



INFORMATION SHEET

PREFERENCE TESTING

Help gain motivation & focus when training

Over the years, there have been a number of papers that have investigated whether animals have motivations and preferences, whether they make conscious choices, and if given various foods to choose among, do animals make adaptive choices that are good for them? Why are such questions important when we come to train our animals?

Before animals make choices, they go through a decision-making process which is guided by their motivations and preferences. To maximise the likelihood of our pet performing the behaviour[s] we're after, we need to create motivation first. This can be facilitated by using rewards our pet finds 'brilliant' rather than using what WE think they like. Preference testing can be used to understand your pet's 'pay scale'. In other words, what are their £5, £20 and £50 note equivalents? This can be done with food against food, food versus toys, and toys against other toys, games or activities.

How to test

- Introduce novel foods slowly and in small amounts to prevent stomach upset.
- Gather 3-4 different items to test against.
- Ask your dog to "Sit" & "Wait" if they know how, otherwise get a helper to gently hold the dog's shoulders.
- Place 2 different items you're testing against, around 1-2 feet apart and in-line, approximately 8-10 feet from your pet.
- Use a release cue (e.g. "OK") and see which one they go to. Avoid leaning to one side, looking at a particular item or pointing towards an item, to reduce bias.
- Repeat at least 3 times to determine your pet's preference. If they choose the same side each time, place that item the other side, & repeat the test to rule out any right or left-hand preference (e.g.) depending on whether an owner typically rewards from one particular hand.
- Having determined your pet's favourite item, swap out the rejected one for another, & re-test against the previously favoured item to see how that fairs.
- Watch my video on How to Preference Test by scanning the QR code.

Ideas of what to test with

Start off with a dried and food treat and compare to a piece of kibble. Then move along the 'pay scale' to discover what your dog perceives as more valuable. Below are some ideas to test with.

- Kibble
- Dried commercial dog treats
- Raw carrot
- Cucumber
- Cooked chicken
- Frankfurter
- Mature cheddar cheese
- Venison sausage for dogs
- Cooked salmon
- Dehydrated liver
- Rabbit sticks
- Kangaroo sticks

Toy/other item ideas:

- Tennis ball
- Soft rope toy
- Squeaky animal toy
- Lotus ball
- Empty clean water bottle
- Rod or dog flirt pole
- Wobbler / food dispensing
- toy
- Frisbee

