

Airborne K9 Homework Guide



Common Vocabulary

Markers

When using your marker words as well as using your obedience commands, it is important to remember that there are some rules when using these words in communicating with your dog. Each marker should be used in a fairly consistent neutral tone, inflection and volume.

Each marker has a specific meaning that something else is about to happen, so it is important to only say the marker once until you have performed the follow on task which will be defined below.

Be consistent with knowing what is expected of your dog following the use of each marker word and be fair in allowing or disallowing certain behaviors after each marker.

Yes - This is used as a “Positive Termination Marker.” Initially the marker begins by just signaling to our dog that they are about to receive a treat, toy, or some other type of reward. The term “Termination Marker” means that following this marker, your dog is allowed to stop doing whatever obedience they may have been given previously.

Good - “Positive Continuation Marker.” Similarly to the “Yes” marker, the word Good is used to indicate that your dog is about to receive a reward for a behavior that they have done correctly. The term “Continuation Marker” means that as your dog receives the reward they are expected to continue performing the last obedience command that they were given.

Free - Your dog’s “release marker” indicates that your dog may stop doing the last obedience command that they were given and can essentially just be a dog. Inappropriate behaviors are still not allowed while in a free, and your dog should still be restrained by the length of the leash.

No - The “Negative Marker” indicates that your dog is about to receive a negative consequence or punishment for a poor decision or an inappropriate behavior. The punishment may vary based on the situation and the behavior, but in formal training sessions or whenever your dog is on leash, this should most often mean a leash correction. (Leash corrections will be covered later in this guide)

Commands

Obedience commands are words or cues that we use to indicate to our dog that we are requiring a non-optional behavior from them. Obedience commands should only be used after the dog has learned the behavior first, enjoys performing the behavior, and has been taught the name of the behavior to a deliberate training process with a professional. All obedience commands are expected to be “until told otherwise.”

Heel - The heel command is used to require the dog to be at our side. The word heel describes a position next to our left foot. This command is most commonly used for walking with our dogs, but it also is applied when we are stationary, or to call our dogs to our side. The reason heel is used as your command for your dog to walk at your side is because if your dog is on your left side, and you are moving forward, your dog will be moving forward as well. If you come to halt while your dog is at your side, your dog is expected to stop and stay at your side.

Sit - The sit position is generally performed in the heel position. While walking with your dog, when you come a halt, your dog should learn to sit anytime you stop walking. Just like all obedience commands, sit is an implied stay command. So, if you come to a halt and tell your dog to sit, your dog should remain seated until told otherwise.

Down - The down position is clearly defined by your dog lowering their body to the ground until both elbows are touching the ground. The down position is required with the down command and is considered required “until told otherwise.”

Place - Place is the common obedience command for a general “boundary stay.” This command requires an elevated service with clearly defined edges. Generally this command is initially taught with an elevated cot or “place bed.” But can also be taught with either platforms such as soft beds, furniture, or even something as subtle as a carpet square. Be aware that the more subtle the platform, or the less defined the edges, the more challenging this command will be for the dog. The place platform and command should not be combined with any other position commands in the early stages such as sit or down.

Come - The “recall command” is used to require your dog to come to your front or heel position and remain there until told otherwise. This command can be combined with your dog’s name, and it is recommended if you have multiple dogs. The come command is initially taught with the dog just come to you and staying with you, and should be rewarded with a significantly higher value reward in the early stages. As your dog progresses, you can require a follow-on behavior to be performed when they reach you, such as a sit or heel.

Leash Management and Communication

The leash is used as a communication tool as well as a safety mechanism. The leash is used in the early stages of learning to keep the dog safe, as well as help them focus. As you learn how to use the leash as a form of communication you will use some of the following leash communication techniques.

Leash Pressure - Leash Pressure is defined as a consistent and continuous gentle leash tension in a specific direction to assist in guiding your dog to perform a target behavior. The direction of the leash pressure will be determined by the desired behavior.

Leash Nagging - Leash nagging, is a technique used to motivate a dog to perform a desired behavior that may conflict with using leash pressure. Leash nagging is a technique similar to leash pressure, but the pressure gently and repeatedly pulses continuously until the desired behavior is performed.

