CORRECT RIDER POSITION
- LOWER BODY

Your body position influences the way your horse stands and moves. If you sit crooked or off balance, your horse's compensations will reflect those position faults.

Understanding and mastering a good position is part theory, part practice. Your mental image of correct position must match the reality of how that position feels when you are in the saddle. Correct position is the starting point for anyone who aspires to achieve the independent seat that allows you to influence every move your horse makes.

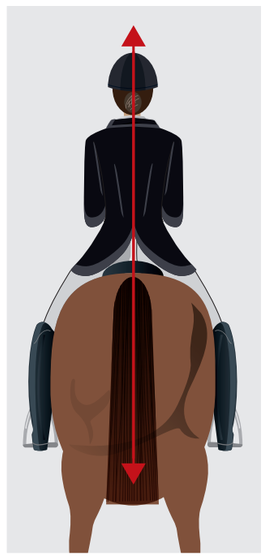
As viewed from the side, you may have your ear, shoulder, and hip correctly aligned and perpendicular to the ground. However, if your heels are ahead of the ideal vertical alignment of ear, shoulder, hip and heel you are sitting in a chair seat. If you glance down and see any toe, it is a sure bet that your upper body and lower body are out of alignment. A chair seat puts you on the back of your saddle, behind your horse's motion and puts more pressure on your horse's back than necessary. Since you may also feel out of balance, you may tip forward to try to get in balance with your horse, compromising your vertical alignment even more.

You must relax your thighs in order to align your heels with your hips. Achieving long, relaxed thigh muscles requires both stretch in the hip flexor muscles, which pull the leg forward when tight and strength in the hamstring muscles, which hold the leg back. You must relax all of your joints so that your lower leg can flex upward and downward in rhythm with the horse's motion. If you tighten your hip muscles, grip with your inner thighs, pinch with your knees, lock your ankles, or tighten your toes, you will not be able to absorb the motion of the horse's movement.

How do relaxed muscles and joints feel? At the walk, on a tolerant horse, grip as hard as you can with your inner thighs as though squeezing a ball between your legs. Then relax. That feeling of relaxation, after the tension of the squeeze, is the way you want your thighs to feel while you are riding. Do the same exercise with your knees. Squeeze tightly and then relax. The relaxed feeling is the one you want. When muscles and joints are relaxed, the heels will flex up and down as the ankles absorb the upward and downward motion of the horse. Try gently bouncing your heels up and down to feel whether your ankle joints are locked or loose. If your ankles are locked, check your toes to see if they are tight and wiggle them to help loosen tight ankles.

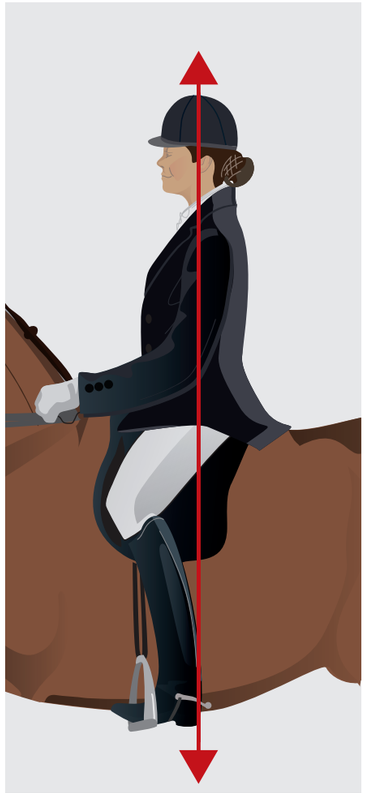
Viewed from back or front, you should be sitting in the middle of the saddle with your legs and stirrups at an equal length. A line through the middle of your chin, breastbone, belly button and pubic bone should align vertically with the horse's spine and breastbone.

Getting weight evenly on both seat bones is a challenge for many riders. Often the feeling of 'even' that is locked in our muscle memories is not quite right. So it is hard to do a self-check. Ask an instructor to line your body up correctly after viewing you from the front and back to check for any imbalances. Then begin riding again, working to re-programme that feeling into your muscles. If you are crooked, you may feel like you are falling off to one side when an instructor straightens your posture. Stick with it until you retrain your body to accept this new feeling of 'even.'



Which hand do you favour for writing? Your muscles on that side of your body may be stronger and more contracted. Meanwhile, the muscles on your weaker side can stretch and lengthen more easily. This combination makes it harder for you to keep the seat bone on your stronger side in contact with the saddle. Your weaker side stretches down more easily, so you may feel pulled to that side. As a result, your ribcage collapses on your strong side as you attempt to counterbalance. Try temporarily lowering the stirrup on your stronger side one hole to stretch the muscles on that side and develop a feeling for the correct position. If you feel comfortable, you can try working without stirrups to help stretch your legs down. Holding a strap placed on the front of your saddle can add a feeling of security as you work to relax your inner thigh muscles.

Whenever you ride on a circle, you must counteract the centrifugal force that pushes you onto your outside seat bone. This is particularly evident at the canter. It becomes an even bigger problem when you are cantering on a circle in the direction of your stronger side. Imagine you are lengthening your inside leg while drawing up your outside leg to help bring your seat bones into better balance. Think of yourself as a gymnast on a balance beam and keep your shoulders directly over your seat bones and hips. Holding the back of the saddle with your outside hand to help shift weight onto the inside seat bone is another helpful exercise.



From the front, your thigh should lie flat against the saddle and your knees and toes should point straight ahead. Your thigh cannot lie flat if your knees turn out. If your knees turn out, probably your toes do, too. If your toes turn out, you probably grip with your calves (which makes reactive horses oversensitive to leg aids and dulls the response of lazy horses to them).

