerchief (2 minutes).

1.00pm – Bring Trigger in for a ride.
  ● Practice calling Trigger in. He will usually come cantering over to me when I call him (1 minute).
  ● Again practice touching the handkerchief (2 minutes).

1.05pm – Saddle Trigger up.
  ● While saddling, practice some tricks he already knows, such as lifting his feet by just pointing at them, and lowering his head for bridling (2 minutes).

1.10pm – Go for a ride.

2.00pm – Return from ride.
● Practice a trick Trigger already knows such as saying "Yes" (nodding his head) (1 minute).
● Practice touching the handkerchief and encourage him to mouth the handkerchief (2 minutes).

5.00pm – Mix up Trigger’s evening feed.
● Practice a trick he knows such as twirling (1 minute).
● Practice touching the handkerchief and encourage him to mouth the handkerchief (2 minutes).

5.05pm – Feed Trigger & put his rug on
● Ask Trigger to give me a goodnight hug (30 seconds).

Total Trick Training time = 16 minutes

The schedule above shows that I have been able to fit 6 short trick training sessions into a day. No special preparation was necessary (except I needed to take a handkerchief and some treats with me – or I could have used some of his feed).

The next day I would follow a similar schedule, but ask Trigger to do more with the handkerchief, if he is ready. For example I would encourage Trigger to actually take the handkerchief in his mouth.

You might not be able to spend as much time with your horse throughout the day, but if you visit your horse even once a day, try to fit a short training session in several times during the visit – at the beginning and end of everything you do.

If you practice several times a day, and make the session short and enjoyable you will find your horse will learn super fast!
Best Places to Train Your Horse

WHERE you practice your trick training can have a big impact on how quickly your horse learns new tricks. If you train your horse in an area where he is relaxed and comfortable, he will learn much quicker, and retain more of what you teach him.

The worst place to teach your horse tricks is in an area where he is unsure and is constantly looking around. A horse that is nervous and worried has very little ability to learn new things. All his attention is focused on what is going on around him, and not on you. So try and practice your trick training in an area familiar to your horse.

I use a small yard that serves as my training area and is also the area where I feed Trigger. He is very comfortable and relaxed in this area. He is in the right frame of mind, and he is focused on what I am teaching him – he isn’t worried about his surroundings. Once Trigger is completely accomplished at doing a particular trick I will then practice in other areas.

I find my horses are also happier to accept new objects, such as trick training equipment, if they are in an area that they know and are relaxed in.

Sometimes I will introduce new things into my horses’ larger paddock; but only if they are free to come and go (no halter or lead rope etc). This allows them to get away from the new object (their natural reaction) and then come back to it on their own terms. I will stand near the object and quietly tell them it is all right and encourage them to come over and check it out.
If you introduce something new in this way you will find your horse will accept it much quicker, and as long as he is never hurt by the object, he will become braver when you introduce other objects.

For example, I bought a large exercise ball that I eventually wanted to teach my horses to retrieve and push around. So I took it out into their paddock. I started to roll it around and very quickly the horses were over to check it out. They would get close to it then snort and run away, but they would soon return, each time getting more and more confident and closer to the ball.

Eventually they were pushing the ball around and having great fun with it. It wasn’t so frightening because they could get away from it and then check it out on their own terms. Now when I want to begin incorporating the ball into my trick training, they will be happy to get close to it and push it around.
Which Trick Should You Teach Your Horse First?

Easy. Just start with something that your horse does naturally.

This will usually be a behavior that he enjoys or does in response to something that is going on around him.

Watch your horse, particularly around feed time, to see if there is something he does that could be turned into a trick. For example some horses will paw the ground. This is the beginning of tricks like counting or Spanish Walk.

My trainee trick horse, Bella, loves to pick things up. If I leave anything lying around, she will pick it up and play with it or throw it. So she especially enjoys tricks like fetching or taking a hat off my head or a handkerchief out of my pocket.

