



# Reponse Cost



## Definition

**R**esponse cost is a procedure in which a specific amount of available reinforcers is contingently withdrawn following a response in an attempt to decrease behavior. Response cost is often used with token economy programs. The response cost must be less than the total amount of number of reinforcers available (i.e., never go in the hole). Response cost procedures are often referred to as “fines.”

## Things to Do

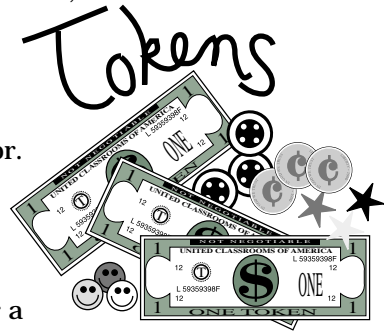
- ✓ Decide on a method to give out reinforcers.
- ✓ Pinpoint behaviors to be fined.
- ✓ Set up a response cost system.
- ✓ Implement the response cost system.
- ✓ Monitor student performance.

## ✓ Decide on a method to give out reinforcers.

Common sense tells us that before an instructor can withdraw or “repossess” a student’s reinforcer the student must first have a reinforcer for the instructor to take. So it is with response cost. Following are two methods for giving out reinforcers.

### Token Economy

In practice, response cost is most often and successfully used as part of a token economy (see *LRBI Checklist: Level I—Token Economy*). In a token economy, instructors give out reinforcers to students who earn them for appropriate behavior. Then using response cost, they can remove or recall the student’s reinforcer as a penalty or fine for problem behavior. For example, each time Patty raises her hand and waits to be called on, the instructor gives her a token that can later be exchanged for a reward. However, if Patty shouts out a comment without being called on, the instructor uses response cost procedures to withdraw one of Patty’s tokens.



### Reinforcers Furnished

Another method of giving out reinforcers is to simply issue students a predetermined number of points, chips, or other forms of reinforcer at the start of the response cost procedure. When a specified inappropriate behavior occurs, response cost takes place. For instance, an instructor may furnish each student with 15 tokens and require them to work 15 math problems. Each problem that a student fails to answer correctly will cost that individual one token. Thus, the goal is to retain as many reinforcers as possible.

## ✓ Pinpoint behaviors to be fined.

Pinpoint inappropriate academic, social, or classroom behaviors that will result in a fine or loss of reinforcers. Make sure the behaviors are observable and measurable. For example, this is too vague . . .

Instead . . .

Students who break the posted classroom rules will be fined.

. . . is a behavior that you can see and count.

Students who are not doing what they are supposed to do will be fined.

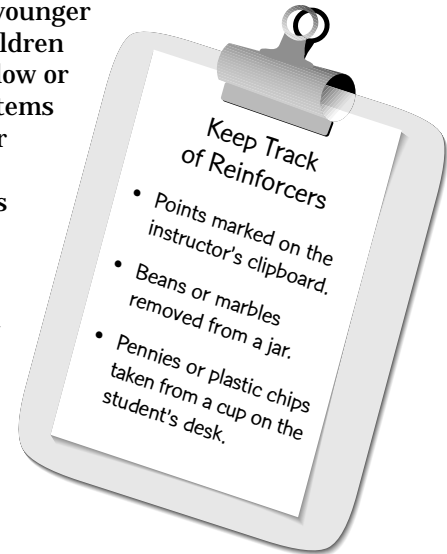
 Observable & Measurable

- Easily observed
- Countable
- Beginning/end
- Repeatable

## ✓ Set up a response cost system.

### Choose a Method to Track the Response Cost

There are many ways to keep track of reinforcers that students must return. Use caution when working with younger or disabled children who may swallow or lodge certain items in their nose or ears. Overall, many elements work well to track response cost as long as they are easily retrievable, difficult to counterfeit, and safe to use.



### Determine Fines

Decide the cost for each inappropriate student response. Give special attention to matching the severity of the misbehavior with the cost of the reinforcer. If costs are too light, they may have little effect. However, if fines are too heavy, students may give up knowing that all their previous efforts can be lost in a single costly fine. Find the right balance to maintain student interest and motivation.

