



# Teaching a Retrieve with a Clicker

Photos by Mia Grant

It is possible to have a reliable and enthusiastic retrieve even if your dog does not regularly play with toys. Retrieving is one of the most valuable training tools used in teaching agility. It is so advantageous to be able to use a toy to reinforce your dog in specific locations or along the course line. The toy toss is always followed by an enthusiastic delivery of the toy back to me so we can have a game of tug or start another agility drill. The toss and retrieve helps put distance between my dog and I and facilitates teaching obstacle independence. I use the toss/retrieve at the end of contacts, weaves, and on jump sequences and finish lines. Toss/retrieve can also be a great tool when teaching your dog extension and collection at tunnels and to drive fast out of tight turns.

I see handlers every week who struggle to get their dog to chase a toy or to return to them after a toss. That creates frustration for the handler because after every tossed-toy reward there is a delay while they try to get their dog to return to them. The dog may be self-rewarding by staying away and shaking the toy or doing a lap around the field. During training time this creates delays and for the dog it can also be confusing. One moment the handler happily tosses a toy reward, and then they turn around and act irritated when the dog won't return with the item. These scenarios can almost

always be solved by having a dog that loves the toss and retrieve.

There are endless games and tricks you can play once you have a retrieve. You can teach your dog to pick up items and put them in a container; to carry or hold all different kinds of objects; to play hide-the-toy games around the house; and to play item discrimination scent games and discrimination name skills, like having your dog bring you a specific named item (like the Border Collie that knows the difference between hundreds of named toys). All these games start with a retrieve—the dog moves toward a designated item on cue, picks it up fast, and brings it to you.

I use a clicker when I train the retrieve, but you can also use a marker word like “yes.” I use this training method to start all my puppies retrieving by the time they are a few months old. I am also playing regular tug-and retrieve-games with toys at the same time.

## Before You Start Training

When I clicker train the retrieve I don't use a soft, tugging-type toy. I pick a size/shape appropriate item for my dog to retrieve. My little 8-lb. Sheltie Jack learned his retrieve using a wooden clothes pin. He weighed only a few pounds when we started the training and he had a very tiny mouth. Some of my Border Collies learned on a small rubber hose—big enough

not to swallow and long enough to go across the width of the mouth, but not so wide that their mouth needs to remain open while holding it. Lately I have switched to teaching the retrieve using a dumbbell because it is easy for the dog to pick up off the floor and it is easy for me to see the dog's mouth on the bar. Once you have a good retrieve on a non-toy item, you can switch your cue and your rewards to your regular agility toys.



I like to use tiny bits of cooked meats for the food reinforcement, but you can use kibble or tiny dried treats if your dog loves all kinds of food. I want my dog to take the treat and swallow fast so I can give multiple rewards quickly. I give so many treats during this kind of training that I often use my dog's complete food ration for a meal during these sessions.

Organize your training area and items:

- **Food:** Get a bowl of kibble or chop up a couple hundred bits of meat. It is helpful if your dog won't mob you for their bowl of

treats while training, but if you have not taught them to ignore a bowl of food, simply put it on a chair or table within your reach but not theirs, or put the treats in a wearable bait pouch.

- **Clicker:** My favorite is the I-clicker. It is quieter than a traditional clicker and I am going to be clicking very close to my dog's face. I find it easier to hold this clicker because of the size, and the exterior button simplifies clicking.
- **Retrieve item:** Choose your size/shape/texture appropriate item
- **Planning:** Decide how many sessions and reps you are going to do. I usually start with about 10 cookies in my hand. When those are gone I take a momentary break to reload and praise my dog. After 3 sets of 10 rewards, I break and move out of the training area to play with the dog, and then I return and do a few more sets if the dog is still enthusiastic and hungry.



### Practice Without the Dog

I suggest you do a “dry run” before you start training the retrieve. Find a comfortable spot to sit and a location for your treats, then practice how all this is going to work. You have some options on how you present the item: you can hold it, place it on a raised platform like a box, or put it on the floor. You need to be able to see your dog's mouth on the item very clearly. If your dog has floppy ears or a

heavy coat around their face, you may not be able to see them pick up the item if it is on the floor. In this case, you could start with the item in your hand and then move quickly to a platform or the floor. (Again, a plus for using a dumbbell is that it is easy to see even when placed on the ground.)

I have clicker-trained retrieves straight off the floor, but I find it is easier to start with the item in your hand so that is what these di-

rections reflect. Holding the item in your hand means the clicker and treats will both need to be in your other hand. Some people find it awkward to give the treat while holding a clicker. If it is difficult for you, try starting on the floor or on the platform so you can have the clicker in one hand and treats in the other. Or, forego the clicker and use a marker word.

Note that I don't add a verbal retrieve cue, yet—that comes a bit later.

**You can start with your retrieve item in your hand, on the floor or on a raised platform as shown.**



### Training the Retrieve

I usually start with the dog sitting close to me and show them the item excitedly.

If the dog looks directly at the item, I click and treat (C/T) and give the treat to the dog in close proximity to the item. Now the dog needs to clearly move his body or head toward the item, then I C/T close to it. Now I want the dog to touch or almost touch the item. C/T that step a few times and feed close

to the item. Now the dog needs to make physical contact with the item with his mouth or nose. After you have rewarded the touch multiple times, don't C/T for just a bop of the nose—ignore that and wait for the dog to slightly open his mouth on the item. There is no exact formula for how many times the dog should touch the item with his mouth, but I would say no more than 10 reps making contact with the item before you wait for the dog to open his mouth slightly.



