



# TRICKS 101

Teaching your dog tricks is one of the best ways to *increase the bond* you share with your dog, as well as provide the dog an opportunity to use their brains and their bodies. Tricks can provide a starting point for activities such as trick dog titles or even competitions. More than anything, it provides enjoyment for the owner, the dog, and anyone who watches.

Trick training requires that you become good at communicating with your dog. Not only does your dog have to understand you clearly, but you must also clearly understand your dog's behavior. To be successful, you have to be consistent or your dog will become confused and frustrated. You must be aware of your dog's signals to you during training, to make sure you don't push too hard or too fast. Pushing your dog too hard can create a negative experience for your dog.

Some tricks are more difficult for some dogs than others, but all tricks cause your dog to think about the desired behavior to get rewarded. Some tricks are natural things for a dog to do, such as jumping, while others cause them to work against their nature, such as walking backwards. *A bored dog will find ways to entertain themselves*, and that can result in undesired behavior. Giving your dog some suitable activities will result in a happier dog and a happy owner. Remember, though, that each dog is different! An older dog will not have the same performance abilities as a younger one. For example, a pug would also be in a different league of ability than a border collie.

Titles can be earned for dogs and owners through organizations such as the American Kennel Club. Trick dog titles are an excellent way to keep you and your dog motivated to continue training. If you're interested, Awesome Dog Academy can perform the AKC Trick Dog Tests for you.

The tricks we'll be teaching you will provide you with a foundation of skills you can use to perform more advanced tricks. They are a combination of simple skills that your dog can pick up quickly and more difficult skills that will require a progression of training to reach a harder goal.

## **TO CLICK OR NOT TO CLICK**

In obedience class, we learn that the clicker helps your dog connect the dots between behavior and reward. *A clicker is a good tool because it is fast to use and always sounds the same.* However, there can be times when a trick could require both hands, and a clicker is not practical. An example trick is "under" which is one that requires the dog to crawl under you while you are on your hands and knees. When the dog performs the behavior, there is no free hand for the clicker.

You can replace the clicker with a voice signal, such as "yes!" The key to using "yes" is that *it has to sound the same, as much as possible, each time.* "Yes" is only used to mark a behavior that has earned a reward. It should be said clearly, loudly, and with excitement each time. If you are a football fan, think about how you

would use “yes” if your team scored a touchdown to win a rivalry game. Remember this too if you are watching football because if you say it during a game, you will owe your dog a treat!

## **SOME FINAL WORDS ON TRICK TRAINING**

- Repetition build behaviors. It takes 120 repetitions for a behavior to move into your dog’s long term memory.
- Using a clicker or saying “yes” to mark the behavior you want from the dog at the instant the dog does it is also important. *You have 3 seconds to mark the behavior with a click.*
- Be patient. The more difficult a trick may be, the more time it will take. Start by thinking about the small steps. In most cases, dogs will not perform a complete trick the first time you try, but that does not mean they failed. Reward them for the smallest effort on their part that helps you reach your goal.
- Keep sessions brief, no more than 5-10 minutes at a time. Stop while you are ahead, before the dog begins to lose interest or gets frustrated. Always end a session by rewarding them for doing something right, especially if it is the trick (or part of the trick) you want them to do. If they are just not getting it, tell them something easy like “watch me” or “sit,” then click and reward before ending the session.
- Sometimes, going backward in training is as important as going forward. If the dog is struggling with a behavior, go back in training to where they were doing it right and do more repetitions before trying the hard part again.
- Plan. Practice. Plan. Know exactly what you want the dog to do and the steps that are needed to get there. If you are not sure what to do next, stop training before confusion starts. It is a good idea to spend a few minutes after each session and think about what went right and wrong so you can correct it in future sessions.
- Be careful not to teach your dog a trick that could get them in trouble when they decide to do it without you. For example, if you teach a dog to open a drawer, you may come home one day and the contents of the drawer could be all over the house or worse; they might get into something harmful.
- Dogs do not generalize well. If they perform a trick for you in the bedroom, they may not perform it in the kitchen. If they do it only for you, they may not do it in front of others. If they do it at home, they may not do it at Awesome Dog Academy or vice versa. So, before you take your trick show on the road, make sure you’ve trained it in a lot of environments.
- You are never finished. If you teach a dog a trick and practice it until the dog gets it right consistently, the dog likely will not retain the trick if you do not continue to practice. You do not have to practice the trick every day, but do it in at least one session a week. The more repetitions, the sharper it will be!

