

Chapter 1

Introduction

Do you race home to be with your pet after a day at work? Is an afternoon at the dog park your idea of heaven? Do you find it impossible to walk by your neighbor's cat without giving her ears a nice, long scratch? If you get licked by a puppy, is it a perfect day?

If you answered yes to these questions, you're definitely in the right course! Pet sitting is a great option for anyone who wants to find a way to turn a passion for pets into a fulfilling career.

I'd like to welcome you to my class *Start a Pet Sitting Business*. I'm Jeff Grognet, and I'll be your instructor for the next six weeks as we explore the exciting world of caring for other peoples' four-legged companions.

I'm guessing you're a lot like me. My passion for animals began at an early age, and I've always been drawn to pets. In fact, when I was 10, I rescued an Airedale dog by pulling him out of the water at the end of the pier. Maybe it wasn't front-page news, but my experience with Salty—that poor, wet dog—showed me how much I loved animals.

I became a veterinarian in 1983 and opened a practice with my wife Louise (also a veterinarian) in 1995. Ever since, we've specialized in caring for cats and dogs. Each and every day, my work with other people's pets continues to be challenging and fun. And yes, our home is filled with animals.



Dr. Jeff and one of his patients

I also love to write and teach—especially when the topic is animals. I've been a regular contributor to several pet magazines and newspapers and have contributed over a thousand articles over the years. As a teacher, I've created and taught three online courses for veterinary assistants, including one on canine reproduction.

I decided to create this course because I've helped several people set up their own pet sitting businesses, and I realized lots of people who are passionate about animals could thrive in this field. And there's one thing I can tell you: You can do this. It'll take hard work and determination, but you can achieve this dream.

I'm here to help you and give you the tools you need. In this course, you'll learn all about the most important meeting you'll ever have with a client—the first one. You'll also see what you'll do when you visit a client's home and learn how to manage your business by creating a schedule and setting fees.

Your knowledge of animals will expand so you can care for your clients' pets properly. You're going to learn how to recognize health problems (such as lameness, skin disorders, ear problems, and elimination issues) in both dogs and cats. And you'll gain a thorough understanding of what you need to do in emergencies. Then there are the how-tos of accounting, legal matters, insurance, employees, as well as marketing—especially the low-cost ways to get the word out that you're in business.

Now, since I'm a veterinarian, I look at animals and their care with a slightly different perspective than you will as a pet sitter. So, in this course, you'll not only get the scoop on what it takes to start your own successful pet sitting business, you'll get extra animal care tips that can set you apart from the competition.

Sound exciting? It is. Follow me to Chapter 2, and we'll take a closer look at exactly what you'll be doing as a pet sitter.

Chapter 2 What Do Pet Sitters Do?

This is the simple fact—people hire pet sitters to look after their pets while they're away. This could be while they're at work, on vacation, or away for a weekend. But this is like saying a mechanic does oil changes. There's a whole lot more involved in pet sitting. People use pet sitters because they want the best care for their pets. Of course, there are other alternatives. Boarding kennels keep pets safe and may provide structured playtime with other dogs, but they can't measure up to the one-on-one care a pet sitter supplies.

Plus, many owners prefer not to put their pets in kennels—a fact that's good for your new business. Doggy day cares also offer services for owners who work during the day, but while some dogs have a ball at these places, they're not the best solution for timid, frail, or elderly dogs.



Typical boarding kennel

As a pet sitter, you provide a unique service. Besides allowing pets to stay home in familiar surroundings, you provide personal care. You walk the dog and play with the cat. This gives you a chance to observe them. You're the early warning system for catching developing health issues.

The greatest value I see in pet sitters is when they look after pets with special needs. For instance, if you have a client with an elderly dog that needs twice-daily medication to keep his arthritis comfortable and his heart condition controlled, it is much better if he stays quiet at home. A kennel may be too stressful for these dogs (cats, too).

