

Clicker Training 101

Clicker training is a safe, fun and effective way to communicate with our pets during training sessions. A clicker, or a verbal marker such as “yes!,” is used to indicate the exact moment that our pet performs a desired behavior, helping us to quickly and accurately communicate with them, avoiding frustrating and confusing situations. Here is a step by step guide to help you through the process so that you and your pet can quickly become pros!

Check out the video and step wise instructions at the end of this handout for an example of clicker training in action.

Charging the clicker means to give meaning to the click sound. You can do this by clicking (or saying some other distinct word such as “yip” or “yes!”) in an upbeat voice 20-30 times immediately before presenting a tasty treat to your pet. You will know when your pet understands what the click means because they will look around for their treat reward. Once charged (you only need to do this once), the clicker is used to mark the exact moment that the correct behavior is performed. For example, when teaching a dog to sit, they may stand back up faster than we give them a treat, and we are therefore rewarding a “sit then stand” behavior. Using the clicker allows you to immediately (within a second) mark the correct behavior and gives you an opportunity to get the treat to their mouths within a few seconds instead of just one. It is also helpful when teaching a dog to “go potty” so that you can click from a distance and then reward when they are done and come back to you.

You can practice your clicker timing by marking (the act of clicking for a certain behavior) the moment a tennis ball hits the ground – it’s harder than you think!

Clicker Training basics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wv1uvvqaSw.

Charging the clicker: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ub0xZBsrk_c.

Animals are very context specific, learning in one environment doesn’t always translate to another, potentially more distracting environment. This means we need to start training in a calm, quiet, familiar area to learn the basics and then gradually work towards more challenging environments over time. The more often you practice the stronger the behavior will be. Here is a video explaining this concept: https://youtu.be/E-SX6H_9hPc.

Practice in short 1-5 minutes sessions. Don’t make things too hard too quickly and always go back a couple steps at the beginning of each new training session to give your pet a chance to perform the correct behavior a few times and have fun. If you or they become frustrated, make things easier or end the session. Training should always be FUN!

Use only positive reinforcement when training (rewards for correct behavior). This will ensure you are both having fun and that these tricks can be used to help your pet feel less anxious as

soon as you ask for the behavior. Rewards should be food the size of a blueberry or smaller. You may be able to use low value rewards such as dry biscuits or kibble when practicing easy behaviors in easy environments but should always use higher value treats such as fresh meats, cheese, or wet food when learning new behaviors or practicing in new or distracting environments. If you use many rewards in a day, you may want to slightly decrease how much your pet eats during that day's meals. It is also helpful to not train right after a big meal as your pet may not be hungry enough to eat treats.

For some pets, rewards can also be play or environmental rewards: squeaky toys, tug ropes and getting to smell a bush on a walk. Other real life rewards are car rides, walks, getting the back door opened, and being petted (some pets don't enjoy petting and praise as much as we may want them to – watch their body language!!).

Touch/Target

This cue is taught by placing your hand, finger tip, or target stick in front of your pet's nose and immediately clicking/treating when they reach their nose towards it. Slowly increase to a click/treat only when your pet is actually touching the target. Over time, continue to increase criteria and only click/treat for firm contact and then move your hand farther and farther away until your pet eventually has to walk across the room to touch. Once they readily run over to shove their nose into the target, you are read to add the cue word "touch" immediately before you place the target/your hand out. Over time they will learn what the word means. This cue can be used to call your pet over to you, up onto something, or when shaping new complex behaviors!

Here are some videos explaining the process:

Dogs: <https://youtu.be/RWSJVwZybwo>

Cats: <https://youtu.be/GVMbGahEtpQ>

Look

Start by holding a few treats in your hand and then crossing your hands in your lap in front of your pet. Wait for your pet to finish sniffing and investigating your hands and click/treat as soon as they do. Once they are good at this wait for them to turn their head slightly towards your face and click/treat. Then eventually you will only click/treat when they glance at your face. The goal is to get them to look at your face for at least a second or two before you click/treat. At that point you can add in the cue "look" right before placing your hands with treats in front of them. With repetition they will learn what "look" means. It may help some pets if you stand when practicing this exercise or make a quiet noise to encourage them to look towards your face.

