

The Power of Training Dogs with Markers





Leerburg

Foreword

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[Leerburg Enterprises, Inc.](#) is owned by Ed Frawley.

Ed has owned German Shepherds (GSD) for over 45 years. Since 1978 he has bred over 350 litters of German working bloodline GSDs. His dogs work in law enforcement, as S&R dogs, as competition Schutzhund dogs, and as family companions and protectors.

Since 1980 Ed has produced over 120 dog training videos and DVDs. He was a police K9 handler for 10 years and competed in several dog sports, including AKC obedience and Schutzhund. In addition he has built one of the top dog training supply businesses in the world.

If you go to the web site **Leerburg.com** you will see that it has over 10,000 printed pages. The Leerburg Web Discussion board has over 12,000 registered members and over 202,000 posts in the archives. Learn to use our site search function.

The Power of Training Dogs with Markers or Clickers

MARKING - SHAPING - LINKING BEHAVIORS

By Ed Frawley



Cindy from here at Leerburg playing the “Hand Touch” with the Dante. This game was trained with Markers/ Clickers and Dante loves it.

On October 18, 2008 I finished 3 1/2 hour DVD production of the same name as this article, [The Power of Training Dogs with Markers](#). I have been producing dog training videos since 1982. I believe this is the best dog training DVD I have ever produced.



This training article is longer than many dog training books. As detailed as this article is, and it is detailed, there are so many things that are better explained by seeing it rather than reading about it.

The purpose for this article is to introduce new and old dog owners, to a system of dog training called "Training with Markers/Clickers." Marker training (sometimes called "clicker training") is truly a revolutionary method of dog training. The power of this system lies in the details of the program. Trainers who master the details will become the most successful dog trainers.

Before I start this article I will begin by saying that I have owned and trained dogs for over 50 years. It was not than many years ago (in the 1980's and 1990's) that I was pretty vocal about how stupid I thought clicker training was.

Those comments were made from a position of ignorance and a lack of understanding. Simply put I was dead wrong

and I made those comments without knowing the details of how the system worked. The power of marker/clicker training lies in understanding and applying the details.

I owe a word of thanks to people like Cindy Rhodes, Michael Ellis, Ann Braue and the work by Karen Pryor for opening my eyes to the power of this system of dog training.

It's not easy to admit you were so wrong on such a powerful method dog training, especially when you do what I did for a living. The fact is it's a little embarrassing and while it makes me feel foolish at the same time it is exciting because this is such a great method to communicate with my dogs.

If you have trained dogs for years and think you're pretty good at it but you don't work with the marker/clicker system, I suggest you take a few days and study this article. You too may find a whole new method of K9 communication and it may re-ignite a fire in your belly to get out and train.

Or you could do what I did, which was tell everyone how stupid it is and then 15 years from now wake up and find out you missed the boat.

Since the early 1900's dog training has been an evolving skill. We only need to look back at [Col Konrad Most](#), William Kohler and Winefred Strickland's training books from 1910, the 1960's and 1970's to realize this. Or look at the obedience routines I filmed of some of the national dog competitions in the 1980's and 1990's. Dogs that won those events back then very well may not even pass much less win a national competition today.

Most trainers who are winning today are training with the marker/clicker system.

Marker/clicker training is one of the most profound systems of training dogs that I have seen in my 50 years of owning, breeding and training working dogs. When I began to learn

this system I had been training dogs for over 40 years and I felt like a kid in a candy store. The fact is I still feel like that when I see dogs work with markers/clickers.

Training with Markers/clickers is a simple concept to understand. It only takes a few minutes to explain but applying the finer points of the system takes years to master. The journey is exciting and well worth the trip. You will find that your dogs are a lot smarter than you thought.

In its simplest form marker/clicker training involves making the work crystal clear for the dog. It involves simplifying the training in a way that removes any possibility of the dog not understanding exactly what you expect from him. It also does this in a way that motivates a dog to want to learn. When dogs enjoy the work and want to be part of the process we have a system that only requires minimal corrections to get compliance.

I will say right off the bat that I am not a motivational purist who thinks that dogs never need corrections. In my opinion those who say this either train a specific type of dog or they lack experience with self motivating dominant dogs.

Dogs that are trained with markers/clickers become problem solvers. The system allows trainers to reinforce correct behavior with pin point accuracy from a distance. It also allows dogs to make mistakes and then learn from their mistakes. The system allows us to pin point the exact moment a dog makes a mistake without correcting the dog in the process. It allows us to communicate with the dog and tell him that "he has not done something correctly and he needs to try it again."

Dogs trained with markers/clickers quickly adapt to new situations. This becomes especially evident when compared to dogs trained in old school methods in which

dogs are afraid to try something new for fear of being corrected for making mistakes. We will talk about in detail about this later.

Dog training is a skill that everyone can learn. When people start to train dogs they often miss the fact that the difference between a good dog trainer and a great dog trainer boils down to communication and timing. New dog owners will learn these skills through marker/clicker training.

The new version of my training DVD titled [Basic Dog Obedience](#) has a section on timing. The basics of training with markers/clickers is a small part of that DVD but it's one of the most important sections on the DVD.

So exactly what is MARKER TRAINING?

In technical terms marker/clicker training is operant conditioning. Operant conditioning has been around for years. It is how Dolphins are trained at sea world.

Operant conditioning forms an association between a behavior and a consequence.

I can see new dog trainers reading this and shaking their heads thinking "Dahhhh isn't that pretty obvious for dog training?"

My answer to that is "YES," but let's go into a little more detail.

When a dog exhibits a behavior we like the consequence is a reward. In marker/clicker training that reward is either a food treat or a toy the dog loves. If a dog does not perform a behavior the consequence is No Reward and it must then repeat the exercises.

In old school dog training the consequence of a negative behavior was a correction.

No matter what anyone ever tells you dogs do things for themselves. Dogs don't do things to make you feel good. They do things to make themselves feel good. They do things because they are motivated towards feeling comfortable and they are motivated towards not feeling discomfort. This is a pretty profound concept and one that pet owners often miss.

So the key to operant conditioning is to teach a dog that when he performs a behavior that we like he gets a reward that makes him feel good - the reward gives him a level of comfort. This reward can either be in the form of a food or it can be a toy he likes to play with or playing a game with the handler he gets enjoyment out of or praise from his handler. I will say here that in all my years of dog training I have only known one dog that would work strictly for handler praise.

In the marker/clicker training system there are only two consequences to a behavior that we are trying to train. They are a reward or no-reward. Which consequence happens depends on the behavior the dog exhibits to a stimulus. A stimulus can be a command or a cue from the handler.

For dogs to associate a behavior with a reward or with punishment the reward or punishment must come immediately after the behavior. We tell people the consequence should come within a 1/2 second of the behavior.

In training it is not always possible to reward within a 1/2 second so we bridge (or connect) the time frame between the behavior and the consequence that follows. This bridge allows us to extend the 1/2 second rule of consequences. That bridge is a word - we will call it a Marker/clicker (I like to use the word YES). Many people use the sound from a clicker. The fact is you can use any word or sound you are comfortable with as long as you are consistent.

A simple way to look at the mark as a bridge is that it is like telling your dog “Hold on a second - I like what you just did and I am going to get to you and give you a reward.”

There are positive and negative markers/clickers. The word for a negative Marker/clicker is “NO” or “NOPE.” It is important to mention that a negative marker/clicker is not a correction. It is simply a way of communicating to the animal that he just made a mistake and if he expects to get a reward he needs to redo the exercise correctly.

Through repetition the dog learns that every time he hears the positive Marker/clicker he gets a reward. Every time he hears the negative Marker/clicker he does not get a reward and he has to repeat the exercise.

Leerburg Books

If you have an interest in more technical details about the scientific aspects of dog training we sell a number of [excellent books](#). The only reason I bring this up right here is so people know that there is a scientific background this system of dog training.

- [Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training: Volume 1](#)

- [Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training: Volume 2](#)

- [Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training: Volume 3](#)

- [Getting Started Clicker Training for Dogs](#)

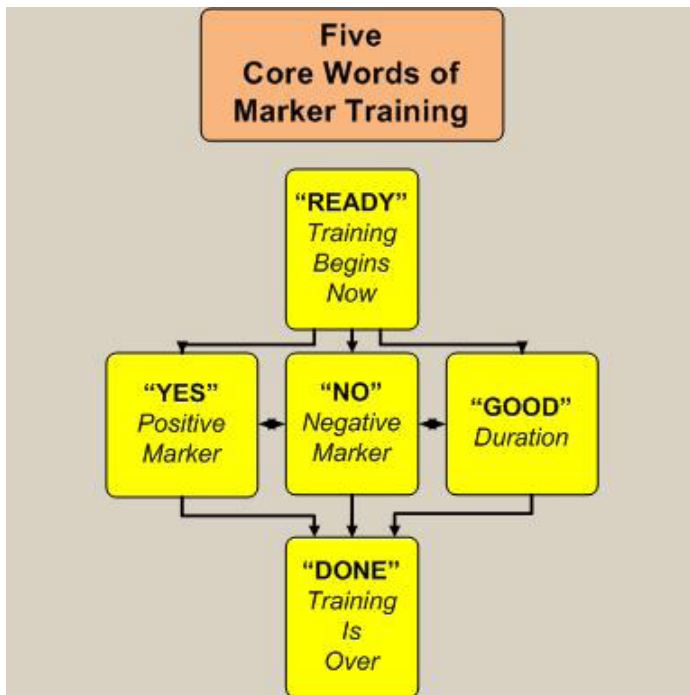
- [Other Leerburg Books](#)

The beauty of this system is that it is a perfect way to train puppies because it is motivational training at its best and there are no corrections involved until you get into the advanced stages of training.

It is also a perfect way to retrain adult dog (even dominant dogs) because the consequences of a behavior are not conflict with the handler. So when it is done correctly it is a safe way to retrain the foundation of obedience work on a dominant dog.

The 5 Magic Words of Marker Training

The basic foundation of marker/clicker training involves teaching the dog the meaning of these 5 core words. Once the dog understands how these words are used to communicate with him they can be applied to every exercise you wish to train your dog.



Those words are:

1 - **READY** or **ARE YOU READY?** - A word that tells our dog that we are about to start a training session. When you ask your dog if he is ready - you always have something on you to reward the dog with when he starts to offer behaviors.

As your dog gains experience you should never start training unless the dog demonstrates he is ready to play when you take him out. If he won't play and this is not normal for the dog, put him away. The relationship between you and your dog is more important than training. So if your dog isn't feeling like playing today. Put him away or take him for a walk.

2- **YES** - a word we use as a positive marker/clicker. Its the word we use to bridge the time frame between a favorable behaviors and the delivery of a reward. This word is also used as a release command. That means the dog is finished with the exercise when we say "YES" and he can now focus on getting his reward - which is either a food treat or playing with a toy.

Once a dog understands the concept of marking with "YES" he thinks he has trained you to become a treat dispenser.

3- **GOOD** - a word that means you are doing a good job and I want you to continue to do what you are doing. Good is not a release command. When we say GOOD we are telling the dog if he should continues performing an exercise he will get a reward in the future.

4- **NOPE** - a word that is used as a negative marker/clicker. It means you just made a mistake and you have to do the exercise all over again

5- **DONE or BREAK (as in "take a break")** - A word that tells the dog that our training session is finished for now. The session can be finished for 5 minutes or the day. But it's over and the toys are put away. When the handler says DONE or BREAK and shows his dog his empty hands it doesn't take long for the dog to know that this training session is over. With time it becomes very clear to our dog.

