

This is the first in a series of workbooks on teaching and developing the basic clicker lessons that form the foundation for more advanced clicker training.

Definition and Purpose

Targeting is teaching a horse to touch an object with its own body part, usually the nose but horses can learn to target with other body parts too. Targeting is one of Alexandra Kurland's foundation exercises and is a very versatile tool that can be used to start many behaviors.

Targeting is a good way to introduce clicker training to horses. Instead of "charging" the clicker, we start by teaching the horse that the click marks a specific behavior, and that it will be followed by a reward. In addition to teaching the horse about behavior->click->reinforcement, I have also found that targeting is a good lesson for teaching horses that mugging doesn't work, not by letting mugging extinguish, but by making another behavior easier.

I like targeting because it is a behavior most people and horses don't know, so there is no emotional baggage associated with it. You can't force it and you can learn a lot about your horse through these early targeting lessons. In addition, it comes with a cue, which is the presentation of the target, so it is easy to get under stimulus control*. Targeting also turns out to be a very useful and practical tool and you will find many ways to use targeting to shape or train other behaviors.

When I first wrote this, I thought it would be short as targeting seems so simple. But it turns out that doing targeting well requires some preparation, thought and attention to detail. Targeting is a behavior that we will return to again and again, both to use targeting as a tool for training something else, and also because through improving and adding on to our horse's targeting skills, we can teach many of the basic concepts and training strategies that are going to be needed for more complicated training.

The workbook has exercises mixed in with text so you can work through each section before going on to the next one. I have included data sheets for the exercises if you want to use them. I do think it is important to keep track of your progress in some way. You can use the data sheets to track daily progress or as a final test once you have done the exercise a few times. At the end, there is a data sheet to record completing each exercise so you can keep track of your progress in one place if you want, or you can keep track of multiple horses.

WORKBOOK EXERCISES:

Coming up with the exercises for each targeting skill was not easy. I wanted to provide some structure so that new trainers could see how to start targeting correctly and then develop their targeting skills so that they were useful for training many different behaviors. There is a general progression that I use when I teach targeting and there are certain targeting skills that I like to make sure each horse knows. I know from my teaching experience that not only does the horse benefit from these targeting lessons, but targeting is a great way to develop the trainer's skills because the exercise itself is so simple which makes it ideal for exploring other more advanced topics (cues, duration, variable reinforcement etc...).

The purpose of the exercises is to provide a step-by-step way to work through many targeting lessons, but I want you to keep in mind that clicker training is very flexible and that in some cases, the exercises

are starting points. I would encourage you to make up your own exercises, or tweak these as needed. Some of the exercises are timed or ask you to count. If you find that timing makes you tense, then don't time them. Just find some other way to track your progress. Some people like to keep data and are happier with a way to measure their progress. Other people are ok with having a general sense of where things are going. You don't have to keep data to be a successful clicker trainer but I do find that it helps when things seem to get a bit stuck. Maybe the horse wasn't as solid on the previous step as you thought. Use these exercises as starting points and make up your own variations.

Do I train my horse with a notebook in hand? No, although I have been known to jot things down on breaks. The easiest way to keep track during a session is to count out a number of treats and see how many you deliver during each session. I usually keep targeting sessions short so I might count out 10 or 20 treats and that will be enough. Drilling does not help. Even if you think your horse has not made progress in a session, just note how they did and come back to it later or the next day.

I often compare learning to clicker train with learning to cook. I like to have the correct ingredients and follow the recipe the first time I make something new. I know that it matters how I put things together and I try hard to follow the instructions of someone more experienced than me. But, I also know that part of the fun of cooking is getting comfortable enough with the process that I can then start to tinker with the recipe. So don't let the workbook with its specific exercises and plan make you think that clicker training does not have room for creativity, because it does. You can make up your own exercises and come up with new ways to use targeting, just remember to go back to the basics if you find things are not working out.

Also, these exercises are not ones that you do once and then move on. I like to use them as refreshers if a horse has had some time off. I also use them as warm-ups to get a horse in the clicker mindset and I will review them when I want to use them as the basis for a newer and more complicated behavior.

