



Riding Your First Dressage Test



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This publication aims to assist young people who are interested in beginning to ride dressage as a discipline of riding or as a method of training their horses. To serve as a “place to start,” this article will:

1. Walk you through the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) 2004 Training Level I Test 1 movements.
2. Discuss basic dressage etiquette.
3. Introduce the dressage scoring system.
4. Address general dressage concepts.

Dressage Is a Test of You and Your Horse

Before you ride in your first dressage competition, it is important to understand that the test you will ride is comprised of movements that will show the level of training of you and your horse, as well as the harmony you have achieved working as a team. The tests you see in competition – whether at a local show or at the Olympics – are designed to show the training of both the horse and the rider. Each level of test builds on the previous tests and guides a horse and rider through increasingly complex levels of training; it is very much like the way you progress through your education by moving to ever-higher grade levels.

The United States Dressage Federation is the national organization for dressage enthusiasts in the United States, and it defines dressage as the “classical training” of the horse and rider. Dressage uses movements and figures – gymnastic exercises – that have been developed over centuries to demonstrate the complete unity possible between a horse and rider. Present-day dressage evolved from the military training of horses and riders that began around 400 B.C. with the great Roman

general, Xenophon. Cavalrymen and their horses had to be in complete harmony with each other to be successful on the battlefield. The riders had to develop clear communication with their horses and be able to perform many movements we see in today’s dressage tests. The ultimate military style classical dressage training is seen in horses such as the famous Lipizzans of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

Training Level tests are designed to confirm that the horse’s muscles are supple and loose, that the horse moves forward freely with a clear and steady rhythm at each gait, and that the horse quietly accepts contact with the bit. Keep these goals in mind as you train yourself and your horse. The USDF updates its tests every four years, so make sure you have a current copy of the test for the level you are riding. The test explained in this publication is simply a sample to help you understand the principles of riding a test. These basic principles can be used to ride any dressage test. This publication is meant to help you understand your first dressage test. It is not meant to replace the guidance of a good instructor. While some basic principles of dressage are covered in this article, a dressage instructor will help you and your horse gain the supple musculing and harmony that is sought after in the discipline of dressage.

Dressage Arena Layout

To begin, you will need to understand the layout of a dressage arena. When practicing the movements – and eventually the whole test – you can lay out a ring inside your arena or in a field (*Figure 1*).

Have you ever looked at a dressage ring and wondered why it has letters all around it? The letters mark certain points where movements begin or end in the test. The first letter you will need to

know is A. There will be an opening in the ring at A for you to enter. The center line is the imaginary line from A to C. X – the very middle of the arena – will not be marked, but if you draw a line from A to C and a line from E to B, X is where they intersect in the precise center of the ring. “C” is where the judge will sit. It is important to become familiar with the location of the letters, as they mark the precise start and finish points for each movement. Become accurate and comfortable in each movement before you put them together for a whole test. The precise execution of each movement is essential to a well-ridden dressage test.

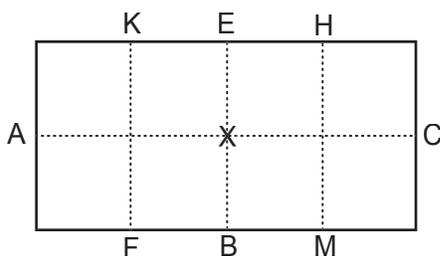


Figure 1

When the rider before you has completed his or her test, you may begin trotting around the outside of the ring while the judge makes final notes on the previous ride. When the judge rings the bell, you have 45 seconds to enter the ring and begin your test.

Movement 1:

A – Enter Working Trot, X – Halt, Salute, Proceed Working Trot

To begin, work on riding straight lines. This is the first thing a judge will see when you enter the arena. You will want to practice away from any straight fences in your arena, because you will not be able to use the fence as a guide for your centerline. To practice riding a straight line, turn off the track at any point along your ring and concentrate your eyes on a point that is straight ahead, such as a fence post. In a dressage arena, you can use the letters as your focal points. As you ride this line, make adjustments to keep your focal point straight ahead of you. It is much harder to ride a truly straight line than most people expect. You can check the quality of your lines by looking at the path your horse's hooves made and seeing how many times you had to correct back to the center. When you ride into the ring at A for your test, you can use C as your focal point for the first straight

