

# 10 Ways To Teach A Dog To Lay Down And How To Shape It Without Luring

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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SG First of all, why would you even want to teach a dog down? Like, why do you care? The dog can sit. They can stand. They can down. It's just a family pet. Why do I care? Well, you want to care number one, because it's a great behavior for your dog. If you're out walking, you want to stop and chat to someone, just tell your dog to relax. They can lie down there.

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It also could save the dog's life. If your dog's out running loose and you don't realize there's a car coming you could just say, "lie down". Boom, the dog hits the deck. Also, it's a great behavior for taking pictures of your dog so there's an added benefit. And you're going to find you're going to use that position for your dog, you have a dog that reliably downs and [stays in that position](#) until you release them. You're going to find you'll use that a lot in your lifetime.

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So, I think everybody who has a dog really should spend the time to teach them to down. But how do you teach them? I decided there's 10 different ways, probably more but 10 uniquely different ways people could teach a dog to down. And many of which I would never use. I went looking on Google to see if anybody teaches a down the way I do. And lo and behold, I could not find any reference to the way I've been teaching down for 25 years. So, I thought, "Hey I think this is something people should know about."

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So, let's jump into it. Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. As I said, 10 ways that I came up with, different, unique ways that people might choose to teach a dog. The first four that I came up with, I don't even want to mention, they involve things like collar pops or pushing on the shoulders or pulling out legs or any combination of those things.

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And guess what, if anybody ever tells you that your dog needs that, run. Run in the opposite direction because it's barbaric thinking. And I think it's just classically disrespectful to dogs and completely unnecessary. Think about this. Would you be more inclined to consistently do something because you had to for threat of losing your job or getting in trouble? Or would you rather want to do something because you love to do it?

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I personally think having a dog that drops reliably every time you ask is more likely because the dog's engaged. They get buy-in, they want to do it. They're fast. They're immediate, they're engaged. They're joyful. Why does obeying have to involve submitting? It doesn't. That's what training the way that I'm suggesting is, it's engaging to the dog so therefore it's reliable long-term. Because it's their choice. But guess what, you do it right the dog's always going to want to do it. So, the first four ways of teaching a down, I would advise you don't even think about. The number five on my list is probably the most common way most people teach a down.



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And that is with getting a cookie, putting one on your dog's nose and luring them into a down. And you know you may or may not be saying, "down, down, down, down, down". Most people will tell you to do that. Again really, really bad advice. And the last time I taught a down using a lure was with my puppy in 1992. So that was, hey this is 2022 so that was 30 years ago was the last time that I use a food lure to train a down. Let's say that's a bit of a celebration. So, know what I'm going to teach you today does not involve using food lure.

You know, and it's not bad, it's not wrong if you do. But there's artifacts in the behavior that you have to get rid of. You have to get rid of the shadowing of your body. The dog, you know, building on different things. And obviously you have to be able to fade the food lure and because the dog is just going to be popping up, looking for more food is among other reasons why I it's just not something that I ever do.

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Number six, you could capture it. So, you look around the house to when your dog's lying down, and you could run in and give them cookies and tell them they're amazing. That's really going to take you a long time. It'll work eventually, but it's probably going to take you a long time to get that. Number seven, you could free shape, which means you could have a bowl of cookies and a clicker, and you could just click pieces of a behavior that leads you to getting your dog into a down position.

Now a problem with free shaping is you might get some cheap behaviors attached to it. You might get the dog spinning or the dog going into a sit and then walking into a down. I don't think it as engaged for the dog. I don't think you're likely to get fast downs when you're teaching with free shaping. I'm not saying it's impossible because there's a lot of clever dog trainers that might, but it's not one that I would do. Number eight and this is a method I have used.

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I've used this one with my, one of my Terriers, because I had a problem getting her to want to go into a down. Now this was again, 30 years ago. So, I don't know that I would use this again, but I wouldn't rule it out. And that is shaping a dog, I would sit on the floor with my knees bent and I would use a [target stick](#) to get them to go under my knee.

When they got under my knee, then I would just give them cookies. I think I have done this with Border Collies as well. It's just a fun and different way you can try it to teach a down. And it involves lots of cookies. It does take a little bit longer, I think. Yeah, it's a fun trick. You might want to try it. So, using a target stick, getting the dog to go under your leg and then eventually you have to fade out the leg, right. And the dog is still laying in the down. Number nine is using that target stick, on my YouTube channel you will find a video where I teach you [how to teach targeting with a target stick](#) among other things. So, you teach a dog to touch their nose to the stick and you can make up your own stick with like a wooden dowel and put a little wiffle ball on the end. Then teach the dog to touch the wiffle ball and then lower the wiffle ball between the dog's front legs.