Some good starting points for tricks:

- Pawing = counting, Spanish walk
- Picking things up = fetch
- Shaking head = answer a question “yes” or “no”
- Follows you = heeling (like a dog), liberty work, dancing

Over the next few days, watch your horse and notice anything they do that could be the beginning of their first trick. You might be surprised to find out how many ‘tricks’ your horse is already doing!
Useful Tricks

There are so many tricks you can teach your horse. There are all the usual ones like Kiss, Hug, Bow etc., but also think about useful tricks you could teach your horse. These can make life a lot easier for you (and safer) around your horse.

Stand
Teach your horse to stand still without needing to be tied up. This is very useful if there is nowhere convenient to tie your horse, or you just want to quickly go into his field and check him, to pick out his feet, or brush him.

Lift a foot
Just point at your horse’s foot and he will pick it up. No need to bend down or strain to lift his foot up. The farriers love this one!

Wait for dinner
Ask your horse to stand away from his feed bin and wait while you mix up his feed. He is only allowed to step forward to eat when you say “okay”. No more worrying about pushy horses. This trick teaches your horse good food manners.

Move away, back up
Point at your horse’s hindquarter and he will move it away. Point at his head and he will move his front end away. Point at his chest and he backs. This is the easy way to move your horse around!

Drop your head
Just lightly touch your horse on the top of his head and he will lower it. This makes putting a bridle on easier. There is also some proof that lowering a horse’s head has a calming effect.
Pick up items you drop
Teach your horse to pick up things you drop. This is especially useful when you are out riding. Imagine dropping your hat and your horse reaches down, picks it up and hands it to you. No need to get off!

There are lots of other useful tricks you can teach your horse. The usual tricks like kiss, hug, etc. are fun to teach your horse and show to your friends, but useful tricks can make your life a whole lot easier!
Safety Comes First

Trick training is great fun but you need to think carefully about the way you approach it and make sure that you and your horse are safe at all times.

Never start any trick training session unless you are sure that you and your horse are safe and you have the correct equipment.

Always be watchful of your horse’s reactions. You are introducing him to new objects and situations and if your horse gets worried about anything, go back a step, or try working on a trick that he already knows. If he is very nervous around an object then move it away. Sometimes moving it away will release the pressure the horse feels and he may actually move toward it.

Remember your horse just won’t learn much (if anything) if he is frightened. We want our horses to be curious (and just a little cautious) about new objects, not scared.

A scared horse can do irrational things and you and your horse may get hurt. So keep it slow and steady and don’t get your horse into a situation where he is likely to panic.

Always wear appropriate gear when working around horses. This includes covered, sturdy boots, and a helmet if you are going to be riding.

Make sure that all the gear you use is well maintained and in good working condition.

It’s fun to find new objects to use in your trick training (like balls and other toys), but make sure that there is nothing that can hurt your horse or break. You shouldn’t use anything that your horse could swallow.

By keeping you and your horse safe at all times, trick training will be fun for both of you.
What NOT to Teach Your Horse

Think carefully about which tricks you want to teach your horse. There are some tricks that can be quite dangerous if not performed in a safe area and by an experienced person, for example rearing or laying down.

Horses will sometimes, particularly in the early stages of training, do tricks without being asked. This is partly because they want to get a reward, and they haven’t yet learned that they ONLY get a reward when ASKED to do a trick.

For example, you don’t want to be out riding one day and your horse decides to perform his newest trick (without being asked) – laying down with you and your saddle on board!

Or even more dangerous - your horse decides to rear. Rearing is a trick that requires strength, calmness, and excellent balance from your horse. Your horse could do enormous damage to himself (and you) if he doesn’t get it right.

Also consider whether or not children will be riding or handling your horse. A trick such as counting with his front foot could knock a child flying. Or a child might mistakenly give your horse a cue to rear.

If there is a chance you might sell your horse at any stage, think about how your horse’s tricks might be viewed by future owners. I believe that simple, well done tricks actually add to the value and appeal of a horse. But some tricks might be misunderstood by some people.
I remember reading an old book that talked about teaching a horse to have a mean face, as if the horse was about to attack. Imagine if you sold this horse to someone, who then sold the horse to someone else that didn’t understand that this horrible face was actually just a trick.

Even worse, if you teach your horse to rear and a future owner accidentally gives him the cue to rear, then he would quickly get a reputation as a difficult or dangerous horse, when all he was trying to do was perform a trick he had been taught.

