

## Hot Take: You Don't Need To Say "Stay" In Dog Training: Here's Why Release Cues Work Instead!

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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Earlier this week, I was on a live stream and got more than one person upset when I suggested that when you ask your dog to sit, you do not require the use of the word "stay" afterwards. And that created a lot of questioning, a lot of commenting, a lot of confused people.

So, I thought, time to do a podcast about why the use of the word "stay" is redundant at best and possibly confusing to your dog.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Think about the words that we use with our dogs. We want them to be cues that have meaning for the dog. And so, in order for those cues to have impactful, long-lasting meaning, we have to be consistent as people. And that's when it gets a little bit dicey.

Because, how many times have you asked your dog to sit, but if they laid down instead, you didn't really care? So that's how cues in general just get eroded. [When you repeat a cue](#), like the dog, you ask them to sit, and if you use the word "stay," I find especially in sports like dog agility, the word "stay" is used and repeated and used with a great deal of passion for those dogs who are highly unlikely to stay.

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So, what does that mean? The meaning of the word, "stay," which is just an extension of what you want the dog to do which is really sit has been eroded. So, the sit got eroded so then we add the stay, and now the stay has got eroded. So, what do I mean by this? Let's just talk about the word "sit."

When you ask your dog to sit, is there a time limit? Like is it okay when you ask your dog to sit, if they just touch their butt to the ground and then pop right back up again and start wagging their tail and say, "Where's my treat?"

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Probably not, right? You want your dog to sit and maybe you're just going to give them a cookie. Maybe you're going to give them two cookies. So then when is, does a sit become a stay? And if it's not automatically a stay, that means that they can leave any time when you say sit, if you don't say stay.

Do you see how confusing this can be for a dog? We need things to be simple for dogs to understand. We need things to be consistent and clear. And so, I [teach the word "sit"](#) or the concept of sit because sit in a small room, like say your living room is very different than sit at the dog park.

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So, it's a concept that has to be generalized into many different locations. The very first place my dogs get introduced to the concept of sit is in [Crate Games](#) where we just shape them to want to sit when we touch the door. We don't ever actually say the word "sit" in Crate Games.

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We have shaped the dog that cookies come high and at the back of the kennel, and then the precursor to cookies coming high and at the back of the kennel is, well, we have to open the door. So, touching the kennel, then opening it and feeding them high at the back.

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So, the dogs have the concept of sit. But with anything that is a controlled behavior, sit is a controlled behavior, down is a controlled behavior, stand is a controlled behavior. "Hop it up," meaning get on a dog bed, that's a controlled behavior. It means go to that position or location and wait there until you get what.

What has to be the yin and yang of any control behavior. If you sat there and said, "I know the answer, Susan. It is the release word.", you would be 100% correct. I teach Crate Games without ever teaching the dog the word "sit", because I think it's critically important that a dog understands a release word before we ever introduce control words. But that's backwards to how most people do it, right?

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I went to my first puppy class, and you were taught sit, sit, sit, sit, stay, stay, stay, stay. And then the word "okay" was magical that you could follow me now. But how does the dog learn the word "okay" while we move out of position? So, movement actually is what teaches the dog to move.

And then they figure out that movement and "okay" is the same word. But then when we try to add distractions and try to add movement as a distraction, we get a little bit annoyed when the dog leaves because I told you to sit and stay. And do you see how confusing this is to a dog?

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I like to bring clarity into all dogs' lives. So right from the beginning, from the first week I have a puppy, I start to introduce them to the concept of a release word. Now, if I have a very young puppy, generally my puppies are 10 weeks old or older when I get them, but if I had a seven-week-old puppy, I probably wouldn't do this you know, in the first couple of days.

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What I wouldn't do is I would never open the crate door and let the puppy fly out because then we have to unlearn that. And so, what I would do is I'd open the crate door, and I would reach in for the first week or so if I had a really young puppy.

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Because a seven and an eight-week-old puppy, you know what, they could learn it. I've taught it to puppies that young. But let's grow their confidence and get some connection first before we start teaching them about criteria. I think anything that's a three-syllable word shouldn't be taught to your puppy in the first week. That's just me.

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So, when that puppy is ready, Crate Games is amazing. There's tons of value for being in a crate. There's tons of value for holding a sit position, and then they learn the most important word in life.

For my dogs, it's the word "break," which means you can leave position. And through Crate Games we add all kinds of distractions.

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Remember, I've never ever told the dog the word "sit." They learn a release word, they learn not to fall for distractions, don't dive on cookies, don't follow the chasing toy, don't do any of that unless you hear a release word first.

