

The magic happens when the handler can trust the dog to be correct. The dog's skills can be trusted faster with a really solid foundation.

Skills needed for Novice level Scentwork:

Dog:

Taught with box work:

- Recognize the target odor as significant
- Understand that the target odor is associated with bringing the dog something he wants
- Understand that the strongest concentration of odor is what 'pays'
- Recognize other common odors are insignificant (such as cardboard, sand, adhesives, human odor, etc.)
- Have a desire to search for and locate the target odor
- Able to ignore the environment enough to be able to effectively search
- Not rushing past threshold hides
- Searching effectively and confidently (to reduce search time)
- Not destroying/damaging/changing the search area or components
- Staying with the hide till handler calls it/rewards
- Searching independently- doesn't need handler encouragement/direction
- Helpful: A trained alert behavior
- Understanding how to work the scent cone to source/strongest concentration
- Understands the target odor is still what 'pays' even if it is not as strong/stronger, if has been in place long enough to fill the space with odor, or if it barely has a scent cone.
- How to work crack hides and ground hides
- Understand the search area is a 'no potty zone'
- Tiny dogs will need to work on elevated hides, small dogs might also
- "In-between" skills needed to successfully navigate a trial day. Dogs should be comfortable waiting (and actually resting) in their vehicle for long periods of time, should be able to wait while staging around other dogs for 10+ minutes, should be able to pee and poop on leash. For many teams, dogs should also be comfortable traveling long distances and with overnights in a strange place.

Novice skills for the Handler:

- Recognize when the dog is in odor and has found the source
- Effective leash handling skills

- Staying out of the dog's way, not crowding, not blocking areas, not being a distraction to the dog
- Staying quiet and letting the dog work, unless the dog actually needs support
- Understanding what the dog needs from them to help the dog be successful (silence, encouragement, distance, etc.)
- Remembering to call alert
- A solid start line routine or cue to tell the dog you want them to search
- Clear, specific, and consistent cues from the handler.
- Proper timing and effective delivery/use of motivators/'rewards'
- Not directing the search pattern until the dog has completed their own search pattern
- Basic understanding of what effects odor and how it moves so they can set practice hides effectively and level appropriately (if they practice on their own).
- Understanding of the rules of the sport
- Being able to indicate exactly where the dog alerted
- Understand what to do when a search doesn't go as planned/a hide is not found
- Good 'odor hygiene' / How to properly handle, use, dispose of odor, etc.

Skills added for Advanced level:

Dog:

- Recognizing the new target odor as significant
- Understanding that the search doesn't end with the first find
- Understanding how to separate two odors if the space smells like both and simple airflow puzzles
- Ignoring non-food distractions
- Not going back to previously rewarded hides and waiting for payment again
- Potential for off-leash searches

Handler:

- Remembering where hides were found
- Remembering when to say finish
- Knowing when the dog is on odor vs. a distraction

Additional Skills for Excellent level:

Dog:

- Recognizing the new target odor as significant
- Working hides that are placed higher and working through those challenges
- How to locate and indicate an inaccessible hide (contained, elevated, beyond a barrier)
- Working out the sources for converging odors
- More complicated air flow patterns/issues (eddying, pooling, etc.)
- Searching more than one area back-to-back and larger search areas with more contents
- Ignoring food, auditory and visual distractions
- Helpful: An 'I have found all the sources' behavior

Handler:

- Understanding when the dog has cleared the room
- Understand when the dog has found an inaccessible hide
- Time management
- How to search larger spaces
- Understanding when to call finish

Additional skills for Master:

Dog:

- Recognizing the new target odor as significant
- Can handle searching a room without any target odor (ideally can clearly communicate the lack of odor to the handler)
- How to work through more complex converging odor puzzles
- How to work through pooling, eddying, channeling of odor
- How to indicate more challenging inaccessible hides
- Ignoring human and mimic distractions

Handler:

- Overcoming the stress of the 'unknown number of hides' issue
- Understanding when the room is blank
- Greater time management skills
- Self-timing skills

Additional skills for Detective level:

Dog:

- Working a large search area and long search duration effectively and efficiently
- Working multiple types of searches within the same search (interior and exterior, plus container/buried/vehicles)
- Added difficulty on previously listed odor problems (Higher hides, deeper inaccessible, closer converging, more pooling/channeling/eddyding, etc.)

Handler:

- Handling the mental challenges
- Increase in difficulty of all previously listed skills