
The Three Most Important Factors Every Orientation and Mobility Instructor Needs to Know when Working with Guide Dogs

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The author discusses three important factors that need to be considered by Orientation & Mobility (O&M) instructors when working with clients that are guide dog users. These include: that the work of a guide dog can be influenced by the presence of the O&M instructor during training; the significance of straight line travel; and the importance of using such O&M techniques as guiding, directional cues and landmarks.

Working with clients who are guide dog users can be daunting for inexperienced Orientation & Mobility (O&M) instructors. Similarly, experienced instructors might feel capable when working with clients less confident in their O&M skills, though less capable when working with guide dog clients who are often highly skilled and confident in O&M. It is important that instructors remain mindful that how the training session is conducted will have either a positive or negative effect on the guide dog and guide dog handler “unit”.

Tips for working successfully with the guide dog unit

To assist in the reduction of guide dog distraction during a training session, it is helpful to keep client instruction to a minimum. To achieve this, the majority of instruction can take place prior to and after the training session. Route planning can also occur prior to the first training session. For example,

the instructor and client can plan the route together in a relaxed environment and then while the client is being guided. It is necessary when planning the route to investigate and become familiar with the overall structure of the route, followed by more intricate familiarity with each route segment. The instructor must also consider the time of day the client is likely to travel as this will be a decisive factor in deciding the direction of the final route. For example, it might be best to avoid a crowded school area at the conclusion of a school day or avoid an area where no footpath is available. Planning the route with the client prior to training will have the positive effects of preventing guide dog boredom and confusion since it is clear from the outset, the route the dog is required to learn. It is imperative to teach the correct route in the first instance, as the dog has an able memory and will memorise most often that which is first taught. It is also important to remember, that unlike long cane work, the dog works at a much quicker pace,

and therefore the instructor must anticipate the training environment more quickly. Reduced instruction will also assist the unit to maintain focus and concentration. Further, the continuity of work will mirror the actual work patterns of the guide dog unit, providing the handler with a more accurate way of recognising time versus distance comparisons on the new route. If a longer route that also includes public transport is to be learned, then the unit may be taught sections of the route in any order and the dog will put it together.

During the training session, the guide dog might be influenced by the position of the O&M instructor. For example, if the instructor is walking to the right of the handler, the dog might veer to the right, or if the instructor walks beside the dog to the left, the dog might veer to the left. During the lesson, it is preferable that the instructor maintain a position behind and slightly to the right of the working guide dog unit. This should be close enough that instruction or support can be given, but out of the dog's line of sight and far enough away so as not to distract the dog or inhibit the client's movements. Where the positioning might change is when the instructor wants to influence the unit to move in a particular direction by using their own body position. The instructor could also walk several paces behind the unit after brief instructions have been given. The instructor should also keep movements slow and predictable, as fast, loud and jerky movements can distract the dog.

In overwhelmingly complex environments such as crowded department stores, the guide dog will sometimes exhibit signs of tension or stress by tightening its ears against its head or dropping its tail. Such signs indicate that the unit is probably

experiencing difficulty. In such instances the "follow" command can be used. It is recommended that at this time, the unit is stopped and the "follow" procedure is explained to the handler. The instructor can then walk approximately two meters in front of the unit so that the handler can command the dog to "follow" the instructor.

Certain sounds can distract the dog because of its high-frequency hearing ability. For instance, the rustling of plastic or paper bags is distracting, as the dog might have received food rewards from similar sounds. These sounds can take the dog's attention away from its work, as Labradors are often food-focused. Noisy shoes can also distract the dog.

An instructor should not command, speak to, feed or control a guide dog when it is being worked by its handler. This should be the sole responsibility of the handler. On occasions the instructor might be requested to hold the leash while the handler engages in another activity. This is usually acceptable as long as the handler commands the dog to sit and stay, and the instructor holds the leash short up until the handler returns.

