



How to stop

Deliberately blocking the movement of your legs and spine might be enough to cause a horse to slow or stop but is a weak signal which has little or no authority in itself. So, although it will probably work while your horse is calm and paying attention to you, it may not be such a reliable way of slowing or stopping in those 'more exciting' moments. While it's important, of course, to deepen your horse's trust, help him get used to the environment and carefully educate and reward him so that these non-authoritative seat aids become reliable over time, we also like to have some methods at our disposal that we can use to keep ourselves and our horses safe in more challenging circumstances.

Perhaps the simplest way of 'enforcing' a slowing or halt when circling is not an option and the non-authoritative aids are not enough, is to combine a blocking action of the bit (or headcollar!) with that of the seat and legs. Although it's by no means the most elegant way of riding, this 'combined effect' was popular in military applications where recruits had to be taught an effective way of controlling their horses in a very short period of time, so let's start by understanding how to do it effectively before going on to look at some other approaches.

The combined effect is applied by the rider (gently) closing and immobilizing their legs, stretching up to straighten and immobilize their spine and then closing their fingers on 'correctly adjusted' reins – which has the effect of bringing the bit closer to the rider's spine by no more and no less than the exact distance that their fingers moved. When the horse responds, the rider immediately relaxes the aids as a reward.

Because it only works if the reins are 'correctly adjusted', this effect can be used as a very useful way of testing and developing the feeling for rein adjustment - a combination of the (light) feeling in the reins and the distance between the bit and the rider's spine at any moment in time. If this distance is too short or there is tension in the reins, the horse will be encouraged to lean on the rider's hands and may become irritated by the feeling of constraint. If the distance is too long or the reins too loose, the closing of the fingers will not produce the desired result.

'Correct' rein adjustment is an ever-changing feeling, a combination of many factors which changes over time as the relationship between you and your horse develops and even from moment to moment depending on what's going on in your horse's mind! Sometimes, even when the rein adjustment is correct, you may find that your horse resists the closing of your fingers rather than yielding to it and changing his posture which in turn causes a slowing or



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halt. If that's the case, a lateral or vertical vibration of one rein is a good way to massage the horse's resisting muscles and coach him into yielding. The vibration can be anything from a gentle 'quivering of the wrist' to a more intense shaking of the rein according to the degree of resistance in the horse's muscles.

Because horses are complete, living, breathing and thinking creatures there are necessarily some assumptions built in to these descriptions. One of these assumptions is that your horse doesn't try to evade the action of the bit by overbending his neck and that you know what to do to correct this if he does. Another is that you are able to use your hands to block the horse's motion without pulling.

To help check the latter, here's a simple exercise you can try with a friend, each of you holding opposite ends of the same piece of rope. One of you (playing the role of 'horse') tries to move away while the other (playing the role of 'rider') prevents any movement by blocking. Next, the horse should 'suddenly' stop pulling at the rope and you can both observe what the rider's hand does in response. If it moves backward even a fraction after the 'horse' relaxes then the rider was pulling too. Pulling on the rein, as opposed to blocking, makes it much harder for real horses to figure out how to respond since there is no reward for a slight yielding on their part.

Of course, explaining in writing how to do something that's mostly about feel is always a challenge. Just as when trying to describe to someone the taste of strawberry jam, an ounce of practical experience is worth a ton of words. So if you are in any doubt we'd always recommend getting some practical instruction from someone who can show you how to make these techniques work before trying them out for yourself.