

Body Language: "Speaking Dog"

What is it?

Up until the 17th century, people thought that dogs were little more than unemotional machines who could not feel pain, either emotional or physical. It took behavioral science a long time to move away from that belief.

Now, of course, we know that dogs are very expressive animals who have a range of emotions. They communicate when they're feeling happy, sad, nervous, fearful and angry and use their bodies and faces to convey much of this information. Dog body language is an elaborate and elegant system of nonverbal communication. If we can learn to read our dog's postures and signals we can better understand his feelings and motivations and be better able to predict what he's likely to do.

What do I observe?

Eyes: Your dog's eyes, their size and shape, and the focus and intensity of their gaze can tell you much about how he is feeling. A soft, blinky, normal size eye indicates a happy and content dog. An overly wide eye may mean that your dog is feeling threatened, while a small or squinting eye may suggest fear or stress.

It is also important to assess the direction in which he is gazing. While your dog may look at you with a relaxed and happy demeanor, the dog who looks at a person or another dog with a direct and hard stare is potentially a threat. Similarly, a dog who looks at something out of the corner of his eye so that only much of the white of the eye is apparent (this is known as whale eye) may be poised for an aggressive outburst.

Mouth: Did you know that some dogs smile? When your dog is relaxed he will probably display a slightly open mouth. A closed mouth with lip licking may indicate that your dog is anxious or stressed. Exposing his teeth is an indication that your dog is fearful or angry.

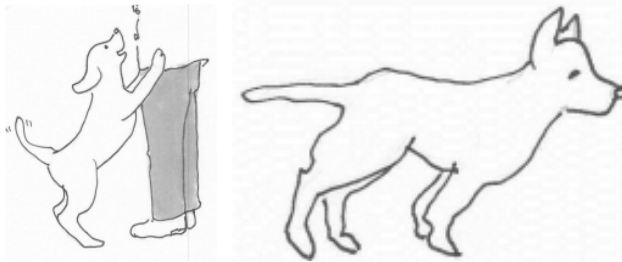
Ears: The type of ears your dog has (pricked, folded, drooping) will affect the way in which he is able to communicate his feelings. In general, however, when relaxed, your dog will hold his ears naturally. Ears raised is an indication that your dog is alert, assessing something. Ears pinned back against his head are a sign of anxiety or fear.

Tail: There is a common misconception that a dog with a wagging tail is always friendly. While it can indicate a gregarious and sociable feeling, it can also be something entirely different. The placement of the tail, the type of the wag and the overall body posture need to be considered.

Of course, if your dog doesn't have a tail (or a full tail) his ability to communicate with it is limited. If your dog's tail is held naturally and gently wagging side to side, he is probably relaxed and happy. When he greets you at the end of the day with a wag that wiggles his entire body, of course it means he is ecstatic!

A tail held high with a stiff and rapid movement likely indicates an aroused potentially unfriendly dog.

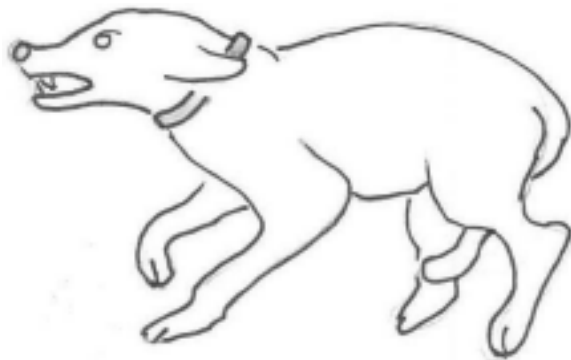
Body Posture: If you think about what your dog's body is like when he is relaxed and happy, you probably would describe it as soft, loose or wiggly. Now, think about when he is scared. He will make his body smaller, hunch over and try to move away. When alert, your dog will stand tall, muscles tense, perhaps with his weight forward on the front legs.



What is he saying?

Having the ability to read what your dog is saying with his body will help you better understand him and what he is feeling. It will also alert you to respond when he needs your intervention.

Fear: If your dog is fearful he may show dilated pupils, ears carried back and down, heavy panting, more so than the weather might require, drooling and moving away from contact. He may look back at the object of fear with a “whale eye” wherein the whites of his eyes are seen as they are peering over his shoulder. Other signs include excessive shedding, sweating through paws, or even shaking. If your dog is very frightened, he may freeze in place and be unresponsive to efforts to move.



There is no way to convince your dog not to be afraid when he is fully shut down. The best strategy is to try and determine the cause of the fear and move away from it. Changing the environment immediately is a smart strategy.

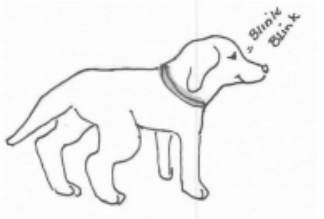
Anger: If your dog is very fearful and believes there is no viable escape, he may respond with aggression. Some dogs in full fear mode might actually look angry. The ears are pinned, the hair on the back, from the neck to the tail, is raised and the teeth may be in full view with the lips pulled back. If your dog is more assertive than fearful, he may look angry in a different way with ears forward, eyes wide, standing with confidence. Sometimes the tail is upright and wagging stiffly.

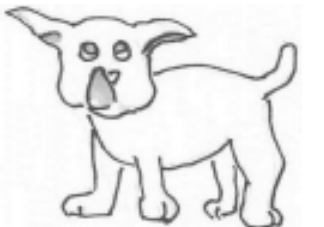
As when your dog is fearful, the best strategy is to move to another environment away from the target of the display.

Stress: When your dog is stressed, he will often try to calm himself and those around him as well. He may engage in any or all of these behaviors:

- Sniffing the ground:** A dog will use his nose to explore the environment, but at times, sniffing can have a different purpose. Owners often blame out-of-context-sniffing as not paying attention or being stubborn. But sniffing when another dog is approaching is an avoidance behavior, a cut off signal of sorts, telling the other dog that there is no threat. It's also a way your dog might try to calm himself in a stressful situation.


- Blinking, averting:** Worried dogs can be calmed when your dog avoids direct eye contact, turns away or offers his backside.


- Moving in an arc:** Dogs will often approach each other in curving lines and walk beyond each other's nose to sniff rear ends while standing side by side. The dogs will continue this circling/curving behavior for greeting.
- Yawning:** Exaggerated yawns or multiple yawns are a sign that your dog is either under stress and trying to calm himself, or is trying to calm another dog. Often people think their dog is sleepy, but a wide-opened mouth yawn, sometimes accompanied by a slight shake of the head, signals an effort to calm.
- Lip Licking or Tongue Thrusting:** This quick flick of the tongue out the end of your dog's mouth often goes unnoticed, but it's a valuable signal. A great deal of tongue thrusting is an indication that your dog is under stress, but is trying to calm himself.


- Shake Off:** This behavior looks like your dog is shaking off water from his coat when he is not even wet. Often this shake appears after a dog to dog greeting or a stressful human greeting. The movement is an indication that your dog found the interaction stressful and the shake off calms him.



Happy and Relaxed: When your dog is content he will have a loose and fluid body with little tension in the muscles. He will display a slightly open mouth, relaxed ear stance and soft eyes. This is the kind of body language you should look for in your dog when you are trying to teach him something new.

