

VSA Mentor Handbook

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Welcome!..... | 2 |
| How to Use this Handbook: | 2 |
| Overview of the VSA Dog Trainer Course In-Person Track: | 2 |
| The Mentor’s Role..... | 3 |
| The Student’s Role | 3 |
| The Mentor-Student Relationship | 4 |
| Student’s Growth During Field Units | 4 |
| Using the Coach Approach to Accelerate Growth | 5 |
| Providing Positive Instruction and Feedback..... | 5 |
| Positive Instructions..... | 6 |
| Giving Feedback: Choosing the Right Time, Place, and Message | 6 |
| Follow the Golden Rules for Giving Effective Feedback: | 6 |
| Do’s and Don’ts for a Successful Mentoring Relationship..... | 7 |
| Mentor’s Requirements..... | 8 |
| Lead and support student during all mentor-led activities | 8 |
| Mentor Training Webinars and Student Communication | 8 |
| Introducing Your Student to Your Clients | 8 |
| Planning and Scheduling | 9 |
| Weekly Check-in with Student..... | 9 |
| Providing Learning Opportunities to Students | 9 |
| End-of-Unit Progress Reports to VSA..... | 10 |
| Mentor Compensation..... | 10 |
| VSA Student Referral Program..... | 10 |
| Positively Online Store Mentor Discount..... | 11 |
| Student’s Requirements | 11 |
| Field Study Unit (60 days) | 11 |
| Field Training Unit (60 days) | 12 |
| Attendance standards..... | 12 |
| Definitions of Terms Used in Field Study/Field Training Units | 12 |

Overview

Welcome!

Congratulations on becoming a VSA Mentor! As a Mentor you have an extraordinary opportunity to help facilitate a new trainer's personal and professional growth as you lead by example; sharing the skills and knowledge you've gained through years of experience. The support, feedback, and positive challenges you provide students will not only have a lasting impact on each individual, but the knowledge you foster has the potential to inspire growth and professionalism in the field of positive training for generations to come.

How to Use this Handbook:

The purpose of this handbook is to provide you with the information and tools you'll need to successfully mentor VSA students. This includes information about establishing a successful mentor/student relationship, the roles of both mentor and student, and best practices to follow as you lead and mentor students through the Field Study and Field Training Units. Much of what's included is likely 'common sense' to you since you are already a positive trainer and teacher so our intent is simply to provide insights and tips to help you facilitate your student's progression.

The handbook defines specific and important student requirements that must be fulfilled for successful completion of the course. Mentor requirements exist to clarify your role and to define the specific actions you will take to help your student complete the course.

Overview of the VSA Dog Trainer Course In-Person Track:

The full VSA Dog Trainer Course program plus In-Person Track consists of six course units including two in-person units, an introductory learning unit, and two field units. The field units are the only components of the course in which the mentor is involved with the student. Students will also complete online lessons and bi-weekly cyber classes throughout the entire course, including during the time they are completing their Field Study and Field Training units.

Students are also assigned a personal virtual Faculty Advisor (FA) who helps to guide them throughout the course. FA's meet with students regularly via videoconference and conduct periodic skills assessments with their students. All FA interaction is completely separate and not related to any activities or involvement from a student's mentor.

1. **Introduction Unit (2 months):** Students begin the program by completing the online lessons in Modules 1-9, attending several Cyber Classes, taking their 1st VSA trimester exam, conducting Office Hours with their Faculty Advisor via videoconference, and completing their 1st skills assessments. Mentors are not involved with students the Introduction Unit.
2. **Primer Intensive Unit (5 days):** VSA Faculty lead students through multi-day intensive learning experiences that include classroom study, hands-on experience, field trips, and more.
3. **Field Study Unit (2 months):** In this unit students continue their online learning, participate in Cyber Classes, meet regularly online with their FA, and begin shadowing their mentor on both private lessons and group classes.
4. **Core Essentials Intensive Unit (5 days):** VSA Faculty lead students through multi-day intensive learning experiences that include classroom study, hands-on experience, field trips, and more.

5. **Field Training Unit (2 months):** In this unit, students complete their online lessons, participate in their final Cyber Classes, meet regularly online with their FA, and continue shadowing their mentor on both private lessons and group classes. Where appropriate and only when both mentor and student agree, students may begin taking a more active role during the shadowing activities.
6. **Final Assessments Unit (7 days):** Students complete any outstanding video assessments with their FA and take both an online and written final exam. VSA confirms completion of all course components and requirements.