Note on the data sheets: you might consider copying them before you use them so you can use the workbook for multiple horses. Most of them have a date so you can keep track of what you did when. You can just list multiple dates on the date: line or the start date or whatever is meaningful for you.

note: items marked with * are in the glossary

Teaching Targeting (Getting Started)

There are many layers to targeting. The first lesson is usually the simplest one which is teaching the horse to touch an object with its nose.

Further down the line, I can improve the “quality” of my horse’s targeting by only reinforcing for touching the object with closed mouth and adding in such things as duration, distance, targeting novel objects, targeting with other body parts, following a target and other more advanced uses for targeting.

Equipment

1. your horse behind protective contact such as behind a fence, gate, stall guard etc... because most horses have to go through a learning process about space and food. These early lessons are important so make sure you set it up so that the horse does not start off by making mistakes or creating bad habits.
2. target (a target can be anything, but first targeting sessions go better if you use something that can be held out away from your body and I like to use a target that has a clearly defined area for touching, such as a ball on a stick or something attached to the end of a whip). I like to use an object that I don’t use for anything else for the initial targeting. That way the horse doesn’t offer targeting unless I specifically want it.
3. clicker (I use a mechanical clicker to start, a tongue click later on)
4. reinforcement such as small pieces of carrots, grain, horse treats, hay stretchers, etc.... You want many small treats and you want them in a location where you can easily reach them. I use a vest or waist pack or the pockets of my coat if I am wearing one.

Training Scenario for First Lesson

Now that you have you are organized and ready to go, here are the actual steps to teach targeting.

1. Present the target by extending your arm our away from you and toward the horse’s nose.
2. Click
3. Put the target behind you
4. Get the treat and feed out away from your body
5. Present the target (horse can still be eating)

When you work with your horse, you are going to follow these steps and do several repetitions before taking a break. Horses learn better when you do several short sessions so I often count out 10-20 treats and do that many repetitions before taking a break. A break could be as simple as going away for a few minutes or doing something else with the horse. If the horse is engaged and enjoying the game, make sure you end each little session nicely so the horse doesn’t feel frustrated that you are leaving or ending the game. I often put a handful of goodies in the horse’s bucket or feed extra for the last effort and make a big fuss before going off to do something else.

One additional suggestion I would make is that if you can find someone to help you, practice targeting with a person before you go out and do it with a horse. It may seem silly but it actually takes a bit of coordination to teach targeting with clear and consistent body movements. If you can’t get a friend to help, you can practice on your own, choosing an item to touch and putting food in a container.

More Information on Each Step

-Tips on presenting the target:

Most horses are curious and will orient toward the target so the first click or two is easy. Then once the horse realizes you have food, you may become more interesting than the target. This is one reason to present the target out away from your body. It makes it clearer to the horse that touching you does not earn reinforcement.

When I first start, I try to present the target in the same location until the horse is consistently touching it with no extra behaviors such as mugging me or responding to any distractions. I usually stand slightly to the side and present the target so it is right in front of the horse.

What I like to do is present the target in the easiest place for the horse to reach, usually right in front of him and feed in the same location. I am actually teaching the horse to keep his head within a certain zone as that is the area in which the target is presented and also the area in which he is fed. This creates a zone of reinforcement out away from me and helps to avoid some of the unwanted behavior chains that can occur in early training sessions. These chains often involve the horse mugging you for treats in the gaps between targeting and feeding or feeding and the presentation of the target again. At this point, I don't want the horse looking for the target in different locations, I want the horse learning to wait for the target so he can touch it and then wait for his food.

-Tips for getting the horse started and what to click:

Click for any movement toward the target. In early targeting sessions you want to get the horse's attention and get him engaged in the game so you want to make it easy enough for the horse to earn some reinforcement, but be careful that you also give the horse some time to think. I may "help" a horse a bit and then become more passive and see if the horse will take some initiative. To "help" the horse, I might present the target again (horses react to movement), wiggle the target gently, or put it where the horse might "accidentally" bump into it.