Some of the safer tricks include:
- hug
- yes
- no
- pick things up
- toot a horn
- fetch
- smile
- push a barrel
- dance

So think carefully about which tricks you want to teach and who might be around your horse. There are lots of fun, safe tricks that your horse can learn that will be enjoyable for both of you and won’t cause your horse to develop a bad reputation.
Equipment

Most basic trick training equipment is cheap or will already be in your collection of tack. You really don’t need anything fancy and a lot of items can be made at home or sourced from bargain stores.

I am always on the lookout for fun things to use. Lots of bargain shops have toys or items that can be incorporated into your trick training. For example I have lots of Pool Noodles ($2 each) that I use for a variety of tricks and training. I also have a soft ball ($5) and a hoolah hoop ($4).

Just watch out for items that may break or have small pieces. Everything must be sturdy, and shouldn’t include anything that could hurt your horse or your horse could swallow.

If you ask your horse to pick up a ball that is spiky and it hurts his mouth, he will soon stop doing the trick – it needs to be comfortable for him to handle.

Basic trick equipment
If you are just getting started with your trick training, then I suggest that all you will need is a treat pouch (full of treats), a headstall, a long lead rope, and a dressage whip (not for hitting but for pointing and guiding).

Treat Pouch
I originally used a small belt bag to hold the trick treats. These only cost a few dollars from a bargain store and work just fine. However if you want something with a few more bells and whistles then I recommend using a purpose built treat pouch with a spring closing top. This means you can close it easily if you have an over eager horse trying to mug the bag for treats. They can also be made to stay open which makes it easier to hand out the treats. There are some that have a removable lining which is easy to clean.

Halter & rope
I use a rope halter and a 10 foot lead rope. However a standard halter and lead rope will work fine for most tricks.
Whip
I use a dressage whip to point or to guide a horse. I never, ever use it to hit a horse. Trick training is all about being positive and having fun with your horse. A dressage whip is a good length - riding crops are a bit short and lunge whips too long and cumbersome. The popular ‘carrot sticks’ used in natural horsemanship are also a good length (but more expensive than a basic dressage whip).

Target stick
A target stick is used to guide your horse and teach him several tricks, such as TOUCH. You can make one from the dressage whip and a piece of foam or you can even use a fly swatter.

Watch this video for some tips on how to make a Target Stick:

CLICK HERE FOR THE TARGETS VIDEO

That’s about it for basic training equipment to get you started. Later on you can add more ‘props’ such as plastic bottles, handkerchiefs, mats, hula hoops, etc. - but even these items you may already have or they are cheap to purchase.
Rewards

Every time your horse does something you ask you should reward him. This will encourage him to try really hard, and you will develop a positive relationship with your horse.

There are a few ways to reward your horse. You can give him verbal praise, such as “Good girl / boy!” but this doesn’t mean a lot to most horses.

Another option is to scratch their favorite spot. It is really worth spending some time finding the places that your horse really likes to be scratched. Some common places include withers, chest, neck, and rump. Both Bella and Trigger like having their gaskins scratched and Bella is a big fan of the belly scratch!

However, by far the most popular reward for most horses is treats. The use of food will usually inspire a horse to really perform.

I have tried 100’s of different treats to find the best training treat. Most horses love carrots, some love apples. And there are some really yummy horse pellets that are convenient and make cheap treats.

To teach your horse tricks (in the fastest time) you need to find a treat that really keeps your horse’s interest.

Trigger’s favorite treat is sliced carrots, or for a special treat I bake him a little biscuit that is easy to make, keeps for several weeks and doesn’t go soggy (I’ve included this recipe). Trigger ‘nickers’ whenever he sees them and I know that I have his complete attention!

You can also use some of your horse’s feed pellets, if he really likes them. These are usually healthy and well balanced, and you can just take some out of his daily feed ration if your horse is prone to putting on weight.

I don’t suggest using sweets as treats – for example sugar cubes or lollies. When you first start training your horse to do tricks, you will need lots of treats and so something healthy is a much better choice.
You only need to feed your horse a very small amount of the treat that you have chosen to use. I use carrots sliced into sticks about 2.5 cm (1 inch) long. The treat must be small enough so your horse finishes it very quickly (they should only be chewing on it for a second or two)... just a taste. Otherwise you will be constantly waiting while he finishes his treat before you can move on to the next thing.