So now we have a dog that is powerfully understanding the release word means 'Magic happens. Now I can go for it. Now I can come out. Now I can leave position.' Now when we are ready to teach a word "sit," we have in our back pocket a valuable word to get them out of the sit.

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But that's not often the way it's taught, right? It's taught like we teach, sit, sit, sit, down, down, down, and we kind of muddle it all together with a release word. And that's why a lot of people say you need the word "stay" so the dog knows when they can't move.

I think for my dogs, the word "sit" means hold position until I either, give you a new cue. So, from the sit, I might say down, I might move across the room, and I might say stand. From the sit, I might give them the cue "bring me."

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All of these, my dogs learn are new release words. I have what we call "spotlights." [Location specific reinforcement markers](#), that are specific to allow my dog to know 'now you can leave position.' So, if there's a cookie that I throw on the floor and they're in a control position, like a sit, a down, or a [Hot Zone](#), and I throw a cookie, there's no consideration of leaving that position unless they hear the word "search."

If there's a toy somewhere around, there's no consideration of leaving position to take that toy unless I've given the cue "bring me." Those are all very consistent in my dog's world. They know hold position until I get those cues.

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So then stay is just like adding a word for no reason because my dogs understand that sit means hold position until I give you another cue, which it could be a recall. I walk across the park and then I say your name. It could be to go and do something else, like you can leave that sit and go hop it up.

But what I never do, I would never say sit to my dog as I'm going out a door and I just don't want my dog to bolt out the door so I say sit, so I can get out the door and close the door. Because now technically your dog should be sitting there when you get home from the grocery store, right? If you want to be consistent.

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So, what do you do? Well, you really invest in Crate Games as a way of life, and then you can open that door. I have people delivering things, the doors open, furniture can come in and out. There is no way—it always kind of makes me chuckle when tradespeople will come in maybe to fix a leak.

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A plumber's there and he's walking out, and he opens the door, he goes, "Oh, what about the dogs?" Just leave guy. Like, they're good. They don't really know you that well.

They're not going with you. My dogs have that understanding that the threshold of a door is not something that you bolt out of.

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Crate Games teaches that. So, I never pollute my dog's understanding of the word "sit" or "down" by asking them to do it and never intending on coming back to release them from there.

Those are sacred words. Control position words are sacred words. You can have words that are not. You can say "Go chill." "Go lie down" is mine. Just get out of my hair. Go chill just means you can sit, down, you can just walk around in another room. Just get out of my way. Right now, I'm in a think mode. I'm busy. I'm carrying in groceries. Whatever it is, go chill. Then your dogs won't have clarity of understanding really what that is.

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Now you have to teach them what go chill or just chill means by giving them reinforcement for going on a bed or leaving the room or whatever that may be that chill means in your mind. But can you see how that is a vague concept that's going to be incredibly difficult for dogs to capture? But they do capture it.

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They do capture it over time. So, I could say go chill without ruining down, sit, stand, hop it up. And so now what do you do if you have two dogs? I want to work with two dogs, but if I say "break," then they both are going to come off. Now there's two things you can do. I have had a student who had a different release word for each of his dogs.

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That's not my deal. I don't have that. What my dogs understand is if I say "break," anyone can break at any time no matter where you are. However, if I say a name, "This!y break," then no other dog can leave but This!y. No other dog can get out of their sit position or down position. How do we get there?

Alright, Crate games first, please, please, I'll leave a link in the show notes to Crate Games Online. Teach your dogs Crate Games.

There's so many valuable lessons, but so much valuable clarity that will come to you and your dog by playing crate games. So, we have this brilliantly understood release word. Now you can go to Hot Zone.

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So, if you go to my [YouTube video where I talk about how to teach a target](#) of a mat that can grow into a raised dog bed or a bed with sides. I do not like putting the responsibility on a dog to stay on something like a towel or a bathmat. You could get it, but it's a lot more difficult for the dog to grasp that concept.

A raised dog bed or a bed with a bumper around it that creates a boundary. It's a higher response cost to lift my paw off of that dog bed, I have to go up and over that bumper and onto the floor, or I have to step from the raised dog bed onto the floor. It's so much easier to create the clarity of what is correct.

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One paw on the floor is not correct. Only four paws in the bed or on the raised bed are correct. Alright, so we've got our dogs, our two dogs, we've trained them individually. We've trained them how to excel at Hot Zone. We've trained them how to excel at Crate games so that when I say my release word, my dog will release.

