



Scentwork for beginners – Week 1

Why do scentwork?

Scentwork is a fun and fast-growing sport which teaches dogs to search for novel scents.

This training method is modelled on the training that sniffer dogs go through to work in the police or at border control.

Scentwork has a huge amount of benefits. For dogs, scent tracking is intrinsically motivating i.e. they get a huge amount of internal reward through dopamine release when they do it. A dog's nose is their strongest sensory organ, and we really don't make enough effort to allow them to use it as they were bred to do. The reason that many dogs won't recall even for food when they're on a scent trail is because it is so enjoyable to track it.

If your dog shows no desire to scent track or hunt, it really doesn't matter, we will teach them how to. We can do this in parallel with imprinting on scent (which I will get to in a minute!). If you have a dog who has never shown any hunt drive, start doing food searches with your dog. This could be scatter feeding in the garden or puzzle feeders. This is a nice easy introduction to tracking and being rewarded for finding the source.

Scentwork is all about your dog driving the search, we just sit back and let them run the show. This is why for anxious dogs or those who struggle to decompress on walks, scentwork is so useful. When they know they have a job to do they go out, smash it and get the biggest sense of achievement. It is the best feeling to see an anxious dog be completely mindful and love their job.

If you want to get really into scentwork, many organisations run trials where your dog will compete against others for rosettes. I am trained with Scentwork UK who run trials, if you check their website you can find in person classes near you to get you started for trials. You will learn how to do vehicle searches, suitcase searches, very fun

There are several novel scents that we can train dogs to track, we call these scents the "source" that they are learning to search.

How we train dogs to search

The method we will be using to find the source will be through the use of shaping and back chaining. The dog is "imprinted" on scent by choosing to interact with it. The dog is rewarded at source (meaning as close to your scent as possible!) and then continues to offer that behaviour for reinforcement. We will use back chaining by rewarding for nose at source and then build in the search.



There are several methods for getting a dog onto scent! One common method teaches the dog to hunt for food first and then the scent is paired with food (meaning food is placed with the hide), and then the food is removed over time. The fundamental issue with this method is that in cases where the food is so exciting, scent may become an after-thought.

Searching for food has advantages for lower confidence dogs or dogs who seem to lack natural searching instinct. However, in this course we will *not* be pairing food with scent.

In our method, we will first work on our timing and reward. The exercises seem very simple to the untrained eye, but practice and timing is very important to avoid your dog becoming confused or indicating on the wrong thing.

10 mins 30

Imprinting on scent

This is the transfer of value from the reward to the scent. This means we take a scent which has no meaning at all to them, and turn it into something very valuable by pairing it with food. In the same way that when your dog first sees a lead it has no meaning, over time it builds value as it is paired with going for walks. In dog training we call this building positive associations.

Task 1 – Marker training

We are going to teach your dog that the word 'YES' means they have done the right thing and will get a reward for it. Markers are great for pinpointing the exact moment that your dog did the right behaviour – in scentwork this will be when they point to the scent. If we just tried to give them a treat for the reward it would be confusing as they would move their nose away and then get the treat, so to your dog the reward would be for moving away from the scent.

If your dog is clicker trained we aren't going to use clicker in this course. The reason is because the timing of a clicker needs to be very precise which is difficult in nosework. Your hands are also going to be quite busy at times, so a verbal marker is actually more accurate.

So let's teach your dog to now build an association with the word 'YES'. If your dog already knows a marker word, you can skip this section.

For this simple exercise, say "Yes" and then immediately give your dog a treat by placing the treat right in front of their nose. *Be careful that you don't do them at the same time.* We don't actually want your dog to offer any behaviours here, so don't ask them for a sit and then say YES treat, all we're trying to do is build an association between YES meaning food. Don't leave big gaps in between or your dog is likely to start offering known behaviours like paw or down.



So 20x I want you to do YES – treat. YES – treat. YES – treat. Simple as that!

Task 2 - Imprinting on scent

- Place your scented article (tin containing cotton buds) on a metal lid
- Add 3 biscuits to the lid to get your dog interested in it – adding several also starts to build duration with their nose near the scent which is how we start to build the indication (nose point behaviour)
- When your dog goes to eat the treats say YES and add a couple more
- After they have finished this couple wait for them to lift their head up. At some point they will then go back to the tin to investigate and see if there are any more treats. As soon as their nose goes back to the tin mark YES and reward again with 2 more
- If at any point your dog goes to specifically sniff the scented article give a really big YES and give more treats. This shows them they did really well, and makes them more likely to repeat sniffing the scented article again
- You want to do several sessions of this (two a day is enough!) so that your dog fully understands the brief by the end of the week.
- You may find that they already start to show an indication behaviour where they point to the tin in anticipation of a treat. Don't push it too far though and wait so long to mark that they move their head away. In the beginning we're not worried about duration – we just want them pointing at the tin reliably.

Task 3

In this step we are going to transition to our indication vessels.

We will be rewarding your dog over the top of the vessel. It's incredibly important to "REWARD AT SOURCE". This means that you will reward as close to the vessel as possible without actually putting food in the vessel. Cupping your hand over the top of the vessel is the easiest method. If you drop food in the vessel your dog is going to start trying to eat it and will be reinforced for the wrong behaviour. Plus, your box will smell like food which your dog may focus on rather than the scent.

If you hand feed your dog away from the vessel it can cause a few issues:

- The alert may be so brief that your dog comes back to you immediately
- Low duration at source
- The dog may increase focus on you when confused which can easily be misunderstood as an alert
- The precision is lower and difficult to rectify



Practice Rewarding Over the Box:

- Place your scented article into the vessel
- Add a treat to your right hand and cup it over the vessel
- Present the vessel to your dog
- Don't use a verbal marker – just let them eat the treat
- Remove the box and repeat several times