So, one of the first things you should do if you want to teach your horse tricks is to find a treat that makes your horse prick up his ears and really gets his interest.
Trick Training Treat ~ Molasses Oat Treats

This simple treat is super yummy and perfect if you want to give your horse an extra reward. Cook a bit longer if you want a drier / crunchy treat.

![Image of treats]

**Ingredients:**

1 cup quick oats  
1 cup oat bran  
1/2 cup flour  
2 tablespoons salt  
1 cup molasses

**Directions:**

Preheat oven to 350 °F (180 °C).

Grease a square baking tray (about 9 inches x 9 inches).

Combine dry ingredients in a bowl.

Add molasses.

Mixture should be sticky but not wet. If wet, add more flour. If the mixture is too dry, add more molasses.

Spread mixture evenly in the tray.

Bake for 20 – 30 minutes.

Remove from oven and allow the mixture to cool for 5 to 10 minutes.

Cut it into small squares. Put the squares in an airtight container for storage.
Assignment 1

Well that’s about all for your first lesson in Horse Trick Training. But you’ve got some work to do before you move onto the next section:

1. Make a list of things your horse already does that could become tricks.

2. Find a treat or reward that your horse really likes.

3. Gather the necessary equipment together.

4. Find a good place to train your horse.
5 Steps to Teach Any Trick

All tricks are taught in exactly the same way. It doesn’t matter if it is a simple trick or a very complicated one.

These steps are:

1. PLAN - We work out a PLAN to break the trick into as many small steps as possible.

2. ASK - We ASK the horse to do the first step by using a cue (either verbal or physical or both).

3. RESPONSE - We wait to get a RESPONSE from the horse. This will either be the correct response or the horse will get it wrong.

4. MARKER - If the horse gives us the correct response we let them know instantly by giving them the MARKER (a special word or sound). If the horse gives us the wrong response we ignore it.

5. REWARD - If we give the horse the Marker for the correct response we must follow it with a REWARD (a treat or something the horse really likes).

Because these 5 Steps are so important here is a link to a version that you can printout and keep handy:

5 STEPS

We will now cover each of these steps in more detail.
1. PLAN - Break Tricks into Smaller Parts

Horses learn much quicker and are less likely to get confused, if we teach them in small steps rather than attempting a trick all at once.

If you want to teach your horse a trick, think about the final result you want, then try and break the trick into as many smaller parts as possible. Make sure that your horse understands each part thoroughly before you move onto the next part.

For example, if I want to train my horse to fetch a ball, I will first teach him to TOUCH the ball while I am holding it near him. Once he gets that right I might lower the ball a bit and again ask him to TOUCH it. When he is doing that easily I will gradually lower it further and further until it is on the ground.

I will then ask him to mouth or bite the ball while on the ground. Then I will ask him to pick it up. Once he is doing this easily, I will roll the ball a little away from him and ask him to pick it up. If I increase the distance a little bit each day, soon my horse should be running after the ball.

I find if I spend a little bit of time planning the tricks before I start training my horse it makes it easier for my horse to learn the trick. This is because I am clear about how I am going to teach my horse the trick and I am only teaching him small parts that he can understand easily.

The best way to organize a plan to teach your horse a trick is to write each step down on a Horse Trick Planner. Further on we will work through a simple trick and we will use a Trick Planner to plan the trick.
2. ASK - The Importance of Clear Cues

You will be using both verbal and physical cues, when you are teaching your horse tricks. A cue is just a signal you use to let your horse know that you want him to do something. Each cue needs to be clear and distinct from other cues, otherwise your horse can become confused.

A verbal cue is saying something like ‘back’ or ‘touch’.

A physical cue is something the horse can see or feel. For example, you may point at your horse’s hindquarters and this is the cue for him to move his hindquarters away. Or you might touch him on his shoulder and this is a cue for your horse to bow.

Physical cues work better than verbal cues

Physical cues tend to work better than verbal cues or commands, when you are teaching your horse tricks. In the horse world there are no words. Horses are used to interpreting minor changes in the body language of other horses in the herd. A cue can be very subtle once a horse learns to recognize it.