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I'm going to give you a little side note. I haven't thought through the fallout of not doing this. When I ask my dogs to go in a Hot Zone, especially in a training environment, the vast majority of the time, I want to say it's 90% or more. If I'm going to release them to train with me, I will walk myself over to the bed and touch them before I release them.

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Why do I do that? I do that because I want that dog who's not being worked at that time to not be on the edge of their toes thinking "This could be my time to work. She's going to call me across the room because that's what she does. She calls me across the room." And I saw when I used to do that, call one dog and release the other from a distance, that the one that was waiting their turn could not relax. Now, I'm not saying I never do it, but most of the time I will walk over, touch the other dog and then release them. Usually to a tug toy.

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Alright, let's get back to, how are we going to train your dogs? You've got two dogs. First thing we're going to do is you're going to train one dog. They understand the word "break." Now you're going to just say their name. They're going to be on the Hot Zone. You're going to say their name.

Let's say their name is This!y. So, you're going to take This!y. She's going to be on her Hot Zone. You're going to say "This!y" and give her cookie. "This!y", give her a cookie. "This!y", give her cookie. So, she's not left the Hot Zone. You've just said her name and fed her.

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Now you're going to say "This!y" and then say the word "break." She should get off and you my friend should not move. If you have to move, that means you need to go back to Crate games and get that great release without your movement. Now you're going to do that with the other dog so that you have two dogs that know 'This!y' could mean I'm just going to come and feed you.

But "This!y break" means you can come off the Hot Zone. You could do this with a dog in a sit. I do because of the front door. I want my dogs to know if I call your name at the front door, I might be giving you a cookie, but I might be following that with the word "break."

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Now, my late husband used to just say the dog's name at the door and then they could release. And honestly, I think that trend has kind of followed along with all the dogs since John passed away. Maybe it's a little memorial to John.

But I was for decades, was very strict about, I would say "This!y feed, This!y feed, This!y feed", and then This!y break. I think my older dogs still won't break with me unless I give the release cue. So just by saying their name, they won't go, but I digress.

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So, we have our dogs on the Hot Zone. The goal being that one dog doesn't release when they hear you say break. So, when you are going to introduce them, this is what you're going to do.

You are going to say the name of the dog you're going to release, 'This!y', the moment you do, you're going to feed the other dog as you release the first one.

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So, I'm going to release This!y. I will say "This!y" as I'm saying the word "break," before I say the word "break," I'm going to feed the dog who's not moving. You could also proof your dog by saying "This!y break", if the dog's name Prophet, he shouldn't be breaking. You could proof in Crate Games. This!y break. That's not a release word. 'Prophet break' is the release word.

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Okay, so you want to build up the dog's confidence before you put it in a test where there's two dogs sitting on a Hot Zone. And the first time I do it, I have the dogs on separate Hot Zones, right? So, they're near each other. So, I can feed the first one, but I might be near the first one closer to the first one, release the second. Give the second one a low value cookie when they release. So, I might say "This!y break," she comes off the Hot Zone, she gets a low value cookie.

The high value cookie goes to the dog that's still on. Then you can reverse, go over to This!y, say "Prophet break," Prophet gets a lower value cookie and This!y gets the higher value for staying on the Hot Zone. Whenever I'm working two dogs, the dog on the Hot Zone will always get some reinforcement.

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I want them to know, "Yes, you will get a turn. Right now, it's not your turn, so you can just chill and relax." As I've mentioned in previous podcast episodes, the word "stay," it goes back to old time dog training where it was kind of an intimidating pretend, "I want you to stay!" and you said it with a crisp pan to the face of the dog, "You stay!"

Today modern-day dog training, we know it's unnecessary. The word "sit," the word "down," the word "stand," the words "hop it up," or whatever you say, "get in your bed," those don't have a limit to how long you stay there. You stay there until you hear a release word.

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I hope that brings clarity to you. If you have any questions for me about how you can be more clear as a dog trainer for your dog, please jump over to YouTube and leave them in the comment section. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Crate Games

[Get Crate Games Online](#)

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 52: The Five Most Common Words in Dog Training and Which Ones I Never Use](#)

[Podcast Episode 155: 10 Ways To Teach A Sit WITHOUT A Food Lure! Unreal Results For Puppies And Dogs Of All Ages](#)

[Podcast Episode 151: How Location Specific Reinforcement Markers Will Improve Your Dog Training!](#)

[Podcast Episode 266: Hot Zone And Stays – How One Dog Training Nuance Can Fix Anxiety And Duration](#)

[YouTube Video: Target Training for Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

### About Susan



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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.



### Meet Us Online

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