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You're going to click and reward them maybe partway down, and eventually they're going to go into the ground, and you're going to reward that and give them release. Keep repeating that. That's an easy way to teach a down behavior. And it's not one that I really use. What I do mostly is number 10, and that is I use targets. I use paw targets or body targets. That is how I teach my dogs the fast and reliable and driven and crazy 'I really want to get into that position'.



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But before we begin, if you are listening to this podcast you might want to jump on over to YouTube at some point. Because as I describe each of this targeting methods, I'm going to show a demonstration in the video on YouTube. And if you are watching this on YouTube and you'd like a little bit more detail about any one of this 4 targeting methods, just leave me a comment and I can shoot you a short video describing in more detail any one of the methods you'd like to know more about. Okay.

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And so, let's jump in and there's more than one target. There's four different ways that I will do this. And some dogs prefer to use a tug reward. Some dogs prefer to use a food reward. I'm going to share with you exactly what that looks like for your dog. So, teaching the downs with targets.

There's some prerequisite. First of all, your dog needs to understand the ItsYerChoice game. Because we want the dog to not be diving at your hands for cookies and lucky you, I'm going to give you a link in the show notes or a description here on YouTube of how you can teach your dog the ItsYerChoice game.

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Remember, I want my dogs down to be their choice. ItsYerChoice is really the foundation of everything I do with my dogs. So, they understand you have the right to choose. But if I'm doing my job as a trainer, I'm going to inspire you to want to choose exactly what I want you to do.

So, ItsYerChoice, number one criteria. Number two criteria is a release word. Here's what most people do. They spend all the time luring the dogs to the ground or getting the dog to the ground. They don't teach the dog when they can get up. So, what they get is as soon as they eat the cookie that dog pops up. I want the dog to understand the release words first.

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So, I have three release words that I use. And again, you can find out how I [teach them on my YouTube channel](#). So, the first one is "search". When I say search to my dog, that means you can go and find the cookie that I just threw. So super important that they are looking for a cookie when they hear the word search.

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Number two, I teach the word "break" and I've got podcast [episode number 134](#) where I talked about control behaviors. I go into detail about how I teach break but really, I teach it in [Crate Games](#). My puppies are raised with crate games. And so, they have such clear understanding of that release word.

If you're using a word like "okay" I strongly encourage you to change it to a word that you don't use as often as okay because it gets really difficult for the dog to understand, is it okay if I leave now or not? So please, you don't have to use break, but I would encourage you to use a different word.

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So, we've got 'search' means you can go and find cookies. 'Break' means you can get up and you know come and hang out with me or do what you want and "get it". Get it is a release word that means grab this toy. Now you can throw the toy, or you can present it to the dog, but it means you now can get out of position. Now, why do we care if we have these release words? It makes teaching the down so much easier because we build in duration right at the beginning.



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So, the dog understands the down isn't just pop up like a Jack in the box. A down is hold position. That's the game hold position. And I can use a tug toy as a little temptation for them to want to hold position or my cookies as a temptation. So really dial in your release word first. So, ItsYerChoice is the first criteria. Second criteria is the dog's understanding of a release word.

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Next up is the cue. Think about the cue that you would like to use for the dog's down position. Now 'down' sounds like a good cue. That's the one I use with my dogs. But I want you to consider, do you use down in other instances with your dog? Like for example, are you one of the people that are inclined to say, "sit down". If you're cue to sit is 'sit down', then don't use down for getting your butt all the way flat on the ground with your chest hitting the ground. So, sit down can be sit, but we need something else for down.

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If you are inclined to when your dog gets their [paws up on the counter](#) which you know if you're watching our podcast or if you're following along on our podcasts, hopefully that's not happening anymore. Or if they're on the furniture and you want them not on the furniture and you say the phrase "get down" which by the way that's just a cue to boogie on a Saturday night, isn't it? I digress. But if you use 'get down', don't use down here. So, what are the alternates you could use? You could use "drop" which just means you know, go into a down position.

