

Marker / Clicker Training



What is it and how does it work?

Clicker training is one of the most commonly used forms of Marker Training. In this article, we will briefly discuss how marker training works, why it is so effective in dog training, and why the clicker is so popular among dog trainers.

A Brief Analogy

When we first introduce the concept of marker training or clicker training to a new dog trainer or a dog training client, it is sometimes hard to understand how it can help with the training. We will go over how to use clicker training, but at first many clients or new trainers see it as an unnecessary step.

There is an old saying that goes, "If you have three hours to chop down a tree, spend the first two hours sharpening your axe." The process of developing your understanding and your dog's understanding of marker training is like sharpening your training axe.

Although it does create a few extra steps in the early stages of training, it will ultimately make your training more efficient and help your dog learn new skills quicker and with more precision!

How Does it Work?

A marker is any word or sound that is used to tell the dog that they have accomplished the task that you wanted. From the dog's point of view, the marker lets them know that their reward is coming. (You can also use different markers to mean different things, but we'll get into that towards the end.)

To simplify the idea, if you are training with treats, the marker word or sound causes the dog to expect the reward. If you are using a toy, the marker causes the dog to expect the toy.

Why Is Marker Training Beneficial?

When we are teaching dogs simple behaviors such as sit, down, or place, it may seem pretty easy to just reward the dog when they perform the behavior. We often are asked why we use the marker when you can just as easily just give your dog the reward?

There are actually multiple benefits to using marker training, even with simple training tasks. The marker can help the dog understand the absolute moment that they have achieved the goal of the training task. The marker can also teach the dog the action

(the motion) of sitting is what we want. The way you achieve this is by clicking when the dog is in the process of sitting but before its back end is on the ground.

And the last benefit is that the marker captures a mental image of exactly what the dog was doing when they heard the marker! Imagine taking a photograph of your dog doing exactly what you want, and being able to tell your dog “Do THAT every time!”

Using the marker training and conditioning for simple tasks will also make the marker more effective when you begin working on more precise or complicated tasks.

We love using a marker when teaching difficult tasks or tasks that we simply cannot reward at the moment that the dog accomplishes the goal. An example of this is a trick we teach called “Hit It” where the dog runs, jumps, and rebounds with all four paws off of a wall. The goal for this trick is for all four paws to touch the wall, but it would be very difficult to offer the dog a treat while they have all of their paws on the wall. Instead we can click or mark the moment when all four paws touch the wall, and the dog can receive their reward immediately following the action.

Marker training is also used in teaching service dog tasks, scent detection, tracking, search and rescue, and basically any other form of dog training you can think of!

How Do I Marker/Clicker Train My Dog?

The first step to marker training is choosing what you want to use as your marker. If you have a clicker this is a great tool because the sound is clear, consistent, and there is almost no variation every time you click. The only downside is clickers can break, get lost, or forgotten.

The other type of marker is called a “Verbal Marker.” A verbal marker is basically any word or sound you want to use as a marker. The most common verbal marker used by trainers is “Yes.” You want to keep your verbal marker short and clear to allow the marker to be as precise as possible. The downside to using a verbal marker is that your voice can add different types of inflection to the word which may make it difficult to understand that the word has the same meaning even when it sounds different.

Conditioning Phase

The first thing we do when we start using our marker with your dog is called marker conditioning. This is simply the process by which we teach the dog that the marker means that the reward comes next. During the conditioning phase and thereafter, you want to make sure that every time you use the marker the dog **MUST** receive a reward. If you choose to use a verbal marker like “yes” or “good”, be careful about using the words too much during conversation with your dog present or the marker may begin to lose their effectiveness.

There are two ways you can go about conditioning your marker. The first is to make the conditioning a completely separate session from your other training. The easiest way is to use food reward such as treats. The entire training session will just consist of you clicking or saying the marker word, and then immediately giving your dog a treat following the marker. (Be careful not to give the reward at the same time as giving the marker. The reward always must FOLLOW the marker.)

If I am conditioning separate from my normal training sessions, I'll generally use about a handful of treats, and just go through the click, treat, click, treat, click, treat routine until the treats are gone and that is the end of that conditioning session. This often takes less than a few minutes. The repetitive "Click, Treat" pattern helps the dog begin to anticipate the treat when he hears the marker.

The other method is to simply begin incorporating the clicker into your training. If you are relatively new to training, this could make things a bit more complicated, but the important thing is that the marker always comes directly before the reward. So, if I am working with a dog on "sit", I would go about the training session as usual, but every single time I am about to reward the dog for performing an acceptable sit, I just click before I reward.

The reason the second method may not be suitable for novice trainers is because you will find that you begin to have a lot of different things in your hand all at the same time with the leash, the clicker, the treats, all in addition to providing the proper communication to your dog through your body movements and position, leash pressure, and verbal commands. Adding just the one extra step can sometimes mess up your training rhythm at first.

Testing the Marker Conditioning

After several sessions of conditioning your dog to the marker, you can test to see if your dog has grasped the concept that the marker means that the reward is coming. The way you can test the marker begins with your dog being "free". (Free means that your dog in not any command is allowed to basically do as they please) Your dog may be roaming around, sniffing the ground, or even just laying on the ground near you.

When your dog isn't paying attention to you but is relatively nearby, you simply click or say your marker word the same exact way you had during the conditioning. If your dog is sufficiently conditioned, they should quickly turn and look at you with a look of anticipation for their reward. If your dog doesn't respond to the clicker or marker, you'll need to continue the conditioning for a few more sessions until your dog responds to the test appropriately.

