Secondary reinforcer See primary reinforcer.

Shaping Building new behavior by selectively reinforcing variations in existing behavior, during the action rather than after completion, to increase or strengthen the behavior in a specific manner or direction. We used to think that shaping was the slang term for incrementally increasing behavior by selective reinforcement, and that the correct term was successive approximation, but that was not what Skinner meant at all when he coined the terms. See successive approximation.

Snell's window The locus of transparency visible directly overhead when diving under the surface of water. Snell's window is a function of the bending of light rays passing from one medium (air) to another (water). You can easily see Snell’s window (and the surrounding opaque reflective water surface) for yourself by putting on a mask and going underwater in a swimming pool.

Successive approximation Increasing or altering a behavior incrementally by repeatedly changing the environment to amplify or extend the behavior. For example, increasing the weight of a load or the height of a jump by small increments to amplify the effort to pull a load or jump an obstacle.

Tertiary reinforcer A technical term for the cue, i.e., a discriminative stimulus, for an action that leads to reinforcement, never to punishment.

Traditional trainers; traditional training Trainers who focus on aversive methods to control and teach behavior. Also sometimes called compulsion-based training or force-training.

Trainer; modern trainer A trainer who uses marker-based, positive-reinforcement technology correctly, with both animals and humans.

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Teach Your Cat to High-five

Before You Begin

These instructions assume that you have never clicked and treated any animal before, so they are designed to give you good skills from the start. You can then use the basic rules—how to click, how to treat, how to start a session, how to stop, how to strengthen the behavior by choosing what to click—for any behavior and any learner.

- Make sure the cat is a little hungry. Play this game just before the cat's mealtime. If you leave dry food out all the time, put it away for at least two hours before you start.

- Use a high-value treat—not commercial dried treats. Tuna fish is relished by all cats. Use small portions, pea-sized. It's handy to count out your treats first and put them on a saucer or a little plate; then you can offer the plate long enough for the cat to take one bite.
• Work alone, at least at the start, with no other dogs, cats, or human kibitzers present. The cat needs to concentrate and so do you. If there is no guaranteed quiet place in the house, take the cat into the bathroom and shut the door.

• Clicker training requires mechanical skills. You might feel rattled by trying to do different things with each hand at the same time. I recommend practicing first. Take the clicker and an empty saucer into the bathroom (without the cat) and practice clicking with one hand and immediately putting the plate down and taking the plate back, until it feels easy.

• Always keep your clicker hand still and out of sight, at your side or behind you. Always keep your treat hand motionless until the click has happened. Cats see movement well; if you don’t keep your hands still, the cat may focus on your hands and ignore the click, which will spoil its chances of learning.

• Always treat after a click, even if you clicked by accident or at the wrong moment. That was your fault, not the cat’s, so the cat does get paid.

• Oh, and shut up. Don’t try to encourage the cat with cheers or praise; that just distracts it from the game.

• Keep a training log. After every session, write down where you started, where you stopped, how many treats you used, and any comments. This log is not just a practical help; you will find it reinforcing as you look back over your progress.

• Don’t feel you have to train every day or for a certain length of time. This is for fun! The more little five-minute sessions you have, the better, but be easy on yourself. Animals remember well what they learn from the clicker. If you have three sessions a day, you’ll accomplish six sessions in two days. If you have one session a month, you’ll take six months to do the same training. Thanks to the power of the click, the cat will still learn.

The First Session

1. Get your clicker and open a can of tuna fish. Put ten pea-sized dots of tuna fish around the rim of a saucer. Sit down somewhere comfortable with the cat.

2. Hold the clicker behind your back, ready to click. While the cat is looking at you, click and put down the saucer. Wait, without talking or restless movement, while the cat sniffs the plate and licks up the first dot of tuna fish.

3. With your free hand, take the plate back immediately and put it next to you on a table or countertop. If the cat is bold enough to jump up after the plate, gently lift the cat to the floor, click when its paws touch the ground, and present the plate on the floor for one more treat. Message: floor is good, countertop doesn’t work.

4. Watch the cat’s right paw. Click the instant the paw moves, in any direction, for any reason. Put the plate down (or hold it out) for one treat only.

5. If the cat is sitting motionless and staring at you, lower a hand to lure it sidewise, then click when the weight shifts or the right paw lifts, no matter how slightly. Pull your hand back when you hear the click and present the plate for one treat. Put the plate far enough away so the cat has to get up to reach it.

6. As the cat eats its treat and you are taking the plate up, watch carefully and click that right paw as soon as it moves as the cat is turning back toward you. Put the plate down again for another treat.

7. Now put the plate back on the table and proceed from step 3, capturing spontaneous paw movements instead of trying to make them happen by tempting the cat to move again. Repeat until all the tuna dots are used up.
Starting and Ending Sessions

If the cat quits on you (walks away or turns its back and washes its face), don’t panic. It’s a good sign. It means the cat is starting to notice that something new is going on here and needs time to think it over. End the session, put the food in the refrigerator, and start another session in an hour or two, or the next day.

Always trust the cat, even if the cat wants to quit before you do. Three to five clicks is a good training session for a novice cat. If the cat is keen, prepare two treat plates and work longer.

Work fast; don’t let dead time go by in which the cat can lose focus or, worse, feel disappointed or discouraged. It’s better to stop the session early and pick it up again later than to pause in the middle of a session because you were distracted by, say, the phone or a visitor.

Next Sessions

1. Repeat as before, in the same place with the same setup. When the cat is deliberately lifting the paw, notice the difference between small moves and bigger moves. Click most moves but refrain from clicking any weak attempt. The cat will learn to try again, and try harder.

2. As soon as you have a clear lifting movement, click during the upward move of the paw. That will encourage a rapid increase in the height of the paw.

3. Click higher lifts until most tries are roughly shoulder height.

4. Now, as the paw goes up, quickly put your free hand, flat and open, under the paw as it starts to come down and click when the paw touches your hand. Then remove your hand and treat.

5. After two or three taps caused by interrupting the downward path of the paw with your hand, raise your hand a little. Keep the hand close to the paw; don’t make the cat reach yet. Click one or two taps at the new level. Repeat until your fingertips are at the height of the cat’s shoulder. You want the cat to switch from just raising a paw to trying to tap your hand on purpose.

6. The offered hand now becomes a target for the paw lift. Present your hand in the right spot as soon as the cat has finished its previous treat. Don’t click for random paw lifts anymore.

7. Now hold your hand slightly higher, so the cat must reach, and perhaps stand up, to tap your hand.

8. Rotate your hand to the side so it’s horizontal, as you go on raising the height of the target.

9. Reinforce stronger swats, too, so the contact looks vigorous and intentional. If claws come out by accident—it is an automatic reaction sometimes—take your hand away and pause, no click, for a few seconds before offering the hand again.

10. Now rotate your hand so it’s vertical, facing the cat in the traditional high-five gesture. This gesture, presenting the vertical palm, becomes the cue for the behavior. Keep a few treats handy (such as dry cat treats) and try it in other rooms and at other times of day. If you don’t have a clicker handy, you can maintain the behavior in new circumstances by marking the behavior with a special word or a mouth click.

11. Teach the targeting hand gesture to other people, too, so the cat will tap its paw to anyone’s raised palm. Amaze your friends and neighbors and the UPS man.

12. Congratulations. You are now a clicker trainer. Teach your cat to nose and then follow a target (a pencil or chopstick is good). Wave your wand and get the cat to jump on the couch, off the couch, onto the bookcase, from chair to chair, through hoops (embroidery hoops are good). Set up your own indoor cat Olympics.