

Handling Obstacle Discrimination

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

In dog agility, having really good discrimination is a desirable thing. Discrimination is the ability to direct your dog to the correct obstacle when two or more are on the dog's possible path. The most common example is a tunnel entrance inches away from an A-Frame or Dogwalk ramp. More subtle examples are two of the same type of obstacles (2 jumps or 2 tunnels) in close proximity. The basics of obstacle discrimination are the same basics you use to direct your dog around any agility course. Handling cues include the handler's position on the course and motion, the handler's upper and lower body positions, the handler's visual focus and verbals.

As humans, we like to use verbals: calling out the obstacle name, using directional verbals like "Come" or "Here", "Left", "Right", "Switch" or "Back" to turn away from you, "Out" to move laterally away but still parallel the handler path, "Go On" to drive straight ahead. For handlers with mobility issues (from wheelchair users to just slow runners), trained verbals are a must. When training obstacle names, pick words that are meaningful to you. At a trial, you will hear a variety of cues from different handlers for the same obstacle. Examples for the weave poles: "Weave" (obviously), "Poles", "Get em", "Noodles", "Slalom", "Shoosh", "ZigZag". Once you have decided on what you will use to cue obstacles, now you must train your dog on the words. Most beginners start by just calling them out as they run the dog around the course. For true understanding, practice having 2 different types of obstacles and send the dog forward with just a verbal, rewarding heavily when the dog matches the verbal to the correct obstacle. For Come/Here, you should make a point to reward those cues in daily life with at least praise and maybe play time. Left/Right/Switch/Back/Out/Go-On all need to be trained as well.

To train directional verbals, we use our body language and reward strategies. Dogs tend to parallel their owner's path and follow arm and eye cues. Showing the dog in small increments what we want is the best way to build understanding. Training these has been covered in previous articles. (You can find them at <https://PracticeMakesPawfect.com>.)

As a handler, we need to be very aware of the path the dog must be on to take the correct obstacle. Even with two obstacles side-by-side, that path would still diverge slightly as the dog takes the previous obstacle. It is our job to influence that path as early as possible to remove any question in the dog's mind as to what obstacle they should take next. Dogs are aware of where we are looking and what our chest, hips and feet are pointing towards. Small dogs are especially aware of the handler's feet. So, if you are pointing with your arms / hands, but your feet are angled differently, the dog may follow the feet, because they are a more consistent indicator of where the body will go. How our path converges or diverges from the dog's path is also information for the dog.

In our tunnel / dogwalk discrimination example, we can use a combination of all our cues to make it clear to the dog which obstacle we want. If the dogwalk is closer to the handler, they could angle their path further away, drawing down their arm and focusing their eyes on the path they want the dog to take, and be calling out "Come, Walk It".



If they want the dog to take the tunnel that is further away, their path would drive towards the dog's path to the tunnel, they would hold their arm up and out as if pushing on the dog's path while cuing "Out, Tunnel!". Practice using only a subset of cues to see which have more meaning for your dog. If the discrimination is two of the same type of obstacle, then yelling the obstacle name is not very helpful and you will need to use other verbals and

motion/actions to direct the dog.

Troubleshooting: What if your dog consistently picks a certain type of obstacle? This indicates that they enjoy doing or have had a lot more rewards for that type of obstacle. Start rewarding the other obstacles more evenly. What if your dog consistently picks the wrong obstacle? Stop and think about how you would cue the dog to take that 'wrong' obstacle. Cue them to take the other obstacle as a way to show them what those cues would look like. Praise, but don't heavily reward. Then cue for the original obstacle. You may need to exaggerate some cues to be clear. Reward when correct, then try again with more normal cues. Jackpot when they get it right.

True masters of any skilled endeavor require a high degree of discrimination; be it a discriminating palate, a sense of style, or the ability to pick the correct path to get where you want to go.

Better Practice.

Don't Forget Your Pet Hurricane Survival Kit

A hurricane survival kit is a collection of basic items your pet may need in the event of an emergency. Vaccinations and identification tags are important measures to keep your pets safe. Keep their vaccinations updated to reduce their risk of contracting potentially deadly bacterial diseases. Also keep your contact info up-to-date, including having a microchip with your info implanted in your pet. Find out what your evacuation zone is and have an evacuation plan, then you should prepare hurricane survival kits for both your family and pets. Even if you're not ordered to evacuate even a strong tropical storm may leave you without power.

When preparing pets for hurricane season:

Make a Plan

- * Always bring pets indoors when disaster threatens.
- * Never leave a pet chained, whether outdoors or indoors.
- * Arrange a safe room at home for your pets. It should be clear of hazards such as tools, debris or toxic products.
- * Seek out a nearby pet shelter. Ask about the type of pets they accept, any limits on size or other pet-specific restrictions.
- * Designate someone to take care of your pet. Consider a trusted person who has interacted with your pet.
- * Get a strong, properly sized pet carrier.

Prepare a Pet Emergency Kit

(For 10 days or more in case there are no basic utilities).

- * Food and water.
- * Basic pet first-aid kit, include latex gloves
- * Medicine and important veterinary documents.
- * Collar with ID tag, rabies tag and a leash. Pets should wear their collars at all times.
- * Sanitation. Keep newspapers and trash bags handy.
- * Familiar items. Favorite toys, treats and bedding can help reduce stress.
- * A picture of you and your pet together. It can help document ownership and identify your pet.

Maintaining Your Kit

- * Keep canned food in a cool, dry place.
- * Store boxed food in a tightly closed plastic container.
- * Re-think your needs every year and update your kit as your family's needs change.

In Case of Evacuation

If you do have to evacuate, take your pet with you. If it's unsafe for humans, it's unsafe for pets. Emergency shelters and hotels may have limited space and pets might not be allowed, so find a boarding facility along your evacuation route and make arrangements before a storm threatens.

For more information on hurricane preparedness: [FEMA.gov/disaster/4339/hurricane-preparedness](https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4339/hurricane-preparedness)

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