

Cue Rules

by Karen Pryor

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The technical name for a cue is a discriminative stimulus. Here is how you can tell if you have built a truly powerful cue which will always work for you and your dog.

Test one:

The dog always does the behavior you asked for, when you ask it. (That is, when you say Sit, or Bark, or High Five, the dog does what you asked, and immediately. For most people, this constitutes obedience, but it is only a start of creating real reliability.)

Test Two:

The dog never offers that behavior (sit, bark, high five) when you didn't ask for it. The dog never gives you that behavior just because it's bewildered, or hopeful, or wants a cookie.

Test Three:

The behavior never occurs in response to some other cue. For example, if you say Roll over, and your dog sits, barks, or lifts a paw for the high five, you have just learned that a) your dog doesn't yet understand what you mean by roll over, and b) your dog doesn't yet understand the cue for the behavior it did give you, either.

Test Four:

No other behavior occurs when you give a cue for one specific behavior. When you say "High Five" the dog does not respond by licking you, rolling over, sitting, etc.

To have a really reliable dog (in the show ring, obedience ring, hunting field, search-and-rescue, wherever) train at least two or three behaviors to meet all four tests. When a behavior meets all four tests, the cue for that behavior becomes an immensely powerful tool. When a dog has learned to refine its attention to cues, to this level, it becomes a tremendously astute partner in learning new cues. You can develop the skill, or fluency, of understanding and recognizing cues, using ANY behavior including tricks.