

# The Power of Training Dogs with Markers or Clickers





Leerburg

## Foreword

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[Leerburg Enterprises, Inc.](#) is owned by Ed Frawley.

Ed has owned German Shepherds (GSD) for over 45 years. Since 1978 he has bred over 350 litters of German working bloodline GSDs. His dogs work in law enforcement, as S&R dogs, as competition Schutzhund dogs, and as family companions and protectors.

Since 1980 Ed has produced over 120 dog training videos and DVDs. He was a police K9 handler for 10 years and competed in several dog sports, including AKC obedience and Schutzhund. In addition he has built one of the top dog training supply businesses in the world.

If you go to the web site **Leerburg.com** you will see that it has over 10,000 printed pages. The Leerburg Web Discussion board has over 12,000 registered members and over 202,000 posts in the archives. Learn to use our site search function.

# The Power of Training Dogs with Markers or Clickers

## MARKING - SHAPING - LINKING BEHAVIORS

By Ed Frawley



**Cindy from here at Leerburg playing the “Hand Touch”  
with the Dante. This game was trained with MARKERS  
and Dante loves it.**

Marker training is the most effective training system I have seen in my 50 plus years of training dogs. It's a black and white method of communication that is based on positive reinforcement.

Marker training provides the dog trainer a motivational method of telling his dog "the instant" his dog does something you like. It provides a non-punishment method of telling a dog "the instant" the dog does something you don't like and it provides a motivational method of telling a dog that you like what he is currently doing and you want him to continue to do exactly what he is doing at this moment in time.

If you stop and think about it, when you can do these three things and do them in a fashion that keeps your dog motivated and engaged with his handler then you can teach that dog to do almost anything.

Marker training (which is sometimes called "Clicker Training" can start with 8 week old puppies or 8 year old dominant aggressive dogs. The beauty of the system is that it's non confrontational, which is why it works so well with dominant aggressive animals or animals with absolutely no training, or animals that need to be retrained. Here at Leerburg we have trained our horses and our parrot with markers. The fact is marker training works on most types of animals and birds.

Marker training is the same thing as clicker training. The only difference is that with markers we use a verbal marker and with clicker training a small mechanical clicker is used to communicate with the dog.

It's embarrassing to say this but back in the late 1990's I was one of a group of people who trash talked clicker training. This was based on my being too closed minded on the subject and a lack of understanding about the principles

of the marker system. That wasn't the first time I stuck my foot in my mouth and it will most certainly not be the last.

The problem I had with clicker training back then was that clicker purists don't believe in correcting a dog. In fact they don't think corrections have a place in dog training. I totally disagree with this line of thinking and because of that I refused to look into what the marker system was really all about. I knew from experience that there are times when a pack leader has to correct his dog. I also knew (because of the kind of dogs that I trained - high drive tough dogs that were trained to do handler protection work) that there are also precise places and times in a training program where a dog has to experience a correction for disobedience (we will discuss this in detail later in this article).

With this said many of the people who brought clicker training to the world of dog training came from training sea mammals and birds. You can't correct a killer whale or a parrot when they disobey. It just doesn't work. These people thought they could apply the same exact training principles to dogs and they convinced a lot of new dog trainers that they were right. Well in my opinion they were wrong.

When I began to see marker trained dogs that were energetic well trained animals who loved working with their handlers I started to explore exactly what marker training was all about. That's when I realized how foolish I had been to poo poo such a great training system.

Michael Ellis was the person who opened my eyes to the fact that markers and corrections can coexist together as part of a training program. The fact since the late 1990's Michael travels around the country giving 40 to 45 weekend seminars a year on his system of using markers in training. He recently opened [a school in San Francisco CA for dog trainers.](#)

What I learned is the power of this system lies in understanding the details of the program. Dog handlers who master the system become the most successful dog trainers. The truth in this statement can be seen in videos of old dog competitions from back in the 1980's and 1990's. Handlers who won competitions back in then would not stand a chance of winning today. The reason for this is that today's top competitors train with markers.

The last two years I have produced two DVDs based on marker training, there are a number of others that will follow:

1 - In October 2008, I produced [a 3 1/2 hour DVD production of the same name as this article.](#)

2 - In July 2009, I finished a DVD titled [The Power of Training Dogs with Food with Michael Ellis.](#)

The first DVD goes into a great deal of detail on exactly what marker training is. It explains why it works and why trainers must become masters of the system to get the most out of marker training. In this DVD you will come to learn that the power of markers comes from correct timing in applying its concepts. You will also learn when trainers make mistakes in timing then end up confusing their dogs.

The second DVD that I did with Michael Ellis is about how to organize a training program around marker training. Trainers can understand the system of marker training but if they don't know how to apply it and set up a structured training program based on markers they will not get the most out of the system. Michael is an expert at teaching people how to do exactly this. He coaches top competitors in the sport of Schutzhund, Mondio Ring and French Ring. In 2009, Michael and two people from his club won the Mondio Ring One, Mondio Ring 2 and Mondio Ring 3 American Championships (in my opinion Mondio Ring is the most difficult dog sport there is).

I have been producing dog training videos since 1982. These two DVDs are the best dog training DVD I have done.



If you have trained dogs for years and think you're pretty good at it but you don't work with the marker system, I suggest you take a few days and study this article and these two DVDs. You will find a whole new world of K9 communication. If you are passionate about dog training (like I am) you will re-ignite a fire in your belly.

On the other hand if you do what I first did, which was tell everyone how stupid you think it is then 10 years from now you will probably wake up one morning and admit that you missed the boat.

## **So exactly what is MARKER TRAINING?**

In technical terms marker training is operant conditioning. Operant conditioning has been around for years. It is how Dolphins are trained at sea world.

Operant conditioning forms an association between a behavior and a consequence.

I can see new dog trainers reading this and shaking their heads thinking “Dahhhh isn’t that pretty obvious and what all dog training is about?”

My answer to that is YES, but let’s go into a little more detail.

When a dog exhibits a behavior we like the consequence is a high value reward. In marker training that reward is either a high value food treat or a high value toy that the dog really loves. If a dog does not perform a behavior the consequence is “No Reward.” This is called a negative reinforcer. When a dog gets a negative reinforcer it must then repeat the exercises if it wants to get the high value reward.

In old school dog training the consequence of a negative behavior was a correction.

No matter what anyone ever tells you dogs do things for themselves. Dogs don’t do things to make you feel good. They do things to make themselves feel good. They do things because they are motivated towards feeling comfortable in addition to doing things that eliminate feeling discomfort. This is a pretty profound concept and one that pet owners often miss. Pet owners or new dog trainers are often led to believe that dogs will eventually do things to make their owner feel good. The reality is that this is seldom if ever the case.

So the key to operant conditioning is to teach a dog that when he performs a behavior that we like he gets a reward that makes him feel good - the reward gives him a level of comfort. This reward can either be in the form of a food or it can be a toy he likes to play with or playing a game with the handler that he gets enjoyment out of or he gets praise from his handler (which he likes). In all my years of dog training I have only known one dog that would work strictly for handler praise.

In the marker training system there are only two consequences to a behavior that we are trying to train. They are a reward or no-reward. Which consequence happens depends on the behavior the dog exhibits to a stimulus. A stimulus can be a command or a cue (or lure) from the handler.

For dogs to associate a behavior with a reward or with punishment the reward or punishment must come immediately after the behavior. We tell people the consequence should come within a 1/2 second of the behavior. If a reward comes 5 seconds after a behavior the dog has no idea why he is getting a reward. If a new dog owner comes home and finds a pile of dog poop in his kitchen and he proceeds to rub the dog's nose in it, that dog doesn't have a clue why he is getting punished.

Now if the same dog has been on leash in the kitchen and peed on the floor and the handler had scolded him the instant he saw the dog pee - the dog would associate the scolding with peeing - because it came within 1/2 second of the behavior.

In training it is not always possible to reward within a 1/2 second. In fact no matter how hard you try you cannot consistently reward a dog within 1/2 second. The get around this we bridge (or connect) the time frame between the behavior and the consequence that follows. This bridge allows us to extend the 1/2 second rule of consequences. That bridge is a word - we will call it a Marker (I like to use the word YES, other people use other words). Many people use the sound from a clicker. The fact is you can use any word or sound you are comfortable with as long as you are consistent.

A simple way to look at the mark as a bridge is that it is like telling your dog "Hold on a second - I like what you just did and I am going to get to you and give you a high value reward."

There are positive and negative markers. The word for a negative Marker is "NO" or "NOPE." It is important to mention that a negative marker is not a correction. It is simply a way of communicating to the animal that he just made a mistake and if he expects to get that high value reward he needs to redo the behavior correctly.

Through repetition the dog learns that every time he hears the positive Marker he gets a reward. Every time he hears the negative Marker he does not get a reward and he has to repeat the behavior or exercise.

Dogs that are trained with markers become problem solvers. They have learned (through the concept of negative reinforcement) that when one behavior doesn't work they need to try something else and if that doesn't work they just keep trying because if they try long enough they have a good chance of figuring out what you want and getting a high value reward.

The system allows trainers to reinforce correct behavior with "pin point accuracy" from a distance. It also allows dogs to make mistakes and then learn from their mistakes. The beauty of the system is that it also allows us to pin point the exact moment a dog makes a mistake, without correcting the dog in the process.

This is radically different from old school dog training where dogs are corrected for doing something wrong. I remember the day when we would take an untrained dog and march down the street with the dog on a leash. We would do a quick left turn, right turn or about turn as we said "HEEL" and give the dog a correction for not staying by our side. When I stop and think about it - how unjust was this to my dogs. It was a terrible way to train. It created dogs that were afraid to try and think on their feet because if they made a mistake they would get a correction.

Training with Markers is a simple concept to understand. It only takes a few minutes to explain why it works but it can take years to master. The journey is exciting and well worth the trip. Along the way you will find that your dogs are a lot smarter than you once thought.

Those days are long gone with marker trainers.

## **Leerburg Books**

If you have an interest in more technical details about the scientific aspects of dog training we sell a number of [excellent books](#). The only reason I bring this up right here is so people know that there is a scientific background this system of dog training.

[Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training Volume 1](#)

[Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training Volume 2](#)

[Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training Volume 3](#)

[Getting Started Clicker Training for Dogs](#)

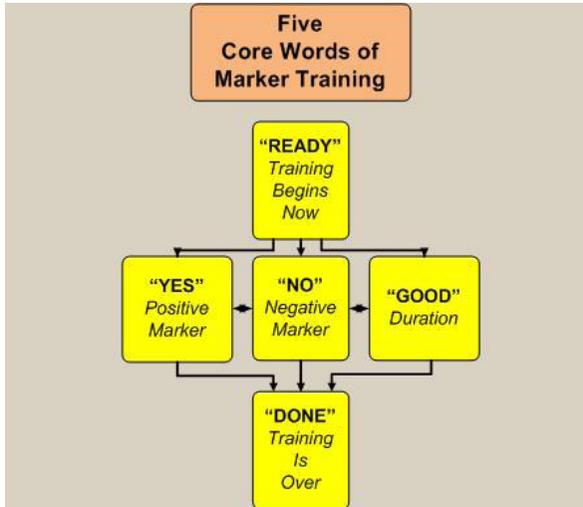
[Other Leerburg Books](#)

The beauty of this system is that it is a perfect way to train puppies because it is motivational training at its best and there are no corrections involved until you get into the advanced stages of training.

It is also a perfect way to retrain adult dog (even dominant dogs) because the consequences of a behavior are not conflict with the handler. So when it is done correctly it is a safe way to retrain the foundation of obedience work on a dominant dog.

