

Charging Up Your Clicker

Clicker training can seem almost magical, but the real beauty of the clicker is that it gives us a positive way to communicate with our dogs that they can readily understand. The clicker is simply a tool we use to signal the dog that he did the right thing at the very moment he does it. The click also predicts a reward, and the precise timing of the click tells the dog exactly which behavior earned the reward. The click is therefore a “reward marker.”

Rewards are something we give to reinforce a desirable behavior. Primary reinforcers are anything that a dog needs or likes enough to work for. The food treat is a primary reinforcer because it is necessary for survival—the dog does not have to be conditioned to care about it. The clicker is a secondary/conditioned reinforcer—the sound of the click is reinforcing to the dog only because it is paired and associated with food—the click predicts a treat.

These are the rules for clicker training:

- 1) Click during the desired behavior
- 2) Always follow a click with a treat, and treat as soon as possible after the click.
- 3) The click marks the end of the behavior.

Sounds other than clickers can also be used as behavior/reward markers; you can use your voice by choosing a special word such as “YES” or “RIGHT” and teaching your dog to associate that word from you with a treat/reward. However, the clicker seems to work best because dogs respond well to the distinctive consistent sound and because using a clicker helps your timing.

Charging or turning on the clicker is the first step. Begin when your dog is hungry and make sure that your dog really likes your treats. You should have about 30 treats on hand, no bigger than raisins. Soft food that the dog can easily swallow works best. Most dogs like small pieces of hot dogs, cheese or cooked chicken or meat. You can also use cheerios or some of your dog’s kibble—but make it more interesting by shaking it in a bag with some of the higher value treats. Combinations of treats are more interesting to dogs than only one kind of treat.

Now with the clicker in one hand and some treats in the other, start clicking & treating. **One click =one treat.** If your dog is at all sound-sensitive, you can muffle the sound until he gets used to it by putting the clicker behind your back or in your pocket with a scarf around it, or you can soften the sound by applying strips of adhesive tape to the solid side of the clicker.

As you click & treat, watch your dog’s expression and body language to see when she starts to associate the clicker sound with a treat coming her way. You can tell that your dog is catching on when she turns around or perks up or pays attention to the sound of the clicker. She may start to look at you with expectation. This may take 10 or 20 repetitions. Things will go faster if you work in a quiet environment without too many distractions.

Tips: Keep up a fairly fast and regular rhythm of clicking & treating. For this exercise it doesn’t matter what your dog is doing when you click & treat, except, try not to click when your dog is jumping up or doing something else that you don’t want to encourage. Remember, the dog will tend to repeat at what he’s doing at the moment he hears the click.