

Canine Body Language

Dogs are very expressive animals. They communicate when they're feeling happy, sad, nervous, fearful and angry, and they use their faces and bodies to convey much of this information. Dog body language is an elaborate and sophisticated system of nonverbal communication that, fortunately, we can learn to recognize and interpret. Once you learn how to "read" a dog's postures and signals, you'll better understand his feelings and motivations and be better able to predict what he's likely to do. These skills will enable you to interact with dogs with greater enjoyment and safety.

It helps to first learn about the various components that make up dog body language. Dogs use facial expressions, ear set, tail carriage and overall demeanor to signal their intentions and feelings to others. Breaking their body language down into components is helpful at first for building your observation and interpretation skills. Your goal, however, is to be able to observe the entire dog and the situation or context he's in, in order to accurately determine what he's trying to say. It's not possible to understand your dog's feelings and intentions by looking at just one aspect of his body language.

Dog Faces

Even though dogs' faces and heads come in many shapes and sizes, your dog's basic facial expressions can tell you a great deal about how he's feeling.

The Eyes

Your dog can, within limits, vary the shape and size of his eyes or the direction and intensity of his gaze. When your dog is relaxed and happy, his eyes will be their normal shape. Some dogs have round eyes, while others are more almond-shaped. Eyes that appear larger than normal usually indicate that a dog is feeling threatened in some way. He may be stressed by something or he may be frightened. An aggressive dog is also likely to have eyes that look larger than normal. If your dog's eyes seem smaller than they usually are, this can also mean he's feeling frightened or stressed. Dogs who are in pain or not feeling well often look as though they're squinting their eyes. Dogs who submissively grin (see below) may also squint their eyes.

The direction of your dog's gaze can also be telling. Dogs rarely look directly into each other's eyes because this is considered threatening behavior. Yet most dogs learn that it's okay, even pleasant, to look directly at people. A dog who looks at you with a relaxed facial expression is being friendly and hoping that you'll notice him. A dog who looks directly at you, actually staring at you with a tense facial expression, is another matter indeed. A direct stare is much more likely to be a threat, and if you're in close proximity to such a dog, it's wise to slowly look away. Looking away is what dogs do when they don't want to appear threatening. A dog who averts his gaze when you look at him is signalling that he's submissive. It can also indicate that he's worried about interacting with you. Maybe he's been scared of people in the past, and so he isn't very confident about dealing with people now.

If your dog doesn't look directly at you, but instead looks out of the corners of his eyes so that you see a good deal of the whites of his eyes (the sclera), he might be leading up to an aggressive outburst. Known as "whale eye" this is often seen when a dog is guarding a chew bone, toy or favorite spot. It's different than the eye of a dog who, for instance, is resting with his head and opens his eyes to give you a sideways glance. In this case, he won't appear rigid or tense, and you won't see much of the whites of his eyes.



The Mouth

Dogs do a lot more with their mouths than just eat and drink. Even though they can't use their mouths to talk, the way they position their lips, jaws and teeth speaks volumes. When your dog is relaxed and happy, he's likely to have his mouth closed or slightly opened. If his mouth is open, he may be panting—this is how dogs cool their bodies. You might see his teeth because his mouth is slightly opened.

A dog who's frightened or feeling submissive probably has his mouth closed. His lips might be pulled back slightly at the corners. He might flick his tongue in and out, or he might lick if he's interacting with a person or another animal. When he's feeling uptight, he might yawn in an exaggerated fashion.



The submissive grin is coupled with pinned-back ears and a lowered body.

Some dogs show a "submissive grin" when they're feeling extremely submissive. They pull their lips up vertically and display their front teeth (canines and incisors). This signal is almost always accompanied by an overall submissive body posture, such as a lowered head, yelping or whining, and squinty eyes. Only some dogs "grin" this way. People sometimes mistakenly think a dog is being aggressive when, in fact, he's grinning submissively and trying to communicate the exact opposite of aggression.



This dog's eyes are soft, and her mouth is open and relaxed.

A dog who's signalling his intention to act aggressively will often retract his lips to expose his teeth. He may pull his lips up vertically to display his front teeth while also wrinkling the top of his muzzle. This is typical of a dog who's warning you not to come any closer.



This is a preliminary aggressive threat. The dog's ears are back, she's giving a direct stare and her lips are pulled over her teeth.



The threat is more serious now. Her muzzle extends forward and she's giving a low growl.



Now she's wrinkled her muzzle to expose her front teeth. She's growling loudly and preparing to lunge forward and attack.

