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# Norfolk K9 Training

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**Welcome to  
Clicker Training**

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## The History of Clicker Training

What the dog trainers are calling clicker training is an application of behaviour analysis that was initially invented and developed more than thirty years ago, by Keller Breland, Marian Breland Bailey, and Bob Bailey. It first reached widespread use in the training of marine mammals. Although the marine mammal trainers use a whistle, not a clicker, their training relied on the same principles and is really exactly the same as what people are now calling clicker training.

Somehow, however, the technology did not transfer from marine mammal trainers to the general public: perhaps because of the focus of the trainers themselves, and perhaps simply because not very many people need to train dolphins.

In 1992, Phil Himeline invited me to speak to this gathering, at that year's annual meeting in San Francisco. I also organized a panel presentation by operant conditioning animal trainers: myself, Gary Wilkes, Gary Priest, and Ingrid Kang Shallenberger. After the conference Gary Wilkes and I put on the first Don't Shoot the Dog! Clicker training seminar, for a group of 250 dog trainers in the Bay Area. That's when things really began to pop.

Clicker training differs in a number of ways from standard or traditional dog training, and from lab training as well. First, although we often use food as a **primary reinforcer**, we use no deprivation. It is simply not necessary. Second, we use no **punishment** within the **shaping**. While reprimands might still occur during daily life, we omit punishment and avoid negative reinforcement as much as possible as an instructional tool. Third, the sessions are very brief, perhaps just a few minutes: no drill, no long repetitions; make progress, and move on. Also, we incorporate a LOT of variety: variations in the training, in the tasks, in the reinforcements used, and so on.

One result is that we are seeing very clearly in our dogs the phenomenon of accelerated learning. On our website we maintain an **honour roll** of clicker trained dogs. We are receiving and posting many observations of behaviours that, with standard training, take months, even YEARS, to establish with any degree of reliability. Now, with clicker training, standard behaviours and repertoires are being accomplished in six weeks. Three weeks. Four days. A big difference.

The biggest difference, however, is the clicker. Not just this mechanical talisman, but what it actually does. The clicker is not just a **conditioned reinforcer**, a substitute for food. Yes, it is that, and it's also a **bridging stimulus**, meaning "Food is coming, but later." And it's a termination signal: "Job's done, come collect your treat." And, as Ogden Lindsley has dubbed it, it is an **event marker**. But it is more specific than that, and much more powerful. I was fortunate to have been able to discuss this question, the functional role of the clicker, with the late Ellie Reese.

The OTI allows you to communicate some very specific concepts to an animal; and it allows the animal to communicate back. Let me give you an example. A beautiful Arabian show horse, a mare, had been brought to a clicker trainer for some remedial training. Show horses are trained to pose with their feet just so, the neck arched, and the ears pricked forward so they look pretty. The standard horse-

training way to get the ears up is to swish a whip around the horse's head, which makes the horse look very attentive indeed. This mare, however, had gone past that. When the whip was swished she'd taken to pinning her ears, that is, laying her ears back flat on her neck, and baring her teeth. NOT pretty at all. And of course, escalating the swishing just escalated the ugly face.

The new trainer had begun clicking the mare for pricked ears, and my husband, Jon Lindbergh, captured the next event on video. The mare had learned that clicks mean carrots; and that she could make clicks happen. And she had also become aware that the operant had something to do with ears. But what? So, she's doing this: flopping her ears this way and that, backwards and forwards, one ear up and one ear down, rotating each individually and then together—quite a show.

Yes, it is charming; but it is also rather sad. We have been training animals for thousands of years, and we almost never ask them to DO something! To bring their own abilities to the table. To think. If you'll excuse the expression.

When an animal participates at this level, the click, the OTI, acquires enormous value. It is "worth" much more than the food. Both the sound and the object become reinforcing. Here's an example of that. A **clicker** training instructor in Texas teaches disabled people to train their own service dogs. She is wheelchair bound, herself, and her service dog is a Papillon, a little toy breed, about the size of a cat, black and white. The dog is very useful, in spite of being small. It can retrieve pencils or whatever you drop, find the TV remote, pull laundry out of the dryer, etc. Anyway, when they go to training class, on Thursday nights, this little dog gets down off its owner's lap, goes around under the chairs, gets into people's training equipment bags, and STEALS clickers and brings them back. "Here, Mom, can't have too many of these, can we!"

It is not just for the animal that the clicker is valuable. The sound also provides feedback to the trainer. It is essential, of course, that you click EXACTLY the detail of **behaviour** you want. But most of us do not have that kind of **timing** naturally. And if you use your voice, you can't TELL when your word was late. With the clicker, though, even a complete novice can tell at once that they weren't on time, and thus fix their own behaviour. The clicker provides that vital feedback. And this is the KEY, I believe, to the rapid spread of clicker training.

Aaron Lynch quotes communication scientist Everett M. Rodgers on the special case of the spread of a technology. For a technology to spread fast, it has to have these characteristics: It must be easy. It must have visible benefits to the user. It must be something that can be learned in small increments. (I would add that there must be instant results that are reinforcing to the learner.) Clicker training fits the bill. When you see a well-trained standard-trained dog, you tend to say, "That must have taken years, I could never do that." Or, "My dog could never be that smart." In contrast, people see a clicker trained dog in action and exclaim: "How did you do that? Can I do it? Show me. Let me try."

The prepared mind can pick this whole technology up pretty fast. I don't mean the person who is already a behaviour analyst, or a dog trainer. I mean the person who

is experienced at choosing action vs. discussion, and who can also think analytically. Some top clicker trainers are, in their day jobs, engineers, scientists, computer technologists, lawyers, police, professors, community leaders, or executives of one sort or another. Some of them almost see it at a glance. They speak in terms of "conversion;" they use the word "epiphany." That makes the people who are opposed to or threatened by clicker training pretty annoyed, you'd better believe.

Sometimes whole schools convert. You may not be aware of it, but in most major cities in this country, and some abroad, there are dog training schools that pass 800 or 1,000 dogs and families a month through their programs. They may have fifteen or twenty fulltime instructors on the payroll. When a school of this size converts to clicker training, that doesn't mean just that 1,000 dogs a month are learning new behaviour. It means that 1,000 PEOPLE a month are learning something about thinking in terms of **reinforcement** contingencies. And they go out and teach more. It is not a geometric progression, yet; based on my feedback from the internet. But it is a very steep arithmetic curve.

What does this mean for behaviour analysis? Expanding opportunities for opening a practice as a pet behaviourist, obviously. But make no mistake: this is not about dog training. People LEARN to apply our science, with their dogs. But then they see what it means. And they start applying it to their kids: "My God, I've stopped jerking my dog around, but look at what I'm still doing to my kids." They apply it to their students: "I worked with my dogs all summer, and something happened. For the first time ever, I don't have any problem kids in my classroom." They apply it to their employees. And their co-workers.

And it "sticks." Training trainers has always been a great interest of mine. Not training the animals we know how to do that, now—but getting the technology across so people can use it themselves. How do you do that? So, these are very exciting times for me. I get wonderful feedback from the internet, where there is a bounty of clicker training discussion lists; I can watch the information flowing and once people "get" it, they'll tell you: "I can't go back."

However: Ernst Meyr, the great evolutionary biologist, said recently that the difficulty with cultural change is that it is so easily lost. Marian and Bob Bailey and I have often commiserated with each other over the loss of operant technology in some marine mammal facilities. When the technology is transferred verbally over the decades, from trainer to new trainer with no scientific input, it tends to degenerate. All kinds of superstitious behaviours start creeping in, such deprivation, and **punishment**, and blaming the animals it slides right back to the Stone Age.

What is going to be needed, to keep this "sushi science" (a reference to Dr. Sato's speech) of behavioural technology growing and becoming part of our culture, is constant fresh input from you. The opportunity and the need are great.

There's another benefit, I think, to the behaviour analysis community. Last night Murray Sidman remarked to me that every time a science moves into a new area, new things happen. That is certainly true of clicker training. There are many, many unanswered research questions popping up as this technology spreads wider and

wider. The animal that identifies the operant feels elation: social animals give all their innate signals—dogs bark, horses prance, elephants, I am told, run around in circles chirping. What is going on here? What's going on inside the animal? Endorphin release as the **reinforcer**?

