



How to Train a Horse to Load into a Trailer

Prerequisite: Horse is already halter-trained; and is able to lead forward and back up confidently with halter cues.

Progress at the Horse's Pace

Trailer training is a gradual process that progresses to each next step only as the horse remains relaxed. Upon any noted signs of fear, anxiety and stress (FAS), like an upraised tail, whites of the eyes showing, a pronounced head raise, tight muscles, ears turning back towards the neck, and attempting to flee or pull away, adjust and move back to an easier step. Build more gradually next time; breaking the bigger step into a series of even smaller steps the horse can more easily handle.

Push the Positive

Use positive reinforcement to reward any approach, voluntary interaction with, entry, and exit of the trailer. Rewards can be anything the horse enjoys; including favorite treats, pellets or hay, as fed by hand or delivered via a feeder, like a bucket. Reinforcement may also include scratching and petting in favorite places, like the withers, shoulders, and chest.

Speed up Learning by Marking Reward-Worthy Moments

A marker signal provides more timely feedback than a reward (e.g. a food treat) alone. It pinpoints the specific action the horse did to earn the reward. The marker signal may be the click of a clicker, a visual thumbs up, or a specific word like 'treat' or 'yes' that holds positive meaning because it's always immediately followed by an enjoyable reward.

Reinforce Approach

With the horse on halter and lead, start at a great enough distance for the horse to notice the trailer, without being overly concerned by it. Initially mark and reinforce any look or movement in the direction of the trailer, building from initial glances into longer looks and eventually steps towards the trailer, with the eventual goal being the horse voluntarily approaching the trailer. Once able to fully and easily approach from one angle, repeat these same steps from other angles to boost the horse's confidence with approaching from all sides.

Entering In

Once at the back entry, patiently allow the horse to put their head down to sniff and paw at the trailer floor. These indicate the horse is thinking about getting in and likely will soon if given time to investigate without added pressure. Avoid corrections, as this hinders progress. At the moment he is sniffing and processing, he should be passively rewarded (by being left alone), or praised, or reinforced with food for forward momentum inside. This builds comfort with getting in.

Watch Where You're Facing

Orient your body and feet to face in the direction you want the horse to move, like turning towards the inside of the trailer when loading. Avoid facing the horse directly, as this can signal the horse to stop.

Allow Horse's Eyes to Acclimate

Horses are visually compromised compared to humans. They have less depth perception and their eyes take longer to adjust to changes in light. Be patient and allow the horse to carefully navigate inside as their eyes adjust.

Backup the Backing Out Skill

Initially only request two feet up, reinforcing for doing so, and then request a back out. Doing so builds the skill, muscle, and trust for backing out; reducing the risk of the horse getting 'stuck' inside.

All In

Once in the trailer, reinforce relaxation and resting in place by offering frequently fed treats or a longer-lasting food option, such as a bucket of grain or loaded hay bag tied up high.

Practice Unloading

The horse may panic and struggle initially at the exit point when visual sight is impaired, either from backing out blindly or facing out towards the blinding contrast outside from the darkness of the trailer. Allow frequent opportunities to stand stationary and rest, reinforcing calm with treats and petting. Mark and reinforce intent to back up, even if the horse initially balks and surges back forward. Taking extra time and reinforcing relaxation lessens the emotional intensity of the situation and keeps the horse in the right mindset to gradually gain enough confidence to calmly unload.

Teaching to Ride Inside

Standing in a moving trailer takes muscle and balance – think about how you feel when you are standing up on a moving bus or train. Initially, drive the trailer only a few feet, and positively reinforce. This may be repeated several times in one or two training sessions without leaving the property. Gradually build to a short ride around the block or just down the road before returning home again. Take along a seasoned and familiar buddy horse to provide additional comfort during the ride. Only add in arrival at a new destination once the horse is fully comfortable with loading, unloading, and riding around in the trailer in general.

Attend to the horse's body language throughout, ensuring training moves forward on the horse's timeline, not your own. Signs the horse is in a relaxed state for optimum learning include the head lowering, tail resting comfortably on the hind quarters, ears facing forward, and muscles relaxed.

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