

Teaching ‘Speak’ and ‘Quiet’

By Sherry Woodard

Why would you want to teach your dog to “speak” (bark)? Well, teaching a dog to bark on cue can actually help control excessive barking. Plus, barking is one way for dogs to express themselves.

It’s a good idea to teach “quiet” first, though, especially if your dog is very talkative. Have a supply of soft, small yummy treats at the ready. You can teach “quiet” by rewarding the dog with a treat between barks. You want to be clear that you are rewarding the quiet, not a bark, so use a marker — a clicker or your voice saying “yes” — at the quiet moment. Start by rewarding a quiet moment, then reward for longer and longer periods of quiet.

Add a verbal cue (“quiet,” for instance) once the dog is consistently giving you the behavior you want. If you start giving the cue before the animal is doing the behavior, the dog may not associate the cue with the behavior. Instead, get the behavior first and then start giving the cue while the dog performs the behavior. Gradually move the cue back in time until you are giving the cue before the behavior. If done correctly, this is an easy way for the animal to learn that a particular cue is associated with a particular behavior. Your dog will learn that if you give the cue “quiet,” she will only be rewarded if she doesn’t make a sound.

To teach “speak,” I often have another dog act as a role model. This technique works amazingly fast if you are rewarding the “speaking” dog with treats. Tether both dogs and stand in front of them so you can be ready to reward the “speaking” behavior from each dog.



If you do not have a role model who speaks, start by tethering your dog and standing in front of her.

Show the dog the treat and wave it close enough for the smell to be enticing.

Most dogs will then start offering any behaviors that have been rewarded in the past (sit, down). Others may wiggle and seem confused. Give the dog time to become slightly frustrated. It doesn’t take more than a minute for most dogs. If the dog makes any sound — a whine or a yip — give her a marker (a click from a clicker or a verbal “yes”) to mark that moment, then reward her with a treat.

Step back and wait again. I reward for any sound for about five repetitions, then I wait for more sound. If I don’t get a bark but do have more vocalizing, I continue to reward the dog. As with teaching “quiet,” get the behavior first and then start giving a cue (e.g., “speak”) while the dog performs the desired behavior. Gradually move the cue back in time until you are giving the cue before the dog barks.

I have met many people who say they will never again teach a dog to speak because their

dog started barking all the time, as a way of requesting treats. If you want your dog to speak on cue, reward her for speaking only when you have asked her to speak. Ignore any unsolicited barking: Turn your body away or walk away.

To increase your rate of success, practice both of these cues often and remember to keep it fun. Talkative dogs love to interact! With that said, I do meet dogs who are not barkers. If your dog is not enjoying learning to speak, I suggest that you move on to something both you and your dog will enjoy.

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: [Why We Use Relationship-Based Training](#)
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