# The 5 Magic Words of Marker Training

The basic foundation of marker training involves teaching the dog the meaning of these 5 core words. Once the dog understands how these words are used to communicate with him they can be applied to every exercise you wish to train your dog.



Those words are:

1 - **READY** or **ARE YOU READY?** - A word that tells our dog that we are about to start a training session. When you ask your dog if he is ready - you always have something on you to reward the dog with when he engages with you or starts to offer behaviors.

As your dog gains experience you should never start training unless the dog demonstrates he is ready to play when you take him out, we call this engagement. Getting engagement from a dog is a learned skill. We have an entire chapter in my Michael Ellis DVD that teaches how to get engagement and a second chapter on how to socialize a dog to environmental stressors.

If he won't play then handlers need to put the dog away and think about what they need to do to get the dog engaged the next time they bring him out.

The relationship between you and your dog is more important than training. So if your dog isn't engaged with you, if he doesn't feel like playing today then you should not try and teach him behaviors or exercises. Put him away or take him for a walk.

An interesting thing that seems to happen when dogs are trained to understand engagement is they view their handler as their own personal treat dispenser. In their eyes they simply have to do this silly little exercise to make you give them a high value treat or a toy.

2 - **YES** - is the word we use as a positive marker. It is the word we use to bridge the time frame between a favorable behavior and us delivering a reward. Once the dog has been introduced to concept of "YES" (we call this CHARGE THE MARK) they quickly learn that EVERY TIME you say YES they know they are going to get the reward. With experience they learn that this can take 3 or 4 seconds if you're not right next to them when you say YES.

It is important that trainers understand that "YES" is not verbal praise. Trainers new to markers commonly misunderstand the difference between a MARK and PRAISE. They need to learn that they can MARK THE MOMENT and then praise the dog with "GOOD BOY" after they mark.

When a trainer who gets excited says "YES, YES, YES. YOU'RE A GOOD BOY," they only confuse the dog because in effect they are marking three moments in time. We will talk more of this later.

YES is also a word that is used as a release command when the dog does something correctly. This means "YES" not only tells the dog that what he just did was correct, it also

tells the dog that he can stop doing what he doing and he is now free to interact with you (IE get his food reward or play tug or chase a toy etc).

3 - **GOOD** - is a word that means "I like what you are doing and I want you to continue to do what you are doing."

In other words GOOD is the word we use to add duration to a command. A perfect example would be to use GOOD when we are teaching the dog to STAY DOWN. When we teach duration for the down we would not mark the dog when he went down with a YES because the mark is the release. If we marked the down that would mean we just gave the dog permission to get up and get his reward.

So new trainers need to understand that GOOD is not a release command. When we say GOOD the dog needs to understand that if he continues to do exactly what he was doing when we said GOOD he will get a reward at some point in the future.

Unlike training the mark, when we first start training duration we can say GOOD a number of times in a row. We can say GOOD, GOOD, GOOD as many times as we need to get the dog to continue to do what he is doing.

4 - **NOPE** - is a word that is used as a negative marker. It means you just made a mistake and you have to do the exercise all over again. It does not mean we are mad, it does not mean that he is going to get a correction, it only means that he needs to repeat what we expected him to do if he really wants the high value reward.

If the reward is high enough in value to the dog it doesn't take a dog long to figure out that NOPE means "DO IT AGAIN."

5 - **DONE or BREAK (as in "take a break")** - is the word that tells the dog that our training session is finished for

now. The session can be finished for 5 minutes or it can mean we are done for the day.

When we say DONE the food or toys are put away. When the handler says DONE or BREAK and shows his dog his empty hands it doesn't take long for the dog to know that this training session is over.

With time this becomes very clear to our dog.

The beauty of marker training is that we can clearly tell a dog by using READY that we are going to start training and with DONE we are finished with training. It becomes very clear to the dog when we expect him to work.

The rest of this article deals with the applications of these 5 core words.

**The Power of Training  
Dogs with Food**

**\$65.00** +s&h



**3 Hours, 45 Minutes**

## **Dogs are Masters at Reading Body Language**

They are far more intuitive than we humans. They are always watching us and they instinctually recognize situations and read us like a book. They know when we are happy and they know when to leave us alone. They base

ALL of their life's decisions on what reinforces their level of comfort and what satisfies their pack instincts.

New dog trainers mistakenly think their dogs listen to them all the time. They think the dog automatically knows when commands are given. The fact is that dogs may listen but they don't naturally pick up on our every word. In fact trained dogs don't understand much of what we say. But they are very intuitive about reading and recognizing specific situations or pictures (of our body language). They are so good at this that we think they know what we are saying when in fact they don't have a clue.

A perfect example of this is a dog that learns to sit in your kitchen. The dog can perform the sit exercise 200 times in the kitchen and you may think he has that concept of the SIT command down pat. Then you take him in your garage and say SIT and he looks at you like you are the man in the moon talking Swahili. He acts like you have two heads and he has never heard the word SIT before.

A better example is when the dog has always been given the SIT command when you are standing in front of him in the kitchen. Simply turning your back and saying SIT results in a blank stare, or kneeling down or sitting on the floor and saying SIT gets no results.

That is because the dog does not understand the concept of SIT. He doesn't know what you are asking him to do. Oh you may think he knows the word SIT but what he really knows is that when he sees the picture of you standing in front of him in the kitchen he should SIT.

So when you see a dog do this you need to know that your dog has not yet grasped the concept of the SIT command.

Marker training is going to teach you how to communicate with your dog so they grasp the concepts of the commands you wish to train them and its going to do this is a way the dog enjoys.

## Active vs. Reactive Dogs

Marker training turns a dog into what we call an “Active Dog” vs. a “Reactive Dog.”

This means the system creates a dog that actively tries to problem solve. These dogs try to engage their handlers by trying to do things that make their handlers play with them, give them a food or toy reward or ask them to do something that will lead to these two things.

Active dogs try to make things happen. They know they can do things that cause their owner to engage them. In essence they themselves become engaged with their handlers by bouncing around and trying to do things that result in their handler giving them a reward. As I have said earlier in this article, trainers need to learn how to teach engagement to their dog. Many new trainers simply think they have the wrong dog and their dogs won't act like this. These people are wrong. They simply need to learn how to provide an environment that makes the dog want to engage the handler.

This is compared to a reactive dog that waits to be shown what the handler wants. Reactive dogs are afraid to try new things for fear they will be corrected for making mistakes.

Every time you take your dog out you are teaching the dog something. You may not know what it is but our dogs are constantly watching and evaluating us. An active dog is trying to figure out how to interact with you in a way that benefits him. A reactive dog is trying not to step on land mines that result in his getting a correction. Marker training is the perfect method to produce an active dog.

We can use a ball reward to demonstrate the difference between active and reactive dogs.

An active dog will go out on the training field and engage his owner. He will focus on the owner and offer behaviors

that he thinks may cause his owner to produce the ball. This is a dog that bounces around and willingly gives eye contact, lies down, sits up, goes into the heel position without being asked to do any of those things. He does this until the owner produces the ball and asks him to do something he has been trained to do.

A reactive dog is a dog that goes to the training field and waits for the owner to ask him to do something. He doesn't offer any behaviors. He will perform a behavior and accept the ball as a reward but he isn't going to try and second guess what his owner wants him to do. In other words, he reacts to what the handler asks.

Reactive dogs have learned that if they try and figure out what their handlers want and they make a mistake - they get corrected. So they quit trying. They back off and take the safe approach - which is "wait until he tells me what he wants because I don't need another correction."

## **The First Step is Called CHARGING THE MARK:**

The first step in training markers is to study the system. Know where you are going and understand the details of how your going to get there. In other words study the details of how the marker system works.

We start teaching this system by showing our dog that every time "YES" or every time they hear [a click from a clicker](#) they get a really high value food treat. The system starts with food and not toys. The reason we start with food is that many high drive dogs can't focus in the presence of a toy. They go into a zone where they can't think. This doesn't happen with food. So we set the foundation of markers with food and once that's done we introduce the dog to the work for to rewards.

The first training step is called CHARGING THE MARK. It can be done anywhere, in your kitchen, your basement, or your back yard. The goal of charging the mark is to teach the dog to associate hearing YES with knowing he is going to get a high value reward.

When we start charge the mark training the dog does not have to do anything to get marked. We simply say YES or click the clicker and give the dog a food treat. He doesn't have to sit, he doesn't have to come to us, he doesn't have to do anything. We just say YES and feed the dog, YES and feed the dog, YES and feed the dog.

New trainers need to understand that the only dog training going on during CHARGE THE MARK is to make the dog realize that saying YES means "my handler is going to give me a really good food treat."

There are handler responsibilities in CHARGING THE MARK. It is important that the word YES is never said at the same instant you move your arm to reach for the food treat. For this program to work there must be short time lapse in time between saying the word YES and moving the arm to produce the food reward.

You will know your dog is getting it when you say YES and the dog looks at you like HEY, GIVE ME THAT TREAT!!! Most dogs pick up the concept of a CHARGED YES OR CHARGE THE CLICK in the first training session. If you go out and say YES to a dog 30 to 50 times in a row he is going to connect the dots.

# What Kinds of FOOD REWARDS to Use

## Use Pieces of High Value Treats - What are they?



### **Steak - notice how small the pieces should be**

The first goal for the handler in marker training is to figure out what their dog considers a high value food reward. Different dogs have different ideas of what treats they like the best. To get the most out of marker training handlers need to determine what trips their dogs trigger.

I will guarantee you that going to WalMart and buying a bag of biscuits is not going to cut it.

There are a couple of important points about treats.

Treats should be large enough to motivate your dog to want another one and small enough that the dog does not take minutes to eat.

I used to say that 2 or 3 treats should fit on a quarter. I have since learned that there is such as to small of a training treat for some dogs. If a dog eats a treat so quickly that it seems like he is inhaling the food and he then loses focus and checks out then the handler may want to increase the size of the food treat. In other words a slightly larger treat may be a high value for that dog to result in him staying

focused for a longer period of time. This is graphically demonstrated in my DVD on [The Power of Training Dogs with Food](#).

The concept of using treats is not to “feed the dog” but rather to offer a reward that has a high enough value that it keeps the dog engaged. When treats are so large they slow down the training because we have to wait for the dogs to chew them up we need to reduce the size or change the treat. I also have a classic example of this in my DVD on food.

The best treats are soft and don’t break up into pieces that fall on the floor. When the handler picks a reward that the dog loves it will stay engaged. This leaves the dog wanting more so his drive stays high. You can see the size I cut the venison steak above and below. These pieces are very small treats. This is where to start the training and then see if you need to modify the size for your specific dog.

We sell a lot of all-natural dog treats here at Leerburg. More and more companies have become aware of the fact that people want quality treats for their dogs. In our case if our dogs don’t like them we don’t sell them. I like the [Soft Training Treats](#) and the [Zuke’s Mini Natural treats](#). They both come in different flavors, they are soft and they are the right size for our dogs.



**Soft Training treats are on the left and s  
teak treats are on the right**

Trainers may want to take the time to establish and prioritize a list of dog treats that their dogs really love. You may find that your dog becomes too distracted by the highest value treat. Some dogs can lose focus (just like some dogs lose focus in the face of a tug reward) and they can't think. If that happens you need to drop down to a lesser value treat in training.

When you move your training into an area where there are a lot of distractions you can go back to the highest value treat because the distractions will offset one another. This is an example of how trainers need to constantly think about what they are doing in their work and be willing to adjust to fit the circumstances.

There is also not anything wrong with using different levels of treats in a training session. Use a higher value treat reward for a really good or really quick effort and a lower value reward for a so-so effort.

