



# DRESSAGE ILLUSTRATED



## Learning your Dressage Test

You have now received the Dressage Illustrated diagram book you ordered, so you likely plan to go to a show to compete your horse at the Level of test that you have chosen. Before you enter that arena at 'A' there is a lot of preparation to do. We hope that these notes will give you some help and guidelines on the best way to arrive arena-side, with the knowledge that you are well prepared. You need to be confident that you could ride the test blindfolded, absolutely prepared for each turn, each change of gait, able concentrate on riding your horse, not consciously having to think about where to go and what to do when you get there. While we can't help you to ride your horse, we can help you to be mentally prepared to do it.

All of us who want to compete our horses in dressage are faced by the challenge of learning new tests. Memorizing dressage tests is a mental, not a physical aspect of dressage. Everyone learns a little bit differently, so try to use the learning method that works best for you. When faced with memorization in school (like vocabulary in a language class) what method did you use? Most people find it easiest to learn what they can see. The Dressage Illustrated diagrams are designed with this in mind. Other people find they can best remember what they both see and hear. It is well known that the visual channel has the greatest capacity to bring information into the brain and when the same information comes in via the auditory channel, it is more likely to be remembered and to be stored in the subconscious for easy long-term recall. Recent research has shown that combining sight, sound and visualization when learning brings about the best results.

One other point to keep in mind before we start the learning process, is to make sure you choose the right test to perform in public. The rule-of-thumb is for you to be working at home at one level higher than the one you are showing. Both horse and rider will find performing in public, under the scrutiny of the judge, quite stressful. Ride a test you and your horse find comfortable to perform so you can enter the arena with confidence. Remember, it is supposed to be both fun and encouraging!

The first step towards learning any test is to check carefully that you are aware of the placement of the letterings set around the arena, as they mark where the different movements start or finish. An arena plan can be found inside the cover of the diagram books. Since the placement of these letters never varies, it is worthwhile learning their positions by heart. The ones that fall on the centerline are not marked within the actual arena, so it is important to be sure where letters such as D, X and G fall in relation to the markers you will be able to see on the outer track, (D opposite F & K), (X opposite B and E), (G opposite M & H) etc.

Study the information provided by the Dressage Illustrated book, make sure you understand the Key to the diagrams, as well as the purpose and instructions for the individual tests, as shown at the beginning of the book. Read carefully through the test

you are to learn several times, referring to the diagrams to see the track to be taken and where changes of gait take place. Also take note of the Directives, which tell you what the judge will be looking for, an important point. You will soon see how the movements flow and the demands that particular test makes on the horse and rider. When you have the basics clearly understood it is time to start to memorize the test. There are several learning- aids available to help with this task.

Dressage Illustrated now offers audio versions of all the USEF dressage tests in MP3 format, for direct download from their website ([www.dressageillustrated.com](http://www.dressageillustrated.com)). In the recordings the test movements are called in real-time, to a background metronome beat. They reflect the average time taken for the test to be ridden and are called with a delay between each command, equivalent to the time it takes to ride that movement and the beginning of the following one. This allows the rider to know the movement to perform at the correct markers as the test progresses.

While you memorize the test you will need to draw out the track the test follows around the arena. Although it is possible to print out arena plans from the internet, using a dry-wipe arena board is a useful and practical learning-aid. We recommend Letter Perfect Dressage Arena boards, which can be purchased from [www.letterperfectproducts.com](http://www.letterperfectproducts.com), [www.dressageextensions.com](http://www.dressageextensions.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) .

It is really important that you have the test thoroughly learned before you begin riding the movements on your horse. If a rider attempts to memorize the test while riding it, one of two outcomes, neither good, will result. The most likely is the horse will become sour and bored, from riding the same pattern over and over OR the horse will memorize the test and start to anticipate the movements. This will lead to inaccuracy when the test is performed, with the inevitable loss of precious marks.

Memorizing the test: Sit down quietly with the text and diagrams of the test before you, an arena plan to draw on, and if you have added the audio option, be ready to start playing the recording. You are now ready to begin to memorize the test and to learn the patterns it creates.

Read the text and draw the track of the movements on the arena plan. If you have the audio version, draw the track as you listen to the test being called.

All learning requires frequent repetition and it takes time for the test to be thoroughly absorbed, don't expect it to be embedded overnight. While you memorize the movements of your test, keep your learning sessions to no more than 20 minutes, for maximum benefit. Give yourself plenty of time to learn it thoroughly before you want to begin to ride.

When you feel you can easily remember the test the next step is to draw it out from memory, without reference to the diagrams, using standard notation for gaits (i.e., dots for walk, dashes for trot, solid lines for canter, and so on). Then compare what you have drawn to our dressage diagrams. Is your geometry correct? Do your gait transitions occur

where they are supposed to occur? Practice drawing the test until it becomes second nature. Do not skip this -important step.