Leash Correction - A leash correction is always associated with a “Negative Marker” such as the word “No.” The negative marker should be given immediately when an inappropriate behavior or poor decision was made, and should be immediately followed by the leash correction. A leash correction is performed by provided a very quick and sudden ‘pop’ or tug of the leash. A leash correction cannot be properly applied while the leash is tight. The leash must be loose, then apply the sudden leash pop, followed by a loose leash again. Leash corrections should be learned during a training session with your training and should not be attempted without proper instruction first.

Canine Learning Concepts

Understanding how dogs think and learn will help you as a handler/trainer understand the training process that is developed for your dog. Some dogs may struggle with simple obedience commands more than others for a variety of reasons. Understanding what factors influence your dogs learning can help you better use your training skills to teach your dog.

Classical Conditioning - This term refers to the way our dogs develop biological and unconscious responses to specific stimuli or situations. Classically conditioned response is something that our dog has no conscious control over. Classically conditioned responses that are commonly focused on in dog training include fear, anxiety, stress, and aggression.

Operant Conditioning - You can think of this as how your dogs learn obedience. Our dogs learn that certain behaviors are beneficial because performing those behaviors gets them a reward, while other behaviors may be not in their best interest because the behaviors result in a negative consequence or punishment.

Reinforcement - Reinforcement is any consequence that comes after a behavior that will make the behavior more likely to occur in the future. In the simplest example, treats are frequently used to reinforce good behaviors such as sitting or lying down. If every time the dog sits, they receive a treat, they are likely to sit more often.

Punishment - Punishment is any undesirable consequence that occurs after a behavior that will make the behavior less likely to occur in the future.

Positive Reinforcement - The most common training feedback used by trainers to teach dogs behaviors. Positive reinforcement means that we provide our dog something that our dog wants to after a behavior to increase the likelihood that the target behavior will occur in the future.

Negative Reinforcement - When we remove something that our dog doesn't like as a consequence of a desired behavior, it increases the likelihood of the dog performing the behavior in the future.

Positive Punishment - We provide an unwanted consequence to reduce the likelihood of a behavior happening in the future.

Negative Punishment - Removing something our dog likes to reduce the likelihood of a behavior happening in the future.

	Provide or Add	Remove or Subtract
Reinforcement	R+ Positive Reinforcement	R- Negative Reinforcement
Punishment	P+ Positive Punishment	P- Negative Punishment

Examples of Operant Conditioning

Positive Reinforcement	Give your dog a treat when they sit
Negative Reinforcement	Apply leash pressure, then release the leash pressure when they sit
Positive Punishment	Give your dog a leash correction when they jump on you
Negative Punishment	Take away a dog's toy if they are playing inappropriately

Stimulus - A stimulus is anything that your dog experiences that produces a response. This can include a word or sound such as an obedience command or a marker. But it can also include situations or conditions that your dog has experienced in the past. A stimulus may be the presence of an object or person. It can also be a specific place or time of day.

Behavior - When addressing dog behavior, it is very helpful if possible to identify the stimulus that provoked the behavior in question. When we say the word “Sit,” that is a stimulus that should provoke our dog to put their rear end on the ground. If every time my dog goes into the crate or kennel he begins whining or drooling, those behaviors are associated with the stress of being in the kennel. Some dogs become very anxious when they walk into the veterinarian’s office and may begin to demonstrate stress signals. While sit is an operatively conditioned behavior, stress and anxiety are considered classically conditioned because the dog has no control over their responses.

Consequence - We use consequences to teach dogs which behaviors are desired and which are inappropriate or unwanted. Consequences are used to operantly condition appropriate and desired behaviors. Consequences cannot be used to change classically conditioned responses. When we ask our dog to sit, and they put their rear end on the ground, the consequence is often that they get a reward. In this case, the consequence is a positive consequence. If a friend visits our home and our dog jumps on them, we may use our negative marker “No” and then send our dog to their kennel for a time-out. This is a negative consequence that resulted from an inappropriate behavior.

