



# Debriefing

## What is Debriefing?

Debriefing is essentially a reflective conversation or meeting that takes place after a training session or any interaction with a working dog. It's a chance for everyone involved—trainers, handlers, and sometimes even the dogs (through their behaviour!)—to sit down and discuss what went well, what didn't, and what can be done differently next time.

For example, after a training session where a dog successfully learned to retrieve an item, a debrief might focus on how the dog responded to the handler's cues, whether the handler felt confident in the dog's progress, and if there were any struggles during the exercise. The goal is to evaluate the session as a whole, making sure all parties are aligned on progress and addressing any challenges that arose.

## How to Organise a Debrief?

Debriefs work best when the right people are involved and the process is structured but flexible. In the working animal sector, debriefs can be informal chats or scheduled meetings, depending on the complexity of the session and the needs of the team. Debriefs should involve everyone who was present or involved in the session – handlers, trainers, occupational therapists and even supervisors,

Immediately after the session is ideal to schedule a debrief while details are fresh in everyone's mind. Choose a quiet, low-stress environment like a corner of the training space, a staff room, a cafe or even take a casual walk outside. If an in-person debrief isn't possible, a quick follow-up call, message, or video chat can work just as well.

Debriefs should be routine, embedded into your daily and/or weekly schedule. Even 5–10 minutes can make a big difference. A checklist or shared notebook can help keep things consistent.

Remember to keep it supportive, constructive and collaborative with a focus on learning and improvement for both dog and handler.



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## How Does Debriefing Work?

The debriefing process isn't a rigid formula—it's about honest discussion and reflection.

**Start with Reflection:** Take a moment to step back and reflect. Ask questions like – What was the goal for today? Did we meet it? Maybe the goal was for the dog to respond more consistently to a sit cue. If the dog did well, that's a great positive to highlight. If not, it's time to think about what could be improved.

**Discuss What Worked and What Didn't:** This is where you talk about the session's successes and challenges. Maybe the dog was particularly responsive during training, but the handler had difficulty giving clear cues. Perhaps there was a setback with a specific behavior. The goal is to recognise both the strengths and areas that need more attention.

**Brainstorm Solutions:** Once challenges are identified, it's time to get creative. Maybe the dog's difficulty with the sit cue came from too many distractions in the room. The solution might be to practice in quieter spaces before gradually increasing the level of distraction. Or perhaps the handler could use a different cue or hand signal to make their cues clearer. This stage is about problem-solving together and coming up with specific actions to improve things for the next session.

**Document the Insights:** It's useful to keep a record of what was discussed during the debrief. Writing down the issues, solutions, and action steps ensures nothing gets forgotten, and it helps track the dog's progress over time. This could be a simple note about which training exercises need more attention or details about adjustments made to the handler's approach.



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## Why is Debriefing Helpful?

Debriefing has a lot of benefits, both for the dogs and the people working with them.

**Improves Training and Outcomes Ensuring High Quality Service** – After every session, there's always room for improvement, and debriefing helps identify that. By discussing what worked and what didn't, trainers and handlers can fine-tune their techniques, which can lead to faster progress. For instance, if a handler notices their dog becomes nervous around crowds, the next debriefing might lead to creating a plan to help the dog get used to more public spaces gradually.

**Helps with Handler and Dog Development** – Debriefing isn't just about the dog's performance—it's about making sure handlers are improving too. Maybe a handler feels unsure about managing the dog's behavior in new situations. A debrief allows for that uncertainty to be addressed. For example, a trainer might suggest a new way for the handler to approach distractions, or even offer some tips on how to reduce anxiety when introducing the dog to new environments.

**Supports Emotional Wellbeing** – Working with animals can be emotionally demanding, especially for handlers with disabilities. Debriefing provides a space where feelings can be expressed and challenges acknowledged. If a handler had a tough day, they can share their frustrations, and the team can help find ways to manage those emotions. For instance, if the dog was trained to help with anxiety but didn't perform well during a stressful moment, the debriefing could help the handler feel supported and find solutions for next time.

**Builds Stronger Teamwork** – Trainers, handlers, and other support staff are all part of a team, and debriefing fosters open communication. When everyone is on the same page, it's easier to address issues early on. For example, if a handler isn't clear on certain cues, a trainer might notice during the debrief and can offer a refresher. It's a great way to ensure that everyone is working together to improve the dog's training and the handler's experience.



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Debriefing is an essential part of working with assistance and therapy dogs. It's a process of reflection, discussion, and problem-solving that helps everyone, humans and animals, continue to improve. It provides the opportunity to celebrate successes, address challenges, and make adjustments to ensure future training sessions are even more successful. Whether you're a trainer, handler, or part of the support team, debriefing helps create a well-rounded, thoughtful approach to training and service provision, ensuring both dogs and handlers thrive.

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