The rest of this article deals with the applications of these 5 core words.

Basic Dog Obedience

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Dogs are Masters at Reading Body Language.

They are far more intuitive than we humans. They are always watching us and they instinctively recognize situations and read us like a book. They know when we are happy and they know when to leave us alone. They base ALL of their life's decisions on what reinforces their level of comfort and what satisfies their pack instincts.

New dog trainers mistakenly think their dogs listen to them all the time. They think the dog automatically knows when commands are given. The fact is that dogs may listen but they don't naturally pick up on our every word. In fact trained dogs don't understand much of what we say. But they are very intuitive about reading and recognizing specific situations or pictures (of our body language). They are so good at this that we think they know what we are saying when in fact they don't have a clue.

A perfect example of this is a dog that learns to sit in your kitchen. The dog can perform the sit exercise 200 times in the kitchen and you may think he has that concept of the

SIT command down pat. Then you take him in your garage and say SIT and he looks at you like you are the man in the moon talking Swahili. He acts like you have two heads and he has never heard the word SIT before.

A better example is when the dog has always been given the SIT command when you are standing in front of him in the kitchen. Simply turning your back and saying SIT results in a blank stare, or kneeling down or sitting on the floor and saying SIT gets no results.

That is because the dog does not understand the concept of SIT. He doesn't know what you are asking him to do. Oh you may think he knows the word SIT but what he really knows is that when he sees the picture of you standing in front of him in the kitchen he should SIT.

So when you see a dog do this you need to know that your dog has not yet grasped the concept of the SIT command.

Marker/clicker training is going to teach you how to communicate with your dog so they grasp the concepts of the commands you wish to train them and its going to do this is a way the dog enjoys.

Active vs Reactive Dogs

Marker/clicker training also turns a dog into what we call an "active dog" vs a "reactive dog." This means that this system creates a dog that actively tries to problem solve. Active dogs know that they can make things happen. They know they can do things that cause their owner to give them a reward or make them feel good.

This is compared to a reactive dog that waits to be shown what the handler wants. Reactive dog are afraid to try new things for fear they will be corrected for making a mistake.

Every time you take your dog out and spend with him you are teaching the dog something. You may not know what it is but he is constantly watching and evaluating you. He is trying to figure out how to interact with you in a way that will benefit him. Marker/clicker training is the perfect method to communicate with your dog.

When new trainers completely understand the fundamentals and details of marker/clicker training they can teach their dog something every day. But until they understand the fundamentals they will do it wrong and confuse their dog. I cannot stress this enough. I will repeat it. *“UNTIL TRAINERS COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND THE FUNDAMENTALS OF MARKER OR CLICKER TRAINING THEY WILL DO IT WRONG AND CONFUSE THEIR DOG.”*

The First Step

The first step in training for system is to study the system. Know where you are going and the details of how to get there. In other words study the details of how this system works. You need to understand things like stimulus control and when to employ it. You need to understand things like stringing behaviors with “GOOD.” Teach yourself the details and you will be able to understand how to teach your dog the system.

Marker/clicker training begins with you creating a training plan.

We start teaching this system by showing our dog that every time we say the word “YES” or every time they hear [a click from a clicker](#) he gets a really good high value food treat. The system starts with food and not toys. These treats come from either the left or right hand and are stored in [a bait pouch that we wear on our belt in the middle of our back or they are stores in our training vest.](#)

In other words we teach the dog to assign a “comfort value” on the word “YES” or the sound of a CLICKER. Throughout this article we will be calling this the MARK or MARKER.

Charging the Mark

The first training step we do in Marker/clicker training is called CHARGING THE MARK. It can be done anywhere, in your kitchen, basement, or back yard. The goal of charging the mark is to teach the dog that when he hears us say YES or when he hears the clicker we feed him a very good treat.

When we charge the mark the dog does not have to do anything to get marked. We simply say YES or click the clicker and give the dog a food treat. Trainers new to this system need to understand that the only dog training going on during CHARGE THE MARK is to make the dog realize that you saying YES means he gets a food treat.

It is important that the word YES is never said at the same instant you move your arm and reach for the food treat. For this program to work there must be short time lapse between saying the word and moving the arm for the food.

You will know your dog is getting it when you say YES and the dog looks at you like HEY, GIVE ME MY TREAT!!! Most dogs pick up the concept of a CHARGED YES OR CHARGE THE CLICK in about 20 minutes.

A point on this system is that while you may think you are teaching your dog that YES means he gets a reward; your dog is thinking that he is training you to give him a treat. What this really means is that you are both developing a line of communication that you both understand.

You will quickly find out that when the value of your reward is high enough your dog is eager to participate in training you.

What Kinds of FOOD REWARDS to Use?

Use Small Pieces of High Value Treats - What are they?



Steak - notice how small the pieces should be

Different dogs have different ideas of what treats they like the best. There are a couple of important points about treats.

The first is they should be very, very small. You should be able to put 2 or 3 of them on a quarter. The concept of using treats is not to “feed the dog” but rather to offer a reward. When dogs are properly motivated they do not need a large treat. In fact larger treats slow down the training because we have to wait for the dogs have to chew them.

We want our dog to eat these treats very quickly, less than a second. The best treats are soft and they basically disappear when they go into your dog’s mouth. This leaves the dog wanting more so his drive stays high. You can see the size I cut the venison steak above and below. These pieces are very, very, very small treats. We sell a lot of all-natural dog treats that also work well. I like the [Soft Training Treats](#) and the [Zuke’s Mini Natural treats](#) for Marker/clicker training. They both come in different flavors, they are soft and they are the right size.



Soft Training Treats are on the left and steak treats are on the right

Trainers should take the time to establish and prioritize a list of dog treats that their dogs really, really love. You may find that the dog becomes too distracted by the highest value treat. It makes him lose focus and he can't think. If that happens you need to drop down to a lesser value treat in training.

Then when you move your training into an area where there are a lot of distractions you can go back to the highest value treat because the distractions will offset one another. This is an example of how trainers need to constantly think about what they are doing in their work and be willing to adjust to fit the circumstances.

There is also not anything wrong with using a higher value treat reward for a really good or really quick effort.

Ask Your Dog What Treats He Likes

You can ask your dog to tell you what treats he likes more than others. Back tie the dog (tie him to a post). Let him smell a treat - hold it out close to his nose but don't let him

have it. Allow him to watch you lay it on the ground just out of his reach.

Do this with two treats and then release the dog. See which one he eats first. Then repeat the exercise and reverse the position of the treats. This will tell you if the dog indeed likes one treat over the other. Try adding a third treat to the protocol. With work you will be able to assign values to respective rewards.

By knowing which treat is his favorite you can use this information in later training. Some training requires the highest level motivation than others and some things only needs the level 4 treat.

Assign Values to Various Treats



FOOD Rewards vs Toy or Tug Rewards

Just as there are times when a food reward is the correct type of reward there are times a toy or tug is a better choice. Knowing when to employ both will make you a better trainer.

Many high prey drive dogs become over stimulated when

they know a toy is the reward. They actually go into too much drive. These dogs have so much drive for a toy that their brain shuts down and they can't focus when they see their handler with a toy.

New trainers mistakenly think the more drive the better. In fact this is often not the case.

Dogs with extreme prey drive do better when they go through the learning phase of an exercise with food rewards. Using food results in the dog staying at a lower level of drive. They can then think more clearly and learn quicker. Once the exercise has been learned a toy can always be substituted to increase speed in the exercise. Toys can also be used in teaching a dog Stimulus Control (which is talked about later).

When we are going to use toys in Marker/clicker training the dog must first go through the training process in which it learns the game of tug. This means it learns that toys are no fun unless the handler is involved with the game. It learns to bring the toy back to the handler when they have it and finally it learns to OUT the toy on the first command every time.

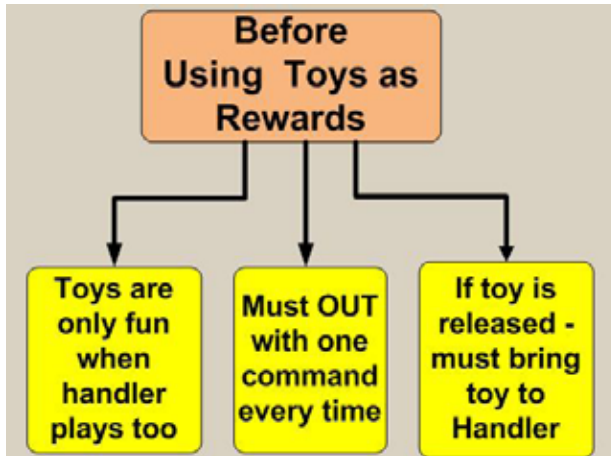
Toys or tugs should not be used in training until the dog knows, understands and respects these three things. If you really stop and think it becomes very obvious why these three things need to be in place:

- 1- If a dog self rewards by playing with his toy then he can cut the handler out of the picture should he accidentally jerk the tug out of the handlers hand. When that happens the handler can only get one repetition out of a training session.

- 2 - If the dog will not out the dog off the tug, or if he has to use excessive force to get the tug away

from the dog he runs the risk of damaging his bond with the dog. Training the OUT is a simple process but beyond the scope of this article.

This work is the subject for another article.



Don't Confuse Your Dog - Only Say "YES" One Time

The reason you should only say YES one time is because dogs see life as a series of pictures or snapshots. Remember how intuitive our dogs are, they know exactly what they were doing at the exact moment good things happen to them.

So when they look into your eyes and you mark that moment by saying YES followed by a high value food treat they quickly figure out the trigger to get you to give them another treat is to look into your eyes.

But when trainers get excited and say YES 4 or 5 times in a row they confuse their dog. The dog doesn't know if they got rewarded for looking in your eyes or if the reward came from lowering their head to look at you hand or for something else.

Often times new trainers mistakenly look at the YES as praise. This is absolutely wrong. Once the dog understands the system the mark will often become secondary praise but that will only happen if the trainer establishes the foundation of the mark correctly by only saying YES once and always with good timing.

So it is vitally important to understand the essence of Marker/clicker training is to start with no obedience command and then only give the mark one time followed by a short pause before you give the dog a food treat.

A couple of points to mention here is that when the Mark has been properly established it will eventually become a secondary reinforce for the dog. This means the dog will eventually develop a level of satisfaction from you simply saying the word "YES," but at the same time you will never get to the point where you expect the mark to be the only reward. Every time you ever mark a behavior you will always offer a reward for that behavior.

"NO MARK" is Valuable Information for Your Dog

Another concept to remember is that your dog will learn that "NO MARK" is information. By that I mean when you don't offer a mark you are telling the dog that he has not yet performed the behavior you want. This is not a negative response on your part, it is simply a non-stressful way to tell your dog that he needs to "keep trying."

Your Voice is a Powerful Training Tool - Learn to use it!

One of the most powerful training tools a dog trainer has is their voice. Trainers who learn to use their voice in a positive way make better dog trainers and have dogs

that learn quicker. This is especially true in Marker/clicker training.

If you are working with a low to medium drive dog you may have to take your dog through a short drive building phase before you get too far into Marker/clicker training. This is done by teaching the dog that when you say “*ARE YOU READY*” he is going to have a little party with you.

There is nothing wrong with saying (in a very exciting tone of voice) “*ARE YOU READY*” every time you charge the mark. Make a game of it. If you get excited, your dog will get excited.