Make your cues distinctive

Cues need to be very distinct if you want to teach your horse lots of tricks.

If you only want to teach your horse a few tricks then you might only need to use a few physical and verbal cues. However if you want to teach your horse lots of different tricks, then you really need to think about which cues you are going to use. Even though horses are very good at distinguishing between subtle body movements, in the beginning, if your cues are too similar it will confuse your horse.
For example, when I first taught Trigger to ‘say yes’ I would point at the front of his head. Then I decided to teach him ‘to be ashamed’, which is where he will put his head under my arm. The cues I decided to use for ‘ashamed’ were to wave my finger in front of him, while saying, “Shame on you”. Trigger saw a finger in front of his face and got a bit confused and started to nod his head to say “yes”.

I needed to make the ‘ashamed’ cue a lot more distinct when I first started teaching it to him. I decided to put my left hand on my hip, as if I was mad at him and really waggle my finger and whole arm back and forth in front of his face. By making my cue very obvious he then understood the difference. As he became better at the trick I could make the cues more and more subtle and now I only need to put my hand on my hip and gently waggle my finger back and forth.

Your own verbal cues

It really does help to put some careful thought into the verbal cues you will be using. For example, some words can sound very similar to a horse, like ‘walk’ and ‘whoa’. But saying the cue in a different tone or speed can differentiate it from another cue. Such as ‘WALK!’ and ‘whhhoooooaaaaa’.

It also isn’t necessary to use a real word as a cue. You can even make up cue words (as long as you remember the word) or use words in a different language to keep the verbal cues distinct.

Where will you be when your horse performs the trick?

Also think about where you will be when you want your horse to perform his trick. If you want to teach your horse to bow with you in the saddle, there is no point in teaching him using a cue that requires you to be on the ground. Unless you are very flexible!

Once your horse has learned a trick really well your cues can become very subtle, but in the beginning make them very distinct from each other. Spend a bit of time planning how you are going to teach each trick and also which cues you will use. This will make it easier and quicker to teach your horse each new trick and prevent him from becoming confused.
3. RESPONSE – Right or Wrong

After you give your horse a cue (either verbal or physical) to do something, wait for a response. Your horse’s response will either be right or wrong.

Wrong Response

If my horse is trying to work out what I want and is getting it wrong, I will try to make the task simpler. My horse has obviously misunderstood what I wanted him to do.

If your horse is genuinely trying and getting it wrong, you must never punish him. We need our horses to have the confidence to try new things. We want them to try and work out what we want, and not be afraid that they will be punished for making a mistake. We also want trick training time to be a fun time for our horses.

However, it is a different matter if my horse is doing something that is not allowed, like trying to bite. Then I use a word that lets him know that he is doing something wrong. I like to use “AARR!” I think this is a fairly threatening sound, and all the horses I have worked with have understood immediately what it means.

The ‘wrong’ word should be a single word or a sound, and it should be said in a very firm tone. You might already have a word that you use when your horse does something wrong - stick with this word.

A single loud clap with your hands, also works well. You should never have to resort to hitting your horse with your hand or a stick. If you feel this is the only thing that your horse will listen to, then it is time to seek the help of a professional trainer, otherwise you and your horse are just fighting with each other to get things done. You want a willing partnership where both you and your horse enjoy your time together.

NOTE: If your horse is being pushy around treats, then this is a different matter. Refer to the section on ‘Treat Training’.
Correct Response

If your horse does the correct thing, even if it’s not 100% perfect, but he is trying, then you need to tell him the INSTANT that he did the right thing.

If you delay acknowledging his success, he won’t associate what he has done with doing the right thing.

For example, if I am teaching my horse to lower his head and he starts to lower it, I need to tell him that he is doing the right thing as his head in GOING DOWN. If I say ‘good boy’ or give him a pat as his head is coming UP, then he will think that he is being rewarded for lifting his head.

*This is VERY important. It is easy to reinforce the wrong behavior by rewarding your horse at the wrong time.*

So how do we tell our horse the INSTANT that he does the right thing? We use a Marker...
4. MARKER – Tell Your Horse When He Is Correct

A MARKER is a word or sound that tells your horse the INSTANT he does the right thing.