Why do we see "play" behaviour associated with the moment when the "lightbulb goes on?" What's going on when the animal becomes conscious of what it's doing, or, for that matter, when the human learns something he or she is NOT conscious of? This stuff is predictable, it's replicable, and it's real. Here's another. We used to think that dolphins were smart because they learned by observation; but we are seeing that clicker trained dogs, watching other dogs get clicked, can learn by observation, and learn even quite elaborate repertoires. Let's study it!

# Clicker Training Course

This course will focus on using the science of operant conditioning and positive reinforcement to train dogs.

The course will include:

- The history of clicker training.
- The science of clicker training.
- Tools, rules and safety for clicker training.
- When not to use clicker training.
- How to start clicker training.
- Solving problems using clicker training.
- How to remove the clicker from training.

People wishing to attend this course must have previously attended either the puppy foundation course of the beginner's course.

Some simple rules that will help whilst clicker training:

1. Never click near your dog's head – It can cause the dog to fear the noise.
2. It is very important to make your timing accurate and to always give your dog a treat after you have clicked. Don't lie with the clicker.
3. Only click once for each behaviour. As you start to progress with training, you can ask for more effort to earn a click, at the end click and reward once.
4. Always take a break after 5 to 10 minutes of training, clicker training is very stimulating and hard mental work for your dogs.
5. Do not reduce the treat value too quickly as this will prevent your dog from working so well.
6. When teaching a new behaviour, it is okay to reward good attempts – if the behaviour is close to the expected or required task then rewarding it will encourage the dog to repeat its attempt, which increases the chances of the full behaviour being learnt correctly – think of it as giving a nudge in the right

direction or a cue to the end requirement

7. Once the task has been learnt then ask for 2 or 3 repetitions before click and treating.
8. It's important to still praise and handle your dog. Once you click you should praise, smooth, cuddle your dog then food or toy reward. Otherwise if all training is hands off the dog doesn't enjoy physical praise
9. Your dog should be allowed to move away and think about things, do not pressure your dog to stay on the spot, let them think about the required task.
10. Do not use the clicker to gain your dog's attention, and ensure no handlers click the clicker when not training the dog.
11. It is a good idea to use a start and end word to let your dog know when learning sessions begin and end, often the clicker signals the start.
12. Make it a fun learning experience for you and your dog!
13. Don't nag your dog; the clicker takes away the need for lots of fuzzy words that cause undue frustration and anxiety during training.
14. If ever you feel tired, upset, stressed or angry it's far better to choose another time. Clicker training requires patience, calm handling, having fun and reading yourself and your dog.

## Five clicker training myths

Clicker training is fast becoming the method of choice when training a dog through positive means. But there are some widespread misunderstandings that could make it hard to know if it's right for you and your dog. The following are five myths about clicker training, both negative and positive, as well as information you can use to decide if this is the best obedience training method for your needs.

### 1) The clicker is a fad or gimmick

The theories that make clicker training work are actually based on some of the principles of operant conditioning, which were first described in the 1930's by B.F. Skinner. The basic idea is that a subject will repeat behaviors that are rewarding and avoid behaviors that are not. Skinner's principles were used to train pigeons and marine mammals in the early 1940's and were developed into the modern method of applied operant conditioning by Karen Pryor in the 1960's. In 1987 she started teaching what is known today as clicker training.

Keep in mind that the actual clicker is only a tool. It's the principles that are important.

### 2) You must always have the clicker with you

The use of a clicker or "marker" is only needed during the initial stages of clicker training a command. After a cue is introduced you no longer need the marker. If you're worried about having to carry a clicker, you can always use a different sound to mark behaviors such as clicking with your tongue or snapping your fingers. The clicker makes a unique sound that's very effective, but it's not a necessity so long as the principles of positive dog training are followed.

### 3) Clicker dogs won't work without food

No one works for free, including your dog. Using food to motivate him is quick and simple, but the treats should be phased out in favor of real-world rewards once he understands a command. Examples include sitting to be let outside, lying down to great guests, or retrieving a leash to go for a walk. The more you know about your dog, the easier it will be to figure out what motivates him apart from food. You may find that a few seconds with a tennis ball is more rewarding for your dog than filet mignon. Be creative.

Also, keep in mind the difference between a reward and a bribe. A reward only comes after a behavior is offered while a bribe comes before the behavior. If you have to bribe your dog to get a behavior, then you need to rethink your training technique and adjust accordingly.

#### **4) There is no punishment in clicker training**

No one can train a dog using positive reinforcement alone. Some type of aversive is always present, including negative punishment. (This is where you take away something that your dog is willing to work for in order to lessen the frequency of a behavior.) Some clicker trainers use no-reward markers or NRM's, which tell the dog that the behavior he offered isn't going to be rewarded. Common NRM's include the words "oops" or "too bad".

The distinction between clicker training and more traditional methods of obedience training is that clicker training steers clear of methods that involve force, pain, or intimidation. And that's a good thing for both you and your dog.

#### **5) Clicker training is the best way to train a dog**

Every dog and trainer are different and what works for some may not work for others. It's up to you to decide which obedience training methods will be most effective for you and your dog. But, if you can train your dog using a technique that doesn't require force, fear, or intimidation, isn't it worth trying?

## What Is the Clicker?

The clicker is a plastic toy like device with a metal strip that makes a quick, clear, consistent and distinctive sound when pressed. For our purpose it serves to accurately "mark" the behavior that we are shaping in our dogs and **provides them with precise feedback** - it does not have magical powers.

## Why is a clicker used?

The essential difference between clicker training and other reward-based training is that the dog is told *exactly* which behaviour earned it a reward. This information is communicated with a distinct and unique sound, a click, which occurs at the same time as the desired behaviour. The reward follows.

Without hearing a click during an action, a dog may not connect the reward with that action. Or, the dog may associate the reward with another, unwanted action. With the click, a trainer can precisely "mark" behaviour so that the dog knows exactly what it was doing. That's why clicker trainers call the click an "**event marker**." The click also bridges or connects the behaviour and its reward, and so is also called a "**bridging signal**."

## Why use the click? Why not just a word?

A click is more powerful for training than a spoken word because it is not a sound heard by the dog in other circumstances. It means one thing only: **a reward is coming because of what you did when you heard the click**. It can be produced instantly and at the exact moment a behaviour occurs. Even a very quick and subtle behaviour, the twitch of an ear for example, can be clicked.

Unlike our voices, which can say the same word in different ways, and so express different emotions or meanings each time, the click sounds the same every time it is heard; its meaning never varies. Humans are highly verbal creatures, but our dogs are not. It can be difficult for them to pick out a single word from the stream of meaningless words they hear us speak every day. The click's meaning, however, is always clear. It is always directed at the dog, and it is always good news.

The clarity with which a click enables trainers to communicate with their dogs has a profound effect on their relationships. Their level of interaction increases, and trainer and dog become more interesting and fun for each other.

## How does clicker training work?

The trainer clicks now the behaviour occurs: The dog sits, the trainer clicks. Clicking is like taking a picture of the behaviour the trainer wishes to reinforce. After "taking the picture," the trainer gives the dog something it likes, usually a small piece of food but sometimes play, petting, or other rewards.

Very soon (sometimes within two or three clicks), a dog will associate the sound of the click with something it likes: the reward. Since it wishes to repeat that pleasurable experience, it will repeat the action it was doing when it heard the click.

Any behaviour can be trained following these three simple steps:

1. Get the behaviour, (this may mean you have to lure the dog with food).
2. Mark the behaviour.
3. Reinforce the behaviour.

## How do clicker trainers ask for behaviours?

Clicker trainers differ from traditional trainers in that they wait until the behaviour is well understood by the dog before using a command or "**cue**." A cue is the name of a behavior, such as "sit," or a hand movement or other clear signal. Until the dog knows what the behaviour is, any name for it would be meaningless.

When the dog has been clicked several times for a behaviour, and then confidently repeats the behaviour, showing that it knows exactly what earns it a click and a reward, it is ready to learn the name of the behaviour. Clicker trainers call this "introducing the cue."

To teach the dog the name of the behaviour, or the cue, the trainer says or signals the cue before the dog repeats the behaviour. After several repetitions, the trainer begins to click and reward when the dog does the behaviour, but only after the cue is given. No click is given if the dog does the behaviour without being given the cue first. The dog quickly learns to listen or watch for its cue, which tells it: *If you do this behaviour now, you will get a click and earn a reward.*

## What if the dog does not obey the cue?

Clicker trained dogs want to perform behaviours for which they have been rewarded in the past. If they understand the meaning of the cue and desire the reward, they will perform the behaviour.