Counter Conditioning - Counter Conditioning is used to reverse the classically conditioned responses a dog has established with a specific stimulus. While we cannot use consequences to punish or reward behaviors that result from classical conditioning, we can use “counter conditioning” to change the behaviors that occur when the target stimulus is presented. In the case of a dog who becomes anxious when they arrive at the vet’s office, we can change how our dog feels about the situation by creating a positive association and reducing the negative association with the stimulus of that location. We can make several trips to the vet’s office where we simply walk in, give our dog a very high value treat or reward, and immediately walk back out. With enough repetition our dog can start to develop a very positive association with walking into the veterinarian’s office.

Desensitization - This is the process by which we can prevent or reduce the likelihood of our dog developing a negative or unwanted classical response to a specific situation. Desensitization is best initiated prior to the dog being required to be exposed to a specific situation. Before our dog’s first vet visit, we can make a few trips to the vet’s office and pair the experience with a lot of high value rewards and treats before our dog maybe needs to get some vaccinations or an invasive exam. First impressions can often be lasting impressions so we always want our dog’s first impression of a new experience to be a very positive one, especially with situations that are commonly known to be challenging for a large number of dogs.

Learning Stages

Stage 1: Acquisition or Showing

When we first want to begin teaching our dog a brand new behavior, a common mistake novice or inexperienced trainers make is giving our dog the command before the dog knows how to perform the behavior. In the first stage of learning, we want to encourage or assist our dog in performing the behavior without asking or telling them to do so. If the behavior is something simple like “look at me” we can encourage our dog to do this by making interesting noises or

sounds that get our dog's attention. When our dog does the target behavior, in this case, makes eye contact, we can capture the behavior with our positive marker and provide our dog with a reward to reinforce the behavior.

Stage 2: Automatic or Fluency

During the first stage of learning, our dog repeatedly experiences that when they perform a specific behavior, they get something that they want like food or a toy. The dog will likely begin to associate the specific behavior with the reward. When this association is made, the dog will often begin to offer the target behavior specifically to solicit a reward. This is the second stage of learning when the dog understands that a specific behavior produces a positive result or reward.

Stage 3: Application or Generalization

Once the dog is predictably offering the desired behavior where we are confidently able to capture with rewards this is when we are able to begin to teach our dog what the behavior is called. When we begin using the name of the behavior or the command, it is important to realize that the dog does not know what it means, and we must go through the process of developing the association of the word or sound, followed by the behavior produces a reward. Once the dog confidently understand the pattern between the word, followed by the behavior produces a word, we can conclude that the dog understands the association and the command.

Stage 4: Always or Maintenance

The maintenance stage of learning is the lifelong consistency that we provide our dogs for their decisions to perform the required behaviors and the consequences that occur for the failure to perform the behavior. It is through the process of providing consistent and productive feedback that our dogs understand that our dogs learn that behaviors are to be performed on the first command, every time, and until told otherwise.

The Big Three

“The Big Three” concepts are the essential things that need to be utilized during training for dogs to effectively learn new skills.

Timing - Dogs have a very short window of time to associate a behavior or decision with the consequences of their actions. As we have learned, we can better capture target behaviors using our positive and negative markers as we discussed previously, however the precision of our markers is just as important as the reward or punishment that follows.

Consistency - Our dog's learn and understand best when the rules and communication is applied consistently. If we are inconsistent in correcting our dog's unacceptable behaviors, they may learn that its like playing the lottery, where sometimes they win, and sometimes they loose, and it may very well be worth the risk. However, if our dogs learn through our consistency that when it comes to unacceptable behaviors that they NEVER win, then they will eventually stop attempting the behavior all together.

Motivation - Just like humans, dogs don't work for free. Ideally, we want our dogs to want to work for us, and while it is a lovely notion to think that they would want to work for us because they love us, let's be realistic. Dogs are opportunistic animals and are always making decisions that will get them something that they want. Not all dogs love treats, and many dogs aren't super excited for toys. The challenge for you as the trainer is to determine what motivates the dog in front of you and figure out how to get them to work for it!