If I am teaching a horse to pick up his back legs by pointing at them, and he gets it right, it can take a second for me to move my hand back to his head and give him a treat or a pat. Because of the delay, he won't understand that I am rewarding him for picking up his back leg.

So the best thing to do is to use a word or sound to tell him the INSTANT that he has done the right thing. We call this a ‘Marker’.

To ‘mark’ correct behavior I cluck my tongue. But a word or other sound will work just as well, as long as it is quite definite. If you can’t cluck your tongue you can use a word like “bing!” or even a simple and enthusiastic “yes!” Just get the tone right and keep it the same every time you use the word.

NOTE: I don’t recommend using ‘Good Girl’, ‘Good Boy’ or just ‘Good’ as your Marker. It’s better if the word is short and distinct. I also like to reserve these words for when my horses are doing the right thing but I don’t want them to expect a reward. Once you give the Marker, your horse will usually stop what they are doing and look for a treat. For example if I am lunging my horse and they are doing a nice trot on the circle, I want to tell them they are doing the right thing and encourage them to keep going. In this situation I use “Gooooooood”.
5. REWARD – Something Your Horse Earns

The Marker must ALWAYS be followed by a reward. Your horse must believe that when he hears that special sound or word that he is about to get a reward. The reward must be something he really likes. It can be a pat or scratch but I have found that treats work the best. Most horses will try super hard to earn a treat.

In the beginning you must give your horse the reward immediately after the Marker. However, once your horse fully understands the use of the Marker, then you can delay the reward for several seconds and your horse will still make the connection.

Some horses are perfectly behaved and calm around treats but others can become super excited by food. It is good when your horse is excited to get the treat - they will try super hard to do what you want - but we want to avoid creating a horse that becomes pushy or nippy around treats.

If you find that your horse is becoming too excited or pushy when you introduce food, then you just need to do some ‘Treat Training’. This will show your horse quite simply how you would like him to behave around food. Click this link for more information and videos on ‘Treat Training’:

TREAT MANNERS TRAINING FOR HORSES

It is also important that you never use treats to ‘lure’ your horse. For example, some people will hold a carrot between a horse’s legs and lure the horse into a Bow. The horse is just following the food and becomes fixated on getting the treat. By using the Marker, you let your horse know when he has done the right thing and THEN give him a treat. Your horse will be more focused on doing something to earn the Marker rather than just following a treat.

Following a few basic treat rules will help your horse to learn faster and will prevent him or her from developing bad habits around treats.
Assignment 2

Before you go any further there are two things you need to do:

1. Think of a word (or sound) that tells your horse they got it right (the Marker).

2. And also a word (or sound) that tells him that he is doing something he is not allowed to do.
Recap and a WARNING

So to recap...

You ask your horse to do something. You then give him the Marker the INSTANT he does what you ask and then you give him a reward.

I know from experience that all you have to do is teach your horse ONE trick this way, and you will find he will try very hard to work out what you want so he can get that reward.

This can have a downside (which can be funny). You might find that your horse will start to perform every trick he knows as soon as he sees you in the hope he will get a treat!

It made me smile, when soon after starting trick training with a new horse, he would work through his whole repertoire when I went near him. He would lower his head, step sideways, and try to kiss me!

But you mustn’t reward a horse for doing tricks when you haven’t asked. This is for several reasons:

1. Your horse can get confused and he won’t be clear on when he gets rewarded.
2. You horse might try to do a trick when it could be dangerous (for example laying down while you are in the saddle).

Here’s a video where Trigger is doing a trick when I haven’t asked him and what I do about it:

DOES YOUR HORSE DO TRICKS WITHOUT BEING ASKED?
Trick Foundations

Something I discovered was that nearly all tricks are made up of several easy movements joined together. I call these ‘Trick Foundations’.

Because horses learn best when they are taught in easy steps, I found that I could teach my horses these ‘Trick Foundations’ quickly and easily and then use them to build all sorts of tricks.

Start by teaching your horse these ‘Trick Foundations’ and you will also develop a system of communication and understanding with your horse. Then use them to design your own tricks!