The Mentor's Role

As a VSA mentor your role is provide consistent leadership, support, and guidance, encouraging your student to deepen their knowledge and empowering them to succeed.

While the student is ultimately accountable for completing all course requirements, the opportunities provided by you for the student to watch, learn and potentially participate in real-world professional dog training activities with your clients is an important part of their success. You are a role model of a professional dog trainer and as such your student will observe and learn from regarding:

- Courtesy – How well you interact with and respect clients and the student.
- Image – What you wear, say and do as well as how you act and react in a variety of situations.
- Experience – The industry knowledge you possess, both in relating to clients and in training dogs to live happy lives together.
- Accountability – How well you will hold the student accountable for attending sessions as well as how you report progress, challenges, and best practices to VSA.

As a mentor you should be:

- Willing to share expertise, past experiences and lessons you've learned.
- Available for the student according to the scheduling agreements made.
- Proactive in offering learning opportunities for the student.
- Prepared to listen and to provide opinions, advice, and encouragement.
- Candid, positive, and honest in the feedback you provide.

The Student's Role

The student will ultimately drive the relationship with their mentor. He or she is accountable completing required activities and achieving the learning goals through field activities with their mentor. As such, the student must be clear about what needs to be learned during the mentoring relationship, both in Field Study Unit and in the Field Training Unit. The Student and Mentor Requirements detailed in this handbook will help to define learning activities and discussions during field units.

VSA expects students to be:

- **Accountable** to all scheduled commitments.

- **Willing** to patiently observe.
- **Open** to receiving and applying helpful feedback.
- **Committed** in their dedication of appropriate time and energy to the mentor relationship.
- **Enthusiastic** about improving while demonstrating a learning attitude.
- **Trustworthy** and respectful of confidences shared with them.
- **Prepared** for the tasks at hand, including presenting a professional, clean, and well-groomed image.

Additional expectations of students can be found in [the VSA Student Handbook](#).

The Mentor-Student Relationship

The relationship between a mentor and a student is one of collaboration. The mentor provides the student with real-world opportunities to enhance their education and witness hands on experiences that help him or her become a successful, well-respected dog trainer.

Think of the mentor-student relationship as a contract. Both members of the partnership have specific requirements to meet and successful completion of requirements is contingent on both partner's participation.

Student's Growth During Field Units

An effective mentor provides a blend of support, education, and empowerment to encourage growth and responsibility in students.

In the early stages of your mentor/student relationship, your student will be working to develop their foundation, assimilating the knowledge and skills they've learned thus far. At this stage your student may look to you to take the lead on everything from scheduling to knowing when and how they can potentially assist you.

Over time, as your student builds a foundation of knowledge and experience, your positive leadership should begin to shift, empowering your student with the confidence to take more initiative in their role. For instance, in the first Field Study Unit, your student will be primarily in an observation role. In the second and last field unit, Field Training, as you become more confident in the student's capabilities, you may let them demonstrate their skills and knowledge by doing more hands-on training and teaching under your guidance.

Here are a few examples of how your guidance shifts to empowerment during the activities in the field units:

- At the beginning of Field Study, you might be the one to initiate calls to plan a student's visits, then within a short time you will likely find it appropriate to ask your student to take the initiative on coordinating visits.
- If both you and your student feel comfortable enough for them to assist you, your student should wait for you to provide direction on what they should be doing and how they can offer assistance. Over time, when you feel a student is ready, you can encourage your student to take the initiative to offer assistance.

- Early on, if a student is asked a question they should defer to you. Over time, you will likely grow comfortable letting your student answer a question with your support, if needed.
- During Field Training, if you and your student agree to have your student teach a topic or solution, you may want to help them create their teaching plan and ask them to practice with you first. Later, as they've gained more experience and confidence, you might ask them to create their own lesson plan and prepare to teach it. If you do not feel comfortable allowing your student to interact with your clients, the student should make arrangements to practice teaching on their own.
- By the end of the Field Training Unit, your student should feel comfortable leading a group class (or mock group class) and conducting a private lesson (or mock private lesson). Note that your student will also be required to submit a video demonstrating a mock (or real) group class to their Faculty Advisor via videoconference. This training element is not a required part of your responsibilities with your student, however if you both choose to do so, your student is eligible to use footage from one of your private lessons and/or group classes.