The way this is done is to say “*ARE YOU READY*” and back away from your dog (moving away from a dog peaks the dogs desire to follow). You can say “*ARE YOU READY*” more than one time.

When the dog turns to follow, mark the instant he turns. That’s the moment he chooses to engage you so you mark the moment. Then reward the dog and praise like crazy. Get the dog excited. Make him like the game. Teach him that engaging you when you say ARE YOUR READY makes fun things happen.

This drive building phase can be done during the charge the mark period. It can be done 5 or 10 times in a row and then put the dog away.

So just as “*charging the mark*” teaches a dog that the mark means he is going to get a reward. We can also teach the dog that by engaging us he has trained us to give him a nice reward.

Verbal Praise after the Reward

In the Marker/clicker system while we only say YES one time followed by a reward, we can add encouraging verbal praise during the reward and after the reward. In fact some

trainers have to add a lot of praise after the reward to get your dog engaged in training.

New trainers especially need to learn how to make a game of this work. They need to sound happy when they ask their dog if he is ready, they need to sound excited when they mark, they need to praise in a sincere excited when they lavish praise after the mark. The more animated and excited you get the more excited your dog will be. This is a very important learned skill and it's a skill new trainers often have a difficult time with.

When new dog owners first start this work they get overwhelmed with everything they have to remember. They have to pick a behavior to Mark, they Mark the behavior, the reach for their reward, they offer a food reward and then they just LEAVE IT AT THAT. They act like they just gave the dog a reward and that is good enough. Well for a lot of dogs, that's not going to cut it. It is OK for high drive dogs but it doesn't float for medium to low drive dogs.

If it is low to medium drive and it gets distracted the dog will stop trying. Dogs like that are going to act bored and they will not engage their handler and they just shut down and the handler stands there wondering what to do next. They feel bad because they really want their dog to work but they don't know what to do.

Well when they see this happen they need to turn the work into a party. They need to act like they are having the time of their lives. They need to back away from their dog and in an inviting excited tone say the dog name (don't tell the dog to come - we don't add commands in Marker/clicker work). And if all this doesn't work, put the dog away. Give him a time out. Let him sit in his crate and get bored.

Control Your Nerves

It is a very common thing for people to get nervous when they train dogs. This is especially true when they train in front of other people.

Those who do get nervous need to learn to relax and control their nerves.

Dogs know when you are angry, they sense it. They also know when you are nervous. If their pack leader is nervous then they think something wrong. When the pack leader is nervous they think they need to be on guard. When dogs are nervous the learning process slows down.

So if you have a nervous temperament by nature you need to practice controlling your nerves for the sake of your dog and its training. Take a deep breath; take a time out; meditate; try to mentally walk through what you want to do. Video tape your training. The simple act of having a camera rolling makes many people nervous. This helps relax you.

Bottom line is that if you expect your dog to have emotional control then you need to be able to demonstrate the same thing.

I relate this to people who ride horses. A horse knows if you're a nervous rider. Nervous riders are those riders who end up on the ground.

Adding Distractions and Impulse Control

People who get into dog training quickly learn how easily their dog can become distracted and not perform a learned behavior. They often find their dog works great at home but forgets everything when they get into a class with other dogs or when the dog is taken into a new environment.

Adding distractions into training can easily be the topic of a book. It is certainly beyond the scope of what I am doing here other than to define how it factors into Marker/clicker training.

New dog owners need to know that when dogs are distracted they don't learn as quickly. In fact many won't even try to work with you.

As a dog becomes proficient at learning a behavior it can be exposed to more and more levels of distractions. Distractions can be as simple turning your back on a dog and asking him to sit. Kneeling down and asking a dog to sit is a distraction for a dog that has just learned to sit with you standing in front of the dog. Stepping in another room and asking a dog to sit is a huge distraction for a dog.

Once you have identified an environmental distraction simply moving a few feet farther away from that distraction can often be enough to help a dog work through it. Dogs have a "bubble" or circle of comfort which is different for each dog. Through experience and practice in multiple training sessions the size of a dogs bubble of comfort can be reduced. Most of the time this work needs to be done on gradually. While one dog may perform comfortably 50 yards from a certain distraction another dog may not have a problem working 10 yards from the same distraction.

The "look command" is a very effective tool to use when our dogs become distracted. When we ask our dog to look we expect it to look into our eyes. When the dog become distracted we simply give a "look" command which makes the dog look at our face. This is often enough to break the dogs focus on what's distracting him. Once the dog is looking at our face you can go on and ask for other behaviors. I talk about how to teach the "look" in the [SIGNAL section](#).

This is the part of training that many call proofing the dog. Remember Marker/clicker training is more about allowing a dog to do something and less about forcing a dog to do something. When you hear trainers use the term “impulse control” they are simply referring to a dog learning to control himself and choosing to do the right thing in the face of distractions.

In old school training distractions and corrections go hand in hand. By that I mean a dog is asked to perform a behavior in the face of a new distraction. When it makes a mistake (because it was distracted) it gets a correction.

That’s not what happens with Marker/clicker training. In Marker/clicker training when a dog gets distracted and fails to perform a behavior it simply doesn’t get a reward and is asked to do it again, or it is put away.

An important point to remember on distractions and learning is that in training you only add or change one thing at a time. By that I mean you would not try and raise the level of distraction at the same time you’re tried to increase the criteria of learning a new behavior. This is critical.

Should You Use the Word “YES” or a Clicker?

Dogs can learn to work with both a verbal mark and the sound from a clicker. We train our dogs with both.

In normal training I prefer using the word over the clicker. I know I will always be able to say YES. I also know there may be times I don’t have a clicker with me. In addition I can say YES a lot louder than the sound a clicker makes. In more advanced training saying YES allows me mark from a greater distance from my dog than I could use a clicker.

In addition when a handler is actively training his dog he has a number of things to do with his hands besides holding a clicker. He often has a leash to hold, he has food rewards or toys to handle and he sometimes wants to pet his dog. He may have to hold a dumb bell. He doesn't need to include a clicker into this scenario.

If a handler is involved with one of the many dog sports I don't think the handler should use the clicker. Let's take the example of attending an agility seminar where there are 5 different people who train with clickers. I will guarantee the sound of another trainer's clicker is going to distract your dog. With that said no one saying YES is going to be misinterpreted by your dog as being you.

If you choose to use the word YES, it is important to learn to say "YES" exactly the same way every time you say it. Don't add inflection or change the tone of how you pronounce the word. It must sound the same every time.

Changing the sound of how you pronounce a word will often change the meaning of what your dog thinks you're trying to say. Let's not forget how perceptive our dogs are. They pick up on our slightest body language. They most certainly pick up on the difference in the way you say YES.

If we find ourselves getting stressed over a training problem and we notice the stress is filtering into the sound of our voice when we mark we will move back to using a clicker. The clicker takes the emotion out of the process.

Also people who are easily excited and have a difficult time maintaining the exact same sound every time are people who should use clickers.

Targeting

While Marker/clicker training can be used to train virtually any behavior you need to start someplace and we like to

start with targeting. We use a targeting stick with a YES markers/clickers (although our targeting stick does have a built in clicker).

It is a simple concept. Extend the stick and hold it out away from your side. When the dog looks at it Mark the moment (only one mark) and reward the dog. The reward can be delivered at the little ball on the end of the stick.

Repeat the process until your dog knows to look at the stick when you hold it out.

When the dog takes one step toward the stick, mark and reward the step (making sure these two events do not happen at the same instant). Then mark two steps and then the dog sniffing the end and finally touching the end of the stick with his nose.

Targeting the end of a stick may seem like a useless behavior but in fact it has many applications. We can use the same concept to teach our dogs to go to their bed, to go into their dog crate. It can be one part of a learned chain of behaviors to trim the dog's nails or clean his ears.

We like to expand the targeting into a [hand touch command](#). This then becomes a fun game to play with our dogs but also a behavior we ask for to re-direct or dog away from dogs and people while on walks or when it's getting into something we don't want him to mess with.



12 week old puppy doing “hand touch”

Timing of the Reward

For a reward to have the best results it must come within 1/2 second of the behavior you want to encourage. Some people say that the reward must come quicker than a second; others say the reward must come within 1 1/2 seconds.

No matter how good you are you are not going to consistently be able to get a reward your dog in under a 1/2 of a second. You may occasionally do it but you will never get it done 100% of the time. Markers/clickers allow you to instantly mark a behavior and when the dog understands that a reward follows the mark you can take several seconds to reward the mark. This results in the dog learning much faster.

People who don't train with markers/clickers don't have that luxury. The longer they delay between the behavior and the reward the less chance their dog associates the behavior with the reward. If praise is delayed by 2 or 3 seconds after a behavior there is an excellent chance that the dog will associate the reward with a behavior that is different than what the handler wanted to reward.

This is why timing the Mark is so important in dog training and why marker/clicker training is so effective.

Through repetition and experience your dog will quickly realize that when he hears the mark he knows he is going to get a reward for what he just did. It may take a few seconds but he knows the reward is coming and he knows what he did to earn it. It becomes crystal clear to the dog.

During your marker/clicker training you do not have to jump to rush the reward. When the dog understands that a reward is coming after the mark, the delivery of the reward becomes part of the satisfaction. Compare it to eating out at a nice restaurant. Watching the waiter as he brings you food and puts it on the table is part of the fine dining experience.

This concept becomes even more important when we are working on exercises where our dog is some distance from us. It allows us the time we need to get to the dog and reward him and still have him understand why he is getting the reward.

Learning to Time the Mark

New dog handlers must learn the correct timing on when they give the actual mark during training. The easiest way to understand how this works is to think like a dog. In a way your dog takes a mental picture of exactly what he is doing at the instant you mark a behavior. They relate the reward to that mental snap shot they took when they heard the word YES.

A visual method to help you learn timing is to ask a friend to use a digital camera and go out with you when you train. Have them take a photo of your dog every time you say the word YES. Tell them not to focus on what the dog is doing but only listen to your voice.

So every time you say YES they need to push the shutter button. This is an easy way to evaluate what is going through your dogs mind when he hears the mark and what he thinks he is being rewarded for. You may be surprised what the results are here.

The correct time to mark is the instant the dog meets the criteria of the particular training step or exercise

For example, when teaching the hand touch, where the dog is expected to touch his nose to your hand when you hold your hand out - if it is the step where the dog is finally touching the hand with his nose. The point to mark is the "very instant" the dog's nose touches the hand. Not 3 or 4 seconds after the fact.

If you are training the sit - the mark should come the instant the dogs but touches the ground, not 2 seconds later.

If you are training the Down the time to mark the Down is the instant the dogs belly touches the ground - not 5 seconds after he has been down.

If you mark the down 5 seconds after the dogs belly has touched the ground the dog thinks he is being rewarded for staying down and not the actual movement of laying. When trainers consistently reward the Down with poor timing of the mark we see dogs that go down slower and slower because the dogs see the exercise as lying down and staying there. They know that the reward is going to come at some time in the future and not when they lay down.

Successful trainers understand that "the act of going down" and "duration in the down exercises" are two independent exercises that are trained separately. When dogs realize that the trigger to get the reward in the Down exercises is to get your belly on the ground you will see then drop like a stone. We will talk about extending the duration of the down later when we discuss training with the word **Good**.

The relationship between the Mark and the Reward

I have already mentioned that it is critical to never move the hand or arm that delivers the reward until after we say YES. I want to revisit that issue now so you understand why this is so important.

Dogs are visual animals. While they may watch you all the time they don't naturally listen to the words that come out of our mouth. The fact is they don't understand most of what we say.

