

## Chapter 1

Hello, and welcome to *Become a Veterinary Assistant III: Practical Skills*. My name is Jeff Grognet, and I'll be your instructor. To those of you who have already taken my other two courses (*Becoming a Veterinary Assistant I and II*), welcome back. For the new students, I'm excited to have you join us. I look forward to guiding you through this course and sharing my love of veterinary medicine with you. You'll get the chance to learn the practical skills needed for working at a veterinary hospital.

But before we dive in, let me tell you a little bit about myself. I've been a veterinarian since 1983. At one time I worked on all types of animals, including horses, cattle, pigs, and even sheep, which is how I met my wife! But now I focus my energies on dogs and cats. I practice with my wife, who is now also a veterinarian, in a wonderful two-doctor practice. I also have several assistants. Two could be called receptionists, though they spend much of their time helping clients in person and on the phone. However, they are ready to help in the treatment area, what veterinarians call the back end. I also have an additional assistant dedicated to animal care in the treatment area.

Each of these people helps restrain animals when I want to take blood tests or do a test on a lump. By themselves, they trim nails, arrange and take radiographs, set up for surgery, and have myriad other duties in the veterinary hospital. These people are invaluable to me and help speed things along. I think they also get a great amount of job satisfaction in what they do. No day is the same as the last one.

My practice is a little different than most. I use conventional medicine—what most of you are familiar with—but I also incorporate alternative techniques. Acupuncture, herbal medicine, veterinary orthopedic manipulation, and kinesiology form an integral part of the care we provide to pets. More recently, I've turned my attention to frequency-specific low level laser. This tool can help arthritic pets but also those with heart problems, incontinence, and even cancer.

Another love for me is writing. I've contributed regularly to several magazines, including the *AKC Gazette*, *AKC Family Dog* and *Dogs in Canada*, as well as several agricultural publications. The focus is (obviously) animal health.

If you haven't guessed it already, I also love teaching. It all began when I taught a course for veterinary assistants at the local college. That later developed into my first online course, *Become a Veterinary Assistant*. A year later, I developed a course on canine reproduction.

I developed this course in response to student requests for a more generalized course that tackled the practical aspects of a veterinary assistant's duties. In it, I'm going to teach you skills that you'll be called on to use in veterinary hospitals. However, the same expertise can be used on your pets at home.

We'll start with restraint—how to approach and hold an animal. People who are unfamiliar with handling scared or injured animals think this is the easy part. It isn't. This is where people get hurt. I want to you to know how to hold dogs and cats in order to examine them, administer medication, trim nails, and give injections.

Drawing blood samples and keeping track of the tests is a common responsibility that falls to a veterinary assistant. Do you know the difference between blood chemistries and white or red blood cells? Do you know what a PCV is? I'll tell you all about these and much, much more.

Another fluid that veterinarians also frequently analyze is urine. I'll demonstrate several ways to get a sample; then I'll give you step-by-step instructions on how to examine it. The results are important to your veterinarian because he'll use them for pinpointing any number of problems with his patients. Proper procedure is crucial.

Next, assistants are often called on to help work with patients in the examination room. An important skill you'll develop is watching the patient. Little things you notice can really help the veterinarian in diagnosing problems. I'll suggest details to look for as soon as patients walk in the door—their breathing, how well the legs are working, and their general demeanor. You'll also learn about TPR(temperature, pulse, and respiration) tests. By doing these tests, a veterinary assistant can speed up the visit and save the veterinarian time.

There's lots to be learned by a veterinary assistant: finding the sex of kittens, determining the ages of dogs and cats, understanding vaccines and how to administer them, taking radiographs, and so much more.

My goal with this course is to anticipate the practical skills an assistant needs to know when starting to work for a veterinarian. If you think of a topic I haven't covered, you are most welcome to pose a question about it in the Discussion Area. This is an excellent way for you to get the most out of this course, so go ahead and read my welcome message in the Discussion Area for Lesson 1 and post a greeting. Valuable information can be found here, so don't miss out!

