

## Bits 101

Welcome back! Thank you for showing concern for your horse, yourself, and those you care about. Today we are discussing what bits are made of and how to choose one.

Let us take my next horse "Bison" as an example. He is a three year old paint gelding with really cool markings. He is that deep copper color with a patch on his side that looks like a running buffalo. Can you see him coming across the pasture when I whistle? I can!

OK, at three and broke to ride he has probably had a bit in his mouth. He also probably did not come with one. I approach him and let him lick the palm of my hand. First thing I learn is that he likes apples. Apple it will be. I rub the bit with apple and let Bison lick it in. He is purchasing the bit. If he has been hurt by a bit, he may bring his head up, shake his head, chomp at the bit, and look like he wants to run scared. If he does I may have the wrong bit for this horse. I also will start riding him in a controlled and safe environment. I am aware that a negative ride or a wreck will stay with the horse for a long time.

My headstall is leather. There are no snaps and clips to cause vibration. Vibrations make the mouth stiff and can annoy the horse. Leather on metal is my preference.

I have chosen a sweet iron bit because horses like the taste of it. Next, they prefer German silver, and then stainless. They like copper but it is soft and a full copper bit is too hot. Copper inlays are very nice and conducive to producing more saliva. Aluminum is too light, it dries out their mouth, they don't like the taste of it, and they fish with their nose. Rubber is bitter and soft so they chew on it and it forms divots like plastic which becomes annoying to the horse and he can become mad at the bit. Cyprium is a gold colored composite metal made from brass and copper alloy. It combines the strength of brass with the palatable qualities of copper. I also like its weight. A two-piece bit should not be ridden with one hand on the reins. It is too hard to apply equal pressure to both sides. That's a "Dr. J. Thing", not a fact.

Horses don't mind the taste of rust and do mind the taste of oil. Wash oil off a bit before you put it in the horse's mouth. Oxidized aluminum is downright nasty. Wipe that off with a cloth. A direct action bit with a 7/8" full taper two-piece mouthpiece and a D ring cheek piece with hooks and copper inlays on the tongue side is a good one to start with. If I choose a two-piece like a snaffle that would be a common level one bit. I like a low wide port to give some tongue relief and allow my horse to swallow. I like a taper to the mouthpiece of a ring snaffle and a slight forward taper with a barrel. It will make it less severe and give Bison an automatic release when he breaks at the poll. I fasten the headstall and curb to the top hook of my D ring. This keeps the bit in place, off the tongue, and communicates slight pressure to the poll. I hook the reins to the bottom hook from the outside. It helps me lift the shoulder without putting pressure on the bars or tongue. I like to neck rein and don't desire much more leverage than the D ring provides. For my kids I may go to a Cavalry shank to give them more leverage and a bushing to keep the purchase from pinching the nose when they tend to apply outward pressure on the reins. The backward curve of the shank helps to make it a slower bit for riders with nervous hands. Size and shape of the mouth piece affect the severity of a ring snaffle bit. My full taper is softer and communicates more to the lips. A narrower mouthpiece is harsher and applies a greater percent of the pressure to the tongue. The snaffle is a level one bit as it applies pressure to the tongue, then the bars.

If you choose an independent action bit you can communicate to each side of the horse without pulling the mouthpiece across the tongue and applying pressure to the other side of the mouth. Bison is a young horse so I have chosen a level one bit but a softer style with the forward curve, the barrel and slight porting for tongue relief. I also get slight poll pressure from my ring hooks or slots, and additional communication from my curb strap. I like a ball at the connection of the mouthpiece and the cheek piece to keep from pinching the lips. Younger riders tend to balance on the reins and so a shank for leverage with a square ring on the purchase will help keep the bit off the tongue and a bushing on the shank will allow it to turn 45 degrees without turning the purchase into the nose when they apply outward pressure on the reins.



It is time for another definition: Level one bit. This is a bit like the snaffle that applies pressure to the tongue and is very basic for the horse to respond to. It can be combined with shanks, curbs, hooks, spindles, and nose bands.

Level two bits are for the horse that has progressed in training to start using cues and more subtle pressures. This horse has learned to listen to the rider and resistance has been resolved. These often add barrels, and ports to relieve tongue pressure and work more on the lips and bars and poll. Severity tends to be milder. The WHOA effect is no longer paramount.

Level three bits are often independent action bits and sometimes influenced by the rider's discipline. Here we are talking English, Western, and rodeo events. Here I see a lot of custom rigs. Some of you spend a lot more time on a horse than I get a chance to do. Your discipline may influence your bit choice. Western bits are often direct action or leverage bits. English bits are generally direct action with rings, D's and full cheeks. If you compete, check with your competition's association and learn what type of bits are allowed.

A three-piece bit, or sweet spot bit, or French shaft, has a connector and can be ridden with one hand on the rein. The three-piece bit or connector bit is like a Pelham, curb, or leverage bit.

These give a slower signal that functions like a yellow light and keeps him from being startled or scared by the sudden jump from level one to level three pressures on the bit. This pre-signal can make it easier to pick up the reins in one stride, neck rein, and lift the shoulder to keep balance. They can look like a small disk over the tongue and can have copper inlays to improve purchase by the horse. If you choose a Don Harris curb bit for one handed riding, this puts pressure on the bars and I would use a solid mouth piece for Bison. I worry that piano wire double twist bits can lead to tension, fear, and set you up for that bad experience.

When a horse is relaxed at the poll he becomes rounded through his top line, engaging his hind quarters underneath himself. This allows the horse to utilize his strength for whatever task we ask of him. The relaxed horse has his ears pricked forward. His poll is the highest point and his head is vertical to the ground with the eyes facing forward. The bridge of the nose is perpendicular to the ground.

Bison drops his head, licks the bit, his eye blinks, and he is not stiff. I may have the right bit. Second thing I have learned. Bison wants a sweet iron bit with copper inlay for Christmas.

Next month Bits and pieces of the bit.

Enjoy your horse.  
Dr. Johnson