

## Understanding Dog Body Language

Understanding dog body language is challenging and it takes practice, knowledge, patience, and a good eye. These handouts are designed to help give you a general overview of how our dogs communicate with other dogs and with us every day. Remember, dogs speak a different language than we do, so in order to create a strong dog-human bond, we need to be receptive to what the dog is trying to say.

We are going to learn how to read a few different parts of the dog's body in this handout. Note: you cannot just look at one part of the dog's body and expect to completely understand your dog. Dogs have complex thoughts and emotions; but, similarly to humans, we can gain quite a bit of insight by observing their body language. Make sure to observe the entire dog and the environment before making a judgement on what your dog may be feeling.

## Read the BEETS

The BEETS acronym is an easier way to break down the process of reading dog body language.

**B=Body E=Expression E=Ears T=Tail S=Stress signals**

### B=Body

#### Tension

Is the dog's body stiff or loose? Are they wiggly or do they look frozen solid? The tension throughout the dog's body can be a clear sign of their mental state at that moment.

Generally,

a tense body = a tense dog

a loose body = a relaxed dog

Body tension can be present when the dog is feeling a variety of different emotions (stress, fear, excitement, arousal).

Pay attention! A tense dog is more likely to react to a stimulus. If dogs are tense during a meet and greet, they may scuffle. If a dog is tense when a stranger tries to pet it, it may nip. Help tense dogs relax their body by adding distance and walking away from the stimulus, or by redirecting the dog.

Usually, loose body language is good! It shows that the dog is more relaxed and has accepted the stimuli in the environment. If a loose dog comes close, it is often friendly.



## Position

Is the dog standing up really tall or hunched down low to the ground? Are they jumping up or are they cowering under something? Look at the levels of the dog's head, shoulders, and hips. Are they neutral or is one area higher/lower than the others?

Generally,

the higher the dog = the higher the arousal/excitement

neutral posture = more relaxed

the lower the dog = the lower the confidence and the higher the fear/anxiety

Dogs offer so many different positions throughout the day that this can be a hard area to read without learning how to speak dog. A dog standing really tall is often trying to look bigger. They may be responding to an oncoming threat or they may be hyper focused on a distraction. Hackles may even accompany this position to add another inch or so!

If a dog is tucked down low, cowering, or slinking along, they are showing signs of fear and/or submission. This body position is trying to communicate that the dog is no threat at all and in fact is feeling rather cowardice. Do not try to pet this dog unless you know the dog well. This position may be a sign that the dog will act defensively to protect itself.

You may encounter other positions as well that have specific meanings -

-a play bow, where the elbows are touching the ground and the but is up in the air, shows that the dog is trying to incite play out of another dog, animal, or human.

-a flopped down position, where the dog's head is on the ground and all four legs are stretched out in the same direction, shows a very relaxed or tired dog.

-an upside down dog may be demanding friendly belly rubs or they may be showing the ultimate submissive behavior.

Looking at other body parts and the level of tension will help you determine what your dog is feeling.

## Orientation

Which direction is the dog facing? Is their head facing a different direction than their shoulders/chest? Or are they oriented with nose-eyes-spine-tail in a line? Dogs show us the intensity of their focus with their body orientation.

Generally,

the straighter aligned the body - the higher the intensity of the focus (aka fixated)

the less aligned the body - the lower the intensity of the focus



These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog, that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.



Typically, I don't appreciate it when a stranger walks up to me, looks directly into my face and squares up their shoulders to mine. This behavior communicates intimidation and confrontation. Dogs are the same! When two dogs walk straight towards each other with their bodies aligned, they are showing intimidation and confrontation towards the other dog. But, wait! This is what happens when we walk our dogs down the sidewalks all the time. Exactly! Leash aggression is a very common problem behavior, which can usually be prevented by turning the dog a different direction or crossing the street to avoid that body alignment.

Similarly, if you see a dog avoiding that alignment, facing the other direction, and/or turning away from a distraction, they are typically trying to show that they are no threat and in fact, are intimidated by the distraction. Letting a worried dog approach and sniff and encouraging an intimidating dog to face another direction and disengage are great ways to diffuse a stressful situation.

## **E=Expression**

### **Expressive Eyes**

Now, look lovingly into your dogs eyes ... ok, maybe just look for a moment to analyze the hardness/softness and the direction of their gaze. Also, note the tension (or lack of tension) in the facial muscles around the eye/eyebrows. Yes, dogs often furrow their brow when they are concerned, similar to humans.