## **Ask Your Dog What Treats He Likes**

You can ask your dog to tell you what treats he likes more than others. Back tie the dog (tie him to a post). Let him smell a treat - hold it out close to his nose but don't let him

have it. Allow him to watch you lay it on the ground just out of his reach.

Do this with two treats and then release the dog. See which one he eats first. Then repeat the exercise several times

and reverse the position of the treats. This will tell you if the dog indeed likes one treat over the other. Try adding a third treat to the protocol. With work you will be able to assign values to respective rewards.

By knowing which treat is his favorite you can use this information in later training. Some training requires the highest level motivation than others and some things only needs the level 4 treat.

### **Assign Values to Various Treats**



## **FOOD Rewards vs. Toy or Tug Rewards**

Just as there are times when a food reward is the correct type of reward there are times a toy or tug is a better choice. Knowing when to employ both will make you a better trainer.

Many high prey drive dogs become over stimulated when they know a toy is the reward. They actually go into too much drive. These dog have so much drive for a toy that their brain shuts down and they can't focus when they see their handler with a toy.

New trainers mistakenly think the more drive the better. In fact this is often not the case.

Before a toy can be used for a reward the trainer needs to take his dog through a training process that teaches the dog three things:

1 - It teaches the dog to engage the toy with vigor and the only fun about a toy is when he is playing with his handler. In other words we teach the dog not to self reward into a toy.

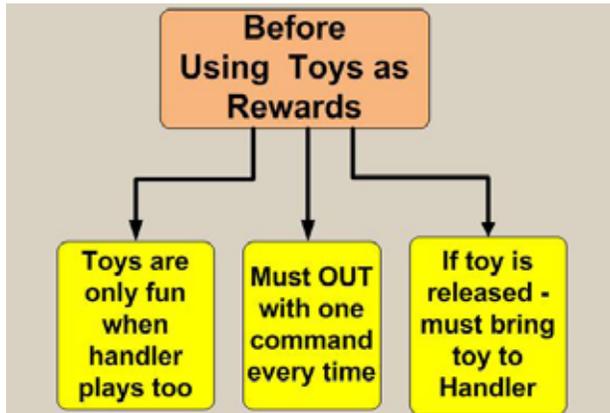
2 - The training teaches the dog to OUT (or drop the toy) when told to OUT. When you stop and think about it - if you have to fight with your dog or use undo amounts of pressure to get the dog to release a toy then you lose the value of the toy as a reward because the dog is thinking about the argument your about to have to get the toy from him and not about what you just gave him the toy for.

3 - The foundation training teaches the dog to bring the toy back to the handler when it is released. If a trainer does not have this established then we can only do one rep if the dog jerks the toy out of the handler's hand.

The training to do these three things along with how to play tug with your dog will be covered in the second training DVD that I do with Michael Ellis.

Many trainers will teach an exercise with a food reward and then switch to a tug or toy reward to increase speed in the exercise.

Toys are also used to teach a dog [Stimulus Control \(which is talked about later\)](#).



## Don't Confuse Your Dog - Only Say "YES" One Time

The reason you should only say YES one time is because dogs see life as a series of pictures or snap shots. Remember how intuitive our dogs are, they know exactly what they were doing at the exact moment good things happen to them.

So when they look into your eyes and you mark that moment by saying YES followed by a high value food treat they quickly figure out the trigger to get you to give them another treat is to look into your eyes.

But when trainers get excited and say YES 4 or 5 times in a row they confuse their dog. The dog doesn't know if they got rewarded for looking in your eyes or if the reward came from lowering their head to look at you hand or for something else.

Often times new trainers mistakenly look at the YES as praise. This is absolutely wrong. Once the dog understands the system the mark will often become secondary praise but that will only happen if the trainer establishes the foundation of the mark correctly by only saying YES once and always with good timing.

So it is vitally important to understand the essence of marker training is to start with no obedience command and then only give the mark one time followed by a short pause before you give the dog a food treat.

A couple of points to mention here is that when the Mark has been properly established it will eventually become a secondary reinforce for the dog. This means the dog will eventually develop a level of satisfaction from you simply saying the word “YES,” but at the same time you will never get to the point where you expect the mark to be the only reward. Every time you ever mark a behavior you will always offer a reward for that behavior.

## **“NO MARK” is Valuable Information for Your Dog**

Another concept to remember is that your dog will learn that “NO MARK” is information. By that I mean when you don’t offer a mark you are telling the dog that he has not yet performed the behavior you want. This is not a negative response on your part, it is simply a non-stressful way to tell your dog that he needs to “keep trying.”

## **Your Voice is a Powerful Training Tool - Learn to use it!**

One of the most powerful training tools a dog trainer has is their voice. Trainers who learn to use their voice in a positive way make better dog trainers and have dogs that learn quicker. This is especially true in marker training.

If you are working with a low to medium drive dog you may have to take your dog through a short drive building phase before you get too far into marker training. This is done by teaching the dog that when you say “**ARE YOU READY**” he is going to have a little party with you.

There is nothing wrong with saying (in a very exciting tone of voice) “**ARE YOU READY**” every time you charge the mark. Make a game of it. If you get excited, then your dog will get excited.

The way this is done is to say “**ARE YOUR READY**” and back away from your dog (moving away from a dog peaks the dogs desire to follow). You can say “**ARE YOU READY**” more than one time.

When the dog turns to follow, mark the instant he turns. That’s the moment he chooses to engage you so you mark the moment. Then reward the dog and praise like crazy. Get the dog excited. Make him like the game. Teach him that engaging you when you say ARE YOUR READY makes fun things happen.

This drive building phase can be done during the charge the mark period. It can be done 5 or 10 times in a row and then put the dog away.

So just as “*charging the mark*” teaches a dog that the mark means he is going to get a reward. We can also teach the dog that by engaging us he has trained us to give him a nice reward.

## **Verbal Praise After the Reward**

In the marker system while we only say YES one time followed by a reward, we can add encouraging verbal praise during the delivery of the reward and/or after the reward. In fact some trainers have to praise after the reward to improve engagement.

New trainers need to learn how to make a game of this work. They need to sound happy when they ask their dog if he is ready, they need to sound excited when they mark, they need to praise in a sincere way when they lavish praise after the mark. The more animated and excited the

trainer sounds the more interested the dog will be. This is a learned skill and it's a skill new trainers often have a difficult time with.

When new dog owners first start this work they get overwhelmed with everything they have to remember. They have to pick a behavior to Mark, they Mark the behavior, the reach for their reward, they offer a food reward and then they just LEAVE IT AT THAT. They act like they just gave the dog a reward and that was good enough. Well for a lot of dogs, that's not good enough. It may be OK for high drive dog but it's often not good enough for medium to low drive dogs.

Low to medium drive dogs get often get distracted and stop trying. When handlers make mistakes during engagement training their dogs can act bored, or simply shut down. Handlers find themselves standing there wondering what to do next. They feel bad because they really want their dog to work but they don't know what to do.

Well when they see this happen they need to turn the work into a party. They need to act like they are having the time of their lives. They need to back away from their dog and in an inviting excited tone say the dog name (don't tell the dog to come or don't add commands. And if all this doesn't work, put the dog away. Give him a time out. Let him sit in his crate and get bored.

## **Turn the Reward Delivery into a Party**

When you actually deliver the reward try and do it in a way that turns the reward into a party. Make the dog move his feet. If this means you Mark the moment and then move away from the dog as you reward him then do it. If it means toss the food on the ground to make the dog chase it like a toy, then do it. If it means you pivot away from the dog and have him chase the reward hand to get his reward then do it.

Turning the delivery into a party increases drive and engagement. We spend a good deal of time in our food DVD showing how to do this. Trainers who simply Mark and hand the dog a food reward don't get the full benefit from marker training.

## **Control Your Nerves**

It is a very common thing for people to get nervous when they train dogs. This is especially true when they train in front of other people.

Those who do get nervous need to learn to relax and control their nerves.

Dogs know when you are angry, they sense it. They also know when you are nervous. If their pack leader is nervous then they think something wrong. When the pack leader is nervous they think they need to be on guard. When dogs are nervous the learning process slows down.

So if you have a nervous temperament by nature you need to practice controlling your nerves for the sake of your dog and it's training. Take a deep breath; take a time out; meditate; try to mentally walk through what you want to do. Video tape your training. The simple act of having a camera rolling makes many people nervous. This helps relax you.

Bottom line is that if you expect your dog to have emotional control then you need to be able to demonstrate the same thing.

I relate this to people who ride horses. A horse knows if you're a nervous rider. Nervous riders are those riders who end up on the ground.

# Adding Distractions and Impulse Control

People who get into dog training quickly learn how easily their dog can become distracted and not perform a learned behavior. They often find their dog works great at home but forgets everything when they get into a class with other dogs or when the dog is taken into a new environment.

Adding distractions into training can easily be the topic of a book. It is certainly beyond the scope of what I am doing here other than to define how it factors into marker training.

New dog owners need to know that when dogs are distracted they don't learn as quickly. In fact many won't even try to work with you.

As a dog becomes proficient at learning a behavior it can be exposed to more and more levels of distractions. Distractions can be as simple turning your back on a dog and asking him to sit. Kneeling down and asking a dog to sit is a distraction for a dog that has just learned to sit with you standing in front of the dog. Stepping in another room and asking a dog to sit is a huge distraction for a dog.

Once you have identified an environmental distraction simply moving a few feet farther away from that distraction can often be enough to help a dog work through it. Dogs have a "bubble" or circle of comfort which is different for each dog. Through experience and practice in multiple training sessions the size of a dog's bubble of comfort can be reduced. Most of the time, this work needs to be done gradually. While one dog may perform comfortably 50 yards from a certain distraction another dog may not have a problem working 10 yards from the same distraction.

The “look command” is a very effective tool to use when our dogs become distracted. When we ask our dog to look we expect it to look into our eyes. When the dog becomes distracted we simply give a “look” command which makes the dog look at our face. This is often enough to break the dog's focus on what's distracting him. Once the dog is looking at our face you can go on and ask for other behaviors. I talk about how to teach the “look” in the [SIGNAL section](#).

This is the part of training many call proofing the dog. Remember marker training is more about allowing a dog to do something and less about forcing a dog to do something. When you hear trainers use the term “impulse control” they are simply referring to a dog learning to control himself and choosing to do the right thing in the face of distractions.

In old school training distractions and corrections go hand in hand. By that I mean a dog is asked to perform a behavior in the face of a new distraction. When it makes a mistake (because it was distracted) it gets a correction.

That's not what happens with marker training. In marker training when a dog gets distracted and fails to perform a behavior it simply doesn't get a reward and is asked to do it again, or it is put away.

An important point to remember on distractions and learning is that in training you only add or change one thing at a time. By that I mean you would not try and raise the level of distraction at the same time you tried to increase the criteria of learning a new behavior. This is critical.

# Should You Use the Word “YES” or a Clicker?

Dogs can learn to work with both a verbal mark and the sound from a clicker. We train our dogs with both.

In normal training I prefer using the word over the clicker. I know I will always be able to say YES. I also know there may be times I don't have a clicker with me. In addition I can say YES a lot louder than the sound a clicker makes. In more advanced training saying YES allows me mark from a greater distance from my dog than I could use a clicker.

In addition when a handler is actively training his dog he has a number of things to do with his hands besides holding a clicker. He often has a leash to hold, he has food rewards or toys to handle and he sometimes wants to pet his dog. He may have to hold a dumb bell. He doesn't need to include a clicker into this scenario.

If a handler is involved with one of the many dog sports I don't think the handler should use the clicker. Let's take the example of attending an agility seminar where there are 5 different people who train with clickers. I will guarantee the sound of another trainer's clicker is going to distract your dog. With that said no one saying YES is going to be misinterpreted by your dog as being you.