### Getting Started

We'll start the course with restraint. This isn't just holding a leash to keep a dog in place. I want you to know how to look at dogs so you can predict what they are going to do. Once you know what to look for, you'll be better prepared to choose the best technique to control an animal for any procedure. Do you know how to take a dog from a kennel and carry him? You may say, "Of course I do," but just in case, I'll refresh you on how to safeguard yourself and make sure he doesn't get away.

Specifically, we'll examine the advantages of table restraint. This isn't keeping a table pinned down; it's using a table as a psychological tool so you can keep an animal still. We'll also look at muzzles andrabies poles to control aggressive animals safely. We

sometimes have to resort to chemicals—sedatives and such. Veterinarians administer the medications, but you should know a little about them, too.

For you cat lovers (and those that like exotics like rabbits and such), don't worry. While I mention cats briefly in this lesson, we'll take a closer look at both cats and exotics in Lesson 2.

So, if you're ready to get started, please click the next button at the top or bottom of this page.

## Chapter 2

### The Mind of the Animal: Visual Clues

Did you know that your success in handling animals isn't determined so much by what you do but by how you approach the animal and your attitude? Many people have difficulty understanding this, but it comes down to body language. It's the message the animal gleans from your posture and actions.

#### Body Language

Dogs and cats pick up most of their communication through body language, and they do it far more than we realize. How many of you have dogs that can tell when they are going for a ride with you or if you are leaving them at home? You get your coat and car keys the same way, but based on your body language (and possibly how you smell), they know if they are going to be included or not. How about cats that hide as soon as you think of getting the bottle of medication to give them a dose?

This innate ability to understand your intentions also tells them how to react to you and other people, both at home and at the veterinary hospital.

Simply put, if you act relaxed and nonthreatening, it's more likely a dog or cat will trust you. Exuding this attitude can work to your advantage when you work with animals. Here's how to do it.

#### Approaching an Animal in an Examination Room

Handling a dog begins when you approach him.

Moving slowly and quietly, slip a leash over his neck. Use your own leash—never trust an owner's collar and leash. Some owners' collars fit poorly and will break if a dog pulls too hard. As well, most owners do not put collars on tight enough, and the collar can slip over the dog's head.

During your approach, use a soft voice, just like you were talking to a baby.

It helps if you can get the owner to play along. I see owners, concerned about their little friend, frantically repeating, "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay!" As they blurt it out, all I see is a dog or cat wondering why it isn't okay. Ask these owners to use a calm voice. It sometimes helps them relax as well!

A little petting can go a long way.

If you have a cat in front of you, a gentle stroke along the jaw or behind the ear often helps him relax. Don't pet a cat on the head; it is a very dominant gesture and some cats resent it. Dogs, on the other hand, aren't as easily offended, but stroking under the jaw and down the neck is still a favorite spot. Always move slowly and calmly.

Stay connected to the dog so he knows you are in control at all times.

Don't let the leash go slack. For your safety, keep your face and fingers away from any dog you don't know, even if you think you can trust him—it's not worth a bite. Finally, keep the visit as positive as possible.

If you can create a positive environment for your patient, it will be easier for everyone next time.

Some dogs and cats are extremely dominant. In the case of dogs, these tend to be what we call alpha dogs, the leaders of the pack. Watch the dog when the owner brings him in. Does the dog walk through the door ahead of the owner? Does he walk around the room like he owns it? That is a dominant dog. Sometimes I see the same behavior in a cat—his tail is up, and he investigates everything. This is very uncharacteristic. Most cats prefer to huddle in a corner. With these animals, an innocent gesture can be interpreted as a challenge and incite an attack. Be wary.

### Approaching an Animal in a Cage

The approach is the most dangerous time.

A dog that is waiting in a kennel for treatment is out of his element. She could be so scared that any gesture could be taken as threatening, and she could bite. So you must be careful as you make your first contact with her.

I don't want you to be wary of every dog, because most dogs are very nice to deal with, but the reality is that we see dogs that want to and can hurt you. Be wary. Start by not starting.

What I mean is, take the time to see what he's telling you. Think about how people communicate through body language. I'm sure you can tell if a person is meek and mild or outgoing and confident according to his posture. The submissive person folds in on himself, making his body smaller. The dominant person stands straight, with his chest out and sometimes can look bigger than life.

