The commands of “sit” and “down” are probably among the most frequently trained. If you are considering going on in formal Obedience and/or Rally training and competition, you will find that the “sit” command is basic at all levels and is used frequently. If your intentions are more to have a well behaved pet, my suggestion is to introduce both of these commands, as teaching the sit command is relatively easy and some dogs are resistant to doing a down at first. For a pet, the down is the preferred command. Especially for puppies and dogs built to run like a Greyhound or Whippet, the sit is physically difficult and or or causes strain on the “core” muscles. In the real world, dogs rarely sit unless requested to do so by humans. Dogs are much more likely to stand or down than to sit. One exception is when the dog wants to focus or study something. They will sit and watch intently. I call this the dog “tripod,” as the dog is using the front legs and his rear as three points to steady his gaze!

SIT

For the sit, have your dog at your side and present a treat in front of and slightly above his nose. Once he raises his head for the treat, slowly move it back toward the tail. As the treat goes back, usually the head goes up and the rear end goes down! As your dog’s rear is about to touch the floor, say “sit” and give it the treat as the rear end is in contact with the floor. Sometimes, dogs will jump up for the treat. This is usually because the handler is holding the treat too far above the dog’s head. You want to hold it just a few inches above the head. Sometimes, the dog will back up, rather than lower their bottom. If this happens, try to either have an object behind the dog or start near a corner of a room, so the only option is to lower their rear as they can’t back up anymore!

As with any new command, once it is learned, you will want to transition from a lure to a reward. Use the treat as a reward for the behavior—in this case sitting. So, you will say “sit” and give the reward when the dog sits. If you are confident that the dog knows what you are asking for in a “sit;” only say the command one time and just wait patiently until the dog sits and then reward.

As tempting as it may be, do not push on the dog’s hips to get the sit to happen. This is critical for young dogs, as you don’t want to put any pressure on those developing joints! Also with young dogs, don’t ask for a sit and stay or ask for frequent sits. It is too hard on their developing body!

Once the command is learned, release dog from sit with “okay” or free. If you are going to give your dog a command to do something, remember to let him know when he can stop doing it!

DOWN

There are basically two ways for a dog to “down.” One way is for the dog to sit first and then lower the front legs into the down position. The other is for the dog to go down from a standing position. They sometimes just “fold” their legs and go directly down, other times they will do a sort of bow with the front half of their body, followed by lowering their rear end into a down. (Exact opposite of a sit!)

Usually the down is taught with the sit happening first. If you think about it, you are already halfway to your desired goal before you even start. Hold treat in front of dog’s nose while he is sitting. Slowly draw treat down the dog’s chest and out away from him to lure the dog down. Just as the dog’s chest touches the floor, say “down,” and give the treat. Some dogs will do the down right away others will be reluctant. It is common for them to lower their head following the treat and raise up their rear from the sit. If this happens, you can gently place your hand on the dog’s hips as a reminder to keep that part of his body still. Please be careful not to put pressure on the hips!

There are lots of variations on how to teach the down for reluctant dogs, including sitting on the floor with your legs out in front of you and then luring your dog to go down under your bent leg. What I find effective and is much easier on the human, is to pay attention to your dog in everyday life. When they are naturally getting ready to lie down, as they are about to land on the floor or dog bed, say “down” to associate the word with the behavior. If your dog has a favorite place to lie down, you can stand close by and after he lies down, say the word “down,” and offer a treat. You can also come up to your dog when it is lying down and say the word “down” and offer a treat.

As with the sit, once the word has been associated with the behavior, you will want to stop the luring and begin to reward the behavior just after it occurs. So, you will say “down” and give the reward when the dog downs. If you are confident that the dog knows what you are asking for in a “down” only say the command one time and just wait patiently until the dog does the down and then reward.

Once the down command is learned, most dogs will quickly learn to do the down from a standing position. As before, have the treat in your hand and lower it straight down. Most dogs will go directly down without the intermediate sit. Be patient. Hold the treat at ground level, say nothing more and wait for the dog to down. Only reward when the down is complete.

Once the command is learned, release dog from the down with “okay” or free. If you are going to give your dog a command to do something, remember to let him know when he can stop doing it!

Remember that timing is everything when it comes to linking the behavior to the word. With either the sit or down command, you will want to treat immediately after the behavior WHILE IT IS STILL OCCURING. If you are too slow and your dog gets up from the sit or down, do not treat. While you are thinking you are rewarding the sit or down, the dog will associate the treat with getting up!

Written by Darlene Colmar, Asheville, NC