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A lot of people use the German cue "platz" or the French cue "couché". So, you could use any of those or make something up as long as it's unique and you will get it. So, pick your cue before you get too far along. Now, when I teach down, I teach three different positions. The first one is 'prone'. So, the dog is lying with their chest on the ground, some people call it a sphinx position where their hips are, and their hocks are all aligned. That's one position. Then there is a 'rolled' or 'relaxed' where the dogs rolled off on their hip. They can hold that position much longer. If you see a dog just laying around the living room, chances are they're in that rolled position.

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The third position is what I call the 'flop' position. And it's a position that we use for a husbandry, consent to cut our dog's nails as I spoke about on [podcast episode 107](#).

And that is a position where our dog is completely relaxed, fully laying out on their side. We're going to start with position one, the sphinx position. That's what I'm going to teach, and they can be morphed into either or those other ones. But we start with that sphinx position first.

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We're gonna start training. First thing you got to [keep in mind, DASH](#). Whenever we're training, the first thing we do is we get our dog's desire to work. We don't try to teach anything. We want them to be engaged with us. That could be a quick game of a tug. It could be a game where your dog's chasing cookies and chasing you, but we want them engaged before we present the target that we want them to use to learn their down. We don't want a dog to learn to down slow. I mean, Tater Salad when he came to us, his down was, you'd ask him to down he'd sit. He'd navel gaze. He'd walk his paws out slowly.



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It took a while before Kim, and I cared and now we're retraining it exactly the way I'm teaching you today with the target. So, we want it fast. So, you need to start with engagement the D of DASH before we moved to the A - the accuracy. And this is what it looks like.

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So, for me, what I often do is I use a low table. So, an agility table or something, a prop like a Cato Board. I recognize many of you listening aren't going to have either, that's okay. I'm just sharing with you this is something that I often do. And what I do is I get the dog tugging around the table. I might go all the way around and give them the release cue.

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They release the toy. And then I say "get it" again until I go back maybe all the way around the table. And then I kind of pull it out of their mouth and I turn towards the table and wait. All they have to do is put one paw on the table and then I reward that. I'm shaping with a tug toy. I love to shape with a tug toy. It doesn't take long before the dog jumps up on that.

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Now with a Cato Board it's so low what I'll do is I'll tug the dog all the way up on the Cato Board. I'll tell them "out" and "get it", "out" and "get it" on the Cato Board. So now we've got a dog who's on the board. They're standing because we are tugging. So, what I'm going to do is I'm going to help them understand the criteria of being on that board.

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So, I'm going to try to pull them off the board. If they come off, I don't say out I just take the toy out of their mouth and I wait. Of course, they're going to jump back on the board. "Oh yeah. Party begins now." And so now I've got a dog who understands they have to be on the board. So now I lower my body so I'm sitting on the ground. Guess what they're more likely to offer.

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So, I'm going to wait. So, we're tugging, they know they're on the board, they get the tug. But now I'm not going to give it to them right away. I'm going to wait until they offer something else. They might offer sit, I'll reward that, "get it" with a tug, and then I'll pull it out of their mouth, and I'll wait for something else. They might offer a sit again. It doesn't get me what I want, they'll go into a down. Boom, get it.

Eventually, all they'll do is offer the down and they'll offer it fast because they know it creates this game. The game is 'get into the down and then when I present the toy and say, "get it" that's your release'.

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I delay how long I'm waiting. Eventually they're in a down and I might go in my head, counting two, maybe three and then I say 'get it'. And maybe the next time I say get it immediately. Now they're progressing they got this down. And they're quivering. They're loving this game so much. I might present the toy and they pop up and I put it away because I'm adding challenge. 5C pyramid, right? The dogs love this. But it's not the only way that I teach down. This is another thing that I do with puppies. Love, love, love this. I have a puppy around the house. I get a bed with sides. Not so tall that the puppy has to like climb a mountain to get in, but sides that create a little bit of a barrier.





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And I sit on the ground, and I have some cookies, the puppy immediately because the bed is in front of me, they're going to come into the bed. I'm going to say the word search, and this is important. I'm going to throw the cookie behind them. So why wouldn't I be giving them cookies for coming into the bed? Because I want them to learn to drop fast, to go into the down really fast.

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So, I'm getting the D, the desire up before I work at letting them drop into a down. So, I might maybe do two or three, toss it a little bit behind them tell them "search", the game is find your cookie, come back to the bed as fast as you can find your cookie. And after two or three of those, I'm not going to feed them right away.