If you have the audio calling of the test you can practice drawing it out reflecting the time it will take to perform the movements on a horse. You will find that some movements follow each other very quickly, while others take longer to perform. Draw the line to follow, taking into consideration the gait you will be doing and the time it will actually take to complete the movement. Be aware that the letters K, H, M and F will come up quickly when you come off the short side of the arena, especially when you have ridden down the centerline.

Practice the test on foot. Now you need to connect the diagram memory with the physical memory. Walk, trot, and canter the movements of the test inside a large room or outside. You can do this in a regular dressage arena if you want, but it is not required (though we might all benefit from the exercise). It will take some time to walk, trot, and canter around an entire dressage arena, but it definitely works to do it. If you have a big rectangular area (inside or outside) mark off an arena with letters and trot down the center line, do your halts, trot off, plan where you're going to turn, walk where you're supposed to walk, canter where you should canter, letter by letter. The area does not need to be as large as a dressage arena providing it has the general shape and, most important, has letter markings (which by now you know like your favorite recipe or poem). Simple, economical, letters can be made by painting or using a black magic marker to write letters on white, upside down, 5-gallon buckets.

The best way to perform the test is to carry the diagram book with you as a walking guide. Perform the test until you know where you are going 9 times out of 10, without looking at the Dressage Illustrated diagrams. Know the test "forwards and backwards" so if you have a momentary memory loss, you can quickly recognize where you are and continue the proper movement. When you finally think you have the test memorized, have a friend look at the diagrams as you walk the test to be sure you are not going into freestyle.

Visualization: You have reached the point when you have the test memorized. While drawing out the test over and over you have been concentrating on where to go and at what gait. Now you should imagine the feeling you will have as you ride through the test. Begin to ride the test in your mind. Down the centerline (make your muscles keep your horse straight), look ahead at the judge seated at C, prepare yourself to tell your horse to turn onto the short side of the arena, feel yourself doing it, the horse reacting to the aids..... You will have seen skiers and athletes on the start-line, mentally rehearsing the moves they will make, twitching and bending as they see the internal video of the test ahead of them. Learn to do the same. When you come to riding the test in the arena you will find your body and mind ready for the challenge.

Riding the test: Many riders do not have access to a full size dressage arena where their horse is stabled, but a full-size standard arena is not essential to have to start riding the test. Most arenas are large enough to allow for half a standard arena to be marked off

with letters. Mark out this half arena with your 5-gallon letters. You can ride the key elements of the movements in that area.

By this time, while learning the test you will have analyzed the parts of it that may be more difficult for your horse to perform correctly. All horses are left- or right-handed, just as we are and will find working on one side easier than the other. Perhaps you find some transitions are harder to do correctly. You have analyzed what is going to be demanded and know where these potential difficulties may arise. It is worthwhile working on these aspects of the test before you start to run through it completely with your horse. Work on small sections of the test, mixing what you feel you need to improve in with other movements. If the horse finds something really difficult, don't keep doing it over until he tenses up, realizing it is a problem; take time to work through it. Ask for it once or twice, and your horse will be willing to co-operate again next time and reward you with his gradual improvement. Don't build mental blocks into him or allow him to anticipate what you will ask him. Keep him interested and attentive to your aids.

The same goes for when you start to ride the test. Don't ride it through repeatedly. It is you that needs to learn it, not your horse! Break it up, do a part, then break off and go a different way, do a gait transition at a different mark, then pick up the test sequence again; you know in your mind where you are going, but keep your horse guessing!

Before you start showing, arrange to ride in a full size arena with a trainer to observe and coach a few times. Now is the time to ride the test in full. Trailering to the full size arena is also good practice to get your horse experienced at loading, trailering, and showing with new distractions (and for you to know how long it takes you to get yourself ready to get on the road).

Now you have done it. You have learned to ride the test.

You are ready to ride the test in a dressage show. It is always good to have a show or some targeted performance of the test as a goal. On show day, try to relax and enjoy the ride. The purpose of the show is to get an honest opinion from a knowledgeable judge about your riding skills and where you can improve.

After the show, analyze the judge's remarks and begin practicing the necessary improvements. Look carefully at the directives for the movements where you did not score a 7 or more. The judge's comments will give you a good idea how to move the score up to at least a 7 and maybe an 8. Don't hesitate to ask an experienced dressage trainer to watch you ride and give you advice as you practice improving those weak movements. There is no way you can see or know what "eyes on the ground" will see.

Another good aid to improve your scores is to purchase the USDF "On the Levels" video. They are available through the USDF web site at <https://www.onthelevels.com>. Thirty-one videos help you understand the requirements for tests within each level, including 18 videos of riders and trainers performing each test and 13 supplementary test tip videos.