Other companions needing special attention are those on temporary medication (such as ointments for ear infections, drops for eye disease, and antibiotics for bladder infections), blind dogs that only know their way around home, and cats with diabetes that require regular insulin injections. Don't worry. I'll be giving you a primer on giving injections and managing diabetic pets later in the course.



Cassidy (Dr. Jeff's cat) getting her daily eye drops after cataract removal

Once your foot is in the door, you'll quickly find that clients ask you to do other things besides looking after their pets. You'll be going to the house on a regular basis, so the client may ask you to bring in the mail, open and close curtains, turn lights on, and generally make it look like someone is at home. Crime deterrence is a reason your clients may choose a pet sitter rather than a kennel. They don't want their house looking empty.

As a pet sitter, you'll probably perform a wide range of tasks. Often, your duties will vary from client to client, depending on their needs. Nonetheless, there are some typical things you can expect to do as a pet sitter, including:

- feeding and watering the pets
- administering medications
- walking the dog or providing exercise in some other way
- playing with the cat (we call this exercising the cat)
- cleaning litter boxes or cleaning up after the dog

taking pets to the veterinarian or groomer
watching continuously for health problems
providing dog training

And then there are the "extra" duties you might be asked to do:
bringing in the paper or the mail
putting out the garbage and bringing in the cans
helping the house look lived in by opening and closing drapes, or turning lights on and off
letting in repairmen and other service people
doing laundry (if you negotiate for this—be sure to include it in your fee!)
watering plants
staying overnight to watch the pets

And while I've mainly been referring to dogs and cats, there's no reason to limit your services to these pets. Your clients may also have exotic pets such as birds, reptiles, and little furry friends like hamsters and guinea pigs. You can choose which animals you want to work with.

Since every client is unique, and since there are so many different things you can do on the job, there is no "typical day" for a pet sitter. But I bet you still want to get a better sense of what this job is like. Let's follow an established pet sitter as she goes about her day.

A Day in the Life of a Pet Sitter

Meet Claire. She became a pet sitter a few years ago. She began part-time, but after a year, she was able to move into caring for pets full-time. Let's start the day with her.

8:00
a.m.




The first visit of the day is at the Wilson house. Sparky, a spritely Papillon, needs to be let out. His owners have gone to Mexico for a week, and Claire is visiting him every day while they're away. She's also making sure he gets the medication he needs for an ear infection. Once he's relieved himself, Claire puts drops in his right ear, and notes that his condition is much better than it was a few days ago. While he's eating, she picks up the daily paper, turns the lights off, and opens the drapes. She checks her notes and remembers that the Wilsons asked her to put the garbage out today.

8:45
a.m.

Claire's next client is a mile away. Chester, a boisterous Chesapeake Bay Retriever, gets his breakfast and then a walk. Unlike Sparky, who exercises himself during the day by barking and running by the front window, Chester needs

