

Teaching Down

Down can be a challenge to teach. Many dogs have a psychological reluctance to lie down on cue as this puts them in a vulnerable position, or they may have concerns that lying down is a precursor to unpleasant experiences, such as grooming, vet exams, nail clipping etc. The reason doesn't really matter – you just need to convince your dog that down is okay and only good things will happen! Some dogs may have physical problems that make lying down difficult and it is unreasonable to ask them to do so if this is the case.

Down is a very useful cue to have and it is worth persevering with reluctant dogs, but you must never physically force your dog into a down position, either by pushing them down, or rolling them over onto their side. Dogs do not resist down because they are trying to be “dominant”, and you are not going “assert your dominance” by getting them on the ground. Down is about trust, not about who is in charge.

Make sure the surface you are asking the dog to lie on is dry and comfortable – carpet, grass, sand etc. Avoid concrete, tiles, gravel, rocks, bush tracks, and any other cold, hard, or debris-strewn ground. Ask yourself if you would like to lie on it. Be aware of elements in the environment that may be causing reluctance or anxiety – other dogs, children, particular appliances or equipment in use, background noise, etc.

Teaching “Down”

There are several good methods for teaching down. These two are common and generally successful.

1) Lured Down

1) Have the Dog Follow a Lure Downwards

It is generally easier to start with the dog in a sit, but not essential. Hold a treat (or a handful of treats) to the dog's nose and *slowly* draw his nose downwards. As he dips his head, release a treat for him. Repeat this a few times, working on getting his head as low as possible. Do not use a cue (eg “down”) at this stage – he needs to learn the action first so he can associate the cue with the right thing later. Your dog may choose to lie down at this point, so mark this as his elbows meet the ground and reward him in the down position – several treats between the front legs reinforces the down position as a good place to be.

2) Wait Out Reluctant Dogs, but Check Hand Position

If your dog is reluctant to drop right down, lure his nose down as far as possible then hold a handful of treats down on the ground under your hand. Keep your hand very still and wait. It can take a loooooong time, so be very patient. Your dog may stare at your hand, paw at it, nibble and lick from sit position, or even get up and walk away – stay put and wait. Do not move your hand. If you really get fed up, leave the session for now and repeat it later - your dog will still be thinking about it. Never just give him the treats anyway; there is only one way for him to earn them!

If your dog is not lying down, or is getting up to come to your hand, you may have your hand in the wrong place. If you are too close to his body, he will have to scrunch himself up to reach your hand and won't have room to lie down. If you move your hand too far away, he won't be able to reach it and will have to get up to follow it. Try to take a line straight down from his nose to the floor and don't pull your hand away from him along the ground or move it about.

3) Add the Marker

Most dogs will eventually lie down, even if only after several sessions. Immediately mark the elbows on the ground with your “yes” marker and release your handful of treats to him while he is in down position. Be effusive with your verbal praise, but *don't pet him*. If his reluctance is because he feels vulnerable or is concerned about the consequences, you touching him will actually reinforce his opinion! Once you have got two or three downs, you usually will have no further trouble, but some dogs will resist for a bit longer.

2) Under-Knees Down

This method usually works when all else fails, but is also quite a fun way to teach down for all dogs. However it may not be practical for all owners and all dogs.

1) Encourage the Dog to Reach Under Your Knees for Treats

Sit on the floor with your legs together and knees bent. Have your dog beside you on one side of your knees, and a few treats (or a favourite toy if treats aren't cutting it) in your hand on the other side of your knees. Reach right through under your legs with your treat hand and let your dog eat them from your hand. Repeat two or three times, until your dog is relaxed and enthusiastic, and then on the next repetition don't put your hand all the way through under your legs. You want your dog to willingly put his head at least a short way under your legs to reach the treats.

2) Require the Dog to Drop Right Down to Reach Treats

Gradually ask your dog to come further and further under your legs, first just having to drop his head right down to reach, then crouch, then drop his front end, and then eventually having to drop right down to get under your legs to reach the treats, which you are now keeping right back on the other side of your knees. Don't touch your dog, as this is likely to cause him to back off and be more reluctant. As soon as you get a full down, use your marker word and reward him with extra treats and lots of praise.

3) Switch to a Lured Down

Continue to practice coming into a full down under your legs. When you feel your dog is ready, try reaching right through under your knees and see if he will lie down without going under your knees first. If so, try switching to a lured down.

At this point, both methods start following the same process:

4) Take Food Out of the Luring Hand

Keep working on luring a down, marking and rewarding in down position, until your dog is readily dropping every time without hesitation. Take the food out of your luring hand and repeat the same action, but rewarding from the other hand. Continue to practice this until you are confident your dog will drop down every time, happily and confidently.

5) Add the "Down" Cue

Start adding your "down" cue, saying it just as his elbows touch the ground. After a few sessions, start saying it earlier, as you start to lower your hand.

6) Add Duration

Most dogs will pop back up out of the down as soon as they have swallowed their reward. To start teaching him to stay down, wait a couple of seconds after he has dropped before marking the down and giving him his reward. Now you are marking not just the down, but staying down as well. Gradually increase the length of time you wait before marking and rewarding, but don't wait so long that he gives up and gets up again.

7) Add a Release Word

A release word is useful for downs and for stays. It tells your dog he has finished the exercise and is free to move. Ask your dog for a down and wait a few seconds before marking and rewarding, as in step 6. Instead of rewarding between his paws, toss the reward in front of him, and as you do so, give a release word, such as "okay". Your dog will get up to go after the treat. Don't be afraid to practice the "down, mark, reward/release" sequence without your dog until you are fluent with it!

8) Reduce the Hand Signal and Work on Different Options

Start reducing how far you lower your hand when signalling your dog to lie down. Work towards being able to get a down on just a brief hand signal alone, and on your verbal cue alone. This is often harder than sit, so go slowly and be patient. Practice downs on either side as well as in front.