



# Getting Started with Clicker Training



## Good Behavior is a Click away!

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What is Clicker Training? In a nutshell, it is using a marker signal to indicate when the animal has achieved your training goal, telling them that they accomplished the task and will be rewarded with a significant reward. For more information on what it is, please see some excellent articles [here](#). The clicker is a marvelous tool to help encourage your dog to act in the polite, mannerly way that you want, and to reduce the annoying or dangerous behaviors you want to avoid. Here is an outline of the steps to use.

(Note that these steps can be used for training any species - horses, cats, birds, rats, dolphins, lions, tigers, and bears. Just substitute your species and appropriate desired behaviors!).

### Step 1. Charge up your clicker

Click the clicker once (press on the end of the metal tab that does not have the dimple, in-out) and then give your dog a treat. Use something your dog really likes at first. Small pieces of yummy food (dog cookies, hot dogs, cheese) are best because the dog can enjoy it and be ready for the next thing quickly. Repeat this until your dog reacts to the clicker (by startling, pricking her ears, or suddenly looking for the treat). If she does, you're ready for the next step. Technically, this is called "establishing a secondary reinforcer" but most people call it "charging up the clicker"! Remember: click first, then treat.

Note: this step is not entirely necessary for the dog's sake; most dogs will quickly form the connection between the click and the treat while you train a behavior. But if you've never used a clicker before, it might help you to practice clicking, then handing over a treat.



### Common questions

*My dog is afraid of the clicker's sound. What do I do?*

Muffle the sound. For a sound-sensitive dog, place several layers of adhesive tape (any kind) over the little round dimple on the metal tongue. For less-sensitive dogs, put the clicker in your pocket, or behind your back. It is a loud sound. Don't point the clicker at the dog or click it right by her ears.

*My dog is so excited by the treats, he can't control himself. How do I stop him from mugging me for treats?*

Take a moment to teach "Doggy Zen", the idea that to get the treats, the dog must give up the treats. Hold a treat in your hand and close your fist over it. Hold it out towards your dog, just above his nose. Don't move your hand. Allow your dog to sniff, lick, paw, gnaw or do whatever to try to get the treat out (if he bites you, yelp like a wounded puppy and take your hand away. Ignore the dog studiously for a few minutes, then try again). Watch for the moment when your dog gives up trying to get the treat, and immediately click and give him the treat. Practice this to the point where he immediately backs away from your closed fist. Then start with a treat held more loosely in your hand. If he tries to take it from you before you're ready to give it to him, simply close your hand around it and again wait for him to back away.

*My dog is biting my fingers when he takes the treat! How do I teach him to have a gentle mouth?*

Work on developing a "soft" mouth: Hold a treat between your first finger and thumb and offer it to the dog. Hold on to the treat, and don't let the dog have it until you only feel lips or tongue on your hand. At that moment, click and give the dog the treat. Practice this until the dog always takes the treat gently. Hand-feed the dog's next meal, if necessary. Later, if you and your dog get carried away with the excitement of training and starts to get rough, but you don't want to stop working on the training task, form a little tube out of your hand and cup the treat inside of it, so that the dog has to stick his tongue into your fist to get the treat out. If your dog is very rough, feed the treat with a metal spoon or tongs.

*Where can I get a clicker?*

You can order one from the [SitStay GoOut Store](#), or use a toy clicker from a party store, or pick a marker word to use instead. Real clickers provide distinctive, consistent, and unique sounds (and last much longer than a toy cricket or frog clicker!).

## **Step 2. Three ways to train: Capturing, Luring, or Shaping**

**Note:** Don't use a command at this point. The dog is trying to figure out what you want, and since she doesn't understand English she will learn to ignore your words while she concentrates on trying to get you to click!

### *Capturing a Behavior*

Whenever you see your dog doing something you like, click the clicker during the behavior and give the dog the treat. The action you reward can be anything: lifting one paw, a "sit", touching your hand with her nose, even looking at you (for a distracted dog) or standing with all four feet on the ground (for a dog that likes to jump up). (If your dog is too distracted to notice that you're giving her a treat, go back to "Step 1"). Every time your dog does the behavior again, click and treat. Timing is important. Think of the clicker as a camera that marks the instant the dog's doing the right thing. Note: Don't bother saying the name of the behavior at this point — you'll probably distract yourself and your dog!

If you're trying out clicker training for the first time, try capturing a behavior that your dog does relatively often, such as sitting or looking at you. Both of these are great actions to encourage! Each time the dog sits or makes eye contact, click immediately, then give your dog a treat. If your dog refuses to get up (or look away!), toss the treat to one side to get the dog to move so you can "reset" the dog to do it again!

### **Common Question**

*My dog is just sitting and staring at me. I clicked the first time she sat, but now she won't move.*

Get up and move around yourself. Act cheerful and light-hearted, especially if your dog seems stressed. You can also pretend to do something else, like read the newspaper or do some chore, while watching your dog and waiting for her to perform the particular action you're looking for (this works great for "down"). After your well-timed click "captures" the action, toss the treat a few feet away from the dog, so she has to get up to get her treat. (In general, it's a good idea to give the dog the treat while she's in the position you wanted, since the treat is really what strengthens the response, and you also don't want to encourage the dog to spend a lot of time sniffing the floor for dropped goodies. But if you're at this stare-down impasse, go ahead and toss the treats for a while).

### *Luring a Behavior*

Another way you can get a dog to move to a position you want is through *luring*. Hold a treat in front of your dog's nose. She'll probably try to lick it, but don't let her eat it yet. You can use it as a "nose magnet," since she'll probably follow it everywhere. You can "lure" or "guide" her into a sit by slowly moving the treat from her nose back towards the top of her head. Keep it low, so she won't jump up. As soon as she sits, click the clicker and give her the treat in your hand. If she's trying everything *but* sitting, at first click and treat for lowering her back legs and butt. Then try to get her to sit down all the way.