Communication is key to successfully shifting roles. Let your student know when you are confident in their abilities and communicate your new expectations for their more proactive role. And likewise, communicate to your student if you feel like they are trying to take on too much too soon. If the latter is the case, plan how you can work together to provide additional opportunities and experience to help them be better prepared.

Using the Coach Approach to Accelerate Growth

As you become more confident in the student's capability, you will want to switch from telling them (directing them) what you would do in specific situations to asking them for their input about what they would do. This switch greatly facilitates their learning to think independently.

Example of Telling: "What I would recommend is to ask the owner to give the dog a break."

Example of Asking: "I'm interested in knowing what you observed about the dog and owner interaction and what you might have done..." Allow the student time to process the question and respond.

One final note about growth, every student is different and may progress at different rates. Using the VSA criteria, coupled with your teaching skills and judgment, you can support and empower your students as they progress through the course. If you feel that your student could benefit from one-on-one coaching, you could suggest that they speak with their Faculty Advisor during their next Office Hour.

Providing Positive Instruction and Feedback

We all know the power of positive reinforcement (R+). We see the impact of R+ in our learners; whether that is an eager and happy dog or a human learner's smile as they enjoy a feeling of accomplishment. We all benefit from positive teaching and training.

As a mentor, you should apply the same positive teaching methods that you use with dogs and clients. When you give positive instructions and clear feedback, you empower your student with knowledge and confidence in their abilities.

Positive Instructions

If you and your student have agreed to increase their amount of involvement, you may occasionally provide your student with instructions throughout both field units.

Frame your instructions to ask for what you want the student ‘to do’ rather than what you don’t want them to do. For example: “I want you to walk around with me as I work with the clients and their dogs in class” rather than “I don’t want you standing away from the client and dogs in class.”

Break it down. Just as you do when training animals, you should break down your instructions to students into small easy to achieve criteria.

A great way to find out if your student understands your instruction is to ask, “What questions do you have?” (which invites the student to ask) rather than “Do you have any questions?”

Giving Feedback: Choosing the Right Time, Place, and Message

Positive feedback promotes trust and builds a sense of security in learning and making mistakes. Just as we train this way with dogs, we teach this way at VSA.

When and where you give feedback is important. Feedback should be given in a timely manner – as soon as possible after a class or an activity.

Feedback should be provided in a private environment that allows you to exchange thoughts and welcome questions, and when you have time to provide the student with additional information or discuss further, if needed.

Give feedback using this format:

- What can you recognize the student for doing well?
Example: “The way you welcomed clients in to the class tonight was great. Specifically, you gave them direct eye contact, smiled and used their names.”
- What are one or two things you want him/her to do differently going forward? Note: Keeping it to two or less things during a feedback session allows your student to internalize the changes needed.

Follow the Golden Rules for Giving Effective Feedback:

- Use “and” – “And” supports both parts of your statement. Example: “I know you were nervous about leading that exercise in class AND you did so well!” or “Yes, that’s a great idea, and you could also do....”
- Avoid “but’s” – When you use “but” as a connector in sentences it negates anything positive that you’ve said. Example: “That was better, but...” negates what they did better.
- Use positive statements to reinforce good habits and/or improvement. Example: “Yes, you got it!”
- Be specific. “I like how you got down on the ground to the puppy’s level to lessen his fear and show him you were a friend” is more informative than “You did a good job in working with that puppy.”

Do's and Don'ts for a Successful Mentoring Relationship

Do:

- Create an open, honest, and safe environment for interaction and learning.
- Be respectful of your student's needs for achieving their learning goals, put yourself in their shoes.
- Clearly define how you will work together and the best way to communicate with one another.
- Seek out learning opportunities for your student.
- Lead by example, your student will emulate your good habits.
- Be proactive in facilitating scheduling of visits for classes, private lessons, and other activities.
- Be reliable and available at your scheduled days and times for visits and other activities.
- Empower your student through positive feedback, framing instructions as a "to do" rather than a "don't do."
- Ask your student questions that will help to deepen his or her understanding of the topics and concepts learned.
- Engage your student with the "yes, and..." approach to demonstrate and build upon shared knowledge and points of view.
- Encourage your student to explore different options, to "think outside the box."
- Share your experiences and stories, including struggles and learning experiences.
- Refer your student to contact their VSA Faculty Advisor for necessary support or questions.
- Be open to your student's ideas and attitude, sometimes the student can also be a teacher if we have the courage to step outside our comfort zone.
- Promote an environment of engagement and fun.

