

Training Terminology

The list below is a quick guide to the terminology that you get in touch with when practicing operant conditioning as a training method. As a trainer, you need to know about how animals learn. Therefore, it's important to be familiar with the terminology below – to have success in training and become a good trainer!

Training – teaching, communication. You train the animal to perform behaviours. The animal trains you to click. *Beware so it's not the animal running the training session!*

Operant conditioning – a type of learning, when the probability of a behaviour increasing or decreasing in frequency depends on the consequences of that behaviour. This is how animals learn! *If a hawk catches a mouse under a bush, it will search at that bush the next day. If a cat burns its whiskers, it will avoid candles henceforth.*

Response – the animal shows a behaviour.

Stimulus – a signal that produces a behavioural response. There may be other stimuli present than the one you're intending to give when you want the animal to perform a behaviour. If something interesting is occurring at the same time the animal might become distracted and look away or even leave. For this reason, try to minimize the number of stimuli so that your cue (ex. "sit!") becomes the most distinctive stimulus! A cue is often referred to as a Discriminative Stimulus, or SD.

Reinforcement – anything positive or negative that, when it happens at the same time as a behaviour, increases the probability of that behaviour being shown again. Reinforcement reinforces behaviour; makes it more frequent or vigorous.

Positive reinforcement – follows a response with something the animal desires. *You say: "sit." Dog sits. Dog gets treat.*

Primary reinforcer – A naturally reinforcing event or object that does not involve learning. *Food treats. Toys. Social partners. Praise. Attention. Sex. Shelter. Different species are reinforced by different things, and there is great individual variability. Motivation plays an important role.*

Conditioned / secondary reinforcer – a stimulus that has earned its reinforcing properties through association with a primary reinforcer. *The sound of the clicker. Money.*

Differential reinforcement – reinforcing selected responses of higher quality to improve the behaviour. This method is used when *shaping* (see below).

Negative reinforcement – follows a response by removing an event or stimulus, regardless how mild, that the animal wants to avoid. *You say: "sit". You apply pressure on the dog's behind. Dog sits. You remove pressure.*

Extinction – a method to get rid of unwanted behaviour by not giving that behaviour any consequences, neither reinforcement nor punishment. Stop giving treats, showing attention, getting mad, yelling. *Dog barks. You ignore him. Dog stops barking (only works for attention barking).*

Punishment – an aversive event that reduces the probability of an unwanted behaviour recurring. Punishment may be positive (adding something aversive) or negative (see below), but the objective is for the unwanted behaviour to become less frequent or less vigorous.

Time out – negative punishment, when the opportunity of acquiring positive reinforcement is withheld for a short period directly after an unwanted response.

Incompatible behaviour – a behaviour that cannot be executed simultaneously with another behaviour. *The dog enthusiastically jumps visitors. You teach it to go and lie down on a mat whenever the door bell rings. The dog cannot jump and lie down at the same time, and your visitors don't have to get licked in the face.*

Shaping – building a behaviour by dividing it into tiny responses and then teaching one response at a time or in combination until the desired behaviour is shown.

Capturing – to "catch" behaviours that cannot be shaped, such as urination.

Target – a type of prop that is very useful in early training. The target can be anything (a piece of cardboard, your hand, a plastic ring, a carabiner) and the desired behaviour is the animal touching the target with a particular part of its body (hand, nose, foot...)

Timing – when the reinforcer (= the click) occurs in conjunction to the desired behaviour. *Good timing means that you click exactly when the animal performs the behaviour.*

Habituation – gradually letting an animal get used to a situation that it normally avoids, by repeated exposure to that situation.

Desensitization – actively pairing a positive reinforcer with a negative event until the negative event loses its ability to affect the desired behaviour. *You've trained the animal to make the association click means treat. The click becomes a positive reinforcer. During injection training, the first time you prick a needle through the animal's skin you simultaneously click. This means that the negative event (the needle prick) is paired with something positive (the click) and becomes less aversive.*

Regression – deterioration in learning or of a response, usually temporary. *Often occurs after, for instance, the first needle prick in injection training.*

Bonus – Jackpot – a reinforcer that is bigger than usual and comes as a surprise for the animal. *Good to use after first needle prick in injection training.*

Superstitious behaviour – an unwanted response that is mistakenly reinforced, which makes the animal think it necessary to earn reinforcement.

Generalization – reinforcement of a particular response increases frequencies of similar responses.

Stimulus control – when a trained response is shown on cue – and not otherwise! *The animal waits for a cue. When the cue is given, she shows the correct response (not some other response) as soon as possible. She doesn't offer the response without the cue, and she never offers the response to some other cue.*