



# Reading the Horse

Students will explore the ways horses communicate through body language. Students will apply their understanding of non-verbal communications by observing cues among themselves and in animals.



Gather students in a circle. Call out a human emotion (happy, sad, angry, confused, content, afraid, etc.) and ask students to take a pose that reflects that emotion. No noise or speaking. Just body language. Have fun with this! Explain how we “read body language.” Play again, but this time you will perform the emotional body language. Ask students to respond to your body language with a response of their own.



Horses are excellent communicators. Since they are gregarious by nature, they communicate with herd members through sound, body language, and movement. Visit a pasture or field to observe how horses communicate to others. You can use a chart on a clipboard to note types and frequencies of certain behaviors.

Before starting the observation period, show students what behaviors they are looking for. Help them identify behaviors that are unique to horses - behaviors that students may not be familiar with.

Be sure to stress that horse behaviors are often interlinked body language like the combination of ear position and head height (alert ) and the turning of the head to look at something behind or to the side accompanied by nostril flare.

This is a very simple horse behavior chart. You can make one with more categories or that includes combined behaviors. Challenge students to observe and interpret complex responses to herd behavior or how horses interact with their environment.

Name of Horse	Ear Position	Eyes	Head Position	Nostrils



Review student observations of the horse’s body language. How do we interpret this behavior? How important is context such as environment and surroundings for understanding horse behavior?

Explain that horses, as social and herd animals, respond to their environment as prey animals. Historically, what were the predators of horses? What kinds of predators evolved to hunt fast, herd-oriented animals? What types of body language did the students observe that may have direct linkages with survival behaviors?

Take a tour of the farm and point out areas where horses congregate. Is there a favorite shade tree, a “relief area,” a high point or low spot where horses can see out across landscapes or gather to rest out of sight?



Horses were domesticated thousands of years ago by people. Over centuries, different breeds have been developed that exhibit certain physical traits that make horses useful in farming, logging, sport, recreation, and (at one time) war. How do breeds display behaviors that are unique in their relationship to people?

Teach the students a variety of verbal and touch commands people use in communicating with horses. Use those commands that are most likely heard or observed on your farm or at your events. Venture out to watch people interacting with horses on your farm, or work with a horse in front of the students where verbal and touch commands can be observed.

Invite students to list the human commands they observe and the response of the horse to those commands. Observe for ten to twenty minutes while making notes on a clipboard or in a journal. After a period of observation, invite students to gather and discuss what they saw and heard.

- What horse behaviors were based upon instincts (survival behaviors)? Describe how human commands may change natural behaviors to learned behaviors.
- Did students observe behaviors that showed mistrust, hesitancy, or refusal? Why? If so, how did the horse's handler respond? Describe behaviors of both human handlers and their horses when there was mutual respect and trust.
- How must human handlers learn to "read" the language of the horse in order to be an effective and trusted trainer? What happens with humans who misread body language in social settings? How can we learn to read body language so that conflicts and misunderstandings can be avoided?



We can read a horse's behavior to understand a lot about how he relates to the world around him. Invite students to reflect on how reading behaviors in other living things can serve as a basic, if not primitive, language between humans and other species. Is there a special animal in their lives that they feel connected with? Invite students to share a few stories.

What did students learn today about horse behavior that is different from behaviors of other animals? How can students apply what they learned today to their interactions with animals in the future?

### **Authors Who Use the Language of Horses**

Students may at first not understand that we can “read” behaviors like we can read books. Use catchphrases like “I can read her like a book” or “You can’t judge a book by its cover” to explain the metaphor of reading animal languages through observation.

Many equine authors use their extensive knowledge of horse behavior to describe how people and animals can read each other. Have a small library for students to explore. Provide a literature list for teachers. You may want to include these classics that offer the author’s understanding of horse behavior as central to a story line. Include your own favorites and share your library list with teachers to take back to school!

*Old Bones the Wonder Horse, Kentucky Derby Champion.* Mildred Mastin Pace.

*National Velvet.* Enid Bagnold.

*The Black Stallion.* Walter Farley.

*Seabiscuit.* Laura Hildenbrand.

*Black Beauty.* Anna Sewell.

*Misty of Chincoteague.* Marguerite Henry.

*My Friend Flika.* Mary O’Hara