

# Fading A Target For Utility Go Outs or Agility Obstacles

## Motivational Retrieve

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In early clicker training days, someone told us to slowly fade a target from the finished behavior by chopping off pieces of an upright plastic pole on a base. Shrinking a target that way is kind of inconvenient, though, so alternatives and other details follow.

I love the way Gary Wilkes showed us to fade targets: Send the dog to a target a few times, quietly remove the target, put it back, take it away etc. Many years ago, at a local training seminar, Wilkes used my flat-coat Malone, then a puppy, to demonstrate and got a directed jump out of him in less than 1 minute since the pup understood going to a target. (Of course the jump was a safe low height for the dog's age.)

First make sure your dog is fluent in going to a target. A taller target, rather than a flat one, works best at first when your primary training spot is outdoors on grass, especially at greater distances.

Fluency criteria:

- Goes great distance to the target (a small traffic cone, a feeding tray target etc.)
- Resists LOTS of distractions (Make it far more temptation than he will ever face in the ring to make up for his and your ring nerves)
- Lots of locations

For go-outs, make sure the sit is fluent before removing the visible target, with all the same criteria, plus adding:

- Straight sits
- Fast sits
- Longer-lasting sits
- Sits at a distance from you – targets make this so easy!

For an agility pause table, make the down fluent with the same criteria.

I usually am not asking for a touch during the go-out while I work on these criteria since there are lots of behaviors that can be used with a target.

If I asked for a touch and I did not get it, even if he did a great run to the target, I might be digging some pits in our training foundation. (Of course the unexpected places/tricks a dog can offer in a shaping session is one of the most fun parts.)

Obedience judges these days are (rightly) looking for dogs that touch the stanchions now that so many trainers have learned how much easier and more enjoyable these methods are for both you and your dog.

Running straight all the way to the target and then turning, sometimes adding the sit and sometimes calling him back for his cookie, is just as valid as a touch after the first few days of go out training.

I can train all these while still starting to sometimes fade the visible upright target. Just send the dog to the target 3-4 times with rewards every time. Quickly pick it up, hide it and send dog quickly to the same spot. Give him a HUGE jackpot with celebration for doing one go-out without the visible target, then put it back again, at least at first. It is even better if someone else can pick it up while the dog is not looking.

Stake it down in the grass so it is not sitting up or tuck it under a mat indoors. Also start using other targets sometimes too like a margarine container lid, the ring gate, a stanchion, a sit chute, a stick-on paper dot on a wall for indoor sites.

Make sure the target goes out BEFORE you bring the dog out to train at this level. Otherwise he is really keying in on you walking out to place it.

Ten cold (as soon as you arrive, without practicing anything else first) go outs, in new locations in the yard, training area, neighborhood, park etc., with the upright target visible, will help show if he really understands the job at hand. Now is the time to fix gaps in the education, but you can go back at any time if a problem crops up.

With so many indoor competition sites these days, take some extra time to send the dog to blank walls wherever you can safely find them.

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