

The Modern Principles of Shaping

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- 1 Be prepared before you start.** Be ready to click/treat *immediately* when the training session begins. When shaping a new behavior, be ready to capture the very first tiny inclination the animal gives you toward your goal behavior. This is especially true when working with a prop such as a target stick or a mat on the ground.
- 2 Ensure success at each step.** Break behavior down into small enough pieces that the learner always has a realistic chance to earn a reinforcer.
- 3 Train one criterion at a time.** Shaping for two criteria or aspects of a behavior simultaneously can be very confusing. One click should not mean two different criteria.
- 4 Relax criteria when something changes.** When introducing a new criterion or aspect of the skill, temporarily relax the old criteria for previously mastered skills.
- 5 If one door closes, find another.** If a particular shaping procedure is not progressing, try another way.
- 6 Keep training sessions continuous.** The animal should be continuously engaged in the learning process throughout the session. He should be working the entire time, except for the moment he's consuming/enjoying his reinforcer. This also means keeping a high rate of reinforcement.
- 7 Go back to kindergarten, if necessary.** If a behavior deteriorates, quickly revisit the last successful approximation or two so that the animal can easily earn reinforcers.
- 8 Keep your attention on your learner.** Interrupting a training session gratuitously by taking a phone call, chatting, or doing something else that can wait often cause learners to lose momentum and get frustrated by the lack of information. If you need to take a break, give the animal a "goodbye present," such as a small handful of treats.
- 9 Stay ahead of your learner.** Be prepared to "skip ahead" in your shaping plan if your learner makes a sudden leap.
- 10 Quit while you're ahead.** End each session with something the learner finds

reinforcing. If possible, end a session on a strong behavioral response, but, at any rate, try to end with your learner still eager to go on.