

Teaching the “Trade” Cue



In teaching your dog “Trade,” you are promising to give him something of value in exchange for the valuable item he has in his mouth. (Cat poop may be abhorrent to humans, but it is of very high value to many dogs!) Here’s how to teach “Trade.”

1. Say “Take it!” and give your dog a low-value object.

Offer your dog something he will easily and willingly give up in exchange for the high-value treat you will offer him next. (If his first instinct is to take the item and run, you may need to put a leash on him and step on the leash or tether him to something solid, so he can’t run off with the item before he realizes there are more potential benefits to this negotiation!)

2. Offer your dog some high-value treats.

You may need to hold the treats close enough to his nose that he can smell them, but don’t try to push them into his mouth; anything that resembles coercion will likely increase his resistance. Make sure you have a large enough supply of the high-value treats that it will take him a few moments to eat them.

If he doesn’t drop the object he has in his mouth in favor of your treats, you need a higher-value treat (think meat, not dry biscuits) and/or a lower-value item to trade for.

Notice you didn’t use a cue yet. We don’t add the cue until we know the dog will drop the item.

3. When your dog drops the item:

Click your clicker (or use a mouth click or verbal marker, such as the word “Yes!”), and while you keep him occupied nibbling at the high-value treats in one hand, with your other hand, pick up the object and hide it behind your back. This part is really important. You must use two hands! If you let him eat the high-value treat and then try to race him back to the object, you’re likely to lose the race – and you may elicit resource-guarding.

If you feel at all uncomfortable reaching for the item as your dog munches on the treats, you can sprinkle the treats in a short “Hansel and Gretel” trail, starting under his nose and leading to a spot a foot or two away from the dropped item. Engage his mouth with the treats in your hand after he follows the trail, while you pick up the item with your other hand.

4. As soon as your dog finishes eating the treats in your hand:

Bring out the object from behind your back, say, “Take it!” and give it back to him. This teaches him that he doesn’t always lose the item; he can trade with you and then get the item right back. This will make him more willing to trade again in the future. He gives you his good stuff, he gets more good stuff, and then he gets good stuff back again. It’s a win/win for him!

5. When you can reliably predict that your dog will drop the item when you offer your treats, add the cue.

Give your cue first (“Trade!”), and pause for a second or two. Then offer the treats, click (or say “Yes!”) when he drops the item, and pick up the item with your free hand while you keep his mouth busy nibbling treats from your hand.

6. After several repetitions, sometimes pause a few seconds longer before offering your dog treats.

Your goal is to get him to drop the object when you say, “Trade!” before you offer the treats. When he will do this reliably, it means you have the behavior “on cue” – that is, he is dropping the object because he heard and understood the cue, not just because you stuck high-value treats under his nose.

While ideally you will always have something in hand (or in pocket) to offer your dog in trade, if you train this behavior well enough and practice it often, in an emergency your dog will still give up that poisonous mushroom (or whatever) when he hears the “Trade!” cue. This is most likely to work if you use your cheerful “training game” voice and not an “Omigosh, it’s an emergency” panicked voice. Your training diligence might even save your dog’s life!