



Use the Four D's to Help Your Dog Gain Fluency

by Terry Ryan

A dog is fluent when he can perform on cue, no matter what the circumstances. Dogs don't seem to generalize well. For example, if your dog responds well to the *Sit* cue indoors by the couch, that doesn't necessarily mean he will respond appropriately to a *Sit* cue outdoors next to another dog. You can help your dog build fluency by making sure he has the opportunity to practice the sit in many different situations.

Common criteria for building fluency in behavior begin with the letter "D." The first D stands for the **Delivery** schedule of the reward. The second represents the **Distance** the trainer is from the dog. The third is the **Duration** of the exercise. The last stands for **Diversity**, which reminds us that we need to train in different places among distractions. To keep your dog motivated to perform you need to carefully apply each of these four Ds. As you're making one D more difficult, relax the other D criteria. Doing so reduces the possibility of a failure and increases the probability for reward. Rewards drive behavior! For example, if you are working with *distractions*, decrease the *distance* you are from your dog and the *duration* or length of the exercise.

If you find your dog is not performing as expected, it may be time to go back a step or two and work on the four Ds.

Delivery Schedule of Reward

It's appropriate to begin training specific behaviors with a continuous rate of reinforcement (reward every behavior that meets criteria). Once your dog knows the response to your cue, you can start to use a variable delivery schedule to help build fluency. Play the "Sit lottery game." Start getting at least one, but no more than two free sits from your dog. That means ask for *Sit* once, release, then as for *Sit* and this time treat when your dog sits. Then ask your dog for three sits before you reward. Now start varying your schedule even more. Keep your dog guessing and mix it up: two-fers, three-fers, one-fers. Before long your dog learns to enjoy playing the lottery game. Try using the lottery game when you are working on *Sit* and *Down*.

This intermittent schedule of reinforcement is thought by many to be the best to perpetuate a learned behavior. Dogs live in a complex environment where more than one thing is happening at the same time. In this real world, as careful as a trainer might be, there will be times when the dog is *not* reinforced for each correct behavior.

You can use your delivery of reward schedule to help build a speedy response to your cue. Usually trainers want the dog's response to a cue to happen within a certain specified period of time. This is called a "limited hold." Think of our dog's wild ancestors hunting for food. When the dog sees a prey animal, he has a certain period of time to respond

(capture and eat). If the response doesn't happen quickly, the prey animal moves on, and the dog goes hungry for a while longer. The primary reinforcement (food) was not available because the response was not fast enough. Dogs catch on to limited hold quickly, and, as a bonus, they seem to be able to generalize speed of response to other exercises as well.

Distance of Trainer

If your dog will perform reliably when he is very close to you, start moving a little farther away before you give your dog a cue. As you gradually build up the distance you are away from your dog, remember to decrease the difficulty of the other Ds.

Duration of Exercise

When the dog is successful for short periods of time, try extending the exercise a little. Ping-pong back and forth on duration: your setup might be 25 seconds, then the next time 10 seconds, and next 40 seconds, and so on. By varying the duration of the sit you are also letting your dog know that the duration of the sit won't always be the same.

Diversity of Environment

If your dog performs well in his usual, calm training environment (home, local park, training class), it's time to complicate matters a little by introducing distraction and taking him to different places to practice. There are many different factors to consider when you are training. What might you be wearing when you need your dog to perform? What smells might be lingering? What noises might be around, like children playing or planes flying overhead? Sights: is your dog's best buddy (human or canine) standing nearby? What type of surface might you ask your dog to perform on? You can help your dog by setting up as many diverse environments as your imagination allows. A dog that has a wealth of experience performing for you in many different circumstances is going to be a more confident, happy dog.