Refrain from:

- Create dependency, rather empower your student's growth through positive teaching.
- Impose personal opinions or points of view that are not relevant to the outlined goals of the mentor/student relationship.
- Allow personal biases to influence the mentor/student relationship.
- Assume success can only be obtained one way or your way. There are many paths to success.
- Jump to conclusions too quickly. Refrain from being judgmental or taking action too quickly.
- Provide your student with personal information that is not relevant for his or her development.
- Shield your student from minor mistakes that could be a learning and growing experience so long as a mistake would not impact the safety or well-being of any person or animal, including the student.
- Abuse the relationship by asking your student to do tasks outside of the responsibilities outlined by VSA for student development.

Mentor's Requirements

Lead and support student during all mentor-led activities

Your role as a mentor is an important part of your student's success. During the field units and in mentoring your assigned student, you provide the key components of observational learning. Please acquaint yourself with the mentor requirements to complete your commitment.

Mentor Training Webinars and Student Communication

VSA is committed to your success and enjoyment as a mentor. To ensure that you are ready for the mentoring engagement, we require that you attend the following:

1. Mentor Orientation Webinar

This one-hour webinar is a virtual meeting of all VSA mentors who are about to embark on mentoring a student and occurs before your student begins Field Study. The Mentor Coordinator will provide a brief overview of mentor's role and requirements, discuss the use of the Mentor Handbook, and acquaint you with other materials you'll utilize during the mentor/student engagement. This call is a great time to meet your fellow mentors and to ask any questions you have.

2. Pre-Mentoring Call with Student

VSA will "introduce" you and your student via email during the student's Introduction Unit, and then you should take the lead on scheduling a call between you and the student. Your first step, as a mentor, is to connect with them briefly by phone to personally introduce yourself, discuss logistics, and begin to build a rapport. VSA will typically assign students to mentor when they complete enrollment, and the Pre-Mentoring call should occur before the student attends their first Intensive.

Checklist for Pre-Mentoring call:

- Introduce yourself: Share how long you've been a professional trainer, and your motivation for mentoring a VSA student.
- Provide relevant information about yourself and your business.
- Ask about your student's goals and share expectations for the mentor portion of the course.
- Discuss preliminary scheduling for student's visits to your classes and private lessons, and provide locations and dates.
- Establish preferred mode for communicating with one another throughout the two Field Units. Example: Do you prefer to connect by email, phone, or text?
- Set your student up for success by discussing what you expect of them when observing group classes and private lessons (where to sit, what to wear, when to speak, etc.)
- Share any information that may help you and your student to gain the most benefit of your mentor/student relationship.

Introducing Your Student to Your Clients

You should plan to introduce, and explain the role of your student, to your clients prior to or immediately upon their meeting for the first time. VSA offers [a sample introduction letter](#) that you can customize and use to make introductions if you wish, or you can simply introduce your student in

person.

Whether you are introducing the student to your client via written communication or in person, please be certain the client knows that you are still the trainer and that your student is participating under your direction and guidance.

Planning and Scheduling

While students are ultimately responsible for completing required course work and scheduling activities during each Field Unit, it's important that you help to facilitate a scheduling plan for visits and activities that is feasible for both of you. Your schedule is likely different each week and your students will be tasked with fitting their schedule to yours. Students that live nearby will likely have greater flexibility for scheduling multiple visits for various required activities. Students that are traveling a greater distance for their visits will likely need to schedule more activities per visit, e.g. consolidating multiple mentor-led activities into one day or weekend whenever possible. Please work together to optimize scheduling.

Weekly Check-in with Student

We recommend that you set a weekly check-in by phone or email to coordinate the schedule for the upcoming week.