Marker Training

Once you have effectively conditioned your dog to the marker and your dog understand that when they hear the marker it means that the reward is coming, you can now begin to incorporate the clicker into your regular training sessions.

In the early training sessions when you first begin to use the clicker, we recommend starting with tasks that your dog may already be proficient with. Start with simple tasks such as heeling, sit, or place. This will further help your dog to understand that by completing the task that was asked for, they will hear the click or marker and receive their reward.

In this way, it will further instill the concept that the marker means that “you have accomplished the goal, and here is your reward!”

You can start to use the marker for identifying very specific or subtle tasks that you are asking for. An example of this would be asking for eye contact. When you reward your dog for eye contact, they immediately shift their eyes to the reward in your hand. By using the marker when your dog is making eye contact, even though they are looking at the reward when you are giving it to them, they still understand that the reward is for what they were doing when they heard the marker.

No matter what you are working on, always just remember that every marker gets a reward!

I personally use a clicker during my training sessions, and I keep my clicker on a small lanyard attached to my wrist. One day, between training sessions I stopped to make a sandwich for lunch with all my personal dogs just milling around the kitchen and living space in my house. I put my hand on the edge of the counter and I leaned over to reach for something and accidentally leaned on the clicker.

Instantly, at the sound of the clicker, each one of my dogs was suddenly sitting around me waiting patiently for their rewards... I didn't want to devalue my clicker conditioning, so I slowly handed out piece of my sandwich that I had just made to each of my dogs.

Different Types and Uses of Markers

If you are finding that implementing your initial marker or the clicker into your training is a bit of a challenge, you may want to continue practicing with just that before adding different markers to mean different things.

Terminal / Termination Marker

The type of marker we have been discussing up to this point is generally known as a “termination marker.” A termination marker or a terminal marker is a marker that tells the dog that they have accomplished the goal and they are now free to do as they please. The marker tells the dog that they no longer need to continue holding a command or performing any specific task.

If you want to use a termination marker, but then want your dog to continue performing the task you should use the termination marker and immediately give the command again for the task after you’ve rewarded your dog.

Continuation Marker

You should choose a different marker from the one you have been using previously. I prefer to use “Good” for a continuation marker if I am using “Yes” as my terminal marker.

A continuation marker is a marker that tells your dog that they are on the right track and should keep doing whatever task they are doing and they will be rewarded for it eventually. You can start by rewarding immediately following the continuation marker at first during the conditioning stage, but eventually you will not need to reward for every continuation marker during the future training sessions. The reward will only come once the dog receives the termination marker.

Depending on the task you are training, you can reward with the continuation marker as long as the reward does not require the dog to stop doing the task. An example of this would be when marking and rewarding for eye contact. If your dog is making eye contact with you, the moment that you are giving the dog the actual reward your dog will immediately look at the reward instead. The continuation marker should not be followed by a reward in this instance.

However, if you are working on a sit-stay, you can use a continuation marker while your dog is in the sit position and reward the dog without the dog breaking from the sit command. If the dog breaks from the sit position after hearing the continuation marker or receiving a reward without being released or hearing the termination mark, you should correct your dog and put them back into the sit position, or whatever task you are working on.

Correction Marker

Your correction marker should be something short and clear, just like our other markers. I prefer to use the word, “No.”

A correction marker is a marker that lets the dog know that they have done the wrong behavior. This can be a behavior that you deem unacceptable, such as jumping on a guest, or it could be a failure to perform a task on command.

Similar to marker training using a termination marker, the correction marker lets the dog know that the punishment or consequence is imminent. You can use positive or negative punishment (see our Canine Learning Theory article to learn more about positive and negative punishment).

A correction marker should also be short and clear and always used in a neutral tone. Even if the dog has done something bad or unacceptable, we don't want to bring emotion into our corrections. Corrections are meant to guide our dogs away from unacceptable behaviors and help them understand how to make better choices and offer more desirable behaviors.

Just like our terminal marker, our correction marker must always be followed by a consequence. With our terminal marker, the consequence is the reward. With our correction marker the consequence is a punishment.

Using the correction marker allows your dog to know exactly what behavior they are receiving a punishment for. For example, if I see my dog jump on the counter in my kitchen, I immediately mark the behavior with the word “No,” then I calmly approach my dog and give them a tug on their leash or collar. They know that no matter how long it takes me to get to them, that that tug on the collar was for the behavior they did when they heard the word “No.”

How to Use Various Markers

The absolute most important principle to your dog understand what each of the markers means is you as the trainer knowing what each means, and using them with 100% consistency every time.

What this means is if you tell your dog to do something and you use a termination marker and your dog breaks that task that you don't correct the dog. If you use a continuation marker and the dog breaks then you must correct the dog. If your dog is in a free and decides to stiff the ground that you do not use a correction marker.

Consistency is the most important concept when helping your dog to learn new concepts. If your dog breaks after a continuation marker and sometimes you correct

them and sometimes you don't, you can't expect your dog to understand that you want them to continue the behavior.

If you are working on heeling with your dog, which is a task that can be generally taught quickly, but takes a long time to perfect, using the different markers can help the dog understand what you want as the handler.

While your dog is walking next to you and you want your dog to look up at you while walking the different markers to help them achieve that specific task. You can give your dog the continuation marker for walking next to you to say that you like that. If the dog begins to get head of you, you can use the correction marker to let them know that you don't like that. While the dog is walking next to you, when they look up, you can use the termination marker and give your dog a reward toy and begin playing!