

Teaching Your Dog to “Sit”

Definition:

“Sit where you are.”

Practical uses:

Have your dog sit before you set down his food dish, put on his leash, let him out the door, pet him, etc. This concept is called “say please” and can help to prevent many common problems such as door-darting, jumping up on people, and pestering for attention. It also helps him learn that doing what you ask is always the best choice and the fastest way of getting what he wants. When in doubt, SIT! This stops whatever inappropriate behavior he may be engaged in.

How to teach:

Start in a low-distraction area that is familiar to your dog, and have your dog on leash. You can stand on the end of your leash or tether him to something heavy if you want to have your hands free. Wait for the dog to sit, and when he does, click and treat (C/T). In this case, it is best to throw the treat on the floor so that the dog has to stand up to get the treat (make sure he sees it). Wait again for the dog to sit, and C/T when he does.

Adding the cue:

When the dog is offering the behavior (sitting and looking to you in anticipation of the C/T), begin saying the cue word “sit” as *she sits*, so the dog associates the behavior with the word. Do this about 20 times over two different training sessions.

In your next training session, start by saying the cue word as the dog sits. After a few repetitions, say the cue word before she sits. Now you have a cue!

Moving On:

- Gradually increase the length of time your dog sits before you click. Work up to about one minute of sitting. Increase the time gradually, just a couple seconds at a time, over multiple sessions. If the dog gets up before you C/T, ask for the “sit” again, but make it shorter so the dog succeeds. Make sure the dog has at least five successes before you try a longer duration again. This is the beginning of the “stay.”
- Variable Schedule of Reinforcement – you have been using a “continuous schedule of reinforcement” which means the dog gets a treat every time he performs the behavior. Now you’re ready to move to a variable schedule of reinforcement, meaning he only gets a treat sometimes. Only C/T every third, sixth, second, fourth, or tenth time he performs the behavior.
- Once your dog is performing the behavior reliably on cue (i.e., he will do the behavior at least 90% of the time when you give the verbal cue) on a variable schedule of reinforcement, you don’t really need the clicker any more for this behavior. You should still reward your dog often and variably with praise and food treats, but you don’t need the clicker any more -- until you’re ready to teach a new behavior!

Tips:

- If he sits only part way down the first time, you may “shape” his behavior by rewarding him for a partial sit the first few times, then not rewarding him until he moves successively closer to a full sit.
- Some breeds, such as greyhounds, don’t sit readily. If your dog doesn’t like the sit position, you may want to substitute another stationary position, such as down.