Nancy Gyes,
Obstacle discrimination- tunnel/contact

A simple dictionary definition of discrimination is "The recognition and understanding of the difference between one thing and another." In agility when obstacles are in close proximity to each other and we ask our dogs to "discriminate" or perform just one of those obstacles on cue from us, it is referred to as obstacle discrimination. (I am going to refer to it as OD for purposes of this article.) You could have OD of more than two obstacles, such as a tunnel wrapping a contact obstacle with both openings available for the dog to take. You could have OD with two tunnels, two jumps, tunnel/weave, tunnel/jump /table, tire/tunnel, contact/jump, contact/weave and of course all the combinations of contact obstacles with tunnels under or beside them.

Most OD challenges need to be "handled"- meaning that you need to physically or verbally put your dog on the correct line to the appropriate obstacle. In some cases where the OD obstacles are very close and you have difficulty getting right next to the obstacles to show the correct one, you will need to rely at least somewhat on your dogs' ability to verbally distinguish between the two or more obstacles by associating them with their specific names, or by using your directional cues.

When handling your dog to a contact/tunnel OD the job could be easy because the dog is on a relatively straight approach to the challenge, or made extremely difficult if the angle the dog approaches the last obstacle before the OD is at a severe angle, or if your dog has a lot of momentum coming into the sequence. So, you know the challenge of OD. Where do you start to train?

Words

It is important that the names of obstacles which could be involved in OD are all quite different sounding. All your nouns should have distinct cues and your dog should be trained to move towards them with just a verbal cue from a short distance. Start by writing down all your obstacle verbal cues; here are mine.
Climb- (AF and DW) Tunnel, poles, tire, teeter, over (all jumps) table
Then write down all the other directional or other verbal cues you use on course like your dog's name, release word, table positions, directional, recall cues and specialty cues like a back of the jump word. Here's mine: Break (release for start line, contacts, table), dog's name, (Scoop, Pie, Ace), go on (go straight) left and back (my right turn cue), out (push away from me) push (back of the jump) close and side (line up cues or recalls to my side) touch, (2020) run (run the frame, don't do 2020).

Now take each directional cue, and combine it with each of your nouns and confirm you don't have words that sound alike. Cue words that sound alike are confusing. Your dogs' name should not rhyme with a direction, like Bo "go", Riot "right" or even the first letter of your dogs' name being the same like Tommy "tunnel". You may need to use your dogs' name to call your dog to the closer of the two OD obstacles and you often have just a split second to say the word and get your dog to respond correctly.

It is usually quite easy to change your verbal cues as long as YOU can remember what the new names are.☺ If you have not yet put names to your obstacles I would encourage you to choose names and directionals that don't start with the same letter. Yeah, I have too many T-words, tunnel-tire-teeter –table. The only reason it has likely not got me in trouble over the years is that those obstacles are often not in OD challenges together.

I started using the word back for my right turn cue when I named a dog Riot. And now I have a dog named Pie and it is good I don't need to say "Pie right". Syllables can also sound similar, like **COME** and **TUNnel**. Avoid using those cues together if possible.

Now that you have nouns to call the obstacles, make sure that you use the important ones like tunnel, climb and weave almost every time you send your dog to that obstacle. You want your dog to firmly associate the obstacle with the verbal cue.

Direction cues

For OD the most important verbal cues are ones that push your dog to the outside obstacle, (like "out") and a verbal cue to call your dog towards you to take the closer obstacle (like your "dogs name" "come" "here") I use my dog's name and "out". There are many articles in CR that address teaching an "out" command and you want to teach those cues before you try to apply them to OD training. If you are using your dog's name or a cue to come towards you, then you need to use that cue hundreds and possibly thousands of times and reward your dog for coming all the way to you.

Physical cues

You can also use physical cues to pull your dog towards the closer obstacle or to push your dog away to the farther one. When you teach an "out" cue it is likely that you will pair a hand signal with the verbal. Another signal widely used is the threadle cue, also called an arm change. When your dog is on an outside track towards the incorrect obstacle the arm change can turn a turn towards you and the inside obstacle. In diagram three the dog is on the handlers left side, showing the dog the right arm as the handler turns towards the dog will cue the dog to turn to the right to take the closer DW.

Name recognition-

I like to teach my dog to recognize the name for obstacles and to move towards them when they hear that verbal cue. I usually start with just a board and a short tunnel or the barrel

part of a chute. You can also play this training game of course with a short set of weaves, a table, a jump, or a tire. I don't train name recognition on a full contact or long tunnel. One reason is that it takes so much longer for the dog to perform a competition size obstacle, and I also don't want to work on contact end behavior performance while I am teaching the obstacle names. I can train 100 repetitions to a short tunnel or board in the same time that I could possibly do 10 full DW's or A-Frames, assuming that I am rewarding my dog at the end of each correct performance of the obstacles. I am also not moving when teaching name recognition because I don't want my handling to override the dog looking for and moving towards the obstacle when I say the cue. Given that I don't want to move, that would mean my dog would have to do an AF or DW on one verbal cue without me moving from my position, and I usually can't do that until my dog is older and is well versed on independent contact behaviors. Because this article is about OD with contacts and tunnels I am only going to address teaching those two obstacle names.

You will need a short training board, a short tunnel or the barrel of a chute, and a table or something to prop your board on. You need some reinforcement cookies and toys. If you have a toy that you can stuff treats in for the non-retriever that would also be useful.

Place the short board on the ground close to a tunnel. Start with rewarding your dog any way you like a few times for getting onto the board or going through the tunnel then you are ready to start the name recognition game. The tunnel and board should be at least 5 feet separated at this point. I hold onto my dogs' collar about 3 feet away from the tunnel, I give one cue, the name of the tunnel. The dog is facing directly towards it when I say "tunnel" and release my dogs' collar. As he shoots forward to the tunnel I praise and immediately throw a toy or treat directly on my dogs' path out of the tunnel. You don't need to throw it too far. You want to call your dog back and start again immediately. Change your position in front of the tunnel every repetition. Dog on left, dog on right and you can start to add a bit of an angle and a few feet more distance if you are successful in your sends and your dog is traveling happily and fast to the tunnel. Don't give a second command if your dog does not go the first time. Move closer to the tunnel and start over. Even if you need to hold your dogs' nose right next to the tunnel to begin with, that is ok. Just start easy and then add distance. This is not a distance exercise though, stay within 10 feet of the obstacles. This is a game to teach your dog to recognize the name of the obstacle and go to it.

Once your dog will happily do all the stationary name games, and you could add some motion to the games, you are ready to increase the difficulty. I have a "discrimination station" with a board going up to a high table that I can wrap a tunnel around or under. Make your own station with a tunnel and a short board propped on a stool if you don't have a table.