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So, they're in the bed. They're going to be like, "this is the place to be". And so, they're going to offer something else. Maybe they back up, I'm going to say, give them a cookie right in the bed. This time I'm not going to say search because they're already excited. And then they're going to offer something else. I might say search then throw the cookie behind. They come back in.

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I'm shaping, but I'm shaping with a dog engaged. So sometimes I give them cookies in the bed. Sometimes I throw it behind them. I'm waiting for them to offer a down. I'm sitting on the ground. It happens really, really fast. The edges of the bed encourage the puppy to jump in and land in the bed. That's the really cool thing about shaping with the bed. Okay, you can now combine those two. So, you've done a little bit of shaping in the bed and pull the couch cushions off your couch. And just, you know if you've got a small dog, you can just use one couch cushion. And you can stack them up, so the dog has to jump up and they're going to be more inclined to drop into a down position.

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If you've got a really big, big dog like a St. Bernard this one might not work as well, but one cushion could. But we're not going to try and get their whole body on one cushion. We're going to use just the front paws. So, hold that thought. You're going to do the same thing as we did for bed games. We're just going to use couch cushions. Now, front paw targeting. Go to my YouTube page, [Perch Work \(Pivots and Spins\)](#). We're going to teach the dog to target something. A bathmat would be great because it's got a rubber backing, so it's not going to move.

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And you're going to teach your dog. They're going to put their front paws on it. You're going to say search, toss a cookie behind. Eventually they're going to come flying in, you're going to go on the ground. So, they're more likely going to offer things like getting into a down. You're just going to shape that by throwing a cookie in front, dropping a cookie on the ground when they come onto the mat, back and forth. They're going to want to offer a down.

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I've also done this with a front paw targeting using a target stick lengthwise. Where the dog comes in and they hit their front feet on that target. Now, what you might want to do is eventually move to something more slippery so the dog kind of skids on their front feet into a down. That's kind of fun, especially if you're doing obedience. It's teaching a dog to love the game.



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As long as you are really consistent with, “you're in a down and now I release you either with search with the word break or with get it”. You can throw in a tug toy in any one of those. So, paw targets for front feet, and I want the front feet target at first because it puts their weight on their front end and then they slam their back end into the down. That's how I get those fast downs, even with a dog like Bulldog cross Tater Salad, who started with a really, really slow down. So, whether you're training a puppy or a rescue dog for the first time, or you're retraining your own dog using a body or a paw target, I promise you you're going to get buy in from the dog.

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They're going to say, “I love this game. It's so much fun.” It's shaping, but it's shaping with engagement and joy and speed all wrapped up. And eventually what you're going to do is you're going to get out of the sitting on the floor. You're going to go to standing up because you have a dog who happily comes and flies into that down.

And now when you consistently have a dog doing it as fast and as consistent as you want, add the word “down”, “drop”, “platz”, “couché”, whatever you want. You're going to [add that cue](#) then. Up to now it's just the dog offering behaviors because they see a target. Once you stand up, you can add the behavior name and then start fading your target.

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And that's exactly how I teach my dogs to love their down. And honestly, it goes so darn fast. It maybe took me a little while to explain it, but it will go really fast for you. Let me know what you think of teaching a dog a down with targets. If your dog already downs, play around with it. Come on back, come on over to YouTube, leave me a comment. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

### **ItsYerChoice Game:**

Learn how to play ItsYerChoice as a foundation for your down training:

<https://recallers.com/iycsummit-join/>

### **Resources:**

[YouTube Video: Target Stick Training Part One](#)

[YouTube Video: Target Stick Training Part Two](#)

[Podcast Episode 134: How To Teach A Dog Stay WITHOUT Luring, Collar Pops Or Using The Word “Stay”](#)

[Get Crate Games Online](#)

[Podcast Episode 33: How Do I Stop My Dog Counter Surfing?!](#)

[Podcast Episode 107: Pedicure Please: 3 Steps To Dog Nail Trimming Or Grooming Success At Home!](#)

[Blog Post: Got D.A.S.H. \(Desire, Accuracy, Speed and Habitat\)?](#)

[YouTube Video: Perch Work \(Pivots and Spins\)](#)

[Blog Post: Dog Training Question ~ When Do I Add a Cue?](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Sit, Down, Stand, Stay! Dog training duration behaviors with Susan Garrett](#)



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### About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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