For example, if I have a horse that keep getting distracted by something to its right, I will position the target so the horse encounters it as it turns to look at the distraction. There are lots of variables you can play with here such as how far the target is from the nose when you present it.

If the horse is really not getting it, try a different target, or move to a different location. You might try using a different type of food as a reinforcer to find something the horse likes better. Some horses will react to the sound of the clicker by startling. Usually this passes quickly but if you think the horse is uncomfortable with the sound of the clicker, you can muffle it by putting it in your pocket or wrapping it with tape or something else to muffle it. Different clickers make different sounds. Box clickers tend to be the loudest although their intensity can vary. The i-click which is Karen Pryor's clicker with the raised button is quieter.

I usually start a new horse with a mechanical clicker of some kind. Once the horse is doing well, I will switch to a tongue click which is the noise you can make with the tongue on the roof of your mouth. It should be a clear and distinct sound, not like the clucking and giddy-up sounds we tend to make with horses. The advantage to the tongue click is that it is always with you and it gives you one less thing to juggle when you are using lead ropes or targets.

-Tips on removing the target:

I usually just tuck the target behind my back. You can put it down out of reach if you are running out of hands, but it is better if the horse can't see it.

Why do we remove the target? In the beginning stages, it is not uncommon for the horse to continue to interact with the target even after I have clicked. I don't want the horse to get frustrated because it is touching the target repeatedly after I have clicked and nothing is happening. So I remove the target while I get the reinforcement out. This is a clear indicator to the horse that the food delivery process is starting and I find it helps many horses learn to do clean target touches. Remember part of the goal here is to get the horse used to the idea of behavior->click->reinforce and I want to help the horse understand that the click tells the horse to stop his behavior and orient to the handler for reinforcement.

I have also found that if the horse continues to interact with the target while I am getting the food out, he will experiment with and then abandon some of the behaviors that can later be used to build duration or teach the horse to pick the item up. Even though I want the horse offering behavior, I can use the presentation and removal of the target to start setting the pace of training. In most training sessions, there ends up being a nice rhythm where the horse and handler are working at a comfortable pace. The horse is not rushing the handler through food delivery or to present the target so the handler is working calmly and smoothly. At the same time, the handler is monitoring what the horse needs and is not rushing the horse to offer behavior or take the food. I think removing the target is part of this process because it helps identify the behavior and the start of the food delivery cycle.

-Food delivery:

In clicker training, food delivery is the name we use to refer to the process of getting the reinforcement from its initial location to the animal. This includes my body movement as I get the food, and the delivery of the food to the animal. With horses, hand feeding is usually the most efficient way to feed them. With horses that are not used to hand feeding, this skill can be practiced on its own, or it can be taught through clicker training. If hand feeding is not an option, the food can be placed in a bucket located near the horse or that is presented to the horse after the click.

However you choose to deliver the food, this should happen in a predictable way so that the animal can see that you are getting the reinforcement and the animal knows where to get the reinforcement. There is an article on my web site called "Loopy Training" which explains more about the importance of every step in the behavior->click-reinforcement cycle. What you need to know now is that the more consistent you are about how you get the food and present it, the more smoothly these early lessons will go. Some key points are:

Have the food in an easily accessible location (open pocket on vest, coat, fanny pack, bucket right next to you, etc...) Having food in Ziploc bags or in pockets that take time to access will slow you down. With a more experienced horse, a delay between click and treat might not cause a problem but with a novice clicker horse, it is important for food delivery to be prompt and efficient. I do not preload my hand as I think this distracts the horse and I want the horse to listen for the click, not watch hand movements. The click takes on value through classical conditioning* which works best if the two events (click and reinforcement) happen in sequence with just a slight delay.

I present the food out away from my body in a natural position for the horse. I don't want the horse to have to put his head in an awkward position in order to eat. Food delivery can also be used to set the horse up for the next trial or to reinforce a particular behavior. Once I have done some basic targeting, I can experiment with where I deliver the food to see if a different location improves my horse's behavior.

