



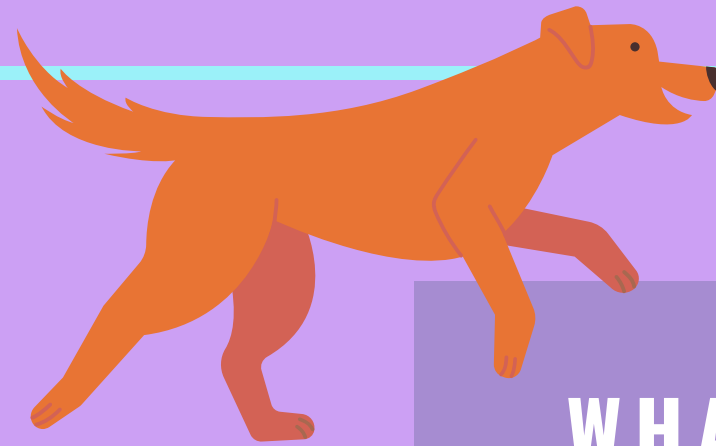
Beginners Guide To Agility

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Before you start agility



AGILITY... WHAT IS IT?!

You may have seen agility at Crufts on TV, or by a display team at a country show, and found your interest piqued. If you haven't seen it, get yourself on Youtube and give it a watch - it's a lot of fun, even as a spectator!

At its essence, agility is a fast-paced sport which derived from dog working trials (and likely inspired by horse show jumping). The first agility show was held at Crufts in 1978, and we've come a long way since then!

Like that very first show, dog and handler work together at competitions as a team to tackle a course set by a judge. They are *marked* on how they tackle the course - receiving *faults* for things such as dislodging jump poles or jumping the coloured area on the end of a contact, and *refusals* for things such as entering the weaves from the wrong side or running past or under jumps. They can also be *eliminated* for taking an off-course obstacle. This can be hard to prevent as often your dog is behind or ahead of you on a course - control is very important!

Agility is fast - there's no doubt about that. Quite often there will be less than 5 seconds between a winner and 10th place; often there can be even less in it!

WHAT IF I'M NOT FAST?

Agility is fast, fun and furious - addictive for both handler & dog alike. But just because your dog is encouraged to go as fast as possible (whilst being as safe as possible, and whilst you exert as much control as possible...) that doesn't mean *you* have to be fast! There are plenty of people who train and compete regularly who are not mobile at all - who are able to handle their dog at a distance, relying on verbal control rather than physical presence. It is amazing to watch and an honour to help our distance handlers succeed!

WHERE CAN I TRAIN?

There are a lot of options, including Kennel Club licensed clubs and private clubs & trainers. Wherever you train, it is important that your trainer doesn't throw you in at the deep end - you should be spending a good length of time working on the *foundations* before your dog starts tackling any equipment.

Good trainers know the importance of strong foundation skills!

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Agility terms

A WORD FOR EVERYTHING!

There are many different terms used within agility - typically referring to a specific manoeuvre that either a dog or handler is performing. Some of these are self explanatory, e.g. a **front cross** is where you *cross* in *front* of the dog, and some are very much not, e.g. a **threadle** is where you pull a dog in to the nonobvious side of a jump.

GENERAL AGILITY TERMS

Acceleration is the ideal state for a lot of agility - the dog picking up speed as they travel across the course. Sometimes we need *deceleration* (*decel*) - for the dog to slow down a tiny bit!

Commitment to an obstacle means that the dog will take that next, regardless of the handler's movements - we want strong obstacle commitment to enable us to then move on to the next part of the course.

Criteria is how you expect the dog to perform an obstacle - they are then either performing *to criteria* or *not to criteria*.

A *cross* is used to switch which side of the handler the dog is on.

A *cue* can be verbal or physical; it is the signal given by the handler so that the dog completes a particular obstacle or manoeuvre in a particular way.

When looking at a course, you need to look not only at where the obstacles are, but where the *dog's line* will take them. This refers to the path that the dog will take across the ground - and will very likely *not* be a straight line from A to B!

A dog heading on independently to an obstacle is *driving* to that obstacle. The arm nearest the dog is the arm that will be used to physically *drive* the dog - the *drive arm*. In comparison, the arm furthest from the dog (or the *off arm*) is usually used to *turn* the dog away from you or to indicate *decel*.

Forward focus refers to a dog looking ahead at obstacle(s) - not at their handler. The more the dog is looking for obstacles, the easier it is to direct them when ahead of you... in theory!



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Basic crosses & turns

FRONT CROSS

Where the handler is ahead of the dog on the course & changes side by turning in toward the dog.

Front crosses slow your dog down (they encourage *decel*) on approach and push them away from you on exit.

