



Choosing an Instructor/Trainer: Part I: Choosing a Riding Instructor By Gerrie Barnes

Just to be clear... The professional that works with people is an *instructor*. The professional that works with horses is a *trainer*. A professional who works with both people and horses is an *instructor/trainer*. Instructing and training are important topics and will be discussed separately.

Being a riding instructor, I know that choosing the right instructor can greatly influence your horse experience. If you are a novice rider/owner your choice of instructor can shape your attitude and approach to handling horses, your riding style, your confidence and many other factors. Making sure that you choose an instructor that meets your individual needs is extremely important.

Let's start choosing an instructor by matching up some of your basic needs:

Do you ride western or English? Are you a novice, intermediate or advanced rider? Child or adult? Do you currently own a horse or does the instructor need to provide a schooling horse?

Some instructors teach both English and western riding disciplines. Others specialize in one or the other. Some instructors enjoy teaching novices; others prefer the more experienced and/or event-specific riders. Some prefer teaching adults, some prefer children and some teach both.

Some instructors have appropriate school horses available for your level of riding and riding goals. Sometimes even if you own a horse, it is valuable to ride a seasoned school horse to work on your riding skills without having to also be training your own horse at the same time.

How much experience should your instructor have?

Your instructor should have enough experience to be proficient at what he or she is teaching you. Realistically share your riding experience, skill level and riding goals with the instructor ahead of time to ensure a good match.

Some instructors are certified, having met standards of a certifying association. Certifying associations differ in their requirements. Some evaluate information only, while others evaluate information and performance. Either way, your instructor should have enough experience to keep you and the horse safe.

What is equally as important is the instructor's ability to teach *you*. Everyone learns differently: some through information, some visually, some through actual experience. Some learners need a direct teaching approach, some like to learn through discovery, some like a lot of instructor support. Evaluate your learning style and choose an instructor who matches your learning style. It is important to either watch your prospective instructor give a lesson or take a trial lesson yourself.

Do the details of the instructor arrangement meet your needs?

Will you be riding in a safe environment? Does the facility have an indoor arena for "weather days"? Are the hours of instruction at a good time for you? Are the fees within your budget? Will you be taking a group lesson, a semi-private lesson or a private lesson? Can you bring your dog?

Once you have chosen an instructor, work *with* the instructor to meet your riding goals. That might seem obvious, but some students take lessons and work against the instructor.

Come with an open mind. As long as what the instructor is asking you to do seems safe for you and your horse, give it a try. Don't argue with the instructor and have long discussions about your past instruction. If the new approach doesn't work, you can always go back to the way you were doing things. Ultimately, if your philosophy and experience does not match your instructor's philosophy and instructional approach, you will want to change instructors.

It is acceptable to refuse to do something you feel is unsafe or that you are fearful of trying. Your instructor may break the skill down into smaller skills that build toward the bigger skill.

Ask questions if you do not understand what the instructor is asking you to do or why you are doing it. Good instructors want you to understand so you can make these new skills your own. If you still do not understand, ask the instructor to demonstrate.

Have a lesson notebook and write down the exercises, tips and discoveries immediately following the lesson. If you have a horse available between lessons, you can work on these new skills.

Basic Tip: To find names of instructors in your area you can contact certifying associations like Certified Horsemanship Association, American Riding Instructor Certification Program or British Horse Society. Breed associations like AQHA's *4aHorse* pre-qualifies instructors. Get references from friends or other sources. This can include veterinarians, farriers, tack and feed stores, newspapers, an internet search and phone directories. Remember that it is your job to screen the instructor and choose one that meets your individual needs.