Checklist for Weekly Check-in:

- Provide student a schedule of your classes and private lessons.
- Choose a date by which the student will confirm the dates and times they will visit your classes and/or private lessons.
- Discuss and agree to logistics, such as what time and where you'll meet before a class or private lesson. Provide addresses of visit locations.
- Determine what circumstances might cause you to change or cancel a scheduled visit, e.g. weather, client cancellation, etc. and how to best communicate any 'last minute' changes.
- During Field Study, feel free to provide any information relevant to the classes or private lessons that the student will be observing. This would include written information relevant to the classes, the curriculum, preliminary client information, etc. If you use a follow-up email with your clients, please copy the student as this can provide additional learning.

Providing Learning Opportunities to Students

VSA mentors are required to provide the opportunity for their students to observe 6 group classes and 6 private lessons during each of the field units (totaling 12 group classes and 12 private lessons over the 6 month period). The topics, issues, and behaviors covered during these sessions should be appropriate for a novice trainer. Appropriate topics, issues, and behaviors may include, but are not limited to: preparing for puppy consultation, puppy class, basic manners lesson, and potentially scentwork classes. Topics, issues, and behaviors that are most likely inappropriate include, but are not limited to: reactive rover class, dog or human-direct aggression cases, and higher level performance based classes. Mentors should spend at least 5 minutes before and after each session briefing and then debriefing their student regarding the day's lesson/class.

End-of-Unit Progress Reports to VSA

At the end of each field unit, mentors are required to notify VSA via email to mentors@vsdta.com that the student has completed the required mentor activities for that unit. In addition to the notification of activity completion, we welcome any additional feedback regarding your student that you feel is appropriate.

VSA's goal is that students remain engaged and on track throughout their program of study, so in addition to these reports we will always be available to discuss and address concerns that you experience with students during the Field Units.

Mentor Compensation

You will be paid \$500 (USD) per student in two payments. The first payment of \$250 is made within 30 days of the student beginning the Field Study unit. The second payment of \$250 is made upon notification by the mentor to VSA that all of the mentor activities have been successfully completed.

US payments can be made via Paypal or check. UK payments can be paid by Paypal or bank transfer. If you prefer to be paid via Paypal, please provide your Paypal email address to the VSA office prior to the completion of the Unit. If you prefer to be paid via bank transfer (UK only), please provide VSA with your bank details (name, sort code and account number).

VSA Student Referral Program

As VSA mentors who have worked with students completing the VSA experience, we encourage you to share your thoughts and experiences regarding the Dog Trainer Course with others who you feel may be good candidates for the program. As a reminder, while the Dog Trainer Course is designed with professional dog training in mind, we've found it's also been hugely valuable to those working in other fields within the pet care industry. So if you know any dog walkers, sitters, groomers, vet techs, shelter workers or individuals in other similar fields who you feel may benefit from a VSA education, this is your chance to earn some extra income while promoting positive training.

Essentially, for every one VSA Dog Trainer Course student that is directly referred by you, VSA will pay you \$150.

To be eligible for the referral fee, the following criteria must be met:

1. The referred applicant must complete a standard VSA Dog Trainer Course application (including payment of the application fee) via the VSA website.
2. Once contacted for the pre-applicant interview with VSA's enrollment coordinator, the applicant must mention that they were referred to the program by you, giving your full name and status as a VSA mentor.
3. The applicant must be accepted for enrollment, sign the VSA Enrollment Agreement, and pay the Registration Fee.
4. The applicant must begin study as a VSA student during an active course.
5. Once the student arrives for their first intensive, VSA will issue payment to the referrer.

Note that the VSA applicant must initiate information regarding the referral – there is not an area on the application form or during the process where they will be asked if they were referred by anyone. In the event multiple individuals are listed as referrers, the \$150 referral fee will be split between all eligible individuals, provided all names were provided to VSA as referrers during the initial VSA pre-interview. This referral program is only available for VSPDT members, VSA students and graduates, and VSA mentors – it is not open to the public. You can find out more about these and specific course date info on [VSA's Course Dates](#) page.

Positively Online Store Mentor Discount

As a VSA mentor, you are eligible to receive 15% off all orders at the Positively Online Store. To activate the discount, enter promo code VSAONLY during checkout. [You can access the store here.](#)

Student's Requirements

Field Study Unit (60 days)

The Field Study Unit begins after the 2-month Introduction Unit and immediately following the student's successful completion of the Primer Intensive. With the knowledge and experience gained thus far in the program, students will now be learning through observing (and, if appropriate, assisting) their mentor in a variety of activities, as outlined below. Each activity should last about 1 hour.