Dogs are the same. If a dog is dominant, he might show aggression. These dogs show it by exposing their teeth and growling at the front of the kennel. They also have a stance that exudes their attitude. The hair on their back is up, and their body language suggests

they are trying to show you who is boss. In contrast, a submissive dog is one that hides in the back of the kennel, not wanting to have any interaction.

Of course, most dogs are somewhere in between these extremes—a mixture of the two. This is what makes it interesting. If you talk to most dogs, they will react by looking to you for reassurance. They seek a friend because they're in a foreign place and scared. Some are cuddlers and just want to be held. Others are looking for a playmate. Some aggressive dogs aren't "aggressive."

There's a way dogs can fool you. Some submissive dogs show their teeth. Many people have been fooled into thinking this is aggression. I have a client who has two Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, and they both smile in a submissive grin that shows their teeth. One day, the owner came in, and as his dog, Keifer, passed by another client, the dog raised his lips. The client screamed and quickly backed up. The owner and I had a great laugh as Keifer cowered to the ground, scared by the client.

It's easy to tell the difference between an aggressive dog and one like Keifer. When aggressive dogs show their teeth, they only reveal the teeth at the very front of their mouths. When submissive dogs smile, the lip goes up high enough to show all the teeth.



Aggressive dog on left. Smiling dog on right.

Stay on guard.

Once you think you have a dog figured out, keep your eyes on him. He can modify his mood quickly if the situation changes. Continuously observe the patient so you are not taken by surprise. A growl is an obvious message from a dog, but you can get more information from his body language. Is the hair on the back up and showing stress? Are the eyes becoming dilated to suggest he's getting scared? Is he in an attack position (body a little off the ground and muscles tense)?

Now that you know how to evaluate a dog, we're going to look at your first job at the veterinary hospital—retrieving a dog from a cage. Let's see how we do this.

### Chapter 3 Handling Dogs: Removing Dogs from Cages

Your mission—get Charlie, a Cocker Spaniel, from the cage for his ear cleaning. You've never met him before, and no one has told you what he's like. Here are some tips on how to retrieve the patient.

Always have the dog confined where you can safely get hold of him.

Most kennels in veterinary hospitals are in separate rooms, so go in and close the door behind you. I cannot stress it enough—you need that door shut. Imagine reaching for a dog, he jumps out of your arms, runs down the hallway, and enters the reception area just as someone is coming in the front door. He's now running down the street. Imagine making that phone call to your patient's owner!

With a leash at the ready, open the door just a little and slip the loop of the leash over the neck.

A leash is your most important tool, next to knowledge! Once you take a look and see if Charlie seems friendly, then you're ready to open that door. So how do you know if he's friendly? If he's like most dogs, he will sit or stand there, looking up at you.

Okay, let's stop a minute and review what I just asked you to do. You're about to put your hand into a space that the dog may want to protect—his personal space. Even though he's only been in the kennel for a short while, it's his home and he feels comfortable in it.



This is a scared dog. Look at the eyes.

Invading his space with your hand can be misconstrued as a dominant gesture. Some submissive dogs react to your dominance by fear biting. Cockers and many little dogs are famous for this.

To see if he is worried, watch the eyes. If he is watching you with dilated pupils, look out! Keep your hands away, and use a stiff rope or leash you can throw around his neck from a safe distance. Remember, your safety should always be paramount so you can provide the best service possible. Now, let's get back to the procedure.

Once the leash is around the neck, open the cage door fully, pull the animal close to your body, and slip your free hand over the back and then under the dog's chest.

You'll end up with your palm facing upward and near or between the front legs. To help you visualize it, below is an image of what position your hand should be in.



Removing a dog from a kennel

Once you have him out of the kennel, move the hand that's holding the leash to the far side of the neck so you can pull the head and neck toward your chest.

If you maintain slight tension on the leash, it will prevent the dog from being able to bite the hand under his chest. Now you have a restrained dog. Keep hold of the leash just in case he struggles and gets away.

