

# HOW TO CAPTURE BEHAVIOR

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Capturing involves using the clicker to mark a *complete* behavior the animal already knows how to do and performs naturally without any outside prompting or guidance. Examples for dogs include: sitting, laying down, stretching, yawning, licking, blinking, shaking off, coming towards you, etc. In other animals such as rabbits, you can capture things like: sniffing, wrinkling the nose, standing up on the hind legs, hopping up in the air, nudging objects with their nose, etc. Horses do neat things too like wrinkle their noses, waggle their lips, twitch their ears, swish their tails, lower their heads, move sideways or backwards, stomp their feet, etc.

## STEP ONE:

### *Get To Know Your Animal*

Before you can decide what behavior you are going to capture, you need to spend some time observing your chosen animal's natural movements and behavioral tendencies. Recognizing patterns is super helpful. For instance, many dogs stretch first thing in the morning or lick their lips right after they eat. So once you know this, you can utilize the moment and have a clicker and treats ready for a quick capture session on the fly. For smaller animals on the other hand, such as rabbits or rats, it helps to set aside some time to simply observe them interacting with their normal environment to see what they tend to do on their own. This will give you an idea what types of things an animal is going to be comfortable learning as well as what types of behaviors you can realistically train them to do.

It is also helpful before beginning any training to find out what types of reinforcers your animal likes as well as if she has any sound sensitivities or particular responsiveness to different stimuli you might want to use later in your training such as targets, pen lights, hand signals, etc. Some animals initially find the sound of a regular box clicker to be startling, so test that out also and switch to something quieter like an i-Click (<http://www.clickertraining.com/store/?item=newiclick>) or ballpoint pen top if you need to.

## **STEP TWO:**

### *Begin Building a Reinforcement History*

The laws of learning dictate that animals will repeat behaviors that work for them. Capturing allows you to influence this tendency by making it very obvious to the animal what behaviors are especially going to work more than others (particularly when you are around watching them ☺). There are two ways to do it. One is to initially carry a clicker and treats with you all day and every time you see the animal do the target behavior, mark and reinforce it. For a dog it may be laying down, for example. Over the course of a few days, if you've caught it often enough, you'll first begin to notice the dog lying down more and more often, and then eventually you'll move into the phase where you get the distinct impression the dog is *deliberately* trying to make you click by lying down. When you see that happening, it's just about time to move on to more formal training sessions (see below) or to add a cue (see step four). Even if you continue to work informally, capturing behaviors throughout the day, it still helps to keep a record of how many times the behavior happens over the course of a few days so you can gage progress.

For more formal sessions, pick a behavior the dog does often at first such as lick her lips or sit. You will need:

- A timer
- A clicker
- 70-100 pieces of food your animal finds delicious cut into pea-sized portions
- Some beans or dry kibble in a bowl to use as counters (or an abacus is helpful if you have one)
- A pencil and paper
- A video camera is optional, but often very helpful (especially if you are like me and get so interested in what the dog is doing you lose track of the number of clicks all the time!)

### **Your First Session:**

In a quiet, distraction free place that your animal feels comfortable being in, get everything organized...treats cut up, counters ready, etc. It is recommended that you practice with everything a couple times before bringing out your animal...turning on the timer, clicking *then* treating rapidly, moving the counter bean into a bowl each time, etc. (Even experienced trainers sometimes find all the multitasking difficult at first. ☺) Feel free to experiment with different arrangements of all your gear until you feel able to go through the motions without having to think about it too much.

Next, visualize exactly what behavior you are going to be clicking for. Picture the animal doing it and yourself clicking right at the same time the behavior happens. (For things like lip licks, you'll need to be pretty on the ball—but it is possible! 😊) Sometimes you might even want to say what you are going to click out loud to yourself. This can really help keep you focused on clicking only one thing at a time and is highly recommended.

Now you are ready to bring in the animal. Let him sniff around and do whatever he likes for a minute to get acclimated. Then maybe give a few free treats just to let him know something new is happening and to get him focused on you. (Although for capturing lying down it is sometimes helpful to pretend to ignore the dog until he gets bored with you and lies down instead of getting his attention with treats like this when you start).

Turn on the timer, set for four minutes (you are going to turn it off at three minutes, though, so the final beep doesn't startle the animal and let him know in an abrupt way that the session is over).

Then sit quietly and watch the body part you are most interested in (mouth for lip licks, for example, or legs and belly for lying down). Ignore everything else the animal does---but the instant you see the target behavior begin to happen—*click!*, toss or hand the animal a treat, then move a counter into the bowl (or slide a bead across on the abacus).