These ‘Trick Foundations’ include:

**Touch**

First teach your horse to TOUCH different items. This is important for getting your horse used to new objects and there can be lots of fun, new objects in trick training! This is also the start of several tricks including KISS, FETCH, and HUG.

**Lower Head**

Teaching your horse to lower their head can be helpful with bridling or giving medications (especially if you have a tall horse or one that likes to put their head way up). It also has a calming effect. It forms the foundation of tricks such as YES, SIMPLE BOW, and FULL BOW.

**Back Up**

BACK UP can be used to teach tricks such as backing by pulling your horses tail (gently), FOLLOW ME (where your horse mimics your movements), and DANCING.

**Leg Up or Leg Forward**

Most horses will already pick up their feet, but it makes life a lot easier if they will do that when you ask by pointing at them. These movements form the beginning of COUNTING, SPANISH WALK, and BOWING.

**Stand & Wait**

It is important to teach your horse to stand still in one spot, as it helps to increase his patience and teaches him to stand in position for certain tricks, such as HUG. You will also
use this command when you are ready to teach your horse to stand on a pedestal or other objects.

Start by teaching your horse these few movements, and you will have taught him the foundations of loads of tricks.

For example the Simple Bow is just:

**LEG FORWARD + LOWER HEAD = SIMPLE BOW**
Preparing for Your First Trick

Before you start teaching your horse his first trick, you need to teach him to associate the Marker that you chose to use, with receiving a treat.

For the first few days, several times a day, visit your horse and use the Marker and then give him a treat. Remember that you are looking for a response from your horse that shows he understands that the Marker will be followed by a treat. Most of the horses I work with will prick their ears expectantly when they hear the Marker. Or they will look at me or my treat pouch expectantly.

If your horse is pushy around treats, it is best to try this over a stable door or fence, so they can’t mug you. Only give him the Marker when he is standing calmly.

I always recommend teaching horses in short regular sessions – a few minutes several times a day, rather than longer sessions spaced apart. Each day, practice this for a maximum of five minutes.

Some horses will get the idea on the first day, while others may take up to a week. It is worth continuing to practice even if your horse doesn’t seem to be ‘getting it’. You will find that all of a sudden he will make the connection between the Marker and the treat.

Once your horse ‘gets the idea’ then continue to practice for several days. Your horse needs to learn, without a doubt, that when he hears the Marker that a treat will soon follow.

Here is a video about how to train your horse to recognize the Marker:
TRAINING THE MARKER
Teaching Your First Simple Trick

The first trick that I usually teach my horses is to TOUCH an item, as this forms the beginning of so many tricks including KISS, HUG, and FETCH.

At this point your horse should understand completely that the Marker means they are going to get a treat.

For equipment, you only need a treat pouch full of treats and a Target (this was covered in the section on Equipment) or another suitable item (such as a ball).

Before you start, you must be dressed safely and in an area that your horse is relaxed in.

Start by placing the target (or other item) near your horse’s nose. Say “touch” and wait for your horse to touch the target with his nose.

Horses are naturally curious, and they will usually try and sniff the target. As soon as he touches the target, give the Marker and treat your horse. Ask him again, and as soon as he touches the target, give him another treat.

You might need to tap the target with your finger to get his attention focused on the target.

Practice this simple trick for a maximum of five minutes. Don’t overdo it. It’s best to come back later in the day to try it again.

If your horse won’t touch the target, then move it closer to him so he accidentally touches it, then give the Marker and treat. Otherwise reward him for even looking at the target. Once he is looking at the target consistently when you say “touch”, make the trick a bit more difficult by waiting until he moves his head toward the target before you give the Marker and treat him. Then once he is doing this when you ask, wait until he touches the target before you give the Marker and treat.

It is important to make each trick as simple as possible, and if your horse doesn’t seem to understand what you are asking him to do, then think of a way to make it easier for him.

Don’t growl or punish your horse if he gets it wrong. You need to encourage your horse to try different things and to try and work out what you want him to do. If he does the wrong thing, don’t do anything, unless he does something that is dangerous, for instance trying to bite or hurt you. We then use the ‘wrong’ word or sound.
Your goal is to say the word “touch” and your horse will touch the target with his nose instantly.

