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The Marker: How we Use It in Training – Everything you Need to Know

Introduction

A marker is a signal that a reward is forthcoming after the dog exhibits a desired behaviour. In technical terms, it is a stimulus that conditions a response which the dog associates with a reward.

For dogs that can hear well, we typically use a sound as a marker. For deaf dogs or those who do not hear well, we can use a vibrating collar.

For sounds that “mark”, here are three common choices:

1. A “clicker”, a small hand-held device that provides a clear, loud, clicking sound when pressed.
2. A tongue-click.
3. The word “yes” or some other word.

Markers are used as training tools, especially for positive reinforcement methods. Positive reinforcement is a technique whereby we give something “valuable” to the dog (a reward) that makes a behaviour more likely in the future. That is, the behaviour is reinforced.

Food treats are very common as rewards, but some dogs respond better to other rewards such as playing with toys and special praise from the owner.

Like all training tools, markers such as the physical “clicker” are not meant to be used forever. Once the owner and dog have mastered a particular behaviour (e.g., “come”, “leave it”), the marker can be discontinued and eventually rewards (other than praise through voice or touch) will be discontinued too.

For the remainder of this discussion, we will assume the dog has good hearing and that a verbal marker will be used. For deaf dogs, a tactile marker (e.g., vibrating collar) would be used. The terms “marker” and “clicker” are used interchangeably.

Getting Started

We must first condition the dog to associate the marker (sound) with something positive, like a treat. Without this conditioning, the sound is meaningless to the dog.

Making this association is easy. Using the marker (e.g., “click”), wait a second or two, give the reward (e.g., a treat). Repeat. Do this for a minute or two a few times a day. Very quickly the dog will learn that the marker sound (“click”) means a reward is forthcoming and he will anticipate the reward when he hears the marker.

Note: The dog does not have to do anything at this point. Click, reward. This is classical conditioning, just like Pavlov's experiments that rang a bell before each meal. Dogs would associate the bell sound (marker) with food and salivate in anticipation of a meal every time they heard a bell ring.

This process is called "installing" or "charging" the marker. It means the dog has been fully conditioned to associate the marker (e.g., "click") with a forthcoming reward (e.g., food treat). To test that conditioning is complete, walk away from your dog, face the opposite direction and give the marker cue. If the dog comes immediately back for a reward, he understands that the marker cue predicts a treat. If he does not respond to the marker, repeat the conditioning exercise above.

It is important to remember that when we are using the marker as a training tool (i.e., until a behaviour is fully mastered by owner and dog), the dog must always be given a reward when the marker cue is given, even if it was done by mistake. However, once the marker cue has been conditioned, you do not need to rush the reward. Indeed, you always want at least a couple of seconds to elapse before the reward is given. Don't panic – you will have time to get a treat.

What Marker Should I Choose?

The choice of a marker is a personal one, but it has to be readily available every time you are training the dog or trying to reinforce a desired behaviour. There is strong evidence that a physical device (a clicker) promotes better and faster training. In part, this is likely because the dog can distinguish a clicker sound more readily (see below), but it is probably also because the use of a clicker forces the human being to be more careful and deliberate in training (i.e., makes us better trainers).

Marker Alternatives

Marker	Advantages	Disadvantages
Clicker	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Consistent, distinctive sound that dogs can hear clearly amongst other noises.● Forces handler to be deliberate and careful in timing and use – hence, can promote greater consistency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Requires the handler to learn how to use the device properly (e.g., don't click by mistake).● One more thing to carry around (we only have two hands and one of them is often holding a leash).
Tongue Click	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Same as physical clicker above.● Tongue clicks are not typical in our normal daily lives – hence, deliberate.● No need for a physical device.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Tongue-clicking needs to be learned by handler and not become a nervous habit.
Word such as "Yes"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Natural for human beings.● No need for a physical device.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● This word can occur commonly in everyday conversation.● Harder for dogs to discern against background noises.● Handler can be inconsistent in the volume and tenor of the "yes". This can confuse the dog.

Marker Installed (Classical Conditioning Complete) – What Happens Next?

Soon enough we will use the marker (hereafter, we will use the term “clicker” or “click”) to teach (train) desired behaviours in response to a cue (e.g., a cue can be a verbal or visual command). However, the marker can be used much more broadly. It can be used to promote desired behaviours that are not directly commanded or “cued”. This is because the clicker has been “installed” – the dog associates the clicker with a forthcoming reward and will be more likely in the future to repeat the behaviour being marked. We can use this to our advantage in subtle ways.

Before training begins, both the dog and human need to be set up for success, as follows:

- The dog should have been lightly exercised (not to exhaustion or tiredness);
- The dog should relieve itself (pee and/or poop);
- The dog should not be given any type of food before training (if treats are used as a reward);
- The owner must have the marker readily available;
- The owner must have valuable rewards (e.g., treats or toys) readily accessible.

One of the best uses of the marker is to reinforce a desired behaviour (e.g., settling down) *when the dog shows it voluntarily (i.e., without a stimulus) or at unexpected times*. For example, suppose the dog is readily excited by the sight of other dogs. If the dog settles down on his own (even briefly) and calmly observes the other dog instead of lunging, barking, etc., you can use the marker and then reward him, even if you were not anticipating or asking for such behaviour. You didn’t ask for the “settling down” behaviour, but it is the behaviour you want and it will be reinforced by the clicker/reward. However, timing is everything. The dog must stop the undesired behaviour and exhibit the desired behaviour (e.g., being calm) for a few seconds before you click/reward.