The Three D's

The “Three D’s” are what make the difference between teaching a dog to sit, and teaching a dog to sit reliably! Once our dogs understand what a command means, it is now our job to teach our dogs that the command means the same thing no matter how far away you are, no matter what else is going on around us, and the command applies until told otherwise.

Distance, Duration, and Distraction

Distance

Distance is most commonly associated with giving a command like sit or down, and then moving away from our dogs. Many novice trainers or beginners will often use the term “stay” for this activity. We prefer to teach our dogs that the original command (Sit, down, stand) applies until I tell you to do something else, so the *stay* is implied and we don’t need to say stay.

Distance can also apply to how far away you are from your dog when you give a command such as recall. But it can also apply to things like changes of position. If your dog is in a sit about six feet away from you, can you tell them to go into a down position from there, or do you need to work up to that?

Duration

Duration applies to the amount of time our dog can continue a specific behavior without necessarily being reminded. This could apply to how long our dog will hold a sit or a down on one command, or how long our dog will continue to heel politely at our side.

Distraction

Its pretty easy to teach a dog how to sit in the quiet, calm space in our living room, but once we begin to add in distractions, it will be much more challenging for our dog to remember how to do the behavior. Distracts can be anything that may divert your dogs attention. This could be you as the handler moving around or making noises. It could be toys or food on the ground. It could even be natural distractions like the wind, butterflies, or leaves blowing across the yard.

Increase the Three Ds Gradually

When your dog learns a command and you want to start increasing their fluency by increasing the distance, duration, and distractions in your training, remember to take it slow. We only want to challenge our dog as far as they can still be successful, not so far as to see where they fail.

Training Schedules

Knowing how much, how often, and how long to train at home can be a challenge for many inexperienced dog trainers. Ideally, we want to train as efficiently as possible. That means that the dog is achieving the most learning with us putting in the least amount of time and work.

Keep It Short!

Dogs naturally have short attention spans for learning new skills or performing challenging or problem solving activities. This means that we cannot expect our dogs to learn during a marathon training session like we would cram last minute the night before a test.

For dogs newer to a training regiment or routine, they don't necessarily start the training session with much enthusiasm, especially when trying to figure out a new skill or task. However, there is a certain point when they begin to understand the objective of the training session. They begin being able to meet the training objectives more fluently and therefore earn them rewards more! This is a great place to end your training session!

Don't Train Too Long

If you continue training beyond this point, your dog may become bored knowing what the skill is and knowing how to achieve it. Or they may become uninterested in the reward. For example, they may become full and no longer want treats, or they may start to become tired and not want their toy any longer.

Lasting Impressions

A simple thing to keep in mind is that we want our dogs going into their kennels thinking about the last thing that they did before they went in. This means we want them going into their kennel thinking about how much fun their training session was, or thinking about how they finally understand what we were trying to teach them.

We want to end our training sessions as soon as our dog begins to demonstrate the understanding of the behavior and begins being able to perform the behavior fluently because that is generally when they are enjoying the session the most! When we finish our training session, our dog should go back into their kennel for at least a short time to rest.

This rest time in the kennel is critical because it actually gives our dogs the opportunity to think. We want our dogs to be calm and actually somewhat bored in the kennel. We always want our training sessions to be something our dogs look forward to, and in comparison to being in the kennel, a great training session can definitely be a pleasant change!

Set Goals and Benchmarks

It's always more fun to work on the things our dogs are already good at, but we know that we still have to dedicate time to the things our dogs struggle with. Keep in mind your long term goals for your dog. These will help guide the direction you want to take with your training.

If your long term goal for your dog is to be able to go hiking off-leash, then having a very reliable recall is likely to be more important than a long sit-stay. If you'd like to take your dog to a pet friendly cafe to enjoy a cup of coffee in the mornings, then a long reliable down-stay will be more important.

Whatever your goals are, work towards them incrementally by slowly increasing the "Three Ds" when working on your desired behaviors. It can be helpful to keep track of your dog's progress and their successes in a training log or journal.