- Observe mentor in six individual group classes.
 - Visits should be to standard classes such as beginner, basic manners, and/or puppy classes – classes can be aimed at solving behavior concerns if unavoidable, but this is not preferred for the Field Study Unit.
 - Visits can be completed in one class series (e.g. a six-week class) or a combination of six individual classes.
 - Mentors should spend at least 5 minutes before and after each class discussing training plans and debriefing classes with students.
 - Students may have the availability and desire to observe additional classes if mentor has the availability.
 - Students should observe for approximately 4 group classes, and if the mentor feels the student is ready, the student can move to assisting during the final 2 group classes.
- Observe mentor in six private lessons.
 - Visits can be to a first meeting with clients or subsequent visits.
 - Mentors should spend at least 5 minutes before and after each private lesson briefing and then debriefing their student for each private lesson.
 - Students should observe for approximately 4 private lessons, and if the mentor feels the student is ready, the student can assist during the final 2 private lessons.
 - Students may have the availability and desire to observe additional private lessons if mentor has the availability.

Field Training Unit (60 days)

In this unit, in addition to observing and assisting, students may begin to utilize the knowledge and hands-on experience gained thus far in the program to teach actual clients and train their dogs, under the direct supervision of their mentor, in a variety of activities.

- Observe and assist in 6 individual group classes.
 - Visits should be to standard classes such as beginner, basic manners, and/or puppy classes – not specialty classes such as those aimed at solving behavior concerns.
 - Students may have the availability and desire to observe additional classes if mentor has the availability.
 - Mentors should spend at least 5 minutes before and after each class discussing training plans and debriefing classes with students.
 - Students should assist their mentor in at least 4 group classes, and are eligible to lead the final 2 group classes if both mentor and student agree that it's appropriate.
- Observe and assist in at least six private lessons.
 - Visits can be to a first meeting with clients or subsequent visits.
 - Students may have the availability and desire to observe additional private lessons if mentor has the availability.
 - Mentors should spend at least 5 minutes before and after each private lesson briefing and then debriefing their student for each private lesson.
 - Student should assist with at least 4 private lessons, and are eligible to help lead the final 2 private lessons if both student and mentor agree that it's appropriate to do so.

Attendance standards

Part of the student's commitment, as detailed in the Student Handbook, is to complete all learning requirements. These include field unit commitments which will be in partnership with their assigned mentor. While circumstances may occur that require planned visits to be rescheduled, we emphasize accountability to the student and expect that they will attend all field training sessions that have been scheduled with their mentor. There is no easy way for a student to make up field unit requirements. Should you feel that a student is not in compliance, please contact the VSA Program Manager right away for guidance.

Definitions of Terms Used in Field Study/Field Training Units

These definitions will help to clarify what a student should be doing during their field units.

Observe

During Field Study, and continuing through Field Training, students should be observing your classes and lessons; watching, listening carefully, and noticing body language in both humans and dogs. Students should observe how people handle their dogs, how you interact with and communicate with your clients and their dogs, how the curriculum is structured, how you manage time, how group classes are physically laid out, steps you take to ensure safety of people and dogs, etc. Basically, they should be taking it all in.

Students should be encouraged to make notes and explore ideas about what they have observed during

field activities so that they can share during Discussion/Q&A time with their mentor. For example, if they observed a pet owner struggling in class, what ideas did they see being applied? Did they have additional ideas they think would have been helpful? If they observed a dog acting fearful or stressed, what steps would they try to reduce the dog's fear and stress? A student's observations can be excellent discussion points, talk about their ideas and share your own.

Assist

Through both field units, assist means to give you, the mentor/trainer support or help when you request it. This could be anything from handing you a prop or helping you mark attendance in class, to asking you to participate in a problem solving discussion or do some training with a dog. Assistance should be in whatever form you see as necessary, productive, and appropriate for the student's current level of knowledge, competency and confidence. Students are reminded that this is a mentorship, and not an internship. Students should be able to focus on observation rather than prepping or cleaning the room for their mentor. Keep in mind that the student's role is evolving during the field units. As they become more knowledgeable, skilled, and confident they can assist you in more complex tasks and gain experience with public speaking.