Generally,

a hard eye, fixed gaze, tense facial muscles = a tense dog

a soft eye, interrupted gaze, relaxed facial muscles = a relaxed dog

If the dog is staring so intensely that you can imagine laser beams shooting out towards the target -that's a hard eye! This is present when the dog is fixated on a distraction. If facial muscles are tight and dog doesn't blink, be careful: dog may be ready to spring at any moment. Try getting the dog to look away and avoid letting the dog stare for over 2 seconds.

A soft eye is more typical during everyday activities. This is a more neutral, relaxed eye and it shows that the dog is not necessarily focused on any one particular thing.

### **Expressive Muzzle**

There many muscles around the dog's muzzle area that we can watch. Similarly to humans, dogs tense and flex different muscles around their mouth to display different emotions. Yes, dogs can smile when they are happy! For an over simplified analysis, look at how much tension the dog has in their lips.



Generally,

tense lips = tense dog

relaxed lips = relaxed dog

exposed teeth = uncomfortable dog

tightly closed mouth (often pursed lips) = ready to bite

mild panting (open mouth) = relaxed dog

### Watch for tension

Tense eyes and eyebrow muscles can often show worry or concern. Tense muzzle muscles often occur when dog is thinking about using teeth. In general, physical tension is a sign of emotional tension. Pay attention to what your dog may be feeling tense about so you can help your dog relax in that scenario.

Like me, my dog is much happier when she's relaxed. Look for relaxed muscles throughout the face. Often, relaxed dogs will have an open mouth and loose floppy lips (this varies with breed). A closed mouth tends to show more tension while an open mouth often shows a more neutral state. If you ever see a dog's teeth, be careful! Showing teeth is a warning sign that we (and other dogs) need to listen to - not punish! Even during play, teeth are less visible if the dog is comfortable and more visible when the dog is tense.

Is the dog sniffing? If they are using their nose, they are using a forward thinking (instead of reactive) part of the brain. This is good! I always encourage dogs to smell and investigate frequently to help them relax and disassociate from feeling stressed.

## **E=Ears**

### Tension & Orientation

It may be challenging to read your dog's ears since every breed holds their ears a little differently. In general, look for tension and the orientation of the ear. Whether floppy or pricked, dogs will move their ears depending on their emotional state or intensity of interest in a stimulus.

Generally,

tense, forward ears = dog is alert and focused on stimulus

loose ears, facing different directions = dog is relaxed or uninterested

tense, backward facing or clamped back ears = dog is worried or fearful

tense ears, facing different directions = dog is stressed by environment



Tension in the ears demonstrates a heightened emotional response. Forward, tense ears are often seen on dogs that are fixated on a distraction, like watching a squirrel. Backward, tense ears are often present on dogs that are nervous about a stimulus being too close. You also may see the backward tense ears on a fear aggressive dog, so proceed with caution. Loose ears will often casually shift different directions or hang without much motion. This is a more typical state for most dogs. Alternatively, if you notice tense ears that are constantly flicking different directions, it may indicate stress and a general feeling of being overwhelmed in an environment.

## **T=Tail**

### Position

The dog's tail represents a little emotional meter, ranging from really high, above the dog's back, to super low, tucked underneath the dog's body. For those dogs that do not have tails -- that can be challenging! Some dogs (especially puppies) will get confused when they meet a dog without a tail because they are much harder to read than the average, tailed, dog.

Generally,

a high, over the back, tail = high state of arousal

a low set, in line with the spine, tail = neutral, relaxed dog (this level depends on breed)

a low, tucked between the legs, tail = fearful or submissive state

The higher the tail the higher the confidence -- or the appearance of confidence. Often, a dog will raise his tail up high when he is fixated on a distraction or trying to appear large and intimidating to an unwelcomed person or animal. I refer to this as a "Scorpion Tail" because it seems as if that hook at the top is poised and pointing directly towards the distraction.

As the tail lowers, so does the emotional intensity of the dog. A lower tail is more common when the dog is greeting a dog or person he knows vs someone he feels is threatening. Also, when dogs are relaxed, their tail will rest at a lower, more neutral position.

The tucked tail is a sign of extreme stress or submission. Either way, I tend to avoid touching a dog with a tucked tail. They are either terrified of me and would appreciate it if I didn't make contact, or they are trying so hard to be submissive that petting them would likely encourage flopping over or urination. I like to save my attention for the neutral tailed dogs.

### Motion

A wagging tail is a sign of a happy dog, right? Well, not always. The tail motion actually says a lot about what is on a dog's mind. Though every dog moves their tail a little differently, most dogs have separate wags for separate occasions.