Directed Training

Ideally, you should choose two or three key behaviours for marker training and focus on those. You do not need to use the marker for every command. We will eventually discontinue use of the marker for fully mastered commands and behaviours.

The command (behaviour) “leave it” is one of the most important ones to teach our dogs. It could quite literally save a dog’s life. “Leave it” doesn’t just mean “don’t pick up that food on the floor” or “ignore that squirrel”. Leave it means: “whatever has your interest, leave it alone and turn your attention back to me”. No matter what, 100% of the time. That “thing” that has a dog’s interest could be a truck, a man wearing a hoodie, a child, a dead rabbit, a porcupine or some discarded chicken wings on the side of the road. By “leave it”, we truly mean “that thing is not your concern, ignore it, look at me”. Dogs that have fully mastered “leave it” often do not maintain focus on the owner for long. They ignore the object, give a quick glance and then continue (e.g., walking) or obey the next command.

This is a hard command to teach, but it is essential to a dog’s life. It will also provide your dog much comfort and stability as he learns that you’ve decided what matters, given guidance (“leave it”) and that he knows exactly what is expected of him. There is no ambiguity and no misunderstanding. This is the security that dogs crave.

Starting more simply, let's say we want to teach a dog not to pick up something dropped on the floor. One way to start is to constrain the leash (so the dog cannot physically get the food) and then drop the food on the floor. Wait. As soon as the dog looks at you, click, reward (with a treat from your hand; do not use the treat on the floor). Repeat this. We have not issued a verbal cue or command. We are conditioning the dog to ignore the food on the floor by marking the desired *voluntarily* behaviour (ignoring the food and looking at you) and rewarding.

Once this association has been made, you can place food on the floor and say "leave it", wait, dog looks at you, click, reward (again, with a treat from your hand, not the treat on the floor). Eventually, the dog will exhibit the desired behaviour (ignoring the object of interest and looking at you) after the verbal cue "leave it" is given.

As with all training, timing is critical. You should use the marker (click) precisely when the dog looks away from the object of interest and looks at you. Since the marker has been installed, you have time to get a treat for a reward. In teaching "leave it", it is important to use highly valued rewards (i.e., especially tasty and smelly treats or the dog's favourite toy).

Eventually, we have this sequence:

Cue (command) → Desired Response (behaviour) → Click (mark) → Reward (treat, play, praise)

Remember, after the marker is fully "installed" and understood, we do not need to rush to give the reward. We can take a few seconds to get a treat or a toy. The dog knows the reward (reinforcer) is coming. It is also important that the clicker be pressed only once before the reward.

Weaning Off the Marker

Just like food rewards, clickers are training tools and we don't use them forever. We eventually wean dogs off treats and use only praise ("good boy") or a pat on the head or a smile. Dogs don't need clickers to mark a behaviour once the behaviour is fully learned and mastered. Eventually, we have this sequence:

Cue (command) → Desired Response (behaviour) → Verbal Praise

However, if a dog regresses, we can go back to using a clicker. This is especially helpful if a dog starts to ignore the recall ("come") command. Once "installed" and used consistently, the dog will know that the clicker marks the desired behaviour and a reward will follow.

Once you have mastered a particular marker (e.g., the clicker), you can try another marker (e.g., tongue click) by starting at the beginning (see "Getting Started"). Most dogs can learn multiple markers and this keeps training fun and helps the dog pay closer attention. For example, you might start using a physical clicker because of its advantages, but once mastered move onto the tongue click.

Common Problems

The table below lists some common errors in using the marker along with some commentary and suggested corrective action. Don't panic if you make a mistake; with practice, you will master using the marker and your dog will learn faster and better than ever!

Common Mistakes When using the Marker

Error or Problem	Commentary and Corrective Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Installation is incomplete – the dog does not associate the marker with an upcoming reward.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Go back to the beginning – see the section “Getting Started”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The clicker is used to distract the dog. For example, the clicker is pressed multiple times in short succession.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● While this will definitely get your dog's attention, this is not the intended purpose of the clicker. The clicker should be pressed only once. Multiple clicks can render it ineffective for training.● Use a different (and unusual) sound to get your dog's attention or better yet, train “look at me”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Treat (reward) is given simultaneously with the marker sound.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The dog needs time to mentally process the marker (“click”) and then anticipate the forthcoming reward. If the reward is given simultaneously with the “click”, the dog will focus on the reward and likely ignore the click. This renders the marker ineffective.● After the marker, wait a second or two before giving the reward.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The dog seems to understand the marker in some situations, but not others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● This typically happens when the word “yes” is used as the marker since the dog hears this word in everyday human conversation and we are often inconsistent in the tone and volume used.● Be very careful in how you say “yes”. Use the same volume and lilting voice each time.● Consider switching to a physical clicker or tongue click.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The clicker is used inconsistently when a behaviour has not yet been mastered.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Depending on the dog, this might not be too problematic, but consistent use (with a reward after every click) will promote faster learning.