	<p>outside exercise. He gets a fast-paced half hour and a little time in the off-leash area in the park down the street. That's his favorite time. Chester's dad got called out of town overnight, so he'll be back later this afternoon. Claire leaves a note telling the owner that Chester seemed a little sore in this left hind leg today.</p>
9:45 a.m.	<p>It's Fluffy's time. A Persian cat, she relishes her once daily visits by Claire. Of course, Claire gives her food and clean water, and cleans her litter boxes, but Fluffy also gets special attention. Each day, she gets 10 minutes of brushing to prevent her long, luxurious hair from matting.</p>
10:15 a.m.	<p>The next client, a cat named Seymour, lives in the same condominium complex, so Claire doesn't need to schedule driving time between these two clients. Claire has actually seen Seymour only once in five days. The poor thing hides when she arrives. But Seymour's food bowl is empty, and the litter box is full, so Claire is content that things are fine. After supplying fresh food and water and cleaning the litter box, Claire is done.</p>
11:00 a.m.	<p>Claire has set up an interview with a prospective client. The Taylors heard about her through one of her existing clients. As she enters the house, she's greeted by a miniature Dachshund called Max. As soon as she drops to his level, it's obvious he likes her. This makes the interview easy. If the dog likes her, the people will. She now gathers information on what the Taylors expect, and she tells them what she's prepared to do. It looks like they can work together. She'll be looking after Max when they go away for a weekend.</p>
12:00 p.m.	<p>Claire takes a short break for lunch and reads a book.</p>
12:30 p.m.	<p>Now, it's time for an energetic walk. Claire has arranged to pick up two dogs, Zack and Kalef, for an hour-long walk. Their parents both work, so Claire steps in to give them the exercise they need. She sees them three times a week, so she knows these dogs well. They get a good workout, and they love their time with Claire.</p>
2:00 p.m.	<p>Next up is a quick visit to let Courtney out. She's an old dog with failing health. Lately, Claire's noticed that Courtney has been waiting by the door to be let out when she arrives. She simply can't hold it that long. Claire makes a note to ask her owners about adding a second visit to Courtney's day.</p>
2:30 p.m.	<p>Claire has been asked to take Sylvester (yes, a black and white cat) to the veterinarian because he's been drinking more water recently. She picks him up, loads him in the carrier, and she's off. She brings a note from Sylvester's owner. It describes what the owner has seen. While Claire's there, the vet calls the owner, and they decide to do blood and urine tests. Afterward, Claire takes Sylvester back home because his situation isn't critical.</p>

4:00 p.m.	 <p>Next, Claire visits another of her cat clients, Clayton, while his owner is out of town. Clayton certainly needs care while the owner is away, but Claire suspects the owner has an ulterior motive. The house is filled with hundreds of plants, and the owner has left a list of plants she should water each day. Claire jokes that she's a part-time plant sitter.</p>
4:45 p.m.	Claire had an appointment for this time slot, but her client canceled her plans to go out of town. This leaves Claire free to do some paperwork.
5:30 p.m.	It's time for the last visit of the day, Claire's second daily visit to see Sparky. He doesn't need his ears medicated this time; he just needs to be fed and let out. Claire also brings in the garbage cans, turns the lights on, and closes the curtains she opened this morning. As she drives away, she's satisfied the house has that "lived in" look.
5:45 p.m.	It's time to go home. It's been a full day, but Claire's loved every minute of it!

Why Be a Pet Sitter?

As Claire's day shows, pet sitting is a lot of fun, but it's more than that. It can be a fulfilling career. There are lots of reasons to start your own pet sitting business. Let's look at some of the benefits of this career.

You're working with animals that you love. This is probably the top reason to become a pet sitter. You get to spend time with furry friends, ensuring they get the best care. What other job has petting and playing catch on its list of duties? It's no surprise some pet sitters don't even call what they do a job. They enjoy it that much.

You're providing a service that people need and value. You probably know what it's like to have to leave your pet for a day while you're at the office. You may have worried in the past about how your dog or cat would be cared for when you're on vacation. Can you imagine the relief you're providing to loving pet owners who can't be there around the clock for their pets? Trust me, they'll be thankful you're there.

You get to be in charge. You make decisions about how much you want to work and how you do your job. You can choose to service all types of animals, or you can specialize. You can have a feline-only pet sitting business if you prefer cats. If you like exercise and walking, you can concentrate on dog-owning clients. If you're physically challenged, you may want to limit your pet sitting to cats or small dogs. If you have expertise in horses, look for work with the equines.

You instantly become an expert. Your clients—and others—will recognize your expertise working with animals, and they'll ask your advice. They may want your opinion about exercise requirements for a new dog. They may quiz you on the best food for a cat. They may find something wrong with their pets and ask if you recommend a veterinary visit. That's why learning all you can is so important. (And don't worry: For the next six weeks, I'll be at your side, helping you get knowledge you need to be this kind of expert!)