Dogs always react to physical cues over verbal cues. When trainers give the verbal cue and physical cue at the same time the dog will always follow the physical cue. This means when you mark the exercise and move the arm at the same time - the movement of the arm is the cue your dog is following and not your verbal cue.

This concept was discovered by Pavlov a long time ago. He kept his dogs in cages and when it came time to feed a bell would ring followed food dropping into food bowls. Pavlov noticed dogs would start to salivate when they heard the bell.

He then did some experiments. He would ring the bell after the food had dropped and while the dogs were eating. Those dogs never salivated to the sound of a bell. The bell meant nothing to them.

The moral of this story is **DON'T REWARD AT THE SAME TIME THAT YOU MARK** an exercise.



Unfortunately it is not natural for people to have a pause between the YES and giving the food reward. Every new trainer reaches for food at the same instant that they say YES. Every new trainer needs to learn the skill of adding a pause in between the MARK and the movement of the reward hand. This is a very simple concept to understand and a very difficult discipline to learn. Those trainers who approach this as a learned skill get quicker results.

To improve your timing video tape training sessions and then study your work. This is a great way to gauge your work.

How Long Should You Train?

Most training is best kept to very short sessions. I used to say that training sessions should be 1 1/2 to 2 minutes. Now with marker/clicker training if a dog is motivated this can be expanded. When training is fun, the reward is high enough in value and the dog is not tired the time can be extended. Once of our young males could go 10 to 12 minutes. We have had others that needed very short sessions because his concentration did not allow for more.

Different dogs have different levels of concentration. As dogs gain drive their concentration will increase. To learn

what is best for your dog start out by only putting 20 treats in your treat bag. When they are gone the session is over. When in doubt it is always better to leave a session with your dog wanting more.

Many times new trainers need get so into the work they need the signal of an empty bait bag to remind them that they need to stop. As they gain experience in the work this won't need to be an issue. They will learn to end a session on a positive high note.

Placement of the Reward

To become an effective marker/clicker trainer you must not only master the art of timing but also the art of where and how to deliver the rewards. New trainers often underestimate how important delivery and placement of the reward is to the learning process. Correct placement of a reward can result in new behaviors being learned very quickly.

The importance of reward placement in the learning phase of marker/clicker training may be best explained with an example.

In the first steps of the "hand touch" exercise we will often mark the dog when he looks at the hand we want him to touch. The correct place to reward the dog is "at that hand the dog looked at."

In other words you don't just hand the dog a food reward. You place the reward on THE HAND that the dog just looked. If the dog actually puts his nose on the hand you mark the nose touch and place the food treat on the hand that the nose just touched.

By placing the reward in the palm of marked hand and letting the dog take the reward off the palm of that out stretched hand the dog quickly figures out that there is a relationship between the behavior and the reward.

That's called proper placement of the reward. When you reward at the correct "place" the learning process will accelerate.

Another example of proper reward placement is seen when training the place command. If you want to teach your dog to go lie on his rug - or go touch his touch pad. In the first steps of the learning phase for these exercises is when the dog looks at the rug or his touch pad you mark the look and place the reward on the rug or the touch pad.

In formal heeling, if you want the dog to focus on the side of your face while in the heel position - you mark the moment he looks up at you face. A split second after the mark you bring the reward up by your face and the reward comes from that point.



This photo demonstrates how to offer your hand to the dog (without a command) to initiate the hand touch.

The photo at the top of this article is of Cindy's dog doing a hand touch. He loves it.

How to Hand the Dog Food - Without Getting Your Fingers Pinched

Just as proper placement of the reward is important so too is how the reward is offered to the dog. It is often a mistake to hand a high food drive dog a piece of food with the tips

of our fingers. At least if we don't want blood blisters and blackened fingernails.

Some dogs naturally take food gently. Some dogs can be trained to take food gently. Then there are those dogs that are so driven for food that a finger getting in the way is not much of a concern for them

The correct way to offer food to a dog is on the open flat palm of the hand.

We hold a food treat in an open hand by pinching the treat between our thumb and the base of our index finger. By holding the treat in this manner it is a simple process to release the treat with our thumb so it rolls into the palm of our hand. The dog can then take the food off the palm. When give a dog a piece of food in this manner you're not going to get bit.



The correct way to hold a food reward - pinched between thumb and side of finger



Use Small SOFT TREATS in most marker/clicker training - they go down quickly and are easy to eat.

Too often dogs HACK UP hard crunchy treats



**The incorrect way to give your dog food.
This is how food hound dogs bite finger tips.**

Food can be stored in a bait pouch which we keep on our belt in the middle of our back or it can be kept in a pocket of a training vest or jacket. Or we can pre-load our hand or hands with a food reward. This means we will have food in the hand before the exercise begins.

Dogs quickly figure this out when we have food pre-loaded in our hands. Some dogs will try to MUG your food hand.

When that happens simply close your hand into a fist and hold it flat against the front of your leg. When the dog continues to mug the hand we say nothing and do nothing but stand there. The dog will eventually give up and look up at you. When that happens - Mark the look and reward the dog with a food treat.

This goes a long, long way to teaching the dog that he holds the key to the food reward. They learn that they can get the food if they do something that you want.



If your dog mugs your hand with food, hold both hands against your legs like this until the dog stops and looks in your eyes - then mark the look and reward.



This photo demonstrated placement of the reward on the target after the mark.

Vary Your Reward Delivery

Food can come from the right hand, the left hand or occasionally your mouth. When you have a piece of food in your mouth you simply spit it at the dog to deliver the reward. Rewards from the mouth won't work in all circumstances and they often take a little training with the dog to teach him how to catch them. But they do offer a change for the dog every now and then.

I have already mentioned that we like to use bait bag in the middle of our back. Some people don't care for bait bags. Those are usually people who don't understand how to use them in the marker/clicker program.

We don't recommended wearing the bait bag on the front of our body. It becomes too big of a distraction for new dogs.

When the bait bag is in the middle of your back you don't have that problem. The correct way to retrieve food from

the bag is to us both hands to reach for the food at the same time. This allows the reward to come from either hands and it is important to vary the hand that rewards come from.

It is important to keep your hand away from your bait bag or away from the pocket you carry bait in. We don't want the hand near the bait to become a distraction or a signal for the dog.

We also don't want the dog anticipating a right or left handed delivery. We want value to be on the word YES and not on a specific hand movement. That's why we do random hand deliveries.

With many exercises we try and deliver of the reward in a manner that forces the dog to move his feet to get his reward. Every dog that has prey drive gets more out of moving to catch a reward. Compare a dog that loves to chase a ball versus the same dog that is simply handed a ball. The dog places a lot more value on the ball when he has to chase after it.

The same thing applies to delivering a food reward in a manner that forces the dog to move to get the food.

- 1- It helps teach a dog that the MARK signals the end of the exercise or the behavior.

- 2- When dogs have to move to snatch a reward it increases the value of the reward to the dog. Compare this to handing a dog a ball or tossing the ball so the dog has to chase it.

- 3- The movement only needs to be one step back and away from the dog. So it goes like this MARK > MOVE > REWARD (being sure the movement does not come at the same time you MARK the behavior - there must be a gap in time).

To accomplish this after the Mark the handler moves his delivering hand down and away from the dog, kind of like a wand. The dog knows the hand contains the reward and will follow it.

How Many Rewards to Give? Jack Potting

In this system you only give the mark one time but there is nothing wrong with giving more than one reward. If a dog does an exceptionally good bob give him several rewards. In fact you can give several different kinds of food rewards in the same training session. A really good job could result in the several of the highest value food rewards. Usually the more rewards the higher in drive the dog stays.

So remember as long as you don't say the mark more than one time you can give several really high value rewards right after another when he does a lightning fast down and then stays down. This is called jack potting.

It's also important to end a training session on a high point. Some people will jack pot the last mark before the DONE or BREAK command.

Dogs with Low Food Drive

Some dogs have very low food drive. Food drive can be increased by using very high value treats and only feeding after you train. Even a dog with good food drive will value food rewards more by not feeding the dog until after our first training session for the day.

I also believe that dogs can learn to acquire food drive. There is nothing wrong with "fasting" a dog for a day or even two days (never 3 days). I guarantee your dog will have food drive for meat treats after he has not eaten for a day or so. If you randomly fast low food drive dogs their food drive will increase.

I have also seen high prey drive dogs with low food drive develop a level of food drive by playing tug with a sock or toy that has food in it or a toy that has been saturated with the odor of the food.

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Splitting and Shaping in Marker/Clicker Training

In the marker/clicker system there are two concepts to training exercises. You can shape an exercise and you can split an exercise into small component parts, then train the parts individually. Once the parts are trained you link (or chain) them together to form the final exercise.

We don't look at maker training as "either you shape" or "you split" and exercise. Marker/clicker training is not an either or process. The people who are good at shaping are usually great at splitting.

It is a fact that people either shape and/or split an exercises or they manipulate and/or correct a dog into performing an exercise. Those in the later category are old school dog training.

Shaping simply means the dog is rewarded for progressively more detailed behavior. For example: in shaping the hand

touch exercise the dog would first be marked/rewarded for simply looking at the hand. Once he was consistently looking and being mark/rewarded, he would then not be marked/ rewarded until he took one step towards the hand. Then not mark/rewarded until he took 3 steps towards the hand. And finally not mark/rewarded until his nose touched the hand.

Simple behaviors are easy to shape but when exercises get more complicated they need to be broken (or split) into small pieces and these pieces trained separately. Those pieces can also be shaped.

When an exercise is split, the trainer either lures a dog or shapes a dog to perform the component part of the exercises. The split pieces of an exercise always need to be small enough that each piece has a reasonable chance of the dog being successful when we ask them to do it.

As a dog gains confidence and become better at offering the pieces of a split exercise you will start to link or chain the parts together before you mark and reward.

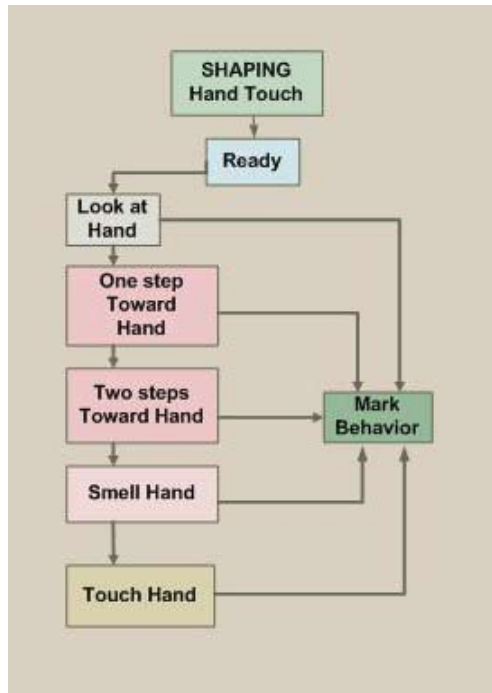
Learning to split an exercise is an art form. It is a factor of experience, training and skill. How to split is often not an obvious choice at least not as obvious as we would think. But with this said splitting is the essence of dog training. To become proficient at splitting a trainer must become a master of observing what his dog is doing, what his dog has done in the past and what his goals are.

Variable Levels of Reward in Marker/ Clicker Training

A point of mention in moving from training one component of an exercise to the next is the trainer should put his current portion of a split exercise on what is called a "[Variable Level of Reward](#)" before linking two component parts of the work.

