**The WATCH Cue**

Right - so now let’s start with the first cue that you will be teaching your dog today in

order to get your dog to be as well-behaved as a service dog, which is the WATCH cue.

The standard for the watch cue is: “drop what you’re doing, and give me eye contact”.

This cue is the foundation of all training. It is more important than most of the other cues

out there, perhaps even more so than a dog learning its name. Why? Because, to a dog,

eye contact is the most powerful form of communication. Dogs naturally use eye

contact to communicate with each other, especially when it comes to serious matters. To

improve how you communicate with your dog, spend time watching them, so that you

can then mimic them.

One reason why service dog trainers are so successful is because they understand that

forming a bond with the dog they are training is the very first step in building a positive

relationship. By asking for eye contact, and then giving the dog a treat every time they

make eye contact, the dog is consistently being rewarded for engaging with the trainer.

In no time at all, the service dog trainer will have established a positive bond with the dog.

The dog will be thinking, “each time I look this person in the eye, I get a treat”, and it won’t

be long before the dog starts constantly staring their trainer in the eye, trying to earn a

treat. When a dog is making eye contact, this shows that they aren’t being distracted by

all of the other things in the environment around them, because the reward beats all of

that. This is the goal - to be the most important thing in the environment to your dog.

Eye contact is a sign that your dog is asking you to be their leader…to tell them what their

next job should be. This means that your dog truly trusts you, along with the decisions

you make for them, and this level of trust is exactly what you need to strengthen that

human-animal bond. Plus, if your dog is spending most of their time trying to make eye

contact with you, then this means that they aren’t getting into any trouble!

Now, most people are under the misconception that the most important cue a dog

should learn is their name. However, a dog’s name is quickly devalued as a word in itself.

People will often say their dog’s name, but then do nothing when their dog responds.

After all, a dog’s name isn’t actually a cue…it’s a noun. Cues are usually verbs, meaning that you’re asking your dog to do something, and your dog’s name should be said before

the cue. For example, “Rover, sit.”

Another common misconception is that looking a dog in the eye means that you are

challenging them in an aggressive or dominant way. Ok, so this might be true if someone

were to just stare down a dog that they have never met before, without a treat or an

incentive in their hand. The dog would be confused, not knowing the context of that

stare, and would most likely look away, simply out of discomfort. However, if the dog

you’re staring down starts to feel unsafe or cornered, then they could take this stare as a

challenge. This is why it is so important to consistently reward your dog when practicing

eye contact as a training cue. This will show your dog that the eye contact you’re making

is friendly. Treats are the best thing to use for this, to really emphasize that you come

bearing gifts!

Learning the “watch” cue is easy and fun for dogs, making it a great way to establish

leadership, build trust, and generally show your dog that you are completely worthy of

their undivided attention. Once your dog fully understands this cue, they will interpret it

to mean “drop what you’re doing and give me eye contact immediately”.

As always, to set your dog up for success, begin teaching all new cues in an area that is

completely free from distractions. Just like when it comes to kids and homework,

information gets absorbed so much better when the brain isn’t competing with anything

else.

So to teach this cue, please follow these steps:

1. The first step is to hold a treat in your fingers.

2. Then, move the treat so that it’s right in front of your dog’s nose.

3. Then, move the treat towards your eyes.

4. As soon as your dog looks at your face, give the treat, but don’t say anything. At

this point in time, we are simply defining the cue - we’re not giving it a name just yet.

Repeat this exercise ten times, asking yourself this:

“Is my dog making eye contact 8 out of the 10 times they’re looking at my face?” If your answer is yes, it’s time to advance on with this cue. If your answer is no, do three

more training sessions, each one following the steps earlier 10 times in a row. Only once

you have an 80%, or higher, success rate from your dog are they ready to move on in

difficulty.

So how do you increase the difficulty of this cue?

You now need to wait for your dog to look you in the eye, rather than just looking at your

face, before rewarding them. The end goal is for your dog to look you directly in the eyes

each and every time they look over at you. Try to practice this three times a day,

following the exercise ten times each time. If, by the third training session, your dog is

giving you eye contact quickly and consistently…congratulations! You are halfway to

teaching the “watch” cue.

Once your dog is quickly and consistently giving you eye contact each time you show

them the treat, you can then add in a verbal cue. Let’s use the word “watch”.

1. As your dog makes eye contact and you are handing the treat over, say “watch”.

2. Repeat this in three separate training sessions, doing it ten times in a row. Make

sure you use the verbal command “watch” at the exact moment you are handing the

treat over. DO NOT say it before you give the treat, as your dog still needs to learn

exactly what the word “watch” means.

To advance this behavior inside your home, the first thing that you can do is add in some

distractions. Different rooms will have different levels of distraction, depending on what

usually takes place in that room. Once your dog is successful in one room, you can move

to the next and practice there. This increases the difficulty of the training. You can also

practice the “watch” cue in real-life scenarios, using their regular meal as their reward. All

you need to do is say the cue word and engage in eye contact before placing their bowl

down. Start doing this at random times during the day, asking your dog to “watch” when

they want a belly rub, or to play - this gives you the opportunity to use the petting or a

toy as the reward for making eye contact.

The key here is to remember to be patient - don’t try to move through these steps too

quickly. If your dog fails to give you eye contact in a certain location or situation, back up.

Repeat the cue again in places where your dog has already been successful in the past,

as this will build their confidence back up and reinforce exactly what they need to do to

earn the reward.