line. The judge will be positioned outside the arena behind C. The halt at X should occur precisely at X. The halt needs to occur directly from the trot without walking steps. You can practice this by picking points around the ring – once again fence posts or dressage letters make good reference points – and working on halting at the exact point you have selected. You may need to begin by halting from the walk and hitting your mark and then work up to doing it from the trot. You should use a few steps of the walk to make your trot-to-halt transition balanced. Each halt you do is a good chance to practice the salute and the ride off. It is important to remember that although you plan to halt at X, your horse doesn't know that unless you tell it. So, as you ride up to X, prepare the horse to halt; then halt. If you prepare the horse, you can get a straight halt at X. If you don't prepare the horse, it will probably halt late and crooked. This is a good principle to apply to all movements of the test. You will need to prepare your horse so none of your requests surprise it. Preparation for any transition or turn will make the movements flow smoothly and assist you in making the transition precisely where you want it to be.

A proper dressage salute occurs once the horse has come to a complete halt. You should take both reins in one hand, drop the other hand to your side, and nod to the judge. Once the judge nods back, you should take the reins back in each hand and proceed forward at the trot.

Moving forward from the halt to the trot smoothly is as important as halting smoothly from the trot. Once again, steps of the walk are allowed. Practice this after each halt so that your horse moves off your leg and seat readily and so that you are ready to move forward with your horse instead of being left behind the motion. Please note that Training Level Test 1 does not specify if trot work is to be done sitting or posting. Most riders at this level perform their trot work posting, as it helps them maintain rhythm and as they may not have developed a deep enough seat to sit the trot properly. If your first trot into the arena is done posting, all of your trot work must be done posting throughout the test. Similarly, if it is done sitting, all of your trot work must be done sitting.

Movement 2:

C – Track Left, E – Circle Left 20 Meters

The next movement of the test is to track left at C. The term “track left” means turn left. You will want to ride directly toward C and make a crisp turn onto the track. The great masters of dressage say that tests are won with good corners. To ride a truly great corner, do not direct your horse’s nose into the corner. Instead, approach the corner with the nose flexed to the inside and use the inside leg to push the horse’s body into the corner. There should be no loss of balance or tempo in the corners. Corners are a wonderful opportunity to straighten and rebalance the horse.

Next, you will proceed to E for your 20-meter circle. There are a few things about a circle that may seem obvious but actually require a lot of practice. The first is that your circle begins and ends on the rail at E. As you approach E, you will want to prepare your horse for the turn so the circle does not come as a surprise.

The second important point is that circles must be round. It helps to visualize a circle as having four equal quarters. You can use four points in the ring to help you divide your circle into quarters. Since this circle begins at E, we will use that as our first point. You will have to imagine the second point by drawing a line across the ring from K to F and putting your point where that line intersects with the centerline (*Figure 2*). Your third point is on the rail at B, and your fourth point is on the centerline where it intersects with the line between H and M (*Figure 2*). Focus on each point as you approach it and create a gentle curve in your path to the points. It is ideal for your horse’s body to bend to match the bend of the circle. If you are unable to do this, keep your horse’s nose straight. You should not bend your horse in the opposite direction of the circle to get the correct size circle. In practice, work on making your circle the correct size first, and then add the correct bend. You will want to practice until you are hitting each of the four points consistently. Along with making a round circle, you will want to maintain the same rhythm and tempo in the circle that you had on your straight lines. When you return to the track at E, you will proceed straight ahead to K.

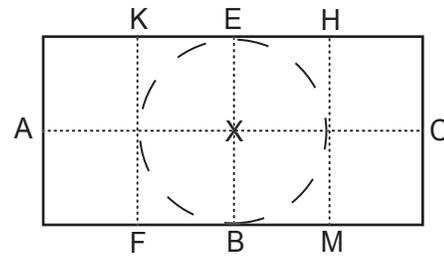


Figure 2

Movement 3:

Between K & A – Working Canter Left Lead

Training Level Test 1 asks you to make the transition to the canter – left lead – between K and A. This gives you the opportunity to prepare your horse for a smooth transition into the canter. While the corner is the easiest place to begin on the correct lead, try to make your transition before the corner so you have more time to prepare for the circle at B. Because the instruction says “between K & A” you have that entire distance to complete your transition. A “working canter” is the speed and rhythm at which the horse is balanced and moving forward in an even and light canter. Practice your canter transition at a variety of spots around the ring until the horse moves off of your leg readily and into the canter you want.