# **CATCHING A BEHAVIOR**

If you are having trouble deciding what tricks to teach your dog, “catching” them doing a behavior is an excellent place to start. Catching means that you will mark (with a clicker or by saying “yes”) and reward them for doing something they already do on their own. In obedience class, we teach that you should mark and reward them for just being good, such as when they are sitting quietly and not doing something like barking or tearing up the sofa. Sitting quietly is the behavior that is being reinforced. The same principle applies to catching tricks.

Most dogs have some behaviors already built into their personalities that you can make full use of as a trick and then get them to do it on command. Some examples would be puppy eyes, sitting pretty (looks like begging), and speaking (be careful with this one). Think of some of the cute or silly things your dogs do on their own, and you can turn them into tricks.

## **There is no command yet, but we will get there!**

The best way to explain this is to give you an example. Here is an explanation of how you might “catch” and teach your dog to do “puppy eyes” on command.

Many dogs have a look they do. Your dog gives you that distinct loving look where its nose is downward, and it rolls its eyes up at you so you can see the whites of their eyes. When you see this, while they are doing it, say “Yes! Puppy eyes!” and give them a reward. The dog will be like, “Wait, what did I do?”

While you’re in the moment, try to get them to do it again by saying “puppy eyes” and waiting while they think about it a second. If you’re lucky, they may do it again and you’ll say “Yes! Puppy eyes!” and reward them again. Do it over and over as many times as they will do it. They will begin to associate “puppy eyes” with that behavior.

More realistically, you may have to catch them doing this naturally several times before they connect the dots, so keep treats handy. Always try to get them to repeat after you catch it.

Consider what other things may have encouraged them to do the behavior, such as your body language or your behavior. Sitting down at the table with a plate of food almost always gets a puppy eyes look from a dog, as they beg with their eyes.

If you can help the dog to repeat the behavior, mark it with a “yes,” and say the command word you’ll want to use, in this case “puppy eyes.”

# TAKE A BOW

The correct position for bow is when your dog has their front paws and elbows on the floor and their butt in the air. It is a natural position dogs offer, called a “play bow,” when engaging in play with other dogs. As your dog is learning to do this for you, they may only offer this position for a split second so be ready with the clicker to *mark the position the instant* it happens.



To begin, the dog should be standing facing you.

Hold treat loosely in your hand where your dog can smell it but can't get to it. Hold your hand near your dog's nose so that it is touching the nose lightly.

Say the word “bow” now and quickly push the treat hand toward the floor underneath the dog toward his or her rear feet. The dog will naturally lower its upper body to follow the treat.



Reward the dog as soon as they are in the correct position.

## **PROBLEMS?**

If your dog sits or walks backward instead of bowing as you push the treat forward, you are holding the treat too high. Aim lower as you push toward the space on the floor between the dog's rear paws.

If the dog lies down with its whole body on the floor, your angle is likely too downward. Push more quickly and more toward the rear paws instead of the front.

# **TOUCH HAND WITH NOSE** **(TARGET)**

We are looking to give your dog the basic skill of touch or targeting that will be the root of more advanced skills. We want the dog to seek to touch your hand with their nose because it will get them a reward. When they understand this, this will allow you to guide your dog in the movements you choose such as weaving, turning lights on and off, or advanced heeling. It also helps dogs who may be hand shy.



To begin, your dog should be facing you standing or sitting.

Hold your hand near to the dog's side. Your hand should be open with palm toward dog at a distance that is close to the dog's head but far enough away that the dog will have to move slightly to touch it with their nose. There is no treat in this hand. You will say the command "touch" as you present the hand to the dog. The dog is naturally curious and will explore your open hand with its nose.

When your dog touches your hand, say "yes" or use your clicker.

As your dog gets the hang of this, try moving your hand to different positions and switch hands.



## **PROBLEMS?**

If your dog doesn't move to explore the hand, there may be too many distractions nearby or your hand is not in the dog's field of vision. Try bringing your hand closer or practicing at first in a place with fewer distractions.

# GO UNDER

To perform this correctly, the dog must walk under you while you are down on the floor on hands and knees. An alternate to this is for you to sit in a chair with feet sitting on a different chair or stool, forming a space for the dog to walk under your legs. This skill is the start for tunneling, an agility skill, and it also builds trust. Dogs can be very shy about going under something and potentially being trapped.



To begin, you should get on your hands and knees with the dog sitting, standing or lying down to the front of you. *If the dog is excited about this, you might have to endure some rapid kisses, so you should get on to the next step quickly!*

With a treat in your hand, reach under your stomach bringing your treat hand behind your other arm (which is supporting you).

