

Scent Articles

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Introduction to metal, leather, wood

Tying articles down to a piece of pegboard or a rubber mat was the way we were introduced to scent article work many years ago. If you faithfully worked the dog several times each week, you might, if you were lucky, have dependable scent discrimination in about a year.

Clicker training for scent articles, using all the articles, loose, from the first day of training, is producing dogs that indicate the right articles between 80 and 90 percent of the time within a month! Janice DeMello, Nancy Patton, Patti Russo, Ian Dunbar, Steve White, Karen Pryor, Gary Wilkes and many other great minds of dog training all contributed pieces of the puzzle for the scent article challenge.

Picking up the right article and returning it to the handler is a fairly easy addition for a clicker trainer, and is a retrieving question more than a question of scent. Wait a while before you add retrieving to the equation. We get fewer dogs snatching up incorrect articles when we use the updated methods detailed here.

New articles, particularly the leather ones, need to be aired out thoroughly before their first use due to smells from the tanning process. Use a highly-diluted soapy solution to wash the articles in the beginning and periodically through your training, rinsing thoroughly of course. Let them dry in the sunshine.

Dogs' noses are so remarkable that of course the cleaning will not eliminate residual scent. It just lays a blanket of new scent over all the articles. The dog is still finding the item you touched last. It is likely that your dog can smell every person who has ever touched your leather article, so recent smell is what becomes important. There are many stories from tracking folks about dogs finding long-lost leather items a year or more after they were placed in a field.

Try lightly rubbing wooden articles with a barely-damp paper towel. The temptation to chew can be a big challenge with both leather and metal, so for many reasons place your scent articles out of reach between training sessions.

Metal, once cleaned of processing chemicals or oils, actually has a cleaner, less contaminated scent than leather and wood which tend to hold old scents. But many dogs are hesitant at first to pick up metal objects, a problem which is much easier to prevent in pups from the beginning by shaping your puppy to pick up spoons, jar rings etc. as well as his metal scent articles.

If your dog has never volunteered to pick up a metal item, bake an old clean spoon in bread or sugar cookie dough and let the dog nibble the cooked dough off the spoon while supervised. Or wrap fur, fake fur or masking or duct tape around the bar, gradually decreasing layers as the dog gets the game. Also connect picking up the metal article to the arrival of meals by having the dog mouth or pick up the article before dinner is delivered.

Alternately you might play with the metal article with another dog to arouse some jealousy as a motivator, or even just toss up the article and catch it (in your hands, of course!) a few times in each training session to pique interest.

For dogs sensitive to the clatter of metal objects, at first you can use several metal bowls, with a treat under the scented one, before meal times. If your dog continues to resist placing the metal articles in his mouth, have your veterinarian check for dental cracks or an abscess. If expense is not an issue, you might also try special-ordering articles with stainless steel bars instead of the more commonly-used aluminum.

Old shoes or belts cut apart can provide an inexpensive homemade set of practice leather items. (Stitch or staple the belt pieces into loops for easy pickup). Or have some fun and teach your pup to spell his name using wooden alphabet blocks.

We have gotten several nice yet relatively inexpensive sets of articles on the internet, and are delighted that our favorite pet supply folks, HMI Inc., located in Orlando FL, are making affordable scent articles now.

Multi-bar articles are not needed for most dogs. A dog typically tries to pick up the first scented bar he reaches once he understands the rewards the game can reap for him. If he can pick up a piece of sticky food from the floor, he can certainly scoop up a dumbbell-shaped item with ease, usually even if he has a serious under bite.

Add the turn with you at a distance and other elements after these initial steps are consistently successful. We put the baby steps in for the turn when we follow the dog to the scent articles in the beginning.

Find mine! Handler skills first...

Add the turn and other elements after these initial steps are consistently successful. Teaching scent articles for the American Kennel Club utility dog title is a natural for clicker trainers. You have to trust the dog's nose just as in tracking tests, and marking the moment your dog sniffs the correct item is easiest with a clicker.

These methods of course are also quite appropriate for United Kennel Club and Canadian Kennel Club scent article work as well. Here we will focus on the typical AKC scent article sets of 5 metal and 5 leather dumbbell-shaped items. TAG points (Teaching with Acoustical Guidance) are clicker-marked steps for the handlers, useful for instructors and for friends helping one another in small training groups.

TAG POINT (steps for the handler to master): Wrap hand around bar for a count of 5.

Hold the first item to be scented by wrapping your hand around the center bar and holding it there at first for a slow count of 5-10; then do the same thing with your other hand. If your scent articles are small, wrap as many fingers as you can easily fit closely around the center bar. Do not roll the article vigorously between your fingers and do not rub the bar hard to impart your scent. Friction heats the scent causing it to rise and swirl around all the articles and could actually make the exercise tougher for your dog.