If they do not perform the behaviour, clicker trainers do not assume that the dog is "disobeying." Instead the trainer asks the following questions:

1. Does the dog know the meaning of the cue?
2. Does the dog know the meaning of the cue in the environment in which it was first taught, but not in the environment in which it was given?
3. Is the reward for doing the behaviour sufficiently desired by the dog?

After answering those questions, the clicker trainer revises the training process to be sure that the dog knows the meaning of the cue in all environments, regardless of distractions, and feels rewarded for the behaviour.

## Do clickers and treats need to be used for every behaviour, forever?

No. Once a behavior is learned and on cue, there's usually no need to click, as the dog understands the behaviour. Clicker trainers can maintain the behaviour by replacing especially good treats with occasional and less intensive rewards including a pat or praise. Learned cues and behaviours are also maintained by real-life rewards: for example, sitting quietly at the door is rewarded by opening the door so that the dog can have a walk. Clicker trainers then save clicks and treats for the next new thing they want to train.

## Advantages of Clicker Dog Training

1. Builds a **strong bond** between handler and dog, based on co-operation and mutual respect.
2. It's a **positive, gentle, non-violent** and motivational training method.
3. Is based on a **proven scientific method** that works.
4. Is great for young puppies - it's never too early to begin your clicker training!
5. Focuses on **what is right rather than what is wrong**, which builds confident dogs.
6. Raises a thinking dog and one who is creative.
7. It's a very forgiving method - just get out and try it!
8. Dogs have a **great attitude towards training** and are stress free.
9. Clicker dog training is **fantastic for big heavy dogs**. This is because you work in cooperation with your dog rather than by pushing, shoving or manhandling your dog. Hey, they use clickers to train Rhino's, so don't be fooled into thinking that it is not an effective technique for big dogs.

## Criteria in Clicker Training

Maybe the easiest way to describe the concept of criteria in dog training is to describe it as a plan or blueprint of different levels of training within a given exercise. Many people misuse this, or they are completely unaware of the concept altogether.

Now some of you may say: "I don't need a plan, I just want to train my dog to sit", that is the wrong approach.

Let's look at what criteria we need to have a good reliable "sit" command trained (this is not in any particular order it is just an example):

- Training the sit behaviour and putting it on cue (first criterion)
- Teaching the release marker (second criterion)
- Training your dog to sit regardless of your body posture (third criterion)
- Increase the timing and duration while the dog is in the sit position (fourth criterion)
- Increase distance (fifth criterion)
- Move to a different environment/generalization process (sixth criterion)
- Add distractions (seventh criterion)

You see, in order to get your dog to sit on command, regardless of the distance, environment, distractions, and to sit for "x" amount of time until released, you need to go through and train each of these steps separately, as indicated above. If you

miss one of them you will have an unreliable command. The main reason why a majority of dogs don't perform their tasks reliably is because the owners, handlers or trainers weren't paying attention to the training plan, or to the criteria.

You may think that "sit" is a simple exercise but in order to have this reliably trained, you have to train all of the different criteria for it. As much as this exercise seems simple to us, for a dog all of these components are separate training steps just like the sit and down are separate exercises.

This is because of the fact that dogs are really simple animals and they require simple, organized steps (criteria) in order to learn, many dog owners make mistakes by asking too much from their dogs.

*TIP:* Always keep in mind; what looks easy from our perspective is not always an easy concept for our dogs.

### **Organizing and raising Criteria**

How to properly organize criteria is not such an easy task, however, once you start, every future exercise will get easier. I can't pinpoint every single criterion for everyone without seeing the actual situation, exercise, dog, etc. but I can give you guidance as to what to pay attention to when creating a training plan.

This is the list of things you want to pay attention to:

### **Your level of knowledge, your dog's level of knowledge and his previous training experiences**

It is a known fact that older dogs and dogs that were previously trained through the use of compulsion methods have not developed their problem-solving skills (in fact, they normally avoid any "experimenting" as they have negative experiences from previous attempts). If they have developed some problem-solving skills, it isn't normally at the same level as a dog that started out with clicker training from the start. If you are working with a dog that has little problem-solving skills, do simple tasks in order to build up his responsiveness. Plan your exercises carefully (keep the difficulty level of criteria at the lowest possible level in order for the dog to reach success more quickly) and start with simple exercises.

### **Create your plan for each exercise and keep it simple**

How good of a dog trainer you are often determines your ability to look at an exercise and be able to break it into increments and then work on one increment at a time (one criterion at time). Always keep in mind that "sit", "sit-stay" or "sit in the midst of walking" are three completely different exercises for your dog, and although all three of them include the same body posture, everything else is different. Many dog owners forget this simple thing and end up creating confusion for their dogs. Remember that dogs can only advance at the level that is understandable to them.

## Learn to recognize problems

If you are training a particular exercise, and your dog gets “stuck”, you need to fix that issue. Normally the problem lays in the criteria, probably the criterion that you are working on is too big of a leap from the previous one and the dog can't figure it out. Instead of being persistent in trying and getting your dog frustrated, lower your criteria, or arrange the environment, or change the place where you deliver the reward, etc. Help set your dog up to pass the level. Keep things simple, and make sure that your dog's success is at the top of your priority list. It is not our goal to make it difficult for our dog; the goal is to make him successful.

*TIP:* This is probably one of the biggest mistakes dog owners do. They expect and ask too much from a dog in a way that the dog is not capable of delivering.

Think of it this way, if I come to you a few days in a row and give you puzzles to solve that you just can't figure out, and then I cut your pay for that day because of this, after a few days, you will feel uncomfortable when I approach, you will feel stressed and hate puzzles, and even if after a few days, I give you something easier that is within your problem-solving capabilities, you will probably still fail. This is called **“learned helplessness”** which means that you won't even try to solve it anymore, based on previous unsuccessful attempts; you will simply quit trying.

I have seen this happen many times throughout my career, dogs who simply “avoid” working with their owners, and who don't care anymore for any type of reward.

## Don't get stuck, keep moving

When shaping behaviour through raising criteria, you need to keep moving. If you get stuck on a certain step, your dog may figure that this is the “final step” and then if you try progressing after that point, it may be difficult, or you may end up with a trained exercise where your dog may occasionally stop in the middle of the performance.

Move at your dog's pace and proceed with the criteria gradually, but be sure to not get stuck, always keep moving!

*TIP:* Don't be afraid to try, if you move too fast from one criterion to another, you can always go back to the previous step, do a few repetitions and then move on again. It is better to try and if it doesn't work to move a step back than to get stuck on one level.

## Increase criteria gradually

Another area in which many people make mistakes is by not increasing the criteria gradually. There are two examples that we commonly see:

Heeling; many people tend to attempt huge leaps between marking/rewarding their dogs. First they reward every 2-3 steps and then they jump to 15-20 steps or

even more. This type of training will never work. You need to increase criteria gradually, 2 steps, then 4 steps, then 7 steps, etc.

Another one is with the 'sit-stay'. People tend to immediately try to leave their dogs for 15 seconds or more. Dogs don't have patience, and this is something that needs to be increased gradually. Having them stay for a couple of seconds, and then increasing gradually to 15 and then beyond, will set them up for success and will reinforce the behaviour.

In many dog training situations, we can say that ***"smaller steps will get you to your destination faster"***, keep this in mind.

## Cues and Signals in Clicker Training

Cues in clicker training and any dog training are the signals that you will use to inform your dog of what exercise you are doing and what behaviours you expect. The ultimate goal of any dog training is to have a repertoire of reliably performed behaviours on command and to use those in various different situations (for more information about different situations and scenarios).

Although there are many theories about how to structure the communication system that leads to a reliable response from our dogs, there are always signals of some kind that are involved in this communication. We will discuss these signals in a little more depth, here below.

### What are cues (commands)?

We will discuss the commonly named “commands” in dog societies, but first, what actually are cues and commands?

Cues and commands (either verbal or physical) are a type of **stimulus**. A stimulus can be an action, a signal or anything that **precedes** a certain dog behaviour.

