

Teaching an “Emergency Stop”

In an emergency, you may want to stop your dog’s forward motion from a distance. Some possible situations include:

- Your dog has gotten loose and is across a street when he sees you and starts toward you. Traffic is coming so you want him to stop and wait till it’s safe to cross or until you can go to him.
- Your dog has seen some wildlife or livestock or another pet and has started to chase (possibly toward a cliff or a street or other unsafe location)
- While walking off lead, your dog is getting too far ahead of you and is about to turn a corner on the trail and go out of your sight
- Your dog unexpectedly jumps out of your car before you are ready and you are not able to grab the leash before he sees a squirrel or other animal on the other side of the parking lot or street
- Your dog is running toward a low wall and is about to jump it, not realizing there is a long drop on the other side
- Your dog gets loose after an auto accident and is running around on the highway. Rescue workers want to help the dog, but need to stop him first (or prevent him from running onto the road.) The universal hand signal to stop (palm toward dog with fingers pointing up) could save his life.
- After a disaster, your dog has gotten loose and is wandering. Rescue workers find your dog, but it is not safe for the dog to come to them. The universal hand signal to stop could save his life.

The idea is to teach the dog both the hand signal and a word you are likely to yell in such an emergency situation. Preferably something common that most people might yell in that situation like stop! or wait!

Decide what word you will use to tell the dog to stop all forward movement. Some possible words could include:

- Stop
- Wait
- Halt
- Freeze

If you will be teaching the dog to lay down fast instead of just stopping in place, you could use:

- Down
- Drop
- Plotz
- Splat

Actually, you can make up a word to name the behavior, but remember, it needs to be the first thing that is likely to come to your mind to get the dog to stop as it is rushing toward danger.

Now that you know what you plan to call the behavior, you need to teach the dog that the word has meaning and give the dog a motivation to respond to it. For the purposes of this exercise, I will be using “Halt” as the cue. If you want to teach the dog to lie down fast instead of just stopping, you will need to teach that before working on the moving exercises. Once your dog has a super fast “down”, then substitute that behavior whenever the dog “halts” in the following exercises. Since dogs don’t understand English, you need to combine the cue with an action to help the dog understand what it means.

Start with your dog on a leash, preferably in heel position as you walk, but not required. If the dog has not been trained to heel, simply keep the leash short so the dog is no more than half his body length in front of you. Walk a few steps, say "halt" then immediately stop. As soon as the dog stops moving, click and reward. Be sure the cue is given before you begin to stop. You want to cue to predict the stop, not your body movements. Do several repetitions of this till the dog is responding to the cue. If the dog doesn't seem to be understanding, be sure your timing is correct and that you are clicking when the dog is completely still. If he is swinging his hind end out so he can face you, that is OK as long as he stops moving. Practice this in a few different locations and during a few different training sessions. Don't forget the reward for stopping; this is the start of the "reward history" for the behavior. It is this history of having the behavior rewarded that will help create the motivation to do the behavior later when you might not have a reward available.

Now have the dog walk on your other side, also on a short leash and repeat the exercises above. It is likely that the dog won't have as solid a response at first from this new perspective. However, the understanding should progress quickly. Once the dog is responding on both sides, start to click and reward only the fast responses. If the dog is slow to respond, simply say "thank you" and start walking again. If the dog is quick to respond and stops fully as fast as possible, that gets a click and reward. Gradually increase the length of time the dog needs to remain still prior to the reward. This will help teach the dog that halt means both stop and stay still.

The dog should have a firm understanding of what the "Halt" cue means before proceeding. The next step is to use the cue when the dog is walking in front of you on a loose lead. On a loose lead, the dog has a lot more room to move about, thus more room for error and slow responses. So only proceed to this stage when the dog is performing rapid stops on a short lead by the cue only (not cued by the slowing of your pace.) When the dog halts, go to the dog to reward the stop (rather than having the dog come to you.) If you teach the dog to stop, and then come to you for the reward, it will make later distance work more difficult. It also makes the "stay still" part more unclear for the dog. If the dog moves as you approach, take a step away from the dog and re-cue the halt. Only move forward with the reward when the dog stays still till you get to him. If you have to do this multiple times, back up to the shorter leash for several more repetitions while varying the length of the "stay still" part of the halt behavior.

