

## The “Leave It” command

How many times has your dog discovered something gross, or even dangerous, that he perceives as potentially edible that you don’t want him to pick up? It happens all the time and the “Leave It” command is the answer. The goal of the command is to bring the dog’s attention back to you, away from an object that attracts him, so you can reward your dog.

We like teaching this command because it is an easy and fun way to get the concept of “leave it” across to the dog. Teaching “Leave It” is a wonderful opportunity to learn more about how your dog’s thought processes work. You can truly see the wheels turning. To teach the command you will need plenty of small treats, something your dog really likes, no larger than a quarter of an inch square. (Avoid treats with a high salt or sugar content.) Keep your sessions short, no more than five minutes at a time. Make yourself comfortable – sit on a chair or the floor, depending on the size of your dog, and you are ready to start.



**Meigs – candidate for the “Leave It” command.**

**Sequence 1:** Hold the treat between your thumb and index finger. With your palm facing up, get your dog interested in the treat. When he tries to pry the treat out of your hand, say “Leave It,” close your hand into a fist, and turn it so that your palm now faces down.

Place your hand against your thigh and keep it still. Observe your dog's reaction. He may stare fixedly at the back of your hand, he may try to get to the treat by nuzzling or nibbling your hand, or he may start barking. Ignore all these behaviors and do not repeat the command. You're looking for the first break in his attention away from your hand. He may look away or make eye contact with you. When he does, say "Good," and give him the treat. The trick is to watch his eyes and the instant he even glances away from your hand, praise with "Good" and reward with a the treat. Repeat until your dog looks at you or away from your hand when you give the command and turn your hand over.

To find out whether your dog is responding to the command or to the turning of your hand, repeat the beginning sequence without turning your hand. If he responds, praise and reward. If he doesn't, close your hand into a fist around the treat and wait for the break in attention. Repeat until he responds to the command.

**Sequence 2:** Show your dog a treat, put it on the floor, and cover it with your hand. When his attention is on your hand or he tries to get to the treat, say "Leave It." Wait for the break in attention, and then praise and reward.

Now cover the treat with just your index finger. Then try it with placing the treat between your index and middle finger. When your dog reliably ignores the treat on command, place the treat 1 inch in front of your hand. Here you need to be watchful: He may be faster at getting to the treat than you can cover it. If he does, no harm done, just try again and be a little more watchful.

**Sequence 3:** Put your dog on leash and stand next to him. Neatly fold the leash into your left hand, and hold your hand as close to his collar as is comfortable without any tension on the leash. You need to make sure that the amount of slack in the leash isn't so much that his mouth can reach the floor. Hold the treat in your right hand and show it to your dog, and then casually drop the treat. When he tries to get to the treat, say "Leave It" and pull up on the leash.

If he ignores the treat, praise, pick up the treat. Now the rules change – you cannot give him this treat because that would defeat the object of the exercise – teaching him not to pick up something on the ground when told. You need to reward the correct response with another treat. Remember, the

object is to bring the dog's attention back to you, away from an object that attracts him, so you can reward your dog. Repeat until he reliably obeys the command.

**Sequence 4:** You are now ready to test his response to the command off leash. With your dog sitting at your side, show him the treat and then drop it in front of him. As his eyes follow the treat, say "Leave It". If he makes a dive for it, don't attempt to beat him to it or yell "No." He's telling you he needs more work on leash. When he reliably responds to the command off leash, you can advance to your ultimate goal – finding something potentially edible on the ground.

Before you can test his response in the "real world", you need to do some preparation. Select a food item that is readily visible to you in the grass or on the ground, such as some crackers or a few kernels of popcorn. Randomly drop four or five pieces of the items you selected in the area where you are going to take your dog for the big test. Put some of your regular treats in your pocket, and take him for a walk on leash in the area where you left the food. As soon as his nose goes to the food, say "Leave It." If he responds, praise enthusiastically and give him several treats, but not the item on the ground. If he doesn't respond to the command, pull straight up on the leash. If he manages to snag a cracker or kernel of popcorn anyway, you either had too much slack in the leash or were too slow on the uptake. Practice walking around the food-contaminated area until he ignores the food on command. Finally, test his response off leash, and he will tell you if he needs more work on leash. Have fun!

The "Leave It" command is one of the most useful commands you can teach your dog because it can be used in different situations, such as when your dog wants to jump on someone. If you are not sure how he will respond, keep him on leash so you can control him.

Periodically test him by dropping some food on the floor while you are preparing a meal. When he tries to scarf it up, tell him to leave it. If he does, pick up the food, and reward him with a treat. If he snags it, review Sequence 3.

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