For example: Your dog sees a squirrel and gets frantic on a lead. In this case we have the stimulus (the squirrel) that is followed by the dog's reaction to it (the behaviour).

There are many different stimuli that are provided by the environment and we may have little to no control over them, those stimuli are generally known as **triggers**.

The next group of stimuli are classically conditioned (learned) stimuli that we use in our daily communication attempts with our dogs. These are the verbal or physical cues (commands). These are usually words or gestures that once were meaningless to our dogs but that now have a meaning to them. Once we have a dog that is reliably performing the same actions by responding to cues (commands) that is known as **“behaviours under stimulus control”** and that is the goal of any animal training.

There are other groups, but we generally stick to these two in order to simplify things as much as possible. For our purposes here, we will mainly focus on the second group of stimuli, the cues.

### What types of cues are used in dog training?

In general, we use two different types in dog training:

- Verbal cues
- Physical cues

The one that you will use depends on your personal preferences or the sport that you are involved in with your dog. In real life scenarios, I prefer verbal over physical cues. The issue with physical cues is that a dog physically needs to face you (or be watching you) in order to perform the exercise or receive the message, which may become an issue when you are faced with some situations in which your dog needs to respond instantly.

On the other hand, training your dog to respond to physical cues (gestures) is easier than with verbal ones. There are many reasons for this, but regardless of which method you are planning to use, you have to be clear with your dog about the “*language*” that you will use, whether physical or verbal. And here is where many dog owners face the first issue.

### **Problems with over-cueing**

Although this is part of the luring and free shaping page, the reason that I'm mentioning it here also, is because even though we may intend to use a luring concept, we may end up with a creating a physical cue instead, if we “*over-cue*” our dog.

For example, if you are making an up-sweeping motion with your hand in order for your dog to sit, keep this as your ‘signal’ and isolate it from the rest of your body movements. Many people tend to also bend down, or nod their head when doing this hand signal, and if you do this for a few repetitions, then the whole sequence (including the bending or the head-bobbing) becomes the cue, not just the up-sweeping hand motion.

The issue with this is that eventually, you may stop bending down, or another member of your family may try exercising with the dog and perhaps that person doesn't bend, now suddenly, the dog doesn't respond to the cue.

Unfortunately, most dog owners mislabel this as “*disobedience*” when in fact the blame is on the handler's side as they are changing the appearance of the cue. Dogs are very visually oriented, and they are always trying to read our gestures. If you are to use body gestures as a cue for certain exercises, make sure that you are consistent. Avoid any unnecessary body movements. The more unnecessary body gestures you use, the broader the “*command*” for that particular behaviour is, and the more mistakes you can run into.

Think of it as a security password. If you use a three-digit password, it is easy to remember the number sequence, if you use five, six or more digits, the chances for making mistakes drastically increases.

### **Where to start**

This is the part that baffles almost every dog owner that is not familiar with the clicker training concept; the topic of when to actually name the behaviour.

In old dog training circles, the training started straight based on command, which means that you would start the training sequence as follows; (we will use the "sit" command for this example):

**Traditional way of dog training:**

- "Sit" (command)
- Pull the leash upwards (negative reinforcement)
- The dog sits (behaviour)
- Relieve the leash pressure (reward)

In a clicker training system, first you lure the dog into the desired behaviour, or reward the appearance of the behaviour itself (as described in the luring and free shaping). Once the behaviour is fluent (after a certain number of successful repetitions) you then name it. It goes something like this:

**Clicker training systems for training the "sit" exercise:**

- Luring or free shaping technique
- Dog offers behaviour
- Click/mark the behaviour
- Reward the dog

Once the dog is fluent with the action:

- Give the verbal cue ("Sit")
- Dog offers the position (behaviour)
- Click/mark
- Reward

It is difficult to master this technique simply because we are so verbally oriented, and it is sometimes difficult for us to understand that our spoken language doesn't mean anything to our dogs.

Until we give a meaning to each of the commands that we use in training, our dogs are simply reacting to other cues or stimuli, they do not actually understand the command that we have spoken.

Many people might ask, "How is it possible that in other types of training, dogs understand the commands first?" and the simple answer is...it's not.

In compulsion-based methods, dogs start by being physically manipulated into the positions, therefore there is no “trial and error” period and no “problem-solving” activity. They have not understood that “sit” means to put their hind end down on the ground; they were simply not given any other choice, as they were physically put into that position.

In clicker training concepts, the process of learning includes trial and error, as well as problem solving activities. If you were to use the command “sit” too early, you would end up with the same results that most dog owners end up with; a dog that sits every now and then and with a poor response to it. This is because, as mentioned above, until the dog knows what the action is that is wanted; it is useless for us to label that action.

When this happens, and our dog no longer responds reliably to a verbal command, we call this a “poisoned” cue.

### **Poisoned cue**

A poisoned cue is a command that wasn't trained properly and therefore dogs don't perform it reliably. For example: if you called your dog to “come” and he doesn't (simply because he doesn't understand the meaning of the cue), you are actually “training” him that the word “come” doesn't mean anything. It just becomes another “sound” he hears you say, not a “cue” that he is paying attention for. Remember, as much as “come” has a definition in English, this doesn't mean anything to our dog and it is no different than “boo” or “blah”, it is just another sound.

Problems can start, for example, if you start training your dog a recall using the same command “come”. By this point, the dog has already learned that “come” means keep doing whatever you are doing, or he may even connect this with an invitation for a play session, as perhaps, in the past you have followed it up by chasing after him.

Now you are faced with a problem. By trying to train your dog with a cue that means something different to him, than what you intend it to, this will delay your training efforts, or even jeopardize them completely.

If you have used a certain command and there were no results, or the results were inconsistent, we call this a “poisoned cue”. To avoid this, name the behaviours after they are already established. If you already used the word without results, previously, then choose another word (cue/command) and start fresh. In the end, whichever words or language we use is indifferent to our dogs because they don't understand the English language. They won't be debating the definition of a word; they will simply associate it to the meaning (action) that we have trained them for.

This is the way to name behaviours (assign cues) in a clicker training system, once you have the behaviour on cue then you start adding criteria in order to get reliable results in various different situations.

## Additional Cues

The use of additional cues and signals in clicker training is an ongoing subject of discussion and a polemic among dog trainers and experts worldwide. We all agree on the benefits of using clicker training principles (regardless of if you use a clicker, verbal marker, whistle, etc.) for marking wanted behaviours, however where the discussions come in is when signals are used to mark the moment that the dog failed to perform or missed, some dog trainers tend to use signals to inform their dogs that they have failed, still others say that these such signals are not necessary or even that they produce unnecessary stress, etc.

### Which additional cues and signals to use?

In broad terms there are two types of additional cues in clicker training that are used, a marker to indicate what is good and on track for a reward and a marker that is used to indicate that the given action or behaviour is unwanted.

In these unwanted situations, markers like **“wrong”**, an **“uh-uh”** sound or sometimes a **“no”** command are often used. Now this is not to be confused with the cue used for correction (which I will describe below), it is merely a signal to the dog that the behaviour he is performing will not bring a reward.

In the case of wanting to let your dog know that he is on the right track, some dog trainers use an additional cue such as **“good”** that serves as a type of a signal that the performed behaviour is desirable and for the dog to keep performing it as he is on track for the reward.

### The meaning of the “good” marker

The word “good” can be used in both clicker training and marker training. This word will be used as a guiding marker. Normally, we use it for endurance and duration, for example, when we want our dog to remain in a certain position or to reinforce that position.

Ultimately, our dog connects that the word “good” will eventually be followed by the release marker (the clicker or verbal marker), which means a reward. The “good” marker will become a signal to our dog that we are happy with his performance and to keep doing it, in order to be released/rewarded.

Sometimes you can even reward your dog on the guiding marker (“good”), for example: You are training your dog endurance while sitting, sit your dog, take a few steps backward praise him with good, wait a few seconds repeat the marker “good” and approach your dog to reward him while still in the sit position, and then take a few steps back again, repeat “good” again (assuming that your dog is maintaining the sit position) and then after a few seconds release your dog with the clicker or marker that you are using and reward him.

In the beginning your dog will probably break the position in order to approach you or to access the reward, you simply withhold the reward and repeat the action, dogs normally grasp the idea fast and from that point, you can phase out the frequency of the rewards while using “good” and your marker itself.

