



January Writing Prompt Winner

Gray Area

By Emma Adamson

As riders, we are all familiar with the phrase “It is just a ribbon.” We repeat this to ourselves over and over and over again, willing ourselves to believe it. However, that same ribbon, or lack thereof, has always determined my self-value. Whether it is blue, red, yellow, or non-existent, I allow it to creep into the corners of my confidence. I doubt myself, my horse, my future as a rider, all because of a ride that takes up less than 10% of my whole career. These past couple years have been very slow for both my horses and I, with fewer shows, and more lessons. Bouncing into 2026 with a full show schedule has had my confidence at an all-time low. Yet what many people don’t realize is how reflective a horse is of their own behavior. Walking into an arena and expecting every single time that something awful is going to happen has taken a toll on my horse and I’s bond. In 2025, I slowly started to accept that things would never change, and that I would never improve. I am ashamed to admit this, especially when I am aware of how hard my horses try for me, even on the days I don’t want to try. When I just want to click a button and just be *perfect*. So that is the standard I hold myself up to, perfection. Picture a perfect frame, perfect steps, a perfect ride. Yet when that doesn’t happen, everything falls apart. So my solution is to just always be *perfect*, to never fall short. I allow my fear of failing to drive a wedge in between my ego, and the real reason I first ever mounted that lesson horse.

In 2026, I want to be able to trot into the light of any arena and be ok if I don’t get that solo lap. I would like to shift my focus away from fear, endless ‘what if’s’ and self-installed expectations and instead rediscover the joy of being able to ride. Often, I forget that I am still a child, still making mistakes that won’t be fixed overnight. Having the ability to accept that improvement is a slow, uneven battle, will be my first step into becoming the rider I always aspired to be. I want to have the same feeling of



“we did it” whether we are leaving with grand roses, or nothing at all. The nerves I feel throughout my mind in the warm-up ring should no longer be out of anxiety, but instead out of excitement. Excited to ride, excited to show, excited to be sitting on this horse I had wished for with every single birthday candle. Allowing a ribbon to dictate the standard I hold myself up to should never be the solution. There is no simple solution to the problem of self-confidence because once it is down, it is hard to get back up. I will most likely never fully eliminate the pit in my stomach every time I have to make that walk of shame out of the arena, yet I can grow to be ok with it. That pit resides in every rider; it is just that some are better at hiding it than others. Some acknowledge the growth needed to reduce the frequency of that pit, and that is where I strive to be. To be able to look back on my ride and realize what needs to be changed; while also ensuring my horse knows every day I am proud of him. Changing my mindset is the first step to overall change in performance. Instead of focusing on my mistakes and comparing myself to riders who have relatively nothing in common with my horse and I, I will celebrate those small victories. Whether it's not panicking in a busy arena or showing up on a hard day. Making these small but beneficial changes to my overall mood when it comes to riding can also help my horse and I's trust and communication. Confidence is a partnership, and everything felt is shared between the saddle. I can no longer just expect that everything is black and white, that you're either winning all the time or you're losing all the time. I need to be able to find that gray area of improvement where I can learn from my ride, but still not let it take up my entire existence because of the color of ribbon.

Just saying this sounds nice, thinking I will automatically be okay with not reaching my impossible standard, since that's what I've trained my brain to think. It will be a slow process, re-teaching myself to accept the little and unpredictable steps required for change. Because at the end of the day, no ribbon doesn't always equate to a bad ride. There are so many things I must accept as a rider who wants to be the best of the best, even if I don't like it. Because yes, it is easier to just blame your horse and be mad until you win something outstanding, but living like that won't be easy. Living in a



fragile confidence that creates distance between the one thing that matters most; the horse. Although, who wants to live with that when you can instead love this sport and everything that comes with it? The memories printed in the unforgettable parts of your mind, the horses you'll hold onto with everything, and the friends who you get excited to see maybe twice a year.

It will be a long journey. It will be hard, and I will want to give up. I will start to imagine that perfect button, no doubt about it. I will compare myself, and I will be ashamed every time I see my pink ribbon hung on the curtains. Yet instead of shutting down and forgetting that little girl who wished every birthday for a horse of her own, I will remember the same little girl who would be shocked to see where I'm at now. I will look back at my ride and try to find that gray area, because there is no such thing as a 'perfect ride.'