There are four stages of learning:

* Learning the behaviour (Acquisition)
* Perfecting and Fluency
* Generalization(Proofing)
* Maintenance

Learning the behaviour (Acquisition)

This is where the behaviour is brand new, we teach our dogs a new behaviour by luring or shaping, then integrating a verbal cue (possibly) and/or a hand signal.

I vary location and my position frequently. If the dog makes a "mistake" here, I ignore it and may make what I want more obvious or easier. I aim for a very high rate of reinforcement for doing what I want.

Now for this example we are in a group class and the dog has acquired this new knowledge here in this very room. You might get home and the dog has suddenly ‘forgotten’ how to sit.

Perfecting and Fluency

Behaviour is on cue. You can start to add variables like distance, duration, distractions. Building to fluency. Dog "knows" what you want, but he's figuring out all the contingencies. Still working in formal sessions.

Take this exercise to the park; at this stage ignoring mistakes and striving for a very high rate of reinforcement. Making it very easy for the dog to gain treats. You *want* the dog to experiment and make some mistakes, because that's how he figures out what you want. He will start to pull out all of tricks “What about this? How about this?" at this stage he is just trying the boundaries of the desired behaviour that you are after. Corrections are absolutely counter to what you want to do during either of these first two stages, because they *suppress* behaviour. You *want* your dog to experiment, and he won't if there's an unpleasant consequence for doing so.

Prefect behaviour happens with practice – we start to see that our pup is fluent when the number of times our pup correctly performs the behaviour asked, is higher than the number of incorrect attempts. Trainers usually aim to increase the criteria when the dog is performing correctly 80% of the time.

This is the stage of learning where the average pup parent will get comfortable, greedy or lazy. We assume that our pup knows how to sit and the learning doesn’t need to continue.

Generalization (Proofing)

This is the part of learning that we should be focused on once our pup has become fluent in a behaviour. I recommend that you train your dog first in the lounge, where the dog is comfortable, then in the bathroom, where he doesn’t go very often and the acoustics are different, and then take the training session outside to the back yard, somewhere that is still very familiar to the dog but still increasing the level of distractions. Remember to make the first couple of rewards easy for each new setting that you apply the behaviour. Then after you feel that the dog has the behaviour sorted after all of those places, then take the training to the park.

Now begin to use it in real-world situations, situations that are NOT cued by the trappings of a "formal session." During this stage, I *only* cue the behaviour when the dog wants something in the environment I can control. Dinner. Access to outside. A toy. Opportunity to go for a walk. Opportunity to meet and greet. If he doesn't respond to the cue, he doesn't get what he wants. No skin off my nose. It's vital that I practice ONLY when *he* has something at stake and *I* don't.

Maybe he wants me to open the door to go outside. Maybe he wants his dinner bowl to be put down. Maybe he wants me to throw his ball. If he does what I ask, I do what he wants. If not, I don't. This is how to use environmental rewards. I create a clear contingency between doing what I ask and getting what *HE* wants. This is the stage where my animals learn that not responding to what I ask has consequences - namely that they don't get what they want. No physical or psychological consequence is used though.

This is a big step for many owners because they think that if the dog knows it at home in the den, he "knows" it in the dog park and is misbehaving when he doesn't perform. Dogs don't generalize very well so they may, in fact, he may know what "sit" means at home, but he may not recognize it as the same old command when he hears it at the dog park when he is bouncing around.

Maintenance

Ah, maintenance. If you’ve been on a diet this is the toughest part where we normally fail. The best part is that when training a dog, it’s fairly easy. I suggest simply reinforcing the behaviour randomly – give a jackpot of treats for a sit a few days after you’re certain your pup has generalized the behaviour and you have asked for it a few times without offering a reward for success. This will strengthen the behaviour as they will never know when the jackpot is coming and they will take that chance! (Don’t we already do this with our weekly lottery ticket purchase?)

Once the behaviour gets to maintenance stage, you can begin to use it when *you* have something at stake, and the dog may or may not. You do need to variably reward the behaviour. Some behaviours will become self-reinforcing. Some behaviours will be so well-practiced (sit, for example), that they're essentially automatic. But you can't count on that. You will still need to reward the dog, this may become a pat or some cheese, rather than the exciting rewards you used earlier on in training.

I occasionally use negative punishment at this stage - removing something they want - if I'm not getting a response. I don't do that very frequently though. By the maintenance stage I simply shouldn't have to. If I'm getting non-responses, I rushed training. (Which doesn't mean it doesn't happen. I'm just not big on making my dogs pay when I'm the one who isn't being thorough.)

The bottom line is that we have to be thorough in our teaching, not take advantage of fully- learned behaviours, and ensure that we maintain the learning for the life of our pups. Take the time to **teach** your pup, help him become fluent, generalize the behaviours and then continue to maintain your end of the bargain.

So before you ask your dog if his sit is broken, or accuse them of being stubborn or upset with you, because the truth of the matter is that dogs aren’t stubborn; they don’t do things out of spite or to drive us crazy. If they are failing to comply with our request, we need to look a little deeper, (usually at ourselves, and the training we provided). Ask yourself if you’ve really taught him what it means. Dogs don’t come pre-programmed so it’s up to us to provide the highest education possible. I always tell my clients that if their dog’s sit is broken, it means it was never fully built and that they haven’t done their job.