

Putting Behaviors on Cue

How to teach dogs verbal cues

Dogs that perform a behavior on a verbal command or cue have learned two things: (1) the behavior itself (like sitting), and (2) *the word* for the behavior. When you need to repeat the cue, don't blame it on the dog being stubborn. More often than not, it is just because the dog has not yet clearly learned the verbal cue! A common mistake is to say the cue *at the same time* as the hand signal (or any other prompt) during training. This is a problem because dogs are typically focusing on our body language—not on listening to and learning human words. To clearly teach a verbal command or cue, follow the three steps below:



1. Train your dog to do a behavior, or start with a behavior your dog knows, **but do not say the verbal cue**. Practice until your dog reliably performs the behavior after every prompt. Example: Your dog should sit immediately on your hand signal. Praise and reward your dog for every good performance.

2. Say the cue while your dog is paying attention. **Make no motions**. Then prompt your dog to perform the behavior. Praise and reward for a good effort. **Always say the cue before you prompt, not at the same time**. Your dog must focus on listening and learning the verbal cue, not on any other signal.

3. Soon, you'll notice your dog starting the behavior after you say the cue. **From then on, say the cue and give your dog 1-3 seconds to do the behavior on their own without prompting**. If your dog does, praise and reward. If not, repeat step 2 until your dog associates the cue with the behavior.

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