



Shush on Cue by Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA

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Most people want a dog that will bark when someone is at the door or has entered the property. Some are concerned that teaching a dog to control his barking means that he will never bark again, not even to alert them to danger. No worries. Dogs will still bark to announce perceived peril, protect their turf, or herald the arrival of a welcome friend. Personally, there is no need for an alarm system or even a

doorbell in my home. My dogs are much more efficient than any bell and an extremely persuasive security system.

The goal is to train the dog to be quiet on cue after he's made his announcement. Teaching shush on cue, as with any behavior, should not be attempted in the heat of the moment. Episodes of uncontrollable barking are not teachable moments. The dog simply cannot learn to shush on cue while he is barking hysterically. Worse yet, we may end up unintentionally reinforcing it. Here's why. Say we try to get the dog to stop barking by offering up a treat. If we deliver the treat immediately after he stops barking, we've reinforced him for barking, not for being quiet. The dog may learn to bark so that he'll be told to be quiet, and then rewarded. This is why timing and sequence are important, where the subtle difference between bribery and rewards need to be understood, and we must have the dog in the right state of mind.

To teach the dog to be quiet on cue we'll first train him to bark on cue. That way we can teach him to stop when he is calm and cognitive, not barking frantically.

To teach him to bark on cue, do something that you know will cause the dog to bark. The doorbell usually does the trick, but anything that consistently triggers barking will do.

Step 1: Station a friend outside the door. Say, "Speak" (or whatever cue word you'd like.) The word "Speak" is also the signal for your friend to ring the doorbell.

Step 2: When the dog barks, praise him abundantly. Be animated and happily excited.

Step 3: After the dog has barked a few times, hold your finger to your lips and say, "Sshhhh" or "Shush." "Sshhhh" makes a good cue because you can't yell it. Holding the finger to the lips is a hand signal, handy for when you are on the phone and do not want to interrupt your conversation (and dogs, like children, will always "talk" when you are on the phone.)

Step 4: As you say, "Sshhhh" wave a treat directly in front of the dog's nose. He will stop barking in order to sniff the treat because it is physically impossible for a dog to sniff and bark at the same time. Praise the dog for being quiet and then give him the treat. Praise should be calm and quiet, as excited, animated praise may incite more barking.

Step 5: Repeat steps 1 through 3 until the dog anticipates the doorbell ringing whenever you say "Speak." He has learned to bark on cue when he hears "Speak" and barks before the doorbell rings. He has also learned to anticipate a treat and stop barking when hears "Sshhhh."

Step 6: Progressively increase the length of time between saying "Sshhhh" and the dog receiving the treat. Alternating between "Speak" and "Sshhhh" has the dog earning rewards for barking on request and then quieting on request. Lengthening the time between "Sshhhh" and the reward ensures that the treat is a reward and not a bribe. Once the dog is reliable with quieting on cue, the treats can be faded out.

Step 7: Put the "Speak" and "Sshhhh" into practice in the real world and help your dog to generalize the behavior. If your dog barks at passers by, employ a friend to walk back and forth in front of your house. Ask the dog to "Sshhhh" while the person passes by. Repeat until the dog can watch in the passerby in silence. Next, have the person walk to the front door. Ask the dog to "Speak" and then to "Sshhhh" and sit

quietly while the visitor enters. Now, the dog has learned to watch passers by silently, but to bark when someone enters the property, and to stop on request.