One common strategy is to present the food so that the horse has to back up slightly. Targeting often brings many horses forward and they will end up crowding the handler or leaning over the stall or gate. By feeding back toward the chest, you can encourage the horse to back up before you present the target again. You want to be careful that however you deliver the food, you don't tease or lure the horse. Usually changing the feeding location just a few inches in the desired direction each time is enough to create a shift within a session. The horse has earned his reinforcement when you click, don't make him do extra work.

If I am targeting and asking the horse to touch the target in a difficult location, I might sometimes feed in the same location as where I presented the target so the horse is more comfortable being there. This doesn't mean asking the horse to contort itself and then feeding there, a more typical example would be working on targeting a low object when a horse is tense. The horse might be reluctant to drop his head down and target. I will feed back at a normal position a few times but then I might start feeding a bit lower to see if I can reinforce the idea that a lower position is a good thing. Food delivery and eating are a break for the horse so I don't want to make them hard or uncomfortable for the horse, but if I can gently expand my horse's comfort zone through the food placement, I will. Remember, food is a primary reinforce* and what the horse is doing when he gets his food is being reinforced too.

-Present the target again:

Once I have delivered the food, I will present the target again. There is often a question of whether or not to present the target if the horse is still chewing. I think this varies from horse to horse. I want to present the target at a time when the horse is likely to touch it. Some horses will be eager to go again while they are still chewing and I don't want to frustrate these horses by making them wait. Other horses need processing time and I don't want to present the target if they are going to ignore it.

You are going to repeat these steps, presenting the target in an easy location until the horse clearly gets that it can get you to click by touching the target or until you have done enough repetitions that it is time for a break. Don't worry if you stop while the horse still seems confused. Taking a break is helpful for both of you and you don't have to worry about ending on a good note.

-Between Sessions: Taking a Break and Ending the Session

I noted earlier that horses learn better in short sessions so you want to do a bit of targeting and then take a break. This gives the horse time to process and think and you should take the time to do the same thing. When I take a break between sessions, I do end each session in the same way so the horse gets used to the routine of short sessions. Even at this early stage, I want to end each mini session on a nice note so I will do the last target, click, and feed, pat the horse and tell him how brilliant he is, and walk out of sight or close his door or in some other way, clearly show I am unavailable for a few minutes. If the horse is in a stall and has a feed bin that I can access, I will drop a few goodies in the feed bin and then leave.

Some things to consider are how successful the horse was at meeting criteria and whether or not the rate of reinforcement* was appropriate. This also gives you a chance to think about if you want to change food delivery or if there are other issues that need to be addressed. Maybe the horse is being distracted by the horse next door or maybe you are having trouble getting the food out of your pockets.

If you are still having problems, you might try using a different target or location or holding the target closer to the horse's nose, or lowering your criteria (click for any movement, even eyes, toward the target). Some horses take longer to catch on than others. If the horse is not getting it, just take a break

and come back later to the same exercise, making any modifications you think might make him more successful.

If the horse is doing well, you can think about what to do next. I find it is better to plan what I want to do in the next targeting session during a break although you can certainly change things within a session. Just make sure that you are not adding too many new criteria at once. I would not ask the horse to target in new locations and work on the “quality” of his touch at the same time.

EXERCISE 1: PRACTICE THE ELEMENTS OF TARGETING WITHOUT YOUR HORSE

Targeting sounds simple but I just spent 4 pages on the basic procedure for targeting. When you get out to your horse, it is going to seem like a lot to juggle. One way to make this easier is to practice some of the elements on your own.

You are going to want to set up a situation that is similar to the actually setup you will use when training, so you want to use your actual target, treats, and food container (vest/fanny pack/pockets etc...). I suggest you also give yourself a real object to represent the horse's head so that you get used to delivering food in a specific location. Most of my clicker subjects are horses so I might practice using a stuffed animal on the countertop, which is about the right height, and I will feed the toy as I would a horse by presenting the food and then just letting it drop out of my hand on to the counter.

Step 1: Practice Presenting the target and removing the target. Stand so that you can easily present the target to the toy (or location by fully extending your arm, but without taking any steps. This is the closest you would stand for targeting. You want the target to encourage the horse to keep a slight distance away from you.