You will subsequently reward each attempt which continues to move toward the dog opening his mouth fully around the item.

Don't be greedy. Reward *each* step at least a few times, then up the ante and C/T at the next level. Yes, your dog will drop the item to eat the treat at each step of the way.

Here are the steps and some photos of the process

- Dog looks at dumbbell, C/T close to dumbbell
- Dog make move toward dumbbell, C/T close to dumbbell
- Dog touches dumbbell, C/T



- Dog opens mouth slightly near dumbbell, C/T
- Dog opens mouth onto the dumbbell, C/T
- Dog's mouth almost closed on dumbbell, C/T



- Dog's mouth fully on dumbbell, C/T
- Dog grabs dumbbell in mouth, C/T



- Dog grabs dumbbell and moves it visibly from my hand, C/T
- Dog lifts dumbbell off my hand slightly, C/T
- Dog lifts dumbbell higher off my hand, C/T
- Dog deliberately lifts up dumbbell, C/T
- Dog picks up and holds dumbbell momentarily, C/T

- Dog picks up and holds dumbbell longer before I C/T

Because the dog is lifting the item out of my hand the close proximity of the retrieve item means that it will likely fall right back into my hand, completing the retrieve. If the item does not fall into your hand, drop your cookie into that hand after you click so the dog is focused on the spot he is com-

ing to after the cookie. Hold your hand in a way that facilitates the item dropping into your hand. As the dog drops the item or puts it into your hand he is completing his task and you just need to keep adding to the process. Soon you will not C/T if the item does not drop into your hand.

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Increase the holding time before the click until the dog is holding for a few seconds while you praise. I am going to start slowly lowering the dumbbell to the floor now until

my hand is resting on the ground and then I am going to place the dumbbell directly on the floor. At this point the dog will need to lift the dumbbell from the floor and

then put it into my hand which is still very close. While I feed the dog I replace the dumbbell on the floor.



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### Adding the Retrieve Cue

I usually add a verbal cue around this time. You could say “get it,” “take it,” “fetch,” “bring,” etc. Choose a verbal cue that you are willing to use when playing fetch

with your dog on and off the agility course. Just as my dog is picking up the item I say my retrieve word. I do this for at least one full training session or about 25 repetitions. Next I will begin to say “fetch” when my dog is moving

deliberately toward the item for at least another 25 or more reps and then I will use the just as the dog has started toward the item. The last step is to introduce the verbal cue just prior to releasing the dog to the item.

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### Progressing the Training

I begin to move the dumbbell farther away from me so that the dog has to move toward the dumbbell and make more effort to turn to return it to me. Eventually I place the dumbbell as far away as I can reach. As I feed for delivering the dumbbell, I quickly place it back in position for him to retrieve again.



Now I am going to C/T only if my dog returns the dumbbell all the way to my open palm, but I am clicking the instant he gets it into my hand. I am not asking him to hold it and I am not giving a re-

lease word. The click is acting as a cue for the dog to release the dumbbell into my hand.

At this point I can decide if I want to ask my dog to sit and wait for

my cue to retrieve or if I want to have him fetch automatically as soon as I place the dumbbell on the floor. I can also gently restrain him while I place or toss the dumbbell a slight distance.



If you have been successful with the training you now have a working retrieve that needs to be “taken on the road.” Take your dumbbell to many locations around your house and yard and to all the locations where you train or play with your dog. You can start to do longer and longer retrieves and ask your dog to sit and stay before he goes to fetch. Don’t add too much sit-stay control in new locations; keep the game fun and exciting by allowing your dog to fetch as soon as you toss the item. Dead-toy retrieves are more difficult because

the toy has stopped moving and is less exciting.

Begin to introduce different retrieve items to your dog as well as balls and toys. Continue to reward the retrieve with a treat each and every time your dog returns the item to you. Eventually the retrieve itself should be rewarding and you won’t have to use a food reward, but that will depend on your dog’s level of desire to play this exciting new game with you. Once you have the basics of the fetch, make the toy exciting and keep your dog aroused while fetching.

When the fetch game can be played successfully almost anytime/anywhere, you are ready to use it to reward your dog for any behavior you like and have him return to you. If you are fetching a tug toy, have a lively game of tug each time he returns to you with his toy.

Next month I’ll return to a Power Paws Drill article, then in the May issue I’ll show you how to teach a hold and have the dog deliver the item to a container. That should give you and your dog time to perfect your fetch. 🐾

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*Nancy Gyes and her husband Jim Basic run Power Paws Agility in San Jose, California. Nancy has been the AKC World Team Coach since 2006 and has been on the AKC World Team herself seven times: four times with Scud and three with Riot. Nancy and Riot earned both a 1st and 2nd place in Individual Agility at the FCI Agility World Championships. Nancy won the USDAA Grand Prix Finals four years in a row with three different dogs: Scud, Riot, and Wicked. Nancy and Wicked were also on the winning team at a Dog Agility Masters championship. Nancy and Riot were the 24" AKC National champions twice, and Ace was second in the Championships in 2012. Nancy and Ace represented the USA at the European Open five times and they were the first US duo to make it to the podium, earning a bronze medal in 2011. Nancy shares her life with four Border Collies aged 13 to 2 years. Contact Nancy at [www.powerpawsagility.com](http://www.powerpawsagility.com) where you can also view articles and videos.*