DECODING

DOG BODY LANGUAGE

A Visual Reference Guide

Your dog speaks constantly — most people just don't know how to listen. This guide teaches you to read stress signals, calming cues, and emotional states so you can respond, not react.

Why Body Language Matters

Dogs communicate with their entire body — ears, eyes, mouth, tail, posture, and movement all working together. Unlike humans, they don't separate emotion from physical expression. Every wag, lip lick, and shift of weight is a sentence.

The problem: most people read only the obvious signals (tail wag = happy, growl = angry) and miss the dozens of subtle cues a dog gives before escalating. Learning to read the quiet signals lets you intervene early, build trust, and prevent most behavior problems before they start.

This guide breaks dog communication into four zones you can scan in seconds: the face, the body, the tail, and the whole-dog picture. Use it as a reference — print it, keep it on your phone, share it with anyone who interacts with your dog.

Three Rules Before You Start

- Read the whole dog, not one part. A wagging tail on a stiff body is not a happy dog. Context is everything.
- Know your dog's baseline. Signals only mean something relative to how your dog normally looks when relaxed.
- Trust the early signals. By the time a dog growls or snaps, you've missed a dozen quieter warnings.

The Face

The face shows emotion fastest. Scan eyes, ears, and mouth together.

Eyes

Soft, almond-shaped	Relaxed. Pupils normal, gaze easy and unfocused.
Hard stare	Tension or threat. Fixed, unblinking, aimed at a target. Back off.
Whale eye	Whites of the eyes showing as the dog turns its head away but keeps watching. Classic stress signal — the dog feels trapped.
Squinting / soft blinks	Friendly, appeasing. Often paired with a loose body.
Dilated pupils	High arousal — fear, excitement, or stress. Read alongside body posture.

Ears

Neutral position	Relaxed, held in the dog's natural resting position (varies by breed).
Forward and stiff	Alert, focused, possibly aroused. Watch what they're focused on.
Pinned flat back	Fear, appeasement, or submission. Often paired with a lowered body.
Slightly back and soft	Friendly greeting posture. Not the same as pinned.

Mouth

Relaxed, slightly open	Content. Often called a 'dog smile' — loose jaw, maybe a lolling tongue.
Closed tight, tense	Stress or focus. A sudden mouth-close is an early warning.
Lip lick (no food present)	Appeasement or stress signal. Very common and very overlooked.
Yawning (not tired)	Stress-displacement behavior. The dog is trying to self-soothe.
Lifted lip / visible front teeth	Warning. Respect it — this is a gift, not aggression.
Full teeth display with wrinkled muzzle	Serious threat. Create distance immediately.

The Body

Posture tells you how the dog is distributing weight — and weight distribution reveals intent. Forward = engaged or offensive. Backward = fearful or defensive. Loose = relaxed.

Posture

Loose, wiggly, curved spine	Happy and relaxed. The whole dog moves as one soft shape.
Weight shifted forward, stiff	Alert, possibly offensive. The dog is committing toward something.
Weight shifted back, low	Fear or avoidance. The dog wants distance.
Frozen / sudden stillness	Critical warning signal. A dog that stops moving is often about to act. Stop what you're doing.
Play bow (front down, rear up)	Invitation to play. Everything that happens after this is play — even if it looks rough.
Rolled onto back, loose	Relaxed, trusting, or asking for belly rubs.
Rolled onto back, stiff, tail tucked	NOT an invitation. This is appeasement — the dog is overwhelmed.

Hackles (Piloerection)

Raised hair along the shoulders or back doesn't automatically mean aggression — it means arousal. The dog is having a big feeling. That feeling could be fear, excitement, uncertainty, or conflict. Read the rest of the body to know which.

The Tail

The tail is the most misread part of the dog. A wag is not a smile — it's a volume knob for whatever the dog is already feeling. Read height, speed, and stiffness together.

Height

Neutral (breed-dependent)	Calm baseline. Know where your dog's tail sits when relaxed.
High and stiff	Confidence, alertness, or threat. The higher and stiffer, the more intense.
Low but loose	Relaxed or mildly uncertain.
Tucked between legs	Fear, pain, or extreme appeasement.

Motion

Wide, loose, whole-body wag	Genuinely happy. The hips wag too.
Fast, tight, high wag	Arousal — not necessarily friendly. Approach with caution.
Slow wag, low tail	Uncertain. The dog is assessing.
Helicopter wag (full circles)	Extreme joy, usually reserved for favorite people.

Research note: dogs wag more to the right when they see something they like, and more to the left when they see something that worries them. Most people never notice — but your dog does.

Calming Signals

Norwegian trainer Turid Rugaas catalogued these behaviors dogs use to de-escalate tension — with other dogs, with humans, and with themselves. When you see them, the dog is saying 'I come in peace' or 'please give me space.' They are almost always missed.