You are going to practice presenting the target and then removing the target. I would do this a few times until it feels smooth, varying how long you stay in location as there is going to be some variation in how quickly the animal touches the target.

Once this is smooth, you are going to take one step back and repeat the exercise, but now you take one step forward and present the target, wait, remove the target and take one step back. This gets you used to moving your feet as you are asking the horse to target. I would do this with both hands.

Step 2: Add the click. This is the same as step 1, but now click and then remove the target. When I use a mechanical clicker, I put the target in my left hand and the clicker in my right hand (or vice versa). I don't like to put the target and clicker in the same hand. For one, I might accidentally click when the horse bumps the target, and also some horses will not like the click right near their heads or it will startle them when they touch the target. You can practice both within target reach and one step back.

Step 3: Practice food delivery. Next you are going to put the target away and just practice food delivery. Count out 20 treats and practice delivering food. Your goal is to be able to easily remove food from its location and present it in a smooth and fluid motion. This is a good time to test out and see if you need to make any changes because the food is hard to get out of your pocket or vest or there is some other mechanical difficulty.

You can time yourself if you want. The goal is not to be fast, but to see if you can be consistent. So I might see how many treats I can deliver in one minute and repeat this a few times until I find a rhythm that feels right to me. In training, how many treats I deliver in a set time is going to vary with the exercise and what the horse is offering, but timing can be helpful to check my mechanics. There are also times in my training where I AM going to use the pace of my food delivery to influence the horse so I need to be able to control food delivery even when a horse is trying to rush me through the process. The bottom line is you should play around with this. Get good at delivering food at a slow and steady pace, at a quicker pace, with irregular pauses and so on.

I suggest you do this so you can stand still and deliver the food, but also one step back so you have to step forward and deliver the food. This will get you used to walking into the horse's space to deliver the food which can be helpful for maintain your space or taking space with horses that get a little muggy about food.

Step 4: Put it all together. Now you are going to present the target, click, remove the target and feed. I suggest you start by putting the clicker in your dominant hand and the target stick in your other hand. You are going to present the target, click, put the target behind your back, take it in the hand holding your clicker and feed with the hand that had held the target. You can try it both ways but you are going to have to transfer either the clicker or the target to feed.

Another option is to use a clicker on a wrist coil so you can just drop the clicker after you click. I like to feed with my target hand because I can feed in the same location I just presented the target. There are actually lots of variations on which hand you can use to feed and where you feed, but for now I would pick one and stick with it so that you are predictable to the horse.

By the time you are done with this exercise, you should:

Be comfortable presenting and removing the target with either hand and while stepping forward and back, or in a stationary position.

Be comfortable holding and using the clicker.

Be able to deliver a consistent amount of food (one carrot piece, one hay stretcher pellet, a few pieces of grain) each time.

Know which hand is going to do what when you are holding both the target and the clicker.

Have practiced timing yourself on food delivery to make sure you can deliver food promptly and consistently.

You might want to add any notes here including the data and what exercises you practiced.

Date done _____

Notes:

EXERCISE 2: BASIC TARGETING WITH YOUR HORSE

Now you are ready to go out and start targeting with your horse. Remember to start your horse behind a barrier and to work in short sets. Count out 20 treats and do a set of targeting. Remember to end each set nicely with a little routine that lets the horse know he has done well and lets him know you are taking a break.

You can use the data sheet to do a “target test” after a few targeting sessions when you feel you and your horse are getting the idea. Or you can use the data sheet to track your progress from the beginning. Remember that you are shaping targeting, so you have to start with what the horse will offer. Some horses will touch it right away, with other horses, you are going to click for orienting to the target.

Touches with target presented in neutral head position from behind a barrier.

Date	Session	Touches

Observations:

Do I need to make any changes in my mechanics?

Is the reinforcer appropriate (horse working for it?, easy to handle? Doesn't take too long to eat?)

What other behaviors are occurring (mugging, pawing, head tossing)?

Where are the horse's ears? Just note if they are mostly forward or back and any other body language that is suggesting stress or anxiety.

How does the horse touch the target, closed mouth vs. teeth?