There are a couple of reasons for this. If we don't put the component on a variable reward the dog could have problems when he expects to get rewarded for a behavior and it doesn't come. Secondly if an exercise has been split into 10 component parts we can't reward each of the 10 components every time we ask for the behavior.

During your training process if your dog starts to have problems and doesn't show progress you need to rethink your training plan and find an easier way. Maybe you need to start from the beginning and reward the smallest of behaviors again. Maybe you need to find an entirely new plan. With this said, this is an important part of every system of dog training.



Flow chart on Shaping the HAND TOUCH Exercise

Back Chaining

Some exercises need to be trained through a process called back-chaining. It may be easier to explain the concept of back-chaining if I use the example of the retrieve.

The first behavior in the retrieve would be to teach the dog to hold something in his mouth. Back chaining is where you train the final behavior first - in this case holding the item in the mouth with the dog sitting in front of the handler. We then train the other behaviors that lead up to the final behavior.

The second behavior would be to walk while holding (follow the handler as he backed away from the dog while it was holding the item). The third behavior would be to hold, walk and sit in front of the handler when the handler stopped backing away. I think you get the picture here.

Luring in Marker/Clicker Training

Luring takes place when we show our dog a food reward before an exercise and then use that food to lure or guide the dogs movements (as he follows the food in our hand) through an exercise. Dogs need to learn to follow lures, just like they need to learn what a mark is.

Clicker purists will disagree with using luring. They call it a bribe. We would have to agree to disagree on this issue. In my opinion certain exercises result in faster learning when the dog is lured through the learning process The key to luring is to fade the lure as quickly as we can.

When a trainer is establishing his foundation in markers he needs to actually teach a dog to follow a lure. This is done after "charge the mark." It's done by letting the dog smell the food in your hand (without actually getting it). Then moving the away from the dog. As the dog is followers the food hand you simply "mark" and open the hand to release

the food. It doesn't take long for the dog to understand a lure.

Luring is great for teaching the dog positions (sit stand and down), for teaching touch pads and for guiding the dog to reposition him for exercises.

It should be noted that when handlers use luring too long the lure can often be difficult fade the lure from training. Trainers need to understand that a dog prefers to follow a physical lure over a verbal voice command. So when we use a lure we need to have an exit strategy for stopping. The quicker the lure is faded the better.

Lures are faded by adding the command for the behavior. The process starts when we feel the dog has reached fluency with the gesture for the lure. At that point we will give a command, offer the lure gesture then and mark-reward the behavior. We do this 10 - 20 - 50 times, as many as we think we need. We then test the process by giving the command and not offering the lure gesture. If the dog performs the behavior he has learned the command.

If the dog hesitates and does not offer the behavior we simply say "Nope" reposition the dog to the point he was before the command was given and repeat the command-gesture again until we think he is ready for another test.

What trainers should not do when the command fails is to add the lure after they have found out that the dog is not going to follow the lure. This is the natural instinct for new trainers but it is the exact wrong thing to do. This only trains the dog to wait for a gesture.

So if the dog doesn't perform the behavior, you repeat the command and add the gesture that the dog knows and then mark-reward the behavior. Do this another 10 or 20 times and test the command again.

Gestures or Signals in Marker Training

The goal of luring should be to create a non-food supporting signal that helps our dog perform a behavior. Gestures are used to help a dog perform a behavior before the handler names the exercise by adding a command.

Here is something new trainers should think about. There is a fine but distinct line between a signal and a lure. If a handler wants his dog to go to his rug and points at the rug from behind the dog, that's a signal. If the handler gets one foot in front of your dog to encourage him to his bed he is luring the dog to the bed with his body.

But if the handler stays one foot behind the dog and encourages the dog to his bed he is offering signals to help him make the decision to go to his bed, a subtle but important distinction. One that requires thought on the part of the trainer.

Signals in Marker/Clicker Training

The goal of luring should be to create a non-food supporting signal that helps our dog perform a behavior. The signal in the down exercise would be to lower the hand (without food in it). Signals are used to help a dog perform a behavior before the handler names the exercise by adding a command. Once commands have been added to a behavior signals are used to help a dog perform the behavior if the dog doesn't respond to a command.

Here is something new trainers should think about. There is a fine but distinct line between a signal and a lure. If a handler wants his dog to go to his rug and points at the rug from behind the dog, that's a signal. If the handler gets one foot in front of your dog to encourage him to his bed he is luring the dog to the bed with his body.

But if the handler stays one foot behind the dog and encourages the dog to his bed he is offering signals to help him make the decision to go to his bed, a subtle but important distinction. One that requires thought on the part of the trainer.



Dog is being LURED to the hand touch - see the food is on the hand

Lumping an Exercise

For the majority of my 50 year career of owning and training dogs I have been a lumper and I am not proud of it.

A lumper is someone who does not split an exercise into component parts. A trainer can become a lumper if they get ahead of themselves and don't properly split an exercise. When someone lumps several component parts of an exercise together and then tries to train all these parts at one time he is lumping the exercise.

When I first started to train dogs to heel I simply put a choke chain on and gave a heel command. If the dog got out in front I did an about turn and said HEEL and corrected the dog back into position. If the dog went to wide I said HEEL and did a quick turn and corrected the dog into position. I

lumped all of the component parts of the heeling exercise into one training exercise. The bottom line is the learning phase was not pretty.

I feel sorry for my old dogs I often wonder how much more they would have enjoyed training had I known about marker/clicker training. I also think how confused they must have been and what it did to our relationship.

Unfortunately there are still many local obedience classes that still teach this way today. It is sad.

Body Signals and Voice Signals

Signals are a very important part of dog training. There are body signals and/or voice signals. An example of a voice signal would be telling your dog that you are going to start training today. You do this by saying "**ARE YOU READY**" every time you go out to train. This is not a command; it is simply a voice signal that tells the dog we are going to start training.

Some purists will say that body signals can be called lures. For me this is splitting hairs. For the purpose of clear communication in this article I will define a signal as the use of your body when you not using food or a toy to help a dog perform a behavior.

An example of an advanced body signal is seen during heeling. Handlers learn to turn their head several steps before making a turn. They look in the direction they are about to turn. In formal competition heeling dogs are trained to look at the side of the handlers face. They quickly learn that when they see "the head turn signal" they need to get prepared to stay with you in the turn.

Trainers need to think about unintentionally adding a signal to their training because they can create problems for themselves. An example of this just came up in our

home. Cindy is training her young Malinois to STAND from a sit. This is needed for Mondio Ring Sport training.

When her dog sat in front, she would signal the dog to STAND by stepping in closer to the dog as she put both hands under his chin. It didn't take long for the dog to catch on and learn the signal to stand.

The problem developed when we realized the dog was reacted to the signal of her stepping forward and not the hands going under the chin. During the sit-stay when she walked to her dog it would stand. It took work to change the dogs thinking on this.

How do you Start Training a New Exercise?

One of the most difficult concepts for new trainers to grasp in the marker/clicker system is "HOW TO BEGIN TRAINING A NEW EXERCISE? WHERE AND HOW DO YOU START?"

The answer depends on the exercise and if you're going to shape the exercises, split the exercise or help the dog by luring it through the learning phase.

Once you have determined that, you have will have a game plan.

People who want to shape a behavior approach it like charging the mark. They mark any behavior and then use successive approximations to reward behavior that is closer and closer to their goal behavior.

People who decide to split an exercise need to have a game plan on splitting. It often helps to write the steps down and then refer to your training plan. Some of the component parts may be shaped, some may be lured. It's up to the handler.

Train a Human - Test Your Understanding of the System

One of the best ways to get a true feeling for marker/clicker training is to train a friend. I am dead serious when I say this. In my DVD that I did on marker/clicker training I included several people (me included) getting trained to perform a behavior.

While it will be funny (or if you play the part of the dog it could be frustrating) it truly demonstrates how a dog would feel when you are trying to shape a behavior.

So when you think you are beginning to understand the concept of marker/clicker training take a bag of M&M's and try training a human with markers/clickers. If you have kids, take a bowl of quarters and use them as rewards. They may look at quarters as a higher value reward than M&M's. Pick a task and use the concepts of marker/clicker training. It is good for laughs and it is great to teach you how to mark a behavior.

The fact is you will learn more when you play the role of the dog and ask someone else to train you.

I can't stress this enough - don't underestimate the value of this little game in learning to have empathy for your dog in training. A word to the wise when you train a human:

1- You will learn how important reward placement is to the speed of learning the behavior

2- You will also learn how powerful simply looking at the target is to figuring out a new task.

So look at your target and reward at the target (even if the behavior is a long way away from the behavior).

If you are not Giving Commands, How Does Your Dog Know What You Want to Train Today?

In this system we never give commands until the dog fully understands the behavior or exercise we want him to do. When new trainers start this work they often ask “If I am not telling the dog what I want him to do, how does he know what behavior I want to work on when I take him out today?”

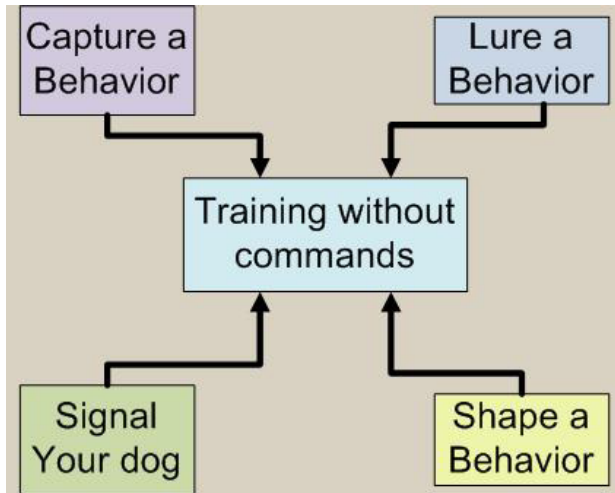
There are several options. Trainers can capture a behavior, (meaning they simply wait for the dog to offer a behavior and then mark it); they can shape a behavior; or they can lure and help a dog with food and signals.

Capturing a behavior can take a long time. We have used it with our horses and it’s an effective training method but it does take a lot of patients. There is a process called “free shaping” where trainers go out and begin capturing behaviors with their dog. They just see what they can randomly teach their dogs. It’s a fun thing to do that leads classic behaviors.

We prefer to help our dog with signals (not a command) for what we want him to do. This is a very important step in the marker training system. To really appreciate its full implication trainers need to also understand the relationship between the command and the reward in this system. I discuss that in detail in the next chapter.

Your dog needs to be motivated to want to participate. This means the reward you use in training must be high enough in value to motivate the dog to want to participate. To the trainer who says “Well I take my dog out and he just sits there. He doesn’t want to do anything.” Well your dog is not hungry enough or your treats were not good enough or your toy is not important enough for the dog.

So go back and re-evaluate what training aids you're using and how you are approaching the work. Bottom line is when this happens the trainer has made mistakes and needs to back up their work. A good trainer is never afraid to back up a few training steps to make sure the foundation is correct.



**Ways to start training a new command
in Marker/Clicker Training**

The Relationship Between COMMANDS and REWARDS

In marker/clicker training commands are not added until the dog knows and understands the exercise. Commands are not added until the dog will perform the exercise 8 out of 10 times that the handler gives a signal.

Unfortunately people are verbal and dogs are visual. When it comes to commands this means people often name an exercise or use a command to try and induce a behavior before the dog knows the behavior well enough to associate a behavior with a command.

When that happens the command becomes part of the human background babble that the dog listen to all day long. When the dog doesn't understand a command the words you used mean nothing, it's the same as not hearing you.

