

## “Beginning Riders” Essay Revised

The following revision connects to pages 356 and 357 of *Acting on Words*. It provides revisions (underlined) to the essay printed on those two pages. These revisions address an editor’s major concern to sharpen key locations: thesis statement, topic sentences, and conclusions. The essay as printed in *Acting on Words* is not the way Joyce Miller presented it. For purposes of this exercise, we cut some of her most important words to see if the inherent logic of the essay structure would help you to guess and restore those words or ones similar. The underlined words below are exactly those that the author used in her final draft, but alternatives are fine. If you would like comments on your proposed revisions, discuss them with your instructor and classmates. Our brief commentary on the underlined revisions follows the essay.

### Beginning Riders: The Untold Story

Joyce Miller

When a beginning rider mounts a horse for the first time, the rider feels awkward, unbalanced, and unsure of what to do. The horse feels exactly the same way. As a result, a horse develops one of three attitudes to beginning riders: playing dead, taking control, and taking off.

The first attitude is generally the attitude of a middle-aged family pet who belongs to the new rider’s neighbour, best friend, or relative. This horse spends its days dreaming in the field, the carefree succession broken only for the odd pleasure ride. The horse doesn’t much care what gets on its back, so long as the mounted thing doesn’t expect much expenditure of energy. While the new rider tries several times to swing a leg high enough to get on without dislocating a hip, the horse catches a few winks. At an uncertain tap from the rider’s heels, the horse ambles five feet, then lowers its head to graze. This process is repeated several times. Thirty minutes later, the ride ends twenty

feet from where it began. The rider is a little frustrated, but no mishaps have occurred and the horse's state of Zen remains undisturbed.

A higher level of energy and more experience with beginning riders creates a horse with the second attitude: a foreman mentality. This is usually a lesson or trail horse. The horse knows what needs to be done, quickly senses that the rider doesn't know what needs to be done, and sets out to do it as efficiently as possible. Intelligent new riders realize this and, with great relief, hand over control to the most competent member of the team. This works great until the horse decides it is time to a) return to its stall, b) visit with friends, or c) clear the three-foot jump in the centre of the ring. The rider may come out of this ride embarrassed, but the worst injury is usually to the ego.

The third attitude belongs to the horse no beginner should ride, and few do for long. This horse may be the "really calm cutting horse" on Uncle Fred's ranch; the "excellent young prospect" being sold cheap by a dealer; or the high-octane, under-used acreage horse whose owner is sure he's safe to ride although she's never been on him because the previous owner was a thirteen-year-old (never mind that she was a thirteen-year-old provincial barrel racing champ). Such a horse has lots of energy, a lively imagination, and complete inexperience with beginning riders. The sensation of 100- to 200 pounds of yanking, wobbling weight on his back brings to life a race memory of killer cougars. He makes an instant, life-saving decision which would win him a berth in the Kentucky Derby if only anyone were there with a stopwatch, and if only he still had a rider on his back. This is definitely the most painful introduction to riding, but strangely enough, there are some riders who don't give up.

Despite frustration, terror, and/or pain (or perhaps because of them), the stubborn novice rider persists until he or she no longer flops on the horse like a sack of ill-sorted potatoes. The magic day arrives when balance and technique come together. Riding becomes almost effortless; the horse seems to respond to the thought of the rider. Best of all, it is clear that the horse enjoys the experience, no longer feeling the need to play dead, take control, or flee.

## Commentary

### ***Sharpening the Thesis***

**Revision:** Add: As a result, a horse develops one of three attitudes to beginning riders: playing dead, taking control, and taking off.

In its opening paragraph, the sample draft presented in *Acting on Words* provides the topic and main issue or concern—the controlling idea that beginning riders feel uncertain, which causes the horse to feel uncertain. Missing from the opening, however, is a precise statement of reasons in support of this controlling idea. Paragraphs 2, 3, and 4 of the essay each discuss a specific effect that results from the beginning rider’s uncertainty. These three paragraphs suggest that the opening would set things up more clearly and completely if it previewed these three effects as reasons supporting or demonstrating the controlling idea.

### ***Sharpening Topic Sentences***

**Revision:**

To paragraph 2 add “The first attitude.” Creating a horse with the attitude of a middle-aged family pet is the first reason is the first reason, so the topic sentence as it stands in the *Acting on Words* draft is essentially fine. We have restored Miller’s words “[t]he first attitude” simply to sharpen the link between this paragraph and the first reason previewed in the revised thesis statement.

To paragraph 3 add “the second attitude.” As with the revision to paragraph two, these linking words clarify the connection to the second reason previewed in the thesis statement. Otherwise the paragraph provides an effective topic sentence in keeping with the larger purpose of the essay.

In paragraph 4 change the general opening word “A” to the specific word “The.” This small change sharpens meaning by reinforcing that the writer has proposed not an indefinite number of reasons (attitudes taken by the horse) but precisely three. “The” insists that there is now just one attitude left to examine.

### ***Sharpening the Conclusion***

To the final paragraph add “no longer feeling the need to play dead, take control, or flee.” These concluding words simply help to drive home the territory that the essay has covered.