Settle/Place

This can be helpful when visitors are over. Please see this article for a detailed guide to teaching this cue: <https://positively.com/dog-behavior/basic-cues/go-settle/>

You can also reward relaxed behaviors: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wesm2OpE_2c.

If we expect too much too soon, it is very common for our pets to get frustrated and confused, showing us everything they know in hopes of earning the reward. If this happens, make the game easier so that you can find something to reward immediately. For example, if you are teaching your dog to touch but they don't touch their nose to your hand, remove your hand. Make sure they are focused on you and then place your hand in front of their face again and immediately click/treat if they move their nose even a millimeter towards your hand. Work up from there.

Read on for an example of clicker training and shaping in a calf!

Here is the associated video showing the end result:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ44mr7Sq4g>.

This is a fun video from one of my rotations during vet school. This is Sam the calf showing off his newly learned behavior of stepping up on a bag of compressed bedding. I used positive reinforcement, clicker training, operant conditioning and shaping to achieve this goal. Read on to learn how to train your pet or patient to perform a behavior.

Step One: Sam learned that a click (can also be a verbal "yes" or whistle) equaled a food reward. I did this by clicking then immediately giving him a few pieces of grain. After 10-20 repetitions most animals will learn this association. You can ensure they have learned it by clicking and watching for their response. If they orient to you or look for the reward, you've accomplished your goal. If not, keep clicking and treating until they make the connection.

Step Two: Shaping!! Outline the behaviors you will reward in a stepwise manner. I didn't just expect Sam to step up on the bag on his own, it wasn't a normal behavior for him! So I had to create approximations towards the final behavior. First was any movement of a front limb towards the bag. Next was a step towards the bag. After that was touching the bag with his hoof. I then increased the criteria and only rewarded for placing his hoof on top of the bag, then for placing weight on the bag with one limb and finally for placing both hooves on the bag.

Step Three: Reward each step of the behavior. I started with the first approximation and rewarded Sam with a few pieces of grain until he was regularly moving one limb towards the bag. Once he was reliably and quickly performing that step I increased the criteria to him actually taking a step towards the bag, and so on.

Step Four: End your session after 5 minutes, or sooner, if you notice your pet is not as interested or is no longer having fun. Start back up again later in the day or even on another day.

Step Five: Start with the previous step than you ended on, with Sam that would mean rewarding for any movement toward the bag. Don't worry, the previously learned steps move quicker during each session.

Step Six: Increase the criteria until you have the final behavior. Give better rewards (higher value treats such as grain vs hay) for really good approximations and for difficult steps (placing weight on the bag).

Step Seven: Once your pet is reliably performing the behavior you can add a cue word, such as "step up." Say the word right before you know your pet will perform the behavior and reward once they have performed it. Using the same process of shaping outline above, you can start to cue the behavior from greater distances from the bag and in increasingly difficult environments (other people or animals around etc).

Remember to work at your animal's pace and always have fun!!

Read on to learn a few things I could have done better in the video

You should click at the exact moment your pet performed the desired behavior, otherwise they might learn the wrong thing. Communication is critical! The click helps you mark the moment of the correct behavior faster than you can deliver a treat.

Sam probably did not enjoy the pat on the head I gave him. Some animals enjoy petting but we shouldn't count on this to be considered a reward. Praise is nice sometimes but treats, toys and play are usually better!!

Pay attention to your own body language and what you say. Your pet will pick up on everything you say and do and might get the wrong message if you aren't paying attention.

Using a smaller bag would have been easier on Sam's body. Don't expect your pet to perform acrobatics. Choose behaviors that are compatible with their species, age, and anatomy. A dog might be able to learn a backflip through shaping but a calf could never perform such a behavior.