- Turning the head away
- Turning the whole body sideways
- Lip licking (no food present)
- Yawning
- Sniffing the ground suddenly for no reason
- Slow, deliberate movements
- Sitting or lying down during tension
- Shaking off (as if wet, when dry) — a 'reset' after stress

If your dog shows these around a person, another dog, or a situation — listen. Create space. The dog is asking politely, and polite requests that get ignored become louder requests.

Putting It Together: Emotional States

Relaxed and Happy

Soft eyes, open mouth, loose body, neutral or wagging tail, weight evenly distributed. The dog moves in curves, not lines.

Alert / Interested

Ears forward, eyes focused, mouth often closed, weight shifted slightly forward, tail higher than neutral. Not a problem — but watch what they're tracking.

Stressed / Anxious

Lip licks, yawns, whale eye, pinned ears, low tail, shifting weight, panting when not hot, pacing. The dog is overwhelmed and needs you to reduce whatever is causing it.

Fearful

Low body, tucked tail, ears flat, weight shifted back, avoiding eye contact, possibly trembling. A fearful dog will try to escape first — if they can't, they may bite. Always give an escape route.

Overstimulated / Aroused

High tail (often stiff-wagging), hard stare, closed mouth, weight forward, sometimes raised hackles. This dog is one step from either play or trouble — intervene early with a calm redirect.

Warning / Threat

Freeze, hard stare, lifted lip, low growl, stiff posture. This dog is telling you clearly: back off. Thank them by listening. Punishing a growl teaches a dog to skip the warning next time.

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Your dog constantly communicates, but most people aren't aware of how to listen to him. This guide will enable you to identify stress signals, calming signals, and emotional states so that you can respond rather than just react.

Why Body Language Matters

To communicate, dogs use their entire body. Their ears, eyes, mouth, tail, posture and manner of movement all function in unison. Unlike humans, they do not separate emotion from physical expression and each wag of the tail, lick of the lips and shift in weight has a meaning.
The problem is that most people only take note of the obvious signals (for example, wagging the tail means the dog is happy and growling means it is angry) and fail to notice the many subtle cues a dog gives before the situation becomes serious. If you learn to interpret these quiet signals, you will be able to take action early, gain the dog's trust, and stop the majority of behavioural problems before they begin.
You can quickly check four areas of dog communication as outlined in this guide: the face, the body, the tail, and the overall situation of the dog. Use it as a reference and print it out or keep it on your phone, and share it with anyone who spends time with your dog.

Three Rules Before You Start

- You must consider the dog as a whole, not just individual features; a tail that wags on a rigid body does not indicate that the dog is happy. The context is everything.
- You should know what your dog is like when he or she is relaxed because behavioural signals only have meaning in relation to the way a dog normally looks when it is at rest.
- Believe the early signs; by the time the dog growls or snaps, you'll have overlooked a dozen softer warnings.

The Face

Emotions are most clearly shown in the face; therefore look at the eyes, the ears, and the mouth all at once.

Eyes

Soft, almond-shaped	Relaxed. Pupils normal, gaze easy and unfocused.
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The Body

The way a dog holds itself shows how it is spreading its weight, and this in turn indicates its intentions. If it stands with its weight forward, this means it is engaged or may be intending to attack. If the dog has its weight shifted backwards, this shows that it is afraid or defensive. A loose posture shows that the dog is relaxed.

Posture

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Be on the lookout for a Warning / Threat

If the dog freezes, gives a hard stare, lifts its lip, growls low, or stiffens its posture. This dog is clearly telling you to back off. Thank them by listening. Punishing a growl teaches a dog to skip the warning next time.

The Best Way to Respond

- If you see a stress signal, ease off. Step back, drop your voice, soften your body. Give the dog room to breathe.
- See a calming signal? Mirror it back. Turn your body sideways. Blink slow. Look away for a second. That's how you tell a dog you're not a threat.
- If you see a warning? Listen to it. A growl or a stiff body is information, not defiance. Don't correct the dog for telling you the truth. Fix whatever caused it.
- If you should see a freeze, stop moving. Don’t do any reaching, any leaning in, or eye contact. Let the dog decide when the tension is over.
- See a loose, happy dog? Take it in. That's your baseline. That's what you're working to get back to every time things get tense.

A Final Note

Your dog is talking to you all day. Once you start seeing the signals, you can't unsee them — and your relationship changes. You stop reacting to behavior and start responding to feelings. That is the whole game.
Keep this guide somewhere you can easily retrieve it. Revisit it after a hard interaction and ask: what did I miss? The answer is almost always there, in a lip lick or a head turn you didn't catch the first time.

Listen with your eyes.