

# The Magic Marker

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## What is a Marker?

A marker is a way to pinpoint a specific behavior that your dog does that you want to draw attention to. A marker can be anything that can be done quickly and consistently. Many people use a clicker or other sound producing device. But a marker can be anything that your dog can perceive by sound, sight, or touch... a finger snap, a tongue click, a whistle, a word, a light flashing, a quick signal, a touch, a gentle blowing of air, etc. Because we want the dog to look forward to the marker, we follow it with something the dog really likes. Usually this is a special food treat, but it can be anything that your individual dog enjoys. Make sure that whatever you choose is something that your dog really likes a lot! Otherwise the marker will not be as effective.

A marker can be as basic or as advanced as you want to make it. The reason so many people use clickers is that the sound is always the same. A marker must be able to be crisp and quick, and it should be something that can be done the same way each time. Each time the clicker is squeezed, the same noise is created in the same way. That way it is easy for the dog to recognize. Some dogs may not be able to hear a clicker. Dogs that are deaf can be taught to respond to a small penlight flash or to a certain hand or body signal. Dogs that are blind and deaf can be taught a touch marker or to respond to a gentle blowing of air. When you teach alternate markers, you need to be very careful that you produce the marker as close as possible to the same way each time. Also, be aware that the timing of some markers may be slower than if you were using a clicker or penlight. Ideally, the marker should occur as the dog is still doing the behavior you want to draw attention to.

## Why I use Markers in my training

Markers are wonderful teaching tools. Dogs get the idea of what's expected much faster when a marker is used. The marker can pinpoint for the dog the exact behavior that I like so he isn't left guessing. Usually a dog is showing so many behaviors at once that he may not know which one I am referring to. If my timing is good with the marker, I can help to make my dog more aware of which one of those behaviors I want to see more of.



It's fun for me to look for behaviors that I like from my dog. I enjoy rewarding my dog for a job well done, and I don't like to correct my dog. By using a marker, I have more opportunities to reward my dog. My dog has much more fun learning because it's more fun to be rewarded than it is to be corrected. And I get the added benefit of seeing those behaviors that I like happen more and more often right in front of my eyes! It's almost magic!

Training with a marker produces a dog that pays attention to its person. The dog is waiting to get that marker and the reward and doesn't want to miss an opportunity. So keeping his attention on the person will ensure he won't miss any opportunities. Marker training is easy and fun for beginners, children, and busy families to learn. It can easily be done anytime, anywhere, during our regular daily activities. While structured learning times are important, there are so many moments in our busy lives when our dogs do

things that we like. Teaching your dog a marker allows you to capture those behaviors when they happen and learning can happen faster than if you relied solely on practice times set aside once a day.

### **How to train a Marker signal**

First decide which marker you want to teach. You may certainly teach more than one marker, but only teach one at a time to avoid confusing yourself and your dog. Then decide what reward to use and get it ready. When first teaching the marker, you will need to set aside a formal lesson time several times a day, but you will only need a few minutes. It might work to do those few minutes right before your dog's meals.

Most dogs learn a marker signal very quickly. Present the marker signal, say "and" quietly to yourself, and immediately present the reward. So if you are using a clicker, your silent mantra will be "click-and-treat" as you actually click and feed the treat. The "and" allows a very brief pause to separate the reward from the marker. But don't wait too long or the dog will not make the association between the two. Do this same sequence 5-10 times at each session. After a couple sessions, give the marker signal and pause a bit longer during your "and." You will probably see your dog startle at the marker and turn toward you to get the reward! Give the reward quickly. Congratulations! You have just taught your dog its first marker signal!

Do a few sessions in other environments also, to really cement the idea of the marker in your dog's mind. Now you're ready to use the marker to teach your dog what behaviors you like and want to see more of.



### **How to use the Marker**

Throughout the day, you can use the marker signal to tell your dog which behaviors you like. Now, in order to do this easily, you will need to have the marker signal with you, as well as have the reward with you, at all times. At first, that will feel awkward. Some people have small containers of yummy treats stashed throughout the rooms of the house, along with clickers. Using a special word as your marker may be easier during day to day activities.

When you see a behavior that you like, mark it immediately, preferably while the dog is still doing the behavior. If you mark too late, the dog won't understand which behavior you marked and may think you liked a completely different behavior than you did! When you mark, the dog will probably stop what he is doing and come to you for the reward. That's ok. That means your dog understood the marker signal. Give the reward and then go back to whatever you were doing.

At first the dog may follow you around waiting to see if you will mark and reward again. Just wait the dog out until you see the same or a different behavior that you like. Mark and reward that behavior. You will start to see the behaviors you marked happening more and more if you continue to mark and reward them. As your dog gets the idea, you may see him coming to you for the reward and then quickly going back to repeat the same behavior again. Once you see your dog starting to offer the same behavior over and over again, you are ready to start adding cues to those behaviors, or you can start to shape the behavior into more of what you want.

A marker can be a good learning tool, but a word of caution is necessary here as well. If you are constantly marking and rewarding your dog throughout the day, you may create a dog that forgets how to lie down and relax because he is always trying to do something to earn a reward. Use a marker only for specific behaviors you want to pinpoint to your dog that you like. For example, if your dog jumps on

people, you can use your marker and treats to reinforce him for keeping four feet on the floor in certain situations, such as when people come in the door.

It's important for your dog to have down time away from training also. Learning to relax, take a nap, and chew a bone are important skills for any family dog to learn, and they are best learned through being allowed that down time to just be a dog.

Markers can also be used during formal teaching sessions with a lot of success. Again, mark the behavior that you like while it is happening and quickly reward. You will be surprised how much your dog enjoys learning and how quickly he seems to catch on. Remember to always follow the marker with things your dog enjoys!! In that way you will be able to preserve the special magic of the marker.

***Debbie Bauer** is a certified Healing Touch for Animals® practitioner, a certified Tellington TTouch® practitioner, a published author, and a professional dog trainer. She has over 28 years of training and consulting experience working with dogs and their people. She specializes in working with dogs that display fearful, reactive and aggressive behaviors, in a positive manner. Debbie has trained dogs in a variety of fields including therapy and assistance dogs, print ad and media work, obedience, agility, and scent work. One of her passions is working with and educating about deaf, blind, and blind/deaf dogs.*