

# Using Food in Training



## 1. Rewards Lead to Increased Behavior

Whether you are working with animals or people, it's a well-known fact that a behavior that gets rewarded is likely to be repeated. Trainers use food in training animals because it's a relatively easy reward that is likely to be desired by a majority of animals. Even the pickiest dog has some sort of food treat that they like, or you can use their regular kibble. If you can't find a food treat or kibble that the dog will "work" for, review the Non Food Rewards handout for more ideas.

## 2. "My Dog Will Only Work for Food!"

Trainers hear this statement all too often from dog owners but the truth is that this is not an argument against using food – rather it's an argument against the inappropriate use of food! Food should be used to train the dog initially but you should move toward fading the food out and using other types of rewards as quickly as possible. Often when a dog will only work if they see a treat is because the owner has never trained the dog any other way, and because dogs are poor generalizers, they become "trained" to expect the food at every instance of a behavior and become confused without its presence. In these instances, food is not a reward but a bribe.

## 3. Rewards versus Bribes

A reward is something a dog gets once he has done something you've asked him to do. A bribe is when you've shown him the reward, *then* requested that he do something, particularly something that you're pretty sure he knows how to do at least 80% of the time when asked. The trick is to fade your food use out as quickly as you can. See "Fading Lures" handout for more information on how to do this. Work on adding in more types of rewards that are non-food related, such as praise, petting, belly rubs, grooming, toys, etc. See the "Non Food Rewards" handout for more ideas.

### *Some important things to remember when using food in training are:*

1. Keep them tiny! You do not need to insert a big glob of food in your dog's mouth for him to be rewarded! The smaller the treat, the quicker he associates his actions with the reward.
2. Moist, soft treats are best because they are more flavorful and the dog can eat them quicker, thereby associating the reward with the behavior. A dog that has to chew a hard biscuit for 10-15 seconds can forget why he got the biscuit in the first place!
3. Timing is critical – you need to get the treat into his mouth within 1-2 seconds of his doing a behavior for him to understand the reward is for that behavior.
4. The food must be rewarding to the dog. Don't use food the dog doesn't like, or that isn't "special" to the dog when working in a high distraction area. If the dog has problems with diarrhea, you can use some of the dog's kibble as a treat. (Tip: soak ½ cup of kibble overnight in a baggy with about 1-2 tablespoon of broth or water to make flavorful kibble that can be cut up into smaller bits.)
5. Occasionally work in "jackpots." These are extra special treats, or a larger portion of a treat, combined with exuberant praise, that the dog rarely gets. Jackpots should be used intermittently when the dog does something really great, like sitting in a crowd of children and adults and dogs and cats.
6. "Fine Dining" is another concept you can use to give the dog an extra special reward when they have done something great, or if you are working on maintaining a great deal of attention. The regular way most people dole out treats is kind of like "fast food"—the dog gets a piece of kibble or a treat, a weak pat on head and lukewarm verbal praise. "Fine dining" means creating a rewarding experience that is highly rewarding to the dog. Break some really delicious, moist, pungent treats up into tiny bits and hand feed them to the dog, while praising the dog exuberantly and constantly while feeding them.