

# *Fitting A Bit*

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*Horse-Training Article*



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# Fitting A Bit

By Kimberly Keown - Cowgirl Image [www.cowgirlimage.net](http://www.cowgirlimage.net)

**Many horse-handlers use bits that are improperly adjusted, or don't fit their horses. Here's a step-by-step guide to help you and your horse get a perfect bit-fit.**

## Step One: Does the bit sit too low or too high?

A) To see if your bit fits your horse correctly, first check to see how low the bit hangs in the horse's mouth.

This should go without saying, but sometimes it's easy to overlook simple things: Look at the two corners of the horse's mouth and make sure the bridle is adjusted properly and the bit is hanging evenly on both sides. It shouldn't be higher on one side -- the two sides should be even.

Once the horse is properly bridled, look at the corners of his mouth. Is the bit creating one to three wrinkles? If so, that's good. This means the bit is adjusted as high and comfortably as it will go in the horse's mouth. As the old saying goes, the horse should smile, but shouldn't die laughing.

B) Next, open the horse's mouth by gently pushing the bars of his mouth (the area without teeth, by the corner of his lips). Be careful when you do this so the horse doesn't bite you or swing his head around and hit you. You may not have much time to look in his mouth when he opens it, but try to see where the bit is sitting on the horse's tongue. The lowest point should sit at least half-way up the tongue.

With a bit that is jointed in the middle -- such as a jointed snaffle -- the joint will be the lowest area and should be no further down than half-way up the horse's tongue. With a straight bit that is not jointed -- such as a curb bit -- the bar itself should be at least half-way up the horse's tongue.

Preferably, the bit will actually sit a little above the middle of the horse's tongue, but the half-way mark is a good guideline -- see what seems comfortable to your horse.

C) It's extremely important that the bit does not hang too low. A low-hanging bit minimizes the effectiveness of the bit. The bit slides around the horse's mouth and pulls to the side when the rein is pulled, increasing the chance that the outside of the other side of the bit will actually be pulled into the horse's mouth. A correctly fitted bit more easily stays in the same place, which means that the amount of pressure and action needed to cue him is minimized.

Some horses that are bridled with a low-hanging bit may work their mouths and stick out their tongues as an innocent way of playing or trying to adjust to the bit. These tongue gymnastics will quickly become a habitual way of evading the bit and its commands. Once learned, this behavior can become a habit, and continue even after the bit is properly adjusted.

With a low-hanging bit, the horse is more likely to get his tongue over the bit. Horses initially being introduced to a bridle with a bit for the first several times are very prone to getting their tongues over the bit, as they work their mouths and adjust to having a foreign object in there that they can't swallow or spit out. It can almost be expected that they will get their tongues over the bit at least once, even if it is well-adjusted. So if you are introducing your horse to a bit, watch carefully for this to happen. If it does, calmly rebridle him. He'll get over it eventually.

D) A bit that sits too high will pull the corners of the horse's mouth too tightly, and possibly rub them. There is not enough release in the set of the bit. Riding a horse in a bridle is a system of give & take on the reins, and therefore give & take on the bit. When the bit is too high, there is no release of bit pressure when the rider releases the reins. Likewise, when the rider attempts to take more contact with the reins, there is no more to take, as the bit will already be pulled high up in the horse's mouth. If the bit is set too high, you are not able to pick up and release the bit with your reins.

## **Step Two: Is the bit too wide or too narrow?**

Now, look at the corners of the horse's mouth. How much of the bit-bar can you see? If you can see at least an inch on either side, the bit may be too large for the horse. If this is the case, measure the bar of the bit with a tape measure, and get a bit that's smaller. (Measure the bit-bar horizontally from end-to-end, but do not include the outer rings or bars the bit-bar is attached to -- the ones that are connected to the bridle and reins.) Ideally, there should be about 1/2" to 1" of clearance on both sides of the horse's mouth -- from the corners of his lips to the end of the bit-bar. A bit that's too wide (meaning the length of the bar is too great) will pull badly to the side when the rein is pulled, and possibly pull the end of the bit into the horse's mouth. This is especially prone to happen with snaffles. That's a no-no. You want the bit and bridle to stay in place.

If the bit is too wide, it will probably also sit too low in the horse's mouth, no matter how tightly you adjust the bridle. So if the bit is creating the requisite 1-3 wrinkles in the corners of the horse's lips, but it's still sitting too low on his tongue, the bit is absolutely too large for the horse.

A bit that is too narrow for a horse does not have enough clearance between his lips and the ends of the bit, and you will not be able to see the bit-bar, or will see less than half-an-inch. This will pinch the sides of the horse's mouth, and cause the bit to sit too tightly. The bit will not be able to slide from side-to-side at all, and when the horse is cued with a rein, there won't be any release when he gives to the pressure. So, while the bit shouldn't be so wide that it slides around, neither should it be so narrow that it can't move at all.

The too-narrow bit is a very common phenomenon. The reason for this is that there are a lot of large horses with wide mouths in existence, but the standard-sized bit is 5" wide. (This is especially true with large Quarter-Horses.) Most large horses need a 5 1/2" bit, and sometimes those bits are hard to find, especially 5 1/2" curb bits.

The majority of bits that are sold in tack stores and catalogues are 5" wide, and some have specialty sections with smaller bits that are 4 1/2" or 4 3/4". However, 5 1/4" and especially 5 1/2" or larger bits can be hard to find. The only way this will change is to raise awareness in horse owners about bit size. Once there is a greater demand for wider bits, there will be wider bits on the market.

### **Summary:**

Make sure the outside portions of the bit sit evenly on both sides of the horse's mouth -- one side should be neither higher nor lower than the other.

The bit should cause the corners of the horse's lips to have 1-3 wrinkles.

There should be 1/2"-1" clearance between the horse's lips and the end of the bit-bar. (1" should be an absolute maximum.)

The lowest point of the bit-bar should sit about half-way up the horse's tongue.

Correctly fitting a bit is extremely important, but unfortunately there is a general lack of information in the marketplace on this subject, and many horse-handlers don't know what to look for or what size bit to use. However, once you get used to fitting bits, it's not that hard to do. Anyone who knows how to bridle a horse can learn to fit a bit. Even if you can't get the bit-fit absolutely perfect, at least you can identify a poorly fitted bit, and improve your horse's experience. Good luck!

**Your Horse Will Appreciate Your Consideration!**