If you choose to use the word YES, it is important to learn to say “YES” exactly the same way every time you say it. Don't add inflection or change the tone of how you pronounce the word. It must sound the same every time.

Changing the sound of how you pronounce a word will often change the meaning of what your dog thinks your trying to say. Let's not forget how perceptive our dogs are. They pick up on our slightest body language. They most certainly pick up on the difference in the way you say YES.

If we find ourselves getting stressed over a training problem and we notice the stress is filtering into the sound of our voice when we mark we will move back to using a clicker. The clicker takes the emotion out of the process.

Also people who are easily excited and have a difficult time maintaining the exact same sound every time are people who should use clickers.

## TARGETING

While marker training can be used to train virtually any behavior you need to start someplace and we like to start with targeting. We use a targeting stick with a YES marker (although our targeting stick does have a built in clicker).

It is a simple concept. Extend the stick and hold it out away from your side. When the dog looks at it Mark the moment (only one mark) and reward the dog. The reward can be delivered at the little ball on the end of the stick.

Repeat the process until your dog knows to look at the stick when you hold it out.

When the dog takes one step toward the stick, mark and reward the step (making sure these two events do not happen at the same instant). Then mark two steps and then the dog sniffing the end and finally touching the end of the stick with his nose.

Targeting the end of a stick may seem like a useless behavior but in fact it has many applications. We can use the same concept to teach our dogs to go to their bed, to go into their dog crate. It can be one part of a learned chain of behaviors to trim the dog's nails or clean his ears.

We like to expand the targeting into a [hand touch command](#). This then becomes a fun game to play with our dogs but also a behavior we ask for to re-direct or dog

away from dogs and people while on walks or when it's getting into something we don't want him to mess with.



**12 week old puppy doing "hand touch"**

## Timing of the Reward

For a reward to have the best results it must come within 1/2 second of the behavior you want to encourage. Some people say that the reward must come quicker than a second; others say the reward must come within 1 1/2 seconds.

No matter how good you are you are not going to consistently be able to get a reward your dog in under a 1/2 of a second. You may occasionally do it but you will never get it done 100% of the time. Markers allow you to instantly mark a behavior and when the dog understands that a reward follows the mark you can take several seconds to reward the mark. This results in the dog learning much faster.

People who don't train with markers don't have that luxury. The longer they delay between the behavior and the reward the less chance their dog associates the behavior with the reward. If praise is delayed by 2 or 3 seconds after a behavior there is an excellent chance that the dog will

associate the reward with a behavior that is different than what the handler wanted to reward.

This is why timing the Mark is so important in dog training and why marker training is so effective.

Through repetition and experience your dog will quickly realize that when he hears the mark he knows he is going to get a reward for what he just did. It may take a few seconds but he knows the reward is coming and he knows what he did to earn it. It becomes crystal clear to the dog.

During your marker training you do not have to jump to rush the reward. When the dog understands that a reward is coming after the mark, the delivery of the reward becomes part of the satisfaction. Compare it to eating out at a nice restaurant. Watching the waiter as he brings you food and puts it on the table is part of the fine dining experience.

This concept becomes even more important when we are working on exercises where our dog is some distance from us. It allows us the time we need to get to the dog and reward him and still have him understand why he is getting the reward.

## **Learning to Time the Mark**

New dog handlers must learn the correct timing on when they give the actual mark during training. The easiest way to understand how this works is to think like a dog. In a way your dog takes a mental picture (snap shot) of exactly what he is doing at the instant you mark a behavior. They relate the mark/reward to that mental snap shot they took when they heard the word YES.

A visual method to help you learn timing is to ask a friend to use a digital camera. Ask your friend to go out with you while you train. Have them take a photo of your dog every

time you say the word YES. Tell them not to focus on what the dog is doing but only listen to your voice and push the shutter button on the camera when they hear YES.

So every time you say YES they need to push the shutter button. This is an easy way to evaluate what is going through your dogs mind when he hears the mark. The resulting pictures are what the dog thinks he is being rewarded for. You may be surprised about what you learn about your timing.

The correct time to mark is the instant the dog meets the criteria of the particular training step or behavior.

For example, when teaching the hand touch, where the dog is expected to touch his nose to your hand when you offer the hand - if it is the step where the dog is finally touching the hand with his nose. The point to mark is the "very instant" the dog's nose touches the hand. Not 3 or 4 seconds after the fact.

If you are training the sit, the mark should come the instant the dogs butt touches the ground, not 2 seconds later.

If you are training the "down" the time to mark is the instant the dogs belly touches the ground - not 5 seconds after he has been down.

If you mark the down several seconds after the dogs belly has touched the ground the dog thinks he is being rewarded for the duration of staying down and not the actual movement of laying down. When trainers consistently mark the down with poor timing we see dogs that go down slower and slower because the dogs see the exercise as a "down stay." They don't see the reward as something they get for quickly dropping to the ground.

Successful trainers understand that "the act of going down" and "duration in the down exercises" are two independent exercises which are trained separately with different words.

The act of dropping to the ground is marked with a YES. The act of a down-stay is encouraged with the duration command "GOOD."

So when it's done correctly and the dogs realize that the trigger to get the reward in the down exercises is to get his belly on the ground you will see dogs drop like a stone. We will talk about extending the down-stay later when we discuss adding duration to a behavior with the word Good.

## **The Relationship Between the Mark and the Reward**

I have already mentioned that it is critical to never move the hand or arm that delivers the reward until after we say YES. I want to revisit that issue now so you understand why this is so important.

Dogs are visual animals. While they may watch you all the time they don't naturally listen to the words that come out of our mouth. The fact is they don't understand most of what we say.

Your dog will always react to physical cues over verbal cues. When trainers give the verbal cue and physical cue at the same time the dog will always follow the physical cue. This means when you mark the exercise and move the arm at the same time - the movement of the arm is the cue your dog is following and not your verbal cue.

This concept was discovered by Pavlov a long time ago. He kept his dogs in cages and when it came time to feed a bell would ring followed by food dropping into food bowls. Pavlov noticed that his dogs would start to salivate when they heard the bell.

He then did some experiments. He would ring the bell while the dogs were eating. Those dogs never salivated to the sound of a bell. The bell meant nothing to them.

The moral of this story is **DON'T REWARD AT THE SAME TIME THAT YOU MARK** an exercise.



Unfortunately it's not natural for people to have a pause between the YES and giving the food reward. Almost every new marker trainer reaches for food at the same instant that they say YES. They need to learn the skill of adding a pause in between the MARK and the movement of the reward hand. This is a very simple concept to understand and a very difficult discipline to learn. Those trainers who approach this as a learned skill get quicker results.

To improve your timing video tape your training sessions and then study your work. This is a great way to gauge your work.

## How Long Should You Train?

I always used to say that training sessions are best kept to very short increments of time - 2 or 3 minutes. Now with marker training, where dogs are engaged with their handler, training sessions can be longer. How long depends on the dog, the motivation of the dog and the difficulty of what's being trained.

When training is fun, the reward is high enough in value and the dog is not tired the time can be extended. It really

comes down to watching your dog and recognizing his concentration levels.

Different dogs have different levels of concentration. As dogs gain drive their concentration will increase. To learn what is best for your dog start out by only putting 20 treats in your treat bag. When those treats are gone the session is over. When in doubt it is always better to leave a session with your dog wanting more.

Many times new trainers need get so into the work they need the signal of an empty bait bag to remind them that they need to stop. As they gain experience in the work this won't need to be an issue. They will learn to end a session on a positive high note.

## **Placement of the Reward**

There will be times during training where a reward needs to be delivered to a specific spot (IE a hand touch is a good example). There are also times when the delivery of the reward needs to be done in a manner that turns the delivery into what my friend Michael Ellis calls a mini-event.

To become an effective marker trainer you must not only master the art of timing but also the art of where and how to deliver the rewards. New trainers often underestimate how important delivery and placement of the reward is to the learning process. Correct placement of a reward can result in new behaviors being learned very quickly.

The importance of reward placement in the learning phase of marker training may be best explained with an example.

In the first steps of the "hand touch" exercise we will often mark the dog when he looks at the hand we want him to touch. The correct place to reward the dog is "at that hand the dog looked at."

In other words you don't just hand the dog a food reward. You place the reward on THE HAND that the dog just looked. If the dog actually puts his nose on the hand you mark the nose touch and place the food treat on the hand that the nose just touched.

By placing the reward in the palm of marked hand and letting the dog take the reward off the palm of that out stretched hand the dog quickly figures out that there is a relationship between the behavior and the reward.

That's called proper placement of the reward. When you reward at the correct "place" the learning process is accelerated.

Another example of proper reward placement is seen when training the place command. If you want to teach your dog to go lie on his rug - or go touch his touch pad. The first steps of the learning phase for free shaping these exercises can be the handler Marking the dog just looking at the rug or looking his touch pad. The correct placement after the mark is for the reward to be put on the rug or on the touch pad.

If you are working on an exercise like engagement the correct placement of the reward after the dog is marked could be to toss the food reward on the ground to make the dog chase it like he would chase a ball. Or it could be to mark the point of focus and then pivot your body and make the dog chase the food hand around you (move his feet) to get the reward. Adding movement to the placement of the reward will build drive.

How and when to do this is explained in detail in my DVD [The Power of Training Dogs with Food.](#)



**This photo demonstrates how to offer your hand to the dog (without a command) to initiate the hand touch.**

## **How to Deliver the Food Reward - Without Getting Fingers Pinched**

Just as proper placement of the reward is important so too is how the reward is offered to the dog. It is often a mistake to hand a high food drive dog a piece of food with the tips of our fingers. At least if we don't want blood blisters and blackened fingernails.

Some dogs naturally take food gently. Some dogs can be trained to take food gently. Then there are those dogs that are so driven for food that a finger getting in the way is not much of a concern for them

The correct way to offer food to a dog is on the open flat palm of the hand.

We hold a food treat in an open hand by pinching the treat between our thumb and the base of our index finger. By holding the treat in this manner its a simple process to release the treat with our thumb so it roles into the palm of our hand. The dog can then take the food off the palm. When give a dog a piece of food in this manner your not going to get bit.



**The correct way to hold a food reward - pinched between thumb and side of finger**



**Use Small SOFT TREATS in most marker training - they go down quickly and are easy to eat.**

**Too often dogs HACK UP hard crunchy treats**



**The incorrect way to give your dog food.  
This is how food hound dogs bite finger tips.**

Food can be stores in a bait pouch which we keep on our belt in the middle of our back or it can be kept in a pocket of a training vest or jacket. Or we can pre-load our hand or hands with a food reward. This means we will have food in the hand before the exercise begins.

Dogs quickly figure this out when we have food preloaded in our hands. Some dogs will try to MUG your food hand.

When that happens simply close your hand into a fist and hold it flat against the front of your leg. When the dog continues to mug the hand we say nothing and do nothing but stand there. The dog will eventually give up and look up at you. When that happens - Mark the look and reward the dog with a food treat.

This goes a long, long way to teaching the dog that he holds the key to the food reward. They learn that they can get the food if they do something that you want.



**If your dog mugs your hand with food, hold both hands against your legs like this until the dog stops and looks in your eyes - then mark the look and reward.**



**This photo demonstrated placement of the reward on the target after the mark.**

## **Vary Your Reward Delivery**

Food can come from the right hand, the left hand or occasionally your mouth. When you have a piece of food in your mouth you simply spit it at the dog to deliver the reward. Rewards from the mouth won't work in all circumstances and they often take a little training with the

dog to teach him how to catch them. But they do offer a change for the dog every now and then.

I have already mentioned that we like to use bait bag in the middle of our back. Some people don't care for bait bags. Those are usually people who don't understand how to use them in the marker program.