Too much scent from holding the article too long or from vigorously rubbing or rotating the article can create insecurity in the dog, leading to mistakes. Scent the center part, the bit only, not the bells on the ends.

It is not uncommon for scent hounds to have to work really hard at scent articles because of the tendency we all have to over-scent. Dogs with average noses may actually have an advantage.

TAG POINT (means the human got it right!): Lay an article on the ground while your dog is still in his crate. Without involving your dog, practice slowly moving a cookie up from the ground to about knee height, which is the path your dog's nose will follow.

TAG POINT: Slowly move article *and* cookie from ground to knee height. The dog will follow the article on its way up from the floor if the cookie is on the other side of the bar. You may also practice dropping a cookie into your cupped hand which is holding the article, deliver treats to the dog instantly and repeatedly.

TAG POINT: Leash and treat in left hand

TAG POINT: Clicker in right hand, or for loud clickers use verbal “Click.”

TAG POINT: Move article and cookie from bar to knee height. This time, practice picking up the scented article while you are holding the leash (if needed at all), the treat and the clicker.

Alternate using metal and leather from the beginning, putting in your extra work on the metal articles away from the set if needed.

Clicker timing drill

Spread five treats in a semi-circle around you and your dog. Release him to eat the treats and click him right before he eats each one. This will refine your timing, and help you learn to predict his next behavior from his body language cues.

The primary steps

1. Taking each article lightly by the edges or, if you prefer, using tongs, place your articles on the ground. Put the first scented article, with a thin strip of canned cheese or hot dog on top of the bar, in the front of the pile so your dog will find it first. The dog will go for the cheese. Click or say the word “click” the moment he sniffs or touches the article. We like to use Janice DeMello's “Around the Clock” work pattern because it is easy to remember which spots you last worked, but you will see several examples of patterns at the end of this handout.

2. Slowly pick up the article and back up, drawing him with you by holding cheese or another yummy treat behind the article the whole way. After you and the dog move a step or two away from the articles, with you still holding the scented article, give him his treat.

In the beginning, and in most cases, for a long time, you will pick up the article every time after the dog indicates it. He may show his preference at first by eating the treat on top and later by sniffing it longer or pausing there however briefly.

Move in to pick up the indicated article quickly but then back up slowly so your dog can easily follow the scented article and your treats at first. A fringe benefit to moving slowly is that later your dog will figure out that he could snatch up the scented article and present it to you to exchange for a treat a lot faster than you seem to be moving. Backing up quickly, which we don't advise, is also likely to make you stumble and fall.

It is quite normal for dogs to move slowly at first and pick up speed as they gain confidence. The more you interfere by using even mild verbal or, worse, physical corrections, the harder it is for your dog to learn new skills.

You may want to have your dog on leash if you are in a group class or in a large open space. The game is to touch the smelly article and eat the cheese, not yet to retrieve or investigate.

3. Now scent the second article and place it in the second spot of your pattern, moving the unscented item that was previously in that spot back to where he first found the first scented article. He will quickly start using his nose instead of his eyes to find the yummy-smelling item in new spots. Only one scented article will be in the pile at any given time. Alternate metal and leather items from the beginning.

At first stand right next to the articles when you release him; then later follow him to the articles as you gradually move your starting point back. Continue to follow him to the scent article pile until he is ready to drag you there in his excitement. Make your starting point 2 feet back, then 4 feet and so on. Every time you add a new element of distraction or difficulty go right back to standing 6” away from the articles.

Your dog usually knows what section the correct article is in before he reaches the article pile.

4. For several sessions (2-5 on average), place a treat on the scented article every time.
5. Next place the treat on the article the first three scent efforts, leave the treat off one time (give him a jackpot for indicating the right article), then place it back on for two more scent efforts. Gradually place treats on the article less and less often, but often still starting with a treat there and ending with one on the article as well. If your dog starts having any trouble finding the correct article, quickly go back to placing the treat on the article for another 10-20 times. Repeat as needed.

Precursor behaviors

Learning precursor behaviors, the dog's body language right before he puts his nose on the item that you have scented, makes it easy to get your timing right.

Does your dog drop his nose suddenly? Does he hesitate with nostrils twitching poised over the scented article? Or do his elbows lock on point? He will start to telegraph the body language – you just have to watch to learn to interpret it.

If you are new to clicker training, this is an excellent place to consider setting up a video camera so you can play back your training session in the slow mode. Or just dive in like we do and watch closely.

When do I add the cue or command?

Later we use the cue “find mine” but for now eliminate your regular retrieve command from your beginning scent work. Even very young pups can learn that using the nose to find the article that smells like you is a highly rewarded activity and very soon all he needs is a release word to go charging out to find the one item that most smells like you!