You don't need a ton of training. Hard to believe, right? Especially right after I told you that your clients will see you as an expert. But this is absolutely true: You don't need years of training to be a pet sitter.

I'm not saying you don't need any special knowledge at all. As our exploration of the duties of a pet sitter suggest, you'll need to master some fundamental skills for caring for animals. But you'll get that basic information in this course. In the next few lessons, we'll cover the basic care of dogs and cats. Later, I'll show you how to set up a small business that can succeed. That is honestly all you need to get started.

So, maybe now you're sold on this career. But can you make a living at it? Read on to find out!

Chapter 3 Someone Will Pay Me to Do This?

Just a few generations ago, paying someone to look after a pet was considered an extravagant luxury. But now, pet care has come of age. Just as people are now willing to pay for complicated, expensive procedures in veterinary hospitals, they're also ready to invest in the proper care for pets while they're away. Pet sitting is not a luxury anymore. It's a necessity.



You can see the complexity of the veterinary care available to pets now

Why has this relatively new industry taken off so quickly? It has a lot to do with how society has changed. Years ago, pet owners just asked the neighbor's kid to feed their

pets. These days, people don't know their neighbors well, and kids are too busy to take on the responsibility.

The other significant change is that people view pets as part of the family and want the same care that they would expect for themselves.

People are also more concerned about the security of their home—they want someone they can rely on when they hand over the keys. People tend to trust like-minded people. Because you like animals the same way they do, you fit the bill perfectly.

You're probably wondering if you can make a living being a pet sitter. You can. In fact, as a pet sitter, you have an (almost) unlimited income potential. You can keep booking appointments until you fill your day. If you have too much work, you can turn some people away (just keep the clients you want), or you can hire an employee to share the workload.

I'll get into how much you can earn—as well as the pluses and minuses of hiring employees—in a later lesson. But for now, I can tell you this: How much you make depends on how much you want to work. I've met pet sitters who work part-time and take home \$20,000 in a year. On the other hand, you can work very hard and push your income to over \$50,000 annually.

The Pet Sitting Market

Thanks to a huge increase in pet ownership, there are plenty of opportunities for pet sitters. In 2009, 39% of U.S. households owned a dog. Many of these households have two dogs, so that's more than 77 million dogs nationwide. There are even more cats—more than 93 million. But since these cat owners tend to have two or more cats, there's a smaller overall number of homes with cats—around 33% of households.



Cats are bigger than ever

If you hadn't noticed, cats are taking over. Each year, we see proportionately more cats and fewer dogs. There are several theories as to why this is, such as the fact that cats can live in smaller homes and fit better with today's lifestyles. But whatever the reason, you need to keep this trend in mind. If you focus on dogs and ignore the growing feline market, you may be missing a significant income opportunity. I know from my experience that the shift from dogs to cats has had a major impact on the services offered by veterinary hospitals.

Are you interested in horses? Only about 2% of U.S. households have one or more of these magnificent beasts, but each has an average of four horses. According to statistics, the number of horses is slowly falling. There is a market for horse sitters, but you have to live in the right place.

These numbers reveal the market you can tap into. Animal care is a growth industry, and people are spending more and more each year. While dips in the economy may affect this industry, the overall trend toward growth is strong, in both pet sitting and related businesses such as pet stores and veterinarian hospitals. Though these numbers are from the United States, trends are similar no matter what country you live in.

What Areas Offer the Most Pet Sitting Opportunities?

Demographically, the best place for a pet sitting business is the suburbs. People live there rather than the city because they want room for themselves and their pets. This means more pets per capita than you'd see in bigger cities, in apartments, or out in the country. People in the country also live farther apart, which is not ideal for you because this pushes your traveling costs up.

People in the suburbs also have lifestyles that suit the hiring of a pet sitter. They're likely to commute to work and leave their pets at home all day. And they usually go on vacations at least once a year. All this adds up to a need for pet sitters.