So, do you think you have the hang of it yet? I suggest that if you've never done this before, you should practice the technique on a friendly dog you know. That way, you can get comfortable with the steps and not be bitten.



Carrying a dog

#### Returning a Dog to a Cage

To put a dog back into a cage, first make sure it is the right cage and it is clean. Open the door completely, and put the dog close to the back wall. Loosen the loop around the neck and gently pull it off. Some scared dogs may try to bite as you take your hand away. In this case, keep a hold on the neck while you loosen the loop. Then, release the neck and pull the loop off in one motion. Close the door and make sure it is latched.

#### Moving Larger Dogs

Let's look for a few minutes at how to handle a 150-pound Great Dane. The procedures I talked about such as slipping a leash loop over the neck still apply; the difference comes when you want to do something with them.

Many of these dogs are well trained, and simply asking them to heel may be all you need to get them walking beside you. Just a caution about large dogs and leashes—don't wrap the leash around your hand or arm. You could get hurt if the dog bolts.

If you want to lift a heavy dog, be careful. I remember that when I was first a veterinarian (I won't talk about how long ago that was), I had a Great Dane in for what turned out to be a torsion—his stomach twisted. I wanted to take a radiograph, so I asked my partner to help me get the dog on the X-ray table. We both lifted and managed to get the dog up, but we both accused each other of not lifting very hard. We weighed the dog after and found that he was 260 pounds. I think it's safe to say that we were lifting hard!

If a dog is over 50 pounds and you are small, it's time to call for help to get the dog on a table. Start with a standing animal with both of you on the same side of the patient. The



front person puts one arm under the bottom of the neck and the other arm behind the foreleg. The second person puts one arm behind the knees and the other under the abdomen. Hug the dog as close as possible to your body. To lift, keep your back vertical (don't lean over), and use your legs to raise the dog.

Transporting your patients safely is just half the battle. Providing treatment sometimes requires that a patient is restrained. Depending on you and depending on your patient's disposition, you have a number of techniques for doing this. In the next chapter, we're going to look at tools you can use to restrain dogs better. Click next to move forward.

## Chapter 4

### Table Restraint

In short, the act of putting a dog on a table and holding him there safely and securely is known as table restraint. Being on a table is an unfamiliar place for the dog, and the animal is likely to be uncertain. This method comes in handy when you have to deal with larger breeds or difficult patients who are hesitant.

If I'm trying to look in a German Shepherd's ears and she's on the floor, it's sometimes hard because she won't hold still. By putting her on a table, I surprise her and take her out of her element. I can often take advantage of this disorientation to do the treatment with no argument. Also, it sometimes helps if the table is slippery and she can't get a solid hold.

For other dogs, I use a rubber shelf liner so they are better footed. For example, if I have a 16-year-old Poodle with arthritic legs, he's not putting up much of a fight, and I don't want the poor old fellow to slip. In this case, I don't have much fear that he's going to jump onto the floor.

In some situations, the table simply doesn't work. This happens if the dog is morbidly scared of standing on a slippery surface and thrashes about uncontrollably, which can lead to severe injuries. I have to admit that occasionally I have to abandon the idea of table restraint and go back to the floor. It's all about what works best.

### Muzzles

There are many styles of muzzles available for dogs. The reason we use them is safety. Putting a muzzle on can also calm a dog (and us). Muzzles are usually made of nylon fabric with a web buckle behind the ears. The wider part of the muzzle is put under the lower jaw.



Dog with a commercial muzzle

To place a muzzle, have the dog leashed and held by a helper. If it's a larger dog, stand over him from behind (he's between your knees), and put the muzzle on from behind the head.



Muzzling a large dog

If you have an aggressive dog, the helper will position himself or herself behind and above the dog and firmly (but gently) hold the loose skin on each side of the neck. Then your job is to put the muzzle on from the front while you're facing the dog.



Muzzling a large, aggressive dog

If you have a small dog, either hold him like you are carrying him (described above) or use two hands, one on each side of the neck, to keep the head still.

