3 Questions to ask yourself when teaching dogs any behavior

Overview: This worksheet describes a plan for teaching your dog to lie down using a verbal cue and hand signal. The principles behind this technique can be used to teach virtually any behavior.

3 Questions

1. What is the goal?

What does the end result look like?

Be specific. At what point will you feel like your dog has learned the behavior to your satisfaction?

Remember: We are not teaching the dog how to lie down. She already lies down when sleeping or relaxing. We are teaching her *to perform a behavior that she already knows in response to* our *signals.*

2. What is the Starting Point/Baseline?

Reassess the Starting Point before every session. The Starting Point is the difficulty level at which the dog is able to perform a behavior correctly 80-90% of the time *in that specific environment.* Starting Points will probably vary from environment to environment. For example, you might find that a dog is 80-90% reliable at home at a certain level of difficulty, but only 20-30% reliable at the park at that same level of difficulty. *The dog tells us his/her starting point, not vice versa*. When teaching a new behavior, the starting point might be some behavior she has learned before. For example, "Sit" might be the starting point to "Down". The Starting Point can also be thought of as the Baseline, and the terms can be used interchangeably.

3. What are the steps that will take us from the Starting Point/Baseline to the Goal?

Each time your dog is able to correctly perform one of the steps between the Starting Point and Goal three times in a row during your current session, that step becomes the *new* Starting Point for that session. If the dog does not respond correctly to the new Starting Point, remind your dog by doing one or two repetitions at the *previous* Starting Point, before trying the new Starting Point again.

Tips

- Keep sessions short and fun.

- Break the behavior down like you might break down any other multi-step project

- Try to end each session after a good response on a new Step. Jackpot that response with lots of treats and excitement.

- Later, when you begin a new training session, do 1 or 2 repetitions at baseline (where you last received 3 consecutive correct responses), then immediately try the more difficult step.

- If you move on to a more difficult step and your dog is unable to respond correctly, after one or two attempts, move back to the previous step for one or two repetitions, then try the more difficult step again.

- Pay attention to what your dog is telling you. Do not only think terms of 'Correct/Incorrect'. Watch and see if your dog seems stressed, bored or confused. Look for excessive panting, yawning, or scratching. Remember that learning is inherently slightly stressful, but should not be overwhelmingly so.

- Use the right treats for the situation! Your dog should be eager to obtain the treats. If your dog will take the treat for free, but does not care

Below, I've given you a sample first step to goal step sequence. Remember, these are just suggested steps. You may need more or you may need less.

Sample Starting Point to Goal Sequence
Step 1 (*Starting Point***)**– Dog has no reliable 'down' cue but will sit reliably to some kind of cue. Start with dog in a 'Sit' position.
Step 2 (*Food lure 1*): Food in right hand. Right hand lure head all the way to ground. Reward with food from **right** hand.
Step 3 (*Food lure 2*): Food in both hands. Left hand behind back. Right hand lure head all the way to ground. Reward with food from **left** hand (should be behind back).
Step 4 *(Empty hand/Closed fist lure):* Food in left hand and behind back. Right hand closed fist lure head all the way to ground. Reward with food from left hand.
Step 5: (*Flat hand lure*): Food in left hand and behind back. Right hand open flat with palm facing down. Lure head all the way to the ground. Reward with food from left hand.
Step 6: (*Flat hand lure 6 inches*): Food in left hand and behind back. Right hand open flat with palm facing down. Lure head toward the ground stopping hand 6 inches above ground. Reward with food from left hand.
Step 7: (*Flat hand lure 12 inches*): Repeat Step 6 but stop hand 12 inches above ground.
Step 8: (*Flat hand lure 24 inches*): Repeat Step 6 but stop hand 24 inches above ground.
Step 9: (Flat hand signal standing straight): Food in left hand and behind back. Right hand open flat with palm facing down. Stop hand before your back begins to bend (your posture should remain standing straight). Reward with food from left hand.
Step 10: (Goal: Verbal/Hand signal): Say the word "Down" in your normal tone of voice, **then 1 second later** present right hand open flat hand with palm facing down. Move right hand no more than 3 inches downward. Reward with food from left hand.

enough to work for it, you need to increase the quality.

- Any changes or distractions added to the environment, or different environments altogether, are considered a change in criteria. Remember to start at the baseline signal, where you are 80-90% they will respond correctly, specific to each environment.

- Get in the habit of saying "OK!" or "Free!" before your dog gets up. This will be helpful when later teaching stay.

- Keep records. It's really helpful to track and refer back to your records before each training session.