Movement 4:

B – Circle Left 20 Meters

Your canter circle at B will have the same four points as the circle you rode at E (*Figure 2*). Practice making a complete canter circle before you add the transition back to the trot. This will help you make better circles and maintain the canter you desire. If you are having difficulty riding round circles at the canter, practice more at the trot, and then try the canter again. Remember, in any circle, your horse should have a consistent bend of its body following the line of the circle.

Movement 5:

Between Centerline & B – Working Trot

Thinking of the circle in quarters will help you with the fifth movement of this test, which calls for a transition to the trot. The first two quarters of the circle – B to centerline and centerline to E – will

be ridden at the working canter. From E to the centerline, start thinking about your transition to the trot, and once you cross the centerline and are heading back to B, ask for the trot. Remember to use your seat and weight to ask for the transition to the trot. If you rely on your hands only, your transition will not be smooth and you will not receive the trot you need to continue the test. You want your horse to continue moving forward into the trot, not come down to a halt or walk and then start trotting from there. Your working trot should be established before you reach B to continue down the long side of the arena.

Movement 6:

C – Medium Walk, C-H – Medium Walk

This movement calls for the transition at the marker C, thus your horse must begin its walk at C. This can be practiced by selecting points around the arena and working until your transition happens exactly where you request it. A “medium walk” is calm but energetic, and the horse’s hind feet should step into – or slightly beyond – the prints made by its front feet. Remember to make an accurate corner and a straight line on your way from C to H. It is important to check that your horse is striding forward enough to be stepping into its prints at the medium walk. If the horse is just poking along at the walk, or walking with short, fast strides, you will not get good scores for this movement.

Movement 7:

HXF – Free Walk, F-A – Medium Walk

The diagonal line, HXF, is used to change direction and shows another straight line away from the track. You will leave the track at H and return to the track at F. You can maintain a straight line using X and F as your focal points. The “free walk” is a relaxed walk in which you allow your horse to stretch its head and neck down and forward. You should give the horse rein to allow it to stretch, but should not lose contact with its mouth. Your horse should not plunge its head and neck down as soon as you begin this movement. You will develop the free walk so that it is a relaxed gait. This is not a slow walk you should still feel like you are moving well across the ring. When the horse is walking well, you will actually be able to feel its back moving under your seat. It is very important that your horse does not begin to trot during this movement. When

you reach F, you will gather your reins as you put your horse back on the track. Bring your horse back to the more collected medium walk you had before you started across the diagonal line.

Movement 8:

A – Working Trot

Your transition to the trot should happen precisely at A. As with all transitions, you will need to practice to make this accurate and smooth. It is important that you establish the medium trot from the walk instead of gradually increasing your pace. Remember, you must either post or sit all trot movements in the test. You cannot switch back and forth.

Movement 9:

E – Circle Right 20 Meters

This is the same trotting circle you did at the beginning of the test, except that you are circling to the right (*Figure 2*).

Movement 10:

Between H&C – Working Canter Right Lead

Approach this movement the same way you did the canter in the other direction.

Movement 11:

B – Circle Right 20 Meters

This is the same circle you did in the other direction (*Figure 2*).

Movement 12:

Between Centerline & B – Working Trot

This is also the same movement you did in the other direction.

You have probably noticed that the last four movements are the mirror image of the beginning of the test. Most horses, and riders, have a “good way” and a “bad way,” so be prepared to have to work on different things depending on the direction you are going.

Movement 13:

A – Down Centerline, X – Halt, Salute

You will be making a right turn onto centerline, and you do not want to look at A as you prepare for the turn as that will put you off of centerline. Instead, focus on C to make the turn and the centerline straight. This halt at X is as important as your first and needs to be straight and square. Prepare your horse for the halt as you approach X. Once your horse is standing still, you will salute the same way you did in the beginning of the test. Once the judge has saluted in return, your test is over! But you are still in the ring, and a graceful exit is necessary. Many judges offer brief comments to riders after a test, so a good practice is to walk your horse toward C. If the judge does not offer any comments, turn either left or right – whichever is your better direction – and ride along the track back to the exit at A.

Points to Remember

You have now been through the entire 2004 version of USDF Training Level Test 1. Congratulations! There are several important general points you can work on to improve the way to ride this test, and any other test.

