

READING DOG BODY LANGUAGE

A practical guide to understanding what dogs are communicating before they need to bark, growl, flee, or bite.

THE BIG IDEA

Dogs communicate constantly through posture, movement, facial expression, muscle tension, distance, and behaviour. A single signal rarely tells the whole story.

LOOK AT THE WHOLE DOG

Read signals in combination and in context. Compare what you see with that individual dog's normal behaviour, and watch how the body changes as the situation changes.

Start With the Whole Picture

BODY	Loose, wiggly, curved movement usually suggests greater comfort. Stiffness, freezing, weight shifts, crouching, leaning away, or becoming very still deserve attention.
FACE	Watch the eyes, brow, mouth, lips, tongue, and jaw. A closed mouth, hard stare, whale eye, lip licking, yawning, or facial tension may indicate increasing stress.
EARS	Ear position matters, but breed and anatomy change what 'neutral' looks like. Focus on changes from that dog's baseline rather than one fixed ear position.
TAIL	A wagging tail does not automatically mean a friendly dog. Consider height, speed, stiffness, breadth of wag, and what the rest of the body is doing.

Remember: body language is information, not disobedience. When a dog communicates discomfort, the safest response is usually to reduce pressure, increase distance, and reassess what the dog needs.

The Body Language Spectrum



Dogs can move back and forth along this spectrum quickly. The goal is to notice early changes before the dog reaches a point where stronger communication is necessary.

1 COMFORTABLE / RELAXED

Soft eyes and relaxed facial muscles • Loose, natural body posture • Open or softly closed mouth • Easy, fluid movement • Neutral ears and tail for that individual dog • Able to sniff, disengage, explore, or respond normally

2 UNCERTAIN / CONFLICTED

Looking away or turning the head/body away • Lip licking, yawning, sudden sniffing, blinking • Slower movement or hesitation • Lowered posture or weight shifted back • Seeking distance, checking in, or becoming unusually still • May approach and retreat rather than fully engage

3 STRESSED / NEEDS SPACE

Panting when not hot or active • Pacing, trembling, repeated displacement behaviours • Whale eye or widened eyes • Tail tucked or body crouched • Attempting to hide, escape, climb away, or create distance • Difficulty taking food or responding to familiar cues

4 HIGH CONCERN / DEFENSIVE OR OFFENSIVE DISPLAY

Body becomes very stiff or suddenly freezes • Hard stare or intense visual fixation • Growling, snarling, lip lifting, barking, lunging, snapping • Weight may shift forward or backward depending on motivation • Raised hackles may occur, but piloerection means arousal - not automatically aggression • At this point, prioritize distance and safety rather than obedience

Common Signals: What They May Mean



These signals are clues, not guarantees. Always interpret them together with the environment, recent events, the dog's history, and the rest of the body.

Lip licking	May occur around food, but repeated quick tongue flicks can also appear with uncertainty, social pressure, or stress.
Yawning	Can reflect tiredness, but may also occur during tension, frustration, conflict, or an attempt to regulate arousal.
Whale eye	The whites of the eyes become visible as the dog keeps the head relatively still while looking sideways. Often seen when the dog is uncomfortable with proximity or handling.
Turning away	A head turn, body turn, or moving away can be a polite attempt to avoid conflict and create space.
Freezing	A sudden pause with muscle tension is important. Do not assume stillness means the dog has accepted what is happening.
Shaking off	A full-body shake when the dog is not wet can occur after a stressful or exciting interaction and may mark a transition in arousal.
Panting	Normal with heat or exercise. Out of context, rapid panting can accompany stress, pain, fear, or high arousal.
Raised hackles	Piloerection reflects autonomic arousal. It can occur with excitement, uncertainty, fear, or conflict and should not be labelled as aggression by itself.
Tail wagging	Look at the entire body. A loose sweeping wag with a relaxed body differs greatly from a high, tight, fast wag paired with stiffness.
Growling	A valuable warning signal. Punishing the growl can suppress communication without changing the dog's underlying discomfort.

Do not wait for a growl. Earlier signals such as avoidance, tension, freezing, repeated lip licking, or attempts to leave may already be telling you that the dog is struggling.

What To Do When a Dog Looks Uncomfortable

1	STOP ADDING PRESSURE Pause petting, handling, approaching, training, or whatever interaction appears to be contributing to the dog's discomfort.
2	CREATE SPACE Increase distance from the trigger. Avoid cornering, looming over, reaching toward, hugging, or restraining unless safety or necessary care requires it.
3	LET THE DOG DISENGAGE Whenever safely possible, allow the dog to move away. Choice can reduce conflict and provide valuable information about what the dog is comfortable with.
4	CHANGE THE PLAN Lower the difficulty, shorten the session, modify the environment, use management, or return to the skill later under easier conditions.
5	GET QUALIFIED HELP For repeated fear, aggression, sudden behaviour change, handling sensitivity, or bite risk, involve an appropriate veterinary professional and a qualified behaviour professional.

A Simple Observation Exercise

Watch a dog for 2-5 minutes without interacting. Write down only what you can actually see - not what you think the dog feels. Then consider the context.

What do I see?	What changed just before it?	What happened next?
Body posture / movement	Person, dog, sound, object, touch, distance	Approached, avoided, relaxed, froze, barked, recovered
Eyes / face / mouth	Environment or activity changed	Could the dog disengage or recover?
Ears / tail	Was pressure added or removed?	What reduced or increased tension?

KEY TAKEAWAY

Good observation is proactive. The earlier you notice a dog's subtle communication, the more opportunity you have to respond before the dog needs to escalate.

Educational note: Body language should not be used to diagnose medical or behavioural conditions. Sudden or significant behaviour changes can have medical causes and should be discussed with a veterinarian.