When the dog moves to the treat, which is on the side of you, say, “go under” and use the treat to lure your dog to go underneath you. You may have to give the treat to the dog progressively and build until the dog goes all the way under and around your left arm.

At this point, your goal is for the dog to follow your lure around your supporting arm, under your stomach and back to the front of you before they get the treat.

**When the dog is comfortable with this, our goal is to have them go under your chest and behind both arms before returning to the front. Like on the picture on the right** →

Begin with the same initial movements, but now, as your dog follows your treat lure and starts to go under you, toss the treat out to your side so the dog will follow it. Then, quickly put your right hand down beside your supporting hand. The dog will follow the treat and come out from under your opposite side.



If you are doing this with your legs outstretched to another chair or stool, you will reach under your legs with a treat lure, say “go under” and progressively lead your dog underneath your legs until they are comfortable going all the way under and through your leg tunnel.



This is sometimes easier for small dogs. Larger dogs will have to lower their bodies to go under.

## **PROBLEMS?**

If the dog consistently tries to come out from underneath you by going between your arms, try putting your treat hand down quickly and closer to your supporting hand.

If the dog has done well with going under and around your arm but hesitates when you put the treat hand down or pursues the tossed treat by going around you instead of under you (or jumps over your back), consider that you may be tossing the treat too far away.

# **WHICH ONE?** **(HANDS)**

This is a game you can play with your dog to encourage the use of their sense of smell. Our goal is to have the dog sniff both hands presented to them and using a paw, indicate which hand holds a treat.



We will begin slowly with a small step. Place a treat in one hand out of the dog's view, then show both hands to the dog closed loosely so that they may smell the treat inside. With the dog in front of you, present both hands at the dogs chest level, close enough for them to smell. Use the verbal cue, "Which one?"

At first, reward your dog when they point with their nose which hand holds the treat. Open your hand and give it to them. A solid indication is when the dog's focus is solely on the hand with the treat and noses the hand or licks it.



When the dog is good at detecting the treat with their nose, you will now require them to touch the hand with their paw to point out the treat. Be patient and expect slobber on this step. A dog's natural instinct is to paw at something they cannot get with their mouth.

When they are working on the correct hand, you may encourage them to use their paw by removing the other hand and saying "shake" if they already know this.

*Avoid using the word "no" if they select the wrong one. Say "keep looking" instead.*

## **PROBLEMS?**

Sometimes dogs will get overly excited when the hands are presented. You can encourage patience by first holding your hands above their head where they can still smell but cannot quite reach to scratch. Once they know where the treat is, you can lower your hands to their chest level and then say "Which one?"

# CIRCLE (POST)

As with many of our other tricks, understanding “circle” is a foundation for other tricks. In advanced applications, this can be used for heeling exercises, agility, or performance-related routines. Our goal is to have the dog circle your a post (or other object) with a command and a hand cue. This is a high level trick!



Begin with the dog in front of you and the post or object to the dog's left about one step away.

Use a lure/treat, held near the dog's nose, and say “circle left” (this is to the dog's left) as you circle the post slowly with the treat in your hand so that the dog follows.

Circle your hand around the post one time and when the dog returns to the starting position, use the clicker or say “yes” and give them the treat.

Repeat this until the dog starts to follow each time then you can begin to increase the speed of your luring action.

As success continues, begin to hold the treat higher away from the dog's nose but do the same action.

Then, when consistent, do the hand action without the treat in your hand. Give the dog the treat when they return to the starting point, but you are no longer luring them around with a treat.

If they are successful, you will gradually reduce the size of the circle motion with your hand until it becomes just a circle of the hand and wrist.



When they are reliably responding to “circle left” and a circle of the hand and wrist to complete the action, start with the post to the dog's right and start training “circle right.”

A key moment in this skill is when the dog switches from following your hand around the post to understanding you want them to go around the post on their own. In most cases, this is where the dog has to take their eyes off of you or your hand to circle the post by themselves. Go slowly with this and offer your hand back when they look lost. If they get halfway, show them the treat in your other hand reaching out past the post so they will have to go around it to get back to the treat.

## **PROBLEMS?**

There are a lot of small steps in “circle.” It is important that the dog is strong in each step before moving to the next step. If at anytime your dog is not improving, getting frustrated, and failing without signs of progress, go back to the skill where they were last successful and do more repetitions at this point. Always finish on a success!