



Guide Dogs for the Blind

FAQ on Using a Marker

Q: What is a marker?

A: A marker in animal training is the use of a signal or sound (we use the word “Nice!”) that indicates or marks a precise behavior performed by the animal. A marker communicates to the animal that it will be rewarded for the behavior that it is doing when it hears the mark. Example: the puppy moves in such a way as to release pressure off his collar during tethering games. The handler marks the moment the pressure is released. This indicates to the pup that the handler will “pay” for that behavior with a reward (in our case a kibble reward). The marker has pinpointed the behavior of keeping the leash loose and the pup will understand that he is being rewarded for that exact behavior.

Q: How does it work?

A: By consistently giving the pup a reward each and every time the mark is used the mark becomes a clear predictor of a payoff by pairing the mark with the kibble reward. The handler must reward every time a mark is used to keep it as a powerful signal. Marking the desired behavior highlights it and allows the handler time to get the food to the dog. Clean handling means you fully complete the word marker “Nice” before moving your hand toward the bait bag!

Q: What if I inadvertently use “Nice!” in conversation?

A: The way you say “Nice!” when working with your pup is important. We want it to sound the same each time and be spoken in a crisp, light tone (the shorter the sound, the better). Your pup will figure out that “Nice” is only a marker when said in that tone and applied to him. If he is not rewarded when you say “nice” in normal conversation, then he will ignore the word unless you are addressing him.

Q: What if another handler close to me is marking their pup?

A: Just like when the trainers are working with multiple dogs on campus, your pup will figure out it’s only your marker that is significant. If he is not reinforced when hearing someone else say “Nice!” (even if that person has handled and reinforced him in the past) he will gradually understand that only the marker coming from the handler actively working with him is significant.

Q: What if I mark the wrong behavior?

A: Even if you marked the wrong behavior, that mark should always be followed by a reward. This way, the mark maintains its significance to the dog. The mark is a promise of a reward and therein lays the power to communicate and influence the puppy’s behavior! If your timing was off just remember to look for another opportunity to mark the puppy correctly!

Q: What if I forget to mark?

A: It’s not that big of a deal! We realize you are learning right along with your pup. Just realize that without the mark the information you are trying to convey will not be as precise or informative to the pup and may take a little longer to learn. Also, due to the delay between the behavior you wish to reward and reaching for the food, you may end up actually rewarding for the wrong behavior.

Q: Why don’t we mark when we lure a puppy into position?

A: Generally a marker is used to communicate about a behavior that the dog volunteered (offered). When a dog is lured into a behavior i.e. follows a piece of hand-held kibble, the handler is making the behavior happen and the pup is just following the kibble. When the dog offers the behavior e.g. stepping onto the mat of his own accord, the dog is initiating the behavior. “Offering” to put his foot on the mat is an operant behavior in that the dog is choosing to perform, not the handler. Once the pup learns that he can influence your rewarding behavior it’s “game on” and learning is fun!

Q: Why don't we use a marker for calm behavior?

A: Dogs tend to get excited when they get the opportunity to play the “mark/reward game”. Often the marker will stimulate the pup and be somewhat counter productive when we want him to remain calm. Marking for lying quietly will often cause a puppy to pop up or offer movement to hopefully earn more food! Quietly rewarding by bringing food down to his level when he is calm teaches the settled puppy that sometimes relaxed behavior brings food reward. You could mark the calm behavior and some trainers do so. We have just found that it is easier to keep the puppy settled if we don't use a mark in this situation. We are classically conditioning* the puppy to associate food rewards with relaxed behavior and prompting more relaxed, low energy behavior.

Q: Why do we use a marker when the puppy is being calm when working around distractions then?

A: Rewarding calm behavior is about rewarding a) an emotional state –calmness and b) remaining settled (usually lying down at your feet). Marking and rewarding around a distraction is teaching the puppy self-control in the presence of distraction. The puppy does not have to be relaxed and actually can be very engaged in the game, even when stationary. The puppy is marked for offering a behavior e.g. looking away from the distraction or striving to keep a loose leash or checking in with the handler.

Q: Can a dog still learn without a marker?

A: Yes! Dogs learn in a variety of ways. You can classically condition* the pup to understand that a particular behavior or chain of behaviors will bring a reward. Pairing a reward with a behavior without a marker is usually done for more broad behaviors like the Food Induced Recall or associating something pleasant, e.g. food, to the head collar or crate. That way the entire event and/or item is put in a positive light for the dog. When teaching a more precise behavior, such as loose leash walking, using a marker allows you to break the larger behavior down to tiny events for the dog (e.g. marking for maintaining a loose leash as you take one step, then two steps etc.) The marker provides clarity to the pup and makes the learning faster and often more fun! It pin points what behavior or part of the behavior brings the reward. This allows you to more closely shape the exact behavior you want.

Q: Classical what?

A: Classical conditioning is associative learning – like Pavlov's dogs. In Ivan Pavlov's famous experiment it was noted that after several repetitions of ringing a bell prior to feeding, the dogs began to salivate when the bell rang, before the food appeared. The dogs associated the bell with the arrival of food. For GDB pups the leash is often a predictor of a walk or outing and they often get excited when we pick it up; the pup has been classically conditioned that the leash is a predictor of fun!

Q: Do raisers need to wean their puppy off the marker and food rewards?

A: We will be answering this in the documents that explain how to teach each behavior. In some cases, yes, once the puppy has learned a behavior thoroughly we can drop the marker and go to random reinforcement with food. We will always praise reward the puppy; this is called “secondary reinforcement”. However, there will be many training scenarios where we will continue to mark and reward right up until the pup enters formal training. Food rewards will continue to reinforce wanted behavior throughout training and beyond; our graduates continue to utilize the power of positive reinforcement with their guides in the field.