If you are working on a lip lick, be ready. The dog is very likely going to lick her lips again right away after eating the first treat. *Capture that one too if you can!* Once you get over the hump of that first incidental lick and get that treat in the dog's mouth, the licks can come fast and furious from then on so watch out!

If the behavior you are capturing is lying down or sitting, a good tip is to toss the treat away about 2-3' so the dog has to get up again. This resets him for the next repetition.

Continue like this until your timer gets to 1 minute. Turn the timer off, gently let the dog know work time is done so he can relax, get up and go record your data for that session. It is helpful to your dog that you get up and move to another location after a session because then he doesn't stay and continue to offer the behavior while you are not looking.

Take a break and then repeat everything for session two. Take another break and do one more session if the dog seems up for it. Record all data on your paper, noting date, time, session location, target behavior, number of minutes,

number of clicks and any noteworthy details—especially things the animal did which could help you plan your next session better in some way.

In three minutes for a first lip lick session you can expect to capture anything from three licks to thirty or more. Be patient and just continue to write down your results, dividing your total number of clicks by 3 to get your rate of reinforcement for 1 minute.

30 clicks in 3 minutes = a ROR of 10/1 minute

#### **STEP FOUR:**

##### *Knowing When To Add A Cue*

Once you've got a good ROR going of about 15/1 minute for about 2-3 sessions in a row, before going on you should test out your dog's understanding of the behavior by changing something in the environment and seeing if he still gets a high enough ROR. (Somewhere between 10-20/1 minute is usually good).

Some ways to change the environment are:

- Try a session with you standing up instead of sitting
- Make sure the dog does the behavior or moves into the behavior regardless of whether he is sitting, standing or lying down
- Go to a different room
- Pay attention to any patterns too. Some dogs start to run things together such as lip licking after lifting their heads or lip licking only when lying down. If you like the behavior that way, it's fine, but it may be a sign the dog doesn't really know what you are actually clicking for yet.

When you've played around with some of these variations for awhile and are still getting approximately 15/1 minute, you are definitely ready to add a cue.

Another way to know you are ready is if during a session you can start accurately predicting the behavior is going to happen. Say the cue you've chosen silently to yourself right before the dog does it. If you are correct 9/10 times, it's a good sign it's time to add the cue.

(For more on cues, please see the article "What Is A Cue?")

## EXTRA CREDIT:

### *Top Five Reasons Things May Not Be Progressing As Fast As You'd Like.*

#1 The animal doesn't feel safe enough or the environment is too distracting.

FIX = move to a more familiar, quieter place.

#2 The animal doesn't like the food very much.

FIX = Do some taste tests with a wider variety of foods to find the favorites. For dogs use things like real meat, cheese, etc. For rabbits you can try fresh veggies and fruit chopped very small (bananas are a favorite), or dried fruit like cranberries or apples. Horses love sweet feed and grain---the point being: don't be stingy! Give high value reinforcers—especially when the animal is learning something new.

FIX = Try training right before meal time when the animal is hungry. No need for any deprivation. Just use his/her natural eating cycles to your advantage.

#3 Your ROR is too low. For capturing sessions, sometimes the rate does start out a little low at first until the animal catches on. That's why for a novice animal it's good to pick a behavior that he does a lot naturally already to start. Keeping the game fun and rewarding is your number one priority.

#4 Your clicks are late. If your clicks are consistently late, the animal will be confused about what you are after and could get frustrated.

FIX = Practice. Go back to the basic mechanics such as clicking a bouncing ball or cuts in a TV commercial until you can really nail it. It helps to try and click *just before* the animal does the target behavior such as the moment the dog begins to fold her legs to lay down. That way by the time your brain processes what you are seeing, your hand will be more likely to hit the clicker at the correct time.

#5 You are too noisy yourself. It is very difficult for some people not to gush and exclaim over their dogs while they are working. This can be very distracting for the animal. Some people also have a hard time hiding their disappointment when they themselves or the dog makes a mistake. This again is not only distracting to the dog, but it is also potentially demoralizing. Remember, your dog doesn't even quite know what behavior you want him to do yet and if you get upset, all he'll know is that training time (i.e. you getting

out the clicker, treats, counters, etc.) isn't very fun---and you really don't want that at all.

FIX= Just try and relax. Breathe. Stay quiet. And let the click do all the talking. ☺