Generally,

a very fast wag = tense dog

a moderately fast wag = happy, excited dog

a slow, loose wag = happy, relaxed dog

These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog, that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.



a still, low tail = neutral dog

a still, high tail = tense dog

a still, tucked tail = fearful dog

There have been many studies done on tail wags. Scientists have found that a dog that wags its tail more on one side or the other is actually trying to communicate different emotions! However, the quicker translation is that the speed of the wag conveys the level of tension in the dog. The super fast “Rattlesnake” wag can often show that a dog is very tense and ready to launch. The moderately fast wag is typically the excited greeting tail, whereas the slow wag shows that the dog is in a calm, but happy state. These two wags are important to pay attention to during your training sessions so you can see how high on the point scale your dog may be.

A stiff, high tail shows an offensive dog and a stiff, tucked tail shows a defensive dog. Both of these tails can lead to aggressive behavior so be very aware when the tail also shows this level of tension.

My dog wags her tail in low circles upon seeing me and I know a dog who actually broke her tail because of how intensely she wagged it when her parents came home! Pay attention to your dog’s tail throughout the day and in different environments so you have a better idea of the meaning behind the motion.

## S = Stress Signals

Dogs have many subtle (or not so subtle) ways of communicating their discomfort. I am referring to those forms of communication as “stress signals”, but understand that dogs experience low levels of stress often throughout the day. Just because your dog offers a stress signal, does not mean they have an anxiety disorder or extreme phobia, it just shows that they are trying to communicate. Removing stressors or giving a dog an opportunity to relax will often help reduce these signals.

Because our dogs communicate primarily through body language, it is important to use context to help identify what these behaviors mean. For example, your dog may yawn to show stress; they also may yawn when they wake up in the morning. Assuming your dog is stressed when they wake up, may not be the most accurate use of context. Looking for abnormal behaviors, repeated behaviors, or linked behaviors, may help you identify a stressful state.

### Possible Stress Signals

<b>Yawning</b> -out of context or repeatedly	<b>Excessive Shedding</b> - out of context, happens suddenly
<b>Panting</b> -out of context, sometimes very rapid	<b>Whining/Vocal</b> - whines and barks can mean a variety of things
<b>Lip Licking/Flicking Tongue</b> - quick, short licks, unlike licking after eating	<b>Tense/Stiff Body</b> - usually paired with other signals
<b>Pinned Ears</b> - depending on breed, some dogs pin ears from excitement	<b>Dilated Pupils</b> - out of context



These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog, that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.



<p><b>Tucked Tail</b> - tail length varies</p> <p><b>Avoidance Behavior</b> - avoiding eye contact, turning or walking away, ignoring owner</p> <p><b>Displacement Behavior</b> - drinking or sniffing excessively at a random moment</p> <p><b>Shaking Off</b> - out of context or repeatedly</p> <p><b>Low Body Posture</b> - lower head or whole body lowered closer to the ground</p> <p><b>Weight Shifted to Back Legs</b> - leaning away from stimulus</p>	<p><b>Whale Eye</b> - can see whites around eyes from being opened wide</p> <p><b>Sweaty Paw Pads</b> - out of context</p> <p><b>Refusal to Eat</b> - specifically with high value treats the dog normally eats</p> <p><b>Restlessness/Pacing</b> - dog's energy varies</p> <p><b>Tightly Closed Mouth</b> - lips become very stiff and tight, use caution if dog was panting first</p>
--	---

The more you watch your dog, the more you will notice when their body language changes. Sudden changes in body language often signify a change in emotion, especially if it is paired with a change in environment. See the following pictures for a few examples.

Remember, all dogs are different. Breed, age, shape, personality, and history can all affect their body language. See the pictures below to see if you can read the BEETS!



This dog has ears pinned back, weight on back legs, and tail lowered. Most likely has dilated pupils with wide eyes and a tense mouth as well. (I assume: does not like being handled by child in that way, may bite)



This pup is avoiding eye contact, has ears pinned and a closed mouth. (I assume: nervous about environment)



The Doberman has lower posture with pinned ears and is trying to avoid eye contact with the Shepherds. (I assume: intimidated by other dogs and looking for escape or break)



These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog, that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.





This dog is upside down, loose open muzzle, untucked tail, relaxed ears.  
(I assume: relaxed, happy, soliciting belly rubs)



This dog is in a play bow, with hard eye, open but tight mouth, high tense tail.  
(I assume: playing ball - showing play behavior plus fixated behavior)



This dog has low posture, low tail, hackles up, low head, hard eye, forward ears, lifted paw.  
(I assume: dog is very worried about stimulus approaching. Dog may bite, cower more, or flee depending on situation)

## signals



These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog, that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.



Here is more dog body language for you to look at. See when you observe these positions in your own dog!

# DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier

