

## It's all in the mechanics: how professional dog trainers make training look easy

You planned on using positive reinforcement to train our dog, then you heard someone say positive reinforcement and “treat training” don’t work.

When watching a professional trainer work with a dog you found yourself thinking, “Wow, they make it look so easy!”



What do these two scenarios have in common? The answer is mechanics. In dog training, the term mechanics refers to the handler’s physical motor skills — such as observation, timing, treat delivery, body language and even how to effectively incorporate a leash into training sessions.

Poor mechanics is why positive reinforcement “doesn’t work.” It’s not the method itself; it’s how it’s implemented. Good mechanics is why professional or experienced handlers can make training look easy *and* get results.

Clean mechanics ensure clear communication, whereas sloppy mechanics can frustrate your dog (and you) and slow the learning process. An important and sometimes challenging skill involves using a marker (a clicker or verbal marker) and rewarding the dog without overlapping (marking and rewarding at the same time).

Once conditioned, a marker informs the dog it has done the correct/desired behaviour and that a reward will follow. It’s easy to fall into the trap of marking and rewarding simultaneously. When that happens, the food takes priority and the marker holds little to no meaning, slowing the dog’s learning.

## The core mechanical sequence

The foundation of good mechanics is keeping your actions separate and linear rather than doing everything at once:

1. **Behaviour:** The dog performs the requested action. Let’s use “sit” as the example.
2. **Marker:** You mark with a click or a specific verbal marker word (e.g., “Yes!” or “Niiice”) when your dog’s bottom touches the ground. This requires good observation and timing. At this point, it’s the timing of your marker that’s important.
3. **Reach:** Your treat hand must remain still until *after* the marker. Reaching for a treat pouch or pocket before marking distracts the dog and degrades your marker’s value.

4. **Treat delivery:** Deliver the reward smoothly. Where and how you deliver the treat (e.g., placing it on the floor between the dog's front legs for a "down") affects your dog's next movement. Always reward in position. For example: when teaching sit, be sure the dog is still sitting when receiving the reward. Do this by quickly moving the treat toward your dog, without startling them. A slow treat delivery typically encourages the dog to stretch for the food and get up. Rewarding after your dog gets up, teaches the behaviour chain "sit then stand."



## Key mechanical skills to master

- **Clear treat management:** Keep your hands in a designated neutral position (like relaxed at your sides) when not rewarding. Don't train with your hand in a pocket or treat pouch. Don't hold treats in your hand while waiting for a behaviour, as dogs focus on the food instead of thinking about the cue. There are some exceptions to this guideline. For instance, in one of our training games, we want the dog smoothly running back and forth in front of the handler. Holding a handful of treats during this game allows the handler to be more efficient — marking and then quickly tossing the next treat.
- **No simultaneous cues:** Avoid giving a physical hand signal and a verbal cue at the same time. Most dogs will primarily rely on the physical signal and ignore the spoken word. You also won't know if your dog is responding to the verbal cue or physical cue. If you have used simultaneous cues, try separating the cues to determine which cue your dog understands.
- **The aim game:** Practice your mechanical loops without your dog. Mark and swiftly deliver a treat to a plastic cup or a designated spot on a table to build muscle memory before training your dog. That rehearsal will build your confidence and improve your mechanical skills, helping your dog better understand what you're teaching.

## Leash handling skills

Let's not forget the leash. Train with your dog both on and off leash (when safe and appropriate to do so). Handling the leash adds another level of challenge. Holding the leash in one hand, while rewarding with the other typically works well. Don't be afraid to experiment and find what works best for you and your dog.

## Why mechanics matter

Good handler mechanics accelerate learning, prevent the dog from being confused by mixed signals and foster focus.

Now that you have a better understanding of the importance of mechanics, you can master your handling skills by recording your training sessions. While watching the recording, focus on your mechanics. Are you following the core mechanical skills? How are your leash handling skills? By watching the video, you can pinpoint areas where your mechanics follow these basic guidelines and where your handling skills could use a little tweaking.

## **The role of rehearsal**

Remember, rehearsal strengthens behaviour. That applies to our canine friends and us. The more you rehearse your handling skills, the better your handling skills will become. That's partly why professional trainers make training look easy. They've rehearsed the same motor skills hundreds of times. By rehearsing your handling skills, before you know it, people will watch you and your dog and wonder how *you* make training look so easy!

Happy training!



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