Significance of straight line travel

Generally guide dog units work from kerb to kerb and all major changes of direction are completed from either the down or up kerbs. As a part of this expectation, guide dogs are also encouraged to go around grass verges rather than over them. This will have the added advantage of avoiding plant matter that might lodge into the dog's paws. An O&M instructor should provide orientation to a guide dog handler in terms of straight lines. Initially, guiding the client can be used to provide straight line orientation.

For instance, when it is necessary to turn at a kerb, turn on the spot. The handler might then be ready to work the guide dog over the same route with verbal support from the instructor. The instructor can use words like “stop”, “go”, “over” (move to the left), “in” (move to the right) and “back turn” (turn around and go back). The final training stage is when the handler can meet the instructor at the end of the route unassisted.

Guide dogs require footpaths, kerbs, walls, fences, roads, corridors and hallways to assist them to remain on route. Open spaces are not helpful because there is nothing for the dog to follow. A guide dog’s detail vision is relatively short at approximately 30 meters, which does not allow the dog to register objects in the distance unless they are moving.

Using O&M techniques

The instructor’s existing knowledge of guiding techniques will help minimise confusion if the client is finding the training session challenging. Guiding might also be used to direct the unit along a preferred path, with the guide dog always remaining on the drop side such as when on a railway platform. Guiding can be used to position a handler in a specific direction if the unit is not facing the direction objective, or to assist the unit repeat a certain part of the route that requires improvement. Guiding is also beneficial at the commencement of training to assist the unit’s awareness of stairs or railway platforms. Importantly, the instructor should look ahead and if necessary stop the unit to explain a change in route before it is reached.

Other useful O&M strategies to incorporate into unit training are the clock face and

distance discrimination. The clock face approach can be used to describe to the client the positioning of objects, or the direction in which the unit should be positioned. For instance, the bank is located in front of us at 12 o’clock, while the café is on our right at 3 o’clock. Distances can be described in terms of the number of steps to climb, the number of blocks to walk, the number of lighted intersections or the number of sloped driveways.

A further consideration during unit training is that different sides of the road can have qualities that might be of value or a hindrance to a client. The instructor and client need to investigate whether or not shadows are a distraction or whether the pavement is too hot for the dog. The client may have a preference for one side of the road or the other.

Instructions can be provided to a guide dog client in a similar way to an O&M client. For example, it is acceptable to instruct a client to stop, turn left or right, or back. If a discussion needs to occur during training, it is also acceptable to suggest that the handler command the dog to sit. If a more lengthy discussion is required, a relaxing café environment is highly beneficial providing a rest for both the dog and handler. Such a relaxed environment allows the client time to fully process and clarify instruction. Clear and concise instructions will ensure that the continuity of work is maintained.

It is important to remember that the handler is responsible for the dog, its behaviour and mistakes, which should not be confused with route instructions. The handler is expected to know what to do if a mistake has occurred. If a problem arises with the dog, simply mention it to the handler.

If the unit is veering off track, the unit must be stopped, the error explained, the unit repositioned, then recommenced. It is recommended that training occur on one small route segment at a time that is repeated until learnt before moving onto the next route segment. This training approach assists to maintain the confidence and motivation of the unit as it is much easier to learn small route segments at one time.

Summary

Pre-session:

- (a) Discuss the proposed route with the client. Determine the client's residual vision, existing knowledge of the route and the intended frequency of travel on the route.
- (b) If possible talk to a guide dog instructor who has knowledge of the client to provide background information on the perceived capabilities of the unit.

- (c) Ensure the client is aware of the basic orientation points on route (in both directions).

During the session:

- (a) On the initial training session, travel the route only with the client, then guide the client with the dog. In the following session commence the client working the dog.
- (b) Maintain correct instructor positioning throughout lesson.
- (c) Keep instruction to a minimum.

Post-session:

- (a) Monitor the client's ability to complete the route on an independent basis. Success might occur on the first session but may require one or two more sessions in some cases.

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