

Six Steps of Clicker Training

STEP 1: ESTABLISH THE MEANING OF THE CLICKER

If your dog already knows that “click” means “food is coming,” skip to Step 2.

At first, the clicker means nothing to an animal. We want your dog to know that when he/she hears the click, a nice treat immediately follows. Start by clicking once and feeding the dog a treat as quickly as possible. This should get your dog’s attention. It won’t take long—fewer than a dozen click/treats should do it for most dogs. Click/treat for any desired behavior (the dog just looking at you, for instance).

To test whether the clicker has meaning to your dog, simply click when your dog is turned in the opposite direction. If his head snaps in your direction, he/she knows what it means!

It is best to begin with the clicker out of your dog’s sight. Avoid pointing the clicker at your dog like a television remote. If your dog is fearful of the sound, muffle the clicker by putting it in your pocket. You can also switch to a softer-sounding clicker or even the click of a ballpoint pen.

STEP 2: OBSERVE THE BEHAVIOR

Now use your clicker and treats (and your eagle eye!) to catch your dog doing something you like. Some easy possibilities include: looking at you, sitting, lying down, coming toward you, touching your open palm with his nose.

STEP 3: MARK THE BEHAVIOR

The timing of the click is crucial. Click as the behavior you want is occurring, not afterwards. So, if you’re clicking your dog for sitting, you would click just as his butt begins to hit the ground. The clicker becomes a new way of communicating with your dog, and must be consistent and mean the same thing every time: a treat is coming.

STEP 4: REINFORCE THE BEHAVIOR

Once you have marked the behavior with a click, deliver a treat to the dog. The treat should always come immediately after the click. The reinforcer (treat) must be rewarding to the dog! If he isn’t enjoying a particular treat, try another.

STEP 5: INTRODUCE A CUE

Once the dog is performing a behavior reliably (about 80% of the time), begin introducing the verbal cue just before the dog performs the behavior. Use any word or visual signal you want, but be sure the word (or short phrase) will only be given for that behavior. After the dog is performing the behavior in response to the cue, you may phase out the clicker and begin to alternate click/treats with things like toys, the chance to go for a walk, and petting/praise for correct performance. If you ask the dog to perform the behavior, always “pay” him in some way—whether it be the chance to go outside, fetch a ball, praise, play with a toy, greet a new person, or eat a small piece of food.

STEP 6: GENERALIZE THE CUE

To help the dog understand the cue in any context, reward successful responses in different environments (such as a new room of the house, outside in the yard, at a friend’s house, on the sidewalk, etc.). For very important behaviors (like a recall or potty training) continue to reward each and every response with a click/treat for a very long time to develop a stronger response.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

1. Proceed at the dog’s pace. Each dog learns at a different rate.
2. If you click, even if by accident, *always* give the dog a treat.
3. Always set the dog up to succeed by reinforcing the dog frequently (10-15 times per minute for simple behaviors like “sit” and “lie down”) and keeping training sessions very short (3 to 5 minutes is plenty for most dogs).
4. Keep a clicker handy. Buy several and leave them around the house, in your purse, and in your car. The clicker is a tool for training new behaviors. Once a behavior is trained to your satisfaction, the clicker is no longer needed for that particular behavior. You can just reward with a treat, petting, toy, praise, a chance to go outside, etc.
5. Have treats readily available. Get a pouch that goes around your waist or one that you can hook on a belt loop. Use treats that you can put in your pocket. Have treats available in strategic locations throughout the house, in case you catch your dog doing something wonderful!

6. If you plan to do a lot of training, reduce the dog's regular meal according to the amount of treats he is getting during training sessions. This will help keep him from gaining weight.
7. Treats are rewards (paychecks) for doing a behavior correctly. They are not bribes. Avoid dangling the food in front of the dog either before the behavior or before the click.
8. As a rule, treats should be small (about the size of a pea), tasty, and easily chewed and swallowed.