

## Clicker Training

No doubt you've seen some trainers and owners working their dogs with a little device in their hands that makes an audible click when pressed. This "clicker" is what we call an event marker – in canine training, it marks the exact moment when your dog gives a behaviour you want. So, if it's a sit you're after, you click at the split second the dog's rear end hits the ground, then follow with a treat. They learn that the "click" means they did something correctly and that a reward is coming.

There are two general types of learning for animals (and people): **classical conditioning**, in which a dog associates something (e.g., an event, person, object) with a consequence that's either pleasant or unpleasant. The more a particular situation is paired with the same consequence, the stronger the association grows in the dog's mind. This is known as passive, or reflexive, learning; it does not require the dog to purposefully act in any way to bring about a consequence; it just automatically happens.



When a dog intentionally performs a behaviour because they've learned it will bring about a desired consequence, we call it "**operant conditioning**." In this case, the dog is an active learner. Clicker training involves both types of learning. It begins as classical conditioning, as the dog makes an initial association between the click sound and the reward, and quickly evolves into operant conditioning, where the dog deliberately gives a behaviour, having learned it will produce a desired consequence. (Please see our info sheet [How Dogs Learn](#) for more details.)

### Do you have to use a clicker to train a dog?

No. Dogs can be beautifully trained without a clicker, just using your voice or gestures, if you are precise, consistent, and clear. However, the brevity and sameness of the "click" sound can be very effective with dogs. Its meaning never varies, and it is always good news.

### Clicker mechanics

Clicker training seems as simple as 1,2,3:

1. Observe the behaviour
2. Mark the behaviour
3. Reinforce the behaviour

However, it's crucial that you have keen observation skills and excellent timing when wielding a clicker. If, for instance, you click before a dog completes a sit, when their rear end is still a few inches from the ground, you've marked a behaviour you didn't intend. If you click a few seconds *after* they're already sitting and now they're engaged in another behaviour, such as watching a bird fly by, then they'll think you're marking the birdwatching, not the sit.



Practise makes perfect. Part of that progression is becoming comfortable with your “equipment.” Many people hang their clickers on wrist straps so they’re out of the way but easily accessible when needed. You’ll likely also want a treat pouch, designed for quick retrieval and delivery of rewards, or “reinforcers.”

### **What is a reinforcer?**

A reinforcer is something that strengthens the probability of a behaviour reoccurring, and for most dogs, that will be food. However, some pooches aren’t motivated by low-value treats or may not be allowed some because of dietary restrictions. In that case, you need to find something else that will reinforce the desired behaviour.

Some common types of reinforcer include:

- High-value treats, such as dehydrated liver, hot dogs, and cheese. Remember a little goes a long way; high-value treats should be cut into pea-sized morsels to avoid over-feeding.
- Regular kibble (this might be considered a low-value treat by some dogs and very motivating for others)
- Toys (reward the dog with a tennis ball or squeaky toy)
- Verbal praise (“good girl!”)
- Physical touch (always be mindful of the dog’s body language and comfort level with handling)

### **How often do we reward a behaviour?**

When training a dog, we also need to think about how often we reward them for giving us a desired behaviour. This is called the “rate of reinforcement.” When a dog is first learning a behaviour, you need a high rate of reinforcement to keep them engaged: every time they get it right, reward them! If you find the dog's rate of performance is dropping off, it could be because the behaviour you’re asking for is a bit too challenging and you need to make it easier. Once they’ve learned the behaviour and can reliably perform it on cue, you can go to a variable rate of reinforcement, in which they get reinforced sometimes for performing the behaviour correctly but don’t know which time will earn them the reward. There are other rates of reinforcement you can learn about once you’ve mastered the basics.

### **4 core clicker training techniques**

- Capturing: the dog voluntarily offers a behaviour, such as sit, down, coming to you – all behaviours they do naturally – and you observe, mark, and reinforce it.
- Luring: the dog is guided into a behaviour, such as sit or down, using a piece of food in the trainer’s hand. You mark and reward when they complete the behaviour. Eventually, you will stop using, or fade out, the food.
- Shaping: the dog learns a more complex behaviour by you breaking it down into small, achievable steps, marking and rewarding each step.
- Targeting: the dog learns to touch a designated object (the target) with a designated part of their body (usually their nose). Once they’ve learned to target the object, which can be anything from the palm of your hand to an actual target stick, you can then use that target training to guide them into other behaviours.

When training a dog, it helps greatly to have a well-thought-out plan. Once you know where you want to go in a behaviour progression, you can use what is known as the Push Drop Stick Rule:

- Push to the next step in your plan if your dog performs the behaviour correctly 4/5 or higher in a set



- Drop to an easier step in your plan if your dog is only able to get it right 2/5 times or less in a set
- Stick to the same step in your plan if your dog gets it right 3/5 times in a set

### **Remember the terms of the clicker contract**

- Do not click your clicker around a clicker-savvy dog unless you are intending to pay!
- Even if you click too soon, too late or accidentally, you must always deliver with a treat. It is better to reinforce your clicker contract!

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#### References

<https://www.clickertraining.com/whatis>

