

Operant Conditioning Writing Assignment

At some point, you will find yourself in a situation where your happiness would be increased if another organism changed his/her/its behavior (e.g., a pet, a child, a loved one, a coworker). For example, I would be happier if my husband would turn off his radio alarm rather than listening to an obnoxious morning show for 60 minutes (see the example of operant conditioning writing assignment on the following pages). Operant conditioning and shaping are two skills that can enable you to increase your happiness by modifying the behaviors of other people or animals in a nonaggressive, nonconfrontational way. This assignment will give you a chance to practice these techniques and reflect on the results.

First, identify an organism whose behavior you want to change (it need not be a person). It should be an organism with which you interact regularly. You may or may not choose to tell the organism you intend to shape his/her/its behavior.

Second, identify the target behavior you want to change. The behavior must be *specific and simple* (e.g., “teach my dog to sit on command” or “get my son to put his dirty socks in the hamper,” not “make my boss give me a raise”). You must be able to clearly describe both the current version of the behavior and the desired version of the behavior, including when and under what circumstances the behavior occurs. Depending on the desired behavior you select, you may need to shape the organism so he/she/it learns how to perform the desired behavior, as well as reinforce the desired behavior after it is learned.

Third, describe every possible variation of the targeted behavior and the exact consequences that will occur after each behavior. This is your conditioning plan. Remember there are four types of consequences: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. In general, reinforcement is more effective in shaping behavior than punishment. You will need to specify the type of consequence that will follow each behavior (e.g., positive reinforcement when the dog sits on command; no reinforcement when the dog doesn’t sit on command) and the specific consequence you will use (e.g., give Fido a treat when he sits on command; no treat when he doesn’t sit on command). You will also need to plan a consequence for behaviors that are somewhere in-between the original and the desired version of the behavior (e.g., verbally praise Fido when he sits in the absence of a command).

Fourth, use your plan to condition the organism’s behavior *over at least five consecutive days*. If you select a behavior that you really want to change (as opposed to something just for the purposes of the paper), you may want to condition the organism over more than five days. The behavior is more likely to change if you condition the organism over more days. The behavior is also more likely to change if your conditioning plan anticipates every possible variation of the behavior and if you use the plan consistently.

Your paper should include four sections:

1. Describe both the original version of the behavior and the desired version of the behavior.
2. Present your conditioning plan in a table. List the possible behaviors in rows and the consequences you plan to use in the columns. Clearly label each consequence as positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, or negative punishment. List the specific consequences as well (i.e., the stimulus you added or subtracted in order to make the behavior more or less likely).
3. Describe the organism’s reactions to the consequences. This is the part of the paper where you describe what actually happened, even if it was different from what you had planned. Look for changes in behavior, verbal comments, or expressions. Changes may be subtle. For example, the organism may perform the original behavior less frequently than before.
4. Describe what you learned about operant conditioning and shaping in this exercise. What do you know now that you didn’t know at the beginning of the process? If you were not successful in modifying the identified behavior, speculate as to why the behavior didn’t change in the desired way. What might you have done differently?

Your paper should be three to four double-spaced, typed pages *including* the table describing your conditioning plan. Include your name *and* your team name. Papers are due *in class on the date listed in the syllabus*. Late papers will *not* be accepted.

Papers will be evaluated using the following criteria. Each criterion will be rated on the following scale 3-point minus-check-plus scale.

—	✓	+
Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Good

- _____ 1. Quality of the description of the original behavior: Is it clear what the original behavior was?
- _____ 2. Quality of the description of the desired behavior: Is it clear how the desired version of the behavior is different from the original version?
- _____ 3. Thoroughness of the conditioning plan: Is there a table included that lists *all* the potential versions of the behavior and the planned consequences?
- _____ 4. Accuracy of the conditioning plan: Is each consequence clearly and accurately labeled as an example of positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, or negative punishment?
- _____ 5. Quality of the description of the organism's reactions to the administered consequences, even small changes: Is it clear how the organism reacted to the administered consequences?
- _____ 6. Quality of the description of what the student learned about operant conditioning and shaping in this exercise: Did the student make a genuine effort to reflect on his or her experiences?
- _____ 7. Quality of speculations as to why the behavior didn't change in the desired way: Are the speculations reasonable? Do they demonstrate learning?
- _____ 8. Mechanics (grammar, spell-check, and so on).

The holistic score is on the following scale:

0%	50%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Absent	Barely adequate	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Outstanding

_____ HOLISTIC SCORE

Example of Operant Conditioning Writing Assignment

I decided to train my husband to turn off his alarm clock. The current version of the behavior is that he lets the alarm run until it turns off automatically after sixty minutes. The alarm is set to the radio and he likes to lie in bed, drifting in and out of sleep while listening to the radio—for an hour!! Furthermore, I hate the radio station he listens to! The desired version of the behavior is for him to turn off the alarm after fifteen or fewer minutes. This goal seems like a reasonable compromise between my preferences and his.