### Signals for corrections (conditioned punisher)

In compulsion based training systems dog trainers use specific signals to predict corrections, and this is something totally different than withholding a reward in the clicker training system.

In much the same way that clicker training uses to train the dog that the clicker is always followed with a reward, compulsion based training uses a specific verbal marker that is always followed by an aversive action (leash pop, e-collar correction, etc.). Therefore, the dog learns to connect that signal with the unpleasant action.

The reason that some dog trainers use signals in the form of conditioned punishers is to “inform” the dog of when they are doing something wrong so that the dog can correct his behaviour himself in order to avoid the correction. One of the most used words for a conditioned punisher is “No”.

It is important to know this, as many of dog owners today adopt their dogs at various ages and may not be aware of the dog's previous “training” history. If you then use the word “No” as a cue for withholding a reward, but your dog has a negative experience with that command, he will react negatively and will probably stop performing future actions as he may start avoiding any work in order to avoid possible corrections.

This may completely jeopardize your training process.

*TIP:* If you are working with a dog that you are not sure of their past or if you are a so-called “balanced dog trainer” (meaning a trainer who uses both, the clicker training principles as well as corrections), make sure that you are using a different verbal signal for withholding a reward than the signal that was used for corrections.

If you are dealing with a dog that you have just recently been introduced to, you can observe the dog's body language when you use the **“No”** or **“Wrong”** command (over 90% of all dog owners use these words in conjunction with corrections); if you see any of the signs of stress, fear, or nervousness (lowering body posture, ears down, tail between the legs, turning head left or right avoiding eye contact, licking lips, body shake or yawning, etc.) it is best to use some other commands from that point as the dog already has an “emotional attachment” to the “No” or “Wrong”.

### The proper way to inform your dog that he is wrong

In clicker training the whole concept is based on two simple principles: mark and reward the behaviours that you like, and withhold (don't reward) the behaviours

that you are trying to eliminate. Now as mentioned earlier, some dog trainers use additional cues for the latter and some don't.

I personally use them as I think that it is important for our dogs to understand when they are performing something that is not wanted or part of the desirable repertoire. However, in saying that, there are rules about when and how to use this signal.

### **Body language speaks more than a thousand words**

As much as we as a species are totally dependent on our verbal communication and language, and our body language is more of an unregulated display of body gestures that follows the contexts of our verbal stories; in a dog's world, body language is the way of communication.

It is important to always keep this in mind, no matter how much our dog appears to be good at understanding our commands, his primary way of receiving input is by observing us. This is why so many people struggle to have dogs trained for verbal cues. In clicker training, the timing of marking the moment when the dog is **“wrong”** is as equally important as marking it when he is right.

Our dogs don't know what the exercise should look like; they don't know the concept of it or what the final goal is. They are observing us in order to predict their upcoming reward. It is because of this that we need to be aware of our body gestures.

Dogs taught with clicker training concepts are training through a **“trial and error”** system, and in every step that the dog takes towards the final goal, we mark and reward him. Normally, our body gestures are more or less always the same when we do that. We click (or use a verbal marker), reach for the reward (or have the treat already in our hand) and then move our hand in order to deliver the reward. It is that hand movement that our dog is so attached to.

Often we move differently at moments when our dog is performing something undesirable or while he is going through the trial and error phase. It is important to remember that if you are doing any body movements (especially similar ones all the time around your dog), your dog may be confused as you are sending him mixed signals. For example: if your dog always gets rewarded in a position facing you and just up above his head, then if you do that similar movement when your dog is doing wrong, then you are sending confusing signals to your dog, as he already associates that movement with receiving his reward.

In order to avoid this issue there are two options:

- Avoid using body language, in order to prevent your dog from getting attached to the wrong signals
- Use specific and different body language (signals) for when the dog is right and for when the dog is wrong

### Using signals vs. not using signals in clicker training

This is a list of pros and cons for additional cues that tell our dog what we don't want:

Some good things about not using "wrong" signals and cues include:

- Your dog doesn't get attached to unnecessary cues
- Your dog has the freedom of experimenting in order to deduce the next step, etc.

Some of the issues that you may face without these signals are:

- Your dog can get frustrated if it takes too long to figure out the next step (criteria is too high, etc.)
- Most humans instinctively tend to produce some type of body (or verbal) gestures when their dog is working, so there is a chance that the dog will get attached to an unintentional cue anyway.
- Your dog may have issues understanding the unwanted behaviour (or a part of that behaviour) as there are no clear markers when the behaviour happened.

The benefits of using a "wrong" marker is a great help in everyday dog training. The most important thing is for the dog to understand the purpose of it.

You can mark behaviours that are unwanted and thereby greatly speed up the training process; as well it is a clear message that the performed behaviour is unwanted.

Maybe one of the most important benefits of additional cues is that you are capable of using the correct timing in order to inform your dog in the moment.

### How to properly use the "wrong" command in clicker training

In some cases, it is very difficult to isolate the wrong behaviours down the road. Often, dogs will start slacking in their work, and you will sometimes see that they tend to "skip" some parts of an exercise in the behaviour chain. For example:

You are training your dog sit and stay; you sit your dog then move to your position, but in the meantime your dog has broken his position, ran over to you and performed his sit again on his own, but in front of you, not where you left him. Now if you were to withhold a reward without using any verbal or physical signals to inform the dog that he did a wrong behaviour, it is up to him to conclude which behaviour sequence was unwanted; the breaking of the sit position, the action of running towards you, or the finishing position (sitting in front of you).

Keep in mind that it is always up to the animal (dog) to interpret what behaviour brings or doesn't bring the reward, so if you don't have a good communication language, you will have difficulties pointing and isolating a specific behaviour to your dog. Often after a few bad repetitions, the dog stops performing the whole exercise in general as a result of frustration.

In order to properly address this situation above (and other situations as well), you need to have a specific language developed and it is a simple one; Use "wrong" or whichever verbal cue you want to use, and a distinctive physical reaction that is unique (this will be a physical cue for not delivering a reward). The moment that your dog has broken the sit position, use the verbal marker "wrong" and do not continue with the exercise in any way (do not go to your place which may allow your dog to perform any other behaviour like coming back to you or a finish "sit" position) at that moment the whole exercise is cancelled, and you go back to the beginning.

*TIP:* Pay attention to your body position and gestures in these moments. If you are cancelling the exercise, and delivering your "wrong" marker, be sure not to maintain your "rewarding" posture and body language, as this would be contradictory information for your dog. He will be hearing "wrong" but seeing "right". Break your position and use different body language so that the message is clear to your dog.

### **When to start using the "wrong" marker in clicker training**

Like many things, there is a controversy about when and how to introduce the "wrong" marker to our dogs. From my personal experience, I wouldn't recommend that it be used from the start of dog training. A dog needs to first go through his learning "trial and error" period to develop and understand how the whole concept works in general. If I was to add the "wrong" from the beginning, it would just serve as more confusion and perhaps it may limit my dog's potential for exploring with trial and error.

Once my dog has a basic understanding of "sit" and "down", and we are performing some easy free shaping exercises, I will start adding in the "wrong" cue for those exercises. Since the dog is already familiar with the behaviour itself, or understands the concept of it, it would be easy for him to understand that every time he hears the "wrong" cue, the reward is gone. But since he knows the behaviour already, he would know what to do instead, in order to access the reward. This is the best and the less stressful way for a dog to learn the "wrong" command.

The more that your dog becomes fluent, the more often you would be able to use this cue in order to help your dog recognize the unwanted behaviours.

This may not be necessary for some simple exercises, but as you advance further, additional cues can be a great tool in your toolbox.

## Tips for Getting Started with the Clicker

**Clicker training** It's easier to learn than standard command-based training.

You can **clicker** train any kind of animal, of any age. Puppies love it. Old dogs learn new tricks.

### **Here are some simple tips to get you started.**

Click DURING the desired **behaviour** (Any observable action an animal does), not after it is completed. The **timing** of the click is crucial. Don't be dismayed if your dog stops the behaviour when it hears the click. The click marks and ends the behaviour. Give the treat after that; the timing of the treat is not important.

Click when your dog does something you like. Begin with something easy that the dog is likely to do on its own. (Ideas: sit; come toward you; touch your hand with its nose; lift a foot.)

