

TRICKS 101 Preparation

According to the dictionary, a trick is “a feat accomplished by a trained animal; a clever or skillful act intended to amuse”. People love to see dogs perform tricks. The goal of **Tricks 101** is simple: teach your dog a trick that both of you enjoy performing! There are many reasons to teach your dog some tricks: mental exercise (to relieve boredom); physical exercise; animal care (“shake hands” can easily turn into “wipe your paws”); positive community relations (dogs look less scary when doing a trick); building a bond with your dog; stress relief; and **FUN!**

Tricks can be simple or complex. You can teach any dog a trick (or two or three!). When choosing a trick to teach, you will need to consider the dog’s natural abilities and instincts as well as your available time and perseverance. A dog born and bred to retrieve will find fetching items to be relatively easy to learn. Dogs without this genetic predisposition can be taught to retrieve, but you may really put extra effort into the trick!

Simple or complex, you can make your dog’s tricks into a real showstopper. You can change his paw shake into a high five or a wave. Does your dog like holding things in his mouth? Use him to deliver messages to family members or to deliver treats from a basket. A dog that pushes a ball across a room can push a doll cart. And the dog who enjoys using his nose can find “lost” objects as “Pet Detective”! You and your dog can develop a routine for parties; for school or other student demonstrations; for community events; and for visits to retirement homes or hospitals.

A trick is a small behavior or chain of behaviors that you make into a “*Star*” performance by your imagination. Once you have taught your dog the individual behaviors, start putting them together into a behavior chain. Add a distinctive cue (verbal and hand signal), props, music, a dialogue or story, and a costume. Voila! Your dog is a “*Star*”.

Tricks are easily taught using reinforcers like food and toys. You need to give your dog something that encourages him to work at learning. Some tricks have built-in reinforcers for the dog: hunting dogs love to use their noses; retrievers love to fetch things; high-energy dogs love to run, jump, and climb.

Because of its ease in use and its high value to dogs, we will use food in class to train your dog. Dogs love to eat, making food a fast and simple way of telling your dog “job well done”. When using food, your payoff to the dog can be small. For large or small dogs, keep your treats to the size of your fingernail or about the size of a pea. Food treats should be something that is easily swallowed so that the dog can “gulp and go”.

You can use part of your dog’s breakfast or supper along with other treats. Hungry dogs are eager to learn. Be creative: dogs enjoy many different food items, such as low fat string cheese, carrots, tomatoes, apples, grapes, tortellinis, sliced hot dogs. Be aware: watch the total daily intake!

When teaching something new, you’ll deliver a single portion for each attempt at performing the behavior. Sometimes, the dog’s behavior is so outstanding that you deliver a jackpot: several treats that will cement the dog’s behavior in his mind. You want to tell the dog that he’s on the right track.

Once a behavior is learned, you’ll move to a more variable schedule. Keep your dog guessing; be unpredictable! Giving your dog occasional reinforcement actually encourages the dog to work harder since he doesn’t know when the next reinforcement is coming. Start by asking the dog to perform the behavior 2 or 3 times before a reward is delivered. Remember that the dog must know the behavior before you can reduce your continuous reinforcement to two-fers or threes-fers (performing 2 or 3 behaviors before getting 1 reinforcer). If you go too fast, you’ll confuse the dog.

Dogs do what works. Dogs continue to perform behaviors that get them what they want. If they behave in a certain way and good things happen, they are likely to try that behavior again. If nothing good happens (no reward), they are less likely to keep on doing that behavior.

As the human partner on this team, you are in charge of the good things. Don't promise a reward and then not deliver; your dog will learn to be suspicious of your promises. You need to deliver the reward at the time the behavior occurs -- not before the behavior occurs and not after the behavior has ended.

Remember this fact: Learning is stressful. While dogs are learning new behaviors, you need to let them know when they are winners. Giving reinforcers for behaviors that approximate or meet the lesson's criteria can reduce the dog's uncertainty. Giving reinforcers reduces the confusion that dogs experience as they try to figure out which behaviors will get them the reinforcer. Along the way, they discard behaviors for which there is no reinforcement.

And now for the sequence that we'll use for training tricks!

GET THE BEHAVIOR!

To get a behavior from your dog, you may wait for it (spontaneous behavior), you may lure it, you may help the dog assume the position or perform it, or you may elicit it by using a target. Let's take a look at each of these methods.

