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What? Dogs Can READ?!?

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We all know that Poodles are smart. In fact, canines on the whole tend to amaze us every day with their life-saving alerts, helpful assists, and troublesome antics. As we discover new natural and learned talents, the horizon appears infinite. Just how much are our fluffy friends capable of?

While attending the Assistance Dog Institute (<http://www.assistedog.org>) (recently renamed the Bergin University of Canine Studies, after the founder and president), the faculty demonstrated an area of canine capabilities that had me hooked – dogs were being taught to read and respond to a typed "flashcard!" These dogs could be shown a sheet of paper with a single command printed in large, bold font, and they would perform the behavior! Amazing!!

It wasn't long before I learned how to teach my string of assigned dogs how to read a few words each, but there were so many other tasks for these future service dogs to master that I never pushed further. That is, until I started working with my Standard Poodle Charlie.

I noticed certain differences immediately – the service dogs were calm, thoughtful, and eager to try this new type of communication. Charlie was high energy, acted on impulse, and never seemed to study the card. He responded faster, but with less accuracy than did the others I had worked with. I decided to video Charlie after we reached three words, and upon watching our session, realized that his accuracy was higher than I had thought – he offered the behavior as I picked up the card (before I actually held it out to him), but when I didn't acknowledge the effort, he would move on to another behavior.

No longer discouraged, I developed an idea to see just how far we can travel down this path towards a form of two-way communication. First, I would teach him quite a few commands. When he really seemed to comprehend those, I would start adding names and locations. I would then place multiple words on the wall and teach him to focus on a single card through use of a laser pointer or similar device. Then, I would see if he could match words into simple sentences to tell me what he was thinking or feeling.



Imagine a dog being able to place written English words into a comprehensive sentence!

Life has been hectic, and I have not spent the time working on reading that I had planned to, but nevertheless I am still aiming for that goal. Charlie is up to about seven words (and five stick figures). I have not yet introduced the concept of a name or location, nor have I shown him multiple cards.

For those of you who would like to expand your Poodle's mental abilities, the following will tell you the steps towards teaching your dog to read.

Teach your Dog to READ

It's actually quite easy - not very different than teaching a verbal command or hand signal.

Learning (for any species) is easiest if the new cue/stimulus/etc. is presented just before something familiar. When you say "cookie" before you give a treat, your dog will perk up his ears at the word - if you gave the treat first it would take much longer for him to make the association.

Make your flash cards by printing one word on a sheet of paper - make it big, all capitals, and use a simple font. Use a landscape layout to get a nice large size. Put the card in a sheet protector so that it doesn't get smudged or creased, as the dog will take that as part of the word.

The dog needs to use their eyes to look at the word, so they must know the behavior without needing visual cues. The easiest way is to use a verbal command (as opposed to scent, taste, or touch). Start with a command that isn't the first behavior your dog will offer - this will make additional words easier to add. I start with DOWN, then do SIT second, followed by the dog's favorite between SHAKE/WAVE/ROLL/TURN/SPEAK.

Show your dog the card (remember how they learn - new first, followed by old), holding it still against your body, around their eye level, and give the verbal command. As soon as your dog complies, take the card out of sight (behind your back or flat on a table) as you praise and play/treat. If the card stays in sight, it's as if you are saying the dreaded "sitsitsitsit."



After three to five repetitions you can delay the verbal command for a couple of seconds, but if your dog doesn't respond, slip it in before he loses interest (don't wait more than about three seconds).

Dogs learn the first word pretty fast, but they are not looking at the word itself - show them anything remotely like the card, and they will lie down. Each consecutive word is taught the same way. For the second one they are guessing (if it's not DOWN, it must be SIT!). It is mainly during these first two words, especially if they build off of each other (such as sitting, but sinking into a down if the reward doesn't come).

The third word marks when they are starting to look at the shape of the words. It's not until this third word that most dogs will really start to do the right behavior on the first try . . . though I know quite a few who understand the difference from the start with no

mistakes after the initial lesson. When learning to read, many dogs have mixed up TUG and TURN considerably more than most other words - they certainly are looking at the letters.

You can lessen those patterns by starting with, for example, DOWN and SPEAK, or SIT and BOW, or DOWN and TURN (spin in a circle). Just make sure they are reliable without any visual cues. It's better not to have any props until the dog knows quite a few words, otherwise the props become a major part of the cue, and it may be hard to apply the task in a real situation (requiring the dog to locate an item).

The more words you teach, especially if they look really different at first, the closer the dog will look at the card to choose the appropriate behavior. There is no known limit for how many written words the canine brain can remember (some dogs are already into the 30s). If dogs can read . . . guide dogs can read signs for restrooms and exits, shy children can be encouraged that reading is fun, and cancer-sniffing dogs can point to a sign that says what type of cancer they are detecting.

Take it a Step Further

Once a dog knows to look at a card and that it will tell them what to do, you can show them a picture and they will figure it out on their own!

After Charlie knew to read DOWN, SIT, SHAKE, and ROLL, I decided to show him a printed stick-figure of a dog sitting, but I didn't say anything. True, "sit" is kind of a default behavior in many cases, but for reading "down" became the default since that was the first one I taught. He looked at the card for a second, then sat – jackpot!!! It may have been an accident, but who cares? I then showed him a dog lying down, and he sank right to the floor! The next one I showed was a dog on its back with all four legs in the air... this was supposed to be a "roll" (back on floor, belly exposed), but I had taught Charlie that only a back leg needed to be lifted - none of his commands at the time were on his back with front legs in the air. I wish I had it on film because it was amazing to watch him think it through... he tried waving one then both front legs, then went into a partial bow and tried to lift a front leg over his head... after about ten seconds he lay down and shot all four paws into the air! A posture that he had never learned or been praised for, and he offered it because that's what the picture said!



Now he rolls and waves a front paw when I show that card and just does his usual back leg for ROLL or a verbal "roll".

Dr. Bonnie Bergin, president of BUCS, has written a wonderful book on this subject. [Teach Your Dog To Read](#) covers the entire concept with many photos and stories to go along with it, making for a fascinating and enjoyable read.

In Conclusion

People think that dogs can't read because it's not an instinct, it's not natural. Uhhh . . . and humans are born knowing how to read? Really makes you wonder how much more canines are capable of. Let's see just how smart our Poodles are, and teach them to communicate in a language that we can share.

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My personal website: <http://www.jillian.americanpoodlesatwork.org>

APAW's (Service Poodles) website: <http://www.americanpoodlesatwork.org>

Here is an instructional video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5AR-VsvkWU>

Photos are of U-Ch, Int'l Ch. Charlie CGC, SD demo dog, SAR dog in-training

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