

Canine Body Language

Because dogs have very limited verbal communication abilities, they do most of their communicating *non-verbally*, or through body language. Your dog is communicating to you or other dogs and people *all the time*. You just need the Dog-to-English Translation Dictionary. Humans have developed millions of words to communicate with. Since dogs principally rely on use of their body parts for their communication, the context, combination and nuance of how they use their body parts all play a role in the message they are sending.

For the sake of brevity, we will generalize some of this information. We encourage you to dive deeper into the study of canine body language. Several great resources we refer to regularly and recommend to you are:

- iSpeakDog.org website devoted entirely to interpreting dog body language
- “What Your Dog is Desperately Trying to Tell You” video on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bstvG_SUzMo&feature=youtu.be
- “Zoom Room Guide to Dog Body Language” video on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00_9JPltXHI
- “On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals” by Turid Rugaas, Dogwise Publishing
- “Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide” by Brenda Aloff, Dogwise Publishing
- “For the Love of a Dog” by Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, Ballantine Books

The body language of dogs is both reflexive and deliberate. The reflexive signals outwardly express the dog’s emotional state. The deliberate signals are those the dog instinctively uses to express their intentions to others around them—both human and canine. Both are important in reading your dog and in the rehabilitation of their reactive behavior. Generally, people can look at a dog, without analyzing the specific position of ears, tails, eyes, etc., and interpret with fair accuracy the dog’s general state of mind. But some dogs, because of physical attributes or breed behavioral characteristics, are harder to read—for both dogs and people. So it is important to know what to look for to get the most accurate read on a dog.

The following charts are simplifications of the reflexive and deliberate body language of dogs.

Canine Body Language: Reflexive Signals

The following body signals can help you interpret the emotional state of a dog. They are used in various combinations and some may flash for only a few seconds. And a dog may move from one state to another quickly, depending on what they perceive about a situation. For example, a dog can go from Curious to Anxious very quickly, resulting in an entire change in the body language. It's important to note, however, that the appearance of the dog could impact the ability to interpret certain signals: coloration, ear and tail crops, muzzle length, etc.

Emotional State	Face	Ears	Body	Tail	Legs
Relaxed & Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No tension - Lips loose - Sometimes open mouth - Eyes blinking & soft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hanging at a natural, relaxed position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No tension, relaxed back - Laying over on hip (if laying down) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relaxed, likely at half mast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not braced
Confident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No tension - Closed mouth - Relaxed eyes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Up at attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forward orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Up, often high 	
Curious & Expectant (not predatory)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Head tilts to side or down toward object - Eyes and nose oriented same direction - Lips loose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alert, but not tense - Asymmetrical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forward orientation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poised to move; not braced
Shy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Looks away - Eyebrows can be pulled together - Tension under ridges of eyes - Tongue flick 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tipped back slightly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Oriented away from object 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lowered 	
Caution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mouth closed - Eyes shaded (not fully round) - Possibly eyes oriented toward object while nose oriented away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawn to the side and/or back 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orientation forward and backwards (conflict) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lowered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Braced front legs - Standing still

Canine Body Language: Reflexive Signals

Emotional State	Face	Ears	Body	Tail	Legs
Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tension under ridges of eyes - Dilated pupils - Lips drawn back; tension ridges around lips - Tongue hanging way out - Spatulate tongue and/or tongue flicks - Yawning - Panting - Hypersalivation - Looks away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawn to the side and back; possibly flattened - Held in tension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rounded topline of back - Sudden, visible dander - Excessive and sudden hair loss - Possible head down sniffing - Shake-off, when coming off stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Braced
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Head lowered - Looks away - Squinting eyes or whale eyes (whites visible all around eye) - Eyes oriented toward concern while nose oriented away - Lips drawn way back - Tongue flicks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawn to the side and back; flattened 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rounded topline of back - Leaning into pressure (wall, handler) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tucked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paw lift - Braced front legs
Anxiety & Avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Head lowered - Looks away or "hides" by pressing face/head into handler - Squinting eyes; avoidance of eye contact - Tight lips drawn backward - Tongue flicks - Yawning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawn back 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rounded topline of back - Leaning into pressure - Oriented away from object 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lowered or tucked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crouching; rounded hindquarters - Braced front legs - Paw lift

Canine Body Language: Deliberate Signals

A dog may use any of these body language signals in combination to communicate their intent to other dogs or people. Signals used may be impacted by their emotional state as well. For example, if the dog is relaxed and is just communicating “I’m no threat” to another dog, he may use eye blinks and look away with a relaxed body posture. However, if the dog is feeling some stress and wants to calm himself while communicating “I’m no threat,” he may use tongue flicks, yawning, scratching and sniffing in addition to look away. It’s all contextual.

Signal Purpose	Face	Ears	Body	Tail	Legs
Calming & Negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Blinks eyes - Looks away - Long lips - Relaxed mouth; often open - Tongue flicks; lip licks - Head lowered sniffing - Yawning - “Puppy licking” (Submissive) to other dogs or people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Half mast - Drawn slightly back 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No tension (Negotiation) - Curve away - Shake off - Laying down - Splitting (walking between two dogs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relaxed - Sweeping movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paw lift - Scratching body
Neutral & Friendly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mouth open; relaxed - No tension - Soft eyes with direct eye contact - Squinting eyes - Head neutral to lowered position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relaxing near head or half-mast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Butt sniffing (can be pushy) - Inguinal sniffing - Curving or sideways approach - Neutral orientation - Greeting stretch (either front legs stretch or back legs stretch) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gently waving at half mast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relaxed stance - Paw lifts
Play Can resemble Predation and Aggression with important differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Squinty eyes, looking away - Long lips, open mouth - Play biting (nibbling, inhibited bites, often on scruff or neck) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Floppy or half-mast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initiate play with vulnerable body posture - No tension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Up, relaxed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Play bow—rear up, elbows touching ground, lowered tail, eyes follow nose orientation, ears alert, mouth open

Canine Body Language: Deliberate Signals

Signal Purpose	Face	Ears	Body	Tail	Legs
Offensive Aggression (Warning Signs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wide open, staring eyes - Eyes/ears/nose all oriented in same direction - Short lips: C-shape if mouth is open; pucker if mouth closed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forward/alert 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forward orientation - Stillness - Straight on toward target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Held high, possibly over back 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Braced - Paw lift (during targeting)
Defensive Aggression (Warning Signs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wide open, staring eyes - Eyes/ears/nose all oriented in same direction - Pupils dilated - Tight, closed mouth in warning - Teeth bared in threat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ears back 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Backward orientation - Head lowered in warning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Down, tucked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Braced - Paw lift (anxious)
Predation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scan & Scent - Alert - Target 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scanning eyes (Scan) - Staring eyes (Target) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forward (Alert) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Head lowered (Scan) - Raised head (Alert & Target) - Stillness (Alert) - Tension - Orientation forward toward prey (Alert & Target) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Down, if stalking - Level with back or up (Target) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paw lift (Alert) - Prey bow—lowered front, body orientation back but set to lunge forward, head on orientation, mouth closed, tail up (Target)