Waiting for a behavior can take time but it may be the best way to get certain behaviors. "Take a bow" can begin when the dog awakens from a nap and does a really great stretch. Reward it often; you'll see it more often.

Luring a behavior involves putting a reinforcer in your hand. Luring a dog to spin or twirl is very easy with a piece of food in your hand. His nose will follow you anywhere! The down side: you don't want to lure with food in your hand more than a few times in a row, or the dog will become dependent on the food instead of your cue. My rule is three times only! Then eliminate the lure and turn the movement into a hand signal.

A **target** can be any object; you teach your dog to go toward the target. You can use a target stick; your hand; or a moveable object such as sticky notes, magnets, plastic lids, or a hat. You train the dog to touch the selected target by showing the dog the target and rewarding him for any movement towards it. As the dog gets the idea, raise your criteria until he is touching or bumping the target with his nose. Targets are handy for moving your dog into any number of positions, and they make great props.

Helping your dog into the position can be useful if your dog is in a fog about what you want him to do. Lightly blowing in a dog's face may cause him to sneeze. Some dogs will shake if you brush their fur from tail to head along their spine. I like to limit the use of helping so that the dog does not wait for you to do all of the work. Dogs seem to remember the behavior better if they have been involved in solving the puzzle.

CHANGE THE PICTURE!

Now that your dog is giving you the desired behavior, change the picture. If he's shaking hands with you sitting on the floor right in front of him, try getting him to shake hands while you stand up or sit on the couch or stand by his side or try it with someone else or (you fill in the blank). Keep up the level of your reinforcers during this stage of the learning game.

ADD THE CUE!

When you can reliably predict that the behavior will occur, add your cue. Pick a distinctive physical and verbal cue. Use your cue just before the behavior is likely to occur. Make your cue easy to discriminate from other cues that you will be using.

Once you have added the cue, reinforce your dog when he performs the trick after hearing the command. You may find your dog offering his new behavior at odd moments when you have not given the cue. Do not reinforce him for performing the behavior without the command.

MAKE IT HARDER!

You are well on your way to developing your “Star” trick. Now, make your training sessions harder by adding one of the four Ds: duration, distance, distribution of reinforcers, and diversity. Use just one of the four “Ds” at a time.

Let’s say your dog has a very nice “sit pretty”. You want him to hold it for a longer period of time (duration). Next, you can ask him to “sit pretty” while you are across the room (distance). Your dog needs to learn to “sit pretty” even though he gets a reinforcer only part of the time (distribution of reinforcers). Finally, your dog will learn to “sit pretty” even though there are distractions in the area. Combining the four Ds will produce a very reliable behavior.

TAKE IT ON THE ROAD!

To make it all work, your dog needs to perform anywhere you ask him to do his trick. To accomplish this, you need to train the behavior in at least six different locations. In a different location, you may find that your dog doesn’t perform as well. Make it easier for him by lowering your criteria and providing more reinforcers. You may think that you are starting all over, but usually it takes less time to teach the behavior in each new location.

PRECAUTIONS

1. **Safety First!** As team leader, you are responsible for making sure that your working area is clear of debris or other items that could injure your dog. You need to check out your props and costumes to be certain that they are safe and non-toxic, and that they won’t get in the way of your dog’s performance.
2. **Jumping for Dogs.** Dogs that are under one year of age are still growing. During training, use jump heights that are no higher than your dog’s elbow. Dogs should never jump over their shoulder height even after attaining their full growth and after receiving proper training.

Dogs are like airplanes: both need runways. Make sure that you leave room for at least 5 doggy strides leading up to the jump and 4 more for landing. Check the take-off and landing zones for safety.

3. **General Health.** You can use treats for reinforcers as long as the dog eats his normal food rations and is not gaining weight. To prevent weight gain, treats should make up not more than 10% of the dog’s daily intake. Use the dog’s normal food for reinforcers and include low calorie treats such as carrots, low-fat cheese, or flavored rice cakes. Use other reinforcers like catching a Frisbee or chasing a tennis ball or getting a belly rub -- if your dog has told you that he likes these things!

If you are increasing your dog’s general activity level from couch potato to mighty dog, build up to it. Dogs love to please us; they will keep on trying in spite of fatigue and pain. Dogs don’t let you know until they are really fatigued. Watch for signs of muscle strains and bruises (change in gait, limping, flinching). In the summer, watch your dog for signs of heat exhaustion (pale gums, heavy panting).

4. **Take It Nicely!** Dogs that take treats roughly need to be taught a better way. See me for details on solving this problem!