Click once (in-out.) If you want to express special enthusiasm, increase the number of treats, not the number of clicks. By this I mean give one treat after the other keeping the verbal praise going as you treat. This is classic of reinforcing the behaviour.

Keep practice sessions short. Much more is learned in three sessions of five minutes each than in an hour of boring repetition. You can get dramatic results, and teach your dog many new things, by fitting a few clicks a day here and there in your normal routine.

Fix bad behaviour by clicking good behaviour. For example: click for paws on the ground, not on the visitors. Instead of scolding for making noise, click for silence. Cure lead-pulling by clicking and treating those moments when the lead happens to go slack.

Click for voluntary (or accidental) movements toward your goal. You may coax or lure the dog into a movement or position, but don't push, pull, or hold it. Let the dog discover how to do the behavior on its own. If you need a lead for safety's sake, loop it over your shoulder (if it's long enough or tie it to your belt. This help you keep hands free and avoid accidental lead jerking.

Don't wait for the "whole picture" or the perfect behaviour. Click and treat for small movements in the right direction. If you want the dog to sit, and it starts to crouch back: click. You want it to come when called, and it takes a few steps your way: click, don't forget the reward or the praise.

Keep raising your goal. As soon as you have a good response-when a dog, for example, is voluntarily lying down, coming toward you, or sitting repeatedly-start asking for more. Wait a few beats, until the dog stays down a little longer, comes a little further, sits a little faster. Then click. This is called "**shaping**" a behaviour.

Don't order the dog around; clicker training is not command-based. If your dog does not respond to a cue, it is not disobeying; it just hasn't learned the cue completely. Find more ways to cue it and click it for the desired behaviour. Try working in a quieter, less distracting place for a while. If you have more than one dog, separate them for training, and let them take turns.

Carry a clicker and "catch" cute behaviours like cocking the head, chasing the tail, or holding up one foot. You can click for any different behaviour, whenever you happen to notice them, without confusing your pet.

If you get mad, put the clicker away. Don't mix scolding's, lead-jerking, and **correction** training with clicker training; you will lose the dog's confidence in the clicker and perhaps in you.

If you are not making progress with a particular behaviour, you are probably clicking too late. Accurate timing is important. Get someone else to watch you, and perhaps to click for you, a few times.

## This first step is essential - don't skip it!

When training with positive reinforcement, you are going to be "shaping behaviours." You are dog may already know everything you are going to teach him. What they don't know is how to do it on "CUE." If you choose not to use the clicker, just substitute a short bridge word like "yeah" for the "Click", followed by a treat and "LOTS OF PRAISE" to reward the behaviour you are trying to get. It's not as fast as using the clicker, but it works.

Charging the clicker is classical conditioning, like Pavlov and his drooling dogs. You are going to take a clicker and pair it with a food reward and/or praise until the click itself gets the dog all happy. If you are going to use a bridge word just substitute the "Click" for the "Bridge" word and follow with a treat.

OK, let's get Clicking. Get your clicker and your tasty treats ready. Once the dog catches on to this type of training the presence of a clicker will be enough to get them excited and in "training mode."

I will be using the term C/T in the lessons, meaning to click and give a treat. You won't be clicking forever... the clicker is only used in the training phase of any new behaviour! Once the behaviour is on "CUE" the clicker can be faded and put away.

Okay, go into a quiet room with your dog and have a bowl of really tasty treats handy.

Human type food such as hot dogs, chicken, roast beef, cheese, corned beef, sausages, lambs liver etc. works really well. The treats should be cut up into very small pieces and be soft (big ones take too long to eat and crunchy ones tend to leave crumbs on the floor which tempt the dog to become a hoover and you will lose their attention slightly whilst they do this).

Now, as long as your dog isn't doing anything naughty at the moment, click your clicker ONCE and give him a treat. That's all. Then do it again and give a treat. We are NOT asking for behaviour (such as sit) here at all... just making the connection needed for the clicker to be effective. Try not to click while the dog is doing the same thing, like sitting and watching you, because he might get the idea that what he is doing is responsible for the click and treat. Be random with your clicks. Remember, more is not necessarily better. You only need to click the clicker ONE time to be effective.

Some dogs may be frightened by the click sound. If your dog is, then try muffling the sound by having the clicker in a pocket or by using a Snapple beverage top - pushing in the raised button in the centre makes a softer click. The fear shouldn't last long! Repeat the Click and Treat about 5-10 times per session. You'll know when you can stop - you'll click, and your dog will immediately look up at you, "There is that sound, so where is my treat?" Do this exercise as often as necessary on day one. It shouldn't take too many sessions before the dog is glued to you when they see the clicker. GOOD, that's just what you want.

Once you've got your clicker charged, (that's is what you were doing as mentioned above) here is a fun exercise to do that will help you get used to using the clicker and will also demonstrate just how powerful clicker training is.

**The Box Trick**

Get a small cardboard box like one you would post something small in. Get your clicker and lots of treats ready. Go to a quiet, distraction free place with your dog.

***Here's what you do.***

Place the box on the floor and walk away from it. Do not draw your dog's attention to it; just wait to see what the dog does. If they go to investigate the box, click and treat, C/T, the instant they interact with the box. An interaction could be sniffing the box, touching the box with their foot, sticking their nose in the box, pushing the box with their nose, anything that shows they are aware of the box. The first time you C/T they will probably come over to you and begin watching you and the clicker to see if you'll click and treat them again. Be patient, this may take a while. Just wait for the next interaction with the box. When it happens, C/T. Each time they interact with the box, C/T.

It's fun to see what happens when the dog finally makes the connection between the box and the clicker. Some dogs will push it around the floor, some will put their foot in it or paw at it, and some might even try to kill it. My dog would put his head in the box to get me to C/T when he finally figured it out. He would do it over and over as long as I would C/T. Now, years later, if I bring out a small box and put it on the floor, it doesn't take him much time at all to get back in the groove. He's got a great memory and really learned his first "clicker lesson" well.

## This Lesson Is Also Essential

If you don't have your dog's attention, it will be very hard to teach him anything. This next step - Attention - is essential if your training is going to be effective. Don't skip this part, and it's a good policy to always begin any training session with a little "Charging" and "Attention" to set the training mood.

### So, Let's Get Started

Once again, go into a quiet room that doesn't have a whole lot of distraction, one where your dog already finds you more than usually interesting (the kitchen is usually best!). Have your bowl of tasty treats ready. Say your dog's name ONCE in an upbeat, happy voice. When they turn to look at you, C/T only once.

Then, let them get a bit distracted by something and do it again. And again! You are looking for them to acknowledge that they have heard their name by looking at you. If they don't look at you, but maybe lifts their head, or flicks an ear to indicate they heard their name, That's OK too. It's also okay at this point if they are just looking at your hand, after all, that's where the click and treats are coming from. Many dogs will also come closer to you which is fine but not required. If, when you first say their name, they don't look, then reach forward and gently touch them on the side or something so they turn around. Even if they don't look right at you, C/T. They will soon get the idea!

Once they are consistently responding to the sound of their name, you want to start shaping the behaviour so that they are actually giving you eye contact. For many dogs, this is accomplished by warming up as you have been, then saying their name again, but NOT clicking if they look anywhere except your eyes. If they have been looking at, say, your hands, they will likely try that again (since it has worked so well so far!), but be patient and wait. You are hoping that they will get frustrated, give up, and look up at you as if you say, "What??" As soon as they do make eye contact, you C/T and praise! From now on, when practicing attention in a quiet area, your dog has to give actual eye contact to receive a C/T from you. This is "Shaping" the behaviour you're trying to get. You will keep asking a little more as you progress to the behaviour goal you have set.

### Attention Progression - Don't Go TOO FAST

Here is an example of how the attention behaviour might progress for you. GO SLOWLY.

1. Turning their head when they hear their name C/T. This is where it all begins.
2. Looking in your direction when they hear their name. Maybe just looking at your hand with the clicker in it. Just hold off on the click until they turn and look in your direction. C/T. We're making progress.
3. Looking in your eyes when they hear their name. Again, hold off on the click until they look into your eyes. C/T. YES!!
4. Increase attention span. Hold off on the click until they have kept their eyes on you for 5 seconds. C/T. Increase the attention span very gradually until they will look into your eyes for about 15 seconds. Now we've got it.
5. Begin to add distractions. Mild distractions at first and gradually increase them. Start with people walking by, then kids or people playing with increased noise, build up to other

animals being around. If you begin to lose the attention you had, always go back a few steps and proceed slowly. It will happen.

