

Desert Wind
Labradors
presents

Five Essential Commands for Your Dog

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Five Essential Commands for Your Dog

Come

One of the most important commands you can teach your dog is Come. A dog who comes reliably is safer than one who doesn't, and the owner of a dog that comes reliably is less frustrated. Here's my way of training a dog to come reliably.

Start with your puppy or dog on leash, or in a very small room or fenced area where he can't go far. Have a toy or a small treat. Say "Fido, Come!" in a happy, playful voice. Say it only once! Then do anything necessary to encourage your dog to come to you—act silly, walk or run the other way, crouch down, anything to make him curious enough to come to you. Then reward him—use your praise word and play with him, give him a treat, or give him a toy. Then let him go back to what he was doing. Repeat the process two or three times; then quit for this session. Do this several times a day if possible.

Chew on This



Wherever you are should be the safest, most fun place your dog knows. If you call your dog to you, always reward him for coming with at least your praise word and sometimes with petting, a treat, a toy, or play time. Never call your dog to you to lock him up or do something he doesn't like—go get him instead.

If your dog doesn't come despite your best efforts, then gently pull him in your direction. If you're training in a small space with no leash, then start over with the leash on. If he starts to come on his own, don't pull anymore, but encourage him with happy talk, and reward him when he gets to you. Keep the leash on for every Come command until you no longer have to get him started with a pull on the leash.

If you're not the only human in the family, then make a game of teaching Come with other family members. You can call your dog back and forth or from one person to another in a circle. Just make sure that only one person calls at a time, and make sure each person rewards the dog for coming.

Remember the basic training rules as they apply to Come:

- *Always* use the same word—don't use "Come," "Come here," "Here," "Get over here," "Get your butt over here ..."
- *Never* call more than once—you'll be teaching your dog to ignore you. If he doesn't come the first time, go get him, put the leash on, then call him, and start him or pull him in with the leash. Then *praise and reward him for coming!*
- *Always* reward your dog for coming—a reward may be a treat one time, a cuddle the next, and your praise word every time.
- *Never* call your dog if you can't enforce the command. If you can't trust him to come when you call, then put him on a leash or a long line so that you can get him back from the cold, wet yard. And *never, ever* let your dog off leash in an unfenced area if he doesn't come reliably. Coming reliably means coming immediately on the first command every single time he's called, even when he'd rather investigate another dog, a squirrel, or something else of interest.

Sit

"Sit" is a very useful command. It can be used to control a rambunctious dog, and to give him something positive to do in place of leaping on you or otherwise being a pest. Sit gives you control over your dog on walks, at the vet, and at home.

To teach your puppy or dog to sit on command, begin with him on leash or confined in a small space. Hold a small treat in front of his nose, but don't let him take it. When he shows interest in the treat, *slowly* raise the treat and move it back over his head toward his tail. As his head comes up to follow the treat, his butt has to go down. When he starts to fold his hind legs into the sit, tell him Sit. Keep moving the treat slowly backward. The instant he sits completely, give him the treat and use your praise word. Then release him with your release word. Do not release him before you give the treat—you'll be rewarding him for no longer sitting! If he gets up before you release him, have him sit again before rewarding him. Repeat three or four times. Then quit for a while. If you do several sessions a day, your dog should sit on command in no time. When he gets pretty good at sitting on command, start to lengthen the time he has to stay sitting before he gets the treat. Start with a few seconds, gradually increasing to half a minute, and then a minute. He should remain sitting until you release him.

Down

There are many ways to teach a dog to Down, or Lie Down. I prefer to teach the command from a standing rather than sitting position for three reasons. First, Down can be a life-saving command—even more than Come. Suppose your dog gets away from you and is on the other side of a busy street. A car is coming. You don't want to call your dog, because he might be hit. If he responds to Down no matter where he is, whether he's moving or standing still, you can make him safe even in such a frightening situation.

The other two reasons I teach Down from a standing position aren't so dramatic. One is that teaching it from a sitting position requires two commands—Sit and then Down. Not a big deal, but I'd rather just give one command most of the time. The other reason is that if you decide to train your dog for obedience competition beyond the Novice level, you'll have to teach him a “moving down” in which he lies down from a trot. If he sits first and then lies down, he'll creep forward a little. If he just drops into a down position, he won't creep forward. If you're thinking of competing eventually, you'll find it's easier to teach Down without the Sit right from the start. So here's how I teach Down.

Chew on This



If you teach your dog nothing else, teach him to lie down and stay on command. In some situations, Down is safer and more effective than Come.