Do not grip with your inner thigh, pinch with your knees, or turn your toes in to flatten your thigh against the saddle. Any repositioning of your lower leg actually starts at the hip's ball-and-socket joint. If your toes or knees point out, rotate your whole leg from the hip socket until your thigh is flat and your toes point straight ahead. Try pulling your thigh back with your hand and repositioning it flat against the saddle. **You have tremendous stability when you position your leg correctly.** Prove this to yourself by standing on the ground with your feet shoulder width apart and your toes pointing out. Shift from left to right and notice the range of motion you have. Now point your toes straight ahead, repeat the exercise, and notice the limited motion. It is easier to stay evenly centred in the saddle when your thighs are flat and your toes point forward.

Feedback from someone on the ground is the best way to correct your position faults. If you are unable to work with an instructor on a regular basis, viewing video of your riding helps. Ask a trusted friend to videotape you or tape your own rides by setting a camera on a tripod. Shoot from the side of the arena to check your vertical alignment from the side. Shoot from a corner on the long side of the arena to check your position from the front and the back.

Check your position at the beginning of every ride. Review your position whenever something is not going just right. Realign your body every time you take a walk break. **Remember that your horse cannot use his body correctly unless you use yours correctly first.** A correct effective seat takes time to develop. Keep practicing and realigning yourself and you too can have a correct seat.

SEAT BALANCE AT THE WALK

Following the horse's motion is a prerequisite to using your aids correctly to influence your horse.

Strong yet relaxed muscles are a prerequisite to following the motion. Your lower back and abdomen need the support of firm core muscles so that your hips can follow the movement of your horse's hips with an upward tipping or swinging motion.

You need a balance between hamstring strength and hip flexor stretch to achieve the long, relaxed thigh muscles that allow your hips to tip. Simultaneously, all of your lower body joints must stay relaxed and flexible. Any tension in knees or ankles will also lock your hips, leaving you bouncing in the saddle.

Achieving the complementary strength and stretch from hips to toes, that allows you to follow the swing of your horse's hips, requires many hours in the saddle. Start by developing a feel for a 'neutral' hip position at the halt. Your spine should be straight and your back flat. If your lower back is arched, your hips are tipped forward. If your lower back is rounded, your hips are tipped backwards. **Your ear, shoulder, hip and heel should align perpendicularly to the ground.**

As he moves forward in a four-beat walk, try to feel the forward and backward swing of your horse's hips. As his hind foot leaves the ground, your hip on that side will feel a slight 'up and forward' lift. As the hind foot hits the ground to swing forward again, your hip on that side will feel a slight 'down and back' drop. Relax your hips and allow them to swing with the horse's hips.

Try to maintain a long, relaxed thigh. If you grip with your thighs, it will be hard to feel and find the swing of the horse's back as his hips move 'up and forward' or 'down and back.' Close your eyes and focus on this feel as your seat bones move with the horse's hip swing.

As your hips follow these forward swings left and right, try not to 'sit left' and 'sit right.' These seat pressures will shorten the horse's stride and slow the walk. Without any muscular tension, allow the left hip to swing forward followed by a right hip swing forward to encourage a forward, marching walk. Most people can eventually feel and follow the horse's motion at the walk. The walk does not have a moment of suspension so the rider never bounces and, therefore, does not feel the need to grip with the thigh to hold her position.

Once you find and can follow this swinging motion at walk without any interference that slows your horse down, try to push him more forward by moving your hips faster or 'bigger.' This exercise helps you discover which muscles control your ability to swing your hips, something that will become even more important when you try to follow the horse's motion at the trot.

When you can successfully use your hips to push your horse into a more forward walk, (you might have to help the 'forward' with leg as well as seat) try pushing him right into the trot by exaggerating your hip motion even more. Do not stop swinging your hips as the horse moves into the trot. At first, you may only get the swing at the trot for a moment or two before you start to grip and lose the feeling of it. Go back to the walk and try the exercise again.

The point of this exercise is to gain a feel for how to move your hips at the trot by using the same swing as in the walk, with a few adjustments. The horse's hip swing at the trot is essentially the same as it is at the walk (with the exception of the moment of suspension). So, if you can exaggerate your hip motion at the walk until the horse feels like trotting - then hold that feeling without gripping - you will be able to follow the horse's motion at the trot as well as at the walk.

The 'frog position' helps you get your seat in the middle of the saddle with equal weight on both seat bones. It also helps you to feel how to keep your pelvis tucked under (that is, taking the hollow out of your back). It demonstrates how it feels when the rider opens and closes her hip and knee joints without gripping with the thigh. Start at the halt with your feet out of the stirrups. Draw your knees upward while keeping your back straight. You should feel equal weight in both seat bones. If your horse swings his head to the left or right to adjust his balance, your weight is probably uneven.

Now ask someone to lead your horse forward at a walk. As the horse moves forward, raise your knees again. If your horse slows its walk, the weight in your seat bones is probably burdening without moving. Continue to focus on relaxing and following the swing of the horse's hips as they move forward while you try to keep your knees up.

The 'dog position' is an exercise that can help riders who tend to grip with their thighs or who may not be able to feel what a 'neutral' position feels like. It can also help riders feel their horse's rhythm and the motion of the joints. With your feet out of the stirrups, alternately lift one leg away from the saddle, then the other, then both legs. Do this at the halt and, again, with someone leading your horse forward at the walk.

When you can follow the swing of the horse's back in a relaxed, 'neutral' position without interfering with the horse's rhythm or forward motion, you become capable of using your seat as an aid to communicate subtleties of direction and speed to the horse.

You are now on your way to truly influencing your horse with perfect clarity.

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