**\*\* Important Note:** Once you begin working on attention with their name it is very important that you never use their name in a negative way. For instance, never say, "ROVER, NO" in a harsh way. Simply use the word "NO" for a correction. If they respond to their name and something negative happens, they may begin to ignore the sound of their name. You certainly don't want that to happen.

Now that you've got their attention you are ready to begin some serious training. You can continue on with the **"Sit"** command or you can select any lesson in the right column to begin with. Each lesson from here on is completely self-contained.

## Rate of reinforcement and reinforcement schedules

Reinforcement rates and schedules, when done incorrectly probably make up 90% of the reason that dog owners (and less experienced trainers) end up missing the results or are unable to achieve higher levels of training.

A prime example of this is what is known as the yo-yo effect when heeling. Most people have issues with this exercise, because if they don't maintain the appropriate ratio for their rewards at the beginning, their dog will take his treat and then disengage (and pull, sniff, etc) but then will return in time for his next reward.

### What is the reinforcement rate?

To put it in simple English, it means how many times we will deliver the primary reinforcement (reward) to our dog, per minute. This is the crucial part. Without this the whole reward training system (including clicker training) would be virtually impossible. In order for an animal to learn properly we use a high-reinforcement rate system in dog training.

### High Reinforcement Rate

This is the most confusing part for many dog owners, and one that is often the most controversial one when it comes to reward-based training in general. How many times do you reward your dog? If I only had a dime for every time I've seen puzzlement or shock on the faces of my students and clients when I've told them that a good rate of reinforcement for simple behaviours is 18-24 clicks (treats) per **MINUTE!!!** Normally, their next comments are always:

- *"But my dog will gain weight"*
- *"I can't give my dogs treats 24/7"*

My answers to these are as follows;

First of all, when training new exercises and behaviours, you are only training for a few minutes at a time, so you won't spend an hour of time stuffing your dog with treats. It is recommended that you cut down and adjust on the dog's food, if necessary, in order to balance his daily portion. Some dog trainers even choose to deliver all of the dog's daily meal through training sessions.

Regarding rewarding your dog 24/7, keep in mind that we use a high reinforcement rate only in the beginning, until the desired behaviour is formed. Then in most cases we switch to a random and variable reinforcement schedule (you can find out more about this below).

### The myth that a dog needs to work hard to earn

It is a common belief that “a dog has to work hard in order to get paid”. This will get you nowhere. It is important to have a high number of successful repetitions of a behaviour, in order for the behaviour to form correctly and reliably.

If you are asking too much based on one single treat (this is in the beginning of training), you will face the next issues:

- Mother Nature: no animal will invest more energy into a performance than they will get out of it. It is through training that they learn to break this “rule” and work for extensive periods of time for a “minimal” reward.
- Frustration: if you are asking too much from your dog in the beginning, he will get frustrated, lose interest and actually start avoiding the work in general.
- Confusion: This happens especially in the beginning when we try cutting on reinforcement too soon, or if the dog hasn't properly clued into what he is getting reinforced for.
- Dogs learn to switch off: maybe the best example for this is with heeling. If you are delivering a treat every 5 steps, for example, your dog will learn to take the treat and then start looking around, sniffing, etc, and once you hit the fifth step he will automatically turn towards you, take the next treat and then switch off (disengage) again. Or even worse, you will create a yo-yo effect where your dog will return (often you will have to somehow call him back) and as soon as he gets the treat he will dart forward and continue doing what he was doing (sniffing, pulling, etc.)

Another example is when people start training their dogs and then do heeling exercises by walking straight 30-50ft while holding the treat over the dog's head. This only teaches the dog two things:

- Only work in the presence of a treat (bribing).
- Eventually give up, because it isn't worth the effort (frustration).

At the end of the day, many people and even dog trainers end up using unnecessary aversive measures in order to “fix” a problem that wasn't a problem at all. Most things can be avoided by applying the appropriate reinforcement rate for the exercise you are planning.

In the case of heeling, if you start with a high reinforcement rate (approximately 18-20 rewards a minute) and start in an environment with no distractions, within a few exercises, you should be able to start lowering your reinforcement rate, as well as gradually introducing distractions.

*TIP:* If you run into problems while clicker/marker training, remember these key pointers:

- Keep a high reinforcement rate

- Lower the criteria, if necessary. Keep the level of exercise always at your dog's pace so that he can learn, then move forward and increase the criteria.
- Pay attention to where you are positioning your reward, this way you can get more repetitions from your dog, as well as help him clue in faster. For example, if your goal is for the dog to sit on a bench in the middle of the room, it would be a waste of time and misleading for the dog if I toss the treats on the opposite side of the room.
- Arrange the environment, if necessary, to speed up the process and increase the level of success.
- Make sure that your clicker/marker training timing is as perfect as possible so that your dog can clearly understand what he is getting rewarded for.
- Last but not least, make sure that your reward is indeed rewarding to your dog.

### **Back to kindergarten**

Always keep in mind that when changing to new environments and situations, we often have to take a few steps back in our training, to help ensure success. For example, if you managed a great heeling performance for 30ft on a single reward in one environment, in a new environment you may need to go back to rewarding every 15 ft. or even 10ft until you work your way back to the 30ft mark. This is normal. As soon as your dog gets familiar with the new surroundings (and this is normally relatively fast, only needing a few repetitions) you can go back to the normal training.

This happens to all creatures and species in the world, including humans. If you were to sit at the table to learn a poem by heart and repeat it over and over again, you would be able to chant it, relatively quickly. Now, if you were to try doing it when climbing the stairs in a strange building, or while pushing a shopping cart at the store, you would realize that you tend to pause, lose the words, or even forget entire parts of the poem. The reason for this is that our brain has to adjust to the new environment.

Basically, this action is a natural response; therefore, we need to factor in an adjustment period into our training to accommodate it. Keep in mind that no matter how simple a dog's exercise appears to us, for them, they are also processing a new environment, just like we would do. Also remember that all of these exercises are not something natural to dogs; if they were we wouldn't need to train them.

Will this happen forever? That depends on the level of communication between a dog and his handler, as well as how good their training plan is. Dogs do reach a generalization point and any good dog trainer knows this, therefore they tend to work in different environments until they reach this point. This process is time consuming and requires patience, but the benefits are huge.

Can you avoid all of this? Probably not; if your dog doesn't reach the generalization point, you will always face some level of issues whenever you move into new environments.

### What are reinforcement schedules?

This will cover the subject of reward schedules. In animal training it is called reinforcement schedules. There are many different reinforcement schedules, however there are generally three (although the last two are sometimes put together in the same group for dog training, I will separate them here to make it easier for understanding).

- Continuous reinforcement schedule
- Fixed ratio schedule
- Variable reinforcement schedule

### Continuous reinforcement schedule

This is the first level that we use in our training, and unfortunately most dog owners never successfully transition from this level. The continuous reinforcement schedule simply means that we reward every repetition. It is a simple formula: **command** → **behaviour** → **click (marker)** → **reward**.

As many dog owners have experienced, this is a quick results approach. Dogs love it, the learning is fast, dogs are happy, etc. However, there is a problem with this type of system. If you were to keep this system for too long, it would actually start working against you.

For example: if you were to reward your dog for every "sit" that you ask him, throughout a period of perhaps one year (the timeframe would vary from dog to dog) and then you try to change the reinforcement schedule, the behaviour will crumble and disappear relatively fast. The reason for this is that the dog will simply stop offering behaviours, because the reinforcement (reward) is missing.

This is also part of the issue that many dog owners face, as soon as they start phasing out the reward, the behaviours are gone down the drain.

In some cases, dog trainers keep their dogs on continuous reinforcement schedules for certain exercises. However, for normal day to day life many people agree that it is better to switch dogs to a variable and random reinforcement schedule to help strengthen the behaviour.

### Fixed ratio schedule

This "in-between" reinforcement schedule for most dog owners is a level in between continuous reinforcement schedules and the ultimate, variable reinforcement schedule. In a nutshell, it works on a very simple principle; instead of every repetition

being reinforced (rewarded) it is every second, third or even more (depending upon your plan, exercises, etc.). In our human world we use this concept on a daily basis; for example, buy three get one free, make your quota per day in order to meet your targets to get paid, etc.

