

# Command vs. Cue

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'Command' is traditionally the term we use for telling our dogs what we would like them to do. Many trainers today prefer the word 'cue' not only because it sounds less like a demand for robotic obedience but also because it emphasizes the need to teach a signal or 'cue' that your dog can easily recognize and respond to. The better a trainer is at associating the exact same signal with the same behaviour, the quicker a dog can learn. Many of us however spend little time thinking about the cues we use and how these cues may make learning easier or harder for our dogs.

Commands or cues need to be:

- Clear
- Consistent
- Easily recognizable
- Linked to the *exact* same behaviour everywhere, everytime.

## A Word about Words

When most of us think of 'commands' we think of words – that's because we're human and we're very good at language. Dogs on the other hand are not very good at discriminating the finer points of language and most verbal commands are guessed at dependent on your tone of voice and the general sound of the word or phrase. For instance 'sit' is a short sharp word, if you said 'hit' 'bit', or 'lit' in the same tone of voice your dog would probably also respond with a sit. Phrases which can be said in a different lilt can also make useful commands for instance a rising "do you want to go out?" The most important factor is that you use the same tone of voice for the same command and a different tone of voice for different commands. Commands should be spoken clearly, consistently and with a little authority rather than a nagging plea however they need not be harsh, loud or threatening. Dogs have very good hearing and if a pleasantly voiced 'drop' command is followed by rewards your dog will learn to 'drop' just as reliably as a dog who is trained using a loud, growling, guttural 'drop!'. There is no 'right' tone of voice or 'correct' word choice that will magically train your dog for you.

## Visual Cues

If you want to make life easier for your dog, you may choose to take advantage of some non-verbal cues. Dogs are expert at reading visual cues – such as hand signals and body gestures. Indeed, most dog-to-dog communication is based on visual cues such as submissive roll-overs and play bows. It makes sense then to teach a visual cue such as a hand signal in addition to a command word whenever possible. 'Sit', 'stand' and 'down' are all behaviours usually 'cued' with both a hand signal and a word.

## Context Cues

Dogs also rely heavily on context cues such as time of day, what clothes you are wearing (walking shoes or work shoes) what you pick up (car keys/lead) or the presence of certain smells (dog shampoo- bath time). You can use these context cues to teach the behaviours you want in routine situations. For example, if you do not attach a lead until your dog sits, the dog soon learns that a quick sit leads to a faster exit out the door.



## Clear commands + good rewards= effective training.

The elements of effective training are simple. Choose a command that your dog can recognize, associate it with the behaviour you want and follow correct responses with rewards such as praise, a treat or a game. The command or cue tells your dog '*what*' you want him to do while the reward provides the motivation or the '*why*' he should do it. When a dog fails to learn, there is usually a problem in one of these two areas – either the dog isn't recognizing the cue (the '*what*') or he's failing to see the '*why*' due to insufficient rewards or too many unintentional rewards for the wrong behaviour (such as the fun of playing in the park instead of coming when called).

## Disobeying commands

What most people refer to as 'disobedience' can be traced back to three common training errors:

1. failure to link a consistent command/cue/signal with the behaviour you want
2. failure to provide sufficient rewards for doing a behaviour
3. failure to have the dog's attention before you ask for a behaviour.

Professional trainers rarely use terms such as 'disobedience' because they know that getting an animal to do the things *we* want is simply a training issue. If you think about it, a dog must first be obedient –that is nine out of ten times demonstrate understanding and compliance to a command – before he could possibly be considered '*disobedient*'. Hence all puppies and most dogs are not 'disobedient' but rather are not yet fully trained

## It's all in the training.

Dogs are perfect at being dogs. If we want to alter their behaviour to fit into our human life style we have to teach them. If we hit problems along the way it's just because we're two different species still working to perfect our communication system.