We don't recommended wearing the bait bag on the front of our body. It becomes too big of a distraction for new dogs.

When the bait bag is in the middle of your back you don't have that problem. The correct way to retrieve food from the bag is to us both hands to reach for the food at the same time. This allows the reward to come from either hands and it is important to vary the hand that rewards come from.

It is important to keep your hand away from your bait bag or away from the pocket you carry bait in. We don't want the hand near the bait to become a distraction or a signal for the dog.

We also don't want the dog anticipating a right or left handed delivery. We want value to be on the word YES and not on a specific hand movement. That's why we do random hand deliveries.

With many exercises we try and deliver of the reward in a manner that forces the dog to move his feet to get his reward. Every dog that has prey drive gets more out of moving to catch a reward. Compare a dog that loves to case a ball vs. the same dog that is simply handed a ball. The dog places a lot more value on the ball when he has to chase after it.

The same thing applies to delivering a food reward in a manner that forces the dog to move to get the food.

1 - It helps teach a dog that the MARK signals the end of the exercise or the behavior.

2 - When dogs have to move to snatch a reward it increases the value of the reward to the dog. Compare this to handing a dog a ball or tossing the ball so the dog has to chase it.

3 - The movement only needs to be one step back and away from the dog. So it goes like this MARK > MOVE > REWARD (being sure the movement does not come at the same time you MARK the behavior - there must be a gap in time).

To accomplish this after the Mark the handler moves his delivering hand down and away from the dog, kind of like a wand. The dog knows the hand contains the reward and will follow it.

## **How Many Rewards to Give?**

### **Jack Potting**

In this system you only give the mark one time but there is nothing wrong with giving more than one reward. If a dog does an exceptionally good job give him several rewards. In fact you can give several different kinds of food rewards in the same training session. A really good job could result in the several of the highest value food rewards. Usually the more rewards the higher in drive the dog stays.

So remember as long as you don't say the mark more than one time you can give several really high value rewards right after another when he does a lightning fast down and then stays down. This is called jack potting.

It's also important to end a training session on a high point. Some people will jack pot the last mark before the DONE or BREAK command.

## Dogs with Low Food Drive

Some dogs have very low food drive. Food drive can be increased by using very high value treats and only feeding after you train. Even a dog with good food drive will value food rewards more by not feeding the dog until after our first training session for the day.

When you are doing a lot of training with young or small dogs you can redesign your feeding program and use all-natural food rolls for the dog's entire daily diet. Determine what volume you should feed for the entire day and then divide that amount into the number of training sessions you plan on having. In that way he gets all his food during training sessions.

I also believe that dogs can learn to acquire food drive. There is nothing wrong with "fasting" a dog for a day or even two days (never 3 days). I guarantee your dog will have food drive for meat treats after he has not eaten for a day or so. If you randomly fast low food drive dogs their food drive will increase.

I have also seen high prey drive dogs with low food drive develop a level of food drive by playing tug with a sock or toy that has food in it or a toy that has been saturated with the odor of the food.

## Establishing Pack Structure with the Family Pet

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## Splitting and Shaping in Marker Training

In the marker system there are two concepts to training exercises. You can shape an exercise and you can split an exercise into small component parts, and then train the individual parts. Once the parts are trained you link (or chain) them together to form the final exercise.

When an exercise is shaped the dog is mark/rewarded for behaviors that approximate the final goal behavior. These approximations can be very small steps. (i.e. just looking at something could result in a mark reward)

We don't look at marker training as "either you shape" or "you split" and exercise. Marker training is not an either or process. The people who are good at shaping are usually great at splitting.

It is a fact that people either shape and/or split an exercises or they manipulate and/or correct a dog into performing an exercise. Those in the later category are old school dog training.

With shaping the dog is rewarded for progressively more detailed behavior. For example: in shaping the hand touch exercise the dog would first be marked/rewarded for simply looking at the hand. Once he was consistently looking and being mark/rewarded, he would then not be marked/rewarded until he took one step towards the hand. Then not mark/rewarded until he took 3 steps towards the hand. And finally not mark/rewarded until his nose touched the hand.

Simple behaviors are easy to shape but when exercises get more complicated they need to be broken (or split) into small pieces and these pieces trained separately. Those pieces can also be shaped.

When an exercise is split, the trainer either lures a dog or shapes a dog to perform the component part of the exercises. The split pieces of an exercise always need to be small enough that each piece has a reasonable chance of the dog being successful when we ask them to do it.

As a dog gains confidence and become better at offering the pieces of a split exercise you will start to link or chain the parts together before you mark and reward.

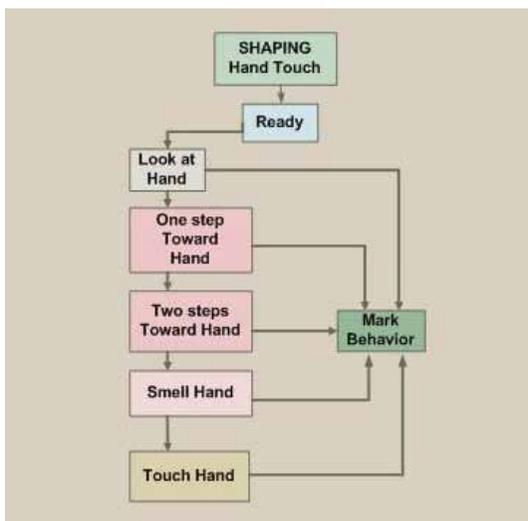
Learning to split an exercise is an art form. It is a factor of experience, training and skill. How to split is often not an obvious choice, at least not as obvious as we would think. But with this said splitting is the essence of dog training. To become proficient at splitting a trainer must become a master of observing what his dog is doing, what his dog has done in the past and what his goals are.

# Variable Levels of Reward in Marker Training

A point of mention before linking two components of an exercise is the trainer should put his current portion of a split exercise on what is called a “[Variable Level of Reward](#)” before linking two component parts of the work.

There are a couple of reasons for this. If we don't put the component on a variable reward the dog could have problems when he expects to get rewarded for a behavior and the reward doesn't come. Secondly if an exercise has been split into 10 component parts we can't reward each of the 10 components every time we ask for the behavior.

During your training process if your dog starts to have problems and doesn't show progress you need to rethink your training plan and find an easier way. Maybe you need to start from the beginning and reward the smallest of behaviors again. Maybe you need to find an entirely new plan. With this said this is an important part of every system of dog training.



**Flow chart on Shaping the HAND TOUCH exercise**

## Luring in Marker Training

Luring takes place when we show our dog a food reward before an exercise and then use that food to lure or guide the dog's movements (as he follows the food in our hand) through an exercise. In my opinion there are clear cases to use lures.

Clicker purists will disagree with using luring. They call it a bribe. We would have to agree to disagree on this issue. In my opinion certain exercises result in faster learning when the dog is lured through the learning process. The key to luring is to understand how to train a lure and then how to fade the lure.

When a trainer is establishing his foundation in markers he needs to actually teach a dog to follow a lure. This is done after "charge the mark." It's done by letting the dog smell the food in your hand (without actually getting it). Then moving the hand away from the dog. As the dog follows the food hand you simply "mark" the follow and open the hand to release the food. It doesn't take long for the dog to understand a lure.

Luring is great for teaching touch pads and positions (sit stand and down).

It should be noted that when handlers use luring too long the lure can often be difficult to fade from training. Trainers need to understand that a dog ALWAYS follows a physical lure over a verbal voice command. So when we use a lure we need to have an exit strategy for stopping its use. The quicker the lure is faded the better.

Lures are faded by adding the command for the behavior. The process starts when we feel the dog has reached fluency with the gesture for the lure. At that point we will give a command, offer the lure gesture then and mark-reward the behavior. The command must come immediately before the lure.

We do this 10 - 20 - 50 times (as many as we think we need). We then test the process by giving the command and not offer the lure gesture. If the dog performs the behavior it has learned the command.

If the dog hesitates and does not offer the behavior we simply say "Nope" reposition the dog to the point he was before the command was given and repeat the command-gesture again until we think he is ready for another test.

What trainers should not do when the command fails is to add the lure after they have found out that the dog is not going to follow the lure. This is the natural instinct for new trainers but it is the exact wrong thing to do. This only trains the dog to wait for a gesture.

So if the dog doesn't perform the behavior, you repeat the command and add the gesture that the dog knows and then mark-reward the behavior. Do this another 10 or 20 times and test the command again.

A point to mention when training is the lure. It is recommended to begin your lure training by luring your dog away from you. It's easy to get a dog to come to you. It's harder to get a dog to go away from you. Sp lure away to a touch pad out in front of you.

## **Gestures or Signals in Marker Training**

The goal of luring should be to create a non-food supporting signal that helps our dog perform a behavior. Gestures are used to help a dog perform a behavior before the handler names the exercise by adding a command.

Here is something new trainers should think about. There is a fine but distinct line between a signal and a lure. If a handler wants his dog to go to his rug and points at the rug from behind the dog, that's a signal. If the handler gets one foot in front of your dog to encourage him to his bed he is luring the dog to the bed with his body.

But if the handler stays one foot behind the dog and encourages the dog to his bed he is offering signals to help him make the decision to go to his bed, a subtle but important distinction. One that requires thought on the part of the trainer.



**Dog is being LURED to the hand touch - see the food is on the hand**

## Lumping an Exercise

For the majority of my 50 year career of owning and training dogs I have been a lumper and I am not proud of it.

A lumper is someone who does not split an exercise into enough component parts. A trainer can easily become a lumper if they get ahead of themselves and don't properly split an exercise. When someone lumps several component parts of an exercise together and then tries to train all these parts at one time he is lumping the exercise.

When I first started to train dogs to heel I simply put a choke chain on the dog and gave a heel command. If the dog got out in front I did an about turn and said Heel and corrected the dog back into position. If the dog went wide

I said Heel and did a quick turn and corrected the dog into position. I lumped all the component parts of the heeling exercise into one training exercise. The bottom line is the learning phase was not pretty.

I feel sorry for my old dogs I often wonder how much more they would have enjoyed training had I known marker training. I think how confused they must have been and what it did to our relationship.

Unfortunately there are still many local obedience classes that still teach this way today. It is sad.

## **Body Signals (gestures) and Voice Signals**

Signals or gestures are a very important part of dog training. There are both body signals and/or voice signals.

An example of a voice signal would be telling your dog that you are going to start training today. You do this by saying "**ARE YOU READY**" every time you go out to train. This is not a command; it is simply a voice signal that tells the dog we are going to start training.

Some purists will say that body signals can be called lures. For me this is splitting hairs. For the purpose of clear communication in this article I will define a signal as the use of your body when you're not using food or a toy to lure a dog into performing a behavior.

An example of an advanced body signal is seen during heeling. Handlers learn to turn their head several steps before making a turn. They look in the direction they are about to turn. In formal competition heeling dogs are often trained to look at the side of the handlers face. They quickly learn that when they see "their handlers head turn signal" they need to get prepared to stay with you in the turn.

Trainers need to think about unintentionally adding a signal to their training because they can create problems. An example of this just came up in our home. Cindy is training her young Mal to STAND from a sit. This exercise is needed for [Mondio Ring](#) Sport training.

When her dog sat in front, she would signal the dog to STAND by stepping in closer to the dog as she put both hands up and under his chin. It didn't take long for the dog to catch on and learn the signal to stand.

The problem developed when we realized the dog was reacted to the signal of her stepping forward and not the hands going under the chin. During the sit-stay when she walked to her dog it would stand. It took work to change the dogs thinking on this.

## **How do you Start Marker Training?**

The first step in training always begins by getting your dog engaged with you.