To best explain the concept we want to establish about adding commands in markers/clickers I will use the relationship between "markers/clicks" and "rewards."

I have already explained that through repetition a dog begins to look at a marker/clicker as a secondary reward. We want the same thing to happen with a command. When he hears his handler say "YES" he feels good, he gets excited, he knows the exercise is over and he is going to get a reward. He has linked the marker/clicker with the reward.

We want the exact same thing to happen with a signal and/or a command. We want the dog to look at a command as part of the linked chain that leads to a reward. We want the dog to look at a command as part of his trigger mechanism to get his reward.

This can only happen if the dog knows and understands the behavior he must perform when you ask him to do something. This behavior must be a "no-brainer" if the dog is going to look at commands in this manner.

When to Add a Command

So in marker training we train the dog to perform a behavior with signals before the command is added. When the dog will perform the behavior 8 out of 10 times with the signal you can start to add the command before the signal. Key here is that there must be a time split between the command or signal.

The concept of when to add a command in marker/clicker training is radically different than old school training.

In old school training commands were added before a dog ever understood the behavior or exercise. A dog would be given a command and then corrected when until it performed the exercise correctly.

Training the dog to “heel” is the perfect example. A new dog would be commanded to “heel” and the handler stepped off. The handler made a sudden turn and the dog got out of position. The handler would then repeat “heel” and then correct the dog back into position.

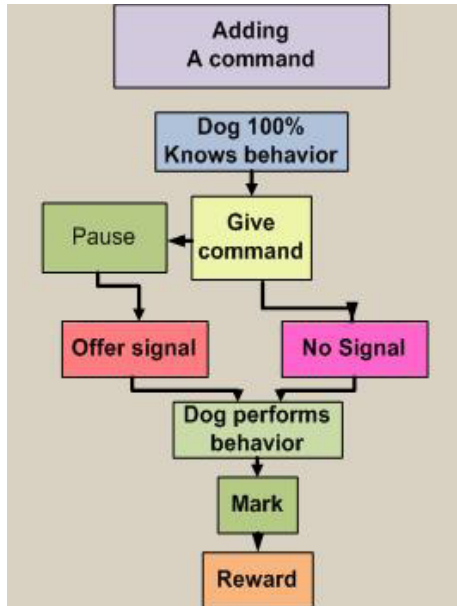
That is not the way things are done in the marker/clicker system.

How to Add a Command

When it comes time to name a behavior (add a command) we always give the command before we add a signal for the behavior.

It is important to wait for a split second after the command before adding the signal to help the dog. This break in time is important. Remembering that dogs will always follow a physical signal over a voice signal, if they are given at the same time the dog will be following the physical signal and not learn the voice command.

To repeat this because it is so important the timing of commands to signals is very much like the timing for marking a behaviors. The command and the signal cannot happen at the same time or the dog will always work off the physical signal and not the voice command.



Flow Chart on Adding Commands to Marker/Clicker Training

Anticipating a Command

When dogs begin to approach the point where we think about adding a command we will see them start to anticipate a behavior. Anticipation in the learning process is a good thing. Anticipation tells us the dog is thinking, he is actively trying to participate in the work. Even if the dog anticipates with incorrect behavior it tells us he is trying to work with us and he wants to do what he thinks we want.

Old school dog trainers give corrections for anticipation. They expected perfection all the times. Think about this from the dogs standpoint. He gets corrected for trying to do what you want. He then thinks "Hey I am trying to do this - what the heck - I don't understand what you want and your jerking me around!!! This sucks I am going to stop trying and wait until you show me exactly what you want!"

Stimulus Control in Marker/Clicker Training

Stimulus control is the finishing tool that completes the training process for a command.

As you go through training you will reach a point where your dog has learned several behaviors. He looks at them as his little bag of tricks that he uses to make you give him his rewards.

During the learning process of a new behavior you will often see a dog reach into that trick bag and offer all of his known behaviors in his effort to get you to give his reward. That is OK during the learning phase but when the dog gains proficiency this needs to end.

At some point the dog should only perform the behavior he is asked to perform. He should also NOT offer this behavior when he is asked to do something else. Getting the dog to do this is called “stimulus control.”

The point to add stimulus control to your work is when the dog performs a behavior on command 8 out of 10 times without a signal or lure. Let me repeat “WITHOUT A SIGNAL OR LURE.” New trainers miss that very important part of stimulus control. They jump the gun and start adding stimulus control while they are still using signals to help the dog. Then when they drop the signal they confuse the dog.

It’s also unrealistic to wait for a dog to perform the exercises 100% of the time. Waiting until a dog performs 10 out of 10 times results in dogs that get bored with training.

A lack of stimulus control is one of the biggest problems many motivational trainers face. New trainers grasp the concept of markers/clickers, they enjoy the reward process,

but they struggle with the refined process of stimulus control.

In this stage of training when the dog is asked to perform a known behavior and he reaches into his trick bag to offer a different known behaviors, you simply say "NO" and turn your back. Turning away for 5 seconds sends a clear message to the dog that he is not doing what you want.

When you turn back and ask for the behavior again you will see if he then offers the correct behavior or an unwanted behavior. If it's not what you asked you repeat the process and again say "NO" and turn your back. It may become necessary to put the dog in his crate for a few minutes and then get him out and try again.

It's not a bad idea to introduce the "*done*" or "*break*" command at this point. This tells your dog your done training for a few minutes. With experience this makes it clear to the dog that training is over for awhile.

An important part of stimulus control is to also take this behavior out of the dogs trick bag. This is called "extinguishing a behavior." By that I mean the dog must understand that this behavior is not allowed to be offered when we introduce new signals and commands.

If we have taken the command "SIT" through stimulus control the dog offers a "SIT" when you are training the down we immediately say "NO" and turn our back.

Trainers will not see consistency in a command until they take their dogs through stimulus control. So if your goal is to enter a dog sport you will have to become a master of this concept. What's interesting is that dogs are smarter than we often give them credit for. They learn the concept of stimulus control after you have taken them through the process a few times. They recognize what you are doing and pick up on it quicker and quicker each time.

In old-school training stimulus control is done with a choke collar or prong collar. If the dog performs an unwanted behavior it is corrected until it complies with the correct behavior. This is why they dogs stop offering behaviors they think their handler wants. It's why they are not good problem solvers and it's why they are reluctant participants in the training process.

The Problem with Adding Commands Too Soon

The first and most obvious problem of adding a command before the dog knows the behavior is we run the risk of confusing our dog or turning the command into background noise.

Our goal is to make the command part of the chain of events that leads to a reward. To accomplish this the training needs to be black and white. Adding a command before the dog understands a behavior is not black and white.

When we initially give a command we follow it with the signal we used to get the dog to perform the behavior. That signal is looked at as help. In training we help the dog with signals until we reach a point where we can stop using the signal and only use the command.

When we name an exercise we need to be prepared to do something to help the dog if it doesn't perform the behavior.

You have your own tool box of possible options to consider when this happens:

- 1 - You can ignore "offered behaviors" until he gets it right.
- 2 - You can help the dog and by offering a signal or signals.

3 - We can say "NOPE" in an upbeat voice - not a MAD VOICE.

4 - If the dog refuses to perform a behavior you need to ask yourself if the reward you are using is a high enough value to motivate the dog and make him want to work.

Only you and your dog can answer that question.

5 - If the dog won't work off the signal then we need to re-evaluate our training plan. We could be lumping the training steps and the dog really doesn't understand the behavior we want. So go back to splitting.

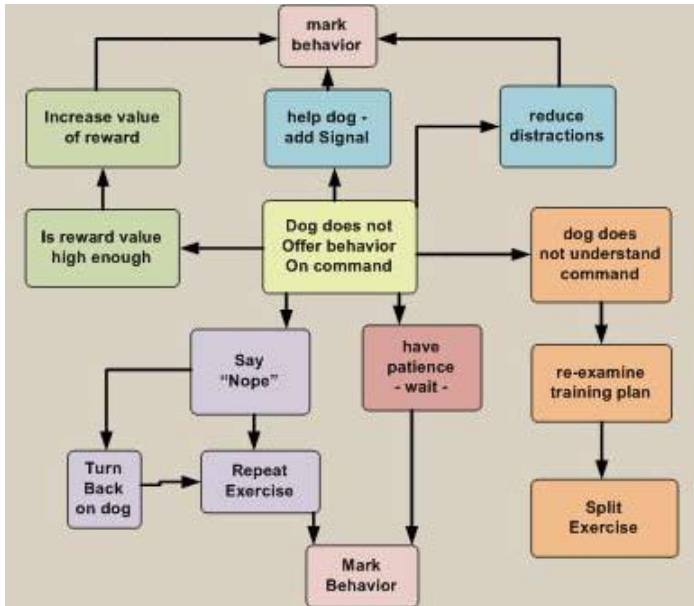
a - To get us out of the problem you can use a "screw up cookie." I explain Screw up cookies later in this article.

6 - If we know for sure that the dog knows the command, if he is being insubordinate we can put him back in his dog crate or dog kennel for a time out. Dog crates are better for time outs.

Do this enough times and the dog learns a time out means something. I didn't used to think this worked. I was wrong, it works. With many dogs it becomes a motivator. It frustrates the dog and frustration builds drive.

If you have a second dog, get that dog out and work it in front of the crated dog. Use a little jealousy.

7 - As the LAST RESORT if we know the dog absolutely knows the command and is simply refusing to do it we can correct the dog.



Flow Chart on Dog Not Performing Behavior

The bottom line is when the dog doesn't perform a behavior you need to evaluate why this happened. There is no set rule of what to do every time. It will always vary according to the circumstance.

Naming Component Parts of an Exercise

Something that new trainers can think about when they split an exercise is to name the component parts of the exercise.

An example of this can be seen in the Heel exercise. One of the component parts of the heel command is to teach the behavior of the dog LOOKING up at your face. Once the dog has learned the look up at your face behavior you can name it with "LOOK."

Then when you link all the components of Heeling and the dog gets a little distracted and is not paying attention you simply say "LOOK." This identifies an exact behavior to

a dog. If the dog doesn't comply you simply say "Nope - LOOK" and start all over again.

In other words this allows you to pin point with a great deal of accuracy what is expected in training.

Adding Duration to an Exercise by Using "GOOD"

Up to this point we have not expected a dog to add duration of time to any exercises. This means we don't expect a dog to perform a sit-stay or down-stay during training.

As far as we are concerned - and as far as the dog is concerned - in the SIT exercise as soon as a dogs but touches the ground or as soon as the dogs belly touches the ground in the DOWN exercise we say YES and the exercise is over. The dog is released to come and get his reward.

We don't think about adding duration to any exercise until a dog is consistently performing that exercises. When the time comes to extend an exercise we simply delay the mark. We remain calm and say GOOD in a soothing tone and when the exercise is over we mark the moment with YES and have a party.

Good is NEVER used to end an exercise!

During the period when we begin extending an exercise we can jack potting rewards - one right after another. This often helps a dog to understand what you expect.

In doing this we have also already conditioned the dog to the word "good." We say it when we pet him. When my dog lies by my office chair as I work, I will reach down and stroke him as I say "GOOD." Some people will even condition the word with food at dinner time. This is a similar concept to charging the mark - only we are adding a good feeling to

the word “Good.” The end result is the dog knows when we say “Good” he feels good.