Luring works great for "down", especially for dogs that are hard to physically manipulate into a down. It's harder for little, short-legged dogs (like Dachshunds) but sometimes you can lure them under your outstretched leg (while you sit on the ground), or place the small dog on a table and draw the lure below the edge.

### Common Question

*This worked great, but now my dog will only do this action if she sees I have a treat. Do I have to show her a treat up front forever?*

Try to "fade the lure" as quickly as possible. Try luring the dog into position two or three times, then try using an "imaginary lure" - your empty fingers, pretending to hold a treat. Don't forget to reward with the real thing. As your dog succeeds with that, stop pretending so much. Most luring motions turn very nicely into hand signals. Sweeping your hand up towards you makes a nice "sit" command, moving your hand down makes a great signal for "down".

### *Shaping a Behavior*

This is sort of an advanced form of "capturing". You start by clicking and rewarding the barest hint of the behavior you want to end up with, and then concentrate on taking small steps closer to your goal. For example, you might click and reward every time your dog turns her head to the left. Soon she'll be doing it more and more. Then you only click and reward when she's turned it further. Then only when she turns it far and takes a step towards the left. Then a head turn and two steps, then three. Eventually you will get her to turn in a complete circle, and will only be clicking and rewarding for that. Then you wait for her to do two circles, and click and reward. Then only click and reward the faster ones. Eventually, you will have "shaped" a spin.

### Common Question

*We seem stuck. I can't seem to get her started on the behavior I want to shape!*

Break the overall goal behavior into little tiny pieces. A spin might start with a head turn, or it might start with a glance to the side. Be a behavior "splitter", not a "lumper"; look for the smallest increments of the action you can imagine.

### **Step 3. Add a Cue Word**

When your dog is doing your trick reliably, to the point where you can predict when she's about to do it, start adding a cue (saying the command). For example, if you know she's about to sit, say "Sit". If you know she's about to lift her paw, say "Wave!". Match this cue with this behavior many times. Remember: dogs don't know what "commands" are. But your dog *will* learn that if she does this trick when she hears this cue, she'll get a reward.

Warning: if you get in the habit of repeating the cues, your dog will think the cue is "Sit-sit-sit", and she'll *always* wait for you to say it three times before responding!

### **Step 4. Test the Cue**

Try saying the cue word. If your dog does the trick, click and give her a "jackpot" — a whole bunch of really good treats! Whenever you really like something your dog does, identify it with one click and reward it with several or better treats. If she doesn't do the trick when you say the cue word, you were a little early. Work on Step 3 for a while longer.

### **Step 5. Ignore Un-Cued Behaviors**

When she's reliably doing her trick when you say the cue, stop clicking-and-treating her for doing it at other times. Just ignore these "spontaneous" behaviors. Continue to click-and-treat when she does it when you cue.

Note 1: You might find that your dog starts doing this trick a lot right after you stop rewarding her. This is normal. It's called an "extinction burst". (You probably do the same thing when a button stops working. Instead of trying something else, you just push the button several times, harder, before you give up!).

Note 2: Capturing is a good way to control *unwanted behaviors*, like barking or jumping up on you. But be ready for the "Extinction Burst" (see Note 1). To keep unwanted behaviors under control, it's good to give the cue and reward the behavior every once in a while — have a little barking or jumping session!

### **Step 6. Become a Variable Reward Giver**

Now try to get your dog to do 2 or 3 repetitions of the trick before you click and treat it (it's still a good idea to say "Good dog!" each time). This is called "putting the behavior on a variable reinforcement schedule". The dog doesn't know when she'll get the big reward, so she keeps trying just like people playing at slot machines or the lottery. Note that if the

dog is always giving a satisfactory response, you should *always* reward it in some way, even if it's just by praising, petting or smiling at them.

You can use this step to refine the dog's actions, as well. Since you're rewarding less often, you can get picky — only reward the *fastest* sits or the *highest* paw-lifts. If you're working on a long-term behavior like walking next to you, click for the closest position, or for walking several steps at your side.

### Common Question

*My dog is doing the behavior, but sometimes it's sloppy, or slow, or he'll do something else first, like jump on me. Should I reward all of these?*

No, only reward the behaviors that you really like. Set a criterion of what the "proper" behavior should look like. If a straight sit is important to you, just allow sloppy sits to go unrewarded. For slow reactions, give your dog a limited "window of opportunity" to respond to your cue: Closely observe your dog responding ten times, and count in your head the amount of time it takes her to respond. Figure out the average response time. Then reward any future responses that take place in the average time or less. After a while, shorten the "window" and only reward responses that take less than average, shortening the allowed response time until you are only rewarding quick, snappy responses.

Sometimes dogs develop "superstitious" behaviors, such as jumping up on your and then sitting, or sitting plus offering a "handshake". This is because they think that the extra behavior is important for getting the reward. Watch for variations and only reward the dog when he performs the desired behavior without the extras. Be patient!

### **Step 7. Generalize It**

Now teach your dog that this cue will work everywhere. Move to different locations in your house and try it. Go outside and try it. Try it with the leash on, and with it off (in a safe location, of course!). Try it in the car, in the park, and at the vet's. You may need to go back a few steps, maybe even back to Step 2, and you'll want to make the rewards big for each new accomplishment. Your dog will "generalize" the behavior, and she'll learn that it's the cue word that's important, not the fact that she's in the kitchen or it's just before dinner or the leash is on.

Use the clicker to teach behaviors you want to replace the ones you don't want — like sitting

instead of jumping on guests. Your dog will find the alternative rewarding!

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