

Training Commands for Dogs

The 4 dog training commands your dog should know.

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I've been asked the number of words or commands my dogs understand, so my husband and I made a list. We decided Ursa, my 12-year-old Australian Shepherd, understood nearly 250 commands and phrases.

Not every dog needs such an extensive vocabulary, but there are obedience commands all dogs should know. Learning starts with the fundamentals, so here are four basic voice commands you can teach your dog:

Find a Spot! If you travel with your dog, you need "Find a spot," a nice, publicly acceptable command to tell your dog to relieve itself. By controlling where your dog eliminates, you avoid house-training accidents and faux pas, like the dog relieving itself on a neighbor's lawn. I make sure my dogs relieve themselves (or at least try) before therapy dog visits and visiting anywhere indoors.

I begin teaching this phrase when my dogs are puppies by taking them to the back yard and watching until they go potty. As the puppy starts to relieve itself, I quietly (so as not to stop the action) say, "Good to find a spot!" When the puppy is finished, I praise it again. I also watch for signs the puppy needs to relieve itself, such as sniffing in the area where it normally eliminates, and tell it to find a spot before it relieves itself.

An adult dog can learn the same command. Go outside with your dog for a few days. Each time it relieves itself, repeat the command and praise it. After a few days, start using the command on your walks around the neighborhood. When your dog starts to sniff the ground, signaling it may need to relieve itself, give the command. Some adult dogs will learn the phrase a little faster if you point them to a spot where another dog has already eliminated. As your dog sniffs that spot, tell it, "Find a spot!" Praise your dog when it relieves itself.

Sit! Behavioral problems, such as jumping on people and dashing through open doors, lead many dogs to training classes. You can easily solve these problems by teaching your dog to sit. You have several ways to do this, but I use treats because it works for most dogs, and they seem to catch on quickly. With your dog on a leash in front of you, let it sniff a treat in your hand. When it sniffs the treat and appears interested, tell it "Sit" as you move your hand (and treat) over its head toward the tail. As your dog watches the treat, its head will come up and its rump will go down. Say "Good to sit!" and give your dog the treat. Repeat several times and then end the training session.

As your dog understands the command, start using it around the house. With your dog on the leash, have it sit while you fix its dinner or at open doors. If it tries to dash out the door, use the leash to bring it back and make it sit again. When people want to pet your dog, have it sit first, and make sure it holds the sit during petting. Use this command frequently and be consistent. If you don't make your dog sit in every instance, the behavior will never be reliable.