Just use your “release,” “free” or “okay” release command for a while. The dog will want to go check out the new, interesting and treat-providing toys you have put out for him. His first click and treat will be for just approaching the pile, which will make him drive ever harder to get to the articles as he progresses in his understanding of the new and fun game you are offering.

Which article do I use first?

On your very first day of teaching a new dog, select the Number 1 metal, leather and wood articles. These are the articles you will be scenting today. On Day 2, use Number 2 articles, etc. Using a different number each day and then starting again with Number 1 teaches your puppy to discern new scent versus old scent from the very beginning.

Creating & maintaining drive & speed

Although obedience trial rules allow you to place your hand in front of the dog's face before sending him for a scent article, many a dog is put off by a hand swinging back at him. Your dog knows your scent very well so this is largely unnecessary anyway. If you like to include this, especially if your dog might on occasion have to do scent work with someone else, then just make sure you frequently click and treat the dog for sitting quietly while you present your hand.

If your dog is already target-trained, or if your dog is having any difficulty, you may briefly indicate the correct article with the target stick or a laser light.

If your dog hesitates or approaches the articles slowly, for a few times place a treat on the ground in the middle of the pile for the dog to find as a motivator. By the time you add in the retrieve part, you may even occasionally put a treat under every article, a lovely way to build in drive and attitude, plus a jackpot of yummys for bringing back the right item.

You may also increase speed by holding back on the dog's collar as you get him excited about the articles or sometimes race him out there and snatch the correct article first.

Do not rush the dog nor push him for speed until he is repeatedly successful at finding the article that has a treat on it (which does not take long). His confidence will build the speed, and you can help that along once he truly understands how to win this new game. You cannot know what else he is smelling or thinking as he learns to trust his nose as the biggest part of the fun.

Standing close to the scent articles too long can also create speed issues since he cannot easily run back over just a few feet of distance. Once your dog has added the pickup to the game, try to tiptoe quietly back while he is concentrating on finding the right article so when he turns around you are further back. You can even run away quickly then so he chases you while holding the scented article in his mouth. If he drops it, just recheese and start again.

Another useful trick is to have the person spreading the articles out shake the bag to get the dog's attention, then throw a treat to the dog with permission to chomp it on down. That person placing the articles can be you or a friend who is helping. Stewards placing scent articles in the ring often shake the bag a bit to get them apart.

Try snatching up the right article, having fun tossing in the air and catching it (in your hand, of course) to give it a little competitive edge to increase his excitement.

Class exercises

Progress to having another person standing nearby as a distraction to get the dog ready for the judge being in the ring with you: 20' away, then 10, 5, 2 and 1' then 6" then straddling or even sitting in the middle of the pile. Your helper can kneel on the floor, and pet and even lightly restrain the dog as the dog searches the pile. As your dog gets better at resisting distraction, have a helper talk to the dog, pet the dog or even eventually sit in a nearby chair and eat a snack.

Whenever you have a helper available, have him give the dog a treat after he dumps the unscented articles on the floor so the dog will learn to love that sound and what comes after as well. You can do the same thing yourself, especially with a dog new to the scent articles exercises.

How long do I hold/scent the article?

Occasionally there is also a problem with too little scent from wildly varying scenting periods with a less-experienced dog. We usually start by holding each bar for a slow count of 20, but find many experienced scent article dogs need much less scenting on their articles. Most of our own dogs, once they figure out what we are asking for, have done their best work if we just hold the bars for a slow count of 5.

Another common issue is a trainer who has used the same numbered or spare articles repeatedly in practice, then holds a new, previously unscented article for the same brief time period as he has been handling the long-seasoned favorites. Use a different numbered article for every training session. Get a golf score tabulator that you can hang from your article bag, and just pay attention to the last number on the dial. Mark which one you used last time and go up one number each time, starting back at the beginning when you use all the articles in sequence.

If you often have to train alone, scent all your articles and place them on the ground or floor. Go off to a different section of your training area and do a few other exercises, returning much later to the scent article pile where you again scent the article you want the dog to select. This is another way to teach "hot" scent skills, to find the item which you last touched.

Do not pump gas and then try to practice scent articles unless you want to teach your dog to avoid your article. The same thing goes for bleaching scent gloves – make sure the weird scents are at least diluted and the articles are well aired out.

Medications such as antibiotics can also affect scent, whether they are taken by the handler or by the dog.

As you and your dog advance through the learning process, do three or four different articles in a session (only one scent in the pile at a time) to prevent a pattern that might encourage your dog to stop too soon in a distracting environment such as an obedience trial. This is an easy way to gradually stretch out the time he spends without discouraging a quick find.

