



How to say, “Good dog.”

Praising your dog is an *art* that is often lost on beginners in a craft dominated by sterile talk of “reinforcers,” “high-value rewards,” and “existential motivators.” The purpose of this handout is to get you thinking about the various ways your praising actions can influence your dog’s working character to more closely match your mental picture of what a trained dog looks like.

Words of Approval

Words of Approval are what most people think of when they imagine praising a dog. The archetypal, “Oh what a GOOD DOGGIE!” expressed with a sugary, high pitched, baby-talking tone tells your dog, “*I like what you are doing.*” Notice that the emphasis on the handler’s attitude about the dog’s actions makes the rewarding character of this praising action dependent on the handler’s emotional state. This means that Words of Approval are only rewarding to a dog who already *cares* about the handler’s feelings, and a relationship already needs to have been established with the dog in order for the handler’s Words of Approval to be meaningful.

Words of Approval can be useful with puppies and in the initial teaching phase of Novice obedience when a dog is still being shown how to find a position. However, overuse of the baby-talking tone will cause a dog with a nice, stable temperament to become inappropriately dependent on the handler’s emotional state, creating unnecessary anxiety after corrections and attention-seeking behaviors outside the training context. Furthermore, a serious or purpose-minded dog may actually regard the flattering connotation of Words of Approval with suspicion, impeding the process of establishing a respectful working relationship with the dog.

In general, after a dog has clearly demonstrated that he knows what is expected of him, we want to avoid the use of Words of Approval in training.

Words of Encouragement

Words of Encouragement tell your dog, “*You got this, keep going!*” Speaking to your dog in a bright, supportive tone while helping him through a new exercise or in a challenging environment builds a strong, response-able, independent character and inspires him to find real joy in the exercise itself, rather than your opinion of his performance. Patting the leg while heeling, whistling, clapping your hands, snapping your fingers, clucking/clicking with the mouth, and moving with a self-assured, confident air also encourage your dog to find *internal motivation* in the work itself, stimulating a cheerful, level-headed attitude about obedience.

The most important thing to remember about Words of Encouragement, as with Words of Recognition, is that they have to come from a genuine place of assured self-confidence. Thousands of years of selection have made your dog specially attuned to recognize and mirror your emotional state, and a dog will easily see through dishonest Words of Encouragement. If you feel nervous or doubting of your own or your dog’s ability to accomplish the task at hand, you probably need to take a step back and honestly evaluate whether you have sufficiently prepared yourselves for the level of pressure you’ve placed yourselves in. If you find that you’re asking too much of yourself or your dog, backtrack and focus on fundamentals until you feel calm, cool, and collected enough to re-approach the scenario.

Words of Encouragement approximate what are sometimes called “continuation markers” in training. They are particularly helpful for building duration on the STAY and HEEL exercises, or when the appearance of an unplanned-for distraction threatens to take your dog off-task. However, as with any reward, don’t expect them to do the heavy-lifting for your dog, and don’t overuse them to the point where they either become meaningless or the dog becomes dependent on them to accomplish simple tasks. On new exercises, work to fade the use of your Words of Encouragement in-line with the schedule established by your adherence to the 80/20 Rule.

Words of Recognition

Words of Recognition are reserved for occasions where a dog’s response-able, committed accomplishment of a task *genuinely impresses* you. “Good JOB, Joe!” expressed with the same legitimate acknowledging tone with which you might congratulate a dear friend or colleague tells your dog, “*You know that was awesome, and I saw it too.*”

Words of Recognition are the hardest praising action to get right, and the most effective when properly deployed. They should have *nothing* of the happy-happy-good-puppy tone of Words of Approval, even if lexically the vocabulary employed is exactly the same. “Good lad!” spoken by one who truly understands the use of Words of Recognition sounds *completely different to the dog* than “Good lad!” by someone who only knows how to express approval. Be very careful that you do not confuse the two.

Words of Recognition afford the greatest variation of expression in praising. A simple, “Good work,” to a dog whose practiced accomplishment of the Auto-Sit in the face of a low to medium-level distraction lets him know that you’re watching what he’s doing and noting his successes, whereas a deeply-awed, “THAT’LL DO!” to the dog who just completed a long retrieve under challenging conditions instills in him a greater love for the work he was genetically selected to perform.

There is perhaps no reward more powerful for a dog who genuinely loves his work than the recognition of his accomplishments by someone he truly respects. Recognition assures the dog that his honest efforts do not go unheeded, and develop a deep motivation in him for more, more, MORE.

When you know how and when to successfully deploy Words of Recognition, the sky is the limit with what you can accomplish with your dog.

A Note About Physical Praise

Many (but not all) dogs find stroking, petting, patting, massaging, and scratching to be pleasant and rewarding experiences in-and-of themselves. Just like with verbal praise, there is a wide spectrum to physical praising. Some types of physical praise will work to excite a dog and bring him “up,” while others are more relaxing and calming. The particulars of what kinds of physical praise your dog finds rewarding will be dependent on his upbringing, breed, coat type, and training history, but in general we want to match our physical praising actions with our verbal praise. Doing so will help strengthen the dog’s associations with your various Words of Praise, and add a tactile dimension to your training vocabulary that allows for more meaningful and varied communication.

As with everything we employ, the Goldilocks Principle maximizes effectiveness and minimizes redundancy:

*Not enough won’t produce the desired result;
More than enough may produce an unintended result;
Just enough will produce the desired result.*