My conditioning plan follows. Some of the consequences in my conditioning plan require explanation. My husband has strong preferences about his morning routine. After he's gotten out of bed and showered, he eats cereal while reading the newspaper. Then he drinks a can of soda. He wants both the milk for the cereal and the soda to be very cold, straight from the refrigerator. He likes it when I get the soda from the fridge for him so he can continue sitting and reading without interruption. Finally, one of his household chores is picking up the dog poop from the back yard. He doesn't especially enjoy this task and would be happy if I did it instead.

I selected the consequences listed in the conditioning plan because most of them could occur during my husband's morning routine, immediately after he does (or doesn't) turn off his alarm. Also, I wanted to use reinforcement as much as possible. I did need one form of punishment. I selected warm milk as a punishment because my husband finds it annoying (but not overly so). Annoying your spouse repeatedly is a bad strategy for long-term marital happiness! Because my consequences were tied to how long my husband lets the alarm run, I timed the alarm each day. I started the timer when the alarm went off and turned off the timer when the alarm turned off, with or without help from my husband.

Possible Behaviors	Do I Want the Behavior to Be Repeated?	Type of Consequence	Example of Consequence
Doesn't turn off the alarm (it runs for an hour)	No	Positive punishment	I take the milk out of the refrigerator so it gets warm.
Turns off the alarm but after more than forty-five minutes	Yes	Positive reinforcement	I thank him for turning off the alarm.
Turns off the alarm but after more than thirty minutes	Yes	Positive reinforcement	I thank him and give him a kiss.
Turns off the alarm after more than fifteen minutes	Yes	Positive reinforcement	I thank him and get him a cold soda.
Turns off the alarm after fifteen or fewer minutes	Yes	Positive reinforcement	I turn on the shower before he's out of bed to warm up the water, thank him, and get him a cold soda.
Turns off the alarm right away	Yes	Positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement (picking up the poop)	I turn on the shower, thank him, get him a cold soda, and pick up the dog poop for him.

The evening after writing the first half of the assignment, my husband and I were having our usual conversation about our day. In the course of this conversation, my husband guessed that I was going to be shaping his behavior. He is also a psychologist so he is familiar with operant conditioning. I didn't, however, tell him what the behavior was or when the shaping would begin.

I began the shaping trial the next morning. Not surprisingly, he let the alarm run for a full hour, just as usual. As I'd planned, I left the milk out of the refrigerator and it got warm. Unfortunately, I had to leave for work

before he ate his cereal so I didn't get to observe his reaction to this consequence. Several days later, I learned that he was annoyed with me for letting the milk get warm. On day two, the alarm ran for the full hour and he got warm milk again. It was the same on day three, except this time he asked about the warm milk. From his point of view, it seemed odd that I was suddenly incapable of putting the milk away! I smiled but didn't say anything. He asked if the warm milk was a message or a hint of some kind. I just smiled. He was in a hurry to get to work so he let the conversation drop. The fourth day of the trial was a Thursday, one of the days he can sleep in a bit. As usual, the alarm went off at 7:15 a.m. but my husband didn't need to get up until 9:00 a.m. Consequently, he turned off the alarm after eighteen minutes. As I planned, I thanked him for turning off the alarm and got him a cold soda after he finished his breakfast. I don't think he noticed. He seemed very focused on reading the newspaper. On day five, he was out of bed before the alarm ran for an hour but he didn't actually turn it off. So, he got warm milk again. This time, he glared at me and, given that it was the last day of the trial, I explained that the warm milk was the consequence for letting the alarm run for an hour. Then I reassured him that the trial was over in an attempt to make him less grumpy.

All in all, my attempt at shaping my husband's behavior was a complete bust. Although he showed some reactions to the administered consequences, there was little or no change in his alarm-related behavior. There were several possible reasons for my failure. First, although my planned consequences seemed reasonable, in hindsight they should have been tied more closely to what he did (or didn't do) to the alarm. There is little logical connection between "didn't turn off my alarm" and "warm milk on my cereal." Furthermore, the warm milk (or cold soda) was administered several minutes after whatever he did or didn't do to the alarm. As a result, it was unlikely that he would realize that what he did (or didn't do) to the alarm led to the consequences. In particular, a more effective punishment would have been turning on the bedroom light or flinging the blankets off the bed immediately after the alarm hit the sixty-minute mark.

Second, his alarm behavior was a poor choice because it was closely tied to other behaviors. He actually uses the alarm as his cue to get up, only in reverse; when the radio stops playing, he knows it's time to get out of bed. Turning off the alarm himself either meant he had to get up earlier than usual or risk oversleeping. In other words, there were clear disadvantages to turning off the alarm that easily outweighed any reinforcements I had planned.

Third, it was short-sighted to plan anything that had to happen in the morning. We're already trying to get four people (me, my husband, and our two boys) fed, dressed, and to work or school on time. The extra tasks of timing the alarm and delivering the appropriate consequence nearly toppled the entire routine.

Despite my abject failure at shaping my husband's behavior, I learned quite a bit about operant conditioning. I learned that part of the reason it is important to administer consequences immediately after the behavior is so that the organism understands that the behavior led to the consequences. I learned that it is difficult to shape a behavior that isn't independent of other behaviors or consequences. Finally, I learned that shaping a peer or a partner is trickier than shaping an animal, child, or other person that has less power and status than you have. Having higher status in the relationship makes it much easier to administer consequences, particularly punishment.