Alternative method

An alternative method we were first introduced to by British trainers is also advocated by Steve White, a major scent work guru. If you cannot resist having the dog retrieve scent articles from the beginning, we suggest this technique as an alternative.

Scent all the articles and set them out in a loose circle, or use the pattern provided. Send the dog for a retrieve. Whichever one he brings back will be scented. After clicking and treating many correct repetitions, scent all but one. Click and treat the retrieve of any scented article. Ignore a mistaken pick-up (do not reward it nor comfort or correct the dog) and send the dog again if he makes a wrong choice. VERY gradually scent fewer articles.

This is a lovely simple process but don't rush it – it takes time to get it right. This can, if not carefully handled, create that common problem of a dog that rushes to bring anything back, scented or not.

Starting a puppy

It is so easy to encourage pups to trust the nose, that busy little sniffing devices at the front of their faces. Collect small containers he can pick up, though once again don't push the retrieving if he is not offering it a lot yet.

Drill holes in all of the containers, and place food in just one for the training session, scenting that one with your hands a bit of extra time.

If he sniffs or picks up the loaded container, click then treat him, again as you back up with the food holder. Open it right down by his face and give him his reward.

If pup picks up a wrong one, show him it is empty, then lead him back to the one with the yummys inside. Now scent the one that previously held the treat, and give pup a jackpot for figuring out, as he likely will, which one pays off the most.

You can also use larger containers, big enough to hold a food-laden scented article in one and unscented articles in others. Once again, this prevents your dog from confusing the retrieve game with the "find mine" game.

What do you do when the dog makes a mistake?

It is easy to back up a step and reward for any effort in the right direction. Avoid or ignore wrong choices as much as possible, especially for scent work where we can only begin to guess what is going on with the dog's nose. Make it easier, get closer, take out the turn and limit distractions to build his confidence up again.

Even though we usually do all the articles loose and on the ground from the beginning, there is nothing wrong with backing up an extra step if a dog seems to be having a hard time figuring it all out. Try briefly putting out just a couple of metal and a couple of leather items if you get stuck at some point in the process.

Proofing Ideas

- New locations around your house and yard, then friend's or neighbor's yard

- While you pretend to be engrossed with your phone, tablet, laptop or desktop
- Barn hunt tubes, with and without rats
- Kids on the floor
- In kitchen while someone is cooking
- While Siri, Goggle, Alexa or t.v. is playing music or talk shows LOUD!
- While a timer or beeper is making noise.
- While garbage cans are being emptied curbside
- Soap bubbles (regular or scented)
- Food taped to floor or food container staked down outside
- Food tubes (commonly used to sort & store hardware for projects
- Toys – far away, then nearby, then in the middle of the pile of articles. Then mechanical and electronic toys.
- On carpet
- On tile
- in short grass and in tall grass
- All the articles standing up on their ends
- On concrete and asphalt
- On gravel
- Tape or chalk on the floor. Judges often use both to mark ring areas
- Dust puppies (in non-dog households know as dust bunnies) -- trade with or get from friends
- Flashlight or laser light flitting around article
- In dim light
- Tall grass
- Dog potty area
- Slightly behind ring stanchion, traffic cone or other obstacle
- Multiple sets of articles
- Hot scent & cold
- Place articles in refrigerator briefly before training session
- Articles in circle, horizontal or vertical lines, serpentine line, cross or X-shape, or all or scented article only on ends
- Scented article farther from pile than others
- One or more unscented articles placed on top of scented article (judge may give a 0 to a dog that brings more than one back)
- In a large circle with articles 12 or more inches apart; and in tiny areas with articles touching one another or spaced very close
- Proximity activity – quiet and busy people, crawling babies, dogs in crates, loose dogs, cats
- Smelly items like garbage, cooking containers
- Noisy and deadly quiet settings
- Near goat or chicken pen, horse/cattle pasture

Scent Article Work Sheet

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Date: _____ # on articles used: _____

Location: house (room? _____), yard, class, show & go

Other location _____

How long article was scented _____

Proofing/difficulty factors: _____

Weather conditions if outside _____

Success rate: Number of times sent _____

Correct article indicated _____

(If percentage drops below 80-90% success, lower your criteria and help the dog more.)

L indicates leather articles, M metal, W wood. Number is order of scenting work in this session. Alternate scenting metal and leather articles. You only take 5 of each of any two types (pick two from among, leather, metal, wood) into the AKC utility obedience ring.

	L					M	
	8					4	
L	M	W		W	L	M	
5	6	7	OR	6	3	8	
W	L	M		L	W	W	
2	3	4		5	2	7	
	W	L			M		
	1						

Or:

5 8 6 3 7 2 4 1

Or M L W M L W M L W M L W