Pet sitting clients often share common traits. They tend to be well educated with most having been to college or university. They also work, and many earn good money. They have a steady income and can afford to hire you. People who are unemployed may have time to go on vacation, but they often can't afford to hire you.

Where I practice, there are lots of retired people. At first glance, they may not seem like the best clients because when they go on vacation, they tend to take their pets with them. And, if they leave Fido or Fluffy at home, they often have friends they depend on to look after them.



Seniors love their pets

Still, retirees can still be good clients. They tend to book well in advance so you can plan your work. They also talk amongst themselves, which means lots of free advertising. If you can break into this market, it can be lucrative.

So, we've established that you can make a living at pet sitting, and we've talked about who your future clients may be. But you're probably wondering: What do I do next? Do I have what I need to start this kind of business? Let's answer these questions in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 What Do I Need to Get Started?

Maybe now you're all charged up—excited at the prospect of starting your own pet sitting business. But you might have some doubts as well. How can you get up and

running in this new career? And how do you know it's the right career for you? In this chapter, we'll be exploring the things you need—both the personal traits and some of the business nuts and bolts—to launch your business and be successful. I'll also provide some tips to determine if there's a market for your business where you live. Let's start with personal traits.

The Two Essentials

There are two essential traits you absolutely must have to be a pet sitter. But I bet you already have them.

One is a love for animals. You can't be a pet sitter without really caring about the dogs and cats you're looking after.

Let's say you see a lost dog in the park. Are you the one that runs after the little fellow, getting wet in the rain and being late for work, just so he can be reunited with his parents? If you see a cat up a tree, are you the one who climbs the ladder even though you're scared of heights?

Here's a story from my career as a vet that helps define what I'm talking about. There's a little dog I once saved, literally. Nino, a 10-pound Maltipoo, came in after a Rottweiler bit him. He had two holes into his chest where the big dog's teeth had torn the muscle between his ribs. I managed to sew his ribs together, sealing his chest, keeping him alive while we stabilized him for surgery.



Nino after he healed

Little Nino has growled at me every time he's seen me for the last 11 years. Even after helping him out, he still growls at me. I think he'd sink his teeth in me if he could. But, I love him anyway—he makes my day. That's the passion I'm talking about. That's one trait. Can you guess what the other is?

It's being responsible. You can't succeed if you're not willing to take on the responsibility of caring for someone's most valued friend. When you arrange an appointment and clients are depending on you—or more specifically Hudson the Lab is waiting for you to let him out to go pee—you have to be there. Missing an appointment isn't acceptable. And, you have to be committed—you can't go out of town at a moment's notice. If you aren't dependable, clients won't use you.

The clients must have a lot of faith in you to feel good handing over the keys to their homes and access to everything they own. It's a huge responsibility, and you can't jeopardize that relationship.

The Business Side of Pet Sitting

You're probably thinking: OK, I know I love animals, and I understand how serious this responsibility is, but don't I need to rent an office? Hire a secretary? Buy equipment? And here's the wonderful answer: No. As a pet sitter, you can start with a very small investment. To get started, all you need are a few business cards, a phone, and a way to get around.

All these things are easy to obtain. You can make the cards on your home computer. There are even companies that offer free business cards. Just search online for "free business cards." You probably already have a cell phone. For transportation, a car is the most convenient, but if you live in a city, public transportation may be an option. Keep in mind, though, a car is useful if you need to get a pet to the vet. You don't need an office other than a corner in your home, and you don't have to stock inventory.



Business cards for pet sitters

You may also want to consider getting bonded to boost your credibility. All you need to do is fill out a form, but you don't need to be bonded to start your business. I would recommend, however, that you get insurance for your own protection. (We'll talk about insurance in a future lesson.)

With these basics, you have everything you need. And if you want to keep your business small, you may never need to expand beyond these few fundamentals. You can keep things lean, work limited hours, and enjoy a thriving career. You don't need to know how to manage people (unless you hire extra help) and, though it's useful, you don't need expertise in dog training.

