

# Ready To Enter an Agility Trial?

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Practice Makes Pawfect

You've been taking agility lessons for awhile now. You've come a long way. Are you ready to start competing? Let's examine what you and your dog should be able to do before sending in that entry form.

Agility skills: You should be able to successfully remember and run (on your first attempt) a tough course at the level

you plan on entering or, even better, the next level up. With all the extra stress, distractions, and possibly nerves at a trial, you will not do as well as your normal familiar lesson or backyard session. Even if you are nailing novice level courses at home or lessons, being able to handle a tougher course than you will see at your first trials will give you the confidence to offset some of those nerves. However, if on your first runs in practice you often must restart or fix mistakes then you won't be successful in a trial.

Registration and rules: To compete in an official trial, your dog must be registered with the national organization sanctioning that trial. You should read all the sections in their rulebook defining if your dog is eligible and what division and jump height you would be competing in. You may need to get a rough estimate of your dog's height at the top of the shoulders where the neck joins the back. Much like a child, you can place them along a wall and use a pencil, straight edge, or even a level and make a mark on the wall to get their estimated height.

The rulebook will also describe what classes may be offered at a trial. In general, all organizations have a 'Standard' class which contains jumps, tunnels, weaves, and contact obstacles. They all also have a 'Jumpers' class which does not have any contact obstacles. Beyond that, each organization may have other classes that require strategy skills where you make up your own course, such as Gamblers or Snooker. For your first trials, plan on only entering the classes that you feel comfortable with.

Crating skills: While you may be in the ring for 2-3 minutes at a time, the rest of the day your dog will be just hanging out. They need to be able to stay safely and comfortably contained in a crate or kennel. Practice this at home by having their kennel set up and available. Putting them in their kennel to eat their meals, work on a chew or food-stuffed toy and to nap are great ways to make it their 'happy place'. The goal is for them to be mentally at ease while locked in their kennel, whether you are visible or out of the room. Crating your dog during lessons is a good way



to practice these skills. Ideally at a trial, your dog will be comfortable enough to just nap between classes. Having a crate cover or sheet to dampen noise and block visible distractions will greatly increase the



chance of that happening.

Travel skills: Agility trials may be an hour or more from where you live. You and your dog should be able to travel the distance and possibly stay overnight somewhere. Ideally, everyone is comfortable in the car and the hotel or other accommodation you might have. If your dog is stressed traveling, now is your chance to work on making it a pleasant experience for them. Good crating skills come in handy for travel and overnight stays.

Public space skills: Agility trials can be crowded, busy events. Can your dog handle walking through a crowd of people? A crowd of people with other dogs? A noisy event with excited dogs running a course 10-30 feet away? This may be one of the more challenging skills your dog needs. You don't need an agility trial to practice this. Start with places and events where you can have a lot of space to move away if your dog is uncomfortable. Start with short durations, not the whole day. Reward for calm, neutral behavior. Take your dog to the park, farmer's markets, outdoor public events, indoor public spaces and events (where possible). The goal is to expose your dog to the activity, not necessarily make them interact with anything, anyone, or any dog. The more they ignore people and other animals, the better.

Remember those agility skills? You need to be able to take them on the road. Take some simple equipment out to a park to practice. Do a field rental at a different facility than you normally visit. The best option is to attend an Agility Fun Run or Match (an unsanctioned trial) which is usually smaller and more casual than the real thing. This is great practice for all those peripheral skills (like crating and crowds) as well as the actual agility run with typical trial distractions.

Consider attending your first trial day without your dog. Yes, go check out a trial without your dog so you know what is going on without having to be worried about how your dog is handling it. If you can, volunteer for ring crew or leash runner. You'll get a ringside view of how it all works. Check out the results and where everything is set

up. Your second day at a trial should be just visiting with your dog (if it is allowed by the venue). You can focus on how your dog reacts to the environment and keeping them comfortable. Can they listen to simple commands while near the rings or do you need more distraction training?

Now, the tough part. Examine your feelings about competing.

If you get upset when you don't do well, then you should work on all the above skills until the chance of you actually placing is good. Are you more interested in training your dog than competition results? Then you can enter classes designating your runs as "For Exhibition Only" (FEO) or "Declared Training In The Ring" (DTIR) which mean you aren't competing for any placements. You get the ring experience over an official course, but no pressure around winning.

Having a mentor/instructor, or even just friends, who can help you navigate the trial experience can be helpful. Be aware they may encourage you to enter before you are comfortable, in which case try attending without your dog first. If your instructor expresses concern about you entering, then ask which of the above skills they feel you should be working on to get ready to trial. It is your money, your dog, and your decision. Plan and prepare for the experience you want for your team. Happy Practicing!

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