

# English Saddle-Fitting Guidelines

*No matter what your riding discipline is, a well-fitting saddle enables your horse's natural freedom of movement. It also helps you find a correct or more effective riding position.*



- 1 Position the saddle correctly on your horse's back.  
Don't use a saddle pad because you want to see how the saddle sits directly on your horse. Place the saddle slightly forward on your horse's withers, then slide it backward so that it stops at the natural resting place as dictated by his conformation. Repeat this process several times until you're sure of the spot where the saddle repeatedly stops. This spot should locate the saddle behind your horse's shoulder blades to allow his freedom of movement.

Because proper saddle fit is so crucial, consider contacting a professional saddle fitter for assistance after using these guidelines, or at the very least get a second opinion from your horse's trainer or a knowledgeable friend.

And remember—not only should you check a saddle that you're considering for purchase, you should check the way your saddle fits at least twice a year. As your horse's muscles or weight change through aging, an increase or decrease in workload, progression in training, changes in diet or illness, the way your saddle sits on your horse will change too.

## How to Check the Fit of a Saddle

Here are some guidelines to help you make a basic assessment about how a saddle fits your horse. To begin, ask your horse to stand squarely on level ground with his head and neck facing forward. You may find it helpful to have someone keep the horse still.

As you go through the steps outlined here, monitor your horse. Look for signs of discomfort and irritation or conversely, watch for signs of relaxation.

Note: Many people place saddles too far forward on the withers. When a rider's weight is then added to the saddle, the points of the saddle tree located on each side of the pommel press on the horse's shoulder blades, where they can hinder movement or cause pain.

- 2 Test wither clearance.

If the saddle you're trying is used or has synthetic or foam panels, you should be able to slide two to three fingers between the pommel of the saddle and your horse's withers.

If you're trying a new saddle with wool-stuffed panels, it may settle as much as one-half inch as the wool compresses and molds to your horse. Therefore, you could consider three or even four fingers between the pommel and withers as acceptable.



*An example of good wither clearance. Panel contours shoulder nicely.*

If you have too much space for your fingers, the tree may be too narrow. If you don't have enough space, the saddle may be too wide.



*An example of a tree that is too small. Panels do not make continuous contact.*



*An example of a tree that is slightly too big.*

Note: Sometimes you have to make minor concessions for wither clearance for horses that are either very flat and round at the withers, such as many Arabs and Morgans, or for horses that are very high and narrow at the withers, as you see in some Thoroughbreds.

If this is your horse's case, adhere as closely as you can to other saddle fitting steps and then monitor your horse's back closely over time. Special padding or customized flocking can help with saddle fitting issues related to wither clearance.



## Saddle Fitting and Use Tips

Throughout your saddle fitting process, keep an eye on your horse's mood and facial expressions. The saddle may be bothering the horse if its ears are pinned, teeth are showing, or if the horse is threatening to kick, moving away or flinching.

To preserve the integrity of your saddle tree, use a mounting block. If you consistently mount from the ground on the same side of the horse, and pull on the cantle as you mount, the saddle tree can become twisted over time.

# English Saddle-Fitting Guidelines



*Good relationship of pommel to cantle. Saddle fits well behind shoulder blade. Note too that seat is level.*

- 3 Check the relationship of the pommel to the cantle.

Look at the saddle from a side view. Imagine a straight line drawn parallel to the ground and stretching from the pommel to the cantle. In a dressage saddle, the point of the cantle is designed to be higher than the point of the pommel—maybe a couple of inches higher—so your imaginary line should hit the cantle at such a point that there is space above the line.

Note that in shallower seats such as those used for jumping, the cantle may be designed to be level with or just barely higher than the pommel. If this is the case with your saddle, rely more heavily on other checks to determine proper saddle fit.

- 4 Check to see if the seat is level.

The deepest part of the saddle seat should be parallel to the ground, not tilted backward or forward. A level seat enables your weight to be properly distributed over your horse's back, and it assists you in finding the correct riding position.

- 5 Check the vertical angle and width of the tree points.

Tree width does not necessarily ensure a proper saddle fit. For example, a wide tree in one saddle may be appropriate for a certain horse, but a wide tree in another saddle may be inappropriate for the same horse. This discrepancy could be because the length of tree points and their angles varies between saddle models and makes. Also, the shape of a tree affects the angle of the points.

Under the saddle flap near the stirrup bar, you should see a pocket into which the points are fitted. You'll see a point on each side of the saddle.

If the angles of the points are too narrow, the points will dig into the horse's muscles and most likely, the middle of the saddle will not come in even contact with your horse's back. If the points are too wide, the saddle will sit low in front, putting pressure on top of the withers or the back. If your horse has hollow spots behind his withers, the points should not press down into them.

Note: All horses are asymmetrical. When comparing the angles of tree points, use your horse's widest shoulder as your guide. The fit on the narrower side can be adjusted by a professional saddle fitter through the use of flocking, shimming or correction pads.



