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The Lie Down Command

For some dogs this can be an easy command to teach, for other dogs it will require patience.

Step One -- Put your dog into a sit position. Most dogs have easier time learning from that position. Take a tasty treat in your “signal” hand and put it at your dog’s nose. Move your hand from his nose straight down to the ground.. As he is dropping to the ground say your cue “down.” Your dog should follow your signal hand (with treat) to the ground. When his elbows and back legs are on the ground, say your reward marker (“yes” or “good”) and reward with the treat. It often helps if you also lower yourself to the ground, so he is following your body. If he doesn’t lie down, try again. Sometimes moving the treat just slightly forward helps them get into a down. Other dogs do better if you move the treat close to their side and luring the treat to their rear flank where they go down on their side. Experiment and learn what works best based on the physiology and preference of your dog. Once you have successfully gotten your dog in a down ten times in a row, it is time to go to step two.

Step Two -- In this step we are going to fade the lure and teach them the word “down” before we give the signal. Start by putting a treat in your hand and move this hand behind your back. Have no treats in your other (“signal”) hand. Put your dog into a sit and then say the word “down.” Then put your signal hand at your dog’s nose, and bring it straight down to the ground like you did in step one. Say your reward marker and reward the dog with the treat. If he doesn’t go into a down after a few times, go back to step one. Repeat this 10 times a day for a few days. When you have 90% accuracy, it is time to go to step three.

Step Three -- Now it is time for your dog to learn a down from a standing position. For most dogs, you will have to go back to the lure method. Place a treat in your signal hand and lure him to the ground like you did in Step One. When you get 10 successes in a row, fade the lure like you did in step two.

Step Four -- So far you may have to really bend and crouch yourself to get your dog into a down, especially with smaller dogs. We want to be able to cue them when we are standing upright. Slowly get yourself in a more upright position by asking for a down while standing just a little straighter and less hunched over than you were before. If you get success, stand a little straighter again, until eventually your back is straight. If you go

directly from crouched and bent to standing tall, your dog may not understand. Dog training is always done in incremental stages.

What if my dog doesn't lie down when I try the lure method above?

Here are some things to try:

1. If your dog's elbows go to the ground but their bottom is still up in the air, you can put gentle pressure with the palm of your hand at the base of their tail and often they will go down. When they do, reward.
2. If they don't go down at all, often putting gentle pressure behind their shoulder blades works. If that doesn't work, try, in addition, putting your other hand behind your dog's front legs or just one of their legs, and he will go down.
3. With your 6 foot leash, tie your dog to a furniture leg. Stretch the treat out just beyond his nose, and as he stretches to get it he might fall into a down.
4. I have found "shaping" has worked for many dogs. Reward your dog for an approximation of the down. Usually your dog will put his head down to follow the treat. Go ahead and reward him. Slowly raise the criteria where he has to lower his head a little more to get the reward, until eventually he will lower his head enough to drop into the down.
5. Use your leg or a horizontal bar and lure him under it. Make it low enough that he has to lie down to go under it. This is best done in a place where he can't go around your leg or bar, like a hallway.
6. If all else fails, your dog will lie down on his own, so capture the behavior. Have treats on you at all times, and when your dog lies down, say the word "down" and your reward marker ("yes" or "good") and reward with the treat.

Note that "lie down" is often harder to teach smaller dogs, dogs with long backs and short legs, and fearful dogs that lack confidence. It often helps these dogs to work in a very quiet and comfortable setting. I work on the carpet or their bed and make sure there are no distractions around them and make sure my voice and body motions are soothing and free of tension.

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