How to write a shaping plan

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A clicker training shaping plan is a step-by-step guide to teaching an animal a new behavior using positive reinforcement. It breaks the behavior down into small, achievable steps so the animal can learn gradually.

How It Works:
1. Define the Goal – Decide exactly what behavior you want (e.g., teaching a horse to bow).
2. Break It Down – Split the behavior into small steps (e.g., lowering the head, bending a knee).
3. Click & Reward – Use a clicker to mark and reward each small success.

4. Progress Gradually – Once the animal masters one step, ask for a little more before clicking.

5. Put It on Cue – Once the full behavior is learned, introduce a verbal or hand signal.

By shaping the behavior in small steps, the horse stays engaged, confident, and successful.

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Each behaviour you are training should have its own training plan. When you are first starting out this guide will help you visualise the steps and learn how to break the behaviour down.

The smaller you can break the steps down, the easier your horse is going to understand what you are asking and the quicker they will learn.

If you get stuck you can cheat and ask ChatGpt to write you a training plan for a particular behaviour, however learning to write and visualise your own plans will do more for your horsemanship then getting AI to do the work for you.

HOW TO USE

STEP 1: DEFINE SUCCESS

WHAT DOES THE FINISHED BEHAVIOR LOOK LIKE?

WHAT CUE (VERBAL/HAND SIGNAL) WILL YOU USE?

STEP 2: BREAK DOWN THE BEHAVIOUR INTO SMALL STEPS

(LIST THE GRADUAL STEPS TO SHAPE THE BEHAVIOUR)

1. (FIRST SMALL, EASY STEP)

2. (NEXT SMALL STEP)

3. (CONTINUE ADDING STEPS LEADING TO THE FINAL BEHAVIOUR)

4. (FINAL STEP BEFORE THE FULL BEHAVIOUR)

5. (FINAL BEHAVIOUR)

SOMETIMES IT'S EASIER TO WRITE THE FINAL BEHAVIOUR FIRST AND WORK BACKWARDS

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HERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF TEACHING A HORSE TO BOW

BEHAVIOR GOAL:

TEACH THE HORSE TO LOWER ONE KNEE WHILE KEEPING THE OTHER LEG EXTENDED, DIPPING THE HEAD IN A GRACEFUL BOW ON CUE.

STEP 1: DEFINE SUCCESS

• **FINAL BEHAVIOR:**

HORSE BENDS ONE FRONT LEG, EXTENDS THE OTHER, AND LOWERS ITS HEAD IN A BOW POSITION.

• **CUE**:

VERBAL CUE ("BOW") + HAND SIGNAL (GENTLY POINTING DOWNWARD).

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STEP 2: BREAK DOWN THE BEHAVIOR INTO SMALL STEPS

1. REWARD HEAD LOWERING

CLICK AND TREAT (C&T) WHEN THE HORSE LOWERS ITS HEAD SLIGHTLY IN RESPONSE TO LIGHT PRESSURE ON A TARGET (SUCH AS A TREAT BETWEEN THE LEGS).

2. ENCOURAGE WEIGHT SHIFT

LURE THE HORSE'S NOSE TOWARD ITS CHEST WHILE ENCOURAGING A SLIGHT WEIGHT SHIFT BACKWARD. C&T FOR ANY BACKWARD WEIGHT SHIFT.

3. INTRODUCE LEG FLEXION

GENTLY LIFT ONE FRONT LEG USING A ROPE AROUND THE FETLOCK (OR BY TAPPING BEHIND THE KNEE). C&T FOR ANY ATTEMPT TO LIFT THE LEG.

4. COMBINE HEAD LOWERING & LEG LIFT

WHILE HOLDING THE LEG UP MOMENTARILY, ASK FOR A HEAD DROP. C&T WHEN THE HORSE HOLDS THIS POSITION, EVEN BRIEFLY.

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5. INCREASE DURATION & DEPTH

GRADUALLY ASK FOR A DEEPER BOW BY REWARDING
ONLY WHEN THE HORSE FLEXES THE LEG FURTHER
AND LOWERS ITS HEAD CLOSER TO THE GROUND.

6. FADE THE LURE

REDUCE TREAT LURING SO THE HORSE BEGINS TO
OFFER THE BEHAVIOR WITH THE CUE ALONE.

7. ADD CUE & PROOF THE BEHAVIOR

INTRODUCE THE VERBAL CUE AND HAND SIGNAL
BEFORE ASKING FOR THE BEHAVIOR. PRACTICE IN
DIFFERENT LOCATIONS AND GRADUALLY REDUCE
TREATS WHILE STILL REINFORCING OCCASIONALLY.

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SHAPING PLAN TEMPLATE

BEHAVIOUR GOAL: (DESCRIBE BEHAVIOUR)

STEP 1: DEFINE SUCCESS

- **FINAL BEHAVIOR**:

- **CUE**:

STEP 2: BREAK DOWN THE BEHAVIOR INTO SMALL STEPS

STEP 1.

STEP 2.

STEP 3.

STEP 4.

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STEP 5.

STEP 6.

STEP 7.

STEP 8.