By that I mean your dog must be focused on you, he must want to interact with you and he must want what you have (IE food or a toy). The image of a dog that is engaged with his handler is a dog that ignores everything in his environment when his handler takes him out. The dog bounces around and looks into the face of the handler as if to say "Hey lets play". When you have that attitude you have true engagement. When you have that you have a dog that is ready to learn.

If you don't have engagement you are going to have a real battle trying to teach a dog any behaviors.

There is a large segment engagement and getting a dog past environmental stressors in my DVD on [The Power of Training Dogs with Food](#). This work is beyond the scope of this article.

One of the most difficult concepts for new trainers to grasp in the marker system is “WHERE DO I BEGIN TRAINING? HOW DO YOU START - WHERE DO I START?”

The answer depends on the exercise and if you’re going to shape the exercises, split the exercise or help the dog by luring it through the learning phase.

The DVD I produced titled [The Power of Training Dogs with Markers](#) explains and demonstrates the concept of marker training. It shows how timing effects understanding and it breaks the system down so people really get a feel for the system.

The DVD I did with Michael Ellis on [The Power Of Training Dogs with Food](#) teaches people how to set up a training program in which using markers is the driving force behind the system. Michael has developed a step by step system of using markers to build a foundation from which exercises and behaviors can be trained.

The fact is these 2 DVDs have 7 hours and 35 minutes of detailed information in this system. The second DVD I did with Michael covers how to play tug with your dog. This DVD is the last part of the foundation for Michael’s System. Once you have established his foundation you can use that base to teach a behavior. To get a feel for this go read the testimonials from people who have come before you.

## **Train a Human - Test Your Understanding of the System**

**You can watch the streaming videos on training a human on these links:**

[The first short streaming video on training a human](#)

[The second short streaming video on training a human](#)

[The third short streaming video on training a human](#)

One of the best ways to get a true feeling for marker training is to train a friend. I am dead serious when I say this. In my DVD that I did on marker training I included several people (me included) getting trained to perform a behavior.

While it will be funny (or if you play the part of the dog it could be frustrating) it truly demonstrates how a dog would feel when you are trying to shape a behavior.

So when you think you are beginning to understand the concept of marker training take a bag of M&M's and try training a human with markers. If you have kids, take a bowl of quarters and use them as rewards. They may look at quarters as a higher value reward than M&M's. Pick a task and use the concepts of marker training. It is good for laughs and it is great to teach you how to mark a behavior.

The fact is you will learn more when you play the role of the dog and ask someone else to train you.

I can't stress this enough - don't underestimate the value of this little game in learning to have empathy for your dog in training. A word to the wise when you train a human:

1 - You will learn how important reward placement is to the speed of learning the behavior

2 - You will also learn how powerful simply looking at the target is to figuring out a new task.

So look at your target and reward at the target (even if the behavior is a long way away from the behavior).

# **If You are not Giving Commands How Does Your Dog Know What You Want to Train Today?**

In this system we never give commands until the dog fully understands the signal (or gesture) for a behavior along with the behavior.

When new trainers start this work they often ask "If I am not telling the dog what I want him to do, how does he know what behavior I want to work on when I take him out today?"

There are two ways to train without commands:

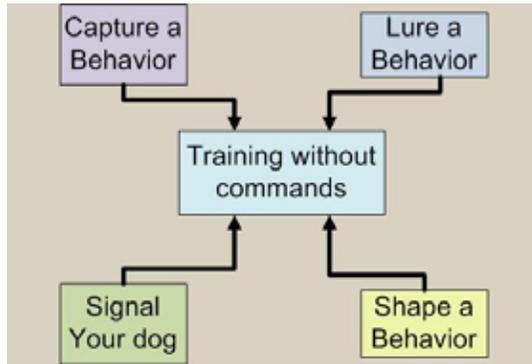
1 - Trainers can capture a behavior through what's called FREE SHAPING, (meaning they simply wait for the dog to offer a behavior and then mark it)

2 - They can lure and help a dog learn a behavior with food and signals.

Capturing a behavior can take a long time. We have used it with our horses and it's a very effective training method but it does take a time and patients. People who free really split exercises down into many, many small pieces. Once the dog learns the behavior he is very solid in its performance.

We prefer to help our dog by luring with signals (or gestures) for what we want him to do. This is a very important step in the marker training system. To really appreciate its full implication trainers need to also understand the relationship between the command and the reward in this system. I discuss that in detail in the next chapter.

Training with lures makes the process go much quicker.



## Ways to start training a new command in Marker Training

# The Relationship Between COMMANDS and REWARDS

In marker training commands are not added until the dog knows and understands the exercise. Commands are not added until the dog will perform the exercise 8 out of 10 times that the handler gives a signal.

Unfortunately people are verbal and dogs are visual. When it comes to commands this means people often name an exercise or use a command to try and induce a behavior before the dog knows the behavior well enough to associate the behavior with a command.

Our dogs hear us talk all day long. The vast majority of what we say is just background babble to the dog. The words mean nothing to the dog. The volume or tone of the words we use may mean something but the actual word means nothing. When people name a command before the dog associates that command with a behavior the command becomes part of the background babble. It's the same as him not hearing you.

To best explain the concept we want to establish about adding commands in markers I will use the relationship between "markers" and "rewards."

I have already explained that through repetition a dog begins to look at a marker as a secondary reward. When he hears his handler say "YES" he feels good, he gets excited, he knows the exercise is over and he is going to get a reward. He has linked the marker with the reward.

We want the same thing to happen with a command. We want the dog to hear the command and immediately feel good because he knows he only has to do this silly little behavior (which he really doesn't mind doing) and he will get his high value reward.

We want the dog to look at a command as part of the linked chain that leads to a reward. We want the dog to look at a command as part of his trigger mechanism to get his reward.

This can only happen if the dog knows and understands the behavior he must perform when you ask him to do something. This behavior must be a "no-brainer" if the dog is going to look at commands in this manner.

## **When to Add a Command**

In marker training we train the dog to perform a behavior with signals (or gestures) before the command is added. When the dog will perform the behavior 8 out of 10 times with the gesture you can start to add the command before the signal. Key here is that there must be a time split between the command or signal.

The concept of when to add a command in marker training is radically different than old school training.

In old school training commands were added before a dog ever understood the behavior or exercise. A dog would be given a command and then corrected when until it performed the exercise correctly.

Training the dog to “heel” is the perfect example. A new dog would be commanded to “heel” and the handler stepped off. The handler made a sudden turn and the dog got out of position. The handler would then repeat “heel” and then correct the dog back into position.

That is not the way things are done in the marker system.

## **How to Add a Command**

When it comes time to name a behavior (add a command) we always give the command before we add a signal or gesture for the behavior.

It is important give the command a fraction of a second before adding the gesture to help the dog. This break in time is important. Remember that dogs will always follow a physical signal over a voice signal. When they are given at the same time the dog will be following the physical signal and not learn the voice command. When these handlers then want to drop the gesture the dogs will not perform. Those dogs have only learned to follow the signal and not the voice command.

The timing of commands to signals is very much like the timing for marking a behaviors and then delivering the reward. The command and the signal cannot happen at the same instant or the dog will always work off the physical signal and not the voice command.



## Flow Chart on Adding Commands to Marker Training

### Anticipating a Command

When dogs begin to approach the point where we add a command we will see them start to anticipate a behavior. Anticipation in the learning process is a good thing. Anticipation tells us the dog is thinking, he is actively trying to participate in the work. Even if the dog anticipates with incorrect behavior it tells us he is trying to work with us and he wants to do what he thinks we want. So don't discourage it too quickly.

Old school dog trainers give corrections for anticipation. They expected perfection all the times. Think about this from the dogs standpoint. He gets corrected for trying to do what "HE THINKS YOU WANT HIM TO DO". He then thinks "Hey I am trying to do this - what the heck - I don't understand what you want and your jerking me around!!! This sucks I am going to stop trying and wait until you show me exactly what you want!"

# Stimulus Control in Marker Training

Stimulus control is the finishing tool that completes the training process for a command.

As you go through training you will reach a point where your dog has learned several behaviors. He looks at them as his little bag of tricks that he uses to make you give him his rewards.

During the learning process of a new behavior you will often see a dog reach into that trick bag and offer all of his known behaviors in his effort to get you to give his reward. That is OK during the learning phase but when the dog gains proficiency this needs to end.

At some point the dog should only perform the behavior he is asked to perform. He should also NOT offer this behavior when he is asked to do something else. Getting the dog to do this is called "stimulus control."

The point to add stimulus control to your work is when the dog performs a behavior on command 8 out of 10 times without a signal or lure. Let me repeat "WITHOUT A SIGNAL OR LURE." New trainers miss that very important part of stimulus control. They jump the gun and start adding stimulus control while they are still using signals to help the dog. Then when they drop the signal they confuse the dog.

It's also unrealistic to wait for a dog to perform the exercises 100% of the time. Waiting until a dog performs 10 out of 10 times results in dogs that get bored with training.

A lack of stimulus control is one of the biggest problems many motivational trainers face. New trainers grasp the concept of markers, they enjoy the reward process, but they struggle with the refined process of stimulus control.

In this stage of training when the dog is asked to perform a known behavior and he reaches into his trick bag to offer a different known behaviors, you simply say "NO" and turn your back. Turning away for 5 seconds sends a clear message to the dog that he is not doing what you want.

When you turn back and ask for the behavior again you will see if he then offers the correct behavior or an unwanted behavior. If it's not what you asked you repeat the process and again say "NO" and turn your back. It may become necessary to put the dog in his crate for a few minutes and then get him out and try again.

It's not a bad idea to introduce the "*done*" or "*break*" command at this point. This tells your dog your done training for a few minutes. With experience this makes it clear to the dog that training is over for awhile.

An important part of stimulus control is to also take this behavior out of the dogs trick bag. This is called "extinguishing a behavior." By that I mean the dog must understand that this behavior is not allowed to be offered when we introduce new signals and commands.

If we have taken the command "SIT" through stimulus control the dog offers a "SIT" when you are training the down we immediately say "NO" and turn our back.

Trainers will not see consistency in a command until they take their dogs through stimulus control. So if your goal is to enter a dog sport you will have to become a master of this concept. What's interesting is that dogs are smarter than we often give them credit for. They learn the concept of stimulus control after you have taken them through the process a few times. They recognize what you are doing and pick up on it quicker and quicker each time.

In old-school training stimulus control is done with a choke collar or prong collar. If the dog performs an unwanted

behavior it is corrected until it complies with the correct behavior. This is why they dogs stop offering behaviors they think their handler wants. It's why they are not good problem solvers and it's why they are reluctant participants in the training process.

## **The Problem with Adding Commands Too Soon**

The first and most obvious problem of adding a command before the dog knows the behavior is we run the risk of confusing our dog or turning the command into background noise.

Our goal is to make the command part of the chain of events that leads to a reward. To accomplish this the training needs to be black and white. Adding a command before the dog understands a behavior is not black and white.

When we initially give a command we follow it with the signal we used to get the dog to perform the behavior. That signal is looked at as help. In training we help the dog with signals until we reach a point where we can stop using the signal and only use the command.

When we name an exercise we need to be prepared to do something to help the dog if it doesn't perform the behavior.

### **You have your own tool box of possible options to consider when this happens:**

- 1 - You can ignore "offered behaviors" until he gets it right.
- 2 - You can help the dog and by offering a signal or signals.
- 3 - We can say "NOPE" in an upbeat voice - not a MAD VOICE.

4 - If the dog refuses to perform a behavior you need to ask yourself if the reward you are using is a high enough value to motivate the dog and make him want to work.

Only you and your dog can answer that question.