Duration in time is extended for random periods starting in seconds and not getting to minutes for a long time. In the beginning we only extend the time by 2 or 3 seconds and then MARK the behavior and end the exercise. Then we go 5 seconds and MARK; then 2 seconds and then 10 seconds etc. With puppies we don’t recommended going beyond 15 to 20 seconds.

Random Rewards in Marker/Clicker Training

“When do I stop using a food reward for a command?” This is an excellent question and an important part of marker/clicker training.

The goal for every dog trainer is to reach a point of variable reinforcement.

It is unrealistic to think that trainers will give a food reward every time they ask their dog to perform a behavior for the rest of the dog’s life. For one thing people can’t walk around with a bait bag for the rest of their lives. Although my Corgi that’s lying at my feet right now thinks that would be the best thing that ever happened to her.

When we start marker/clicker training we reward for the smallest of efforts. We reward for looking at a hand in a hand touch. When the dog knows and understands a behavior and will perform the behavior correctly 8 out of 10 times for a signal or a command the handler can begin to reward randomly.

A behavior needs to be put on a random reward schedule before that behavior is linked to a second split behavior, when you stop and think about that statement it makes sense. If a dog expects a reward every time it performs

a behavior and then you totally stop rewarding for that behavior the dog could shut down.

So the way around this problem is to establish random rewards.

Back in 2001 my brother (who is a psychologist in Canada) wrote an article for my web site titled "[USING INTERMITTENT REWARDS IN TRAINING - THE CONCEPT OF DIFFERENTIAL REINFORCEMENT.](#)" You may want to visit this article.

As a handler and the dog gain fluency in an exercise they can go longer and longer in between rewards. This becomes a factor of experience and a feeling for what works and what doesn't work.

Using "GOOD" to Link Components of an Exercise

The concept of random rewards should be in place when handlers begin to link or chain behaviors together to form a finished exercise.

The beauty of the word GOOD is that it also lets you tell your dog that he just successfully completed a portion of a LINKED exercise. It tells him that he is doing a good job and is going to get a reward if he continues to do what you expect.

Good can also be used to link component parts of an exercise. It goes like this:

The dog is asked to perform the first linked behavior.

The dog performs the behavior.

The dog is told GOOD.

The dog is then asked to perform the next behavior in the chain.

When used in this manner the word GOOD becomes a powerful tool to communicate with your dog. The beauty is that it can be used at a distance to tell the dog he is doing a good job.

Using Food with “GOOD”

Let's use the example of a down-stay in which the final MARK is rewarded with a game of tug.

When a dog is asked to down it is expected to stay down until released. After a handler gives the down command and the dog complies, the handler can say GOOD and offer a food reward. The handler can even jack pot a food reward as the dog stays down. The exercise is not yet over because he has not marked the exercise as being finished. The dog remains down until the handler is satisfied with compliance and gives the MARK (YES) and presents the tug toy and a session of tug.

Snap - Open Bait Bag



Allow Your Dog to Make Mistakes it Creates Problem Solvers

One of the harder skills new trainers must learn is that there will be times when you have to allow your dog time to offer behaviors and sometimes you have to allow your dog to make a mistake. Dogs become problem solvers when allowed to work through problems.

Many people look at confusion in their dogs as a problem. These are often people who come from old school dog training where they always want their dog to perform the exercise the correct way every time.

When a dog looks confused or makes a mistake the natural instinct is to step in and rescue the dog, try and lure it through an exercise. When in reality the dog should be given time to try and problem solve. That's how dogs learn.

When this work is done correctly, your dog will see value in performing. It is your job to allow your dog to make choices and if you have built enough value for the behavior the dog will want to perform correctly.

Negative Markers/Clickers

When a dog learns a behavior to the point where that behavior can be put on cue (most of the time this means with a command but it could also be a hand signal) the handler can start to use a negative marker/clicker if the dog does not perform the behavior.

A negative marker is "NOPE" or "No let's dog it again." It is important to understand that this is not a correction. It's said in a tone that implies "look you can do a better job lets do it again."

Handlers should not sound mad when they say "NO." Sounding mad turns a negative marker/clicker into a

correction and that's not what we want. "NO" is simply a word that tells the dog that he has not performed a behavior correctly and he has to do it again.

The beauty of using "NO" or "NOPE" is we can use it to identify the exact instant the dog makes a mistake. Unlike a physical correction, which often takes drive out of the dog, a negative marker/clicker often has the opposite effect, it adds drive. Many dogs get a little frustrated and frustration builds drive.

Now here is something to think about. With positive markers/clickers the reward must come within a short period of time after the mark. How long is a factor of the dog, its training and experienced. But dogs should get a reward within several second of the mark if the reward is to be associated with the behavior and mark.

The same concept applies to negative markers/clickers. If your dog makes a mistake and you say "NO," you need to immediately have the dog repeat the exercise or immediately put the dog away. If you wait too long the dogs mind will wander and he will not associate the negative behavior with repeating the exercise.

If a dog continues to make mistakes and does not seem to be concentrating and your pretty sure the dog understands the cue the handler should give a time-out and put the dog in his crate for a few minutes. Putting a dog in a crate is a mental break for a dog. While some dogs may look at a time-out as punishment others need the break to allow them to refocus.

The best trainers are constantly re-evaluating their training plan. When their dog shows a problem the best trainers stop and think about what they need to do to help the dog understand the behavior they want. Many times the problem is a handler problem and not a dog problem (I.E. the handler needs to re-split the exercises into smaller parts).

Screw up Cookies

The beauty of MARKER/CLICKER work is it's pretty hard to hurt your dog much if you make a mistake. Missing a mark is not like giving a prong collar correction at the wrong time. Give a soft dog a prong collar correction and the dog will shut down and quit trying. Miss a mark on the same soft dog and you have not hurt the dog's temperament. Oh in marker/clicker training he may be confused but you don't shut the dog down.

Earlier in this article I talked about "*screw up cookies*" Ann Braue introduced me to "*screw up cookies*" and I love the concept.

There may come a time when your dog simply doesn't offer the behavior you want no matter how long you wait.

This usually indicates one of the following:

- 1 - The dog got tired and just slowed up or stopped trying.
- 2 - The dog does not have that good of a relationship with the owner.
- 3 - The exercise was not SPLIT into small enough pieces for the dog to understand what you wanted (you lumped the exercise).
- 4 - The reward is not a high enough value.
- 5 - The dog is not hungry enough.
- 6 - You have not shown enough patience and allowed the dog time to work out the problem.

So when your training and your dog doesn't give you the behavior you want you need to get out of the training session in a manner that still allows the dog to feel like he is still learning. **YOU ALWAYS NEED TO MAKE THE DOG FEEL LIKE HE IS A LEARNER.**

Just because the dog fell short of YOUR GOALS does not mean that you should jeopardize your relationship with the dog to achieve your goals. Relationships should always come first over goals.

One option that allows this to happen is to use a “screw up cookie.” Here is how it works; the dog stops working, you realize the problem is one of the above, rather than give a correction or walk away you want to leave on a positive note.

So you ask the dog to do a simpler exercise that the dog knows. It needs to be something the dog thinks is a really, really, really simple task/ a task we know he knows (I.E. hand touch - after it's trained).

When you use a “screw up cookie” you should use it two, three or 4 times in a row. A dog with a high rate of reinforcement will want to work. A dog with a high rate of reinforcement will feel like a learner.

These “screw up cookie” not only get you out of a problem they redirect the dogs mind away from a potential negative incident. They redirect the dog onto a task that leads to a reward. Screw up cookies allows you to stop your training and put your dog away on a positive note. Once that's done you can go sit down and figure out what went wrong.

Corrections and Marker/Clicker Training

In my opinion there is no such thing as an all motivational system of dog training. Just as there is no such thing as an all force or compulsion system of dog training.

If you want to become an effective dog trainer you will have to learn how and when to employ corrections in your training. I wrote an article titled [THE THEORY OF CORRECTION IN DOG TRAINING](#). You may want to visit this eBook.

Purists will argue with me when I say there are applications for using corrections in the marker/clicker training system. Most of the time these are people who either lack experience; or only work with a very compliant non-dominant type of dog; or do not handle their dog in highly distracting environments; or are not involved with very high drive dogs in demanding dog sports; or they are not involved with competitive dog sports that require precise exercises.

The application of corrections in marker/clicker training should never be taken lightly. When they are used incorrectly there is always the risk of changing the relationship between the dog and handler, especially on soft dogs.

Corrections should only be used when you are 200% sure the dog understands the behavior you want and he is refusing to do it. This must be past the point in training where commands have been added to the behavior. We need to see the dog consistently performing exercise without handler signals.

This means we are 100% sure that the dog knows and understands the command without you using a signal. It means you are sure that you have established stimuli control and you are sure the dog is not relying on your signal to understand what you want.

A perfect example of this is teaching your dog to sit in your kitchen. The dog sits 98 out of 100 times. You then take him outside and ask him to sit in the front yard. He doesn't sit and you correct the dog. That's a bad correction. You missed the fact that the signal to sit was you standing in front of the dog in the kitchen. So you just confused the dog and probably did some damage to your relationship with the dog.

I am the first to say that this is not a simple issue for new trainers. Is the dog being disobedient or have we failed to

motivate him enough? Is the dog being disobedient or does he simply not understand what we expect? If the dog being disobedience or are the environmental distractions to high for his level of training? Are we asking him to do something he physically can't do? Maybe because of an injury he is not feeling well. Is the dog being disobedient or is he waiting for a signal from us to tell him what to do?

There is a lot to think about here.

If we determine that the dog knows what we are asking and is being disobedience then he needs a correction to basically say "Look you know better and you have to pay attention and dog this." In most sport dog training, corrections are a finishing tool. They are used to proof a dog to show him that he must work with us in every location, under every distraction every time.

Dogs with very high prey drive need fewer corrections. Their drive carries them through distractions and corrections. You will find that when its done correctly a slight correction will cause them to refocus and get it right because they want drive satisfaction.

The most difficult dogs to train are medium to low drive dogs. These dogs end up getting more corrections. It takes skill and perseverance to build drive in a dog. I won't go into that here. This is information for another time.

A rule of thumb on a correction is that we want the dog to be able to take food and play with us after a correction. If the dog will not do either of those things we have corrected the dog too hard. That information needs to be tucked in your mind so your remember it next time.

The level of correction used is a factor of the dogs temperament (a hard dog versus a soft dog), the drive level of the dog and the distractions he is faced with.

Sometimes with immature young dogs trainers get ahead of themselves. They don't have the patience to let a young dog grow up. These people would be better advised to back off training for awhile to let their dog mature a little than push them through a punishment phase just to reinforce a complicated behavior.

A couple of points need to be made here. Trainers need to recognize the fact that corrections are self-reinforcing for the handler. This means they fulfill the desire to make the dog comply. They tell the dog "this will be done my way or else!" This is rewarding for many men. It makes them feel confident and powerful. Sometimes I think that's why many men train dogs in the biting sport. It's called ego.

Corrections - Extinguishing a Behavior - Dominant Dogs

There is a difference between being disobedience and wanting to EXTINGUISH A BEHAVIOR.

When a dog becomes handler aggressive we need to extinguish this behavior right now. This needs a correction so the dog learns that this is unacceptable.

There are some things that dogs do that are self rewarding, like chase rabbits or squirrels. No amount of redirection or marker/clicker training is going to change my dogs' desire to chasing squirrels. You can't take the fun out of the chase. Even though they seldom if ever catch a squirrel they derive pleasure from the chase. Therefore the solution is that the fun needs to be taken out of the chase.