As you have your eyes on your dog throughout, front crossing can help prevent them from taking *traps* (i.e. an incorrect next obstacles) on course - but may also temporarily slow you down as they require some fast, fancy footwork.

BLIND CROSS

Where the handler is ahead of the dog on the course & changes side, without turning toward the dog.

Blind crosses keep your dog in *acceleration* and encourage your dog to stay close to you on exit. They are typically used for more subtle changes of direction.

Blind crosses also mean you are temporarily *blind* to your dog, so may not be a good idea if there are lots of *traps* around!

REAR CROSS

Where the handler is behind the dog on the course & changes side - crossing behind the rear of the dog.

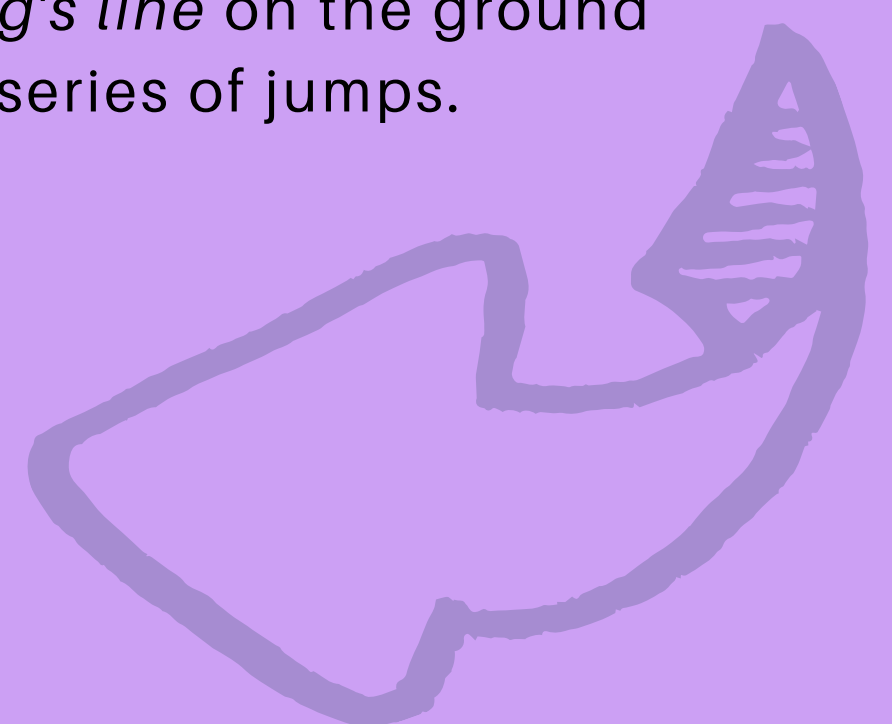
Rear crosses are most often used by distance handlers, and as a "oh no" handling option by running handlers!

They can be hard to pull off as require a lot of obstacle *commitment* and *drive* from the dog and a good understanding of directional cues.

PIVOT (TURN)

Where the handler turns, keeping the dog on the same side but changing the dog's trajectory.

Pivots or pivot turns are an important and sometimes neglected skill in agility. They can be used to shape the *dog's line* on the ground or through a series of jumps.



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But wait - there's more!

KETSCHKER

Where the handler performs a blind cross on a wing wrap or backside wrap, usually close to the jump; picking the dog back up on their original arm as they move away.

Ketschkers are a fast handling option, usually allowing the handler to move away more quickly; this in turn encourages the dog to chase the handler and *drive out* of the jump faster. They also encourage tighter exits from jumps. Ketschkers should be used sparingly, as they aren't just a 'better version' of a pivot; they have their purposes and their drawbacks!

GERMAN TURN

Where the dog slices across a jump, and on landing is picked up on the opposite side of the handler to where the obstacle was.

German turns are another way to encourage speed and tight slice lines around a course. They can be used both on the face of a jump (with the handler on the landing side of the jump) and when pushing the dog to the back of the jump. They can be tricky to get your head around to start with!

FLICK AWAY OR SCOOP

Where the handler uses their 'off arm' to turn the dog away from them, either on the ground or when performing or exiting an obstacle.

Flick aways can be used as both as a rear cross, and to drive a dog to an obstacle independently while the handler moves on to the next obstacle. They are also a great back-up option to fix a line, especially if you end up on the wrong side of your dog to otherwise turn them!

FALSE TURN

Where the handler begins to front cross the dog, bringing the dog in tight toward them; before returning to their original handling position and/or path.

These should be used sparingly, to avoid traps that you can't otherwise navigate. If over-used, your dog may start to disregard front crosses, assuming that you won't complete the cross - and then your false turn will be ineffective!

