

Teaching Your Dog Basic Cues

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Teaching your dog to respond to basic cues such as “sit” and “down” is easy, fun and gives fast results. When training, make sure you have yummy treats, broken into pea-sized pieces, and use a “marker” of some sort. A marker is a signal (either a clicker or a word such as “yes”) that marks a desired behavior the moment it occurs. It is your way to communicate with the dog to tell him that he did a good job and is getting a treat. Here’s how to train your dog to respond to several useful cues.

Teaching “sit”

Hold a treat in front of the dog’s nose, just out of the dog’s reach. Raise the treat toward the top of the dog’s head. When the dog’s head follows the treat up, his rear end will go

down. When the dog's rear hits the floor, use your marker, give the dog the treat and praise him. If the dog jumps up rather than sits, you are holding the treat too high. If the dog backs up, try teaching the cue with a wall behind the dog. When training any new skill, do not use a verbal cue (like "sit") in the beginning. The verbal cue will be introduced later, when the behavior is strong enough to be given a name.

[See step-by-step training plan for teaching your dog to sit](#)

Teaching "down"

Start with the dog sitting in front of you. Hold a treat near his face, then move the treat straight down toward the floor. Wait a moment, holding the treat close in to the dog's body, then move the treat slowly away from the dog. If the dog gets up instead of lying down, try again. Also, make sure that you are pulling the treat straight down; sometimes, by moving it forward instead of down, the dog will stand up to follow the treat. Be patient with this exercise; it may not work perfectly the first time. Once the dog lies down, use your marker and give him the treat.

Teaching "stand"

Start with the dog sitting in front of you. Put the treat in front of his nose and then slowly move the treat toward your body, taking one step back. The motion is similar to opening a drawer. As the dog follows the treat, he will stand up. As soon as he stands, use your marker and give him a treat.

Teaching "sit" from "down"

Start with the dog lying down. Hold a treat in front of the dog's nose, keeping the treat close to his nose, almost like a magnet drawing him upright. Slowly raise the treat up over his head. As he follows the treat, he should move into a sit. As soon as he is sitting, use your marker and give him a treat.

Graduating from a food lure

When using food as a lure to teach a dog new behaviors, you want to make sure that you don't get stuck in the rut of needing to have a treat in your hand before he responds to the cue. When teaching any of these behaviors, try using a treat for the first 5 to 10 times (depending on how quickly your dog is moving into the desired position), but after that, do the same motion with your hand without holding a treat. Most dogs will follow the hand as if there were a treat inside. As soon as the dog drops into a down position or sits (whatever behavior you're working on), use your marker and then give him a treat. That motion with the hand is now becoming the hand signal that cues the dog to do the behavior.

Adding a verbal cue

When you begin training a new behavior, don't say anything. If you say "sit" over and over again when trying to teach a dog to sit, the cue "sit" loses its meaning for the dog. First, get the dog reliably doing the behavior. Then, work on him doing the behavior consistently with a hand signal (usually the same motion of your hand that you were using when you had treats in your hand to lure him into that position). Finally, you can add a verbal cue.

To teach a new cue, the process is new cue, old cue: Say "sit" (the new cue) and then give the hand signal to sit (the old cue). Use your verbal marker (e.g., "yes") or the clicker when the dog sits. If you start giving the verbal "sit" cue after you give the hand signal, the dog will not clearly associate the new cue with the behavior. Repeat this many times so the dog learns that the word (e.g., "sit") is the same as the hand signal, which is a cue to perform the behavior (e.g., sitting). Eventually, you will not need to give the hand signal after saying the verbal cue. If done correctly, this is an easy way for the dog to learn that a particular verbal cue is associated with a particular behavior.