We want our horses to perform this trick consistently. Some horses will be touching the target within a few minutes; others may take several small sessions over a week or more.

This very first basic trick is SO important to get right. Your horse needs to make the connection between you asking him to do something, hearing the Marker, and then receiving a reward. If you spend time on this simple trick and make sure your horse completely understands, you will have developed a form of communication with your horse that you can use to teach your horse a lot of other tricks.

TRAINING VIDEOS

Here a link to several training videos that show the basic steps of teaching TOUCH. There are also videos of Trigger doing the trick and Bella learning TOUCH from the very beginning:

TOUCH TRAINING VIDEOS
Assignment 3

Practice the following over the next week:

1. Teach your horse to understand that when they hear the Marker that they will receive a reward.

2. Practice teaching your horse to TOUCH a target or another object.

3. Then practice moving the target into different positions and asking your horse to TOUCH it.

4. Then practice asking your horse to TOUCH lots of different objects.
Your Second Trick

Okay TOUCH was a very simple trick. Now you can build on this foundation to teach your horse other tricks. For example, you can use TOUCH to teach your horse to give you a HUG.

It feels really wonderful to get a hug from your horse!

Here is the link to step-by-step instructions and videos for teaching your horse to HUG.

HUG VIDEOS

Have a look at the video of Trigger (our experienced trick horse) demonstrating how to give a really good horsey HUG.

Then print out the step-by-step HUG instructions.

Watch our new trick horse, Bella, learning to give me a HUG.

Then try it with your own horse.

I know I repeat myself... but just take your time.

Some horses will get the idea really quickly, while others can take several weeks.

If you take your time, your horse is less likely to get confused. You will notice a real difference if your horse understands what you want and can perform a simple trick - he will become really pleased with himself and it is wonderful for his confidence!
More Ideas

Now that horse knows how to TOUCH an object, you can use the method to teach your horse other tricks.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

**Go to a cone**
Ask your horse to TOUCH a cone. Just move it further and further away until your horse is walking some distance to the cone. You could also include obstacles such as small jumps that the horse must walk over (or jump) to TOUCH the cone.

**Follow a target**
Use a pool noodle (or other item) on the end of a whip to guide your horse into different places, such as on to a trailer or over obstacles (such as jumps) or onto obstacles (such as a pedestal).
Chase a ball
Teach your horse to run after a ball. You can eventually build on this trick and teach your horse to fetch.

Here’s an idea of the steps you could use to teach your horse this trick:

**Step 1** - horse touches the ball when placed directly in front of his nose.
**Step 2** - horse touches the ball when held 1 foot from his nose.
**Step 3** - horse touches the ball when placed 1 foot above the ground.
**Step 4** - horse touches the ball when placed on the ground.
**Step 5** – horse touches the ball when placed 1 foot away on the ground.
**Step 6** – horse touches the ball when placed 3 feet away on the ground.

Continue building up the distance until you can throw the ball and your horse will chase after it.

Just a note... some horses LOVE this trick while others find it a bit like hard work. Trigger will slowly wander after the ball and is only happy to do it a few times, whereas Bella will run after a ball and I get bored before she does!

Trick training is supposed to be fun for you (and your horse), so only do tricks that your horse enjoys. If your horse is getting bored, or is not interested in a particular trick then try something different.

If you find things that you both like to do, then you will really develop a partnership with your horse and you will become very good friends.
All tricks are taught in exactly the same way: So when you want to teach your horse something new just follow these guidelines:

- Think of a trick you would like to teach your horse (it may be part of something your horse already does).
- Think about the possible outcomes of teaching this trick – could it be dangerous?
- Use a Trick Planner to break the trick into as many steps as possible.
- Gather the necessary equipment and treats.
- Start by teaching your horse the first step of the trick by using the Marker and rewards.
- Only move onto the next step when your horse has completely mastered the previous step.
- Most importantly - have fun!
Questions?

Let me know if you have any questions... about anything. You can contact me (and Trigger) via the Contact Page on our website: CONTACT US

or via the Horse Tricks Academy Facebook Group (instructions on how to join the group are in the Academy).

We would love to hear from you and no question is too silly 😊

Have fun!

Jain & Trigger