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Dare to jump?



THE MOST COMMON OBSTACLE

Jumps are by far the obstacle that your dog will tackle the most often. When you first start training, it's important not to jump your dog too high, even if they are naturally athletic and enjoy jumping when out and about. It takes a while to teach our dogs good *jump form* and for them to understand their own bodies and how to safely and successfully navigate jumps.

TYPES OF JUMPS

There are a number of different jumps - most of which require the same action from your dog, but which *look* very different to them.

- Standard jump: a single pole between two wings
- Tyre: a circular hoop jump, usually with breakaway elements.
- Wall: a solid looking jump (no gaps that dogs can see underneath - so they don't know what's on the other side) with two pillars on either side.
- Spread jump: two standard jumps placed one in front of the other, with the first jump's pole being lower than the dog's normal jump height; the dog has to clear both poles.
- Long jump: a *long* construction of up to 5 elements (wood or foam) - the dog has to jump *long* to clear all elements.

JUST BOUNCE!

It is important that your dog understands more than just a singular 'jump' cue in agility. Your dog needs to know, before they take off for a jump, where they are going next! They may need to *extend* and accelerate; they may need to *collect* themselves; they may even need to ignore the tempting front of a jump and take the back of it!

All jump cues should be taught independently of handler movement; verbal cues should be distinctive; and all cues should be given early enough to the dog, so that they can translate the human speech into dog action, adjust their gait or path if necessary, and then carry that out - long before they get to the jump itself!

As standard, your dog should have cues to...

- Jump in extension - i.e. go go!
- Jump & turn left or right.
- *Wing wrap* - jump tightly and do a 180° *wrap* around the wing
- Go round the back of a jump (backside slice/wrap cue)
- Pull in to the 'off' side of a jump (threadle slice/wrap cue)

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Tunnels...

making dogs crazy since 1978

CREATING A TUNNEL MONSTER

Tunnels are one of the first pieces of equipment we can safely introduce to inexperienced & younger dogs. Dogs must run through from one side of the tunnel to the other - meaning they exit from the opposite side they were sent in. Turning around in the tunnel is an impressive feat of dexterity - but not what we want!

Most trainers use tunnels with beginners to build *drive* and *obstacle commitment* - dogs typically enjoy tunnels, so they are a good way to encourage novice dogs to move further away from their handlers and pay less attention to what their handlers are doing. Tunnels are also a great place to start introducing crosses, as they give you a couple of seconds to get in the right position - and your dog is likely to come out looking at you for guidance on where to go next!

SAFETY FIRST!

Although tunnels are one of the *safest* bits of equipment, they can still cause problems if not pegged or weighted down appropriately. Faster dogs often run along the outer edge of the tunnel (think Sonic the Hedgehog style!) if sent in from harder angles, and it is important that the tunnel doesn't shift or they'll slip and potentially injure themselves!

BLIND TO YOU

Remember that while your dog is in the tunnel, they are completely blind to where you are and what you're doing. Sometimes this is a bonus, as it means that we can get into position for a cross or start moving toward the next obstacle and make the dog catch up with us. And sometimes it isn't at all, as if the dog comes out of the tunnel and sees an obstacle close by they may take that - even if you haven't told them to do so! Or they may run straight to you, instead of taking an obstacle you *thought* they would see.

We need to give information to the dog on what to do next *while* in the tunnel - this may include checking in with you or a certain piece of equipment that we want them to look for.

Examples of cues we may give, for the dog to perform on exit:

- Dog's name - look at me
- Directional cue - turn left/right
- Jump cue - perform this action on an upcoming jump next (e.g. backside, wing wrap, GO)
- Other obstacle cues - look for this obstacle and take it

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The big ones... Contacts!

WHAT EXACTLY ARE THEY?

The *contact* equipment is the most daunting looking kit in an agility course. Consisting of the *a-frame*, *dog walk* and *seesaw*, these require the dogs to exercise a lot of self control, to understand how to safely increase and decrease their speed, and perform set *criteria* at the end.

The *a-frame* is a pair of two wide, steep planks that the dog must traverse.

The *dog walk* is the longest piece; three very thin planks attached to each other that the dog has to run over. This requires great balance from the dog - especially when they're travelling at speed!

The *seesaw* is the only piece of equipment in a course that moves - it bangs down to the ground like a child's seesaw and dogs must have the confidence and understanding of where the *tipping point* is in order to safely navigate it.

Top tip: the *dog walk* and *seesaw* look very, very similar to the dog on approach as they are the exact same angle - so distinctive cues and *early cues* are important!



SO WHAT'S THIS ABOUT "CRITERIA"?