On the other hand, you may choose to expand your business by taking on employees to help cope with the workload. You can also get into retailing by selling pet-related products you particularly like. That's the great thing about pet sitting: It's a flexible business. You may want to work just during the day while your kids are in school. If you're a student, you can work before or after school, or both. You're the boss, so you decide how much you want to work, and when.

Tapping Into the Pet Sitting Market

There's still one last thing you need: clients. In the last chapter, we talked a bit about the kinds of people who hire pet sitters and why they value this service. But big questions remain: Do these people live in your area? Does your city offer a good pet sitting market? There are several ways to find out.

Start by visiting the local pet supply stores. Are they successful? Are any new stores being built? People in pet stores can give you their take on the need for pet sitting because people regularly ask them about pet services.

Also look for veterinary hospitals. The pets and owners they serve are the same ones you will be depending on for business. If there are several veterinary hospitals or a number of veterinarians at one hospital, there must be clients supporting them. Even better, these clients have already demonstrated that they take care of their pets.

Boarding kennels also show you there's a need for someone to look after pets. Clients who use kennels might be willing to change to you, if you can offer the kind of care and attention they need.

Another source of information is the local chamber of commerce. They have a finger on the pulse of the community. Ask their opinion about whether there's a market for your services and if they know how similar businesses have done in the past in your area.



The Chamber of Commerce

Last, take a look around and see if there are any established pet sitters. Look in the phone book, on the Internet, or ask at any of the pet-related businesses I've listed above.

If you find other pet sitting businesses in your area, don't assume this spells doom for your business. In fact, the presence of another pet sitter shows there's a market. As a plus, you may be able to get referrals from the other pet sitter businesses by telling them you're available—you can help them out when they're busy. If there are no pet sitters, take a really close look. There may be a reason. Maybe the economy of the area won't support such a business. Perhaps a boarding kennel has the market wrapped up. But, on the other hand, maybe nobody has thought of creating a pet sitting business before.

Wow, that's a lot of information, and we're only getting started. Let's summarize what we just learned in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 Concluding Thoughts

Let me close by telling you about my first pet sitting job. When I was about 8 years old, I was asked to look after a friend's cat when they went away on vacation. I fed her and petted her a lot, but my parents obviously had a supervisory role in my duties.

I dutifully went over to my friend's house twice a day to feed the cat and clean the litter. On one of my visits, I couldn't find her. Desperately, I went through the house calling "Kitty," very worried that I'd lost the cat I was responsible for. I finally found her hiding in a closet. When I went to pull her out, I found the reason.

Kitty was nestled in a blanket, cuddling four kittens. I was ecstatic, but totally unsure of what to do next. That's when I yelled, "Mom, help!"



What a pet sitter doesn't expect

It turned out her owners didn't have a clue she was pregnant and certainly hadn't warned us. Looking back, I was ill-prepared for the job. But don't worry. I'm going to make sure you're prepared.

This is just our first peek at pet sitting. I've given you a brief overview of what pet sitters do, but we'll get into much more detail as we go on. We looked at the market that creates opportunities for pet sitters. We saw that as long as there are animals around and people leaving them at home, there's a market.

You now also know some requirements for starting a pet sitting business. It doesn't cost that much, and you need little training, but you do need a commitment. You have to be serious about your work if you want people to hire you and continue using your services.

But, the biggest reason for embarking on pet sitting as a career—I can't stress this enough—is that you'll enjoy your job. When I've had a busy day, you'll sometimes catch me taking a moment and holding a cat or taking a dog out for a quick walk. As a pet sitter, you can do this all day! What a great stress reliever. No other job can do that for you.

We're on our way. I've put some introductory notes in the Discussion Area, and there's a place where you can tell the class a little about yourself. I'll be looking for your introduction!

In Lesson 2, we're going to focus on dog care. (Don't worry, cat lovers! Felines will get their own lesson.) See you then!