5 - If the dog won't work off the signal then we need to re-evaluate our training plan. We could be lumping the training steps and the dog really doesn't understand the behavior we want. So go back to splitting.

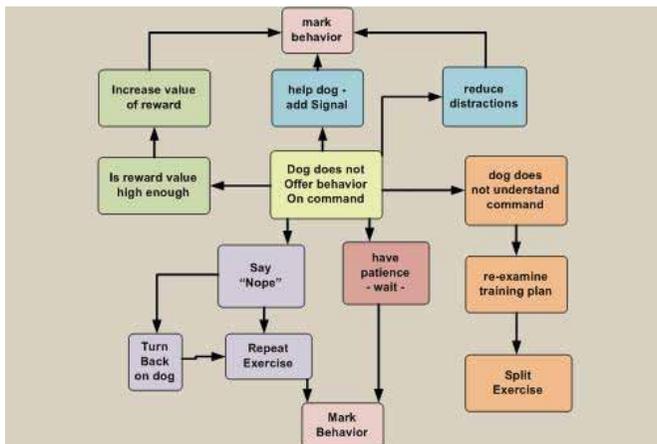
a - To get us out of the problem you can use a "screw up cookie." I explain Screw up cookies later in this article.

6 - If we know for sure that the dog knows the command, if he is being insubordinate we can put him back in his dog crate or dog kennel for a time out. Dog crates are better for time outs.

Do this enough times and the dog learns a time out means something. I didn't used to think this worked. I was wrong, it works. With many dogs it becomes a motivator. It frustrates the dog and frustration builds drive.

If you have a second dog, get that dog out and work it in front of the crated dog. Use a little jealousy.

7 - As the LAST RESORT if we know the dog absolutely knows the command and is simply refusing to do it we can [correct the dog](#).



### Flow Chart on Dog Not Performing Behavior

The bottom line is when the dog doesn't perform a behavior you need to evaluate why this happened. There is no set rule of what to do every time. It will always vary according to the circumstance.

## Naming Component Parts of an Exercise

Something that new trainers can think about when they split an exercise is to name the component parts of the exercise.

An example of this can be seen in the Heel exercise. One of the component parts of the heel command is to teach the behavior of the dog LOOKING up at your face. Once the dog has learned the look up at your face behavior you can name it with "LOOK."

Then when you link all the components of Heeling and the dog gets a little distracted and is not paying attention you simply say "LOOK." This identifies an exact behavior to a dog. If the dog doesn't comply, you simply say "Nope - LOOK" and start all over again.

In other words this allows you to pin point with a great deal of accuracy what is expected in training.

## **Adding Duration to an Exercise by Using “GOOD”**

Up to this point we have not expected a dog to add duration of time to any exercises. This means we don't expect a dog to perform a sit-stay or down-stay.

As far as we are concerned - and as far as the dog is concerned - in the SIT exercise as soon as a dogs butt touches the ground or as soon as the dogs belly touches the ground in the DOWN exercise we say YES and the exercise is over. The dog is released to come and get his reward.

We don't think about adding duration to any exercise until a dog is consistently performing that exercises. When the time comes to extend an exercise we simply delay the mark. We remain calm and say GOOD in a soothing tone and when the exercise is over we mark the moment with YES and have a party.

Good is NEVER used as a release to end an exercise!

During the period when we begin extending an exercise we can say “GOOD” multiple times and jack pot the rewards - one right after another. This helps a dog to understand what you expect. Unlike the MARK (which is only said one time) the duration command can be said over and over depending on what the dog is doing.

You can “charge the word GOOD” command as the god grows up by saying GOOD when you pet him, or saying GOOD when you feed him. This is a similar concept to charging the mark - only we are adding a good feeling to the word “Good.” The end result is the dog knows when we say “Good” he feels good.

Duration in time is extended for random periods starting in seconds and not getting to minutes for a long time. In the beginning we only extend the time by 2 or 3 seconds and then MARK the behavior and end the exercise. Then we go 5 seconds and MARK; then 2 seconds and then 10 seconds etc. With puppies we don't recommended going beyond 15 to 20 seconds.

## **Random Rewards in Marker Training**

"When do I stop using a food reward for a command?" This is an excellent question and an important part of marker training.

The goal for every dog trainer is to reach a point of variable reinforcement.

It is unrealistic to think that trainers will give a food reward every time they ask their dog to perform a behavior for the rest of the dogs life. For one thing people can't walk around with a bait bag for the rest of their lives. Although my Corgi that's lying at my feet right now thinks that would be the best thing that ever happened to her.

When we start marker training we reward for the smallest of efforts. We reward for looking at a hand in a hand touch. When the dog knows and understands a behavior and will perform the behavior correctly 8 out of 10 times for a signal or a command the handler can begin to reward randomly.

A behavior needs to be put on a random reward schedule before that behavior is linked to a second split behavior, When you stop and think about that statement it makes sense. If a dog expects a reward every time it performs a behavior and then you totally stop rewarding for that behavior the dog could shut down.

So the way around this problem is to establish random rewards.

Back in 2001 my brother (who is a psychologist in Canada) wrote an article for my website titled "[USING INTERMITTENT REWARDS IN TRAINING - THE CONCEPT OF DIFFERENTIAL REINFORCEMENT.](#)" You may want to visit this article.

As a handler and the dog gain fluency in an exercise they can go longer and longer in between rewards. This becomes a factor of experience and a feeling for what works and what doesn't work.

## **Using "GOOD" to Link Components of an Exercise**

The concept of random rewards should be in place when handlers begin to link or chain behaviors together to form a finished exercise.

The beauty of the word GOOD is that it also lets you tell your dog that he just successfully completed a portion of a LINKED exercise. It tells him that he is doing a good job and is going to get a reward if he continues to do what you expect.

Good can also be used to link component parts of an exercise. It goes like this:

The dog is asked to perform the first linked behavior.

The dog performs the behavior.

The dog is told GOOD.

The dog is then asked to perform the next behavior in the chain.

When used in this manner the word GOOD becomes a powerful tool to communicate with your dog. The beauty is that it can be used at a distance to tell the dog he is doing a good job.

## Using Food with “GOOD”

Lets use the example of a down-stay in which the final MARK is rewarded with a game of tug.

When a dog is asked to down it is expected to stay down until released. After a handler gives the down command and the dog complies, the handler can say GOOD and offer multiple food rewards.

By jack potting a food reward along with multiple GOOD commands we encourage the dog to stay down. The exercise is not yet over because he has not marked the exercise as being finished. The dog remains down until the handler is satisfied with compliance and gives the MARK (YES) and presents the tug toy and a session of tug.

### Snap - Open Bait Bag



## Allowing Your Dog to Make Mistakes Creates Dogs that are Problem Solvers

One of the harder skills new trainers must learn is that there will be times when you have to allow your dog time to offer behaviors and sometimes you have to allow your dog to make a mistake. Dogs become problem solvers when allowed to work through problems.

Many people look at confusion in their dogs as a problem. These are often people who come from old school dog training where they always want their dog to perform the exercise the correct way every time.

When a dog looks confused or makes a mistake the natural instinct is to step in and rescue the dog, try and lure it through an exercise. When in reality the dog should be given time to try and problem solve. That's how dogs learn.

When this work is done correctly, your dog will see value in performing. It is your job to allow your dog to make choices and if you have built enough value for the behavior the dog will want to perform correctly.

## **Negative Markers**

When a dog learns a behavior to the point where that behavior can be put on cue (most of the time this means with a command but it could also be a hand signal) the handler can start to use a negative marker if the dog does not perform the behavior.

A negative marker is "NOPE" or "No." It is important to understand that this is not a correction. It's said in a tone that implies "look you can do a better job lets do it again."

Handlers should never sound mad when they say "NO." Sounding mad turns a negative marker into a correction and that's not what we want. "NO" is simply a word that tells the dog that he has not performed a behavior correctly and he has to do it again.

The beauty of using "NO" or "NOPE" is we can use it to identify the exact instant the dog makes a mistake. Unlike a physical correction, which often takes drive out of the dog, a negative marker often has the opposite effect, it can add drive.

Now here is something to think about. With positive markers the reward must come within a short period of time after the mark. How long is a factor of the dog, its training and experienced. But dogs should get a reward within several second of the mark if the reward is to be associated with the behavior and mark.

## **Only say “NO” one time**

If your dog makes a mistake and you say “NO” one time and immediately have the dog repeat the exercise or immediately put the dog away.

A negative marker can be looked at in the same manner as a positive marker (YES). The dog takes a mental snap shot in his mind of exactly what it was doing when it got the negative makers. If the trainer is consistent and only says “NO” one time the dogs catch on quickly.

When a trainer repeats “NO” several times this only confuses the dog because he must determine which mental snap shot you are referring to.

So, just as you don’t say “YES YES YES” when you mark a behavior you don’t say “NO NO NO” when you give a negative reinforcer.

In addition you don’t wait before making the dog repeat the behavior, you do it immediacy. Waiting too long will result in the dogs mind wandering off and he will not associate the negative behavior with repeating the exercise.

If a dog continues to make mistakes and does not seem to be concentrating and your pretty sure the dog understands the cue then rather than repeat the exercise the dog is given a time-out and put in his crate for a few minutes (or even end the training session).

Putting a dog in a crate is a mental break for a dog. While some dogs may look at a time-out as punishment others need the break to allow them to refocus.

## Screw Up Cookies

The beauty of MARKER work is it's pretty hard to hurt your dog if you make a mistake. Missing a mark is not like giving a prong collar correction at the wrong time. Give a soft dog a prong collar correction and the dog will shut down and quit trying. Miss a mark on the same soft dog and you have not hurt the dogs temperament. Oh in marker training he may be confused but you don't shut the dog down.

Earlier in this article I talked about "*screw up cookies*" Ann Braue introduced me to "*screw up cookies*" and I love the concept.

There may come a time when your dog simply doesn't offer the behavior you want no matter how long you wait.

This usually indicates one of the following:

- 1 - The dog got tired and just slowed up or stopped trying.
- 2 - The dog does not have that good of a relationship with the owner.
- 3 - The exercise was not SPLIT into small enough pieces for the dog to understand what you wanted (you lumped the exercise).
- 4 - The reward is not a high enough value.
- 5 - The dog is not hungry enough.
- 5- You have not shown enough patience and allowed the dog time to work out the problem.

When your training and your dog doesn't give you the behavior you want you need to get out of the training

session in a manner that still allows the dog to feel like he is still learning. YOU ALWAYS NEED TO MAKE THE DOG FEEL LIKE HE IS A LEARNER.

Just because the dog fell short of YOUR GOALS does not mean that you should jeopardize your relationship with the dog to achieve your goals. Relationships should always come first over goals.

One option that allows this to happen is to use a “screw up cookie.” Here is how it works; the dog stops working, you realize the problem is one of the above, rather than give a correction or walk away you simply use a screw up cookie.

Using a screw up cookie means asking the dog to do something very simple that we are 100% sure he enjoys doing (IE a hand touch). When you use a “screw up cookie” you should use it two, three or 4 times in a row.

Screw up cookie not only get you out of a problem they redirect the dogs mind away from a frustrating incident. They redirect the dog onto a task that leads to a reward and then allows you to stop your training and put your dog away on a positive note. Once that’s done you can go sit down and figure out what went wrong.

## **Corrections and Marker Training**

In my opinion there is no such thing as an all motivational system of dog training. Just as there is no such thing as an all force (or compulsion) system of dog training.

If you want to become an effective dog trainer you will have to learn how and when to employ corrections in your training. I wrote an article titled [The Theory of Correction in Dog Training](#). You may want to visit this eBook.