A dog may draw his lips back horizontally so that his lips are really tight at the commissure (the corners of the mouth). With this expression, you're more likely to see both his front and back teeth (premolars and molars). This posture is often indicative of a dog who's feeling afraid. However, once a dog is ready to bite, he usually pulls his lips up AND back so that his mouth is open and his teeth are exposed.

Dogs can display an "aggressive pucker." They move their lips forward over their teeth and exhale air so that their lips look puffy and large. You can sometimes even hear them breathing heavily. This display is often accompanied by a wrinkled forehead. A dog who looks like this is saying, "Don't come any closer."

Dog Ears

Dogs have a wide variety of ear types. The size and shape of your dog's ears will dictate how well he can use them to communicate. Some are dropped (like a beagle's), some are pricked (like a German shepherd's) or semi-pricked (like a Shetland sheepdog's), and some hang long (like a Bassett hound's). Some dogs' ears are cropped so that some or all of the earflap is removed (like a Doberman pinscher's or Great Dane's). The ASPCA does not condone ear cropping and encourages breeders and dog parents to leave dogs with their natural ears. In most cases, ear cropping is surgery done purely for cosmetic reasons and causes dogs unnecessary pain and discomfort.

When your dog is relaxed and comfortable, he'll hold his ears naturally. When he's alert, he'll raise them higher on his head and he'll direct them toward whatever's holding his interest. Your dog will also raise his ears up and forward

when he's feeling aggressive. If your dog has his ears pulled back slightly, he's signalling his intention to be friendly. If his ears are completely flattened or stuck out to the sides of his head, he's signalling that he's frightened or feeling submissive.

Dog Tails

People often assume that a dog with a wagging tail is a friendly dog, but this is far from the truth. Dogs wag their tails for numerous reasons, including when they're feeling aggressive. And a dog who isn't wagging his tail can still be friendly. A dog's ability to use his tail to express how he feels is limited by the type of tail he has. Most



dogs have a "natural" tail that hangs down to somewhere near the hock (the joint between the lower thigh and the pastern on the rear leg). Others, such as the pug, have tails that curl up and over their backs. A few breeds, like the greyhound and whippet, have a tail that naturally tucks slightly between their rear legs. And some breeds have naturally short bobtails or have tails that were surgically docked. (For example, Australian shepherd puppies may be born with natural bobtails, and the Doberman pinscher is a breed that often has the tail surgically docked.) Because it's a painful procedure done only for cosmetic reasons, the ASPCA does not condone tail docking.

When your dog is relaxed, he'll hold his tail in its natural position. If he's feeling happy, he may wag it gently from side to side. If he's really happy, like when he greets you after being apart from you, his tail will wag more forcefully from side to side or might even move in a circular pattern. If your dog feels nervous or submissive, he'll hold his tail lower and might even tuck it between his rear legs. He may still wag it from side to side, often at a more rapid pace than if he's relaxed. If he's really scared or feeling extremely submissive, he'll hold his tail tucked up tight against his belly.

When your dog is alert or aroused about something, he'll probably hold his tail higher than normal. He'll hold it stiff, without any movement. If he's standing his ground or threatening someone (a person or another animal), he may "flag" his tail, which means he holds it stiff and high and moves it rigidly back and forth. It might look like he's wagging his tail, but everything else about his body tells you that he's not feeling friendly at the moment.



Dog Hair

Although dogs don't communicate much with it, you can discern some things from a dog's hair. First, a scared or stressed dog is likely to shed more than normal. It's as though the scared dog is blowing his coat, and it suddenly comes out in buckets! You may have seen this if your dog gets nervous during visits to your veterinarian. After the examination, you, the vet and the table are covered with your dog's hair.

Dogs may also stick up their hair to communicate how they are, which is called "piloerection," or more colloquially, "raising the hackles." Although dogs' hair is most often raised over the withers (the area where the tops of a dog's shoulder blades meet), dogs can raise their hair all along their spine. Dogs raise their hair when they're aroused about something. It's comparable to a person having goose bumps. Raised hackles can mean that a dog is afraid, angry, insecure, unsure, nervous or wildly excited about something.

Overall Body Posture

Dogs also use their bodies to communicate their intentions. In general, dogs either try to look normal, smaller or larger. If your dog's feeling happy and contented, he'll look normal—relaxed muscles and weight evenly balanced on



This is the same dog as in the relaxed pose above. Under The Mouth. Now she's growling with her ears pulled back, her eyes rounded and her lips pulled over her teeth.

all four feet. Similarly, when he's playful, he'll look normal. He may be bouncing around or running wildly with exaggerated movements, but his facial expression and his muscles will be relaxed and nothing about his body will look unnatural.

