

Can You Train a Dog to Wink?

Positive reinforcement makes it possible to train a dog to wink.

By September Morn

Q. Lately I've been interested in teaching my dog new tricks. I was wondering if it is possible to train a dog to wink.

A. This would be a good trick to teach using a training clicker or a verbal behavior marker (say a short word like, "Click!" or "Yes!"). Use the click or word to mark the precise moment your dog's eye closes, and then quickly reward her with a small, tasty treat. Hearing the sound of the click or word right when she winks will let your dog know exactly what she did to earn the treat.

Show your dog a treat (hold it close to her nose). When her attention is focused on the treat, gently touch the eyelid of the eye you want her to wink. This will cause her to momentarily close that eye, but she'll keep the other eye open because she won't want to lose sight of the treat. Click when she closes the eye, and then give her the treat. Do this about ten or twelve times, take a one-minute break, then do another ten or twelve repetitions of touching her eyelid, click, and treat. Take another one-minute break, and then start another short session. This round, try moving your finger close to her eyelid but don't touch it. If she winks, click/treat. If not, go back to touching her eyelid to encourage the blink another few times (click and treat for each wink).

Within a few short sessions, she'll start winking that eye when you move your finger toward it but before you touch it. Continue to mark the moment of each wink with either the clicker or the short word. When she's consistently winking as you move your finger toward her eyelid, move your finger gradually less close to her eye. Observe how close you need to move it to elicit the wink and work at that distance for a few rounds of ten or so repetitions. Then you can start adding a verbal cue for the wink behavior by saying, "Wink" (or whatever verbal cue you choose), then move your finger toward her eye. Keep marking the moment of the wink and rewarding each wink with a treat.

At some point you'll notice your dog will start winking her eye when your finger is still pretty far away. Gradually minimize your finger movement "signal" by pointing to her eye from greater distances. Continue to use the verbal cue before you move your finger. Soon you'll notice your dog will wink when she hears the verbal cue and you won't need to use the finger "signal" any more.

Have fun! This will be a cool trick to perform for your friends!