TRAINING WITH MARKER WORDS

The Reward Marker

The *reward marker* is a single word — usually "yes" or "good [your dog's name]" — that signals to the dog that a reward is coming. The marker word pinpoints the exact moment a particular behavior occurs that has earned the dog a treat. (If, in any of our other articles, you see a cue to "praise and reward" your dog, that's where you use the reward marker.)

For example, we would mark the moment a dog's bottom hits the floor after cueing for a sit. Timing is everything when it comes to marking desired behaviors. If too much time passes between the behavior you requested and giving your dog the treat, they might have already done something else. If this happens, the dog will not understand what he actually did to earn the treat. For example, if your dog sits when you ask them to sit, but then stands up before you can deliver the treat, your dog won't be sure which behavior the reward is for. This is why it's so important to mark and reward your dog the *exact moment* they do what you ask them to.

Loading the Reward Marker

The goal of loading the reward marker is for the dog to recognize that the word means a treat is on its way. The dog needs to learn that when you say "yes," a treat is coming. You will know your dog has made this association when you see anticipation and/or your dog snapping their head towards you when you say the word yes. During this initial marker loading phase, the dog is not required to do any type of behavior: they get the treat just for learning the word.

Training

Pick a quiet area with few distractions.

- **Say it:** Always the reward marker *before* you treat.

- **Pause:** Count to one. The dog does not need to perform any behavior, such as looking at you or sitting, during this time.

- **Reach:** Pull out a treat.

- **Treat:** Reward your dog with the treat, either from your hand or tossed to the floor.

- **Repeat:** Start again at "say it."

Tips

- Avoid training with repetitions that are timed too closely together in a sequence. If the time in between the reward marker and the treat is too fast, it is quite possible this will confuse your dog. The treat could end up predicting the marker instead of the marker predicting the treat.

- Vary the time in between the reward marker and treating the dog. If done too predictably, your dog might that they get a treat at the end of an increment of time. To avoid falling into a pattern, change the timing (five seconds, three seconds, eight seconds, nine seconds, four seconds) between marker and offering the treat.

- If you make a mistake and say the marker when you shouldn't while training any behavior, reward the dog. This is to keep a strong (and positive) association between marker and the treat.

The No-Reward Marker

The *no-reward marker* is a word used to signal to the dog that they made a mistake, did not respond at all, or offered the wrong behavior (i.e. sitting instead of laying down after the "down" command). In reward-based training, we typically withhold the reward to let the dog know that their response to our command was incorrect. The no-reward marker, like the reward marker, pinpoints the exact moment the dog offered the incorrect behavior. The no-reward marker that HSSW uses is "too bad." (You can also use "bad [your dog's name]" — just be careful that the association forms with "bad" and not your dog's name.) The no-reward marker must always be followed by a negative consequence such as withholding a food reward, or withholding praise or attention.

Training the No-Reward Marker

The no-reward marker does not need to be charged in the same way as the reward marker: the dog will learn the meaning of the no-reward marker on the fly, meaning it will take some repetitions for dog to learn what it means. This is what a no-reward marker would look like:

- **Behavior:** Your dog is naughty or does not perform requested behavior.

- **Say it:** Say the no-reward marker immediately after the bad behavior or incorrect action.

- **Cancel:** Implement a 10-20 second time-out and/or withhold the reward. Then try again.