



Training Plan: Teaching ‘Back Up’

Why this cue is useful for your dog to know: Walking backward or backing up doesn’t come naturally to dogs, so it’s a skill they have to learn. It can come in handy when navigating tight spaces. It’s also a way to help dogs who do agility become more aware of their hind end.

End behavior: The dog walks backward on cue until he’s released.

Step 1: Stand directly in front of the dog, then prompt him to back up by taking a step toward him. As soon as he takes a step backward, click and reward him with a treat (C&R). Repeat this 4 more times and then move on to Step 2.

Tip: If he sits down or moves to the side instead of walking directly backward, arrange some tables, chairs or other objects into a narrow chute so that the only direction he can move is backward.

Step 2: Step toward the dog, and as soon as he takes a step backward, offer your hand cue, then C&R. Repeat 4 more times.

Tip: The Dogtown hand cue for “back up” is to hold your forearms straight out with your hands bent at a 90-degree angle at the wrist and fingertips pointed toward the ground. Then flick your fingers forward, in a “shooing” motion.

Step 3: Offer the hand cue without stepping toward the dog. If he backs up without the prompt, C&R. Repeat until he backs up on cue (without the prompt) 4 or 5 times out of 5 repetitions.

Tip: Some dogs do better with gradually fading the prompt rather than suddenly dropping it. To fade the prompt, take increasingly smaller steps toward the dog, then just lean toward him, then don’t move at all and use only the hand cue.

Step 4: Offer the hand cue, but don’t C&R when the dog backs up one step. Instead, keeping offering the cue until he takes a second step back, then C&R. When the dog is reliably taking two steps back 4-5 out of 5 times, continue offering the hand cue until the dog takes three steps back, then C&R. When the dog is reliably taking three steps back 4-5 out of 5 times, continue offering the hand cue until the dog takes four steps back, then C&R.

Step 5: Once the dog is reliably taking four steps back, begin C&R for varying distances of backing up. For example, C&R for four steps back, then one step back, then three steps back, then two steps back, then five steps back, then two steps back. As the dog becomes consistent at the current distance you ask for, periodically ask for one step more than he’s done before.

Step 6: Continue practicing varying distances until the dog will reliably continue to back up until you stop cueing and C&R. Offer your verbal cue (“back” or “back up”) immediately before your hand cue 10 times in a row, then offer the verbal cue alone without the hand cue. If the dog responds, hooray! If not, pair the verbal cue with the hand cue 5 more times, then try again.

Proofing

Proofing means teaching the dog to generalize the behavior in different contexts.

Just because your dog can back up on cue in a quiet room in your house doesn't mean he'll be able to do it in a busy vet office. So, start practicing it with him in different places and with different people. Start off with the two of you in a slightly more distracting place than your home and gradually work up to practicing in more distracting environments. Then, you can have other people work on the behavior with the dog, too. By practicing in different places with different people, the dog can learn to back up for anyone, anywhere.

If you get stuck between steps, create an intermediate step with duration that your dog is comfortable with. Don't rush: Take it at the dog's speed.