

Release Cues

It is important that your dog understands a specific cue that releases him to action, usually from a control position such as sit, down and stand. (These commands should be taught so that your dog understands that he does not leave that position until he is released. An additional stay command should not be necessary). This release word should be used consistently and needs to be independent of body position and movement. What that means is, your dog should stay whether or not you start running, or moving, and the release cue should indicate it's all right to move whether or not you move. You should be able to stay perfectly still and calm, and when you use your release word, your dog moves from position.

Quiz the Release

If you think your dog already know his release word, test it now. Sit your dog next to you and move away about six feet. Return to your dog's side. If he hasn't budged, that's great! He knows his stay. Now give your release word with no physical prompts or lures. Be certain you are not leaning or twitching any part of your body before, during, or after uttering your cue word. If your dog moves from position with this totally neutral release, congratulations! Only about 17% of dogs are trained correctly to do this. If you have been pairing the release with movement, it is likely that your dog has no understanding of his verbal cue alone without your movement.

What Cue to Use?

Most of us like and use the traditional *O.K.* as a cue that allows the dog to break his position. Sometimes a common word like this can cause problems when someone else nearby uses it. Some people prefer to use less common words, such as *break*, *release*, *free* or anything else.

The Importance of Understanding

Train your dog not to move until you give him permission, and maintain your dog understands once you have trained it.

1. Give a verbal cue such as *Break* or *OK* and wait to see what your dog does.
2. This step is your dog's responsibility. He must move once you have given him a release cue. Your dog's movement after his release cue is what gives you permission to move. Do not move until he does. If he does not move he is demonstrating his lack of understanding.

Multiple Release Words

You may have more than one release cue. On a recall exercise you do not have to say, *OK*, *Front*. Simply say *Front*. Here the word *Front* is a release. Likewise the word *Heel* is also a release during obedience. Once you throw a toy for your dog, *Get It* is the release. You must be consistent with each cue and not allow the dog to release without your giving permission. A conditioned reinforcer such as a click or the words, "yes" or "good dog" should never be a release. Teach each and every release word you plan to use in training as a separate skill. Initially you can use both words together, the release word the dog knows, paired with the new one. With your dog in a sit, you drop a toy. *Get It* at this point is meaningless. So give the combined cue, *Get It, OK*. Quickly your dog will learn that the cue *Get It* always precedes *OK*, and at this point you can drop the *OK*.

Training the Release

Teach the release in the context of a game.

It's Your Choice Game

The idea is to drop a cookie on the floor near your foot and cover it quickly if your dog breaks his stay to steal it. Practice this first without your dog.

1. With the dog in a sit beside you, drop a cookie on the floor near the foot that is furthest away from your dog. If the dog breaks out of the sit, quickly cover up the cookie before the dog gets it. Take your dog by the collar and gently guide him back to his original sitting position. The worst

thing that could happen at this point is for your dog to break his stay and get the cookie, which earns him reinforcement for an inappropriate response. Once the dog learns there is no value in moving when the cookie is dropped, give him a cookie from your hand, and then pick up the cookie on the floor and feed him that as well. The lack of reinforcement teaches the dog he shouldn't move. There is no need for "aah-aah" or other punishment.

2. Drop the cookie on the floor and wait for your dog's response. You want him to look away from the cookie. If he does, mark his effort with praise and feed. Eventually shape him to look at you when the cookie falls to the floor (wait for him to look and then click and treat him). Repeat this step 5 to 7 times.
3. Once you are certain that when you drop a cookie on the floor, your dog will look at you and not try to steal it, drop a cookie on the floor, feed your dog from your hand, then give him his verbal release cue (without body motion from you). The lure of the cookie on the floor will cause him to want to break out of position. As soon as the dog gets the cookie, call him, run away, and reward him with a game of tug when he catches you. By running away as soon as he gets his cookie, you decrease his desire to hang around and "shop" on the floor. Repeat the entire sequence making sure that you pick the cookie up off the floor more often than you release the dog to it.
4. Drop the cookie on the floor and feed the dog when he looks up at you. While you are feeding the dog, bend down and pick up the cookie. Now release the dog. He will probably move toward the spot where you dropped the cookie. Reward him immediately for any movement but be certain he is not in a sit when you deliver the reward. We want to reinforce the dog for breaking position on the verbal cue, not for breaking and sitting again. Alternate between this game and allowing your dog to get the treat on the floor. Be sure to pick up the cookie off the floor more often than you release the dog to take it from the floor. You're working toward the dog being rewarded for breaking without the lure of the cookie.
5. Your dog should now be moving out of his control position with a verbal release alone. Test the dog's understanding by using fake cues (cues other than the release word). Drop the cookie on the floor and say "good boy" or "peanut butter". You want to be certain the dog has learned to release on his verbal cue and not move on the first word he hears from you. He should learn to discriminate between your talking to him or praising him and his being released.

Be consistent with the release cue around the house as well as on the practice field. Respect your verbal release cue and you will have a dog that is confident and happy to work duration on any control exercise you require for your chosen canine sport.