Purists will argue with me when I say there are applications for using corrections in the marker training system. Most of the time these are people who either lack experience;

or only work with a very compliant non-dominant type of dog; or do not handle their dog in highly distracting environments; or are not involved with very high drive dogs in demanding dog sports; or they are not involved with competitive dog sports that require precise exercises.

One thing to keep in mind when thinking about corrections is the use of the leash. When people first start this work they should NEVER use the leash as a tool to correct until after the dog has progressed to through touch pads and learning positions. The only use for the leash is to keep the dog with the handler. In other words, to stop the dog from leaving.

I recommend that initial training be done in a harness. This eliminates the handler making the mistake of giving leash correction.

In more advanced training (IE heeling) the dog will be trained to give to leash pressure. There is a very specific way to teach a dog to give to pressure. This will be covered in my DVD title TRAINING A COMPETITION HEELING DOG with Michael Ellis. Give to pressure is not a correction based skill but it could be confusing to a dog that had earlier been trained with collar corrections. Hence - do your initial training with a harness.

The application of corrections in marker training should never be taken lightly. When corrections are used incorrectly there is always the risk of changing the relationship between the dog and handler, especially on soft dogs.

Corrections should only be used in later training when you are 100% sure the dog understands the behavior you want and he is refusing to offer this behavior. This is past the point in training where commands have been added to the behavior. We need to see the dog consistently performing exercise without handler signals.

If we determine that the dog knows what we are asking and he is being disobedient then he either needs a negative reinforcer or he needs to be put away or he needs to get a correction. The correction on young dogs does not necessarily mean - take the dog's head off with a level 10 correction. More often than not it's a slight tap of the leash that means "Look you know better and you have to pay attention."

In most sport dog training, corrections are a finishing tool. They are used to prove a dog to show him that he must work with us in every location, under every distraction every time. The more work a handler does on training engagement in the face of environmental stressors less problems they have. (see the full chapter in my DVD, [The Power of Training Dogs with Food](#).)

The level of correction used is a factor of the dog's temperament (a hard dog vs a soft dog), the drive level of the dog and the distractions he is faced with and what kind of infraction the dog made. Obviously unwarranted human aggression would receive a stronger correction than not getting completely into heel position when asked.

A rule of thumb on obedience corrections is that we want the dog to be able to take food and play with us after a correction. If the dog will not do either of those things we have corrected too hard. That information needs to be tucked in your mind to remember next time out.

Many times new dog trainers get ahead of themselves. They don't have the patience to let a young dog grow up. Trainers need to recognize the fact that corrections are self-reinforcing for the handler. This means they fulfill the desire to make the dog comply. When in fact there are often better ways to make a dog want to comply.

## Corrections - Extinguishing a Behavior - Dominant Dogs

There is a difference between being disobedience and the need to EXTINGUISH A BEHAVIOR.

There are some things that dogs do that are self rewarding, like chase rabbits or squirrels. No amount of redirection or marker training is going to change my dogs desire to chasing squirrels. You can't take the fun out of the chase. Even though they seldom if ever catch a squirrel they derive pleasure from the chase. Therefore the solution is that the fun needs to be taken out of the chase.

Dogs need to be corrected for self rewarding behaviors. There are many ways to accomplish this but in my opinion the best solution is with a remote collar. I have done a training DVD titled [Remote Collar Training for the Pet Owner](#).

The beauty of the marker system is that because the training is so black and white the level of correction used to get compliance is much less than what's needed in other old school methods of training. Because it is so black and white there is also less conflict with the handler.

## Corrections vs Compulsion

There is also a difference between trainers who train with compulsion (IE forced tracking) and trainers who use corrections. Corrections involve fixing a mistake. Compulsion means the dog offers the behavior to avoid a correction (yank and crank training).

While this may seem like mincing words, there is in fact a profound difference. People who plan on training dog sports and doing so with a level of consistency are going to have to introduce obedience correction in their

training. The beauty of marker training is that the level; of corrections are usually much lower than in other forms of training - especially forced compulsion training.

Anyone who has trained dogs as long as I have has trained with compulsion. When I started training there were no motivational dog training methods. Frankly I think back and feel sorry for my old dogs. Many were so good and I was so unfair. It's sad. They deserved so much more than I gave them. Maybe in some small way this article and my marker DVDs are a way saying I am sorry.

## **How Long Do You Use Food Rewards**

One of the arguments that inexperienced trainers expound on is to say that you eventually have to stop using food. When people say this it only confirms they do not understand the system or the power of marker training.

Intermittent food rewards can be used throughout the life of the dog. At the beginning of this article I wrote that dogs can be rewarded with a food reward, a toy reward or handler praise. It's a handlers prerogative to determine what his dog needs at any one point in time. But to insinuate that you would stop using food is foolish.

## **Do You Ever Stop Marker Training?**

There are several parts of this question.

Marker training is a method of communication with your dog. It's not just used to teach new behaviors and exercises. Once dogs understand the 5 core words of the marker system they will always be used (throughout the life of the dog) to communicate with the dog.

## Don't Be Afraid to Scrap Your Training Plan

The best way to approach handler mistakes is to first accept the fact that mistakes are a normal part of dog training.

Mistakes in training need to be looked at as learning experiences on the path to training your dog. They don't always necessarily need to be a bad thing.

The best trainers always look for points in training where they hit a wall and the dog just doesn't seem to understand what you are trying to teach him. This usually means your getting ahead of yourself in training steps. You need to back up the work and split the exercise into smaller pieces.

Inexperienced trainers on the other hand always blame the dog and say that "THE DOG KNEW BETTER."



**A 13 week old puppy trained to give straight "fronts" with markers**

# Retraining Adult Dogs; Dealing with Dominant Dogs; Retraining Puppies and Pack Structure Training

In my opinion marker training is the perfect system to start training adult dogs. It is especially effective for dominant dogs or for people who adopt rescue dogs because it is stress free.

Marker training is the perfect way to interact with dominant dogs in a positive manner that will not cause a conflict. It's a way to show a dominant dog that you can be interesting and fun.

A perfect example of the power of marker training is teaching a dog to down. The down exercise is a difficult exercise for a dominant dog. They resent being forced into different positions. When a dog downs in front of you it's an example of submission, not something a dominant dog cares to do. In fact many owners of dominant dogs get dog bit when they try and force their down into a down position.

But by training the down with a high value food reward and shaping the exercise we can easily train a very dominant dog that there are benefits for him to down.

Don't misunderstand what I am saying here. Marker training doesn't eliminate dominance in dogs. It's only a method to interact with a dominant dog with very little risk of getting bit. Because there is no conflict there isn't a reason for a dominant dog to feel like you are challenging his rank within your pack. In the early stages of marker training there are no corrections so the dominant dog does not feel threatened.

With that said marker training is a way (through "NO MARKS" or "negative reinforcers") to show a dog that you do have rules.

Owners of dominant dogs should take their dog through my [pack structure program](#) before they reach the point in marker training where they add corrections. Some people with seriously dominant dogs should get the DVD I produced titled [Dealing with Dominant and Aggressive Dogs](#).

## Rescue Dogs and Marker Training

As a general rule dogs that have been turned into rescue organizations have some form of behavioral problem. If these dogs have had any training it has been old school “yank and crank” methods that have used avoidance methods to train their dogs. In most cases this has not worked which is why the dogs were turned into the shelters. The dogs therefore come with emotional baggage.

Rescue dogs often require patience when new owner try to work with markers. Because of their previous avoidance training they are afraid to try new things. This is because they have learned that if they make a mistake they get a correction. They will often just stand and look at you because they are waiting for you to show them what you want. They are afraid to experiment.

The new owners need to be patient. They need to mark the slightest movements. These dogs really need to have behaviors split into tiny little parts. When they stop and stare it’s not because they are being stubborn. It’s because they are stuck. They either don’t understand what they are expected to do and are concerned about a correction - so use a screw up cookie.

When the light bulb goes off in the dogs head that they are being reward for trying, their true personality will come shining through. With effort you can bring true joy to these dogs’ lives.

## What Exercises Can Markers Be Used For?

There is no limit to what exercises or parts of exercise that can be trained with markers. You are only limited by your imagination.

You can use it for things as simple as giving you eye contact on voice command (a very important thing for people who compete in dog sports) to something as complicated as teaching a police service dog or a Schutzhund dog correct positioning to bark at a suspect or bark at a helper.



**Side view of the focus your dog can give with marker training - again a 13 week old pup**

## People I Owe a Special Thank You to:

I would like to close this training article with a sincere thanks to Cindy Rhodes, Michael Ellis, and Ann Braue for what I have learned from them about marker training.

Cindy has been great. We have lived together for years and I am continually impressed with her skills as a trainer. The results she has had in her training has been my inspiration to study and learn marker training.

While Michael and Ann had no part in this article or the production of my DVD on markers, they have contributed greatly to my understanding and appreciation of training dogs with Markers.

Ann Braue is one of the top Agility competitors in the world. Over the years she is consistently on USA's world agility team. Ann's web site is [ABCTC.com](http://ABCTC.com)

Cindy and I are lucky to live 20 miles from Ann's training center E/C WI - have attended a number of her seminars.

Anne gives seminars throughout the country – If you ever have an opportunity to go to one of these seminars you will walk away a better dog trainer.

Michael Ellis is one of the most gifted dog trainers I have ever met. He is also one of the first biting sport competitors to embrace marker training. While there are many good dog trainers around the world there are very few who are as gifted at teaching people how to train dogs.

Cindy and I have attended more [Michael Ellis seminars](#) than I can remember. We have hosted Michael here at Leerburg and in 2009 Michael and I will begin to produce training DVDs together.

In August 2009 Michael plans on opening the [Michael Ellis School for Dog Trainers](#) in CA. I have created a page on our web Leerburg web site that we hope to keep updated with Michael's seminars and school information.

If your goal is to make a career of dog training you will not find a better school anywhere, if you wish to take advantage of his short courses and seminars – you will

see why I decided to do training videos with him. <http://leerburg.com/michaelellis.htm> And finally I would like to thank my customers for purchasing our leerburg products. If it were not for those who support us we would not be able to do what we love, which is to train our dogs and horses.

I hope that this article and my DVD will convince you that there are better ways to train dogs than the old school methods of training dogs.

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## **Terminology of Marker Training**

Terminology is always the bane of dog trainers. I can't tell you how often I have seen two trainers argue about training only to find out that they were talking about the exact same thing and just using different terms.

Examples could be that some trainers call the split portions of an exercise "building blocks" some call them "components" some call them "pieces of the exercise." Some call them criteria. It really doesn't matter what terminology you use as long as you understand the concept of splitting exercises.

As time passes I will build a list of terms that apply to marker training in this section.

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## Equipment we use in Marker Training

There is not a lot of equipment needed for marker training. I have listed what we use in our home below.

- [Buckle Collar](#) or [Harness](#)
- [Leash](#)
- [Clickers](#)
- [All-natural treats](#)
- [Bait Bag](#)

**For Products related to this article,  
please visit our [Clicker Training  
Equipment Page](#).**

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## DVDs I recommend

If you want to learn about this training get my new [Basic Dog Obedience video](#). It is an exciting way to train a dog. Motivational methods are ALWAYS better than force training or AVOIDANCE training. This work is fun to do and it builds a bond between the handler and his dog. It ends up with a dog that loves to go out and train and a much happier handler because the dogs want to learn. They want their MARKERS because they know the REWARDS are so good.

[Establishing Pack Structure with the Family Pet](#) - while this DVD has nothing to do with marker training it is probably the most important DVD that the average pet owner can purchase. 99% of all behavior problems in dogs have the roots in a lack of pack structure.

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## Have more Questions?

[Check out Q&A on Marker Training](#)