

Teaching the Marker Word, “Yes”

What is a Marker?

In dog training jargon, a “marker” is a signal to the dog that whatever he was doing when the marker was given was correct and he has earned a reward. Usually the marker is a sound or word, but it can also be a visual signal.

How Does a Marker Work?

First of all, the dog learns to associate the marker with receiving a reward. Then he learns that certain actions or behaviour on his part cause the marker to happen, which results in him getting a reward. For example, if the dog is learning “sit”, the trainer will sound the marker the instant the dog’s bottom hits the ground, and then reward the dog. After a few more repetitions, the dog realises that the marker sounds when his butt contacts the ground, and he will start assuming that position without being asked or encouraged to trigger the marker and so get his treat.

Why Use a Marker?

A marker provides much more targeted information than just handing the dog a treat does, because it allows for much more pin-point timing. It also allows the dog to be some distance away, or looking in a different direction, and still provides information at the right moment, even if the delivery of the actual reward is delayed by several seconds. Using a marker also encourages the dog to really think about what they are doing, and to become proactive in the training process – most dogs love playing the “make the marker happen!” game.

The Golden Rules of Markers

- A reward *must* always follow the marker, without fail, preferably within two or three seconds, even if the trainer marked the wrong thing or triggered the marker by accident, to keep the marker-reward association strong.
- The marker is *never* used as a reward in its own right – it is not intrinsically rewarding to a dog and does not replace treats, toys, or even praise.
- The timing of the marker must be spot-on, so the dog can associate it with the correct action, and so knows exactly what just earned him a reward, and can repeat it.
- The marker must be as consistently uniform as possible, so the dog can recognise it every time.

How to Use a Marker in Training

In this course, we encourage you to use the word “yes” as a marker to enhance your training. Using a word means you always have it with you ready to go, and you have both hands free. It’s a natural thing to say in these circumstances, is a clear sound for a dog, and tends to come out in a happy, upbeat tone.

1) Create an association in the dog’s mind between the “yes” marker and a reward. Let the dog know you have treats in your hand. Say “yes!” in a quick, bright, happy voice and *immediately* give the dog a treat. Repeat this rapidly ten to twenty times. Do as many sessions of this as you can over the next two or three days.

2) Test the association. Wait until your dog is looking in a different direction. As long as he is not actually doing something you don’t want him to do, say “yes” in your marker-word tone of voice. If the association has been formed, he will quickly look at you for his treat. If he doesn’t respond with obvious expectation, go back to step one.

3) Once you think an association has been formed, you can start introducing the idea of using your marker to indicate reward-earning behaviour. If possible, choose a cue your dog already knows, such as sit or down. Give the cue, and then the moment your dog completes the action, say “yes” and give him the treat. Timing is crucial – mark as soon as the dog assumes the right position – butt hits the ground or elbows hit the floor. What you mark is what the dog believes is correct. If your dog sits, but you delay marking the sit until he starts to stand up again, you are actually marking and rewarding a not-sit, which is what you will start to get. Timing takes practice, but it is the key to success!

4) Use your “yes” marker in as many different situations as possible, but only ever when you have rewards immediately available. Remember *you must reward every time*, without fail. A marker without a reward is meaningless to the dog and you will lose its power.