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## Dog Talk: Keep It Simple

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By Margaret Littman

There is little that is more frustrating for a dog owner than trying to get your dog to listen to you in the heat of the moment — before he grabs your dinner off the counter or jumps on Aunt Alice when she walks in the door — and having your command words go unheeded.

Everything you've been told is true: Consistency, practice and patience are crucial in teaching Fido commands. But trainers, behaviorists and researchers have also found that there may be certain words — or more precisely, specific sounds and speech patterns — that are easier for dogs to discern than others.

"I don't want to say that dogs can't learn any word you want to teach them, but they certainly are better equipped to respond to certain sounds," says Dr. Pamela Reid, vice president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals located at the Animal Behavior Center in Urbana, Illinois.

### Sound associations

When Beth Shaw, a Torrance, California-based yoga teacher, says two little words, "Palm Springs," her three dogs go nuts. Their excitement level rises and they race for the car. Of course, they don't know Palm Springs is a golf town two hours east of Torrance. But Shaw has taught the dogs that when she says those words, they get to go on vacation with her. In fact, Shaw's dogs have a "vocabulary" of more than 50 words, ranging from "bone" to "flashlight."

"No sound has a value until the dog knows what that sound means," says Jim Burwell, owner of Petiquette, a Houston, Texas-based dog training firm. It takes conditioning for a dog to associate the sound of the cookie jar with the fact that he'll receive a treat. Shaw's dogs only learned "Palm Springs" after repeated conditioning. In addition to repetition and conditioning, there are verbal tricks you can employ to help your dog succeed in learning to speak your language.

### **Building your dog's vocabulary**

Reid says dogs learn and respond to the beginning of a word first. If Rover hits the floor when you say "down," it's likely that he's starting to move his paws just based on the "d" sound. To differentiate between "sit" and "stay," he'll have to listen to more of the word. "Dogs are good at anticipating," says Reid. "They try to guess what we want."

Also, make sure your use of the words is clear. For example, Burwell says, "Never tell a dog to 'sit down.' That's two commands, 'sit' and 'down.' That can be confusing."

Jamie Damato, a certified pet dog trainer and the owner of AnimalSense, a Chicago-based dog-training company, thinks the most important word is the one used for the recall command — whatever you use to get your dog to come to you. That's the command that can avert disaster, keeping your dog out of the street or stopping him from running away.

"The best word is one that has a good association with it. 'Yahoo' or 'Yippee' are fun words to say. You cannot be upset when you say them," says Damato. By using a positive recall word, you can make sure that whenever you call your dog, you'll sound upbeat — someone to whom he'll want to run.

The old-school recall word, "come," has fallen out of use among trainers, because it is so often used in everyday conversation. A unique recall word, something you hardly ever use in other contexts, is best for keeping the word pure.

### **How you say it counts**

The way in which you say a word is just as important as what the word is. Burwell says that higher-pitched, happy words work best for behavior you are encouraging, and short, bark-like sounds work best for behaviors you are discouraging.

In her book "The Other End of the Leash" (Ballantine Books, 2002), Patricia B. McConnell suggests thinking about the sounds your words make and the commands you're associating with them. Crisp, short sounds ("no") are best used for getting your dog to stop doing something, while longer words with more soothing sounds ("goooooood") are better for praise or encouraging your dog. This is yet another reason why "come" is not the best choice for a recall word.

Such linguistics can also apply to what you name your dog. In a survey conducted by the ASPCA, "Max," "Sam" and "Buddy" rank among the top-10 dog names in the country. Burwell says those kinds of short, one- or two-syllable words are best for dog names. Again, they should be sounds you can say with excitement and sounds that can't be easily confused with other words. For instance, Burwell is not fond of the common name "Beau," because it sounds so much like "no." When it comes to your best friend, he says, "You want happy tones that tend to flow off the tongue."

*Margaret Littman is the author of "The Dog Lover's Companion to Chicago," now in its second edition, and she contributed to the "Woman's Best Friend: Women Writers on the Dogs in their Lives" and "Cat Women: Female Writers on Their Feline Friends" anthologies.*