When navigating any of the contacts, dogs have to touch at least one paw to the differently coloured parts of the contact (the *contact points*) at the end. For the *seesaw* that must also have hit the ground before the dog departs. Failure to do any of these results in *faults* if competing - and it is a safety risk otherwise. As fun as it looks: no leaping from the top!

It is important to have *criteria* for your dog's contacts, such as:

- 4 on: dog stops with four feet on the contact point - usually seen on *seesaw*.
- 2 on, 2 off: dog stops with two feet on the contact, two on the ground.
- Running: for the *a-frame* (and *dog walk* if you're feeling brave) - the dog learns a set stride pattern to take them across the entire contact.

It's important to have set criteria that you hold your dog to. *Hope and pray* contacts, where you try to slow your dog down in roughly the right area, simply don't stand the test of time in the competition ring - and it can be very hard to un-teach the bad habits formed from doing this!

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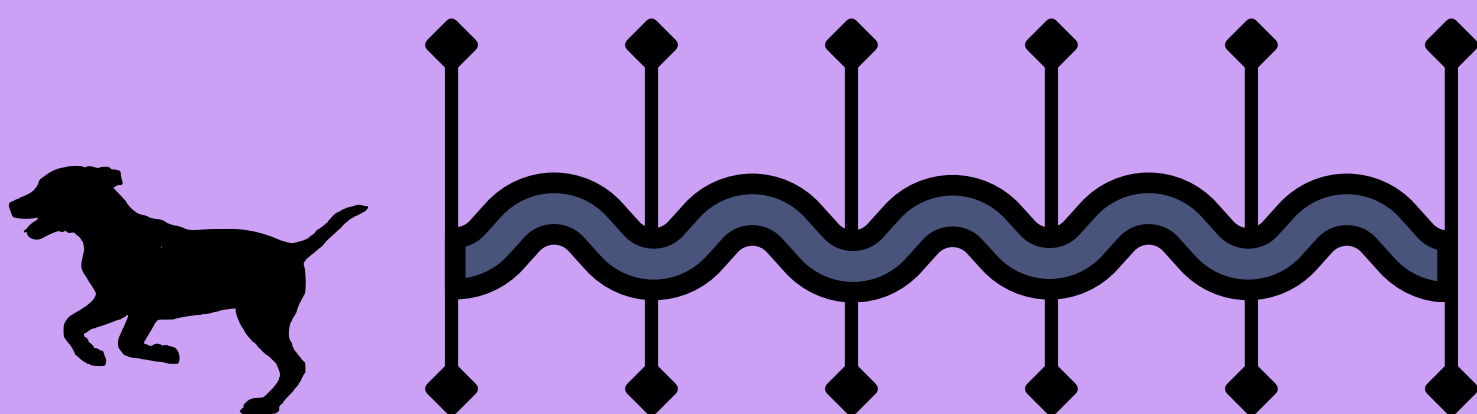
Get your wiggle on!

WEAVE, WEAVE, WEAVE!

Weaves are one of the most exciting things to watch - and one of the toughest on the dog's body. It requires the dog to fully flex and bend their spine throughout and puts a lot of pressure into the dog's shoulders. For bigger dogs, it's not uncommon to see them in contact with the weaves at several points - their head and shoulders passing by one pole, their body curved around another, and their tail curved around another still.

Weaves require enormous levels of concentration from the dog. We usually see a set of either six or twelve poles in a course - that's a long time for them to be doing this physically demanding obstacle!

Weaves are typically one of the last things we teach dogs when working through agility skills. We need to make absolutely sure the dog is fully grown and that they are physically capable of doing them - as well as mentally capable of it! They aren't one to rush into, and most trainers don't even begin to start training them until the dog is around 15 months old.



HOW DO WE TEACH THEM?

- Channel weaves: dog runs through 6 or 12 poles in total (3 and 3 or 6 and 6 on each side) and the gap is slowly reduced.
- V weaves: a set of weaves that bend at the joint where poles meet base; these are initially flattened so the dog is stepping between, then slowly lifted up.
- 2 x 2: the dog is *shaped* to run through a "gate" of two poles, which are then adjusted until they are one in front of the other. Then more gates are slowly added.
- Other shaping: through reward placement, dogs are taught to offer a singular weave motion - and this is then built upon.

It is possible to use a combination of methods. We don't suggest *luring* through the weaves, as although this seems like a shortcut to the finished goal, it is hard to build independence!

THINGS TO REMEMBER...

Dogs have to enter the weaves with their left shoulder first.

The faster the dog approaches the weaves, the harder for them to stay in. They need to learn to *decel* themselves at the last possible moment.



*If you want to find out
more about agility...*

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