

Dogs learn very quickly what behaviors will get them praise or a reward. This is why **positive reinforcement training** focuses entirely on rewarding good or desired behaviors, rather than punishing undesirable behaviors. When behaviors are rewarded, dogs are much more likely to repeat that behavior again and again, reinforcing the behaviors you want to see from your pet. Telling them what behaviors you want them to do, and giving them a good reason to do it, is a much easier and much more reliable process than trying to teach them what *not* to do.

Clicker training is a method of doing this by using a distinct sound or signal to immediately indicate to your dog exactly what behavior you want to reward them for. There's nothing particularly magical about the sound of the clicker itself, other than it is a unique sound that you likely don't otherwise use around your dog. The clicker sound could theoretically be substituted with a snap of the fingers, a whistle, a squeaker, or even the words "Good" or "Yes". The only downside is that you may often use those words or other sounds around your dog in a non-training capacity, whereas the clicker is distinct and usually used just for the training method. The clicker "marks" the specific behavior, so it is obvious to the dog what they are being rewarded for.

When your dog begins to understand that the sound of the clicker is associated with a treat or reward, they will realize that the sound of the click indicates a treat is on the way. This becomes a conditioned reinforcer to encourage them to repeat those same behaviors again, knowing that the behavior earns them a reward. It's also a great way to get your dog engaged and interested in learning, making it a game for them to earn a click and a reward. On top of that, it gives you a reason to focus on your dog's good behaviors and good qualities, rather than focusing on mistakes or struggles, which makes it a more fun experience all around. Clicker training is such an effective method that it can be used for dogs of any age, and can easily be used for cats and other animals as well!

So How Do You Do It?

1. The first step is to create the association for your dog between click and reward, often called "loading the clicker." Before you actually begin training activities, sit down with your dog and begin by clicking, and then immediately giving a treat. Click, treat. Click, treat. Always follow the click with a reward. After 20 or so repetitions, your dog will understand that the click means a reward is coming. Now you're ready to use the clicker during training session, out on walks, or even when you're just at home with your dog.
 - a. This can be done with training treats, chunks of cooked chicken, or anything that your dog will enjoy! Different dogs will have different preferences, but it is best to start off by using something that your dog will highly desire.
2. When your dog does a desired behavior, click immediately **DURING** the behavior. If your dog sits, click as its butt hits the ground. If your dog checks in with you on a walk, click as they turn to look at you. When they hear the click they will know the reward is for what they are doing at that exact moment. The timing of the click is the most important piece, so if you click late, it is better to not click at all. But be ready to click the next time your dog does that behavior.
 - a. Sometimes your dog may stop the desired behavior when it hears the click. This could be because they became distracted by the click or excited at the thought of the treat. This is ok, as long as you clicked during the desired behavior!

3. After clicking, give the reward right away. The timing of the reward is less crucial than the timing of the click, but should be given as close to the click as possible to continue to reinforce for your dog the relationship between the click and the treat.
4. Begin with simple things like clicking when your dog sits or comes towards you. Think of things you do *not* want your dog to do, and make sure to watch for times when they don't do them. For example, if your dog often jumps up on visitors, click any time they greet a visitor politely with four paws on the floor. If your dog barks when the doorbell rings, be ready to click and treat if the doorbell rings and they do not bark. Sometimes it will feel like you're rewarding them for doing nothing, which you are! You're rewarding them for not doing the things you don't want them to do, which will shape their long-term behavior.
 - a. If your dog does something particularly well and you want to reward them with special enthusiasm, increase the amount of treats/praise, not the number of clicks. Multiple clicks at a time may confuse them as to what behavior they are being rewarded for.
5. While your dog is learning, **click for progress rather than perfection**. If you're trying to teach them to sit, click and reward even if they begin to crouch, but don't sit all the way. If you're working on getting your dog to come to you, click and reward for them taking a step or two toward you, even if they don't come all the way. It's still a step in the right direction, and you can increase your goals as you go.
 - a. This also encourages the dog to learn to do that behavior on their own. If you have to force their butt down or pull them toward you, your click and reward will not have the same affect.
6. If using clicker training during training sessions, keep those sessions short and positive. The longer a session goes, the more boring and repetitive, or even overwhelming, it can become. If you feel yourself becoming frustrated, then it's time to take a break. If your dog is not picking things up or not responding it is not because they are disobeying you. It's because they are still learning!

It's important to remember that clicker training is not intended to be a command-based training method. The point is to allow your dog to learn on their own which behaviors to act on, based on their understanding of which behaviors will get them a reward. Once you and your dog have that part down confidently, then you can begin pairing the behaviors with a cue, or a command, and clicking for when they respond appropriately to the cue.

Over time, you'll weed out undesirable behaviors simply by reinforcing the desired behaviors. They'll stop barking at the doorbell because they've learned they get a click and a treat when they are quiet. You'll be able to reduce pulling on the leash, because they'll learn that they get a click and a treat when they walk with more slack in the leash and check in with you more often. Eventually they will begin doing these things naturally and you can remove the clicker from the equation, once the behavior has been reinforced enough.

Also keep in mind that clicker training will not solve all problems and may not be the most effective method for every dog and every behavior that you want to train. But it is a great place to start, and a great way to grow a positive bond between you and your pet!

For more information about clicker training, check out Karen Pryor's [clickertraining.com](https://www.clickertraining.com)

*Adapted from <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/clicker-training-your-dog-mark-and-reward/> and <https://www.clickertraining.com/15tips>