- Practice your transitions until you can receive and maintain whatever gait you request whenever you want it. Remember, an essential part of smooth transitions is preparing your horse to let it know a request is coming.
- Practice your halt until your horse stops smoothly and squarely and remains still until you ask it to move forward.
- Work on circles – there are four in this test! They need to be round and balanced. In a good circle, the horse's body has a uniform bend from poll to tail, and remains in the same bend throughout the circle.
- Work on each of your gaits until you get the rhythm and tempo you desire. Counting aloud, or riding with a metronome, may help you to find and maintain a comfortable rhythm.
- Your horse's gaits should show activity and cadence. Sluggish movement does not show the harmony between horse and rider that one tries to achieve in dressage.
- Every movement in this test is done in both

directions, so you should practice in both directions until they are the same.

- You can ride each part of the test once only. This means that even if you do not get the canter before you start a circle, you must ride the circle once. You can continue to ask for the canter during the circle, but may not continue circling until you get the canter.

Dressage Etiquette

- You will be assigned a ride time. You should not be asked to ride earlier, and you cannot ask to ride later. Ride times are set based on how long it takes to ride each test, and they allow each rider to properly schedule his or her warm-up.
- You may ride around the outside of the ring when the rider before you has completed his or her test. Use this time to familiarize your horse with anything that may scare it. Do not interfere with the rider who is leaving the ring.
- The judge will ring a bell when you have 45 seconds to enter the ring. This is enough time to get to A at a trot from wherever you are around the outside of the dressage arena.
- You are allowed to have someone read the test aloud while you are riding it. This person must stand at E or B outside of the dressage arena. Your reader cannot read any movement more than once and must read it exactly as written. The reader cannot coach you through the test; he or she can just tell you what movements you need to do. Your reader should stay one letter or movement ahead of where you are riding. There is no penalty for having a reader.
- When you salute the judge at the beginning and end of your test, it is important to wait for the judge to acknowledge you before you proceed. Some judges write a lot of comments on the test, and you want to be sure the judge is ready to give you his or her undivided attention.
- Voice commands are not to be used in the dressage arena. There may be a penalty if the judge hears you using voice commands, which includes words and clicking.
- If you go off-pattern, you are not disqualified. The judge will ring a bell and you will be given a two-point penalty and begin riding from the point in the test that the judge tells you.

- Do not dawdle when exiting the ring after a test. To keep the show moving and to show respect for the competitors who will follow you, leave the ring at a medium walk and clear the area.
- Refer to your 4-H rulebook for the appropriate attire and equipment when you ride in a 4-H dressage show. The United States Dressage Federation rulebook explains the attire and equipment for other dressage shows.

Scoring

- The judge scores each movement of your test individually, and you can see these scores, and any comments the judge writes in, after you ride. This means that you receive a separate score for each circle, turn, or transition. The points you receive for each movement are added together, and your final score is the percentage of points you earned out of the possible points for that test.
- Each movement is worth 10 points. The points tell you how well that movement was performed. 10 – excellent, 9 – very good, 8 – good, 7 – fairly good, 6 – satisfactory, 5 – sufficient, 4 – insufficient, 3 – fairly bad, 2 – bad, 1 – very bad, 0 – not executed. The score you receive for some movements will be multiplied by two. This is true for the collective marks described below and for any movement that is not performed frequently in the test or which has great importance.
- The bottom of the judge's score sheet has collective marks, which are scored for the entire test. Your position and effectiveness as a rider, the quality of your horse's gaits, submission, and impulsion are all scored in the Training Level I Test. These scores are multiplied by two, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining these qualities throughout the test.

- Sometimes the judge will write additional comments on your test. These can be very helpful in preparations for the next test you ride. You can track your improvement by comparing scores from tests you rode earlier in the year!

Dressage truly is the basis of all riding disciplines. Skills learned riding dressage can be used by the horse and rider in all riding situations. We hope this publication has helped you understand how to ride a dressage test, and will inspire you to work with your horse to develop the teamwork needed not only to ride a good dressage test, but to make every ride more enjoyable.

References

Dressage World – www.worlddressage.com

USDF Rulebook – www.usdf.org

For further information

The Competitive Edge: Improving Your Dressage Scores in the Lower Levels, Max Gahwyler, Half Halt Press, Middletown, MD, 1989

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