In a dog's world, this means that we reward every second or every third "sit" instead of every single one of them, for example.

### Potential issues

This is not as easy as many people think, as there are many factors that may go wrong. Here is a list of some of them:

- If you spent too much time in the continuous reinforcement schedule or for some other reason your dog believes that he gets rewarded for each repetition, he may stop offering behaviours.
- Dogs often get frustrated (especially in the beginning), this may turn them away from work completely if you keep pushing.
- It often happens that animals start "slacking off" on the non-rewarded behaviours. A great example was given by Karen Pryor once when talking about dolphins; if you keep the dolphin on a fixed ratio of every third jump gets rewarded, he will start slacking off on his first two jumps and only invest all of his energy and strength into the third one as he knows that that is the one that brings the reward. In order to avoid this, every now and then you will need to reinforce the in-between behaviours to keep them strong and fluent.

Another issue is the actual value of the reward itself. Although many people think that their dogs are crazy about treats, as soon as things get tougher, their "food drive" disappears. In order to get reliable responses, you need to meet a few criteria:

- Your dog needs to be driven by the reward. This means that the reward needs to be a high enough value for him not to quit easily. There are ways to build drive in your dog, but this is a whole other training aspect which is not the focus here.
- This is the time that building a good relationship and building good working habits will start to pay off. People, including inexperienced dog trainers, who put all the training efforts on the value of the reward, will soon realize that it is not all about rewards. Dogs need to enjoy working and hanging out with you. This is the ultimate and the strongest reward. The whole working concept has to be extremely rewarding to your dog. If you make it that way, then the actual reward is just like a cherry on top of whipped cream. I know that it sounds easy, but it is not, however it is not impossible either.

As mentioned above, the majority of dog owners don't pass the first barrier of continuous reinforcement even though this is crucial for successful dog training and to keep asking your dog for more.

### **Variable reinforcement schedule**

The variable reinforcement schedule is the most challenging one. It is the type of the system that is constantly changing, and constantly increasing therefore always slightly pushing the limits. The whole key here is for our dog to not be able to predict what repetition will bring the reward. The most accurate comparison would be the casino slot machine. Not every coin is the winning one, but it drives you forward because you know that eventually you will win. This leads into the next question...

### **How far can we push the limits?**

Theoretically, by using the *variable reinforcement schedule technique*, we can gradually postpone the reinforcement indefinitely. However, in reality, it really depends on many factors. I've seen dogs quit after 10-15 non-rewarded repetitions, but I have also seen dogs that went 70+ repetitions and would still keep going without being rewarded. So, what's the difference?

Not every dog is the same and not every dog has the same level of drive and motivation. In general, the more you invest in building a solid relationship, and the more the training is motivating for your dog, the action and exercises themselves will become more self-rewarding driven activities. However, in the end, the results always depend on the dog himself.

### **The name of the game: Behaviour extinction bursts – A tricky plan**

Even though this is a way to increase the intensity of behaviours and to postpone the reward, it can be so difficult for some that many dog trainers (not to mention dog owners) don't bother experimenting with it. I will describe the basics of it for you here, so that you can understand how this concept works.

I will use the mirage effect in the desert, as an example. Imagine a person walking thirsty through the desert and suddenly spotting an oasis on the horizon. He will walk towards it (beginning of the behaviour) in order to access the water (reinforcement). At some point along the way he will start second-guessing whether or not he can reach it, but will decide to try pushing and walking an extra mile to see if maybe he can get there (behaviour extinction burst), eventually the person will realize that there is no way to reach it, so he will stop walking towards it (quitting, the behaviour falls apart and disappears).

If by any chance, the person was able to reach the water after that extra push, then the next time, if in a similar situation, that person will invest even more energy and walk even further, therefore postponing the quitting sequence.

Often, we do this unconsciously with our dogs and their negative behaviours, barking is one of these examples or jumping.

If using this approach for training wanted behaviours, we need to capture these moments and make sure to reward them appropriately. It is a risky job, as you need to really have a lot of experience and be able to read the behaviour extinction burst signals in order to capture them. Why is it considered risky?

If you miss the behaviour extinction burst, the next step is the crumbling and disappearance of the behaviour. As mentioned, this is the tricky part and many dog trainers and dog owners don't end up using it, or at least not intentionally.

### **Why is this so important?**

At some point in time, you will need to ask your dog for more. More speed, more reliability, more repetitions for less rewards. The reason that it is important to do it properly is because it is the deciding factor between success and failure; it's that simple.

If you follow the steps above, you will be a few steps closer to your goals, the behaviours that you are working on will strengthen, and you will be closer to the final product; a strong reliable behaviour that is controllable on command (behaviours put on cue). On the other hand, if you miss or don't do the job right, as soon as you try switching your dog from a continuous reinforcement schedule to anything else, you will most likely face failure.

## Teaching a Hand Touch

The shape of the hand and its position become visual cues for different behaviours. For example: the back of the fingers of a flat extended hand pointing downwards becomes a distinct signal for the dog to touch the back of the fingers with his nose. However, with the palm of the hand upwards and extended horizontally, it can be a cue for the dog to shake hands by placing a paw on your hand. If the palm is held vertically facing the dog, it can become a visual cue to give a hi-five.

For dogs that have issues with strangers, teaching them to touch the back of a stranger's hand with their nose is an excellent way to teach them to say hello. It also keeps people happy (and they will stop forcing themselves onto your dog if your dog has said 'hello'). A nose to back of the hand touch can also be useful for teaching close heelwork. A nose to palm touch can be invaluable in re-focussing a dog, in teaching a recall and in teaching the dog to deliver objects to hand (retrieve).

If you teach the dog that the cue 'touch' means put its nose on whatever is presented, then you can teach the dog a multitude of targets and 'tricks' such as turn the lights on and off, shut the door etc.

How to start a nose touch:

- Place a piece of smelly food between the middle two fingers near to the base of the fingers.
- Hold your hand straight and stiff and present the back of your hand towards the dog's nose. Your hand should be only a few centimetres from the dog's nose.
- When he sniffs the back of your hand to smell the food, click (clicker held in your other hand) and take out the treat and give it to the dog. Repeat this step no more than 5 times.
- Appear to do the same routine but leave out the food this time, then hold out your hand in exactly the same way. Click him for sniffing and take a treat from your other hand and give it to him. Once he has successfully done this with your hand a few centimetres in front of his nose, move your hand slightly further away. Move your hand slightly to his right, then to his left, then slightly up or slightly down.
- Repeat this so that the dog moves his head towards your hand each time it is offered, and click and treat.
- When the dog moves to your hand without hesitation every time, introduce the 'touch' cue just before you offer the hand.

At this stage, you are standing still except for the movement of your hand and arms to signal and reward. The hand is being offered near enough to the dog, so he only has to move his head to reach your hand.

The next stage is to position your offered hand so the dog has to make more effort to touch it. So move your hand so that the dog has to take one step at first to touch it, then two steps, then by moving your hand from your front to one side then another. Each extra move by the dog is clicked and treated after each nose touch. Remember that the click ends the behaviour and a treat will be given. Let the dog savour each treat before asking for the next touch.

It is important that you present the hand as a distinct signal. Do it with a flourish to attract your dog's attention. As soon as he has touched it and you have clicked, the target hand is relaxed and withdrawn, until the next deliberate presentation.

To increase the strength of your dog's targeting behaviour, gradually make it harder by throwing the treat further away and by beginning to move away yourself before presenting the hand signal.

The next progression is to change the behaviour from a single nudge to an extended contact with the nose. This is achieved by using the shaping technique. After many clicks and treats for every single nose touch you suddenly withhold the click for the next nudge. Keep your hand still and wait for the dog to offer something, anything else. It is usually a second nudge – great, click and treat it. Now shape it until the dog begins to maintain nose contact, for a second at first then two seconds and so on.



*The hand touches*

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## Troubleshooting

### **If your dog goes to the hand holding the treats instead of the target hand**

This is a common issue for the hand target exercise. To solve the problem, put a treat in the palm of your target hand and put your thumb over it. Then offer your palm to your dog. When he sniffs and licks at the treat, click and let him have it. Do this a few times, and then remove the treat for a couple of repetitions. Add a treat for a few more repetitions then phase it out.



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