Dogs need to be corrected for self rewarding behaviors. There are many ways to accomplish this but in my opinion the best solution is with a remote collar. I have done a training DVD titled [REMOTE COLLAR TRAINING FOR THE PET OWNER.](#)

The beauty of the marker/clicker system is that because the training is so black and white the level of correction used to get compliance is much less than what's needed in other old school methods of training. Because it is so black and white there is also less conflict with the handler.

Corrections vs Compulsion

There is a difference between trainers who train with compulsion which is forced training (i.e. forced tracking) and trainers who use corrections. Corrections involve fixing a mistake.

While this may seem like mincing words, there is in fact a profound difference. People who plan on training dogs in dog sports and doing so with a level of consistency are going to have to introduce correction in their training. The beauty of marker/clicker training is that the level; of corrections are usually much lower than in other forms of training - especially forced compulsion training.

Anyone who has trained dogs as long as I have trained with compulsion. Frankly I think back and feel sorry for my old dogs. They deserved so much more than I gave them. Maybe in some small way this article is a way to say I am sorry.

How Long Do You Use Food Rewards

This is a simple issue, while it's not necessary you can use food forever. Once the dog is trained past the point of performing to voice commands man people will use random rewards.

Random rewards maintain drive. There are a couple of examples I use to convince people of this.

1 - We have cats and they constantly try and catch birds. Our cats are well fed and not the swiftest creatures on earth. I have never seen them

actually catch a bird -- but they NEVER STOP TRYING.

2 - Some dogs chase squirrels. Most dogs never come close to catching a squirrel but they never tire of it.

3- I bow hunt for deer. This past fall I probably spent a total of 2 weeks sitting in trees. I shot one deer. The fact that I only had success one in 15 times has not dampened my interest in hunting.

4 - People go to the casino and play slot machines - they only win occasionally but this is enough to build their anticipation to play again.

Do You Ever Stop Marker/Clicker Training?

There are several parts of this question.

The first and most obvious is that you never need to stop using markers/clickers in training to teach new behaviors. It also doesn't hurt to continue to mark and reward behaviors throughout the dogs life. Dogs love the work because it is crystal clear for them.

The second part is you should never get to the point where you mark a behavior and then don't offer the reward. If you do this you run the risk of the dog slowing down. Some dogs will start to think "Is this one of those times I am not going to get a reward?" They often decide this is probably one of those times and lose interest. So the concept of "A mark always gets a reward" never changes.

Random Reinforcement

The last part of marker/clicker training is called an "intermittent or variable schedule of reinforcement" or "Random Reinforcement."

When a dog will perform a behavior or a component of a split exercise 8 out of 10 times we begin to randomly mark and reward the behavior. This doesn't mean we mark and then don't reward. It means we can substitute GOOD for a Mark to tell the dog that we like what he did.

The reason you don't wait until a dog performs a behavior 10 out of 10 times is that dogs are never perfect and handlers would end up boring their dog to death if they waiting until it was perfect on every behavior before they moved on or started to randomly reward.

Making the decision to move on when the dog is correct 8 out of 10 times speeds learning. Your goal needs be to increase understanding. By moving on the dog will remain interested in the process and as his understanding increases so to will his speed and level of compliance increase.

Another important concept is that once the point of random reinforcement is reached you never stop doing it. In other words there is nothing wrong with marking and rewarding a sit or a down on a 6 or a 10 year old dog that learned to sit or down when it was 8 weeks old.

Stop and think about that statement. What does it hurt to reward a 10 year old dog for sitting? Not one single thing. It is kind of giving your dog an "ATTA BOY."

This is the part of training old-school trainers who bad mouth training with food never understood. They will say "But at some point you won't have food with you." The answer to that is yes that is true but we train for that by finishing our work with random rewards.

Don't Be Afraid to Scrap Your Training Plan

The best way to approach handler mistakes is to first accept the fact that mistakes are a normal part of dog training.

Mistakes in training need to be looked at as learning experiences on the path to training your particular dog. They are not screw ups and they don't always necessarily need to be a bad thing.

The best trainers always look for points in training where they hit a wall and the dog just doesn't seem to be getting what you are trying to teach him. Usually your getting ahead of yourself in training steps. You need to back up the work and split the exercise into smaller pieces.

Bad trainers on the other hand always blame the dog and say that "THE DOG KNEW BETTER."



A 13 week old puppy trained to give straight "fronts" with markers/clickers

Retraining Adult Dogs; Dealing with Dominant Dogs; Retraining Puppies and Pack Structure Training

In my opinion marker/clicker training is the perfect system to start training adult dogs. It is especially effective for dominant dogs or people who adopt rescue dogs because it is stress free.

Marker/clicker training is the perfect way to interact with these dogs in a manner that will not cause a conflict. It's a way to show a new adult dog that you can be an interesting and fun person to be around and it's in their best interest to figure out how to work with you.

A perfect example of the power of marker/clicker training is teaching a dog to down. The down exercise is a difficult exercise for a dominant dog. They resent being forced into different positions. When a dog downs in front of you it's an example of submission, not something a dominant dog cares to do. In fact many owners of dominant dogs get dog bit when they try and force their down into a down position.

But by training the down with a high value food reward and shaping the exercise we can easily train a very dominant dog that there are benefits for him to down when we give the signal or add the command.

Don't misunderstand what I am saying here. Marker/clicker training doesn't eliminate dominance in dogs. It's only a method to interact with a dominant dog with very little risk of getting bit. Because there is no conflict there isn't a reason for a dominant dog to feel like you are challenging him for rank within your pack. In the early stages of marker/clicker training there are no corrections so the dominant dog does not feel threatened.

With that said marker/clicker training is a way to show a dog that you do have rules.

Owners of dominant dogs should take their dog through [my pack structure program](#) before they reach the point in marker/clicker training where they add corrections. Some people with seriously dominant dogs should get the DVD I produced titled [Dealing with Dominant and Aggressive Dogs](#).

Rescue Dogs and Marker/Clicker Training

As a general rule dogs that have been turned into rescue organizations have some form of behavioral problem. As a general rule these dogs have been owned by old school “yank and crank” trainers that have used avoidance methods to train their dogs. In most cases this has not worked which is why the dogs were turned into the shelters. The dogs therefore come with emotional baggage.

Rescue dogs often take a little patience when their new owner tries to work with markers/clickers. They will often just stand and look at you because they are waiting for you to show them what you want. They are afraid to experiment. They are afraid of failure; they don't want to make a mistake get corrected.

The new owners need to be patient. They need to mark the slightest movements (I.E. the twitch of an ear). These dogs really need to have behaviors split into tiny little parts. When they stop and stair it's not because they are being stubborn. It's because they are stuck. They don't understand what they are expected to do and they certainly don't understand what you want them to do.

But when the light bulb goes off in the dogs head that they are being reward for trying, their true personality will come shining through. With effort you can bring true joy to these dogs' lives.

What Exercises Can Markers/Clickers Be Used For?

There is no limit to what exercises or parts of exercise that can be trained with marker/clicker training. You are only limited by your imagination.

You can use it for things as simple as giving you eye contact on voice command (a very important thing for people who compete in dog sports) to something as complicated as teaching a police service dog or a Schutzhund dog correct positioning to bark at a suspect or bark at a helper rather than bite the helper. Only in these circumstances the high value reward is the fight with the helper.

One point to keep in mind is when you use marker/clicker training to teach a moving exercise (for example the jumps) only mark the same location during the movement twice in a row. This is an important issue I learned from Ann Braue. What this means is if you mark the dog just before the take-off point only do it twice in a row. Then mark the point where it lands twice in a row, then the point where it lands and takes several steps away from the jump. Once this is done you can go back and mark the take off place twice again.

Bottom line is the use of markers/clickers is limited only by your imagination of the trainer.



**Side view of the focus your dog can give with marker/
clicker training - again a 13 week old pup**

People I owe a Special Thank you to:

I would like to close this training article with a sincere thanks to Cindy Rhodes, Michael Ellis, Ann Braue for what I have learned from them about marker/clicker training.

Cindy has been great. We have lived together for years and I am continually impressed with her skills as a trainer. The results she has had in her training has been my inspiration to study and learn marker/clicker training.

While Michael and Ann had no part in this article or the production of my DVD on markers/clickers, they have

contributed greatly to my understanding and appreciation of training dogs with Markers/clickers.

Ann Braue is one of the top Agility competitors in the world. Over the years she is consistently on USA's world agility team. Ann's web site is ABCTC.com

Cindy and I are lucky to live 20 miles from Ann's training center E/C WI - have attended a number of her seminars.

Anne gives seminars throughout the country – If you ever have an opportunity to go to one of these seminars you will walk away a better dog trainer.

Michael Ellis is one of the most gifted dog trainers I have ever met. He is also one of the first biting sport competitors to embrace marker/clicker training. While there are many good dog trainers around the world there are very, very few who are as gifted at teaching people how to train dogs.

Cindy and I have attended more [Michael Ellis seminars](#) than I can remember. We have hosted Michael here at Leerburg and in 2009 Michael and I will begin to produce training DVDs together.

In August 2009 Michael plans on opening the [Michael Ellis School for Dog Trainers](#) in CA. I have created a page on our web Leerburg web site that we hope to keep updated with Michael's seminars and school information.

If your goal is to make a career of dog training you will not find a better school anywhere, if you wish to take advantage of his short courses and seminars – you will see why I decided to do training videos with him. <http://leerburg.com/michaelellis.htm>

And finally I would like to thank my customers for purchasing our leerburg products. If it were not for those

who support us we would not be able to do what we love, which is to train our dogs and horses.

I hope that this article and my DVD will convince you that there are better ways to train dogs than the old school methods of training dogs.

Terminology of Marker/Clicker Training

Terminology is always the bane of dog trainers. I can't tell you how often I have seen two trainers argue about training only to find out that they were talking about the exact same thing and just using different terms.

An example could be that some trainers call the split portions of an exercise "building blocks" some call them "components" some call them "pieces of the exercise." Some call them criteria. It really doesn't matter what terminology you use as long as you understand the concept of splitting exercises.

As time passes I will build a list of terms that apply to marker/clicker training in this section.

Equipment we use in Marker/Clicker Training

There is not a lot of equipment needed for marker/clicker training. I have listed what we use in our home below.

- [Buckle Collar](#) or [Harness](#)
- [Leash](#)
- [Clickers](#)
- [All-natural treats](#)
- [Bait Bag](#)

**For Products related to this article,
please visit our [Clicker Training
Equipment Page](#).**

DVDs I Recommend

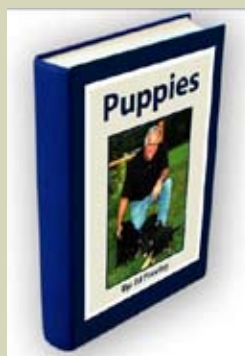
If you want to learn about this training, get my [Basic Dog Obedience DVD](#). It is an exciting way to train a dog. Motivational methods are ALWAYS better than force training or AVOIDANCE training. This work is fun to do and it builds a bond between the handler and his dog. It ends up with a dog that loves to go out and train and a much happier handler because the dogs want to learn. They want their MARKERS/CLICKERS because they know the REWARDS are so good.

[Establishing Pack Structure with the Family Pet](#) - while this DVD has nothing to do with marker/clicker training it is probably the most important DVD that the average pet owner can purchase. 99% of all behavior problems in dogs have the roots in a lack of pack structure.

Have more Questions?

[Check out Q&A on Marker Training](#)

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