A gauze muzzle is simple and convenient, fits all sizes, and is always available. Use a 3-foot piece of 2-inch gauze. Place a loop around the nose (both jaws), and tighten it on the top of the nose. The ends are brought down each side, crossed on the bottom, and then brought along each side of the face and tied in a bow behind the head. To release, the bow is untied and the loop simply pulled off the nose.

#### Putting a gauze muzzle on a dog

One other muzzle option I use is tape. To use this, you'll put the white bandaging tape around the muzzle, sticky side to the hair. One or two turns should be enough, and make sure it's comfortable for your patient. In an emergency situation, you may not have anything. If you can, steal a necktie from someone, find a small piece of rope, or even use a bungee cord. Just loop it around the nose and tie it on.

I'm often asked if dogs can breathe with a muzzle on. Because dogs breathe through their noses, the answer is yes they can. The only time you might run into a problem is when a muzzle is put on a short-nosed dog that has trouble breathing even on his best days. I'm thinking of Boston Terriers, Pugs, and Boxers. If you have a muzzle on one of these dogs and the dog is in distress, remove it immediately.

I sometimes see clients with basket muzzles. These are made of wire or plastic and secured behind the ears with a buckle. The advantage is that the dog can still pant, and these muzzles can be left on for a long time. They are often used on aggressive dogs that are taken out in public. They are also useful for short-nosed dogs with breathing difficulties because they don't restrict breathing.

#### Rabies Pole

Also known as a quick-release pole or snare pole, this contraption is used to capture a dog while keeping the handler a safe distance away. The loop is placed over the animal's head and tightened around the neck with a cable located in the pole. You can easily choke a dog with this tool, so you have to be aware of how hard you pull on the cable.

Once you have the dog's head secured in the loop, put the pole on the ground and step on it. Now you can give an injection and safely release the dog.



#### Rabies pole

Though I've already mentioned leashes for control, you can also think of them as a restraint mechanism, much like a rabies pole. After positioning the dog head-first between the door and a wall, you put the leash through the crevice where the hinges are. Then you'll pull the leash so that the dog is secured and ready for her injection.



A dog restrained using a door

### Chemical Restraint

When I have a dog I can't handle, I always have a way out. Drugs! I don't use sedatives very often, but they are very useful. For example, suppose I want to clean out the ears of a muscle-bound Black Labrador. This dog may not be aggressive, but he just doesn't want to hold still. A sedative allows me to cool him down so he (hopefully) will hold still while I do the procedure.

Sedatives (also called tranquilizers) are not anesthetics. They make an animal sleepy, but unlike anesthetics, which put the dog to sleep and also have a pain-killing effect, they are not sufficient for surgery.

There are many sedatives out there, but a popular one is acepromazine. It's given by injection or orally as a tablet. The drug gives just enough sedation so the dog doesn't object to what you're doing. It can be used for minor procedures such as blood or urine collection, X-rays, or minor surgery if combined with a local anesthetic. The decision to use a sedative must be made by the veterinarian, but the sedative may be given by the assistant.

If dogs still can't be controlled with a sedative, then I consider using an anesthetic. In this case, the animal will be completely asleep and oblivious to what is going on. An anesthetic should only be administered by a veterinarian or under his or her supervision.



Acepromazine and syringe

## Chapter 5 Summary

Well, you've made it through the first lesson. We've certainly learned a lot today, and you now have a good idea of how to approach and move a dog from a kennel to a treatment area. Some of the things we looked at are body language, approaching an animal in different situations, being aware of an animal's mood, safely removing an animal from a kennel, moving large dogs, and using different kinds of restraints.

Together, all of these procedures will help you, your pet (or patient), and the veterinarian stay safe. When the work environment is safe, that means the patients will receive the best possible care.

But learning how to read animals isn't something you learn overnight. It takes experience to understand what the animal is trying to tell you. The best thing you can do if you are unsure is wait and watch. Don't hurry. That's when people get hurt.

When it comes time to get a dog from a kennel, plan what you want to do and be prepared. If you are working for a veterinarian, ask for advice on how things are done at your hospital. I've told you how I do it, but for your setting, there could be different (and better) ways of doing things.

Lesson 2 continues our investigation into restraint, but we'll move on to cats and other little friends.

I'll see you there!