

Marker & Release Cues

What is a Marker cue?

The marker word or signal provides information to your dog that he has done a behavior correctly and has earned (a reward) reinforcement.

A marker is always paired with a reinforcement, which should be delivered promptly. Reinforcement is something that your dog finds valuable or motivating in that moment. Food will be the example in this discussion, but more advanced applications utilize varied rewards, such as toys, personal play or attention.

Why should we learn it?

Clear, consistent communication is the crux of a successful, stress-free training relationship. It is the handler's responsibility to adapt her teaching style to her dog's learning needs. The marker cue, given in a timely manner, helps your dog understand which training cues belong to a particular behavior. It is of paramount importance that the handler delivers the marker cue at the exact instant your dog performs the body motion corresponding to the cue. Timing is everything!

Training the Marker Word:

Pre-requisite: Select a Marker Word

You can use a verbal marker like "Yes" or "Good" or anything you find easy to say, but keep it a single, one syllable word and use it consistently.

Method One

1. Relax with your dog in a comfortable space with few distractions.
2. Say your marker cue and immediately deliver reinforcement (the reward).
3. Repeat that sequence 10 times during the session.
4. Repeat the session at least two or three times over the next day or so.
5. Note: Avoid asking your dog for a specific behavior at this time.



Method Two

1. In a quiet space with few distractions, scatter 10 treats on the floor in a wide arch nearby.
2. Allow your dog to access the food on the ground and as he is about to eat each one, say your marker cue.
3. Do this several times a day over the next few days.

Training Tips:

- Deliver a food reward from a flat hand, palm toward your dog.
- Deliver the food reward such that your dog does not have to jump up to access it.
- If using food rewards, provide food that is soft, small (thumbnail-sized) and pungent.
- The food should be in a readily accessible pocket or pouch.
- If you are working from a distance, don't reach out with the food until you are immediately adjacent to your dog. This looks too much like a lure.
- As you teach each exercise, have a strong understanding of when to insert the marker word for each behavior. In other words, know ahead of time what you are going to mark. This preciseness will help your dog learn exactly what you want him to do.
- Avoid pairing your reward with the "Release" cue.

What is a Release cue?

The release word or cue provides information to your dog that he can end a behavior. "Release" is a good choice. The behavior is that he moves out of position.

Why should we learn it?

In addition to the importance of having well defined rules for communication, the release cue gives him information on how long he should remain in a particular behavior. If you ask your dog to "Sit," how long should he remain in that position? The "Release" cue controls duration in behaviors.

Training the Release cue:

Release Cue (Verbal with Body Language)

1. When you've decided the exercise (such as sit, down, wait) is at an end, say the "Release" cue you have chosen then step away and invite him to join you.
 - a. He may need a slight tug on the leash in addition to your physical invitation.
 - b. The goal is for him to move out of position (coming to the handler is a good choice).
2. Note: Practice at this level for a week before you move on to eliminating the use of body language.

Release Cue (Eliminate the Body Language)

1. Ask him to do a behavior like "Sit". Say the "Release" cue and move away and encourage him to move to you utilizing your body language.
2. Ask him to do a behavior like "Sit". Say the release word and then fade the body language (minimize your body invitation).
3. Say the verbal "Release" cue and move away from him three times. On the 4th repetition, say the verbal only. Your dog may very likely move out of position. This is an indication your dog is starting to understand the verbal release.
4. Ask him to do a behavior like "Sit" and switch the cue to verbal only.

Advanced Training and Application:

Building Duration using the “Release” Cue

Duration comes as a result of a clear understanding of the behavior requested by the handler (sit/down) and the “Release” cue. But as with any new behavior, building duration should be done slowly. The use of a “Stay” cue adds an unnecessary level of complexity to the behavior.

1. Cue him to do a behavior like sit. (Please review our **Sit** handout.)
2. Reinforce him with food rewards for sitting in position.
 - a. The food should be delivered at a rate sufficient to keep him in the sit behavior.
 - b. Over time you can change the rate of reinforcement.
3. Three to four seconds before cueing “Release” end the reinforcements.
4. Say your “Release” cue and move slightly to invite your dog to move out of the sit.
5. Note: If you are using food rewards to help him understand a certain behavior position (sit, down, stand) make sure the food is placed in a location so he does not have to move to get the food reward.

Keep-Going Signal

Keep-going signals should be used in problem solving situations only. It is a signal, verbal or otherwise, given in the middle of a behavior to indicate he is doing the behavior correctly and to continue to maintain the behavior.

An example of a keep-going signal is repeating the cue “Sit” or “Good Sit” to remind him to continue sitting until he is given the “Release” cue. Keep-going signals can add an unnecessary level of complexity in training and become a crutch.

Training Tips:

- A good dog teacher is patient, kind, fair and clear.
- Concentrate on reinforcing him for behaviors he is doing correctly. Try to ignore or manage a dog’s ability to repeat behaviors you do not want to see repeated.
- Reinforcements (or rewards) are items or activities **the dog** finds reinforcing not the human. Examples of rewards are different types of food, water, toy play, praise and freedom.
- Timing and delivery of rewards are very important. If you want your dog to walk right beside you, delivery of the reinforcement next to your leg helps him understand where he is supposed to be walking.
- Increase your criteria for behaviors slowly. This means to slowly build duration for stationary behaviors. Build duration first then build movement around your dog. Keep the reinforcement very high while he is learning duration and movement.
- Never take a behavior completely for granted. All behavior needs to be maintained and reinforced in order to remain strong. Routinely check in with behaviors you have taught your dog to ensure clear understanding remains.

Training Resources:

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.