This is quite different from the overall appearance of a scared dog. When your dog is scared, he'll be hunched as though trying to look small. He might lower his body or even cower on the ground. His head will be held low as well. If he's frightened by something or someone, he'll recoil away from it. For instance, if your dog is scared on an examination table, he'll pull away from the veterinarian and lean into you. If your dog is uncertain but curious about something, he might approach it tentatively, with his weight centered over his rear legs so that he can retreat quickly if he needs to.

A submissive dog looks very similar to a frightened dog because he makes himself look small to convey that he's not a threat. If your dog is submissive, he'll lower his body or even cower on the ground. His head might be raised, though, if he's greeting a person or another animal.

An assertive (dominant), alert or aroused dog tries to make himself look large. His muscles will be tense. He'll stand erect, sometimes even on his tiptoes, with his neck and head raised above his shoulders. His weight will either be centered over all four feet or he'll be leaning slightly forward on his front legs.

An angry, aggressive dog also makes himself appear larger than life to be as intimidating as possible. If your dog is aggressive, he'll look very similar to an assertive, alert or aroused dog, but his posture will be accompanied by aggressive threats. Typically, his weight will be centered over his front legs so that he can lunge or charge forward rapidly.

Putting It All Together—The Whole Dog

The messages dogs communicate with their body language can be subtle, but with careful attention, most people can learn to recognize and interpret the most important meanings. It's crucial to know when your dog's happy, when he's playful, when he's worried or scared, when he's feeling uncertain or insecure about something or someone, and when he's feeling upset and potentially angry. As long as you can recognize these messages, you can interact with him confidently and safely, and you can protect him when he needs protection.

Happy, Contented

When your dog is happy, he has relaxed body language. His muscles are relaxed, his tail and ears are held in their natural positions, and he looks neither large nor small for his physique. He might wag his tail from side to side or in circular motion. His facial expression is neutral or he appears happy—the muscles in his face are relaxed, his mouth is closed or slightly opened, and he might be panting with a regular tempo. The corners of his mouth (called the commissure) might be turned upwards slightly, as though he's smiling.

Alert

When your dog is alert, he looks intense and focused. He stands upright with his weight centered on all fours, his ears are up and forward, and his head and neck are erect. He holds his tail either in its natural position or vertically, possibly even over his back. His tail is rigid and immobile. His gaze is directed toward whatever he's detected. His mouth is typically closed. He might growl or bark. The hair on his shoulders or back may or may not be raised.

Excited

When your dog is excited, he looks as intense as he does when he's alert, but he might also adopt a playful demeanor. His body is ready for action. He looks natural in size, but his weight might be centered over his rear legs as he prepares to move. His ears are up and his tail is held high, and it may or may not wag. He looks at the individual or object that's the source of his excitement. Excited dogs often hold their mouths open, and they might bark.



Aroused

When your dog is aroused, you might have a hard time distinguishing it from when he's alert or excited. The only time it's useful to know the difference is when the arousal pushes him closer to feeling frightened or aggressive. An aroused dog almost always has his hackles up. However, just about everything else about his body language depends on whether he's feeling scared, uncertain or angry. His body may look normal-sized or larger, his ears might be flattened to the side or held forward, and his tail might be held low, in a normal position or high. He may or may not be looking directly at an individual or object. Sometimes there's nothing in the environment that's obvious to us, but a dog can be aroused by a sound that we can't hear or an odor that we can't smell.



Playful

It's fairly easy to detect when your dog's feeling playful. His body movements are jerky and bouncy. He might bounce around in exaggerated twists, turns and leaps. He might dodge around you, paw at you and then take off running to invite a chase. Or he might just jump on you and start mouthing. Dogs enjoy a variety of play styles, including chase games (in which the dog is either the chaser or the chased), rough-and-tumble (wrestling or tackle) games, and games of "keep-away" with an object, like a toy or stick. Almost all play is interspersed with the characteristic "play bow" that's common across all dogs. When your dog play bows, he bounces into position with his forelegs on the ground and his hind legs extended so that his rear sticks up. This signal is extremely important because so much of dog play consists of aggressive behaviors and dominant postures. The play bow tells a dog's playmate, "Anything that comes after this is play, so please don't take it seriously." Some dogs also show a "play face," a happy facial expression characterized by a partially open mouth that almost looks as though the dog is smiling. A playful dog might also growl or make high-pitched barks.

Fearful, Scared

When your dog is scared, he does his best to look small. Often, his body looks hunched, with his tail held low or tucked between his rear legs and his ears flattened back on his skull. He might cower close to the ground. If escape is possible, he might lean so that his center of gravity is over his rear legs to permit a hasty retreat, or lean to the side so that he can recoil. He might look directly at the source of his fear or he might look away. The muscles of his body and face are tense and rigid. He might yawn in an exaggerated way.



