

Teaching Your Dog Down

Definition

“Lie Down.” (We recommend using the cue word “off” rather than “down” for “get off of me” or for “get off the bed.”)

Practical Uses

Down is the best, most comfortable position for your dog to stay in for any length of time. Down (and especially down-stay) is a wonderful calming maneuver and can also help teach your dog to be more independent.

How to Teach

Different dogs will do better with different methods of teaching this behavior. Here are three ways of teaching the behavior. You may want to experiment to find the best method for you and your dog.

- **Capturing:** In this method, you simply wait for the dog to lie down – something he does naturally multiple times a day. You must be ready with your food reward at all times in order to “capture” this behavior and mark it. You may be able to speed up this process by trying one of the following techniques:
 - Start in a small room with no toys or distractions (like a bathroom) with your dog. Have his bed or something he likes to lie on nearby. Don’t interact with him and just wait until he lies down, then say “yes” in a happy tone and give him a treat. If using a clicker, click and then treat. Toss the treat so that he must get up to get it, then ignore him again until he lies down and reward.
 - If your dog enjoys chewing on an object, use his favorite chewy and give it to him. Most dogs will lie down to chew, so when he lies down, click and throw the treat, so he gets up to get the treat.
- **Shaping:** Ask your dog for a few behaviors he knows how to do. If you are using a verbal cue, say “yes” and treat. If you are using a clicker, click and treat. Then wait for him to offer a new behavior – any behavior (if you’re lucky, it might be a down!). Reward any new behavior he offers about three times. Then stop rewarding that behavior and wait for him to again offer a new behavior, but this time, reward him only for a down. He may offer several behaviors before he gets to down, but since down is a fairly natural position, you shouldn’t have to wait long. Don’t let him get too frustrated though. If he doesn’t offer a down in a minute or so, reward a behavior he is offering a few times and then end the game and try again later.
- **Luring:** With the dog sitting, hold the treat right in front of his nose. Bring the treat straight down between the dog’s legs to the floor. The dog’s head should follow the treat down to the floor. Pull the treat forward along the floor, and the rest of his body should follow naturally. If pulling the treat forward makes him stand up to reach the treat, try pulling it back toward his chest. As soon as his elbows touch the floor, reward. When using the lure method, make sure you fade out the lure quickly; otherwise your dog will only learn to follow your hand.

Adding the Cue

When the dog is offering the behavior (lying down and looking to you in anticipation of the reward), begin saying the cue word, “down” as he lies down, so the dog associates the behavior with the word. Do this about 20 times over two different training sessions.

In your next training session, say the cue word before the dog lies down. If he lies down then he understands the cue. If your dog does not lie down, go back to saying the cue word as he lies down for a few more repetitions.

Moving On

- Gradually increase the length of time your dog is in the down position before you say “yes” or click. Work up to about one minute before rewarding. Increase the time gradually, just a couple seconds at a time, over multiple sessions. If your dog gets up before you reward, ask for the “down” 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 “down stay.”
- Once your dog is responding to the cue, start giving the cue sometimes when the dog is standing and sometimes when the dog is sitting.
- 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 reward 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 or a food treat, but you don’t need the clicker any more for this behavior.

Tips

- If he lies down only part way the first time, you may shape this behavior by rewarding him for a partial down the first few times, then not rewarding him until he moves successively closer to a full down.
- When you reward, throw the treat so the dog must get up to eat it. That way he can offer the down again.
- Once you have moved to a variable schedule of reinforcement you may start to use it to shape a “better” behavior. For example, if you want the dog to respond more quickly to your cue, then reward only the quicker and cleaner responses.