*Bad fit because tree is too small. Points press straight down into the shoulder blade.*

- 6 Check channel or gullet clearance.

Turn your saddle over, and you'll see a space between the panels that runs the length of the saddle. This area is referred to as the channel or gullet, and it allows room for your horse's spinal processes to work.

Older saddles tended to have very narrow channels, but advancements in the study of equine biomechanics lead to saddles being designed with wider channels. If the channel of a saddle is too narrow for a particular horse, it will affect the freedom of a horse's movement by pressing on the spinal processes or creating pressure on the spine. For example, wide-backed horses may require very wide gullets.



Conversely, if your horse is very narrow with a high spine, or if your horse's back muscle slopes dramatically away from his spine, you have to be sure the gullet isn't too wide. If so, it could put pressure directly on his vertebrae.

Feel your horse's spine and the soft tissue running along it. The gullet on the saddle should completely clear this area so that the panels rest only on your horse's long back muscle. That way, his muscle will bear your weight and not his spine.

Being careful not to be kicked, stand toward the back of your horse and look to see light coming through the gullet.



*An example of good clearance with room for movement throughout the spine and withers. Panels contour to the shoulder well.*

# English Saddle-Fitting Guidelines

## 7 Check panel pressure and contact.

Saddle panels are supposed to distribute your weight evenly along your horse's back when you ride. Panels can be stuffed with wool, foam or synthetic-filled systems to absorb pressure.

Press on the seat of the saddle with one hand, and run your other hand under the front of the panels. You want to feel even pressure under the saddle points; you don't want the front of the panels to pinch the horse's withers.

Next run your hand under the entire panel along the back, on both sides, feeling for even pressure. Any unevenness in pressure that you feel would be felt by your horse as you ride.

A common problem in saddle fitting is bridging. Bridging occurs when the front and the back of the panels are in contact with the horse, but there is no even pressure in the center of the saddle.

If the saddle has wool-flocked panels and all other steps in the fitting process make you feel that the saddle is essentially a good fit for the horse, a professional saddle fitter may be able to adjust the panels to correct bridging. Otherwise, the saddle will be uncomfortable for the horse to wear and you should consider another choice.

## 8 Check the stability of the saddle.

The saddle should remain fairly stable, not shifting side to side or rocking front to back. Shifting may be a result of your horse's natural asymmetry, and a saddle fitter should be able to make suggestions to lessen or eliminate the problem.

## 9 Check the seat length.

The weight-bearing surface of a horse's back is the area that is supported by the ribs. This area is known as the thoracic region. It runs from about the point of his shoulder to the middle of his back. The 18th vertebra represents the end of the thoracic, or weight-bearing, area and is associated with the last rib.

The lumbar region of his back has no ribs and therefore no support structure; it should not bear weight. This area runs from about the middle of his back to the point of his croup.



*Bad fit because saddle sits on top of shoulder blade and seat extends past last rib.*

Feel your horse's rib cage to locate his last rib. Follow that last rib up to his spine, and you'll see the approximate location of the 18th vertebra and end of the thoracic area. Ideally, your saddle should not extend past this point. If it does and you have no choice but to ride in a saddle that is slightly too long, be sure to check your horse continually for signs of soreness. Some saddles feature more compact designs than others, and one of those may be more appropriate for your horse.

## 10 Girth the saddle, mount and recheck the fit.

When you've finished all the steps to check the saddle fit, put on a girth but consider skipping the use of a saddle pad. A properly fitted girth sits approximately five inches behind the horse's elbow. While sitting in the saddle, check the wither clearance and gullet clearance again.

The pommel should still clear the withers by two to three fingers. Your helper—being careful not to be kicked—should be able to see daylight running the length of the saddle when looking at the saddle from the rear view. This is easiest to see without the use of the saddle pad.

Notice the feel of the saddle. It should feel stable and level under you, and you should feel balanced—not like you're leaning backward or forward or struggling to sit up straight.

Again, assess how your horse is feeling. Is he able to move out freely? Is he relaxed? Or are his ears pinned and tail swishing?

## Advantages of Synthetic and Leather Saddles

When you're considering the type of saddle to purchase, keep the points outlined here in mind:

### Synthetic Saddles

- Available at economical prices
- Low maintenance
- Easily cleaned with soap and water
- Lightweight
- Virtually weatherproof
- Durable

### Leather Saddles

- Available in a range of prices
- Develop attractive patina
- Break in for a rider's seat
- Some leathers offer enhanced grip
- Good resale value if properly maintained
- Durable with proper maintenance

## Related Topics

[Choices in Saddle Panels](#)

[Choosing a Saddle Pad](#)

[About Stirrup Irons](#)

[About Stirrup Leathers](#)

[How to Select a Girth](#)

[Tack and Leather Care](#)

**For more assistance or to request a catalog, call 1-800-989-1500 to speak with a Dover Saddlery product advisor, or stop by any of our retail stores.**

**Visit [DoverSaddlery.com](http://DoverSaddlery.com) for a complete store listing and full product offering.**