Start with your dog standing. If he's a puppy, or a small dog, you may want to kneel in the beginning. Hold a treat in your hand, let your dog know it's there, and slowly move your hand under your dog's head, toward and then between his front legs, lowering it as you go. As his head follows the treat, he should fold himself downward. If necessary, gently guide his rear down; then praise him and give him the treat as soon as he's completely down. If he steps backwards instead of lying down, move your hand with the treat a little faster—that will get his head and neck down faster and he should go down.

If he continues to leave his butt up in the air once his shoulders are down, and he doesn't drop it with a light touch from your hand, don't try to force him down. You want him to learn to put his body in the right position, and he'll learn faster if he has to do it himself. Besides, a dog's natural response to force is to resist—if you push down on his butt, he'll push up against you. It's amazing how much resistance even a small dog can muster! Instead of forcing him down, keep a treat close to the ground with one hand, and with your other arm cradle your dog's hind legs from behind. Gently move your arm forward around the hind legs until he folds down. Once he's all the way down, praise and give him the treat. Then release him. Slowly increase the amount of time he has to stay down before getting the treat.

Stay

“Stay” is a useful command. It tells your dog not to move from whatever position he's in, whether he's standing on the vet's examining table, sitting on the back seat of the car, or lying on his bed in the family room.

I start teaching Stay in the down position. It's the easiest position for a dog to hold, so if he learns to stay in the down, stays in other positions will be easier. Once your dog lies down on command, start to teach him this extension of the down. Have your leash on the dog. When he is completely down, praise and reward him; then tell him Stay. If he starts to get up, put him back in the down position and praise him, but don't give him a treat. Tell him Stay again. If he stays down a few seconds, praise, reward, and release. Start with very short stays—less than a minute—and stay close to your dog. Very slowly increase the time until he will stay about five minutes with you standing close to him. When he's solid for five minutes, put him in the down stay, and take a step away from him. Shorten the time to 30 seconds, and slowly build the time up again to 5 minutes. Repeat this process, always reducing the amount of time and building it back up each time you increase the distance between you and your dog. If you hit a point at which he starts popping up before the time is up, shorten the distance for a few days until he's solid again at that distance and time. Then increase the distance by one or two steps, and shorten the time.

Always remember to release your dog from the stay when you're finished. Don't let him decide for himself that he's done. If he does that after 10 minutes, why not after 1?

When your dog seems to understand the idea of the stay when he's lying down, repeat the same process with him in

a sit. Remain very close and keep the time very short to begin with. Slowly increase the time, then increase the distance and shorten the time, and then slowly lengthen the time again.

You can have your dog practice down stays and sit stays while you're doing other things. Just don't forget that you told him to do something and let him wander off two minutes later! If you want him to be reliable about following commands, you need to be reliable and consistent about giving them, enforcing them, and releasing him from them.

Leave It!

“Leave It” is a useful command in many circumstances. It enables you to tell your dog not to touch that pretty Poodle at obedience class, that tuna sandwich you set on the coffee table while you get the remote control, and that disgusting pile of what's-it just off the trail at the park.

To teach Leave It successfully, you need to make sure that following your command is more rewarding than getting “it” would be. So when you start to teach the command, you need to reward the dog for leaving the object of his desire, and the reward has to be worthwhile in his eyes (or mouth!). You also have to have enough control of the situation to prevent your dog from getting “it,” because if he does, then he has been rewarded for ignoring you.

Begin with a setup. Put something that you know your dog will find interesting on the floor or a low table. It could be a ball (not one of his regular toys—something he's never seen before), a bit of food, a stuffed toy, or anything else he'll probably try to investigate or pick up. Have some especially yummy treats in your pocket or training pouch. Put your dog on leash. Walk your dog near “it,” making sure the leash is short enough to let you keep him from getting it. As soon as he shows interest in it, say “Leave it!” and walk quickly away—he'll have to follow you because of the leash. (You can also simply give a quick tug on the leash and reward him, but at first I like to keep moving so the dog refocuses quickly.) As soon as your dog looks at you instead of “it,” praise him and give him a treat. Make a big fuss about what a good dog he is. Repeat the process three or four times, and then quit. A couple sessions a day will soon have your dog responding to Leave It, but beware of a couple of pitfalls.

If your dog manages to get “it” before you get him away, you need to get it back if possible. If “it” is a toy, take it away from him, put it back where it was, and repeat the training routine—making sure he doesn't get it again! If “it” is food, you need to get it away from him if possible. *Caution—do not* try to take food away if your dog growls or has a tendency to guard food—in fact, if that's the case, don't use food for teaching Leave It. You could get bitten. Get some help to get the guarding behavior under control. *Do not let a child attempt to take food or anything your dog guards away from him!*

Eventually, you won't need treats to reinforce your dog for leaving things, but do always praise him and maybe pet him for obeying this command. You know how hard temptation is to resist!