Note the dog's hunched body, lowered head, flattened ears and tucked tail. The dog leans slightly and looks off to the side.



Here the dog licks her lips nervously.



Now the dog yawns in an exaggerated way to release tension, much as a person would.

Dominant

During interaction with a person or another dog, dogs sometimes convey a confident, assertive attitude that's often called "dominant." If your dog is feeling dominant, he stands tall, sometimes on his tiptoes, and tries to look large. He arches his neck. He appears tense, like a coiled spring. His weight is squarely on all four feet or he's leaning forward slightly. His ears are up and oriented forward. His tail is high and rigid, sometimes flagging or quivering at the end. His hair may or may not be standing up on his shoulders or along his back. He usually makes direct eye contact with the other individual. He might growl, but his mouth will typically be closed.

Submissive

If your dog is feeling submissive while he interacts with a person or another dog, he tries to convey the message that he's the underling, that he's not a threat and that aggression is unnecessary. During active submission, he makes his body look small by hunching over and getting low to the ground. He holds his tail low or tucked, sometimes rapidly wagging it back and forth. He flattens his ears or holds them off to the sides of his head. He keeps his neck low to the ground, but he turns his muzzle up toward the other individual. He might nuzzle, lick or flick his tongue. He averts his gaze so as not to look directly at the other individual. Some dogs, particularly puppies, urinate. (Please see our article, [Submissive Urination](#), for information about how to resolve this problem.)

Your dog might switch from active submission to a more passive position, in which he lies down and rolls over on his back to display his inguinal area (his genitalia). During passive submission, your dog might lie still, or he might paw at the other individual. He looks away. He might whine. Some dogs, particularly puppies, urinate in this position.



The dominant black and white dog places her head and neck over the submissive dog's neck.



The submissive black dog voluntarily drops to the ground.



The dominant dog stands over him, pushing down with her chin, while the submissive dog displays his inguinal region.

Fearfully Aggressive

If your dog is fearfully aggressive he won't look any different than when he's fearful, except that he might show his teeth and growl. Some fearful dogs never escalate to aggression, but others will if they feel there's no escape. A fearful dog isn't likely to bite a person or other animal unless all avenues for escape are blocked and he feels trapped. When this happens, he continues to cower but, at the same time, shows his teeth and might growl or snarl. If he snaps or bites, it's usually lightening quick, and then he retreats as far away from the threat as possible. Some dogs wait until the person or animal who frightens them begins to retreat, and then they dart out to nip them from behind.



First, the frightened dog cowers, with ears flattened and tail tucked while showing her teeth and staring directly at the dog who's come too close.



Then she lunges at the dog with an open mouth. She gives a high-pitched bark—almost a scream.



When faced with an assault from a fearfully aggressive dog, most dogs recoil like the red dog is doing.



Finally, as the red dog backs off, the frightened dog retreats.

Offensively Aggressive



If your dog feels anger and confidence at the same time, you might see offensively aggressive body language. He's on the attack, and he may or may not stop if the person or animal he's focused on stays away or retreats. He does his best to look large and intimidating by holding his head high, his ears up and forward, and his tail raised and rigid. He might flag his tail. His hackles might be up. He positions himself over his forelegs so that he's ready to lunge or charge forward. He stares directly at the person or animal. He shows his teeth by wrinkling his muzzle and retracting his lips vertically to display his front teeth. He growls, snarls or barks in a low, threatening tone.

Defensively Aggressive

Most dogs give plenty of warning before reacting aggressively, but you need to know what to look for to recognize the signs. If your dog is feeling defensively aggressive, he'd rather not get into an altercation if he doesn't have to. He'd rather the person or animal he's afraid of just back off and leave him alone. But at the same time, he's ready to stand up for himself. Because he's feeling both fear and anger, he often adopts a combination of fearful and offensive postures. Typically, he looks large, his ears are up and forward, and his tail is held high and rigid. He centers his weight squarely on all fours, over his forelegs or over his rear legs, depending on the situation. Usually it depends on how close he is to the threat and whether his intention is to stand his ground, charge forward or retreat. Typically, he draws his lips back to display his teeth, and he may or may not wrinkle his muzzle. Usually he growls, snarls or barks, although his bark might be high-pitched. Often, his hackles are up. People sometimes refer to a defensively aggressive dog as adopting "a good offense as the best defense." Dogs like this are sometimes bluffing in that they really would not fight if push came to shove—they would likely retreat. But other dogs will make the first strike, depending on the balance of confidence and fear they're feeling.

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