## ✓ Implement the response cost system.

### Explain the System to Students


Identify specifically when and where the response cost system will be in effect. Some run all day while others take place during certain class periods. Remember to post rules and list fines for specific infractions. This may require careful discussion and role-playing to demonstrate the details of the program. Helping students to clearly understand the procedures will prevent lengthy explanations when misbehavior occurs.

### Withdraw Reinforcers

When an infraction takes place, immediately withdraw a reinforcer. Always accompany the withdrawal with a brief, nonjudgmental description of the problem behavior.

For example . . .

Do this quickly and unobtrusively to cause as little interruption as possible.



Sonya, that's talking without permission. You just lost a point.

## ✓ Monitor student performance.

Record each incidence of response cost. Identify the student, behavior, and penalty. Then graph the data. Regularly review the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and make adjustments as needed.

## Examples

### Example 1

In Mr. Jenson's classroom, students earn a point on their point card each time a beep sounds on the tape if they are following classroom rules. For each rule infraction, a point is marked off the point card. At the end of the day, students may spend the points remaining on their cards in the class store.

### Example 2


Steve is awarded 10 points at the start of recess. Each time he breaks one of the playground rules (i.e., refuses to give up the bat or catcher's mitt when it is someone else's turn), he loses a point. At the end of the recess period, Steve may bank all the points he has retained and exchange them after the last recess of the day for items listed on a menu of reinforcers.

### Example 3

Each day, Mrs. Taylor gives her students several small slips of paper on which they write their names. Then they place the slips in an envelope on their desks. When a student engages in a

response cost behavior, Mrs. Taylor—while calmly describing the misbehavior—takes a slip of paper from the student's envelope and states, "You have lost one ticket." At the end of the day, students are allowed to place all their remaining tickets in a jar for a daily lottery.

## Variations of the Technique

 Response Cost Lottery (see *Example 3*). Also refer to:

Witt, J. C., & Elliott, S. N. (1982). The response cost lottery: A time-efficient and effective classroom intervention. *Journal of School Psychology, 20*, 156-161.


## Potential Problems and Solutions


### A Reinforcer is Not Retrievable


An instructor must be able to withdraw the reinforcer after it is given. Avoid getting into a physical tug-of-war with a student to recall a reinforcer. Also, students who eat edible reinforcers make it undesirable to return the item. Instead, consider using points on the board. Then be sure to keep a back-up copy in case students attempt to alter it.

### Students Run Out of Reinforcers to Withdraw

If students are allowed to go in the "hole," all motivation for behaving and performing appropriately is likely to be lost. Further misbehavior may intensify.

 **Examine the reinforcers.** Are they appealing and of interest to the students?

 **Examine your overall classroom environment.** Is there sufficient positive reinforcement? A good rule of thumb is four positives for every negative.

 **Examine the cost of reinforcers and fines.** Are fines too heavy while rewards too light?

### After Withdrawing the Reinforcer, Some Students Whine, Pout, and Cry

(No solutions suggested.)

### A Student Argues With the Instructor to Not Withdraw the Reinforcer

The teacher should never be intimidated into not using response cost by the student. Nor should the teacher argue with the student about whether or not the reinforcers will be withdrawn once the response cost has been earned. **(What's the solution?)**

### An Instructor Withholds Bathroom Privileges as Part of a Response Cost

All students have civil rights to water, food, clothes, and the right to bathroom use. These things cannot be withheld as part of a response cost system.

## Getting Ready

- 👉 When using response cost, make certain that just one part of a preplanned hierarchy of behavior reductive techniques. **(I don't understand the statement.)**
- 👉 Make certain there is a high rate of effective reinforcement for desirable student behavior.
- 👉 Generate an adequate supply of reinforcers that are easily retrievable.
- 👉 Design and implement an effective token economy if the response cost is to be used in conjunction with this procedure (see *LRBI Checklists: Level 1*).

### Materials and Supplies

- 👉 A supply of reinforcers.



## References

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- Iawata, B. A., & Bailey, J. S. (1974). Reward versus cost token system: An analysis of the effects on students and teacher. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 7, 567-576.
- Suzer-Azaroff, B., & Nayer, G. R. (1977). *Applied behavior analysis procedures with children and youth*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Walker, H. (1983). Application of response cost in school settings: Outcomes, issues, and recommendations. *Exceptional Education Quarterly*, 3(4), 4-55.
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