The loose leash is the beginning of the distance work. When the dog is doing well and responding quickly to the cue when at the end of the leash you are ready for the next step. Return to a short lead or having the dog in heel position. Cue the halt (dog should stop) but you will keep moving a step or two past the dog. If the dog stays still, return to the dog and reward. If the dog moves after you pass by, say "oops, too bad" (or use some other no reward marker to let the dog know his behavior choice won't be rewarded) and try it again. Vary the distance you go past the dog by starting with a short distance in front of the dog and progressing slowly to longer and longer distances. Many dogs are not comfortable staying in place as you walk away, so don't push this too fast if your dog is often breaking the implied stay.

Once the dog understands to stay in place as you continue past him you are ready for the next step. Put the dog on a long line (25 to 50 feet) and repeat the loose leash exercise above where the dog is ahead of you. The cue should come right before the dog reaches the end of the line when you stop. If the dog is moving quickly, give him enough line to respond without getting jerked by the line. The end of the line is simply a reminder. The cue is still given before you make any physical indication that you are about to stop. Vary the length of the line

so that the dog doesn't know when the halt cue will happen. When you give the halt cue, the dog should stop and wait for you to come to him and deliver a reward. Don't let the dog come to you for the reward or it will make the next step more difficult.

By now, the dog should have a firm understanding of what the halt cue means (It should mean the dog stops and doesn't move until reached by an approaching person or until told to move.) Now he is ready for the most difficult step. It will help to have a friend that can hold the long line attached to the dog. Start with the dog about 10 to 15 feet away on a stay near the helper. The helper should have the long line held so the dog has only half the distance to you available. So if you are 10 feet away from the dog, the helper holds the line so the dog only has 5 feet of line. If your dog has a rocket fast recall, you'll want to give more distance to give the dog time to react to the halt cue during the recall. When ready, call the dog then give the hand signal **just before** you cue the dog to halt. The helper is a back up to help the dog understand the cue in this new context, NOT to jerk the dog for a slow response. This is a new context, so it might take the dog a few tries to fully understand that halt still means halt, even when given during a recall while facing you. Once the dog stops, go to the dog to reward him. Having an assistant holding the line helps remind the dog to stay in place to wait for you instead of going to you for the reward. As you practice, vary the distance the dog travels before being told to stop (so he doesn't anticipate that it will be half the distance to you.) Also vary the length of time the dog needs to remain stopped before you approach to reward.

Note: You want to introduce the new hand signal just before you give the verbal cue so that the dog will start to use the hand signal to anticipate the known verbal halt cue. If they are used simultaneously, the dog might ignore the unknown cue. After lots of practice, during different sessions in different locations, you can test to see if your dog knows the hand signal. Go to a new location and for the first practice run, use only the hand signal. It is important that the dog understand this hand signal so that strangers can keep the dog safe even if they don't know the cue you chose to use. It has the added benefit of stopping your dog if he is approaching someone that doesn't like dogs (if the person uses the signal to try to stop the dog's approach.)

If you decide you want the dog to sometimes come to you (instead of you going to the dog) after the dog has been cued to halt: I recommend you wait till the dog has a very firm grasp on the fact that the halt cue has an implied stay component before you add a recall. In other words, don't start calling the dog to you from the halt when the distance work starts just so that you don't have to walk to the dog. You should be walking to the dog more than half of the time until the dog has completed all of the above training levels. Preferably, the dog should go through all of the above steps before a recall or other "you are free to move now" type cue is added after the halt cue. This will help keep the stay still part of the halt cue very clear to the dog.

Congratulations! You have taught your dog a new cue! Now you just need to practice on occasion to keep it fresh in the dog's mind.