

# Cues for Training vs. Performance

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

A big part of animal training is the process of teaching an animal “when I do this, you are supposed to do that”. Today, let’s look at the ‘this’ portion of that sentence, the cue. Cues may be verbal and/or physical. Dogs are very attuned to the physical; your location, your stance, your motion, how you point your feet vs. your upper torso, where you are looking, and probably lastly how you are waving your arms around. Humans, on the other hand, are very verbal and usually prioritize what they are doing with their hands more so that all the other parts of their bodies. As trainers, we need to be keenly aware of all the things a dog could be focusing on as part of the cue.

First, define your expectations of what the final performance of the dog should look like. This will help you identify what physical action you will be performing yourself. Will you be standing or in motion? Will you need this cue at a distance? Where should rewards be placed or given? What direction will you be facing relative to the dog? There is no point in teaching the dog a cue that you cannot perform or which the dog can’t read as they execute the desired behavior.

Second, decide what cue to use for the behavior we want. Ideally, the physical cue will encourage the dog in the correct performance, will be non-ambiguous (only used to cue this one behavior), will be easy for the handler to perform, will be subtle but unmistakable, will be easy to integrate when performing chains of behaviors. We also want to teach all the individual components of the behavior separately, so the physical cues for those parts may

influence what our final cue will look like. As you can see, selecting a good cue can be a tall order.

Now that we’ve decided on what the finished performance should look like and the cue we would like to use, we explain the relationship between cue and behavior to the dog. Usually, we will start with a very exaggerated motion and a reward method that will encourage the dog to physically perform the behavior we want (luring them into performing). We quickly phase out the lure, but reward placement and technique will always be a key method of communication. As the dog learns, we should reduce the grandiose cue into something less spectacular. Example: teaching the dog to turn away from you. You start with a treat in your hand, making big circles leading the dog’s nose around. Then you hold the treat in the other hand as a reward for following the leading hand. Then you gradually hold your hand higher and make your hand circle smaller as the cue.

Once past the baby steps we should start looking for fluidity, where the dog easily executes the behavior in a simple scenario in response to the cue. Now we may start to challenge the dog in more distracting environments or chaining behaviors together. Examples: turning while in motion, turning away from you on an agility course.

At some point, the dog will not respond properly to the cue. Our natural inclination is to try again and make the



cue more obvious somehow; we gesture more widely, we turn our bodies more, we get closer, we add other supporting cues. This may all be subconscious and we may not even know we are escalating the cue. The dog performs correctly and gets rewarded. Yay, right? Actually, the dog just learned to perform the behavior only when given the more exaggerated cue. After the dog gets it right most people will then just go on to other things. When they try this behavior again there are two

possibilities. They may use the more subtle cue which the dog still doesn’t understand and fails to perform. Then the person gets disappointed because “he knows this” or “he is so unpredictable” and they re-cue stronger. Or the person uses the stronger cue to begin with and the dog performs correctly. But now the handler thinks “I have to be closer” or “I always have to babysit this behavior” and the team doesn’t progress in their skills.

So how can we avoid training the dog to only respond to extreme cues? First, we must be aware that we are escalating our cues. One tell-tale sign this is happening is when the dog always gets things right the second time. This usually means we either escalated our cue or somehow made the performance of the behavior easier. When repeating an agility obstacle in training, always go back a couple of obstacles to restart so you are coming into the scenario with the same speed and positioning. With the escalated cues, when the dog gets it right the second time, praise and give a small reward. Now, try it a third time. Focus on giving the reduced cue that you want to use. The dog, having been successful the last time and getting rewarded, is much more likely to perform correctly to the more subtle cue, or further distance, or whatever has increased the challenge. When they are successful this time, they get a jackpot reward, because that is the true performance that you want.

In short, if your dog fails to respond correctly to a cue, plan to do it at least twice more. First giving extra help and rewarding but then follow up with the more challenging ask and jackpot the success. Bouncing around between obvious and more streamlined cues for the same behavior is a fantastic way to solidify the behavior and work down to the more polished cue-behavior performance that you want. Happy Practicing!

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**Christy Gammage**  
● [agility@gammage.org](mailto:agility@gammage.org)  
● [PracticeMakesPawfect.com](http://PracticeMakesPawfect.com)