

Dog: Body Language



Nonverbal communication fascinates most of us animal lovers, and who can blame us for wanting to understand our furry friends? But reading the body language of another species is quite a challenge. Most of us try to translate facial expressions, body postures, tail positions, and other details into signals that make sense in human terms—a strategy that often fails.

Here's an overview that can help you learn to read your dog's signals. Look for the clues provided by the look in her eyes, the tone of her voice, the position of her ears and body, and the motion of her tail.

And remember to take into account your dog's entire body and the situation she's in—context is everything.

Vocalization

Bark	Territorial call, attention-seeking, anxiety, social needs, or aggression
Whine	Care soliciting, puppies, pain, or frustration
Howl	To Some breeds, this may be the vocal equivalent of marking
Growl	Aggression or distance-increasing signal

Facial Expression

Eyes	Pupils dilated = Nervous, playful, aroused
Ears*	Forward = Alert, interested, happy, relaxed Flat, backward, sideways = Fearful, frightened, irritable Swiveling = Attentive, listening to every little sound, alert, vigilant
Mouth	Closed = Relaxed Open with relaxed lips = Happy, excited Open tight and showing teeth = Fearful, aggressive Lip curl or lifting, vertical or horizontal = Defensive aggression Submissive grin = Appeasement behavior

*Depends on the breed's natural ear position

Body Language (posture)

Happy and content dog = Approaching with relaxed body, sitting or lying down, eyes soft, pupils moderately dilated, tail softly wagging or straight, ears forward.

Playful dog = Bouncy body movements, might be bowing front body and sticking hind end up (called playbow).

Nervous, insecure, fearful dog = Ears sideways or back, pupils dilated, tail low or tucked between legs, low body posture, tense, wants to hide, turns away, does not accept treats, lip licking, yawning, hyper vigilant, moving slowly, stalling, panting, or pacing.

Frightened, startled dog = Stiff or lowered body posture, ears back and flat against head, fur standing straight on back, tail erect or low, hyper vigilant, may growl, bark, or snarl.

Fearful, aggressive dog = Stands stiff or crouches, leaning body position, ears flattened, tail between legs or up, pupils dilated, panting, lip licking, yawning, may loudly growl, bark, or snarl.

Aggressive dog on the offensive = Ears forward, forward-leaning body position, tail hair bristling or fur standing straight on back, hard stare or growl, bark and snarl or snap.